

“Sectionalism, not slavery, was the major cause of the United States Civil War.” To what extent do you agree with this claim?

For the first half of America’s history, the political landscape was dominated by sharp contrasts between the varied people who inhabited this bountiful land. Arguments arose between large and small states, civilians and military, but most vitally, between free and slave states in the civil war. However, to what extent was the civil war caused by slavery? Based on the evidence in regards to the behavior of southerners, it is reasonable to argue that sectionalism had a larger role in persuading those people to fight for independence. Sectionalism was the major cause of the United States Civil War because it was integral to creating the Southern social life as well as shaping its political tendencies, not the issue of slavery, which only affected a very small percent of southerners.

The different economic life of the South led to the tensions that began the Civil War, and those economic differences originated from sectionalism, not slavery. From the beginning, the split settlements of Jamestown and Plymouth led to vastly different cultures developing, primarily notable in the types of people who were present in either society. While in the North, manufacturing became the prime job for middle or lower class workers, the Southern colonies were typically indebted to indentured servitude, and slowly worked on the large plantations. As the land in the South was very fertile to grow indigo, cotton, and tobacco, all of which are cash crops that are extremely labor intensive, people who came out of indentured servitude sought these jobs to work in. However, farming is a very difficult process, especially as the land that was available to farm in was limited by the Appalachian Mountains, leading to the development of an extremely poor class of people. These “poor white trash” made up a considerable percentage of the population, typically starving and barely able to sustain their own families. It

goes without saying that this class of people was unable to support a plantation, much less any number of slaves. Therefore, it can be reasonably implied that slavery had very little direct impact on their will to fight in the Civil War. The next class of people were the farmers who had small patches of land, not large enough to be considered a plantation, but large enough to make a living. Although these farmers were far better off than the “mountain people” as discussed earlier, they still supported at most one slave, and those slaves were typically treated more like close workers and not as inhuman workers. It is only the very rich, politically influential men of the South who were able to own large plantations and have hundreds of slaves with them. However, the fact that these people made up a very small and insignificant portion of the population implies that the only way for them to convince the South to fight is through some reason other than only the cause of slavery. It was not enough to champion the cause of slavery for the entire South, as the majority of the South was not dependent on slaves. In addition, all of these differences arose only because of the original sectionalism that divided the North and the South. If there was increased industrialization or improved transportation in the South, there would have been less reliance on plantation life, thus minimizing the effect of slavery even further.

Sectionalism in the south created the cavalier and family images, which propagated the ideas of revolution much more efficiently than slogans for slavery. Because of the way that family relationships were created in the South due to sectionalism, large extended families would fight to defend the honor of others within the family to death. This type of attitude clearly did not emerge in the North, primarily because the sectionalism that divided the two sides dictated the policy of primogenitures in the North, where sons would be very much separated from their parents and siblings once they came of age. On the contrary, in the South family members frequently relied on each other in order to make ends meet, or otherwise accomplish tasks.

Therefore, if a richer, better off relative asks for one of the white trash to fight in the Civil War, he is more apt to agree than if a similar situation arose in the North. This proves that the family relations created by sectionalism was one of the most major root causes of the Civil War, as without the support of that large population in the South, the Confederate Army would not have been strong enough to fight in the war.

In addition to family relations, strong political movements were important to the origins of the Civil War, which were rooted in sectional pride instead of the strength of slavery. Publications such as Debow's Review were widely circulated and spoke of the pride that Southerners should have for their land. They showed a disdain for the society in the North, which largely shunned the backwards people of the South. Therefore, the increasing sectionalism as driven by the competing economies of the North and South allowed for southerners to unify against the North more easily. Evidence that political structure arose due to sectionalism can be found in the commitment that the South had towards the paternalistic system, and by association, the regionalism that was in the South. All of these ideas created a system that heavily supported secession from the Union, especially as the North became more industrialized and more anti-South. Therefore, it was due to the effects of political life that originated from sectionalism that the Civil War began.

In conclusion, the Civil War was primarily driven by a combination of complex factors that stemmed from sectionalism, not slavery, including a plantation-style economy, tightly woven family lives, and a political life that all originate from sectionalism. Slavery was merely a byproduct of the lifestyle that was created by sectionalism in America. Although through the course of the Civil War, slavery was used as a rallying cry for both sides, it was never the primary reason the war began.