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The True Cause of the Civil War: State Rights or Slavery?

The American Civil War was fought between 1861 and 1865. The war was fought to determine whether the Union would survive or whether the Confederates would attain independence. This was after seven Southern “slave” states declared their secession from the Union and formed the Confederate States of America. The Confederates grew to include 11 states but no foreign country recognized their statehood or sovereignty. At the end of the war, the Union triumphed and the Southern states remained in the Union.

The root cause of the American Civil War is perhaps the most controversial topic of American history. A 2011 Pew Research Center poll indicated that 48 percent of Americans attribute state rights as the main cause, 38 percent claim it was an issue of slavery while the rest thought that both contributed or were not sure (Pew Research Center, 2011).

Long before the Civil War began, there were various disagreements between the northern and southern states. Some of these issues included taxation, internal improvements, tariffs, and state versus federal rights. While the North had made remarkable steps of industrialization, the South remained predominantly agrarian and largely dependent on slave labor.

Slavery was the main reason for the American Civil War. As John Pierce points out in his article “*The Reasons for Secession: A Documentary Study*,” the best way of establishing the root

causes of the war is looking at the primary documents. The primary documents are the “Articles of Secession” that every state used to declare their intention to secede from the Union. In the article, Pierce notes that apart from the “Articles of Secession” four states namely Georgia, Texas, South Carolina and Mississippi went further to issue additional “Declaration of Causes” documents where they explained their decisions to leave the Union (Pierce, 2014).

The main reason why slavery was the main cause is that slavery was defended by all Declarations of Causes as being the source of labor for their vast plantations. Thus, without slavery the South would face tough economic times as productivity of the states would go down leading to poor economic status of the citizens.

Secondly, the states defended slavery arguing that owning slaves earned a person some prestige and with declining cotton prices, slaves remained one of the main sources of a person’s corporate and personal wealth. Some of the states such as Mississippi actually wanted slavery to be expanded. The Confederates also claimed that abolitionism spearheaded by Lincoln was being used as a method of inciting violent uprisings (Pierce, 2014).

Conclusion

The claim that States’ Rights were superior is not grounded in the Declarations. Actually, among the factors considered to fall under States’ Rights centered on the issue of slavery. The failure of the Northern states to honor the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 was seen as a panacea for the Southern states to seek secession. The Act mandated the Northern states to return fugitive slaves back to the South. With the failure of the Northern states to honor the act, the Southern states then concluded that the Union was a compact, which could be annulled whenever a state was not satisfied with what they received from other states or the Federal Government.

Works Cited

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