

Course: Civilization

Sixth Semester Lectures in American Civilization
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Antebellum America: The Road to the Civil War

I. Introduction

The term Antebellum comes from Latin and it literary means “before the war”. “Ante” means “before” and “bellum” means “war”. The term is usually used to refer to the era that precede wars and in the case of “antebellum America”; the term is used to refer to the period in the American history that expands between the Constitutional Convention of 1787 and the start of the Civil War in 1861. The era was mainly characterized by very intense political, cultural and economic conflicts between the Northern and Southern states of the country. It is commonplace for many students to think that the Civil War (1861-1865) between the Northern and Southern states was chiefly over the immoral question of slavery and that the military confrontation had one sole aim; abolition of slavery. In response to this misconception, this course is going to argue that the economic conflict between the two belligerents (Northerners Vs Southerners) of the Civil War was the chief cause of the armed conflict between them.

II. Sectionalism

The Civil War was not between two races or two classes but rather was between two regions, North VS South .The polarization between the North and the South of the country in terms of divergent sectional interests started to manifest itself in the national political discourse since the early days of the Constitutional Convention of 1787. The first seeds of opposing interests was about the question of representation in the legislature when the Northern free states and the Southern slave states disputed over adding the number of the enslaved persons to the population total to determine the size of the southern electorate. On the face of it, the conflict appears political but it undoubtedly had serious economic dimensions as the two sides of the conflicts stood for

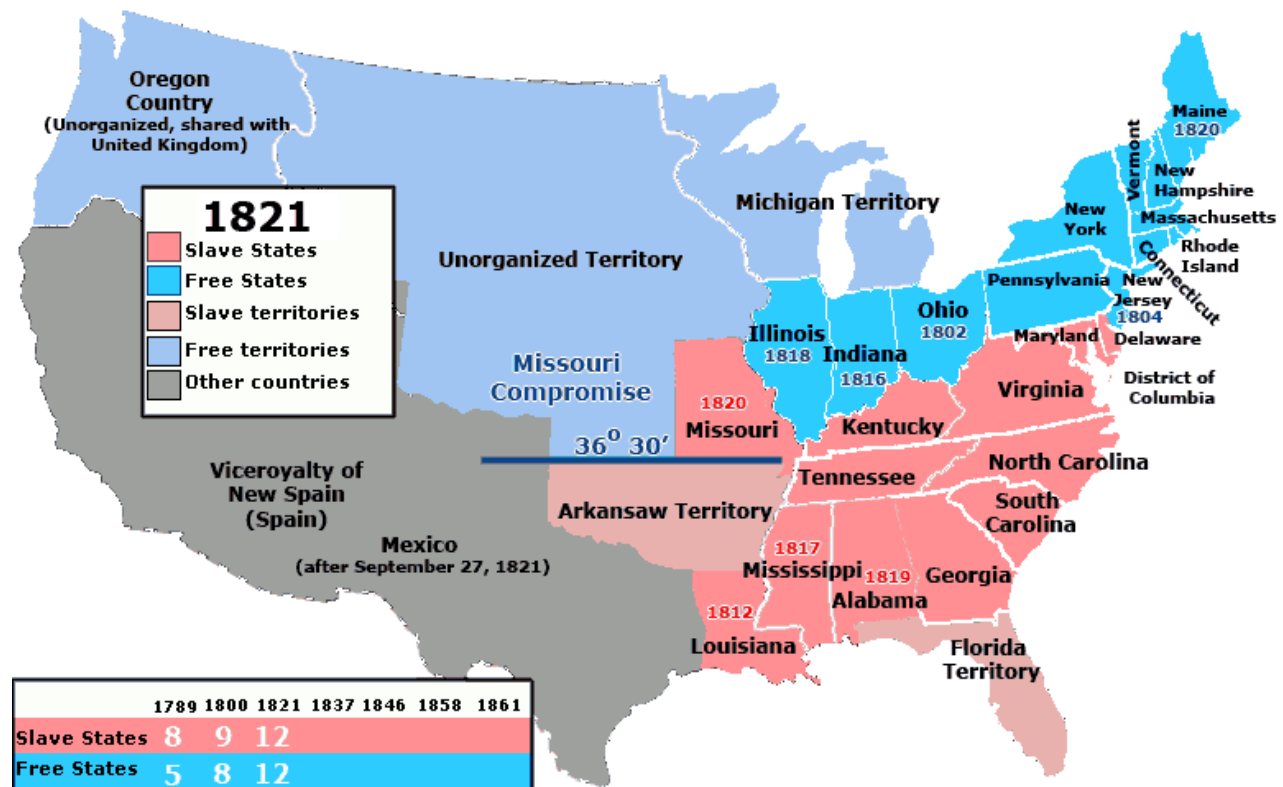
divergent economic legislations in the Congress in the years that followed up. The Federal Legislature (Congress) was the arena that hosted the most acrimonious disputes where divergent interests and hopes of the two sections directly came to a face-to-face confrontation over specific economic policies.

