

# One hundred and fifty years since the US Civil War

Tom Eley, David North  
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This week marks the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Confederate attack on Fort Sumter, in Charleston Harbor, South Carolina, which began the Civil War between the Union and the Confederacy—an epochal event in American and world history.

Six weeks after the inauguration of Abraham Lincoln as president, the Confederacy, formed by 11 slave-owning states, entered into armed rebellion against the government of the United States.

Fort Sumter had become the eye of the storm after the federal commanding officer, Major Robert Anderson of Kentucky, refused to turn the base over to the Confederacy. The South laid siege to the small federal detachment, refusing to allow in supplies.

A debate raged in the North over how to respond. The two preceding administrations, those of Democrats Franklin Pierce (1853-1857) and James Buchanan (1857-1861), had repeatedly retreated in the face of the intransigence of the Southern slave owners. But by the winter of 1860-61, there was a growing sentiment in the North against further concessions.

Between Lincoln's election as president in November 1860 and his inauguration four months later, millions of people in the free states of the North came to the conclusion that resistance to the slave owners was necessary. As a historian has recently written, "It was during this crisis that citizens of the free states finally defined the fundamental nature of the American Union, a task at which their Revolutionary forebears had deliberately and tragically balked." [*Lincoln and the Decision for War*, by Russell McClintock (Chapel Hill, 2008)]

The bombardment of Fort Sumter began in the early morning hours of April 12. Within a day, the Fort, which had not been built to withstand an attack from land-based artillery, fell to Southern guns.

Despite the long buildup of the crisis, the actual attack on Fort Sumter provoked shock and outrage in the North. Lincoln's call for 75,000 volunteers to put down the slave owners' rebellion, issued April 15, 1861, was met with overwhelming support. A war ensued that over the next four years would result in the loss of more than 625,000 people, approximately 2 percent of the population of the United States in 1860.

The central and overriding cause of the war was slavery, the

great political and moral problem of American society that had been left unsolved by the Revolution of 1775-1783. The existence of slavery made a mockery of the Declaration of Independence and its proclamation that "all men are created equal and endowed with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

The founding fathers evaded the issue, convincing themselves against their better judgment that slavery would eventually disappear on its own. Just the opposite took place. The invention of the cotton gin in 1793 made slavery far more productive and profitable. The "slave power" came to exercise enormous influence even in the North, particularly in the textile and banking industries.

But for all its political power and aggressiveness, the slave system and the society that it sustained was as socially and intellectually backward as it was economically regressive. Later myths of the "Old South" were just that: myths.

Science and every form of progressive thought could make no headway in a culture blighted by the hideous reality of human slavery. Of course, Northern society with its emerging capitalist economy was by no means a paradise. But the "free labor" industrial capitalism in the North, in contrast to the Southern "peculiar institution," was dynamic and, in an historic sense, progressive.

The economic superiority of Northern industry became ever more evident during the first half of the nineteenth century. The southern elite sought to compensate for the economic weakness of their region and the threatened decline in political power by extending slavery into new territories. Though the slave owners could not keep up economically with Northern industry, they intended to maintain their political power over the United States.

The South led the stampede into the war with Mexico in the 1840s in order to open up new lands for slavery. It demanded that the federal government enforce the "peculiar institution" even in the North, a principle enshrined in the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 and the Supreme Court's *Dred Scott* ruling of 1857, which held that persons of African origin had no rights anywhere in the US either as citizens or as people.

The Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 allowed slavery to be extended into Northern territories based on the cynical doctrine

of “popular sovereignty.” Its advocates—principally the leaders of the pro-slavery Democratic Party—claimed that the population of each territory should be allowed to decide whether their new state would be slave or free. This formula invited the slave owners to create pro-slave majorities through violence. Border ruffians from Missouri flooded into Kansas in an attempt to win the state for slavery. The state’s anti-slavery majority and abolitionists matched their violence blow for blow.

