

What Caused the Civil War?

Ayers Draft 6/22/05

ON *THE SIMPSONS*, a popular animated satire of American life, Apu Nahasapeemapetilan, an industrious South Asian immigrant in Springfield, U.S.A., has studied hard for his citizenship test. "What was the cause of the Civil War?" is the final question on the oral quiz. "Actually, there were numerous causes," says Apu. "Aside from the obvious schism between the abolitionists and the anti-abolitionists, there were economic factors, both domestic and inter—" The official, clearly bored with such superfluous erudition, intones flatly: "Just say slavery." Apu eagerly concedes the point: "Slavery it is, sir." With this declaration Apu wins his American citizenship.¹

Why is this funny? It's not because slavery was not the cause of the Civil War, but because the bureaucrat demands a rote answer to explain a profoundly complex problem at the center of the nation's experience. Some Americans of course have other short explanations for the Civil War. "It was really just economics," one often hears, or "it was really about

states' rights" or "Southerners just wanted to be left alone with their way of life." People deliver these explanations with an air of savvy common sense, of putting the matter to rest.

Historians are exasperated by such assertions. No respected historian has argued for decades that the Civil War was fought over tariffs, that abolitionists were mere hypocrites, or that only constitutional concerns drove secession. Nor does any historian argue that white Northerners, suddenly discovering that slavery was a gross injustice to African Americans, rose up in 1861 to sacrifice 350,000 of their sons, brothers, and fathers to emancipate the slaves. Yet one still hears the old explanations in virtually any discussion of the Civil War.

The challenge of explaining the Civil War has led historians to seek clarity in two ways of thought. One school, the fundamentalists, emphasizes the intrinsic, inevitable conflict between slavery and free labor. The other, the revisionists, emphasizes discrete events and political structures rather than slavery itself. Both

sides see crucial parts of the problem, but it has proved difficult to reconcile the perspectives because they approach the Civil War with different assumptions about what drives history.² One focuses on deep social and cultural structures, the other on public events close in time and consequence to the war's beginning. Both perspectives see essential aspects of the problem, but neither sees it whole.

Fundamentalists claim with confidence that the Civil War was a struggle over the future of the United States and can say with justice that the war pitted slavery against freedom. Revisionists can truthfully say that the Civil War was caused by the disintegration of the Democrats, the failure of compromise, and the election of Abraham Lincoln. For the fundamentalists, slavery is front and center; for the revisionists, slavery is buried beneath layers of white ideology and politics. As thousands of books and articles show, both schools have a point.

"What caused the Civil War?" misleads us because it seems such a straightforward question. The implication of

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“what” is that some factor can be isolated, held apart from everything else. “Cause” evokes a mechanical model of action and reaction. “The” implies that the Civil War was the four-year set of battles and outcomes that eventually unfolded, including Union victory and emancipation. Such a simple question virtually demands a simple answer.

We really need a series of questions that combine the structural explanation of the fundamentalists with the dynamic explanation of the revisionists. The questions should acknowledge that what became the Civil War was caused over and over again as it changed from a political conflict to a military conflict to a struggle over emancipation. We need to set aside our knowledge of later events and their outcome to ask the first key question: “What motivated millions of Americans to declare themselves as enemies of one another in 1859, in 1860, and in 1861?” We must push below the surface of familiar events to see how people throughout the social order thought of themselves and their responsibilities.

The Civil War came by a number of small steps, each with an explicit logic all its own. Combined, these small steps led to large unanticipated consequences. Each period in the struggle between 1859 and 1861, despite recurring language and personalities, was framed differently, presented different challenges, permitted different solutions, and pushed toward different outcomes. The frame of perception and decision making before John Brown differed from that which followed; that frame changed again when the parties put four candidates in the field, again when Lincoln won the Republican nomination, again when Lincoln won the election, again when the Gulf South states seceded, again when Fort Sumter was fired upon and the troops were called out. Each frame dictated the range of actions, and those ranges grew ever more restricted with each stage.

Slavery was a profound economic, political, religious, and moral problem, the most profound the nation has ever faced. But that problem did not lead to war in a rational, predictable way. The war came through misunderstanding,

confusion, miscalculation. Both sides underestimated the location of fundamental loyalty in the other. Both received incorrect images of the other in the partisan press. Political belief distorted each side’s view of the other’s economy and class relations. Both sides believed the other was bluffing, both believed that the other’s internal differences and conflicts would lead it to buckle, and both believed they had latent but powerful allies in the other region that would prevent war. By the time people made up their minds to fight, slavery itself had become obscured. Southern white men did not fight for slavery; they fought for a new nation built on slavery. White Northerners did not fight to end slavery; they fought to defend the integrity of their nation. Yet slavery, as Abraham Lincoln later put it, “somehow” drove everything.