II.1. Two Distinct Economies

Climate and geography had significantly shaped regional economies of the U.S during the early centuries after the age of discovery. The Physical geography had a profound impact on the Southerner's economic choice who opted for agriculture as their main economic activity. Warm weather, fertile soils, large plains, plentiful rainfall were all well suited to growing different crops in many Southern states like South Carolina and Virginia. Crops grown in the plantation system, such as cotton, sugar cane, tobacco and indigo were labor intensive and grown as cash crops (sold for moneymaking and not for personal subsistence). The North, however, was cold, had access to waterways, rich in natural resources in addition to a remarkable abundance of financial capital. These geographical and climatic features drove the North to opt for an industrial economy manufacturing different products such as textile, iron, shipbuilding, leather goods, firearms...etc.

The economic differences between the North and the South had separately drove the two regions to embrace different life forms, different family and social structures. The following map exhibits the two regions of the country in terms of Southern agrarian slave states versus Northern industrial free states. The map also draws the parallel 36°30' north which practically divided the country into two distinct regions after Missouri Compromise. The latter was enacted in 1820 and was a legislative arrangement between the Northern and Southern states through their representatives in Congress to decide about the expansion of slavery in the new territories. The expansion of slavery within this context was about political dominance in Congress as the number

of free/slave states will determine which region of the country (North or South) would have more representatives in the legislature. Essentially, the aim of Missouri Compromise was to preserve a certain balance of power in Congress between the Northern industrial free states and the Southern agricultural slave states.



II-2- Economic Politics during the Antebellum

Differences in political theory in general and in political economy in specific were very apparent among political and business elites of the two regions of the country. The first political factions of the country were brought to life during the Constitutional Convention when certain Founding Fathers contended over the issue of how much power to vest in the federal government. Alexandre Hamilton, from the North, advocated for a strong federal government with many

powers whereas James Madison (and Thomas Jefferson though did not attended the Convention), from the South, advocated for the principle of states' rights which argued against establishing a strong federal government but rather called for maintaining sovereignty at the state level.

The two political factions, which became known as Federalists (sometimes referred to as Hamiltonians) and Anti-federalists (sometimes referred to as Jeffersonians) respectively, continue to argue during the antebellum over many questions such as the creation of a central bank, the expansion of slavery, and the protection of industry through a protective tariff policy. The latter is the issue that this course will bring attention to as it deems it the real issue that brought the two sides (North and South) to a face-to-face military confrontation.

Jeffersonians (Anti-federalists)	VS	Hamiltonians (Federalists)
States' Rights		Strong Central Government
Free Trade		Protect Industry
Anti-Central Banking		Pro-Central Banking

III- Protectionism

Protectionism in economics is a government's policy that aims at protecting the local (national) producers from foreign competition and it is usually done through imposing high tariffs on imported products. Protectionism in Antebellum America is believed to manifest itself in economic policies after President James Monroe's famous annual speech to Congress in 1823. Monroe's speech advocated for isolating the country from other powers of the world (Europe mainly) and

that by calling other nations not to interfere in the western hemisphere of the planet which Monroe believed was a sphere for American influence.

Senator Henry Clay of Kentucky followed Monroe's doctrine with an economic plan, which he called the "American System". In a speech delivered to Congress in 1824, Clay coupled his economic plan with the politics of the day (isolationism), and called for isolating (protecting) the American industry from the European competition (the British mainly). The American industry during the antebellum was blossoming and was a far cry from its European counterpart which was comparatively more modern. Northern American industrial plant during the Antebellum varied from textile and iron mills to flour milling and from leather and shoemaking to shipbuilding and fisheries. Clay's plan remains one of the most government-sponsored economic programs in the history of the country that aimed to help boost the national economy.

