

Was Southern Secession About Tariffs?

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Was Southern Secession About Tariffs?

*I*t is among the most enduring myths of the American Civil War. Many pro-southern apologists continue to exonerate the South by saying the War was never about slavery but about tariffs. Not only does this position remain popular for particular audiences and purposes, it provides a sort of last redoubt. When the facts of American slavery continue to bombard the denier, demonstrating over and over the defenselessness of that abominable institution, the shouts of “tariffs, tariffs!” grow louder and more frequent. As we shall see, however, the facts ultimately decimate the tariff argument as well.

Two recent events give occasion to discuss this matter afresh and in a pointed way. The first is the recent announcement that the Texas State Board of Education voted to revise its textbook account of the Civil War.¹ They will now teach that slavery played a “central role” in causing the War. If you’re like me, you are probably shocked it did say at least that much already. But no, it was listed only as a distant third reason, and even once dismissed as a “side issue” by one board member in 2010.² Since Texas makes up an overwhelming percentage of the public school textbook market, this change will have effects far beyond Texas. Likewise, the failure to include the truth about the cause of the War up until this point has potentially misled millions of students.³

1. <https://www.npr.org/2018/11/16/668557179/texas-students-will-soon-learn-slavery-played-a-central-role-in-the-civil-war>

2. https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/whitewashing-civil-war-history-for-young-minds/2015/07/06/1168226c-2415-11e5-b77f-eb13a215f593_story.html?utm_term=.58b9ae4462ff

3. Texas is in focus because it plays a powerful role in shaping textbooks nationwide. Some have attempted to push back at this fact, some even calling it a myth, but it is a widely-acknowledged generality that as Texas goes, so go the rest. Fact is, while only one state in fifty, Texas enrolls a whopping one tenth of public school students in the nation. The textbook publishers serve this market, and the Texas State Board

The news that the textbooks have not acknowledged this all along will surprise many people, as it is usually assumed as a part of the standard account. When I recently shared the article on social media, however, I was harangued by southern apologists reminding me once again just how fiercely some cling to what threads of pretense of the respectability of southern secession remain. I was hit with all the classic diversions from the South's stated position and campaign to hear about Lincoln, the North, and tariffs. Some friends even, who *know better*, nevertheless reverted like intellectual addicts to fallacies from which I had thought they had been inoculated.

This defensive reaction leads me to the second event: the redoubled effort of scholar and journalist Paul Craig Roberts to prove the point that secession was most definitely *not* about slavery but about *tariffs*.

While the tariff argument may be found throughout the enduring, though waning, tenure of "Lost Cause" historiography, its most popular expressions today appear in works like Thomas DiLorenzo's *The Real Lincoln* (2002) and *Lincoln Unmasked* (2007), and in the even more focused book *When In the Course of Human Events: Arguing the Case for Southern Secession* (2000) by Charles Adams. Roberts's essay, "A 'Civil War' Lesson for the Uneducated," is a condensed but representative version of this thesis.⁴

We have already dealt with some of Roberts's previous essays on the topic, relating to the Corwin Amendment and the South Carolina secession documents.⁵ This most recent essay appears to be an attempt at retreating to the redoubt of tariffs (with a rearguard ad hominem at his detractors).

Let me be quick to note that Mr. Roberts is no slouch of a contributor.⁶ He has held multiple academic positions, including a stint as a Senior Research Fellow at the Hoover Institute. He has taught and

of Education holds the rudder. Everyone else, with few exceptions, is generally along for the ride.

4. <https://www.paulcraigroberts.org/2018/11/13/a-civil-war-lesson-for-the-uneducated/>

5. See here <https://americanvision.org/14639/the-corwin-amendment-and-its-false-absolution-of-the-south/>; and here <https://americanvision.org/14646/southern-secession-dishonest-court-historians/>

6. See his extensive resumé at <https://www.paulcraigroberts.org/pages/about-paul-craig-roberts/>

published all over the place, worked in the business world as well, and was even appointed to a position in the U.S. Treasury under Reagan. We should take his contribution seriously, as it represents perhaps the strongest and most serious version of the argument. Further, since his last attempt is an obvious response to equally serious criticism of his previous essays, it is a more sharpened version. In short, this is the strongest form the tariff argument can take, and this is its best light.

The respawned outrage at the Texas announcement and this representative contribution from Roberts, therefore, provide a fitting occasion for a response. I have seen this tariff argument repeated ad nauseum. A direct and somewhat detailed refutation of the “tariffs not slavery” argument is warranted. What follows is seven reasons why the tariff argument fails.

There are more reasons than these included in what is below. I have taken liberty with the length here, and these “reasons” are more like general headings in an essay. Some overlap. Also, it will be seen by some that the most obvious cases for slavery as the cause instead of a tariff appear in the openly stated positions of the declarations of the seceding states, and famous orations such as Alexander Stephens’s Cornerstone speech. This is true, and we have included those references under relevant headings; but please be aware that the apologists are seasoned at diverting attention from those or explaining them away. This case includes those as well as a more thorough approach that, I hope, leaves no way out.

There are some who will say I am beating a dead horse. This horse, however, is very much alive. I see it kick, buck, and run regularly. “Tariffs not slavery” is written upon the horse’s bells. It is the standard of an undead war.

I want to be candid for you: I want to kill this horse. I don’t care how many blows it takes and how much blood flows. I want to make it a dead horse, and *then* I want to beat that dead horse until I am exhausted. I wish that no single reader of mine—no matter how much steeped in Lost Cause propaganda, no matter what favorite libertarian or agrarian writer, speaker, teacher, idol, or celebrity they follow, no matter what tradition they come from—will leave thinking the tariff argument has the slightest prayer or respectability. I hope all are persuaded, and at the very least, failing that, they leave without excuse

and with a conscience burdened by the crippling weight of a dead and bloodied horse of a lie.

1. Apologists conflate the motives of the North and the South.

Flip-flopping between the reasonings of the North and South is an almost universal reaction among partisans of southern secession. If you mention that slavery was a cause of secession or the War, they will almost instinctively turn attention from the South and begin deriding Lincoln and the North. They will remind us of Lincoln's racist statements on various occasions. They will recall Lincoln's statement in Horace Greely's column that he would preserve the Union even if it meant freeing no slaves at all. They will remind us once again that the Emancipation Proclamation did not come until half way through the war, only as a "war measure," and even then did not free the slaves in the Northern-friendly border states, but only in the South which did not recognize it. They will show through multiple lines of evidence that Lincoln and the North absolutely did not go to war to free the slaves and did not care to do so. How in the world, then, can you say that the war was about slavery?

