

**AMERICAN CIVILWAR ROUND TABLE OF AUSTRALIA
(NEW SOUTH WALES CHAPTER)**

PRELUDE TO THE WAR

Meeting June 2002

When people hear of my interest and study of the American Civil War, I find their first questions about the conflict are likely to be along the lines of one of the following:

Why did they go to war?

What made brother take up arms against brother?

Wasn't the War just about slavery?

At the risk of trivialising a most complex set of issues, my reply to these questions is normally something like:

“Men started fighting because they became tired of talking”

The decision by a collection of relatively large but diverse and unrelated states or colonies to form one nation with a federal government when these “United States” could hardly agree on anything, set the scene for inevitable conflict in some form. The American Civil War fought in the period 1861–1865 was crucial in defining the American peoples as a nation. Indeed, before 1861, people spoke in terms of “...the United States **are**...”, after 1865 people said “... the United States **is**...”.

There are many similarities that can be drawn between the federation of American states and the Australian Federation. Some political scientists have even suggested that to fully understand and appreciate any federal democratic form of government, it is necessary to study the causes and effects of the American Civil War. In this paper, I have sought to provide readers with a chronology of events of historical significance that led up to the War with a view to providing some assistance in reaching a deeper understanding of this fascinating but sad part of American history. This may well serve, then, as a basis for developing a better understanding of our own system of government.

Paul Kensey

In this paper a chronology of events and major political issues that are of particular significance to 19th Century American history leading up to the Civil War in 1861 are presented as a reference for anyone studying the conflict for the first time. It is important to note that this chronology is not exhaustive in its scope. Rather, it seeks to provide Civil War enthusiasts with some guidance for their initial study of this fascinating area of American history.

NAMING THE WAR

The Official United States Records refer to the Civil War as the ***War of Rebellion***, thus indicating the official view that it was a war against the Government. Depending on your political persuasion, geographical location or ideological beliefs, however, any one of many names is applied to the conflict, including:

- The War of Northern Aggression;
- The War Between the States;
- War of/for States' Rights;
- The War for the Preservation of the Union;
- The War for Constitutional Liberty;
- The Second War of Independence; and
- Mr Lincoln's War.

OUTLINE OF THE WAR

The War was fought between two federal armies, the United States Army (USA) and the Confederate States Army (CSA), over four long and violent years. The nation suffered the loss of more men killed in the Civil War than in all of the wars that the United States has engaged in since.

War broke out when shots were fired by Confederate artillery against the Union Army at Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor, South Carolina at 4:30am in April 12, 1861. Effectively, the War came to an end almost exactly four years later when General Robert E Lee surrendered the Army of Northern Virginia to General Ulysses S Grant (USA) at Appomattox Court House, Virginia, on April 9, 1865. The formal surrender ceremony involving subordinate officers¹ was held three days later on April 12. Subsequently on April 18, General Joseph E Johnston surrendered the Western Theatre forces of the

¹ Neither Lee nor Grant were involved in the formal surrender ceremony. Major General Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain, who had been awarded the Medal of Honor for his actions at Little Round Top on Day 2 of the Gettysburg battle, received the formal surrender of the Confederate forces from General John B Gordon.

Confederate Army to William T Sherman at Bennett Place, North Carolina² (This surrender was not finalised until April 26).

Between these two surrenders, President Abraham Lincoln was shot on the evening of April 14, dying early the next day. This assassination was to have a souring effect on the attempts to bring peace and reconciliation to the nation.

BACKGROUND TO THE WAR

The War was a man-made tragedy, the end-point resulting from years of rivalry, bitterness and compromise dating back to the earliest days of the Republic. Clearly, the fledgling “United States” had never been truly united. The nation was a collection of communities of different national origins with diverse cultural, economic and philosophical beliefs and values. From the early 1770s until the War of 1812 they were united on only one issue: the common enemy – the British Government. The thirteen colonies that had fought and won the American War of Independence would not and did not surrender their sovereign rights on becoming States of the Union.

This “less than perfect Union” soon evolved into bitter sectionalism with the basic division being between the industrial North and the agrarian South. While the North saw the future in terms of the factory and the industrial revolution, the South clung to its pastoral way of life. Living off its agriculture, the South depended on slave labour to produce economically its rice, sugar, tobacco, corn, indigo, wheat and cotton – but “King Cotton” above all! Cotton had become extremely profitable particularly for export following the invention of the cotton gin in 1793 and the demand for slaves as field hands soared.

