WHAT CAUSED THE CIVIL WAR?
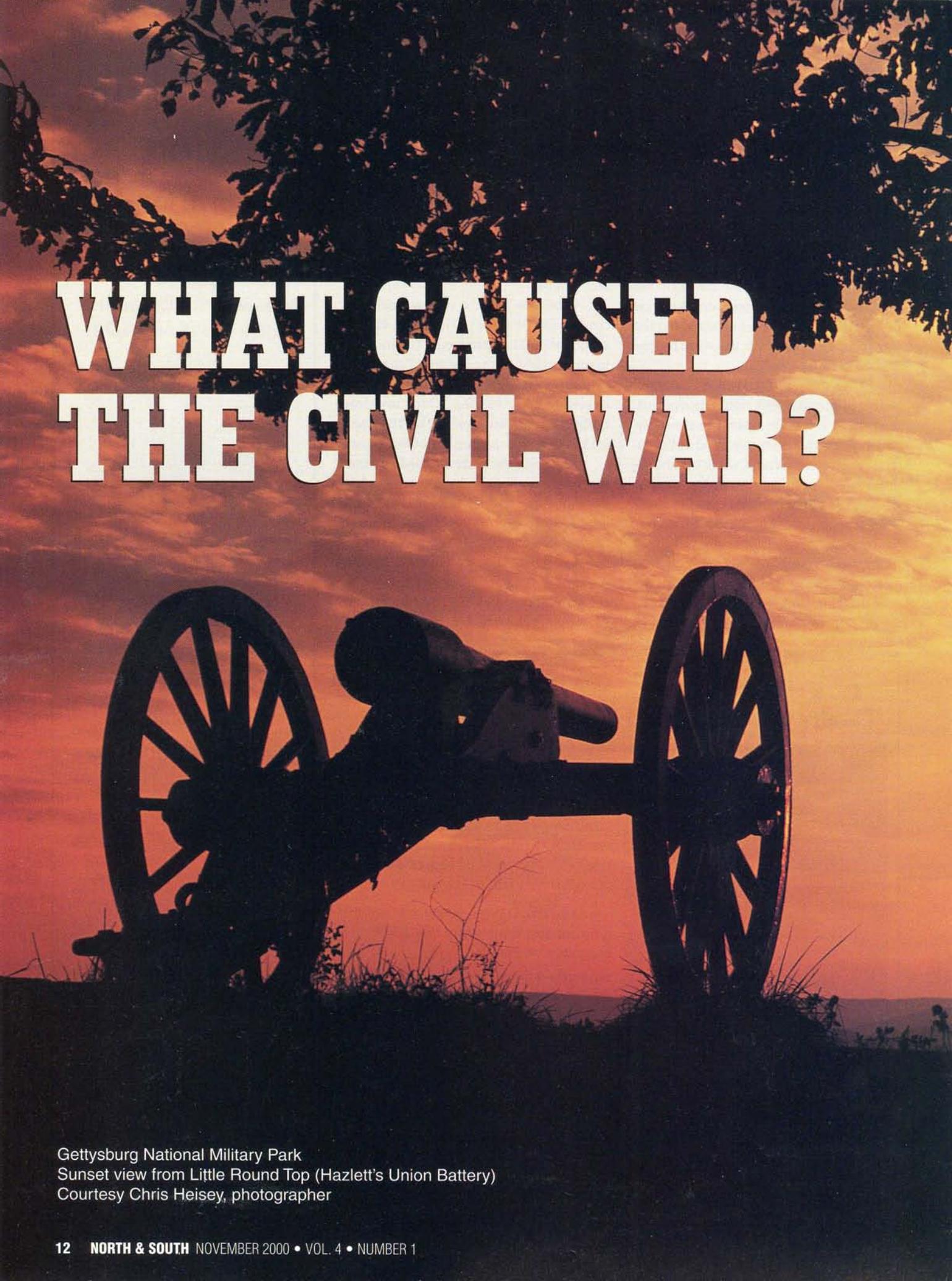
Gettysburg National Military Park
Sunset view from Little Round Top (Hazlett's Union Battery)
Courtesy Chris Heisey, photographer

James M. McPherson

IN THE 1860s, few people in either North or South would have dissented from Abraham Lincoln's statement, in his second inaugural address, that slavery "was, somehow, the cause of the war."[1] After all, had not Jefferson Davis, a large slaveholder, justified secession in 1861 as an act of self-defense against the Lincoln administration, whose policy of excluding slavery from the territories would make "property in slaves so insecure as to be comparatively worthless… thereby annihilating in effect property worth thousands of millions of dollars"?[2] And had not the new vice president of the Confederate States of America, Alexander H. Stephens, said in a speech at Savannah on March 21, 1861, that slavery was "the immediate cause of the late rupture and the present revolution" of Southern independence? The old confederation known as the United States, said Stephens, had been founded on the false idea that all men are created equal. The Confederacy, by contrast, "is founded upon exactly the opposite idea; its foundations are laid, its cornerstone rests, upon the great truth that the negro is not equal to the white man; that slavery, subordination to the superior race, is his natural and moral condition. This, our new Government, is the first, in the history of the world, based on this great physical, philosophical, and moral truth."[3]

AFTER THE WAR, however, Davis and Stephens changed their tune. By the time they wrote their histories of the Confederacy, slavery was gone with the wind. To salvage as much honor and respectability as they could from the lost cause, they set to work to purge it of any association with the now dead and discredited institution of human bondage. In their postwar view, both Davis and Stephens hewed to the same line: Southern states seceded not to protect slavery, but to vindicate state sovereignty. This became the virgin-birth theory of secession: the Confederacy was conceived not by any worldly cause, but by divine principle.