At this point in such a discussion, the astute reader will realize that the discussion has been heisted. Instead of examining what motivated the South to secede in the first place, they divert attention to an alleged outlook and motivations of the North after the fact. Since the North was not interested in invading to stop slavery, it is said, therefore the war could not have been about slavery. But the Northern motivations have never been controversial to begin with. They have always been openly acknowledged in the textbooks and major works, as we have discussed elsewhere.⁷ These motivations, however, are a separate issue from those that led the South to secede and thus spark a war over disunion (as we shall see, the South *knew* it would spark a war).

This view also assumes that it was the North alone that brought about the war. This was not the case. The assumptions at the time were not simply that States had a right to seceded peacefully whenever they wished, and that the South therefore obviously did nothing wrong when it "merely" tried to secede "peacefully." No, there was a

7. See my article, "What the Textbooks Don't Tell You About Lincoln and the War," at <https://americanvision.org/15212/textbooks-dont-tell-lincoln-war/>.

long history of hot debate, going back to the Constitutional Convention and ratification debates themselves, over the nature and perpetuity of the Union. As we shall see more below, when the Nullification Crisis occurred in 1828–1832, a national debate ensued over this very topic, with two sides polarizing over it. Southerners, led in Congress by Robert Hayne, said the Union was voluntary and states could leave on their own deciding. Unionists led by Daniel Webster argued the Union was perpetual and binding and that states could only leave with the consent of all the other states. Secession would therefore be revolution without such a ratification first. This debate raged, and Southerners knew that at the very least a large section of the country would not accept secession without contest; many would even consider it rebellion. This was the position Abraham Lincoln held.

When South Carolina made its move in 1860, therefore, it *knew* it was most likely precipitating a war because of the view of the permanence of the Union, and the Constitutional requirements of potentially leaving it, that had been debated intensely for decades prior. The later stance of Lost Cause proponents and others that the South should have just been allowed to walk away peacefully is an unhistorical pretense. *Could* it have been a possibility under some circumstances? Perhaps. But it was highly unlikely, and pretty much everyone at the time on both sides realized that even if it were theoretically a remote possibility, it was not a practical one, and it had not been treated that way by those seceding.

Thus, people who divert attention from an examination of the South's openly-stated motivations unto various points about the North *not* going to war over slavery, or northern racism (while both those things are true) are conflating reasons for the *cause* of Southern secession and of the Northern refusal to accept it. To take the further step of saying that the War was purely an invasion by the North is a ridiculous notion built on top of a conflation.

This diversion phenomenon is manifest in Mr. Roberts's effort. He begins his essay as a refutation of the argument for "slavery, not the tariff, as the reason for Southern secession." We emphasize that the focus is on "*the reason for*" and "*Southern secession.*" Half-way through the piece, though, we find Mr. Roberts switching his presentation to the typical anti-North claims: "Lincoln understood that he had no

authority under the Constitution to abolish slavery. . . . The North had no intention of going to war over slavery.” Those later things may be true also, but they are not relevant to the question of why the South seceded.

It is just further obfuscation to pretend all of this has been unrighteously assumed by Northern partisans, or liberal historians, and that only some remnant of the faithful still see the truth, while everyone else has been brainwashed. Roberts complains of the “misportrayal of the War of Northern Aggression as Lincoln’s war to free slaves.” There is no “misportrayal.” Even the most basic sources on the topic openly acknowledge everything Roberts presents as the “gotcha” quotes about Lincoln and the North. Wikipedia has a whole article just on Lincoln’s views of slavery and race, and it gets it right.⁸ The History Channel has a 2012 article that openly relates how Lincoln was not an abolitionist, was a racist, believed in Colonizing blacks back to Africa, issued the Emancipation Proclamation only as a war measure, and did not free all the slaves.⁹ That great bastion of left progressivism, PBS, has detailed notes on several of the same points, without spin or apology. It is all just basic history, and it can be found anywhere.¹⁰

The difference is that the elementary sources then go on to tell the rest of the story, and there is a whole lot more to the story that Roberts and others like him leave out. It just so happens that the rest of the story is what the real biased position cannot bear to hear.

Mr. Roberts’s particular bias shows further when he resorts to conspiracy theory to impugn his critics: “Civil War history is mistaught in order to support the Identity Politics agenda of fomenting hatred of whites. . . .” Part of the irony here is that the specific points he enumerates over and over again—Lincoln’s views, the North’s views, the true nature and scope of the Emancipation Proclamation, etc.—are all things that textbooks have long since openly taught to begin with. There has been therefore no conspiracy at all to hide these things all along, let alone out of an Identity Politics agenda.

Even here, then, in the best of efforts to sustain the tariff angle,

8. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abraham_Lincoln_and_slavery

9. <https://www.history.com/news/5-things-you-may-not-know-about-lincoln-slavery-and-emancipation>

10. <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4p2967.html>

the author cannot remain focused on an examination of the South's reasons, as he stated, but must divert to a discussion of what the North allegedly *did not do*. But this does not really answer the question.

There is a reason for such diversions. That reason is exemplified by Mr. Roberts. When he does focus on the South's motives, he is forced into absurdities.

2. The alleged Southern opposition to nullification is absurd

Mama used to say that if you tell a lie, you'll just have to tell a bigger lie to cover that one up. Much of Lost Cause mythology is of that variety. The tall tales start to pile up after a while. Mr. Roberts's attempt, certainly in earnest, is nevertheless no different.

Let's start with the main thesis, the corner into which the author has painted himself after previous failed attempts:

When the Southern states seceded, they were concerned to do so legally or constitutionally under the Constitution so that the North could not legally claim that it was an act of rebellion and invade the Southern states. To make this case, the South needed to make a case that the North had broken the Constitutional contract and that the South was seceding because the North had not kept to the Constitution.

This presented a legal challenge for the South, because the reason for which the Southern states were seceding was the tariff, but the Constitution gave the federal government the right to levy a tariff. Therefore, the Southern states could not cite the tariff as a breach of the Constitutional fabric.

