

Major Problems in American History Chapter 13 Documents

Summaries

Document 5: Senator Charles Sumner Addresses the “Crime Against Kansas,” 1856

This document was an address by Senator Sumner against slavery in the Senate, especially in response to the controversial Kansas-Nebraska Act. He begins by claiming that the Kansas region had previously been among the most pure, free land in the Americas and that by introducing slavery to that region would be a hateful and unjust act solely meant to increase the power of pro-slavery states in Congress. He goes on to claim that slavery is unconstitutional and the source of unhappiness, because it makes slaveowners accustomed to absolute power over others, who would form a tyrannical, undemocratic society. Sumner then explains that the South is always ready to protect slavery without second thought or logic, as if it were married to the institution. The Southern ignorance in their inflexible support for slavery and its inability “of his own position unable to see himself as others see his” causes the national sectionalism and tension of the time period. Next, he tauntingly singles out Senator Douglas and his Kansas-Nebraska Act for supporting the introduction of Kansas as a slave state (thus reinforcing his first main idea). Sumner accuses Douglas for trying to “subdue the North,” but that the “immortal principle” (the natural law that makes all men equal) and God itself is against slavery and acts such as the Kansas act.

This speech is the famously provocative “Crime Against Kansas” speech that led Southerner Congressman Brooks to beat Sumner with a cane, showing the brutality (Sumner with accusatory words and Brooks with physical force) of both sides of the national sectionalism.

Document 8: Republican William Seward Warns of an Irrepressible Conflict, 1858

This speech was a systematic explanation of why slavery is immoral to a discussion of the national problem of slavery to the probable future exploitation of slavery by the South that would extend the national problem to an intolerable extent. He begins with logical claims that slaves are only enslaved because of societal norms based on race, and that “the white laboring man ... is not enslaved, only because he cannot, as yet, be reduced to bondage.” He explains why slavery harms not only the slaves but also the free white men who cannot compete with the free labor, which is thus unfair for its undeserved commercial advantage. Seward brings in Enlightenment ideas such as the “divine law of equality” to help explain why “constant danger, distrust, suspicion, and watchfulness” stem from this odious system. He proposes the free-labor system as an alternative that would eliminate these risks of slavery.

The next section warns that the U.S. has existed with slavery and anti-slavery systems simultaneously, but that these opposite systems were becoming ever more in conflict as the U.S. was becoming more tightly related through infrastructure. He imagines the impending conflict between the two sides as a “collision” that would be “an irrepressible conflict between

opposing and enduring forces, and it means that the United States must ... become either entirely a slaveholding nation or entirely a freelabor nation.” Thus he predicted the conflict of the U.S. Civil War

The final part of Seward’s address was an explanation of the immoral acts that the South was committing in order to increase slavery’s hold on the nation and eventually win the “collision.” This explanation antagonizes the South and shows Seward’s view of Southern intentions as evil or immoral.

Document 9: Abolitionist John Brown Makes His Last Statement to the Court Before Execution, 1859

John Brown begins this speech by clarifying his motives to justify his actions. He claimed that any of his actions resulted from his “design ... to free slaves.” He explained that his intentions were all moral, and that he “never did intend murder, or treason, or the destruction of property, or to exercise or incite slaves to rebellion, or to make insurrection.” He thus informs the court of his simple, righteous motive, which is meant to show his simple ideal of anti-slavery. He then justifies his motive with religion, stating that he did what he believed was right, even if it was radical and against the common sentiment in the South.

The final section of his speech shows his final feelings. He states that he had no guilt because he did not mean to harm anyone, but to preserve an ideal. He finishes by again asserting that he did not want to commit treason or to create rebellion.

Holt Essay: The Political Divisions That Contributed to Civil War

Holt’s essay breaks down several political abnormalities in the U.S. that led up to the Civil War. He begins by explaining that the Civil War deviated from the typical manner of compromise that resolved or deferred many of the issues of the previous decades and broke out into a violent outburst, and that this is caused by several political factors.