The South, Davis insisted, fought solely for "the inalienable right of a people to change their government ... to withdraw from a Union into which they had, as sovereign communities, voluntarily entered." The "existence of African servitude," he maintained, "was in no wise the cause of the conflict, but only an incident." Likewise Stephens declared in his convoluted style that "the War had its origin in *opposing principles*" not concerning slavery but rather concerning "the organic Structure of the Government of the States. . . . It was a strife between the principles of Federation, on the one side, and Centralism, or Consolidation, on the other . . . . Slavery, so called, was but *the question* on which these antagonistic principles . . . were finally brought into ... collision with each other on the field of battle."[4]
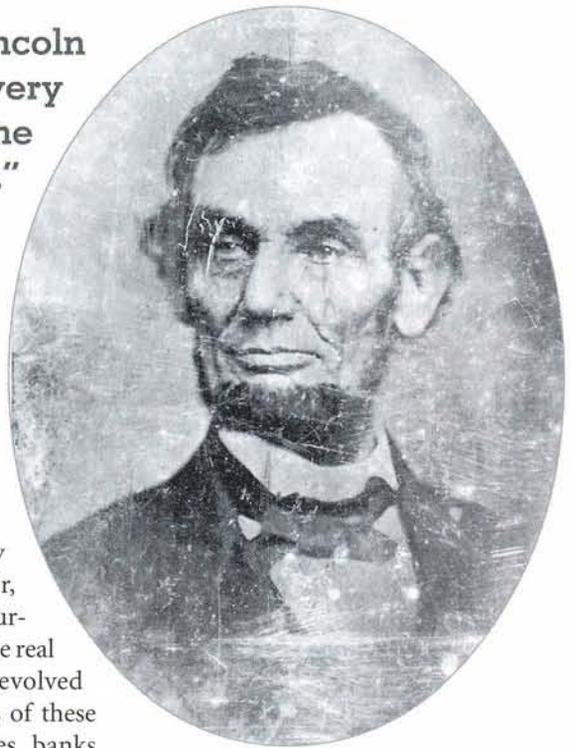
Davis and Stephens set the tone for the Lost Cause interpretation during the next century and more: slavery was merely incidental; the real cause of the war that killed more than 620,000 people was a difference of opinion about the Constitution. Thus the Civil War was not a war to preserve the American nation and, ultimately, to abolish slavery, but rather a war of Northern aggression against Southern constitutional rights. During the first half of the twentieth century, professional historians stepped into the debate about Civil War causation with a variety of interpretations. These schools of historiography differed from each other in some respects, but they all agreed with the Lost Cause creed in one respect: slavery was not the principal cause, but merely an incident.

The "Progressive school" led by Charles A. Beard dominated American historiography from the 1910s to the 1940s. This school posited a clash between interest groups and classes as the central theme of American history—industry vs. agriculture, capital vs. labor, railroads vs. farmers, manufacturers vs. consumers, and so on. The real issues of American politics revolved around the economic interests of these contesting groups: tariffs, taxes, banks and finance, land policies, industrial and labor policies, subsidies to business or agriculture, and the like. American political history progressed in an undeviating line from the clash between Jeffersonian Republicans and Hamiltonian Federalists in the 1790s to the similar clashes between the New Deal/Fair Deal Democrats and conservative Republicans in the 1930s and 1940s.

The Progressive school explained the causes of the Civil War within this general interpretive framework. The war transferred to the battlefield a long-running contest between plantation agriculture and industrializing capitalism in which the industrialists emerged triumphant. This was not primarily a conflict between North and South: "Merely by the accidents of climate, soil, and geography," wrote Beard, "was it a sectional struggle"—the accidental fact that plantation agriculture was located in the South and industry mainly in the North.[5] Nor was it a contest between slavery and freedom. Slavery just happened to be the labor system of plantation agriculture, as wage labor was the system of Northern industry. For some Progressive historians, neither system was significantly worse or better than the other—"wage slavery" was as exploitative as chattel bondage. In any case, they said, slavery was not a moral issue for anybody except a tiny number of abolitionists; its abolition was a mere incident of the destruction of the plantation order by the war. The *real* issues between the North and South in antebellum politics were the tariff, government subsidies to transportation and manufacturing, public land sales, financial policies, and other types of economic questions on which manufacturing and planting interests had clashing viewpoints.

This interpretive synthesis, so powerful during the second quarter of the twentieth century, proved a godsend for a generation of mostly Southern-born historians who seized upon it as proof that slavery had little to do with the origins of the Confederacy. The Nashville Fugitives, that influential group of historians, novelists, and poets who gathered at Vanderbilt University and published the famous manifesto *I'll Take My Stand* in 1930, set the tone for the new Southern interpretation of the Civil War's causes. It was a blend of the old Confederate apologia voiced by Jefferson Davis and the new Progressive synthesis created by Charles Beard. The Confederacy fought not only for the constitutional principle of state rights and self-government, but also for the preservation of a stable, pastoral, agrarian civilization against the overbearing, acquisitive, aggressive ambitions of an urban-industrial Leviathan. The real issue that brought on the war was not slavery—this institution, wrote one of the Nashville Fugitives, historian Frank Owsley, "was part of the
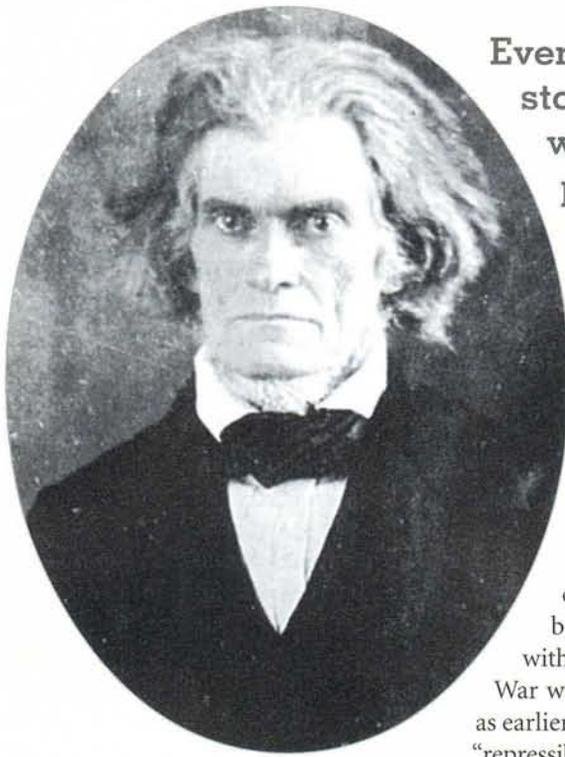
giant of revisionism, James G. Randall, even suggested that they were no more irreconcilable than the differences between Chicago and downstate Illinois.[7]

Such disparities did not have to lead to war; they could have, and should have, been accommodated peacefully within the political system. The Civil War was not an irrepressible conflict, as earlier generations had called it, but a "repressible conflict," as Craven titled one of his books. The war was brought on not by genuine issues but by extremists on both sides—abolitionist fanatics and Southern fire-eaters—who whipped up emotions and hatreds in North and South for their own self-serving partisan purposes. The passions they stirred up got out of hand in 1861 and erupted into a tragic, unnecessary war which accomplished nothing that could not have been accomplished by negotiations and compromise.