Slavery was the only issue that the South could use to make a legal case that it was not in rebellion.

This thesis is ingenious in itself. It basically argues that the South really wanted to secede for an *unconstitutional* reason, they just needed to find a constitutional cover for it. Slavery was the constitutional cover!

If this were true, it would mean they were not only responsible for the sins of their peculiar institution, but they were also dissemblers when it came to national politics! They not only *openly* wanted

to preserve their economic cash cow of slavery, they *secretly* wanted to preserve it in a political setting where it was immune from outside tariffs. The dissembling slaveocracy was even greedier than we thought. So much for the vaunted Southern honor. But it gets even more interesting than that.

Roberts concludes that the contract was found to be broken precisely at the point of the fugitive slave clause, with those northern states that nullified that law and refused to turn slaves back to their masters:

Article 4 of the US Constitution reads: “No person held to service or labor in one State, under the laws thereof, escaping into another, shall, in consequence of any law or regulation therein, be discharged from such service or labor, but shall be delivered up, on claim of the party to whom such service or labor may be due.” In defiance of Article 4, some Northern states had passed laws that nullified the Fugitive Slave Act and other laws that upheld this article of the Constitution. The South used these nullification laws to make its case that Northern states had broken the Constitutional contract, thus justifying the Southern states secession.

The absurdity here is that the South would be up in arms demanding secession over *nullification* of all things. This doctrine had earned its most prominent stripes in the recent history of South Carolina in what was openly known as the “Nullification Crisis” of 1828–1832. This crisis was *in fact* over tariffs—a particularly high tariff to be clear, and one which was subsequently lowered. South Carolina threatened secession at the time over the high tariffs, and claimed the right to *nullify* the federal laws within its boundaries, citing Jefferson and Madison among others. Madison actually backtracked on his former doctrine at this point and sided with the nationalists. But from South Carolina and the proslavery crowd, there was one cry: “nullification!” They believed and openly fought *for* nullification of particular federal laws within a state’s boundaries was a natural right of the states.

It seems odd, then, that the same guys would cite nullification in the northern states as breaking the contract of the Constitution. They

had been fighting *for* precisely that doctrine all along!

No, slavery was not a façade of a reason to cover a secession that was secretly about tariffs.

The simplest explanation is obvious, then, from the clear statements of the seceding states themselves. In virtually every declaration from every state, slavery takes a prominent role as the stated cause of the war. In virtually no place does any state mention tariffs.

3. Expansion of slavery was the real issue

From this position, however, Mr. Roberts is forced into further absurdities. In some cases, these take the form of taking liberties with the facts. He says, “Lincoln said that the South could have all the slavery that it wanted as long as the Southern states paid the tariff.” The reference is to Lincoln’s first inaugural, where he said he would not interfere with slavery where it exists, but that he would use what federal force is necessary to collect duties at the ports. Roberts leaves out the most crucial point of all: what Lincoln *did* say against slavery in that very address:

One section of our country believes slavery is right and ought to be extended, while the other believes it is wrong and ought not to be extended. This is the only substantial dispute.¹¹

What was the “only substantial dispute,” according to Lincoln? It was not slavery *where it already existed*. That is what he had conceded. It was the *extension* of slavery into the territories, which would be future states. It was this issue that had animated hot debates in Congress since 1820, particularly in 1850 and beyond. This issue was hot because it would determine the balance of power in the Legislature. If future states did not allow slavery, then non-slave states would soon outnumber slave states in both the Senate and the House. Once the votes could be gotten, slavery could in theory be abolished. Up to this point, the slave states had maintained superior or equal numbers. This was threatened.

The South saw the handwriting on the wall. Lincoln was right. As we shall see in a bit, prominent Southerners agreed with him on this

11. See the address in full at http://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/lincoln1.asp.

point as well. This was the only substantial dispute, because it spelled the *eventual* end of slavery where other aspects of it at the time did not.

So no, Lincoln did not say the South could have “all the slavery it wanted.” He only conceded it where it existed. But the South *wanted* much more, and Lincoln would not concede that at all. On this he was immovable, and that is why his election more than any other single factor triggered the slaveocracy in South Carolina.

4. The debates of the previous decades were not over tariffs

This is also why Mr. Roberts’s comments are exposed as further absurdities, for example, when he says,

During the decades prior to Southern Secession, the conflict between North and South was over the tariff, not over slavery.

This idea is refuted by so many lines of evidence one wonders if Mr. Roberts has ever read much outside of a very narrow circle of historiography. Delegates from South Carolina had threatened to secede from the Union *over slavery* even before there was a Union! In the Constitutional Convention itself, South Carolinians said they would not even join unless the institution of slavery were protected legally. Tariffs were not mentioned in that discussion, but rather the power to levy tariffs was added into the Constitution without objection. Then the South Carolina delegates returned home and bragged openly that they had preserved the institution for at least twenty years per the Constitution, and perhaps indefinitely. Slavery was for them *the* issue long before there even was a tariff question.

Along the way, slavery was contested at nearly every major turn. We’ve already mentioned 1820, which was the time of the addition of Missouri to the Union. The main controversy was whether it would be a slave state or free, and thus would it disrupt the South’s hegemony in Congress *to protect* its slavery. This debate continued, *along with* different permutations of the tariff question, throughout the period. After 1832, however, when the nullification crisis had been abated by lowering tariffs, the South stood largely pacified on the tariff issue and the point of contention remained slavery.

All the great battles of 1850 and beyond featured slavery and hardly

anything about tariffs. The Great Compromise of 1850 featured debates over the entrance of new states as either slave states (still allowed) or free (such as California), as well as a strengthened Fugitive Slave Act. This Act led to the outlandish resolution of *Dred Scott* (1857) which was about recovery of a fugitive slave and was exploited as a platform for indefinite protection of slavery into perpetuity, and in fact in some respects *imposed* upon the non-slave states. The Kansas-Nebraska Act (1854) also was about extension of slavery. With the secession and war looming in 1860–1861, two desperate attempts at rescuing the Union reveal the same reality. The Crittenden Compromise attempted in Congress feature about ten resolutions, six of which were new Constitutional amendments, all of which pertained to slavery, none to tariffs. A couple months later, the Peace Conference of 1861 tried a similar program. It featured seven points, all of which focused on slavery. Tariffs did not enter the discussion.¹²

Tariffs, on the other hand, were lowered throughout this period until they were a non-issue. The Walker Tariff of 1846 was a large cut. The Tariff of 1857 was an even greater cut on top of that. There was a new bill known as the Morrill Tariff working its way through congress in 1860–1861, but by the time it could even be brought up for a vote in the Senate, the South had already seceded. Again, even this tariff had not been a point of contention in the attempts to maintain peace and union at the time.

