



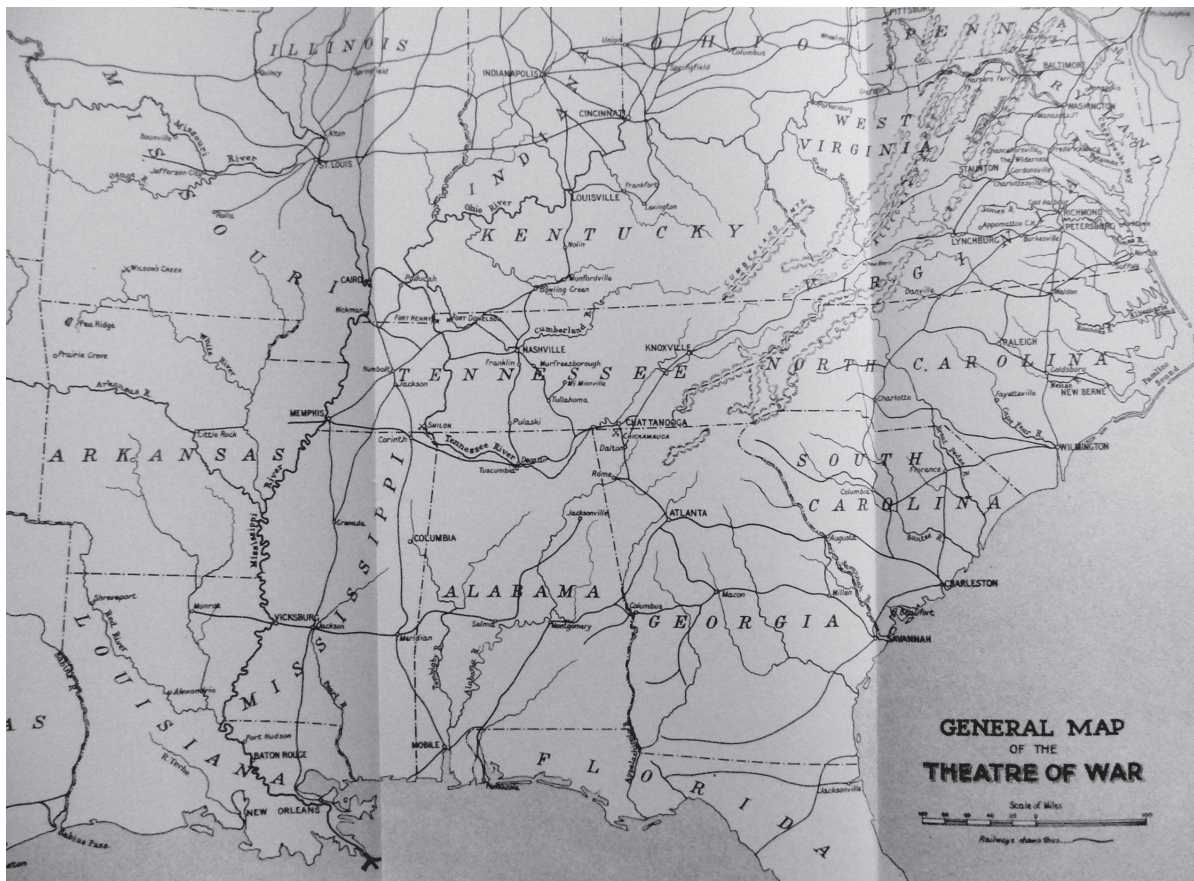
CAUSES OF THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR

Bob Evans

13 December 2012

Due to illness, this was a change to the advertised lecture 'The History of Medicinal Plants, Ancient and Modern'.

Coming just six weeks after a presidential election in which the 44th President was returned for a second term of office in a quietly accepted result, Mr Evans contrasted tonight's lecture with events that followed the election of the 16th President. He introduced his subject by reference to a map of the United States of America, explaining that whilst military engagements did take place over a wide area, the majority and certainly the focus of the campaigning and therefore the location of the major conflicts took place within a relatively small area from Tennessee to Virginia (see map).



In seeking to explain the causes of the war, Mr Evans first needed to dispel a myth that it was regarding the abolition of slavery – it was not! Certainly slavery *became* an issue, but it was not a *cause*. So embedded has the abolition of slavery become in the 'history' of the war that Mr Evans necessarily devoted much time to dispel this myth.