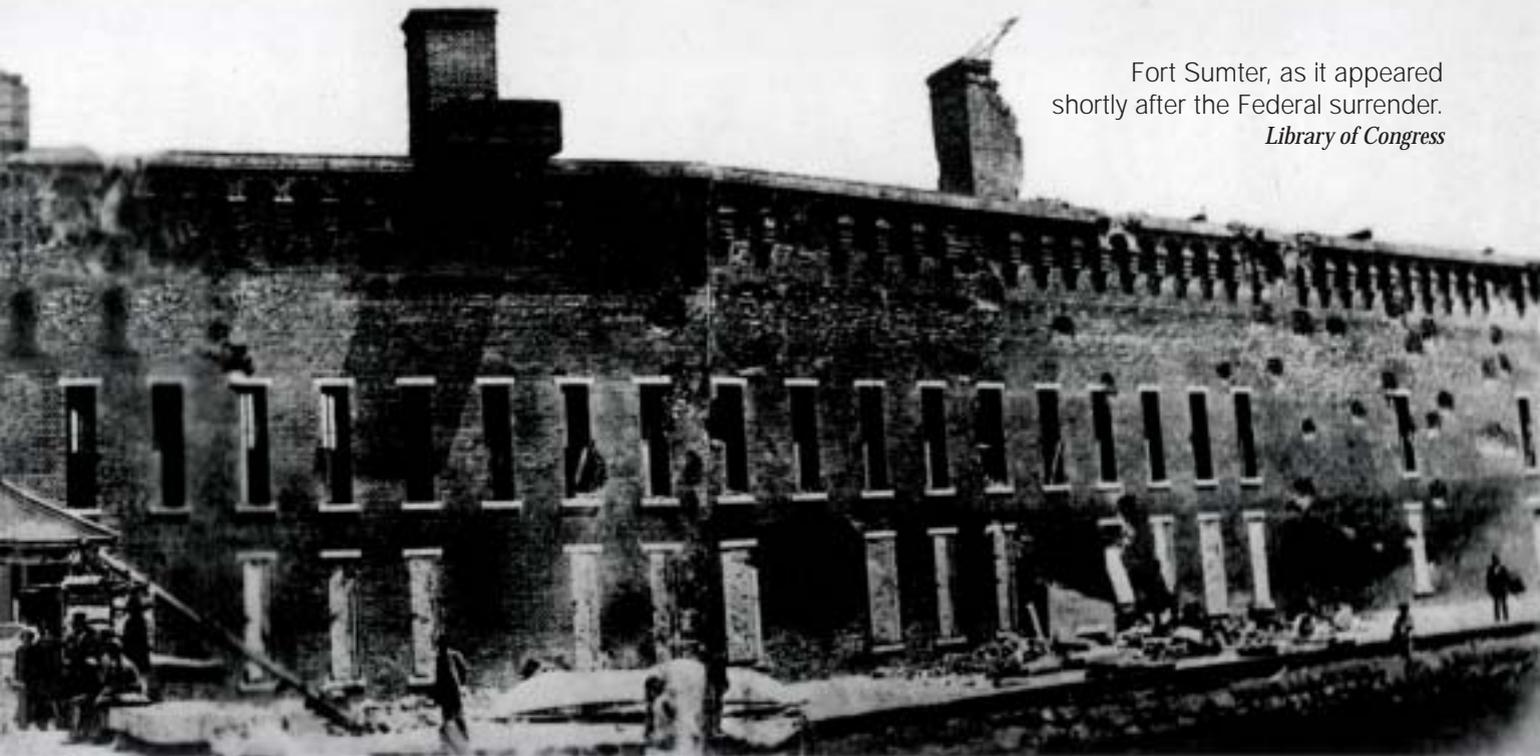
What we might call “deep contingency” can help explain this puzzle. All social life is “contingent,” implicated and unpredictable, because all parts of life depend on one another. What we think of as public and private, economic and political, religious and secular, and military and civilian are deeply connected.

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War?

Fort Sumter, as it appeared shortly after the Federal surrender.