Thus, when Henry Clay attempted to campaign for president partly on tariffs in 1844, he was seen as out of touch and ended up often apologizing to his audience for the bore.¹³ He lost. Tariffs were a largely dead issue already by that time in North and South.

The delegates to the 1860 South Carolina secession Convention acknowledged in their debate that slavery was the issue, not tariffs. When one delegate noted the absence of any mention of tariffs in their proposed declaration, Lawrence Keitt made it clear why: secession was about slavery *not* tariffs. This was not because slavery was a cover for tariffs, but because the tariff issue had been settled long ago:

12. On these latter two points, see the educated discussion at <https://www.quora.com/To-what-extent-was-the-American-Civil-War-fought-over-the-issue-of-slavery/answer/Ken-Fishkin>.

13. See the review at <http://qr.ae/RbKOGM>.

We have instructed the Committee to present a summary of the reasons which influenced us in the action we have now taken. My friend from Richland said that the violation of the Fugitive Slave Laws are not sufficient, and he calls up the Tariff. Is that one of the causes at this time? What is that cause? Your late Senators, and every one of your members of the House of Representatives, voted for the present tariff. [Mr. Miles. I did not.] Well, those who were there at the time voted for it, and I have no doubt you would, if you were in it. The question of the tariff did agitate us in 1832, and it did array this State against the Federal Government.

I maintain, and do always maintain, that this State triumphed then. . . .

But the Tariff is not the question which brought the people up to their present attitude. We are to give a summary of our causes to the world, but mainly to the other Southern States, whose co-action we wish, and we must not make a fight on the Tariff question.¹⁴

When we get to the point on primary sources below, we will see that Mr. Keitt was not alone in these sentiments. It was universally understood and often admitted, with the sole exception of when southern diplomats abroad realized slavery was not an acceptable cause outside the American South. But Mr. Roberts is forced to reverse the order of the reality. He says,

Slavery played a role only in the South's effort to keep a balance in the voting power of "free states" and "slave states" in the attempt to prevent the passage of a tariff.

This statement is simply ignorant. To say that the only role slavery played in the South was to prevent tariffs is to let pet theories make a mockery of truth at the expense of the suffering and cruelty imposed on many millions of people. It does, however, illustrate the degree of absurdity to which one must run when defending that position.

14. See the whole document at <http://history.furman.edu/benson/docs/scdebate2.htm>

Instead, let us remember Mr. Keitt's appeal, which was heeded by his fellow statesmen. Tariffs were not the issue. That question had been settled, and his present contemporaries had actually voted *for* the tariff that was then in place. It was a done issue, they were satisfied with it, voted for it, and did not need any other cover for it. Slavery was the cause of their secession.

5. Secession over tariffs was not seen as unconstitutional, but failed anyway

Mr. Roberts claims, "Southern states could not cite the tariff as a breach of the Constitutional fabric," and thus tariffs could not be used as constitutional reason to secede. If this is true, then why did they do exactly that in 1832?

The Nullification Crisis we mentioned above was nothing less than just that: South Carolina declared it would secede from the union over the tariff of 1828/32. Many of the men who fought that issue in '32 were there in the room in '60 also. They had not seen any constitutional problem declaring secession over the issue of tariffs.

The most popular expression of South Carolina's position at the time was John Calhoun's *Exposition and Protest* (1828). The lengthy essay argued precisely that the high tariff in question at that time was *unconstitutional*. Thus, the tariff was indeed seen as legitimate constitutional grounds for secession.

Further, when South Carolina put out that call in 1832, no other southern states joined them. They did *not* refuse because they thought the issue was not constitutional grounds for secession—most agreed with Calhoun's view that the tariff *was* unconstitutional. They rejected secession at the time anyway.

In short, they were willing to endure *even the tariff of abominations* while remaining in the Union. It would take something greater than tariffs to move them so great a length as to leave their Union.

What could this something be? It was of course, slavery. Perhaps then there is an element of truth in Roberts's claim that the 1860 call was dissembling on the part of the South Carolinians at least. Perhaps they were secretly moving just to protect against tariffs, but they had learned their lesson previously with the other states—that they would need some deeper motivation. So, they appealed to slavery just to move

their unwilling southern brethren!

Even if this were the case, however, it would only mean that the dissembling was true for South Carolina. For the other states, however, it would act only to *confirm* more steadfastly that slavery was the prime motivation for secession. For them, it was not a cover for anything.

Even this view, however, is unlikely, because of Mr. Keitt's debate comments. He argued that the tariff question was settled and done persuasively enough that most members of the Convention agreed by both consent and the resulting document of that deliberation. Thus, it seems that even for South Carolina, and certainly for all the other states, slavery was the issue, not tariffs.

6. The whole scholarly world acknowledges slavery was the central if not only real cause for Southern secession.

This reason could by itself constitute a fallacy of appeal to authority, but the insistence of Mr. Roberts that his critics are "uneducated" makes the opinion of the educated directly relevant. What do the specialized scholars on the topic actually say?

The views I have set forth above are hardly novel or new with me, but are standard and well-accepted. Further, they are not only mainstream views, they are also conceded and defended by those historians of the era who would be most sympathetic, and in some case completely sympathetic, with conservatives and limited government proponents. One source at least is even sympathetic with libertarian economic views of secession.