Any such compromise in 1861, of course, would have left slavery in place. But the revisionists, like the Progressives and the Vanderbilt agrarians, considered slavery unimportant; as Craven once stated, the institution of bondage "played a rather minor part in the life of the South and the Negro."[8] It would have died peacefully of natural causes in another generation or two had not fanatics forced the issue to armed conflict. This argument hints at another feature of revisionism: while blaming extremists of both sides, revisionists focused most of their criticism on antislavery radicals, even antislavery moderates like Lincoln, who harped on the evils of slavery and expressed a determination to rein in what they called the "slave power." Their rhetoric goaded the South into a defensive response that finally caused Southern states to secede to get free from the incessant pressure of these self-righteous Yankee zealots. Revisionism thus tended to por-

agrarian system, but only one element and not an essential one"—but rather such matters as the tariff, banks, subsidies to railroads, and similar questions in which the grasping industrialists of the North sought to advance their interests at the expense of Southern farmers and planters.[6] Lincoln was elected in 1860 not in the interest of freedom over slavery but of railroads and factories over agriculture and the graces of a rural society. The result was the triumph of acquisitive, power-hungry Northern robber barons over the highest type of civilization America had ever known—the Old South. It was no coincidence that this interpretation emerged during the same period that the novel and movie *Gone With the Wind* became the most popular literary and cinematic successes of all time; history and popular culture on this occasion marched hand in hand.

An offshoot of this interpretation of the Civil War's causes dominated the work of academic historians during the 1940s. This offshoot came to be called revisionism. The revisionists denied that sectional conflicts between North and South—whether such conflicts occurred over slavery, state rights, industry versus agriculture, or whatever—were genuinely divisive. The differences between North and South, wrote Avery Craven, one of the leading revisionists, were no greater than those existing at different times between East and West. The other

tray Southern whites, even the fire-eaters, as victims reacting to Northern attacks; it was truly a war of Northern aggression.

Since the 1950s, however, most professional historians have agreed with Lincoln's assertion that "slavery was, somehow, the cause of the war." There is less consensus on this matter outside the halls of academe, however, especially in the South. When Ken Burns' PBS video documentary on the Civil War portrayed slavery as the root cause of the conflict, reaction among many Southern whites proud of their Confederate heritage was hostile. "The cause of the war was secession," declared a spokesman for the Sons of Confederate Veterans, "and the cause of secession could have been any number of things. This overemphasis on the slavery issue really rankles us."[9]

The distinction drawn here between the causes of secession and the cause of the war is useful, and we shall return to it later. The assertion that the cause of secession could have been any number of things, however, is not very helpful. Presumably those "things" include the themes summarized in the review of the state rights, Progressive, agrarian, and revisionist schools in the preceding paragraphs. Of all these interpretations, the "state rights" argument is weakest. It fails to ask the question, state rights for what purpose? State rights, or sovereignty, was always more a means than an end, an instrument to achieve a certain goal more than an abstract principle. In the South, its purpose was to protect slavery from the potential hostility of a national majority. Southern political leaders from the 1820s to the 1850s jealously opposed the exercise of national power for a variety of ends. "If Congress can make banks, roads, and canals under the Constitution," said Senator Nathaniel Macon of North Carolina, "they can free any slave in the United States."[10] John C. Calhoun, the South's leading political philosopher, formulated an elaborate constitutional structure of state rights theory to halt any use of Federal power that might conceivably be construed at some future time as a precedent to act against slavery.

But even for Calhoun, state sovereignty was a fallback position. A more powerful instrument to protect slavery was control of the national government. Until 1860 the South did this remarkably
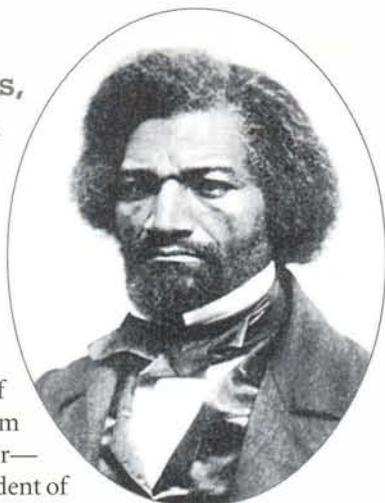
well. During forty-nine of the seventy-two years from 1789 to 1861 a Southerner—and slaveholder—was president of the United States. Two thirds of the Speakers of the House and presidents pro tem of the Senate were also Southerners. At all times during these years a majority of Supreme Court justices were Southerners. This happened because, while the South had only a minority of the national population, it usually controlled the Jeffersonian Republican party and, after 1828, the Democratic party, which in turn usually controlled the government. Southern domination of the Democratic party increased during the 1850s, so that even though both Democratic presidents in that decade—Franklin Pierce and James Buchanan—were Northerners, they were beholden to Southerners and did their bidding.

The importance of this national power had been demonstrated in the 1830s when Congress imposed a gag rule to stifle antislavery petitions and the post office banned antislavery literature from the mail in Southern states. But the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 provided an even more striking example. It was the strongest manifestation of *national* power thus far in American history. In the name of protecting the rights of slaveholders, it rode roughshod over the state rights of Northern states. It extended the long arm of Federal law, enforced by the army and navy, into *Northern* states to recover escaped slaves and return them to their owners. Southern congressmen voted almost unanimously for this law. Senator Jefferson Davis, who later insisted that the Confederacy fought for the principle of state sovereignty, voted with enthusiasm for the Fugitive Slave Law. When Northern state legislatures and courts invoked state rights and individual liberties against this federal law, the U.S. Supreme Court with its majority of Southern jus-

tices reaffirmed the supremacy of national law to protect slavery (*Ableman* v. *Booth*, 1859). Most observers in the 1850s would have predicted that, if a rebellion in the name of state rights were to occur, it would be the North that would rebel. It was the *loss* of national power to an *anti*-slavery party in 1860 that caused Southern states to fall back to the position of state sovereignty, and secede.