The result of the 1860 Presidential election so distressed some nine million citizens that eleven states, independently of each other, decided to leave (secede) the union which was the United States of America with those supporting this line being known as secessionists. The newly elected President, Abraham Lincoln, regarded the move as treason and hence the term 'rebels' coming to be used to describe the secessionists. The secessionist states found Lincoln's language deeply offensive, believing that having joined the Union of their own volition they were free to leave it of their own volition. There was nothing in the Constitution of the Union that took away the 'sovereignty' of each state, which was a deeply felt loyalty that itself was the result of the way in which the British had founded the original thirteen colonies. These had been established independent of each other, each having its own Governor who answered to the British Parliament. Following the War of Independence these former colonies became independent states, which in 1787 agreed to continue their wartime alliance into a Constitutional union. The passage of time led some (such as Lincoln) to see the union as a nation-state, whilst those with an eye to the long-view recognised it as nothing more than a 'club' and like any club, having joined voluntarily, they were free to choose whether and when to end their membership. An observation not mentioned by the speaker is that those debates and perspectives regarding the nature of sovereignty and sovereign power were keen philosophical topics of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (one thinks of Hobbes and Hume among others) and which were themselves another legacy from the 'old colonial master' spilling out from the justifications and legitimisation of rebellion against the rule of Charles I in the English Civil War.)

So it was that the cause of the American Civil War was not itself a moral issue, but a constitutional crisis brought about by the political failure to explicitly express within the Constitution (the 'rules of membership of the club') the subject of sovereignty in respect of 'States' Rights'. Such failure it seems has not been subsequently addressed within the United States of America (having been overshadowed by the emancipation movement and pursuit of civil rights), and it is only the reliance upon the subsequent concept of a 'national' identity which keeps the constitutional ogre asleep. Meanwhile, Mr Evans observed, on this side of the Atlantic the current status of the European Union and the political debates around it provide uncomfortable parallels.

However, even within the secessionist States, there was division as with any civil war. For instance, at the Battle of Vicksburg the State of Missouri sent 39 regiments, 17 of which fought for the secessionists (the 'South') and 22 for the Unionists ('the North'). How, then, did abolition of slavery come to take centre stage in the popular imagination as the cause of the American Civil War?

For some eighty years prior to Abraham Lincoln's election, the abolition movement had existed within the Union as it had in many European countries, but in the United States it was generally less influential than, for example, in Britain. Slave ownership existed to significant levels throughout the Union, nor was the abolitionist movement founded upon a religious motivation:

660,000 slaves in the United States were owned by ministers of the Gospel;

5,000 Methodist ministers owned 217,000 slaves;

6,500 Baptist ministers owned 120,000 slaves;

1,400 Episcopalian ministers owned 88,000 slaves.



BATTLE & DISTRICT HISTORICAL SOCIETY



Many preached that slavery was ordained by God and sanctified by the Gospels. However, the abolitionist movement was growing – particularly in the North as the consequence of its being the main point of entry and settlement for immigrants from Europe, who brought with them ideas from the great liberalising movement flourishing across nineteenth-century Europe. With the election of Abraham Lincoln to the Presidency of the United States, the polarisation between the liberal-leaning North which sought not abolition but the limitation of slavery to those eleven secessionist States of the South which sought its extension into the newly settled areas west of the Mississippi. Lincoln went to war not to abolish slavery, but to preserve the Union (States' Right being secondary to the sovereignty of the Union) and to that end was willing to compromise with the 'South'. But the secessionists could see that as more states (without slavery) were formed into the Union as a result of the drive to the west, the position of the South would become unsustainable in future voting and abolition would follow with consequent economic and social ruination.

The association of emancipation of slaves with the *objectives* of the war was a strategic (some might argue cynical) political decision to attempt to reverse the militarily disastrous early years of the war. In profile the North and South were very different, the South having just one ninth of the industry of the North, whilst the smallholdings of the North could not compare with the vast farms and plantations of the South. Economically, therefore, the agrarian South was based upon the cheap labour provided by slavery whereas the North was based more upon wage labour. So it was that Lincoln adopted an economic attack aimed at weakening the ability of the South to maintain an aggressive field army due to insurrection from within. The North needed to buy time for its industrial and manufacturing might, as its population resource fitted it better to a war of attrition. So in the absence of an ability to match the South in the field, a means of disabling its fighting capacity needed to be urgently found. Lincoln conceived that inciting the slaves of the South to revolt would be the answer and so, half way into the war, he made his Declaration of Emancipation. It related solely to the slaves of the South and was intended to raise them to revolt. Although it failed in this, it did ensure politically that the liberal democracies of Europe (in particular Great Britain) would not enter the war on the side of the South. Meanwhile the North found a military commander (Grant) who was equal to those of the South and so time was bought on the battlefield that enabled the industrial capacity of the North to win the war through logistical and economic superiority.



Neil Clephane-Cameron

Abraham Lincoln in 1865