Former Stanford Professor and Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Carl N. Degler, for example, wrote about many aspects of American slavery from alternative perspectives. His book, *The Other South: Southern Dissenters in the Nineteenth Century*,¹⁵ covered many lesser-known and unorthodox angles, such as the Virginians who opposed secession only because they thought slavery was better protected in the Union than out! When Degler arrives at the issue of tariffs and nullification, he has some interesting things to say, beginning with fact that some prominent southerners were actually in favor of the tariffs over slavery. He writes,

15. New York, Evanston, San Francisco, London: Harper and Row, 1974.

One of the favorite arguments of Southerners, especially during the 1820's and 1830's, was that the protective tariff was enriching the North at the expense of the slave South. John C. Calhoun, for example, carried this argument to the point of bringing his native South Carolina to the brink of war with the national government in 1832 when it nullified the tariff of that year. . . . During the South Carolina nullification controversy, 1828–1832, James Madison, the reputed “Father of the Constitution,” told several of his correspondents that slavery was a greater detriment to the South than the tariff. He even took it upon himself to tell Thomas R. Dew, the proslavery writer from the University of Virginia, not only that the tariff had been in operation for a long time without objection but that a slave state like Virginia had lagged behind nonslave states long before the protective tariff came into operation.”¹⁶

For Madison, slavery had damaged the South, and tariffs, well, not so much really.

According to Degler, the rest of academia agrees that tariffs were never the issue. Behind all efforts at disunion, even when tariffs were indeed at the forefront of the discussion, the root cause was always slavery. There was dissembling, after all, but it was the opposite of what Roberts argues. The scholars acknowledge that even in those few instances in which men like Calhoun remonstrated about tariffs, the root issue was really slavery:

Since the publication in 1965 of William Freehling's *Prelude to the Civil War*, however, historians no longer accept at face value the nullifiers' insistence that the tariff was their primary concern. Behind the hostility to the tariff lay the deeper fear, as John Randolph of Roanoke warned, that the constitutional power that permitted Congress to enact a protective tariff could also be used to free the slaves. . . .

He adds that the three similar movements of the “nullification in 1832, disunionist efforts in 1850, and secession in 1860–61 were

16. Degler, *The Other South*, 61.

linked by the desire to protect the South's 'peculiar institution,' slavery." ((Degler, *The Other South*, 101.))

This should not surprise us. Again, South Carolina agreed to join the Union in 1787 to begin with *only* on the condition slavery would be protected, and they felt that what protection they received was all but indefinite. Slavery was always their economic engine; they protected it from day one, and anything that threatened it they opposed, including tariffs. Thus, Degler notes, "Not surprisingly, slavery and its protection became the one issue on which the South tested its friends in the North. For the South to view the Union as useful and valuable, it needed to know that slavery would be protected." Note carefully here it was the *protection* of slavery that was the interest. Secession would follow from this, but even on the verge of that decision, again, there were Southerners, especially in Virginia, who thought secession was a bad idea, but only because they thought slavery would be better protected with the Union intact. The determining factor was still the preservation of slavery. Those who thought it safer outside the Union simply outnumbered them. These judged that slavery could no longer be protected in the Union. Degler concludes,

From the foregoing it follows that the root cause for secession was the belief on the part of those Southerners who supported secession by 1860 that their region was a *permanent* minority within the nation.¹⁷

The North had no cause or reason to continue supporting slavery, and since the whole western world by and large had reprobated the practice by this time, there was no prospect they would ever support it again. The secessionists judged there would be no support for its institution forthcoming whatsoever within the Union, only creeping hostility.

The academic treatment, however, which has been most well received by libertarians is that of Jeffrey Rogers Hummel, *Emancipating Slaves, Enslaving Free Men*.¹⁸ Hummel has largely adopted the position that slavery and secession are separate theoretical ideas and he defends an ideology of secession still today. His work is celebrated and cited by

17. Degler, *The Other South*, 119.

18. Chicago and La Salle, IL: Open Court Publishing Co., 1996.

small government and libertarian writers today.

Nevertheless, Hummel does not actually support the view that some seem to assume. He does not argue that southern secession as it actually occurred in history was justified. Nor does he argue that the South seceded over tariffs, not slavery. He is forthright, rather, about the opposite view: secession was in fact over slavery and *not* tariffs. In reviewing the scholarly literature on the causes of the war, he establishes the nationalist school as the mainstream touchstone, among whom there was only and always one cause, slavery. This older generation of historians, however, tended not to inquire into the North's motivations so much. This left an open question that could be exploited.

While holding out that there could possibly have been a better way to secede, and that such a view could have been defensible, Hummel nevertheless states that the only group actually defending southern secession *as it was* are neo-Confederates. These he said are forced to "justify secession by downplaying slavery" and are thereby left "vulnerable to the recent research of neo-abolitionist historians." This latter group, which includes some of the finest scholars on the issue today, "have exhaustively *reaffirmed* the nationalist school's contention that *slavery was the root cause of secession.*"¹⁹

While Hummel gives credence to the minority of scholars who think slavery could have ended sooner and the nation would have suffered less centralized economic tyranny had the North simply let the South leave, he nevertheless sees the North's refusal to let them go as a *separate question* from the South's determination to secede. Again, this goes back to conflating the reasonings of the North and South. In his prologue, he writes,

We can simplify our understanding of the Civil War's causes, however, if we follow the advice of one eminent historian, Eric Foner, and ask two separate questions. Why did the southern states want to leave the Union? And why did the northern states refuse to let them go?

Hummel wants us to know that at least one of these questions is not up for dispute, and that does not spell favor for the tariff argument. He concludes,

19. Hummel, 6–7; emphasis added.

The answer to at least the first of these questions necessarily revolves around what Southerners called their “peculiar institution”: black slavery.²⁰

Even during the Nullification Crisis itself, when tariffs were the central issue on the table, Hummel nevertheless is able to conclude, “Although South Carolina challenged the national government over the tariff, protection of slavery was the hidden agenda.” ((Hummel, 19.))

Roberts therefore has things backwards. Slavery had not been used as a cover for tariffs, but even when tariffs had played a central role (1832), it was the tariffs providing a cover for slavery.

Where did Hummel get this idea? The answer to that leads us to our final point.

7. The tariff argument is refuted repeatedly by prominent primary sources.

Hummel got his idea that the focus on tariffs even in 1832 had been a front for the slavery agenda from reading primary sources of the era. Particularly, he got it from the man who said this:

I consider the Tariff, but as the occasion, rather than the real cause of the present unhappy state of things. The truth can no longer be disguised, that the peculiar domestick institutions of the Southern States, and the consequent direction which that and her soil and climate have given to her industry, has placed them in regard to taxation and appropriation in opposite relation to the majority of the Union; against the danger of which, if there be no protective power in the reserved rights of the states, they must in the end be forced to rebel, or submit to have ... their domestick institutions exhausted by Colonization and other schemes, and themselves & children reduced to wretchedness.