Clay's economic system consisted essentially of three strengthening parts:

A protective tariff to stimulate and protect the locally produced items from foreign competition, a national (central) bank to promote commerce and business, and lastly federal subsidies to build roads, canals, bridges and other necessary infrastructural improvements (funds for these subsidies will be generated mainly from the tariffs imposed on imported products). This program was largely a prime interest to the business community of the Northern states namely the states of Pennsylvania and Massachusetts whose businessmen were pouring Congress with petitions on the question of tariffs clearly requesting to impose duties on foreign products for the purpose of protecting their businesses. It is important to note here that the European products (the British mainly) were very competitive because they were better in terms of both quality and price. Imposing tariffs on imports would surely raise the cost of importation and thus making the locally produced products cheaper and more affordable to the average Americans. Protective tariffs aim

primarily at protecting the local businesses from foreign competition. They aim also to provide revenues to the government on the one hand and to launch infrastructural projects to promote interstates commerce and business, which by its turn will create job opportunities, on the other hand.

The tariff policies in Congress during the Antebellum was highly sectional: the North sustained high tariffs while the South favored low tariffs. Northern representatives, who happened to outnumber their Southern fellows and that due to the proportional representation, controlled Congress during the Antebellum. The Northerners were in favor of high tariffs because they did not want foreign products to come into the country. Thus, they pushed to levy many tariffs across this period. This policy of protective tariffs put the Southern business in jeopardy due to the losses this policy brought to their exports. The South wanted low tariffs on imports and exports since its exports of cotton, tobacco and rice accounted for around two thirds of the American total exports to foreign markets during the 1830's. Therefore, this policy was in the benefit of the North at the expense of the South. The chief economic interests in the South had a strong export-orientation and therefore representatives from the South, who were representing the Southern agrarian community, were passionately against high tariffs.

III.1. The Struggle over the Tariff Policy

The Southern states counted around 8 million whites and more than 4 million black slaves, while the North's population totaled 19 million whites and ¼ million blacks. The new territories that started to emerge in the West of the country were settled by people whose economic interests were not with the South. This explains why the Southern states found themselves repetitively outvoted in Congress, especially on commercial regulations. Below is a list of the most controversial protective tariffs passed by Congress during the Antebellum, which stirred

contentions between the Northern and Southern states and eventually paved the road to the Civil War.

The Tariff of 1816

In Fact, the tendency towards protectionism did not start with Monroe's doctrine and Clay's American system, but it was even way before. In a mid of a wave of nationalism following the war of 1812 against Britain, Alexandre J. Dallas (the U.S secretary of treasury) advised to embrace a policy of protectionism against foreign products to help the American industry in case of an unexpected war with other powers takes place again. A committee was established in the House of Representatives recommending the adoption of this tariff, which is known also as Dallas Tariff. The Committee agreed to charge a series of 25 percent duties on imports and was intended to boost domestic manufacturing. The tariff did not meet serious controversies in the country because of the general circumstances of the country following the war of 1812 against Britain. In fact, the Tariff of 1816 did not aim only at protecting the local businesses but also to raise money to pay back the 1812 war debts, which was the reason why the Southern agrarian community did not express resentment or refusal. It is important to note here that the tariff of 1816 was widely supported by Northern manufacturers especially in states like Pennsylvania, New York and Ohio, which were home to many growing factories.

The Tariff of 1824

During the 1820s, with the development of science and technology and with the aggrandizement of the U.S, new natural resources were being exploited as the frontier expanded and the new techniques of the industrial revolution were being set up. At the heart of this development, there was the "American System". Henry clay's American System sought to bring together the three

economic sections of the country: agriculture, commerce and industry by implementing internal improvements such as road and canal building, and a national bank to boost manufacturing. Clay put the promotion of the American industry as a priority to protect it from foreign competition. Thus, he suggested an implementation of a protective fiscal policy as the main way out to raise funds for the government in order to embody his projects on the ground.

Clay was the Speaker of the House of Representatives and thus managed to influence the selection of members of the Committee on Manufacturers. John Tod, a very passionate protectionist from Pennsylvania, was installed as head of the Committee. Tod reported to the Congress the need to pass a protective tariff with a 35 percent duty on specific imported commodities such as iron and wool. Hostility among fervent representatives on both sides featured as has never been before. The cotton states disagreed on almost every detail of the tariff and decided to report to the Committee on Agriculture a report on the effects of this tariff of 1824 on the Southern economy. Southerners regarded the tariff as an imposition placed by one sector of the economy (Northern industrialists) upon the burden of another sector since (Southern agriculturists) as it will diminish the Southern exports because of the decrease in imports.

