



The Opinion Pages

DISUNION

The Causes of the Civil War, 2.0

By Edward L. Ayers April 28, 2011 10:07 pm

Disunion follows the Civil War as it unfolded.

A new poll from the Pew Research Center reports that nearly half of Americans identify states' rights as the primary cause of the Civil War. This is a remarkable finding, because virtually all American textbooks and prominent historians emphasize slavery, as they have for decades. Even more striking, the poll shows young people put more stock in the states' rights explanation than older people. The 38 percent of Americans who believe slavery was mainly to blame find themselves losing ground.

Of course, there's no denying that states' rights played an important role as the language of secession. But how might historians convey a more precise, comparative sense of the role slavery played in the states' decision to secede? New computer-assisted techniques allow historians to draw clearer conclusions from immense amounts of data, including newspapers, public records and legislative proceedings. And few states left behind a better, more information-rich record of their secession debates than Virginia.

Virginia, a visitor from South Carolina during the secession crisis noted with exasperation, would "not take sides until she is absolutely forced." In retrospect, it may seem surprising that Virginia took months to decide what to do. The state, after all, had more enslaved people than any other, became famous as the capital of the Confederacy, suffered more battles than anywhere else, and held to the memory of the Lost Cause with a special devotion, long after the war had ended.

But in 1861 it was by no means clear what Virginia might do. After South

Carolina seceded in December 1860, quickly followed by six other states in the Lower South, Virginia's General Assembly responded by calling for a special election in February 1861. Each county in the state would send delegates to a convention to debate the matter thoroughly and then recommend a course of action for the Commonwealth. The great majority of the 152 delegates arrived in Richmond that winter as Unionists, expecting to find a way to save the nation, the state and slavery. Virginia's convention debated until April — so long, in fact, that secessionists built bonfires of protest in the streets of the city.

The weeks of debate in Richmond were transcribed by local reporters and then gathered and edited in 1965, totaling nearly 3,000 pages. Historians have long mined this record for material to support a wide range of arguments, but until recently it has been impossible to assess the debates as a whole — to measure, for example, exactly how often and in what contexts delegates invoked various words and phrases.

New computer-assisted tools and techniques can find and evaluate patterns of language and emphasis, otherwise hard to see, among those debates. Researchers at the University of Richmond have developed a computerized text that allows us to explore those hundreds of speeches over time and space, to find connections buried beneath parliamentary procedure and exasperating digressions. Those tools, available to the public online, also make it possible for people to explore the Virginia debates themselves, to address this enduring question with their own curiosity and ingenuity.

Some of the patterns in the speeches quickly undermine familiar arguments for Virginia's secession. Tariffs, which generations of would-be realists have seen as the hidden engine of secession, barely register, and a heated debate over taxation proves, on closer examination, to be a debate over whether the distribution of income from taxes on enslaved people should be shared more broadly across the state. Hotheads eager to fight the Yankees did not play a leading role in the months of debates; despite the occasional outburst, when delegates mentioned war they most often expressed dread and foreboding for Virginia. Honor turns out to be a flexible concept, invoked with equal passion by both the Unionist and secessionist sides. Virtually everyone in the convention agreed that states had the right to secede, yet

Unionists in Virginia won one crucial vote after another.

The language of slavery is everywhere in the debates. It appears as an economic engine, a means of civilizing Africans, an essential security against black uprisings and as a right guaranteed in the United States Constitution. Secessionists and Unionists, who disagreed on so much, agreed on the necessity of slavery, a defining feature of Virginia for over 200 years.

The language of slavery, in fact, became ever more visible as the crisis mounted to the crescendo of secession in mid-April. Slavery in Virginia, delegates warned, would immediately decay if Virginia were cut off from fellow states that served as the market for their slaves and as their political allies against the Republicans. A Virginia trapped, alone, in the United States would find itself defenseless against runaways, abolitionists and slave rebellions.

But the omnipresence of the language of slavery does not settle the 150-year debate over the relative importance of slavery and states' rights, for the language of rights flourished as well. The debate over the protection of slavery came couched in the language of governance, in words like "state," "people," "union," "right," "constitution," "power," "federal" and "amendment." Variants of the word "right," along with variants of "slave," appear once for every two pages in the convention minutes. When the Virginians talked of Union they talked of a political entity built on the security and sanction of slavery in all its dimensions, across the continent and in perpetuity.

Contrast this with white Republicans in the North, for whom the real issue was the threat slaveholders presented to the nation. For too long, Republicans argued, slaveholders had overridden popular majorities at home and in the United States as a whole, dragged the country into war, and corrupted the Supreme Court, the presidency and the Senate. The Republicans pointed out that only a quarter of white Southerners owned even a single slave and that the rest of Southern whites suffered from the dominion of slaveholders.

But the Republicans miscalculated, underestimating the unanimity of white Southerners, whatever their other divisions, over slavery. Entire states, not merely individuals, possessed and were possessed by slavery. Secessionists and Unionists in

Virginia sought to protect the single greatest unifying interest in the state — enslaved labor — with the single language they possessed for doing so, a language of political right. The South sought to protect slavery's interests in the only way available to them, through shifting their allegiance to a new federal system, the Confederate nation.

In short, the records of the Virginia secession debate demonstrate how the vocabularies of slavery and rights, entangled and intertwined from the very beginning of the United States, became one and the same in the secession crisis. Virginians saw themselves as victims, forced into action. Walter Leake, a delegate from Goochland County, lamented that “Northern fanaticism” had brazenly claimed “the power of the Federal Government for the purpose of advancing their selfish interests, and not for the purpose of saving the Constitution or advancing the rights and interests of all.”

The “disease which has called together this convention,” Leake lamented, was the North’s fixation on slavery. That fixation was not a mere “derangement; it is chronic, it is deep-seated,” and it must come to an end. “It is necessary for the Northern people to correct their sentiments upon the subject of slavery, it is necessary that they should abstain from intermeddling with the institution before any harmony or quiet can be restored.” No one could doubt who, or what, was to blame for the crisis of the Union.

Lincoln’s call for non-seceding states to contribute militia to put down the rebellion in South Carolina after the firing on Fort Sumter forced a choice. Virginia, willing to stand aside while the Union was dismantled, would not raise its hand against the “subjugation” of a “sister” slave state. If the federal government could coerce South Carolina it could coerce Virginia. The call for troops drove a choice between the North and the South and the secessionists seized that moment to push Virginia into disunion.

Perhaps, given new tools and perspectives, Americans can change the focus of our arguments about the “primary cause” of the Civil War. If the North fought to sustain the justice, power and authority of the federal government, the corollary, many assume, must be that the South fought for the opposite, for the power of the

states.

But the equation did not balance in that way: the North did not fight at first to end slavery, but the South did fight to protect slavery. It is vital that we use the tools newly available to us to grasp this truth in its immediacy and complexity, before it fades even further from view.

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