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An End to Slavery in the Confederacy: One of the Civil War's Greatest "What-Ifs"

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Abstract

A few weeks ago one of our readers posted [a comment](#) on one of our blog posts asking for a “best guess” as to when slavery would have ended in the South had the Confederacy been successful in winning its independence. There is, of course, no easy answer to this question, as counter-factual history is just that: not factual. However, the question is an important one that deserves attention and at the very least can be used to explore some ways in which slavery can be contextualized in the Civil War era.

[excerpt]

Keywords

Gettysburg College, Civil War, slavery, Confederacy, the South

Disciplines

History | Military History | United States History

Comments

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

An End to Slavery in the Confederacy: One of the Civil War's Greatest “What-Ifs”

By Jeff Lauck '18

A few weeks ago one of our readers posted [a comment](#) on one of our blog posts asking for a “best guess” as to when slavery would have ended in the South had the Confederacy been successful in winning its independence. There is, of course, no easy answer to this question, as counter-factual history is just that: not factual. However, the question is an important one that deserves attention and at the very least can be used to explore some ways in which slavery can be contextualized in the Civil War era.

The Confederacy was founded on the idea of preserving the institution of slavery. The short-lived nation's need for slavery was economic as well as social. Economically, the South depended on an agrarian economy driven chiefly by cotton production. Cotton, a very labor-intensive crop, required large labor forces to produce. Consequently, profit margins depended on decreasing the cost of labor. Therefore, cotton's profitability—and thus the economy of the South—benefited immensely from slavery. A change in the workforce would have severely disrupted the status quo. Poor Southerners, who may not have owned slaves, also saw the economic trickle-down effects of slavery: wealthy planters required food, tools, and other goods to keep the system of slavery running, and of these supplies would be supplied by yeomen farmers and craftsmen. As a result, many white Southerners who were neither wealthy nor owned slaves were also economically invested in the institution of slavery.



When discussing the institution of slavery from a wide angle lens, it is easy to forget its human toll. Images like these remind us of the inhumanity of the practice of human bondage. Photo via Wikimedia Commons.

Socially, white Southerners adhered to strict social classes and feared what freed slaves would do to their former masters. They had witnessed what rebellious slaves like Gabriel Prosser and Nat Turner had done and were fearful that this could happen throughout the South, especially after news of John Brown's failed "slave insurrection" in Harpers Ferry in 1859. Moreover, slaves were seen as the premier symbol of status in the South; poor Southerners aspired to join the ranks of the slave holding elite, hoping that one day they too could own slaves. The "peculiar institution" was therefore used as a "carrot" to keep many poorer Southerners socially invested in the practice of slavery. Evidence of these reasons, both economic and social, for maintaining slavery can be found in the very articles of secession that each Confederate state adopted in 1860

and 1861, as well as the many speeches that Confederate leaders gave before and after secession. With slavery being so central to the Confederate cause, economy, and social structure, it is unlikely that slavery could have been abolished within the near future after secession.

The institution of slavery was by no means a static institution. In fact, it was going through a number of changes before and during the 1860s. First, the concentration of slavery was gradually moving southward as years of cotton planting had depleted the soil of the Upper South. Slaves from large plantations in the Upper South were then sold "down the river" to the Lower South, where relatively newer plantations were in need of more and more slaves. This makes sense as to why the biggest proponents of slavery could usually be found in the Lower South, where the practices of cotton planting and picking were still growing. Many slaveholders envisioned a new era of manifest destiny where this southward shift would

continue all the way to the Tierra del Fuego. Several unsanctioned (and failed) missions to invade Latin American nations before the war show that many were willing to act on these wishes. Thus, if slavery were indeed to thrive well into Latin America following the victory of the Confederacy, it would be difficult to envision a quick end to the institution.

The second change to fall upon slavery in the antebellum era was the advent of industrial slavery. Many slave owners, especially in the Upper South where agriculture was becoming less fruitful, were eager to turn their field hands into laborers in factories or other centers of industrial production. During the war, this could be seen most notably at Tredegar Iron Works in Richmond, the largest iron works in the Confederacy. By the beginning of the war in 1861, roughly half of Tredegar's work force consisted of slaves that were "contracted" to Joseph Reid Anderson & Co., the proprietor of Tredegar. The prospect of an expanding slaveholding empire to the South, coupled with industrial slavery in the heart of the Confederacy represented two major changes that may have run their full courses if the South had successfully declared independence from the United States. This complicates our evaluation of if/when slavery would have been abolished in an independent Southern Confederacy.

It is also important to consider what else was happening around the world in terms of slavery in the mid-19th century (and beyond). The United States was neither the first nor the last nation to abolish slavery. In Russia, slavery was abolished in 1723, but serfdom—a sort of pseudoslavery—would exist until the 1860s. Haiti outlawed slavery in 1804 following its war for independence, which many historians note as itself being the largest successful slave revolt in history. Britain, France, and The Netherlands all outlawed slavery throughout their American empires well before the outbreak of the Civil War. Spain and Portugal outlawed slavery at home around the same time, but did not fully outlaw the institution in their colonies until the 1870s. Brazil, an independent nation since 1825, is considered by many historians to be the last power to abolish slavery when it did so in 1888. However, several African colonies of European powers, as well as some African and Middle Eastern nations, did not abolish slavery until the 20th and even 21st centuries. There is no definitive date in the past where slavery "must have" ended, as many states, most of which never held the institution up as its "cornerstone," did not officially abolish the practice until very recently. Given the state-sponsored human rights atrocities of the 20th century and even today, a moral end to inhumane practices demanded simply by modernity should not be taken as a guarantee.

A Confederate victory in the war would likely have created a nation proud of the institution of slavery, bucking the international trend of emancipation. However, some external and internal pressures could have exerted change within and without the Confederacy that could have pressed the new nation towards emancipation. First, other nations could have imposed economic and diplomatic sanctions on a slaveholding Confederacy, crippling the South's cotton export-driven economy. By the end of the war, this may have even been an economic (and

moral) priority for Britain, which had ramped up cotton production in its holdings in India and Egypt. Second, poor white farmers and laborers might have objected en masse to an industrial and agrarian Southern economy dominated by slavery. While the economic and social incentives worked to consolidate white support for slavery before the war, it is not a guarantee that they would have worked indefinitely. Many poor whites may have felt increasingly marginalized as the Confederacy turned into a slaveholding empire and either voted for emancipation or fought to abolish the institution within the Confederacy. Finally, the United States—or any other nation, for that matter—could have invaded the South after its independence and ended slavery by the sword. While it is highly unlikely that abolitionist fervor alone could trigger an invasion, nations may have seen a war-ravaged, under-populated Confederacy as an easy target for colonial expansion after a war for independence against the United States.

As always, these alt-history speculations are just that: speculative. There is no limit to the possibilities of the future of slavery in an independent Confederacy. As such, assigning a “best guess” to the end of slavery in such a scenario is really anyone’s guess. At the very least, these are at least some of the items to consider when discussing the matter. Please feel free to comment below with your own “best guess.”

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