Congress eventually passed the tariff on May 22, 1824 leading to massive rise of complaints in the South with cotton-growers fearful of British retaliation for the increase in price. Southerners argued that the policy of protectionism would push Britain to try other markets and away from the United States Southern commodities. This would enormously decrease the Southern profits and would lead to a regional chaos, and thus argued for a return to trade liberalization and open door policies.

The Tariff of 1828 (Tariff of Abominations)

Although the enactment of the tariff of 1824, the British products were still pouring in the American markets and merchandized in relatively low prices. Northern manufacturers, especially in the areas of Ohio and Pennsylvania, requested from Congress to pass other protective tariffs but with tougher measures in order to terminate the importation of European commodities. Under such pressure from the Northern manufacturing community, President John Quincy Adams accepted to sign a tariff on May 19 but with hesitancy because of the Southern potential antagonism. This tariff placed a very high duty on imported manufactured goods reaching 50 percent on specific imported items. The Vice President, John C. Calhoun, from South Carolina, stood firmly against the tariff and expressed his outrage due to the expected losses in the Southern profits.

With the Southerners' antipathy in general and the cotton producers' pressure in specific, John C. Calhoun, as Vice President, could not publicly contest against the president. Anonymously, Calhoun wrote what is called "South Carolina Exposition and Protest" which was an official complaint addressed from the government of South Carolina to the Federal government of the U.S against the Tariff of 1828 (called also by the Southerners the Tariff of Abominations).

"... the whole system of legislation imposing duties on imports,--not for revenue, but for the protection of one branch of industry at the expense of others,--is unconstitutional, unequal, and oppressive, and calculated to corrupt the public virtue and destroy the liberty of the Country..."

The document clearly condemns the tariff and deems it unconstitutional as it favors the Northern manufacturers over the Southern Cotton planters. The Southerners argued that the American

Constitution does not give Congress the right to impose tariffs for the sake of protection but solely for the aim of raising revenues to the government.

The documents also mentions what is known as the Doctrine of Nullification which is, to Calhoun, the right of the state to declare a federal law void and null within its jurisdiction in case, that given state, deems that law inconsistent with the general principles of the Constitution. This doctrine draws in fact on the principle of states' rights which argues that the states, as creators of the Constitution and thus of the Federal government, should have the final power to decide the limits of the Federal government and should be the ones to whom the final interpretation of the Constitution belong. Therefore, the states may reject any Federal laws, which they believe are trespassing the government's Constitutional powers.

The Tariff of 1832 and the Nullification Crisis

Following the Southern bitter antagonism to the Tariff of 1828, Congress passed a new one in 1832 and was signed into law by President Jackson in an attempt to gratify the irritated cotton states. Though the rates of this new tariff system of 1832 was put back, in the main, to its levels which had been in place in 1824, the Southern states refused it on the whole and expressed very fierce rejection of it. In November 1832, and in response to the enactment of this Tariff of 1832, South Carolina endorsed the states' rights principle of "nullification," which was articulated by Calhoun, Jackson's Vice President, in his document known as South Carolina Exposition and Protest. The legislature of South Carolina officially then declared both tariffs of 1828 and 1832 null and void within its borders and that the states' customs will refuse to collect these duties. In December 1832, Calhoun followed South Carolina's Ordinance of Nullification with resignation from his office as Vice President and joined the Senate to express his anger and refusal of the protective policies.

The concept of Calhoun's nullification argue that states in due course should have the ultimate right to rule a federal law null and void if the states believe that Congress exceeded the powers assigned to it by the Constitution. Calhoun assumed that the tariffs in question trespassed the limits of federal power and that by limiting the rights of the states to exercise freely their commercial rights. In addition, The Constitution clearly assigns the Federal government the power to levy tariffs for the sake of raising funds and not for protecting one sector of economy at the expense of another. Calhoun pointed out that the thirteen states' acceptance to federate and enter in a compact by ratifying the Constitution did not take their states' rights away. To this regard, the man concluded that South Carolina had the right to deem the tariffs of 1828 and 1832 null and void within its borders because they were unconstitutional.