The nation’s founding fathers deliberately omitted two vital but controversial issues from the American Constitution – States’ Rights and Slavery. If they had waited until consensus on these issues was reached, the Constitution may never have been enacted. Many States believed, or wanted to believe, that as they had joined the Union voluntarily, they could leave, therefore, of their own accord. This led to almost a century of government characterised by compromise and what started as a bitter dispute over ‘Union’ and ‘States’ Rights’ ended as a struggle over the meaning of freedom (a new birth of freedom).

SLAVERY IN AMERICA

Slavery existed in all the American colonies long before the Revolutionary War. It failed to flourish in the North as it proved to be unprofitable and as a result legal measures in the North provided for gradual emancipation and abolition. In 1787, the *Northwest Ordinance* barred slavery from lands north of the Ohio River and east of the Mississippi River and, in 1808, the Federal Government ceased the importation of slaves from Africa. In the South over the following years, various State Legislatures argued out the South’s last public debates on slavery and voted to let them keep their “peculiar institution”.

² Interestingly, some Confederate forces continued their resistance beyond this time with the last land engagement occurring on the Texas-Mexico border near Brownsville on May 12-13, 1865. The Confederates, although victorious in the battle, were among troops previously surrendered by the military convention in New Orleans. They subsequently surrendered to their captives after this Battle! .

THE MISSOURI COMPROMISE OF 1820

There was slavery in the southern sections of the Louisiana Purchase Territory when it came under the United States flag in 1803. For many years Missouri Territory had been petitioning for statehood as a slave state but Congress had denied this petition. In 1820, a Bill to admit the State of Maine into the Union as a free state was passed by Congress but held up in the Senate where the South had control. It was proposed that the Senate would admit Maine if Congress agreed to admit Missouri without any restriction on slavery, thus keeping the balance of free and slave States. The Missouri Compromise of 1820 allowed Missouri to be admitted to the Union as a slave State but that the rest of the Louisiana Purchase north of the 36° 30' parallel would be forever free from slavery.

THE FEDERAL TARIFFS ACT OF 1828

The *Federal Tariffs Act 1828* spread fear throughout the South. Designed to assist and promote the manufacturing industries in the North, the “tariffs of abominations” brought with it the threat of secession and was intensified in 1832 when tariff was increased. South Carolina called a state convention and passed an *Ordinance of Nullification* declaring the tariff void in that State. President Andrew Jackson denounced the nullification as rebellious treason and sent two warships to Charleston Harbor and troops to the State border threatening to enter South Carolina with 4000 troops to preserve the Union. Congress passed the *Forces Bill* allowing for this action, but not before Senator Henry Clay of Kentucky, the great master of compromise, carried through a revision of the tariff before the nullification was to come into effect. South Carolina was mollified and repealed its Ordinance. The Union was saved.

THE MEXICAN WAR

The importance of the United States involvement and eventual victory in the Mexican War, 1846-1848 should not be understated in terms of its implications for the Civil War. Victory meant the South gained more territory and new lands were opened up for settlement. Importantly in a military sense, the Mexican War provided the training ground for the senior officers in the Civil War allowing them to be “blooded” and practise their military art against a formed army.

THE COMPROMISE OF 1850

In 1849, cries of disunion again resounded throughout the South. California sought to enter the Union as a free state thus destroying the balance of free and slave states in the Senate and upsetting the delicate equilibrium of power of 15 free states and 15 slave states. The South saw that it would lose the political influence that it had enjoyed for so many years. After a long and bitter debate another compromise, the Compromise of 1850, was to emerge. This involved California entering the Union as a free state and the boundaries of Texas being defined. Both New Mexico and Utah gained territorial status with the right to decide the question of slavery on their own soil and the slave trade was forbidden in the District of Columbia. The *Fugitive Slave Act* in the Compromise, however, made it possible to reclaim a runaway slave by establishing ownership before a commissioner. It did not admit in evidence any defence by the fugitive! The Northern states that had passed laws safeguarding the rights of slaves as persons rather than as property, were alarmed by this law as it evaded their courts and threatened the liberty of free blacks.