The Progressive interpretation of the war's causes carries little more water than the state-rights interpretation. To be sure, economic conflicts of interest did take place between agrarian and industrial interests. These conflicts emerged in debates over tariffs, banks, land grants, and the like. But these matters divided *parties* (Whig vs. Democrat) and interest groups more than they divided North and South. The South in the 1840s and 1850s had its advocates of industrialization and protective tariffs and a national bank, just as the North had its millions of farmers and its low-tariff, anti-bank Democratic majority in many states. The Civil War was not fought over issues of the tariff or banks or agrarianism versus industrialism. These and similar kinds of questions have been bread-and butter issues of American politics throughout the nation's history, often generating a great deal more friction and heat than they did in the 1850s. But they have not caused any great shooting wars. Nor was the Civil War a consequence of false issues trumped up by demagogues or fanatics. It was fought over real, profound, intractable problems that Americans on both sides believed went to the heart of their society and its future.

In 1858 two prominent political leaders, one of whom expected to be

elected president in 1860 and the other of whom *was* elected president, voiced the stark nature of the problem. The social systems of slave labor and free labor "are more than incongruous—they are incompatible," said Senator William H. Seward of New York. The friction between them "is an irreconcilable conflict between opposing and enduring forces, and it means that the United States must and will, sooner or later, become either entirely a slaveholding nation, or entirely a free-labor nation."[11] In Illinois, senatorial candidate Abraham Lincoln launched his campaign with a theme taken from the Bible: "A house divided against itself cannot stand." The United States, he said, "cannot endure, permanently, half *slave* and half *free*. . . . It will become *all* one thing, or all the other." The policy of Lincoln's party—and Seward's—was to "arrest the further spread of [slavery], and place it where the public mind shall rest in the belief that it is in the course of ultimate extinction."[12]

The slave and free states shared the same language, legal system, political culture, social mores, religious values, and a common heritage of struggle to form the nation. The one institution they did *not* share was slavery. Southerners agreed with Lincoln that it was the institution of bondage that created the house divided. "On the subject of slavery," declared the Charleston *Mercury* in 1858, "the North and South . . . are not only two Peoples, but they are rival, hostile Peoples."[13] Anticipating Alexander Stephens' speech proclaiming slavery the "cornerstone" of the Confederacy, the members of a South Carolina family that contributed four brothers to the Confederate army, reacted to the news of Lincoln's election with a determination that "now a stand must be made for African slavery or it is forever lost." In going out of a Union ruled by Yankee abo-

litionists, "we . . . are contending for all that we hold dear—our Property—our Institutions—our Honor . . . . I hope it will end in establishing a Southern Confederacy who will have among themselves slavery[,] a bond a union stronger than any which holds the north together."[14] In language echoed by other seceding states, the South Carolina secession convention justified its action on the grounds that, when Lincoln became president, "the Slaveholding States will no longer have the power of self-government, or self-protection, and the Federal Government will have become their enemy."[15] After fighting for two years, a cavalry lieutenant from Mississippi reaffirmed his belief that "this country without slave labor would be completely worthless. We can only live & exist by that species of labor; and hence I am willing to fight to the last."[16]

Slaves were the principal form of wealth in the South. The market value of the four million slaves in 1860 was close to $3 billion dollars—more than the value of land, of cotton, or of anything else in the slave states. Slave labor made it possible for the American South to grow three quarters of the world's marketed cotton, which in turn constituted more than half of all American exports in the antebellum era. But slavery was much more than an economic system. It was a means of maintaining racial control and white supremacy. Northern whites were also committed to white supremacy. But with 95 percent of the nation's black population in the slave states, the region's scale of concern with this matter was so much greater as to create a radically different set of social priorities.

The centrality of slavery to "the Southern way of life" focused the region's politics on defense of the institution. Many Southern leaders in the age of Thomas Jefferson had considered slavery a "necessary evil" that would eventually disappear from this boasted land of liberty. But with the rise of the cotton kingdom, slavery became in the eyes of Southern whites by the 1830s a "positive good" for black and white alike. Proslavery pamphlets and books became a cottage industry. Their main themes were summed up in the title of a pamphlet by a clergyman published in 1850: *A Defense of the South against the Reproaches and Encroachments*

of the North: In which Slavery is Shown to Be an Institution of God Intended to Form the Basis of the Best Social State and the Only Safeguard and Permanence of a Republican Government. The foremost defender of slavery until his death in 1850 was John C. Calhoun, who noted proudly that "many in the South once believed that slavery was a moral and political evil. That folly and delusion are gone. We see it now in its true light, and regard it as the most safe and stable basis for free institutions in the world," and "essential to the peace, safety, and prosperity" of the South.[17]

The defensive Southern image of slavery was perpetuated in such idyllic scenes as this Currier and Ives lithograph. By the 1830s the "necessary evil" was being portrayed as a "positive good." *Library of Congress*

The defensive tone of much of the proslavery argument was provoked by the rise of militant abolitionism in the North after 1830. William Lloyd Garrison, Theodore Weld, Wendell Phillips, Frederick Douglass, and a host of other crusaders branded slavery as a sin, a defiance of God's law and of Christian ethics, immoral, inhumane, a violation of the republican principle of liberty on which the nation had been founded. Although the abolitionists did not get far in the North with their message of racial equality, their argument that slavery was an unjust, obsolete, and unrepublican institution—a "relic of barbarism" as the new Republican party described slavery in its 1856 platform—entered mainstream Northern politics in the 1850s. "The monstrous

injustice of slavery," said Abraham Lincoln in 1854, "deprives our republican example of its just influence in the world—enables the enemies of free institutions, with plausibility, to taunt us as hypocrites."[18]

But it was not the *existence* of slavery that polarized the nation to the breaking point, but the issue of the *expansion of slave territory*. Most of the crises that threatened the bonds of union arose over this matter. The first one, in 1820, was settled by the Missouri Compromise, which balanced the admission of Missouri as a slave state with the admission of Maine as a free state and banned slavery in the rest of the Louisiana Purchase territory north of 36°30' while permitting it south of that line. Paired admission of slave and free states during the next quarter century kept their numbers equal. But the annexation of Texas as a huge new slave state—with the potential of carving out several more within its boundaries—provoked new tensions. It also provoked war with Mexico in 1846, which resulted in American acquisition of three-quarters of a million square miles of new territory in the Southwest. This opened a Pandora's box of troubles that could not be closed.

