

Title:

Myths of the American Civil War

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Summary:

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Article Body:

The Civil War (1861-5) has spawned numerous myths and falsities.

The Republicans did not intend to abolish slavery - just to "contain" it, i.e., limit it to the 15 states where it had already existed. Most of the Democrats accepted this solution.

This led to a schism in the Democratic party. The "fire eaters" left it and established their own pro-secession political organization. Growing constituencies in the south - such as urban immigrants and mountain farmers - opposed slavery as a form of unfair competition. Less than one quarter of southern families owned slaves in 1861. Slave-based, mainly cotton raising, enterprises, were so profitable that slave prices almost doubled in the 1850s. This rendered slaves - as well as land - out of the reach of everyone but the wealthiest citizens.

Cotton represented three fifths of all United States exports in 1860. Southerners, dependent on industrial imports as they were, supported free trade. Northerners were vehement trade protectionists. The federal government derived most of its income from custom duties. Income tax and corporate profit tax were yet to be invented.

The states seceded one by one, following secession conventions and state-wide votes. The Confederacy (Confederate States of America) was born only later. Not all the constituents of the Confederacy seceded at once. Seven - the "core" - seceded between December 20, 1860 and February 1, 1861. They were: South Carolina, Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, and Texas.

Another four - Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Arkansas - joined them

only after the attack on Fort Sumter in April 1861. Two - Kentucky and Missouri - seceded but were controlled by the Union's army throughout the war. Maryland and Delaware were slave states but did not secede.

President James Buchanan who preceded Abraham Lincoln, made clear that the federal government would not use force to prevent secession. Secession was declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court only in 1869 (in Texas vs. White) - four years after the Civil War ended. New England almost seceded in 1812, during the Anglo-American conflict, in order to protect its trade with Britain.

The constitution of the Confederacy prohibited African slave trade (buying slaves from Africa), though it allowed interstate trade in slaves. The first Confederate capital was in Montgomery, Alabama - not in Richmond, Virginia. The term of office of the Confederate president - Jefferson Davis was the first elected - was six years, not four as was the case in the Union.

Fort Sumter was not the first attack of the Confederacy on the Union. It was preceded by attacks on 11 forts and military installations on Confederate territory.

Lincoln won only 40 percent of the popular vote in 1860. Hence the South's fierce resistance to his abolitionist agenda. In 1864, the Republicans became so unpopular, they had to change their name to the Union Party. Lincoln's vice-president, Johnson, actually was a Democrat and hailed from Tennessee, a seceding state.

He was the only senator from a seceded state to remain in the Senate.

Reconstruction started long before the war ended, in Union-occupied Louisiana, Arkansas, and Tennessee. Slave tax was an important source of state revenue in the South (up to 60 percent in South Carolina). Emancipation led to near bankruptcy.

The Union states of Connecticut, Minnesota, and Wisconsin refused to pass constitutional amendments to confer suffrage on black males. The Union army consigned black labor gangs to work on the plantations of loyal Southerners and forcibly separated the black workers from their families.

Contrary to myth, nearly two thirds of black families were headed by both parents. Slave marriages were legally meaningless in the antebellum South, though. But nearly 90 percent of slave households remained intact till death or forced separation. The average age of childbirth for women was 20.

Segregation was initiated by blacks. The freedmen lobbied hard and long for

separate black churches and educational facilities. Nor was lynching confined to blacks. For instance, a white mob lynched, in September 1862, forty four Union supporters in Gainesville, Texas. Similar events took place in Shelton Laurel, North Carolina. The Ku Klux Klan was the paramilitary arm of the Democratic party in the South, though never officially endorsed by it. It was used to "discipline" the workforce in the plantations - but also targeted Republicans.

The Democrats changed their name after the war to the Conservative Party. By 1877 they have regained power in all formerly Confederate states.