Issue 4.1: “Was the Civil War Fought Over Slavery

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December 12, 2019

HIST 221

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The Civil War, fought between North and South in the United States, is remembered as one of the most devastating wars in American history. Over a century and a half later, the debate still rages as to what the participants were fighting for, and more specifically, whether or not slavery sparked them to take up arms.The book: “Apostles of Disunion: Southern Secession Commissioners and the Causes of the Civil War,” written by Charles B. Dew, states that the Civil War was in fact fought over slavery due to the fact that “white southerners attempted to gain support for secession in the southern states by arguing for the need to preserve slavery and white supremacy as social norms” (341). He further elaborates by stating that the main argument is whether it is a matter of slavery or state’s rights, but ultimately, the main “state right” they had disputed over for years was the right to own slaves. Gary W. Gallagher refutes this argument in his book: “The Union War”. He argues that white northern soldiers’ priority was “saving the Union and not the abolition of slavery” (341). He uses Abraham Lincoln’s motives represented in his many speeches to support his claim, since Lincoln focused more on “unionism” rather than ending slave ownership (349). Charles B. Dew, who believes that slavery was in fact the reason for the Civil War, mainly focuses on writings and speeches by men who served as state secession commissioners in the states of Mississippi, Alabama, South Carolina, Georgia, and Louisiana who chose commissioners in 1860 and 1861. They were told to give their statements across the region, in order to state and justify their reasoning for breaking from the Union, as well as encouraging others to join them in their movement (344). These men were not politicians by any means, but were rather doctors, farmers, newspaper editors, or men who had previously had small political careers that were ultimately not successful. Dew further goes on to state that the commissioners’ speeches are extremely significant and play a vital role in uncovering the reasoning behind the Civil War, but are too often ignored or “overlooked by historians, and as a consequence, by the public at large” (345). This is hard to comprehend considering the North and South at the time were extremely attentive to the commissioners’ statements, and many speeches were republished and spread everywhere. Even years following the war these speeches and statements held great value. In the late nineteenth century, the record of the Civil War as preserved by editors at the War Department included an immense amount of information involving the secessionist commissioners’ messages and indicated they played a pivotal role in the events that led to the Civil War (345). Charles B. Dew further stresses the value of these statements by providing information from Dwight Lowell Dumond, who extensively researched and reported on the secession movement. Dumond’s writing says that “from the speeches and writings of the commissioners, as nowhere else, one may realize the depth of feeling and lack of sympathy between the two sections of the country,” though he touches little on what specifically they said in these speeches and writings (345). Due to this absence of detail, Dew researched the texts of forty-one of the commissioners’ writings. He first describes the way they spoke, which was quite blunt and unapologetic, yet passionate and emotional. He states that the commissioners and those they represented “clearly believed the racial fate of their region was hanging in the balance of the wake of Lincoln’s election” and even described horrifying details such as women and children being raped or murdered at the hands of “half civilized Africans” if they did not secede and fight to keep what they believed was the racial purity of the nation (348). Gary W. Gallagher, who argues that, although slavery “precipitated the fighting” (349) it was not the primary reason the North engaged in the war, similarly analyzes and researches statements made by people in America at the time. In contrast to Dew, he looks at Abraham Lincoln and his supporters to uncover their true motives for war. Gallagher first discusses what Walt Whitman, a supporter of Lincoln, said at the time of Lincoln and his assassination. He discusses the importance of the Union specifically, which is evident in his statement “He was assassinated, but the Union is not assassinated” (349). This is what Gallagher states is a piece of evidence for the importance of the preservation of the Union to the people of the North. Abraham Lincoln wanted to end the expansion of slavery, but made no attempt to free slaves immediately after his election or during the initial years of his Presidency. Lincoln and those who agreed with him wished to weaken the Confederacy and strengthen the Union. Gallagher argues that a small percentage of the people in the North viewed the war as necessary due to the moral evil of slavery, but most wished to end the political power of slaveholders by any means necessary because it was a threat to the democratic ideal, even if that meant going to war.

Ultimately, Gary W. Gallagher states that this proves that slavery was more of a tactic to preserve the Union rather than their sole reason to fight, but that it is more believable and admirable to think that soldiers fought to end the injustice of slavery, rather than simply to restore the Union. He elaborates on this by stating that many movies and books take this more “appealing” idea that people in the country came together and successfully fought to end slavery, though he believes there is more evidence supporting the idea that the abolishment of slavery was not their main priority. Gallagher states that almost 99% of the free state population was white, and “their racial views offend our modern sensibilities”, implying that they still felt a sense of superiority to slaves and were not as passionate or motivated to free them as some may believe. (350) After reading both sides, it is clear that the Civil War was undeniably fought to end slavery. When looking at the evidence Dew provides, the yes side is more compelling and more fully supported. Southern slaveholders were outraged at the idea of losing the right to own slaves, and bluntly stated they would separate from those who disagreed with them on the issue, and would fight to keep their slaves and their way of life. Gary W. Gallagher’s writing does not give enough evidence to support the claim that they primarily fought for the Union, and by stating that slavery still “precipitated the fighting” (349) actually bolsters the argument that this was the main cause of the war. Though he believes the primary reason for Northern participation in and support for the war was the preservation of the Union, this does not negate the fact that the war began over one issue: slavery. Though Gallagher’s writing was intended to be refuting the claim that the Civil War was fought over slavery, it only serves to further support Dew’s claim.