Convinced that the "slave power" in Washington had engineered the annexation of Texas and the Mexican War, the

Harriet Beecher Stowe. Her *Uncle Tom's Cabin* sold more than one and a half million copies.
Library of Congress

Stephen A. Douglas. Author of the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, which proved a pyrrhic victory for the South.
Library of Congress

antislavery bloc in Congress determined to flex its muscles. In 1846 David Wilmot of Pennsylvania introduced in the House a resolution banning slavery in all territory that might be conquered from Mexico. By an almost unanimous vote of all Northern congressmen against the virtually unanimous opposition of Southern representatives, the resolution passed—because the larger Northern population gave the free states a majority in the House. Equal representation in the Senate enabled Southerners to block the Wilmot Proviso there. But this issue framed national politics for the next fifteen years.

The most ominous feature of the Wilmot Proviso was its wrenching of the normal pattern of party divisions into a sectional pattern. On most issues before 1846—such as tariffs and a national bank—Northern and Southern Whigs had voted together and Northern and Southern Democrats had done likewise. But on the Wilmot Proviso, Northern Whigs and Democrats voted together against a solid alliance of Southern Whigs and Democrats. This became the norm for all votes on any issue concerning slavery—and most of the important national political issues in the 1850s did concern slavery. This sectional alignment reflected a similar pattern in social and cultural matters. In the 1840s the two largest religious denominations, the Methodists and Baptists, had split into separate Northern and Southern churches over whether a slaveowner could he appointed as a bishop or missionary of the denomination.

In addition to a growing conviction in the North that slavery was contrary to the teachings of Jesus, a secular free-labor ideology became the dominant Northern worldview. This ideology championed the dignity of labor, the right of free competition in the labor market, and social mobility. Slavery, in this view, denied equal opportunity and rights, degraded manual labor by identifying it with servitude, and blocked social mobility for white non-slaveholders as well as slaves by dragging all labor down to the level of slave labor. "Slavery withers and blights all it touches," wrote a free-labor advocate. "It is a curse upon the poor, free, laboring white men . . . . They are depressed, poor, impoverished, degraded in caste, because labor is disgraceful." Wherever slavery goes, said a New York congressman in 1849, "there is in substance no middle class. Great wealth or hopeless poverty is the settled condition."[19] It mattered not that this was a distorted picture of white class relations in the South, or that most non-slaveholding whites there supported the institution of slavery—what mattered was that a growing number of Northerners believed the free-labor ideology.

The national political controversy focused on slavery in the territories because the Constitution protected the institution in states where it existed. But Congress presumably had the power to legislate the status of territories. In the eyes of both Northerners and Southerners, these territories represented the future. In 1850 they constituted more than half of the landmass of the United States. And there was no reason to assume that the acquisition of new territory was over—Cuba, with its 400,000 slaves, looked like it might become the next territory added to the United States. From 1790 to 1850 the territories that became states accounted for more than half of the nation's increase in population. As that process continued, the new territories would shape the future. To ensure a free-

labor destiny, Northerners wanted to keep slavery out of these territories. In 1848 a new political party, the Free Soil party, was founded on this platform. "We are opposed to the extension of slavery," declared a Free Soil newspaper, because if slavery goes into a new territory "the free labor of the states will not . . . . If the free labor of the states goes there, the slave labor of the Southern states will not, and in a few years the country will teem with an active and energetic population."[20] And eventually, the expansion of free territory and the containment of slavery would make freedom the wave of the future, placing slavery "in the course of ultimate extinction," as Lincoln phrased it.

That was just what Southerners feared. The North already had a majority in the House; new free states would give them a majority in the Senate as well as an unchallengeable domination of the electoral college. "Long before the North gets this vast accession of strength," warned a South Carolinian, "she will ride over us rough shod, proclaim freedom or something equivalent to it to our Slaves and reduce us to the condition of Haiti . . . . If we do not act now, we deliberately consign our children, not our posterity, but *our children* to the flames."[21]

This argument appealed as powerfully to non-slaveholders as to slaveholders. Whites of both classes considered the bondage of blacks to be the basis of liberty for whites. Slavery, they declared, elevated all whites to an equality of status by confining menial labor and caste subordination to blacks. "If slaves are freed," maintained proslavery spokesmen, whites "will become menials. We will lose every right and liberty which belongs to the name of freemen."[22] The Northern threat to slavery thus menaced all whites. Non-slaveholders also agreed with slaveholders that the institution must be allowed to go into the territo-

ries. Such expansion might increase their own chances of becoming slaveowners. The attempt by Northern Free Soilers to exclude slavery from the territories struck white Southerners a blow at their most cherished value—honor. Northerners, they believed, were trying to place a stigma on the South of "degrading inequality . . . which says to the Southern man, Avaunt! you are not my equal, and hence are to be excluded as carrying a moral taint." Such an insult could not be tolerated by men of honor. "Death is preferable to acknowledged inferiority."[23]

The controversy over slavery in the region conquered from Mexico led to a crisis that almost provoked secession in 1850. In the end, the complex Compromise of 1850 narrowly averted this outcome. A convention of Southern states meeting at Nashville to consider secession adjourned without taking action. The essential features of the Compromise of 1850 admitted California as a free state and divided the remainder of the Mexican Cession into two large territories, New Mexico and Utah, whose residents were given the right to decide for themselves whether they wanted slavery. Both territories subsequently legalized slavery, but few slaves were taken there. The Compromise of 1850 also included the fateful Fugitive Slave Law, which provoked endless controversy over the recapture in the North of escaped slaves, caused thousands of free blacks in the North to flee to Canada, inspired Harriet Beecher Stowe to write *Uncle Tom's Cabin,* and led to a showdown between federal power and Northern state rights (in the form of personal liberty laws) in which the Southern-dominated U.S. Supreme Court overruled the Wisconsin Supreme Court in *Ableman* v. *Booth.*

Meanwhile, the South used its leverage in the Democratic party to wield greater national power than ever. Jefferson Davis was one of the principal architects of this process. As secretary of war in President Franklin Pierce's cabinet he helped persuade a reluctant Pierce to cave in to Southern demands for repeal of the Missouri Compromise restriction on slavery in the territories north of 36°30'. Pierce endorsed repeal as a party measure; so did Senator Stephen A. Douglas of Illinois, who knew that he would need Southern votes if he expected to win the presidency. Patronage and pressure induced just enough Northern Democrats to vote for the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854 to obtain its passage.

