

# THE HARDEST WAR TO AVOID: U.S. CIVIL WAR

*By Ed O'Rourke*

The Civil War came and it went.  
Its reason for fighting, I never did get.  
-From the song, "With God On Our Side."

"The war... was an unnecessary condition of affairs, and might have been avoided if forbearance and wisdom had been practiced on both sides."

-Robert E. Lee

The United States chose to fight many wars. There was some popular sentiment for the Revolutionary War. The US had to fight the Axis Powers or see them conquer Europe and Asia. Other wars were by choice: in 1812 with Great Britain, 1848 with Mexico, 1898 with Spain, 1917 with Germany, 1965 with Vietnam, 1991 with Saddam Hussein and 2003 with Saddam Hussein again.

The US Civil War was the hardest to avoid. There were many cross issues: immigrants, the tariffs, priority on canals, roads and railroads. The main issue, of course, was slavery. Like abortion today, there was no room to compromise. In most other issues, Congressmen could split the difference and close the deal. Not here.

The biggest mistake at the Constitutional Convention was not considering that a state or states in a group would leave the Union once they joined. In other places in life, there are legal separation procedures, as for married people who can separate or divorce. Such an arrangement

would have avoided bloodshed and destruction. The Constitution was silent on departure. They probably never thought it would happen.

Since the United States started as a break away from Great Britain, the Southerners had a valid legal theory to leave the Union.

James M. McPherson's *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* describes the deeply felt feelings on both sides. The cotton economy and slavery was exemplified the Dutch disease, which is concentrating a national or regional economy around a single product. Cotton was to the South what petroleum is to Saudi Arabia today, the driving force. Cotton absorbed most available investment capital. It was easier to import manufactured goods than to make them locally. Since labor to grow and harvest cotton was simple, there was no need for a public school system.

As usual with exploitation, the exploiters sincerely think they are doing a favor for the oppressed that people outside their culture cannot understand. South Carolina senator James Hammond gave his famous "Cotton is king," speech on March 4, 1858. See these excerpts from page 196 in McPherson's book:

"In all social systems there must be a class to do the menial duties, to perform the drudgery of life...It constitutes the very mudsill of society...Such a class you must have, or your would not have that other class which leads progress, civilization,, and refinement...Your whole hireling class of manual laborers and 'operatives' as you call them are essentially slaves. The difference between us is, that our slaves are hired for life and are well compensated...yours are hired by the day, not cared for, and scantily compensated."

My theory is that the Civil War and emancipation did not help the black people as much as an avoided war. The late economist, John Kenneth Galbraith thought that by the 1880s slave owners would have had to start paying their slaves to stay on the job. Northern factories were booming and needed cheap labor. Emancipation was a tremendous psychological boost that only white people who have been in concentration camps could understand.

Since almost all the battles were fought in the South, black people and white faced an impoverished economy. What was worse was deliberate destruction by the Union Army that served no military purpose. Sherman's march through Georgia was necessary but his scorched earth policy was for vengeance only. The Union's deliberate destruction in Virginia's Shenandoah Valley was outside international law even then.

In all the great compromises, 1820, 1833 and 1850, there was never any serious consideration about what separation terms would have been acceptable. The nation shared the same language, legal structure, Protestant religion and history. At the same time, the North and the South were going their separate ways, in culture, the economy and the churches. In early 1861, the Presbyterian Church separated into two churches, one in the north and the other in the south. The other three large Protestant churches had separated before then. Slavery was the elephant in the room that crowded out all else.

What I never have seen in the history books was serious consideration or even mentioning the idea for a commission, Northerners, Southerners, economists, sociologists, and politicians to make recommendations for separation terms. Upon separation, Union states would repeal the fugitive slave laws. Southerners would have wanted to add more territory in the western states, Mexico, Cuba and the Caribbean. The US Navy would cut off additional slave imports from Africa. I imagine there would have been bloody skirmishes but not anything like the Civil War's 500,000 dead.

There would have to have been trade and travel treaties. There would have to be an agreed division of the US public debt. One case where separation was as bloody as the US was Pakistan and India when the British left. The British were good at exploitation but did little to prepare for a peaceful transition. Today there is only one port of entry along the 1,500 mile border. Northerners and Southerners could have done a better job.

Of course, since emotions were inflamed, the hypothetical commission may have been unsuccessful. The country was deeply divided. By 1861, the four main Protestant churches had split, with the Presbyterians the last to make the break. With Abraham Lincoln's election in 1860, it was way too late to negotiate anything. The commission would have had to been established several years before 1860.

My feeling is that even if the US would split into several entities, that industrial progress and prosperity would have continued although more slowly. If the Confederates would have left Fort Sumter alone, there would have been skirmishes but no war. The Fort Sumter incident was something like the Pearl Harbor attack, the spark to the powder keg.

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Main Source:

McPherson James M. Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era ,Ballantine Books, 1989, 905 pages.