

# Why the Civil War Happened and What We Can Learn From It

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The underlying causes of the American Civil War were systemic and long-standing. However, in the decades before the Civil War, the failures of the political party system, the states, and the branches of the federal government to deal decisively with rising tensions made war inevitable. This course will discuss the major political events from 1800 to 1860 (with emphasis on the 1850s) as they led to war. In this class, we will address three fundamental questions:

1. Why did the crises of the Early Republic NOT result in Civil War or other dissolution of the Union between 1790 and 1860?
2. What was different about the crisis in the late 1850s that resulted in the Civil War?
3. Was it misguided to focus on the preservation of the Union above all other objectives during this period?

## Session One

In his 1796 Farewell Address, George Washington warned against what he saw as threats to the fragile Republic over which he had presided for eight years; these threats included disunity, the rise of sectionalism, and the emergence of political parties. His concerns provide the framework for looking at the questions addressed in this course.

I posit two historiographic approaches to the study of this period.

1. Economic/technological change drives history. These changes create challenges to the social structure of the society, which in turn create challenges to the political institutions and processes. Failure by the political system to deal with these challenges creates the kind of instability that leads to war.
2. Three forces were at work in America during this period: industrialization, slavery, and westward expansion. Any two of these trend toward stability. It is the presence of all three of them that create the conditions that lead to war.

In this session, I will trace the economic/technological developments of early 19<sup>th</sup> century. In addition, I will look at the growth of the slave-based labor system of the South. We'll look at the social and cultural consequence of these economic changes. Then we'll examine the pursuit of westward expansion that led the United States to triple in land area and increase its population ten-fold between 1790 and 1850.

## **Session Two**

In this class we will examine some of the initial challenges to the early Republic as it grappled with the issues Washington examined in his Farewell Address. The early struggles between the Federalists and the Democratic-Republicans over such issues as the power relationship between the Federal government and the states and the power of the branches of government within the Federal system occupied the minds of leaders during the first few decades of the Republic.

With the American victory over Mexico in the 1846-1848 Mexican War, the United States achieves its goal of becoming a continental nation. Then, the trouble started.

The clash of the three forces I identified earlier – industrialization, slavery, and westward expansion – began in earnest after 1848. In this session, we'll look at the challenges of the early 1850s – The Compromise of 1850, the 1853 publication of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act and "Bleeding Kansas," and the 1856 caning of Charles Sumner on the floor of the United States Senate. We'll look at the two presidential elections during this period – 1852 and 1856 – and at the dissolution of the Whig Party and the emergence of the Republican Party in 1854.

## **Session Three**

In this class we'll pick up the story in the mid-1850s. We'll look at the 1857 Dred Scott decision, the 1858 Lincoln Douglas Debates, the 1859 raid on the Federal armory at Harpers Ferry, Virginia, and the election of 1860.

We'll examine how the stresses of the earlier years of the Republic were dealt with by the political institutions and by strong leaders, including the "Great Triumvirate" of this era – United States Senators John C. Calhoun, Henry Clay, and Daniel Webster. As the political institutions faltered and then failed in the 1850s, and as the "Great Triumvirate" died in the early 1850s, the elements that held things together for the previous 50 years proved not to be up to the challenges of the 1850s. War resulted from the inability of the political system to adapt to the economic and social changes that characterize this era.

We'll talk a little about the role of compromise in politics. On the one hand, compromise helps things run smoothly, both in government and in life. On the other hand, compromise can paper over real and significant differences that might best be dealt with. Would it have been better to tear off the band-aid and rip open the wound?

And finally, we'll address what we can learn from this history. When the political institutions created to resolve disagreements and generate compromise in a society aren't able to fulfill these obligations, Civil War may very well be the result. We need only look around to see our current political dysfunction – at the federal level in all three branches of government, and in too many of our states. Our political party system is struggling and we have, as a people, have largely disengaged from civic life as technology allows us to live and work in a self-generated bubble. When extremist groups promise to meet our current dysfunction with violence, calling for a Second Civil War as we have seen in the past year, we are in perilous times and we need to learn from our history.