That confession came from none other than John C. Calhoun himself, writing to Virgil Maxcy on September 11, 1830.²¹ This was

20. Hummel, 3.

21. See <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~cap/calhoun/2Bhed.html>; also quoted in Hummel, 19.

in the midst of the Nullification Crisis, and it reveals directly from the most prominent source himself that the true issue at the root was slavery, not tariffs.

Similar admissions are not difficult to find throughout the slave era, and they grow more radical and more desperate the more threatened the southern elite perceived their institution to be. When the time came, prominent Southerners knew they were seceding over slavery, and they also knew that secession would bring about a war. They did not care.

We have just seen Calhoun essentially prophesy a war due to slavery, from about three decades out. A similar acknowledgement, though closer to the time, came from the man known as the “Calhoun of the Church,” Presbyterian minister James Henly Thornwell. The account comes from a history written while many of the individuals involved were still alive, though Thornwell himself was deceased. R. L. Stanton wrote in the *Princeton Review* in 1876 (bear with the lengthy quotation):

It is well known that Dr. Thornwell took ground in favor of the secession of the Southern States for a considerable time before it was effected, and that during some two years or more before the war began, he did not hesitate to give expression to his sentiments with great freedom. Of this we have the most undoubted evidence. Dr. Charles Hodge is our first witness. In the PRINCETON REVIEW, for July, 1864, on reviewing the proceedings of the General Assembly, for that year, Dr. Hodge says: “In the year 1859, Dr. Thornwell opposed (in the General Assembly) the recommendation of the Colonization Society, on the principle above stated. In private, if not in public, he took the ground, that the division of the country was a certain event.”

Rev. N. West, D.D., of Cincinnati, is our next witness. For a few days immediately after the adjournment of the Indianapolis Assembly of 1859, Dr. Thornwell was the guest of Rev. Dr. West at Cincinnati, occupying his pulpit, and discussing with him and others the great questions of the day. The following three points were emphasized to Dr. West

by Dr. Thornwell: (1.) That while disapproving the horrors of the “middle passage,” the African slave-trade was, nevertheless, in essence, “only the application of the principle of emigration to a degraded people, too lazy to emigrate for their own good;” (2.) That “slavery is national, protected by the Constitution and the flag, and we shall never be satisfied until the Dred Scott decision is applied to all the States as well as to the Territories;” (3.) That “the Northern vote for Fremont has so shaken the confidence of the South in the Union, that we are already organizing to go out of it, and mean to go out, in the event of the election of a sectional President.” To the question of Dr. Thornwell, “You are opposed to the extension of slavery. Tell me, as you know, is this sentiment of opposition only that of the insignificant abolition party North, or is it the sentiment of the Northern people generally? How high, deep, and broad is it?” Dr. West answered: “Doctor, you may begin at Maine, and sweep the Eastern, Northern, and Western line of the States, then go down deep as the granite foundations of the continent, and then reach up high as the blue heaven; it is as deep, broad, and high as all that!” *“Then sir,” replied Dr. Thornwell, “civil war must come! I do not expect we shall be allowed to secede peaceably. We will fight to maintain our rights. We will never rest quiet in the Union until our rights under the Constitution are respected, and we are allowed to bring our slaves into Ohio and Illinois, and buy and sell them as we do in South Carolina and Georgia. If what you say is correct, however, as to the anti-slavery sentiment, war must come. Then we shall have two nations, and a border conflict perpetuated throughout our history, and you men will be responsible for it.”* To this Dr. West answered: “Dr. Thornwell, you cannot over-ride the moral sentiment of the North to the extent of applying the Dred Scott decision to the States. It is too powerful.” *To this Dr. Thornwell replied: “Then we shall have civil war. We mean to go out. We are determined to force the issue.”* This was in June, 1859.²²

22. R. L. Stanton, “The Ecclesiastical Disruption of 1861,” *The Presbyterian*

Thornwell's published views make clear he believed secession was over slavery, not tariffs. In an appendix to my *The Problem of Slavery in Christian America*,²³ it is clear that clergy from both the North and the South agreed on this point. It was not controversial at the time.

In 1861, Thornwell openly defended secession in his "The State of the Country," published in the *Southern Presbyterian Review*. He set forth the cause of South Carolina and the whole South for secession. Were tariffs mentioned? They were indeed referred to, but only to say that they were *not* the issue:

The South has, indeed, complained of the unequal administration of the Government. Her best and purest statesmen have openly avowed the opinion, that, in consequence of the partial legislation of Congress, she has borne burdens, and experienced inconveniences, which have retarded her own prosperity, while they have largely contributed to develop the resources of the North. . . .

But grievances of this kind, unless greatly exaggerated, *never would have led to the dissolution of the Union*. They would have been resisted within it, or patiently borne until they could be lawfully redressed. So far from contending for an arbitrary right to dissolve the Union, or the right to dissolve it on merely technical grounds, the South sets so high a value on good faith, that *she would never have dissolved it for slight and temporary wrongs, even though they might involve such a violation, on the part of her confederates, of the terms of the compact, as released her from any further obligation of honor*.²⁴

Were tariffs the cause? Thornwell twice repeated the answer "never" to this question. Not only "never," but not even if the other states had violated the terms of the compact—i.e., the Constitution. Thornwell is actually saying here that the South did not secede over tariffs, and in fact did not even secede over a violation of the Constitution, and

Quarterly and Princeton Review 5 (April, 1876): 328–330; emphasis added.

23. <https://store.americanvision.org/products/the-problem-of-slavery-in-christian-america>

24. Quoted in McDurmon, *Problem of Slavery*, 413; emphases added.

would not have!

