

Sectionalism in Antebellum America Sectional Conflict Divides the United States

Shortly before the Civil War (1861-1865), President Abraham Lincoln declared that "a house divided against itself cannot stand." Abraham Lincoln meant that the United States of America had to remain united if it wanted to continue to exist as a nation. Through this statement, Lincoln was reacting to the conflicts that were dividing the United States of America in the first half of the 19th century. These divisions were embodied in what historians call **sectionalism**.

A. What is Sectionalism?

Sectionalism is the placing of the interests of one section of the nation over the interests of the whole nation.

Since the colonial era, there were **differences in geography that gave rise to variations in culture and economy in two sections**. They developed differently in the 17th century and disparities increased in the 18th, and 19th century. Those different sections were the **North** and the **South**. The **West** was also a section but this section, because it was new and in continuous being (because of westward expansion), did not practice sectionalism. Instead it was the two other sections that entered in conflict in order to control the destiny of the west.

Since the birth of the republic, sectionalism poisoned intra-American relations. Instead of looking at the nation as a whole, **regional separatism** took pre-eminence. Southerners, Westerners and Northerners began to identify themselves regionally and not as Americans.

B. The North and the South: Differences and Divergences

The North was primarily industrial. Business, industry, shipping, and manufacturing played major roles in Northern economy. The North was not known for its agricultural production but it was also a large producer of grain. Life there was faster and commerce important.

The South was primarily agricultural. The Southern economy was mainly based upon the existence of large family farms known as **plantations**. The plantation economy relied on cheap labour in the form of slaves. Southern states started to produce **tobacco** (17th and 18th centuries) but turned to **cotton** (end of the 18th century) since it proved to be more profitable. The plantation produced a slower lifestyle. Farmers on the plantation did not do the work themselves. They were referred to as the "**gentlemen farmers**."

By the 1830s, the production and export of cotton was essential to Southern economy. The entire economy, and thus the social structure of the South relied on cotton. Moreover, the cheap production of could only be sustained by a cheap labour: **slavery was thus essential in maintaining that cheap production**. As cotton production grew, so did slavery.

SLAVERY and COTTON PRODUCTION		
YEAR	SLAVES	COTTON
1790	750,000	3,000 bales
1800	1,000,000	75,000
1810	1,375,000	178,000
1820	1,775,000	335,000
1830	2,325,000	732,000
1840	2,875,000	1,348,000
1850	3,650,000	2,136,000
1860	4,450,000	3,841,000

C. Four main issues created the sectional conflict between Northern and Southern states:

In fact, those four issues were tangled together.

1. Slavery

first and foremost, the most important difference between the North and South was slavery. The majority of northerners really didn't care about slavery in the beginning but as time went on, slavery, its existence as well as its extension into the western territories, became the central issue. The most contentious issue about slavery was its extension to newly acquired territories (to the west).

2. Representation

The North and South each wanted power to pass laws that would benefit their section. This meant that the more states that became "free" or "slave" meant more votes, both in the House, Senate and Electoral College, for that section. The issue of representation rose in importance as Americans expanded westward and decisions had to be made about the integration of each state into the Union.

3. Tariffs

The South disliked all kinds of tariffs because they relied on British goods for more of their everyday goods. They also needed European countries to purchase cotton from their plantations. On the other side, the Northern states supported tariffs so as to protect their growing industries. That was a source of tension between the two sections. The South then claimed they had the right of **nullification, the power of a state to declare a federal law null and void.**

Wishing to support domestic manufacturing, Northern politicians endorsed a series of protective tariffs. The first tariff was passed in 1816 and was relatively soft; however the second, passed in 1828, was much constraining for Southern states. They called it the "Tariff of Abominations" and demanded the **right of nullification.** The split over the tariff and nullification was so fierce that it even led to a violent attacks on the floor of the senate.

4. States Rights

That issue was a direct consequence of the South's fear that the North would pass laws that would hurt its lifestyle and its economy. Some examples would be tariffs and laws to restrict or abolish slavery. The south again claimed they had the right of nullification. They also claimed that the federal government did not have to intervene in states' own affairs.