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Social change can start anywhere and lead anywhere. As a result, the most profound kinds of self-understanding can change radically and abruptly. The American Civil War stands as an example of how history can suddenly pivot and take a new direction. Histories of other nations in other times record similar seismic changes, changes explainable only through deep contingency.

An argument for deep contingency is based on the simple principle that the best explanation reckons with the most information. Simple explanations that ignore complication in an impatient determination to get to a bottom line or root cause are worse than useless. They give the false impression that we have explained something when we have not.

Those who want a demographic explanation for the Civil War, for example, make the point that the higher the percentage of slaves in Southern states, the

greater the eagerness with which those states seceded. The deep South had a higher percentage of slaves, and the deep South seceded before the border South.³ But there are problems with such simple mathematics. First of all, if those same tables showed the number, rather than the percentage, of slaves, the pattern would change. In 1860, Virginia held more enslaved people than any other Southern state. The border South was fully invested in slavery. Second, suggesting that a delay in secession implied a lack of commitment to slavery ignores the geopolitical calculation that shaped the course of secession. Unionists in the border South did not waver on slavery; they counseled, in fact, that union offered the best protection for slavery. They were correct.

Moreover, even in the deep South white Southern self-interest in slavery, so real and so obvious, did not lead to one

political stance. Many of the largest slaveholders of Mississippi and Louisiana did everything they could to keep their counties and states in the Union. Despite the misleading impressions created by statewide numbers, we find few statistical links between individual slaveholding and votes on secession. Slaveholders were not necessarily more likely than nonslaveholders to vote for immediate secession.

Slavery held profound meaning for every person who lived within its orbit. Slavery's power stretched all the way to the Mason-Dixon Line, into every facet of life. Yet the force of slavery was refracted through prisms of social practice and belief. Slavery defended itself with Unionism as well as with secession, with delay as well as action. Each county's and state's strategy depended on where it fitted in the machinery of American politics.⁴



Abraham Lincoln



Stephen A. Douglas

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John C. Breckinridge

Oxenduff Collection



John Bell

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"Dividing the National Map," a satire of the 1860 presidential election. Three of that contest's candidates—from left) Lincoln, Douglas, and Breckinridge—tear at the western and southern sections of a map of the United States, while another candidate, John Bell (far right), attempts to mend the northeastern section with glue.

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Northern politics proved just as complicated as that of the South. Men held political loyalties for reasons that had little to do with slavery. Democrats appealed to Catholics and to men who wanted the government to tax them as little and to do as little as possible. Republicans appealed to Protestants and to men who wanted the government to accelerate economic growth and expansion. Slavery presented itself to many Republicans as an obstacle to Northern progress. White Northerners strongly opposed to slavery often viewed the Republicans with mistrust. Predicting which men in a county or state would vote for the new Republican party proved challenging in 1860 and is difficult even in retrospect. The gears of the Northern political mechanism spun around many axes, of which slavery was only one—and not always the most important one.

The political mechanisms of the North, the South, and the nation as a whole had to be reset several times in the late 1850s and early 1860s. The regular rhythms of the 1840s, when victories between the Democrats and Whigs swung back and forth in small and predictable arcs, gave way to erratic and jolting swings. The Whigs died, the Know-Nothings came and went, and the Republicans emerged. Powerful and unforeseeable events jarred the regular patterns of elections. John Brown's raid and the Dred Scott decision, Lincoln's election and the secession conventions made the old political mechanism seem obsolete, unable to keep up with the pace of events. The political meaning of slavery changed with each occurrence, shifting with events, reactions to events, and reactions to the reactions.