Holt first explains that there is little debate that the general cause of the war was the increasing tensions between pro-slavery and anti-slavery areas of the U.S. Some historians believe that it was political ineptitude caused politicians to deviate from typical compromise-based diplomacy to war, but most historians agree that the war was the culmination of decades of sectional conflict. This is background information that Holt uses to build off of in the rest of his essay.

The first question that Holt points out is the arbitrary timing of the Civil War. He asks why the war began when it did and “why not in 1820 or 1832 or 1846 or 1850 or 1854,” each of which are years of debate over the slavery issue. He explains that this had a root in party politics. The Democrats became the sectional power in the South and the Republicans became the sectional power in the North. The two-party system and national parties in general disappeared, making politics much more geared towards local issues. Also, people lost faith in the party system, especially that of established parties, and people sought to revive republicanism, the idea that the power should come from the people. Both the North and the

South wanted to restore republicanism, but they had different ideas that they wanted to bring up through it (pro-slavery in the South and anti-slavery in the North). However, republicanism supports public opinion over law, and secession was the Southern idea of starting anew based on the popular agreement in the South to keep slavery. This was especially true of the deep South, which Holt believes never recovered its belief in a normal national government system with the North and thus seceded first.

Holt then discusses why the political parties break down. He explains that this is because competition between political views is necessary for the survival of a party system, but there was no party competition between the Whigs and the Democrats: the two parties were too similar and agreed on too many sides. As Holt put it, “what destroyed the Second Party System was consensus, not conflict.” Therefore, the people became confused between the two parties and the Whig party broke apart to leave the Democrats to dominant power.

Holt then discusses the balance of political power between the national (federal system) and local (states’ rights) levels. The local political levels were more important to the average citizen than the national issues, which explained why sectionalism became prevalent: a person’s loyalty and political knowledge was more or less confined to his or her state, rather than the entire U.S.

Levine Essay: The Economic Divisions That Contributed to a Civil War

Levine begins his essay by stating the importance of the Civil War, including the great change of the social and economic structure of the U.S. by the removal of slavery and the slaveowning elite. He then explains that the ordinary people, not the elites, were the most affected by the Civil War and their demographics shifted due to the societal pressures (the slavery dispute) of the time. Thus having clarifying his emphasis on ordinary people, Levine divides the remainder of his essay into two sections: the slave economy of the South and the industry of the North.

The South originally held a very high opinion of slavery in an idealism of slavery that disregarded the morality of holding other human beings in bondage and instead focused on the the great economic benefits to white slaveowners. However, this did not take into fact the reality of slave-owning, which was in reality a risky job. Along with the rapidly growing numbers of white non-slaveowners, the proportion of slaveowners in the South declined in the years leading up to the Civil War. Meanwhile, the wealth gap between the rich and the poor in the South increased. Poor white Southerners, unable to compete with plantations and slave labor economically, often went to the free states to work.

On the other hand, the northern population increased at a much faster rate than the South, including from immigration. The transportation revolution and the commercialization of agriculture greatly improved Northern industrial power; the introduction of many new western free states expanded it. Cheap labor in the North was plentiful, especially with new immigrants; along with improved machinery from industrial advancements, productivity

surged in the North. A new millionaire class emerged in the North, and the social gaps between the factory owners and the “wage slaves” increased. However, the economic benefits of this era in the North were balanced out by the low incomes of the wage slaves, who were a lowly and hardworking class necessary for this system to work.

Synthesis Questions

Was the Civil War inevitable? Can you think of ways in which compromises might have forestalled the division between the North and the South?