Kansas-Nebraska hardened opposition to slavery in the North. Lincoln, who had left Congress after one term in disgust over the war against Mexico, reentered politics in 1854 and rapidly emerged as one of the leading figures of the new Republican Party, which rejected the expansion of slavery to any new territory. From then on, Lincoln’s career rose in tandem with popular opposition to slavery and the provocations of the Southern slaveholders.

Lincoln won the November 1860 election, sweeping every Northern state except New Jersey. In the months that followed, the president-elect carefully avoided making any statement that could be perceived as provoking the South.

Yet the slave owners would not accept a presidency they did not control, even though Congress remained stalemated and the Supreme Court was dominated by a majority under pro-slavery Chief Justice Roger Taney, author of the *Dred Scott* decision. All of the North, meanwhile, waited to see whether the policy of compromise that had so discredited the administration of Buchanan would be continued, with attention increasingly focused on Fort Sumter. In the end, the slave owners decided to bring matters to a head.

Confronted with the slave owners’ insurrection, Lincoln initially defined the conflict solely as a defense of the Union. And yet, as the conflict intensified during the year that followed, with vast quantities of blood being spilled in a series of horrific battles, the underlying political reality of the war could not be evaded. Victory in the war and the salvation of the Union demanded the destruction of the economic foundation of the Confederacy—the slave system. What began as a military conflict became a social revolution.

In the immediate aftermath of the Battle of Antietam in September 1862, in which 23,000 soldiers were killed or wounded in just one day of fighting, Lincoln announced that he would issue an Emancipation Proclamation by January 1, 1863. As was usual for Lincoln, even his most radical measures were cautiously implemented. The Proclamation freed slaves only in those states that were still in insurrection.

However, the Proclamation heralded the inevitable destruction of slavery. Little more than two years after the Proclamation, the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment, passed in early 1865, abolished slavery in the United States.

Lincoln’s attack on slavery strengthened the military position of the North, in part by encouraging slave resistance in the South. But, above all, it raised the Civil War in North America

to the level of a world historical revolutionary struggle for human liberation. And that is how the war came to be seen throughout the world.

In Great Britain, it rallied the support of the class-conscious workers, even though the Union blockade of the Confederacy starved British mills of cotton. Working class support for the Union’s war against slavery effectively ended the possibility of British and French intervention on the side of the South.

The most far-sighted partisans in Britain of the Union’s cause were Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. From the earliest stage of the conflict, they understood that no compromise was possible with the South.

In October 1861, Marx declared: “The present struggle between the South and North is, therefore, nothing but a struggle between two social systems, the system of slavery and the system of free labor. The struggle has broken out because the two systems can no longer live peacefully side-by-side on the North American continent. It can only be ended by the victory of one system or the other.”

Three years later, in November 1864, Marx addressed a letter to Lincoln, congratulating the American people upon his re-election to the presidency. With evident emotion, Marx summed up the significance of Lincoln’s re-election and, indeed, his historic presidency: “If resistance to the Slave Power was the reserved watchword of your first election, the triumphant war cry of your re-election is Death to Slavery.”

On April 9, 1865, the Civil War came to an end with the surrender of Robert E. Lee’s army at Appomattox. Just five days later, on Good Friday, Lincoln was assassinated. Writing on behalf of the Working Men’s International Association, Marx mourned the death of “one of the rare men who succeed in becoming great, without ceasing to be good.”

On the eve of the Civil War, few could have imagined the scale of the social transformation that the conflict would bring about. Abraham Lincoln, who in 1858 had prophesied that the Union could not survive “half-slave” and “half-free,” hardly expected that the intransigent and vicious “Slave Power” would be swept away within a few short years. But that is what happened. The example of such an extraordinary and progressive advance remains a source of inspiration.

Even after the passage of 150 years, the Civil War lives on in the consciousness of humanity as one of the greatest chapters in the struggle against oppression and for social equality and the liberation of mankind.

Tom Eley and David North



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