The incident of the Nullification Crisis was the first time in the American republic since Missouri Compromise of 1820 when sentiments of revolution and secession appeared after some legislative discontent related to a purely financial question (tariffs). This incident came to support the claim that Antebellum America's seeds of revolution were directly connected to matters other than the question of slavery. South Carolina was about to enter into a civil war against the federal government over economic paradoxical views. It is important here to mention that President Jackson requested from Congress permission to use force against South Carolina to bring its leaders to submission to the Federal will while South Carolina threatened to secede if the Federal government uses force against it.

Southerners in general and South Carolina in specific felt not welcome within the union and started looking at themselves as having quite inconsistent interests compared to that of the North. The South understood that it was not in need of the North, since it could purchase the commodities

it needed from Europe. However, the Northerners understood that the South was a promising market for their goods and thus the idea of secession for them was off the table. The revolution was inevitable three decades later, when the Southern states felt outraged because of what they considered a Northern lust to dominate Congress and thus dominating tariff policies.

In mid of fervent Southern rejection of Federal tariff policies, and in an attempt to maintain the union from collapse, Henry Clay outlined a new tariff system in response to South Carolina's Ordinance of Nullification. Calhoun accepted the outline and a Compromise Tariff was passed by Congress in 1833 which provided a gradual reduction of tariff rates over a period of ten years reaching those of 1816 (20 percent).

Morrill Tariff 1861

After July 1, 1842, by the end of the Compromise Tariff of 1833, the tariff rates returned to a uniform level of 20 percent (like that of 1816) on all articles. Obviously, the reduction took place very gradually from 1833 until 1842, whereas in the first six months of the year 1842 a sharp reduction in tariff rates took place. The tariff rates remained relatively low during the 1842's but in the four years that followed (1842– 1846) there was a return to the application of protection especially with tariff of 1842 (Black Tariff) which raised the tariff rates to around 40 percent. After 1846, a period of a relatively free trade era began with moderate protection. Congress was controlled by the Democrats whose Southern activists were very keen to free trade policies. The Northern manufacturers did not really oppose the free trade policies during this era (except in Pennsylvania) mainly because the American economy was prosperous during these times because of the protective policies between 1842 and 1846.

The economic crisis of 1857 had instigated a decrease in the revenue from Tariffs. It was used as pretext to react against the liberal policy of 1846 and 1857. In 1860, the Northern manufacturing community started calling to go back to protectionism. The Congress passed a tariff act and named it Morrill Tariff after Justin Morrill from Vermont. Moreover, the election of Abraham Lincoln, from the North, as president of the U.S in November 1860 added salt to injury. Lincoln in his campaign speech “A House Divided” stood against **the expansion** of slavery westward of the country.

Lincoln’s election was an occasion for the Southern states to declare secession from the union (South Carolina was the first to declare secession on December 20, 1860)) as they saw that the Northern take of liberty and business will prevail in Congress knowing that ending expansion of slavery would certainly mean a Northern majority in the Congress. It is very important to point out here that Lincoln was firmly against **the expansion** of slavery and not slavery per se. The following excerpts from some original documents of the day support the main claim of this paper which is that the two belligerents of the war (Northerners vs southerners) was not about the question of slavery per se but rather about control over Congress and thus over legislation.

Abraham Lincoln’s speech from the august 21, 1858, Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas Debate (re-featured in his first Inaugural Address on March 4, 1861)

I have no purpose, directly or indirectly, to interfere with the institution of slavery in the States where it exists. I believe I have no lawful right to do so, and I have no inclination to do so.

Lincoln's First Inaugural Address on March 4, 1861

*I trust this will not be regarded as a menace, but only as the declared purpose of
....The power confided to me will be used ... to collect the duties and imposts; but
beyond what may be necessary for these objects, there will be no invasion, no
using of force against or among the people anywhere*

**Lincoln's Letter to Horace Greeley (founder and editor of the New-York Tribune) August 22,
1862**

*My paramount object in this struggle is to save the Union, and is not either to
save or to destroy slavery. If I could save the Union without freeing any slave I
would do it, and if I could save it by freeing all the slaves I would do it; and if I
could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone I would also do that*

Jefferson Davis inauguration speech, February 1861 (Jefferson Davis was the president of the
Southern seceding states which were collectively known as the Confederate States)

*... An agricultural people, whose chief interest is the export of a commodity
required in every manufacturing country, our true policy is peace and the freest
trade which our necessities will permit. It is alike our interest, and that of all
those to whom we would sell and from whom we would buy, that there should be
the fewest practicable restrictions upon the interchange of commodities*

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