This act, which opened the opportunity for slavery to expand into Kansas, turned out to be the first of several Pyrrhic victories for the South. It drove tens of thousands of angry Northern Democratic-voters out of the party and gave birth to the Republican party, which by 1856 became the second major party in the North. Running on the Wilmot Proviso platform of excluding slavery from the territories, the Republicans carried most Northern states in the presidential election of 1856. Democrat James

"Tell mother I died for lower tariffs."

CAUTION!!

COLORED PEOPLE

OF BOSTON, ONE & ALL,

You are hereby respectfully CAUTIONED and advised, to avoid conversing with the

Watchmen and Police Officers of Boston,

For since the recent ORDER OF THE MAYOR & ALDERMEN, they are empowered to act as

KIDNAPPERS

AND

Slave Catchers,

And they have already been actually employed in KIDNAPPING, CATCHING, AND KEEPING SLAVES. Therefore, if you value your LIBERTY, and the *Welfare of the Fugitives* among you, *Shun* them in every possible manner, as so many *HOUNDS* on the track of the most unfortunate of your race.

Keep a Sharp Look Out for KIDNAPPERS, and have TOP EYE open.

APRIL 24, 1851.

Southerners were shocked at the support for John Brown manifested in the North

Battles and Leaders of the Civil War

Chief Justice Roger B. Taney presided over a Southern-dominated court which extended powerful Federal protection to the institution of slavery.

Library of Congress

Buchanan owed his victory to solid Southern support plus three key Northern states.

In Kansas, open warfare between proslavery and antislavery settlers spilled over into the halls of Congress, where fistfights broke out between Northern and Southern representatives, members came armed to the floor of Congress, and South Carolinian Preston Brooks caned Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts into unconsciousness at his seat in the Senate. These violent confrontations all occurred over the issue of slavery—not the tariff, or the bank, or railroads, or any other economic issue. And whenever it appeared that the settlers in Kansas might choose to exclude slavery when they became a state, Southerners favored the use of federal power to prevent them from doing so.

Presidents Pierce's and Buchanan's actions—and non-actions—favored the proslavery side in Kansas. Under heavy Southern pressure, Buchanan went so far in 1858 as to endorse the fraudulently ratified Lecompton constitution to bring Kansas into the Union as a slave state. Kansas "is at this moment," the president told Congress, "as much a slave state as Georgia or South Carolina."[24] This was too much for most remaining Northern Democrats, who followed Douglas' leadership and broke with the president to defeat the Lecompton constitution.

Each incident in the Kansas controversy propelled more Northern voters into the Republican party. So did the Supreme Court's *Dred Scott* decision in 1857, in which five Southern and one Northern Democratic justices overturned precedents to rule that Congress had no power to prohibit slavery in the territories. This ruling made slavery legal not only in Kansas but also in every other territory. But the right to take slaves

into territories would remain dubious unless the territorial legislatures enacted and enforced a slave code (as did New Mexico and Utah). In Kansas, where antislavery settlers were in a clear majority by 1858, there was faint chance of that. So Southern politicians made their boldest bid yet to use national power in the interest of slavery. Senator Jefferson Davis introduced a resolution declaring that "it is the duty of the Federal Government there to afford [slavery] . . . the needful protection, and if experience should at any time prove that the judiciary does not possess power to insure adequate protection, it will then become the duty of Congress to supply such deficiency."[25] Davis and his colleagues served notice that they would insist on incorporating this demand for a federal slave code into the 1860 Democratic platform.

Meanwhile the abolitionist John Brown, who had gained experience and notoriety as an antislavery guerrilla fighter in Kansas, led a quixotic but violent raid to seize the Federal armory at Harpers Ferry in Virginia. He planned to arm the slaves and foment a chain reaction of slave uprisings throughout the South. The raid was a total failure: Brown and most of his followers were captured or killed; Brown was hanged. This affair sent shock waves of fear and outrage through the South. It also confirmed Southern convictions that loss of control of the national government would be fatal. U.S. Marines commanded by Robert E. Lee and J.E.B. Stuart had captured Brown. But what if the Federal government had been in Republican hands? Southerners equated John Brown with all abolitionists and abolitionists with the "Black Republicans."

The Brown raid formed the backdrop of a bitter contest for Speaker of the House in the 1859-1860 session of Congress. The Republican candidate gained a plurality but not the necessary majority of votes. For eight weeks the donnybrook went on. Congressmen hurled bitter insults at each other, and one observer reported with perhaps some exaggeration that on the floor of the House "the only persons who do not have a revolver and a knife are those who have two revolvers." A Southerner wrote that a good many slave-state congressmen wanted a shoot-out in the House; they "are willing to fight the question out, and settle it right there . . . . I can't help wishing the Union dissolved and we had a Southern confederacy."[26] At one point during the contest, the governor of South Carolina wrote to one of his state's representatives: "If you upon consultation decide to make the issue of force in Washington, write or telegraph me, and I will have a regiment in Washington in the shortest possible time."[27]

The Speakership fight was finally settled by election of a nonentity. A few weeks later, Southern delegates walked out of the Democratic National Convention when Northern Democrats refused to accept a platform endorsing a federal slave code for the territories. All efforts to reunite the severed party failed, and the bolters nominated a "Southern Rights" candidate. This ensured the election of Abraham Lincoln, who carried every Northern state and therefore the election. For the South, this was the handwriting on the wall. They had lost control of the government, probably permanently. It was not state rights they had contended for in this contest. It was national power, power they had previously held and had used to secure the Fugitive Slave Law, the Kansas-Nebraska Act, the Dred Scott decision, and other measures

to protect slavery. But every such victory had driven more Northern voters into the anti-slave power camp, which finally elected a president who believed slavery a "monstrous injustice" that should be "placed in the course of ultimate extinction." So seven slave states left the Union and formed the Confederate States of America.

When the spokesman for the Sons of Confederate Veterans said that "the cause of the war was secession, and the cause of secession could have been any number of things," he was half right and half wrong. The cause of secession was one specific thing: the Southern response to the election of a president and party they feared as a threat to slavery. The cause of the war was indeed secession, but it did not make war inevitable. A series of decisions and actions by men on both sides brought on the war.