Yes, the Civil War was inevitable. The compromises regarding slavery that led up to it increased in risk and backlash as the nation sought to make ever more desperate attempts to keep the nation together while respecting both sides of the slavery issue. As Holt mentioned in his essay, the war likely could have broken out in “in 1820 or 1832 or 1846 or 1850 or 1854” almost as easily, and the impending “collision” was a matter of *when*, not *if*. Every compromise strained the conflict more, with the highly controversial Kansas-Nebraska Act sparking the first violence of the war in “Bloody Kansas” in 1854.

Compromises such as the Missouri Compromise, the Compromise of 1850, and the Kansas-Nebraska Act were amongst many others in American history (others include Jay’s Treaty, the Adams-Onís Treaty, the Treaty of Paris) and were a part of American history, but the importance of war to solve the most pressing problems of American history (for example to resolve the conflict between the U.S. and Britain in the Revolution and the War of 1812, and Mexico in order to gain a massive amount of Western land and prevent the British from buying it first) prevailed in this highly volatile situation. This shows a different aspect of *American identity*: the flexibility to act accordingly in various difficult situations, knowing when compromise is possible and where war is necessary. The use of war to solve the slavery and disunity dispute was an important event that prevented prolonged discontent and disunion through redundant and unpopular compromises.

In addition to the controversial compromises, there was the increasing force of abolitionism in the North and pressure on the South to protect their economy and way of life that heavily depended on slavery. Books such as *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* or *The Impending Crisis of the South* antagonized slavery and increased Republican support in the North. Many advanced foreign nations, especially in France and Britain, also sided with the Northerners with the free countries farther east. The increase in commerce and the transportation revolution of the North made the Northern economy far outpace the Southern one. The North had elected an anti-slavery president for the anti-slavery Republican party without any representation from the South. There was no relent on the increase of anti-slavery movement, and therefore the South felt that they needed to act with increasing importance—eventually, the cause would be too great and conflict would need to follow. The anti-slavery movement became more passionate and gained momentum as it went on, and the increasing anger that the North felt

for the South— as could be seen in Sumner’s accusatory “Crime Against Kansas” speech— and vice versa also distanced the North from the South.

If the South had not been so bold and have held off until the Northern strength was stronger relative to the South, the North may have been able to force a diplomatic compromise abolishing slavery, enforced by a military threat. The South may also have created a compromise to re-enter the Union on the premise that slavery could be retained, thus preserving Lincoln’s original goal of national unity above all else, including slavery. However, such a compromise would not solve the underlying issue of slavery and may require further intervention— whether as another compromise or a war. Due to the nature of the sectional growth, with advancements more rapid in the North, either compromise or war was necessary with Northern provisions, and the former would likely not be a permanent solution. It was also a matter of *politics and power*: the North had to act immediately on the event of the Southern secession to immediately solve the issue of slavery and prevent slavery from over-proliferating in the Confederacy before the North intervened. The Union also decided that they were powerful enough to attack the South at the moment, and were heavily advantaged in terms of economy and population, and thus had more military might than the South.

Were economic or political issues at the base of the conflict?

The fundamental cause conflict was economic, but the differences between the North and the South became increasingly political as the conflict moved on. Slavery was the system that allowed the Southern economy to prosper, and its economic basis (a system of *work, exchange, and technology*) of the South was its greatest practical concern. As Levine discusses in his essay, the South was suffering because slavery, although difficult and risky, was the only major source of income in the South. When the North became more profitable and the wealth gap in the South widened between wealthy plantation owners and small farmers, the single-crop economy of the South (based almost completely on cotton produced from slave plantations) had no other option to turn to. Hence, even though it alienated the poor majority of its population, the South had no choice but to support the institution of slavery in its best attempt to save its economy.

Economics was not only at play when the South cried out against losing its profit-gaining activity, but also when the free states of the North and the poor farmers from the South argued against free labor as an unfair system that only benefited a select few who had slaves. Any paid laborer had a difficult time competing with slaves, who could be paid nothing at all. Levine used examples of Southerners being violent to slaves because of the tough economic conflict that they faced, which strengthened the cause and conflict against slavery, even in the South. Senator Seward also mentioned that free farmers could not compete against unpaid laborers in the South.