In fact, Thornwell goes yet a step further. The Constitution and tariffs were *ad hoc* reasonings: “these considerations were not invented to justify secession—they were only adduced as motives to reconcile the mind to its necessity. Apart from that necessity, they would have had as little weight in determining public opinion, as the small dust of the balance.”²⁵

Thus, there was a motivation deeper than even the Constitution and good faith itself. Thornwell finally arrives at it:

The real cause of the intense excitement of the South . . . is the profound conviction that the Constitution, *in its relations to slavery*, has been virtually repealed; that the Government has assumed a new and dangerous attitude *upon this subject*; that we have, in short, new terms of union submitted to our acceptance or rejection. Here lies the evil. The election of Lincoln, when properly interpreted, is nothing more nor less than a proposition to the South to consent to a Government, fundamentally different *upon the question of slavery*, from that which our fathers established. If this point can be made out, secession becomes not only a right, but a bounden duty.²⁶

Granted, he has concern for the Constitution—but *only in regard to the question of slavery*. “This subject,” he says, “the question of slavery”—*that* was what drove the South to secede.²⁷ He goes on from this point for several pages to defend the institution and the South’s right to it, to defend the Fugitive Slave Act, to note the general hostility to slavery in the North, and to defend the right of the expansion of slavery into the territories. He eventually ends up confirming the exact reason Abraham Lincoln gave in his first inaugural address:

The rights of the South are the rights of the South as slaveholding; the rights of the North are the rights of the North as non-slaveholding. *This is what makes the real difference betwixt the two sections. To exclude slaveholding is, therefore,*

25. Quoted in McDurmon, *Problem of Slavery*, 414.

26. Quoted in McDurmon, *Problem of Slavery*, 415.

27. McDurmon, *Problem of Slavery*, 415.

*to exclude the South.*²⁸

Forbidding extension of slavery Thornwell saw as “the death knell of slavery.” And for this, the South would secede. He concludes on this unmistakable note:

From these considerations, it is obvious that nothing more nor less is at stake in this controversy than the very life of the South. The real question is, whether she shall be politically annihilated. We are not struggling for fleeting and temporary interests. We are struggling for our very being. And none know better than the Republican party itself, that if we submit to their new type of Government, our fate as slaveholding is for ever sealed.²⁹

The northern Presbyterian giant Charles Hodge was just as clear. He arrived at the same conclusion with less drama and more succinctly. In his 1865 essay on Lincoln, he noted that while some partisans were changing their tune since the result of the War, “the great design and desire of the authors of the late rebellion were the perpetuation and extension of the system of African slavery.”³⁰ He added,

That this conviction is well-founded is plain, because slavery has been from the formation of the government the great source of contention between the two sections of the country; because the immediate antecedents of secession were the attempts to extend slavery into the free Territories of the Union; the abrogation of the Missouri compromise, in order to facilitate that object; the Dred Scott decision, which shocked and roused the whole country, because it was regarded as proof that even the Supreme Court, the sacred palladium of our institutions, had become subservient to the slave power.³¹

Hodge was also up to date on the Southern newspapers:

28. Quoted in McDurmon, *Problem of Slavery*, 419.

29. Quoted in McDurmon, *Problem of Slavery*, 422.

30. Quoted in McDurmon, *Problem of Slavery*, 407.

31. Quoted in McDurmon, *Problem of Slavery*, 407.

[S]laveholders were called upon by the Richmond editors to sustain the burdens of the war, because the war was made for them; and the editor of the leading journal in Charleston, South Carolina, declared that the South sought and desired independence only for the sake of slavery; that if slavery were to be given up, they care not for independence.³²

We could go on with Hodge and many others who were equally as clear about slavery and even the cause of secession.

We must also remember the obvious. We already mentioned the declarations of causes of secession from the seceding states.³³ Virtually every document produced stated slavery as the cause. Virtually *no* document listed tariffs as even a proximate cause.

Likewise there are on top of all of this such admissions as the obvious “Cornerstone” speech of Alexander Stephens, Vice-President of the Confederacy, given in March of 1861 as a premature celebration of a bloodless secession.³⁴ In it, he famously declared,

[T]he new Constitution has put at rest forever all the agitating questions relating to our peculiar institutions—African slavery as it exists among us—the proper status of the negro in our form of civilization. This was the immediate cause of the late rupture and present revolution. . . .

Even Jefferson and the previous generation had been *wrong*, Stephens argued, because they thought slavery was against the law of nature and would eventually die out. Stephens was here to tell us that view was not only wrong, but that the new Confederacy was *founded upon* the belief that it was wrong:

Those ideas, however, were fundamentally wrong. They rested upon the assumption of the equality of races. This was an error. It was a sandy foundation, and the idea of a Government built upon it—when the “storm came and the

32. Quoted in McDurmon, *Problem of Slavery*, 408.

33. See the compilation at <https://www.battlefields.org/learn/primary-sources/declaration-causes-seceding-states>.

34. See <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/mod/1861stephens.asp>.

wind blew, it fell.”

Our new Government *is founded upon* exactly the opposite ideas; its foundations are laid, its cornerstone rests, upon *the great truth that the negro is not equal to the white man; that slavery, subordination to the superior race, is his natural and moral condition.* [Applause.] This, our new Government, is the first, in the history of the world, based upon this great physical, philosophical, and moral truth.

Whether we look in the obvious, prominent places, or more obscure places, we run into the same truth. For example, a recent biography of an obscure but important man, British diplomat and spy Charles Bunch, stationed in Charleston, gives us a virtually unknown but revealing confirmation. He was tasked with keeping the British government up to speed on contemporary developments, because they would have crucial decisions to make regarding whether to recognize the Confederate government or not, and if so, to take sides, etc. When the furor of secession peaked, Bunch reported:

This new Confederacy is based upon the preservation and extension of Negro slavery. It seems, to my humble judgment, quite impossible that in the present age of the world, a government avowedly established for such purposes can meet with the sympathy and encouragement which are as necessary to Nations as to individuals.

He also noted that since the Confederacy proposed a very strong states’ rights position for its members, the revival of the *African slave trade* was virtually guaranteed.³⁵

The biography also reveals an early source of the dissembling among Southern operatives. We may ask ourselves, even suspending all that we have already covered above, if perhaps among *some* South Carolinians tariffs really were the issue, and slavery only a populist cover. We would then be faced still with this case:

Southerner William Lowndes Yancey had been sent as a diplomat

35. For both of these points, see the review of Christopher Dickey’s *Our Man in Charleston*, by researcher Ken Fishkin at https://kensbooksandstuff.quora.com/Our-Man-in-Charleston_

to Britain tasked with convincing the nation to recognize the Confederacy as legitimate and to support her cause. Dickey tells how Yancey

was now in Europe as the head of the Confederate commission seeking diplomatic recognition and material assistance. But he soon discovered that the oratory that had brought delegates and spectators to their feet in Charleston moved very few people on the far side of the Atlantic. His defenses of slavery and the slave trade fell on deaf ears, or very hostile ones. Instead, he quit making them, and then he pretended he never had. In May, Yancey and the other two commissioners had an unofficial meeting with Lord Russell at his house in London, trying to persuade him that the main reason why the Southern States had seceded was not slavery at all but the high Federal tariffs imposed on manufactured goods from abroad in order to protect the industries of the North. This rationale completely contradicted South Carolina's stated reasons for secession published fewer than five months before.³⁶

Why was this Yancey over in Britain giving defenses of slavery? He knew quite well that Britain had long since outlawed it and that Europe opposed it. Was this supposed to be a cover? Obviously not. It was his true belief. When he saw that it was *so* unpopular it was defeat his mission to win over the British government, he switched his tune to tariffs immediately.