The Northern people and their government could have acquiesced in the division of the United States into two nations. Some Northerners did propose to "let the erring sisters depart in peace." But most were not willing to accept the dismemberment of the nation. They feared that toleration of disunion in 1861 would create a fatal precedent to be invoked by disaffected minorities in the future, perhaps by the losing side in another presidential election, until the United States dissolved into a dozen petty, squabbling, hostile autocracies. The great experiment in republican government launched in 1776 would collapse, proving the contention of European monarchists and aristocrats that this upstart republic across the Atlantic could not last. "The doctrine of secession is anarchy," declared a Cincinnati newspaper in an editorial similar to many others in the North. "If the minority have the right to break up the Government at pleasure, because they have not had their way, there is an end of all government."[28]

Even the lame-duck President Buchanan, in his last message to Congress in December 1860, said that the Union was not "a mere voluntary association of States, to be dissolved at pleasure." The founders of the nation "never intended to implant in its bosom the seeds of its own destruction, nor were they guilty of the absurdity of providing for its own dissolution." If secession was legitimate, said Buchanan, the Union became "a rope of sand.... The hopes of the friends of freedom throughout the world would be destroyed.... Our example for more than eighty years would not only be lost, but it would be quoted as conclusive proof that man is unfit for self-government."[29]

No one held these convictions more strongly than Abraham Lincoln. "Perpetuity ... is the fundamental law of all national governments," he declared in his inaugural address on March 4, 1861. "No State, upon its own mere motion, can lawfully get out of the Union." Two months later, Lincoln told his private secretary that "the central idea pervading this struggle is the necessity that is upon us, of proving that popular government is not an absurdity. We must settle this question now, whether in a free government the minority have the right to break up the government whenever they choose. If we fail it will go far to prove the incapability of the people to govern themselves."[30]

But even this refusal to countenance the legitimacy of secession did not make war inevitable. Moderates on both sides sought a compromise formula. Nothing availed to stay the course of secession in the seven lower South states. But the other eight slave states were still in the Union when Lincoln took the oath of office on March 4, 1861. He hoped to keep them there by assurances that he had no right or intention to interfere with slavery in the states and by refraining from hostile action against the Confederate states, even though they had seized all federal property and arms within their borders—except Fort Sumter and three less important forts. By a policy of watchful waiting, of maintaining the status quo, Lincoln hoped to allow passions to cool and enable Unionists to regain influence in the lower South. But this hope was doomed. Genuine Unionists had all but disappeared in the lower South, and Fort Sumter became a flash point of contention.

A large brick fortress on an artificial granite island in the middle of Charleston Bay, Fort Sumter could not be seized by the Confederates as easily as other federal property had been, even though it was defended by only some eighty-odd soldiers. Lincoln came under great pressure from conservatives and upper South Unionists to yield the fort as a gesture of peace and goodwill that might strengthen Southern Unionism. After leaning in this direction for a time, Lincoln concluded that to give up Sumter would do the op-
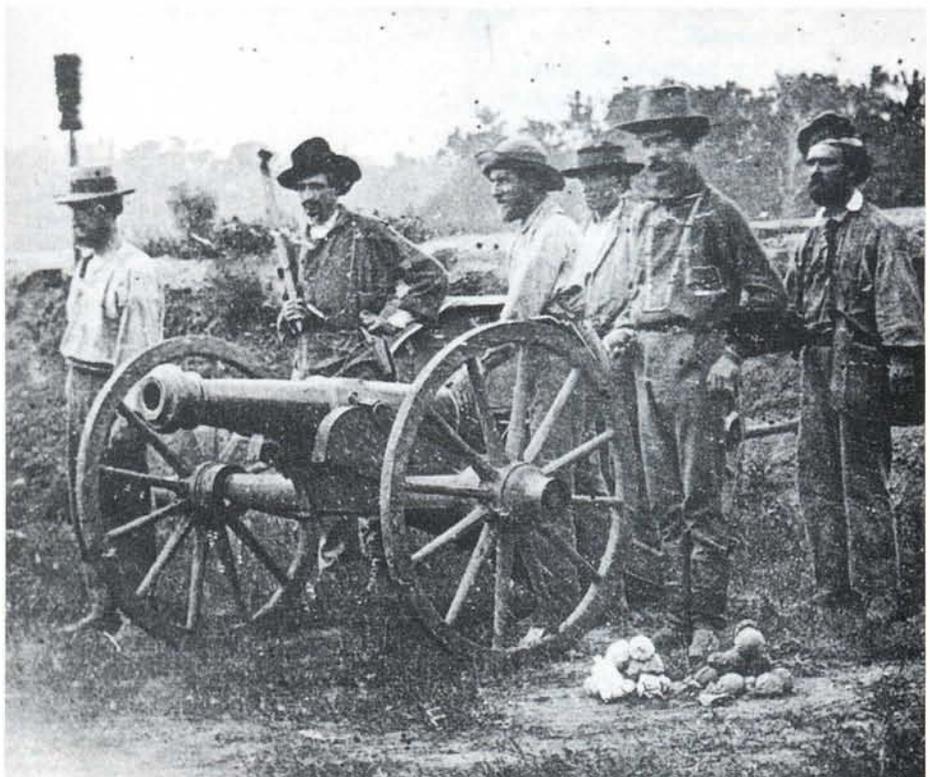
Violence broke out between those for and against the expansion of slavery into the territories. Here members of the Kansas Free State Battery are photographed at Topeka in 1856. *Kansas State Historical Society*

posite; it would demoralize Unionists and strengthen the Confederacy. Fort Sumter had become the master symbol of sovereignty. To yield it would constitute *de facto* recognition of Confederate sovereignty. It would probably encourage European nations to grant diplomatic recognition to the Confederate nation. It would make a mockery of the national government's profession of constitutional authority over its own property.

So Lincoln devised an ingenious plan to put the burden of decision for war or peace on Jefferson Davis' shoulders. The garrison at Fort Sumter was about to run out of provisions in April 1861. Giving advance notice of his intentions, Lincoln sent a fleet toward Charleston with supplies and reinforcements. If the Confederates allowed unarmed boats to bring in "food for hungry men," the warships would stand off and the reinforcements would return north. But if Southern artillery fired on the fleet, the ships and the fort would fire back. In effect, Lincoln flipped a coin and told Davis: "Heads I win; tails you lose." If the Confederate guns fired first, the South would stand convicted of starting a war. If they let the supplies go in, the American flag would continue to fly over Fort Sumter. The Confederacy would lose face; Unionists would take courage.