By the time of the Civil War, however, the basis of the problem was more political than economic. The North had turned to the debate over the morality of slavery. John Brown

mentioned that it would bring out the worst in people, giving slave-owners an undeserved sense of absolute power over someone else. These people, he reasoned, would be unfit to be good citizens of a democracy, because they fostered a tyrannical attitude. Senator Seward mentions that the idea of slavery violates the “divine law of equality” that should exist in America— although there is little mention of total racial equality, there is the emerging sense that slaves, among other men, should be treated equally. The Compromise of 1850 and the Kansas-Nebraska Act were strictly political decisions that regarded slavery as something strictly to be compromised in order to achieve the purpose of the new annexation of land, and there was little economic or social consequences that were taken in mind. The result of these political actions that disregarded slavery as a moral or economic issue greatly inflamed the issue— such as with Sumner’s radical speech and his subsequent beating— and formed the basis of the South’s grievances for the Civil War. The politics surrounding the debate formed a strong anti-slavery movement in the North and pro-slavery movement in the South, thoroughly affecting *culture and society* to be more at odds with one another. For example, Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and Helper’s *The Impending Crisis of the South* were written in response to the Kansas-Nebraska Act and the horrors that they felt of slavery.

Of the documents you have read in this chapter, which is the most conciliatory toward the other side? Which is the most antagonistic?

Both of the essays are the most conciliatory towards the “other side” of slave-owners. Holt’s essay mentions both sides of the debate: that the North was being provocative with its creation of the new sectional Republican party, and that the people were simply trying to promote their own interpretation of republicanism. He defends the causes of the Civil War as simply a historical and political anomaly of bad leadership and culminating social tension, and doesn’t place blame on the South for having seceded. Levine’s essay writes about the economic troubles and risks of slave-owners in the South. His view of the South and the North is impartial: he sees the economic advantages of the North and the decline of the Southern economy, which helps to justify the loss in the South. While there is no true “side,” they portray both sides as defensive in their own right and accusatory in other aspects: the North was trying to defend its unity and the South its slavery, and both were trying to protect republicanism. This is another ideal and important facet of the *national identity*: the idea of power by the consent of the people is a fundamental right of democracy and a republic. Both sides were hence portrayed as justified in their own beliefs.

All of the primary source documents from people during the time period, on the other hand, were clearly accusatory of the South from a Northern perspective. John Brown’s address to the Court was meant to forgive and justify his actions more than to attack the slavery institution, and therefore his was the least antagonistic of the three. Seward had a logical explanation that went through various key points of slavery and why they are immoral, and is more critical of the South. Sumner’s address to Congress, however, is the most antagonistic,

being an emotionally-charged attack on slavery. It was considered so foul by the South that he was physically beaten by Southern Congressman Brooks with a cane. The political bitterness between North and South again reflected itself in *cultural and societal* scorn and violence—Brook's violence was applauded by the South, and Sumner's hateful speech against slavery was applauded by abolitionists in the North. Unsurprisingly, debate over Kansas and Nebraska led to the first violence of the war in the Kansas and Nebraska Act, and the normalization of violence in ordinary culture and politics allowed the violence to more easily break out.

Sumner claimed that slavery made the slave-owners tyrannical and that the South would try to take over the North simply to spread slavery. Sumner specifically targets the Kansas-Nebraska Act and Senator Douglas as the perpetrators of this conflict; he claims that they are trying to "subdue the North" and he portrays the actions of the South in a negative light. He portrayed the South as the aggravator and the North as being on the defensive, while it was probably the other way around with the South attempting to defend their institution of slavery and the North attacking the South in order to keep it in the Union in the Civil War. His claims are clearly biased against the South with an anti-slavery and portrays the North in a higher-than-thou tone over the South, which he falsely claims to provoke the North.