UNCLE TOM'S CABIN

The publication in 1852 of Harriet Beecher Stowe's book³ *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, a novel about slavery's evils, is classed as one of the greatest books ever written in terms of its impact and influence it exerted on the society of the day. Although not every literary expert would deem it a classic, few would fail to call it controversial. The effect in the North was overwhelming and gave the abolitionist movement the fervour of a great religious crusade. The South replied that the conditions of slaves were no worse than those of the youth workers in Northern factories. Reason flamed into irrational passion and it was said:

"Hate flowed down the Mississippi, meeting the tide of hate coming up"

THE KANSAS-NEBRASKA ACT OF 1854

War seemed inevitable as the 1850s wore on with the struggle to have new territories gain statehood as slave or free states with the aim of increasing the voting strength in Congress. In 1854, the *Kansas-Nebraska Act* wiped out the Missouri Compromise, admitted Kansas to the Union and opened more of the West to slavery:

"...where popular sovereignty would decide slave or free"

The people of Kansas were required to vote on the issue. "Bleeding Kansas" became a battleground as "border ruffians", financially supported by both North and South, clashed with settlers heading west. The army garrison at Fort Leavenworth, established as a frontier post to provide escort and protection for settlers heading west along the Santa Fe Trail from marauding Indians, found themselves thrust into a peace-keeping role keeping the dissidents apart. Kansas erupted into anarchy with pro-slavery "Border Ruffians" sacking the town of Lawrence and John Brown beginning his deadly crusade at Osawatimie Creek. Over 200 settlers were killed in thirteen months.

It was as a direct consequence of the *Kansas-Nebraska Act* that a new political party was formed – the Republican Party – which, in contrast to present times, was the radical party of its time.

THE DRED SCOTT DECISION

In 1857, the United States Supreme Court enraged opponents of slavery throughout the North and the West when it handed down its infamous Dred Scott decision. His master had taken Dred Scott, a Missouri Negro, from Missouri, a slave state, to Minnesota, which subsequently became a free state, where he sued for his freedom.

The decision was made public two days before Democrat James Buchanan became the 15th President of the United States. The Supreme Court declared that a slave was property and had no rights as a citizen. Moreover, three justices said that a Negro – a member of an inferior race – could never be a citizen of the United States. This infuriated the Republicans, the anti-slave Democrats and all others fighting for human rights. On June 26, 1857, Abraham Lincoln, a lawyer in Springfield, Illinois, attacked the Decision as erroneous and not valid as a precedent.

³ *Uncle Tom's Cabin* had been previously serialised in the *National Era* magazine in 1851, one year before its publication in book form.

THE LINCOLN – DOUGLAS DEBATES

From its inception the Republican Party increased rapidly in strength and influence. The Party existed exclusively in the North and made no attempt to extend its organisation into the South. In 1858, Abraham Lincoln became a leading Republican figure by engaging in a series of debates with Democrat Senator Stephen A Douglas. Douglas supported the *Kansas-Nebraska Act*, the right for States to decide their own destiny and other States to mind their own business. In contrast, Lincoln's position based on his literal interpretation of the *Declaration of Independence*. He stated:

“As a nation we began by declaring all men are created equal – there was no mention of any exception in the Declaration of Independence – but now we say all men are equal except the Negroes – If we are to accept this doctrine what is to stop us in the future to decree that all men are created equal except Negroes, foreigners, Jews, Catholics or just poor people”

On June 16, 1858, the Republican State Convention nominated Lincoln for the US Senate. In his acceptance speech at this Convention, Lincoln gave the first of his “House-Divided” speeches, so named from the biblical quotation cited in the initial paragraph, in which he declared:

“A house divided against itself cannot stand. I believe that this Government cannot endure permanently half slave and half free. I do not expect the Union to be dissolved – I do not expect the house to fall – but I do expect that it will cease to be divided. It will become one thing or it will become the other...”

Lincoln was beaten by Douglas for the Senate in 1858 but their debates provided him with recognition outside Illinois and laid the foundations for his 1860 Presidential nomination and victory. As such, these debates are arguably the most famous of all political debates in American history.