Davis did not hesitate. He considered it vital to assert the Confederacy's sovereignty. He also hoped that the outbreak of a shooting war would force the states of the upper South to join their fellow slave states. Davis ordered Brigadier General Pierre G.T. Beauregard, commander of Confederate troops at Charleston, to open fire on Fort Sumter before the supply ships got there. At 4:30 a.m. on April 12, Confederate artillery started the Civil War by firing on Fort Sumter. After a thirty-three-hour bombardment in which the Confederates fired four thousand rounds and the skeleton crew in the fort replied with a thousand—killing no one on either side in the first clash of this bloodiest of wars—the burning fort lowered the American flag in surrender. As Lincoln put it four years later in his second inaugural address: "Both [sides] deprecated war; but one of them would *make* war rather than let the nation survive; and the other would *accept* war rather than let it perish. And the war came."[31]

JAMES M. MCPHERSON is the George Henry Davis Professor of American History at Princeton University, where he has taught since 1962. He has authored a dozen books, mostly on the Civil War era, including *Battle Cry of Freedom,* which won the Pulitzer prize in 1989, and *For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War*, which won the 1998 Lincoln Prize. He is currently working on a book on the Antietam Campaign as a key turning point in the war.

NOTES:

1. Roy P. Basler, ed., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln,* 9 vols. (New Brunswick, NJ, 1953-1955), VIII, p. 332.

2. Dunbar Rowland, ed., *Jefferson Davis, Constitutionalist: His Papers and Speeches,* 10 vols. (Jackson, Miss., 1923), V, p. 72.

3. Augusta *Daily Constitutionalist*, March 30, 1861.

4. Jefferson Davis, *The Rise and Fall of the Confederate Government,* 2 vols. (Da Capo Press reprint: New York, 1990), I, vii, pp. 67, 156; Alexander H. Stephens, *A Constitutional View of the Late War between the States,* 2 vols. (Philadelphia, 1868-1870), I, p. 10.

5. Charles A. Beard and Mary R. Beard, *The Rise of American Civilization,* 2 vols. (New York, 1930), II, p. 53.

6. Frank Lawrence Owsley, "The Irrepressible Conflict," in Twelve Southerners, *I'll Take My Stand* (New York, 1930), p. 74.

7. Avery Craven, "Coming of the War Between the States: An Interpretation," in Craven, *An Historian and the Civil War* (Chicago, 1964, reprinted from 1936), pp. 28-9; Randall cited in Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., "The Causes of the American Civil War: A Note on Historical Sentimentalism," *Partisan Review,* XVI (1949), reprinted in Hans L. Trefousse, ed., *The Causes of the Civil War* (New York, 1971), p. 83.

8. Cited by Schlesinger, "The Causes of the American Civil War,'" in Trefousse, ed., *The Causes of the Civil War,* 83.

9. *Newsweek,* October 8, 1990, pp. 62-3.

10. Quoted in Norman K. Risjord, *The Old Republicans: Southern Conservatism in the Age of Jefferson* (New York, 1965), p. 242.

11. George E. Baker, ed., *The Works of William H. Seward,* 5 vols. (New York, 1853-1884). IV, pp. 289-92.

12. Basler, ed., *Collected Works of Lincoln,* II, p. 461.

13. Charleston *Mercury,* Feb. 1, 1858.

14. William Grimball to Elizabeth Grimball, Nov. 20, 1860, Berkley Grimball to Elizabeth Grimball, Dec. 8, 1860, John Berkley

Grimball Papers, Perkins Library, Duke University.

15. "Declaration of Causes Which Induced the Secession of South Carolina," in Frank Moore, ed., *The Rebellion Record,* Vol. I, "Documents," 4.

16. William Nugent to Eleanor Nugent, Sept. 7, 1863, in My *Dear Nellie: The Civil War Letters of William L. Nugent,* ed. William M. Cash and Lucy Somerville Howarth (Jackson, Miss., 1977), p. 132.

17. *Congressional Globe,* 25th Cong., 2nd Sess. (1838), Appendix, 61-62; *Senate Documents,* 28th Cong., 1st. Sess., No. 341 (1844).

18. Basler, ed., *Collected Works of Lincoln,* II, p. 255.

19. *The Debates of the Constitutional Convention of the State of Iowa,* 2 vols. (Davenport, 1857), II, pp. 681-82; *Congressional Globe,* 34 Cong., 3rd Sess., Appendix, 53; 30 Cong., 2nd Sess., Appendix, 103.

20. New York *Evening Post,* Nov. 8, 1847, April 14, 1857.

21. Quoted in William L. Barney, *The Road to Secession: A New Perspective on the Old South* (New York, 1972), pp. 105-06.

22. Quoted in Lacy K. Ford, Jr., *Origins of Southern Radicalism: The South Carolina Upcountry, 1800-1860* (New York., 1988), p. 369.

23. Michael F. Holt, *The Political Crisis of the 1850s* (New York, 1978), p. 54; William J. Cooper, Jr., *The South and the Politics of Slavery 1828-1856* (Baton Rouge, 1978), p. 239.

24. James D. Richardson, ed., *Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents,* 20 vols. (Washington, 1897), VII, p. 3010.

25. *Congressional Globe,* 36 Cong., 1st Sess., 658.

26. Quoted in David M. Potter, *The Impending Crisis, 1848-1861* (New York, 1976), p. 389; and in Allan Nevins, *The Emergence of Lincoln,* 2 vols. (New York, 1950), II, pp. 121-22.

27. Nevins, *Emergence of Lincoln,* II, p. 122.

28. Cincinnati *Daily Commercial,* May 6, 1861, in Howard C. Perkins ed., *Northern Editorials on Secession* (New York 1942), p. 183.

29. Richardson, *Messages and Papers* of the *Presidents,* 10 vol. edition (Washington, 1897), V, pp. 628-37.

30. Basler, ed., *Collected Works of Lincoln,* IV, pp. 264-65; Michael Burlingame and John R. Turner Ettlinger, eds., *Inside Lincoln's White House: The Complete Civil War Diary of John* Hay (Carbondale, Ill., 1997), p. 20.

31. Basler, ed., *Collected Works of Lincoln,* VIII, p. 332.