But just in case there was any doubt left as to what Yancey's true beliefs were, the reader needs to know he was a ring leader in America of a group that was not only for slavery, but for actually reopening the African slave trade, for annexing Cuba and much of Mexico to create a slave breeding empire encircling the whole Gulf of Mexico. This group of radicals was large and well-known as "fire eaters" in the South, and they drove much of the secession agenda and more.

Such ideas were widely discussed at Southern Commercial Conventions, held in the 1850s, which were intended to answer how the southern economy could boost itself to compete with the industrialism of the North. Many thought it could not, or would not, industrialize, so

36. Quoted at <https://kensbooksandstuff.quora.com/Our-Man-in-Charleston>.

it needed its own answer. The “Golden Circle” perpetual slave empire was one answer. Yancey was a strong proponent. At the 1858 Commercial Convention, he argued for it:

If slavery is right per se, if it is right to raise slaves for sale, does it not appear that it is right to import them?

Let us then wipe from our statute book this mark of Cain which our enemies have placed there.

We want negroes cheap, and we want a sufficiency of them, so as to supply the cotton demand of the whole world.³⁷

It is clear that slavery was not only the cause for secession but the great hope of such men. Tariffs had virtually nothing to do with it. The switch in topics from slavery to tariffs while in Britain was clearly dissimulation to hide what he had just learned was a losing case abroad. But it was too late.

Conclusion

What more need be added? Is it necessary to go on to note that several prominent men even of the South agreed that secession was de facto rebellion and would necessitate a war? This was the view of Robert E. Lee, though his fans rarely even know it, let alone admit it. He wrote to his son on January 23, 1861, before Virginia had joined the secession movement:

The South, in my opinion, has been aggrieved by the acts of the North, as you say. . . . But I can anticipate no greater calamity for the country than a dissolution of the Union. It would be an accumulation of all the evils we complain of, and I am willing to sacrifice everything but honor for its preservation. I hope, therefore, that all constitutional means will be exhausted before there is a resort to force. Secession is nothing but revolution. The framers of our Constitution never exhausted so much labor, wisdom, and forbearance in its formation, and surrounded it with so many

37. Quoted in Eric Walther, *William Lowndes Yancey and the Coming of the Civil War*, 211. See the Wikipedia entry: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Lowndes_Yancey.

guards and securities, if it was intended to be broken by every member of the Confederacy at will. It was intended for “perpetual union,” so expressed in the preamble, and for the establishment of a government, not a compact, which can only be dissolved by revolution, or the consent of all the people in convention assembled.³⁸

The same view had been defended earlier by Andrew Jackson in the midst of the Nullification Crisis. He was a big states’ rights man, a Southerner, and yet he fiercely denounced secession as revolution, and he mobilized the army to prevent it. Had South Carolina not been pacified by the lowered tariffs in 1832, and gone forward with their planned secession, the slave-owning Democrat Andrew Jackson would have been Abraham Lincoln before Lincoln was.

Why? Because Jackson followed the same key leaders, including Daniel Webster, in the view that the union was perpetual and that secession was not a state’ right to decide, but required ratification by the nation as a whole. Lee himself held this view and described it eloquently. Likewise, the normally stoic Rev. Thornwell, mentioned above, confessed that secession was a “radical revolution.”³⁹

This view was widely held, even by those precipitating the secession and thus war. This reality goes one step further than the issue of the cause of secession, which is clear, and answers the question of the cause of the *war*. While not fully, satisfactorily settling this here, it is pretty clear that anyone who held this view—including many of the most elite and prominent of the southern leaders *from the beginning*—would have acknowledged the deduction that the act of autonomous secession itself virtually guaranteed a war.

From this perspective, who fired first at Sumter and why is beside the point. The act of secession was, according to the view of Andrew Jackson, Robert E. Lee, and J. H. Thornwell, to mention only an important few, was that secession itself in the way it was done *was* an act of revolution and thus of rebellion and war.

What we can rest assured of is that secession was over slavery, not tariffs. Tariffs were a real issue in 1832, but they had long since faded.

38. See the letter at https://loa-shared.s3.amazonaws.com/static/pdf/Lee_Evils_of_Anarchy.pdf.

39. Quoted in McDurmon, *Problem of Slavery*, 411.

Slavery was the issue which had always been debated, from the Constitutional Convention forward. It was the issue stated everywhere in public and private, by every line of evidence, as the issue. By the crisis of 1860–1861, tariffs only came up in those few venues where slavery counted for bad PR. This was rarely if ever before the war. Once the war started, it was intended primarily for foreign audiences. After the war, it was almost standard practice to shout “Constitution” and “tariffs” while trying to bury the slavery issue.

We have reams of material that act, think, and say to us in repeated, loud proclamations that slavery was the cause. Slavery was the cause. Tariffs were not. Pointing out Lincoln’s racist statements one more time will not change that. Pointing out that the North did not initially go to war to free the slaves also will not. Nothing will.

Despite what centralized problems resulted from the Civil War, it was a war that began with a secession that took place over slavery. Had we taken care of the slavery in a righteous way first, we probably would have avoided all of it, including the centralized results afterwards. Better yet, we would not find ourselves in a position of trying to defend otherwise good doctrines such as decentralized government and state’s rights with all the baggage that attached because of failure after failure with slavery and especially race since then. It is time for Christians, libertarians, and limited government proponents to acknowledge the whole truth, quit straining pet theories, and focus attention on the true causes, their true effects, and especially the real solutions for liberty going forward.