JOHN BROWN

Nineteenth Century abolitionists hated slavery with a passion and wanted it abolished throughout the country forthwith. The most violent abolitionist was John Brown of Kansas, whose activities were supported by funds from Eastern sympathisers. In 1859, Brown turned his attention from Kansas to Virginia where he sought to liberate the slaves by force. He and his followers seized the Federal Armoury at Harpers Ferry on October 17, killed five civilians and took hostages from the town. He believed that the black slaves would rise up and join his command thus starting a general rebellion. This did not occur and a Federal force under command of the then Lieutenant Colonel Robert E Lee, 2nd US Cavalry and troops led by Lieutenant JEB Stuart, 1st US Cavalry, attacked and captured the raiders. Eleven of Brown's party was killed in this action, including two of Brown's sons. Brown was captured, tried for treason against the Commonwealth of Virginia and hanged on December 2, 1859. The anti-slavery North had a martyr and the South a glimpse of the horror to come. Southern militias were now strengthened and the country saw the beginnings of the Confederate Army.

THE 1860 ELECTION

The election year of 1860 was to prove ominous. The only political party to embrace all sections of the “one and indivisible democracy” was the Democrats. They met in Charleston, South Carolina, to choose their candidate for President but when the convention voted to leave their policies unchanged from that of 1856, the Southern delegates from the eight slave states walked out. When the Democrats met later in Baltimore the Southern Delegates again walked out leaving the Party irrevocably split. The Northern Democrats then nominated Stephen Douglas as their candidate with the Southern Democrats putting forward John C Breckinridge for election.

In 1856, the newly formed Republican Party had lost its first national campaign for President. The nomination of Abraham Lincoln on May 18, 1860 for the 1860 presidential election later that year strengthened their resolve to succeed. Lincoln made his election platform clear – to preserve the Union at all costs. On the issue of slavery he called for its restriction not its abolition. For the South the election of this “Black Republican” (Lincoln) would precipitate a campaign for immediate secession. There was nothing new in this, it had all been said before. This time, however, the South believed their political position would be hopeless if they remained in the Union. The admission of three free states – California, Minnesota and Oregon – had destroyed the balance of power and their influence in the Congress and the Senate.

With the election of Lincoln on November 6, 1860 the die was cast. His popularity in the slave states was reflected in the number of votes ten of these states gave him – exactly zero! Prior to the election South Carolina had decreed that if Lincoln were elected, they would secede and secede they did. The day after the election, South Carolina hauled down the United States flag at Charleston and raised its own ensign, the Palmetto flag.

SECESSION

On December 20, 1860, South Carolina voted to secede from the Union, repealing its 1788 ratification of the US Constitution. Other States followed⁴ throughout the first half of 1861 –

Mississippi	January 9
Florida	January 10
Alabama	January 11
Georgia	January 19
Louisiana	January 26
Texas	February 1
Virginia	April 17
Arkansas	May 6
North Carolina	May 20
Tennessee	June 8

The pro-slave states of Missouri, Kentucky, Maryland and Delaware did not secede but remained in the Union. West Virginia held a convention at Wheeling where it named a pro-Union Governor and on

⁴ The dates reported here are taken from James M McPherson's book *Battle Cry of Freedom – the Civil War Era* and relate in most cases to when the convention passed the ordinance of secession. In the case of Virginia it was not until May 23 that a referendum was held to ratify the ordinance. The Tennessee Legislature “short-circuited” the referendum scheduled for June 8 by allowing Confederate troops to enter the State several weeks before the referendum date.

June 11, 1861 was admitted to the Union as the State of West Virginia. Its constitution provided for the gradual abolition of slavery.

THE CONFEDERACY

Forty-two delegates from the South met at Montgomery, Alabama on February 4-13, 1861 and adopted a provisional constitution of the Confederate States of America and February 9 elected Mississippi Senator Jefferson Davis as Provisional President. The Confederate Congress adopted a flag consisting of a red field with a white stripe, a blue jack and a circle of stars – the Stars and Bars. This flag was subsequently changed a number of times.

CONCLUSION

Most historians will emphasise the issue of slavery as underpinning the causes of the American Civil War. Whilst this is correct, it is important to recognise that the War was the consequence of many issues and that it is simplistic to assert that the War was fought over slavery. Issues such as the constitutional right to secede, tariffs, the North's desire to preserve the Union and States' rights issues all were contributing factors. The South was motivated by a variety of motives but most of all it was fear – fear that its institutions and particular way of life would be rudely overthrown by an abolitionist centralist government from Washington.

The Confederate States of America might have proved successful and have remained in place to the present had it not been for Lincoln's determination to preserve the Union and accept war. When the first shots rang out over Fort Sumter, the talking was over. The politicians had had their turn, now it was the turn of the military.