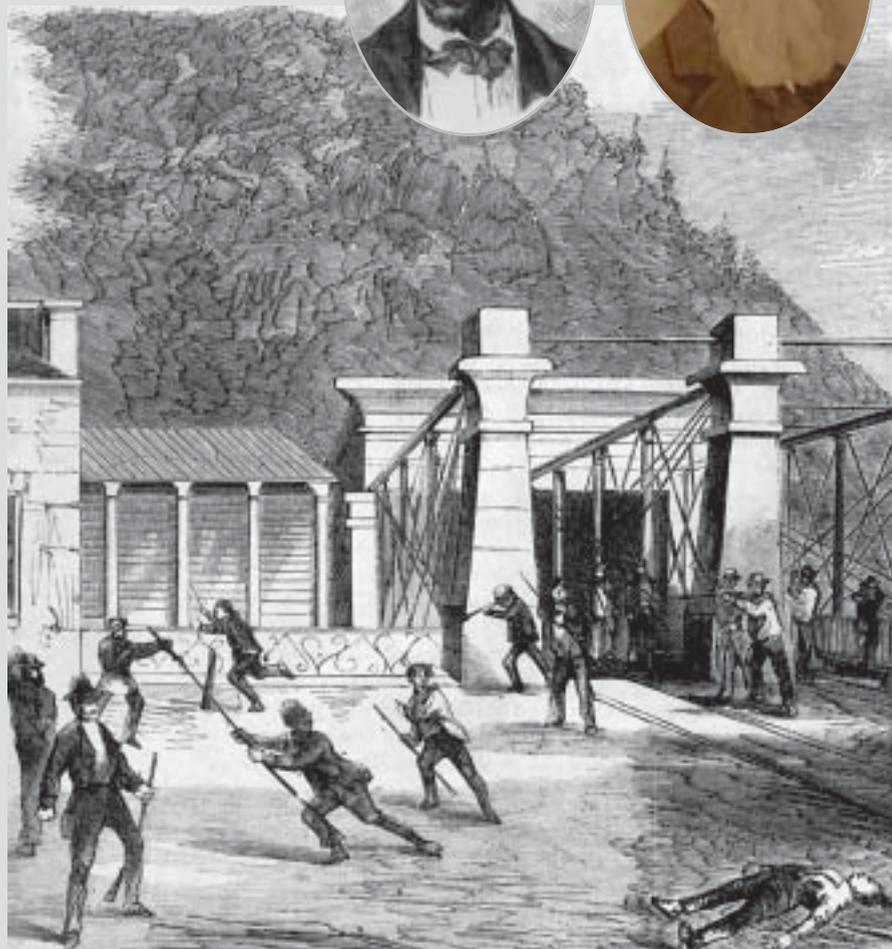
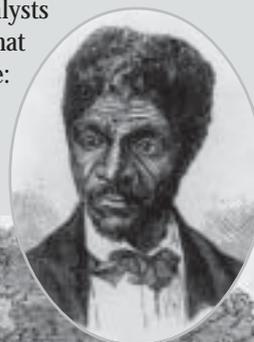
The political system itself helped bring on the Civil War. The mechanism assembled over the first half of the nineteenth century turned around binary choices between two parties and only two parties. Party regulars demanded that true loyalists were all or nothing. To be undecided and open to persuasion was to be less than a man. As the two-party system strained and broke in the 1850s, American voters took this habit of mind with them; they felt driven to dichotomous choices of Republican or Democrat, Union or Confederacy. Voices of caution and moderation were drowned out beneath charges of cowardice and be-

trayal. With each decision the next round of choices became even narrower: yes or no, now or never, with us or against us.

Slavery drove the United States to the Civil War, as the fundamentalists argue, but politics determined the momentum, timing, and outcome of regional suspicion and hostility, as the revisionists insist. We can reconcile the truth of the fundamentalists with the truth of the revisionists by focusing on the connection between structure and event, on the relationships between the long-existing problem of slavery and the immediate world of politics. The Civil War was caused neither by the mere existence of slavery nor by the twists and turns of politics, however, but rather by catalysts that emerged in the two or three decades before the war began.

To understand these catalysts we need to set aside a formula that has come to seem obviously true:

Right: Dred Scott (left) and John Brown.



"Attack on the insurgents at the bridge by the railroad men" (c.1859) depicts members of John Brown's band coming under fire during their raid on Harper's Ferry.

The war as a conflict between a modern North and a pre- or antimodern South.⁵ In this kind of fundamentalist interpretation, everything fits together neatly. Economy, politics, religion, gender relations, literacy, demography—everything aligns along the opposing axes of modernity on either side of the Mason-Dixon Line. This interpretation avoids granting the North an enlightened racial vision but grants it instead the sanction of world history. The North could not help fighting for autonomy, technology, diversity, and progress, for that is what modernity demands. The South could not help fighting for hierarchy, agriculture, homogeneity, and the past, for that is what modernity has overcome. Exactly why differing degrees of modernization needed to lead to war is left unexplained,

but it apparently seems self-evident to many people.

The role of modernity in the Civil War might better be understood as a catalyst for both the North and the South rather than as a simple difference between them. The debate and anger that fed into what became the Civil War contained “modern” elements that would not have existed before the middle of the nineteenth century: a struggle over a hypothetical railroad, a novel written by an obscure woman, an act of symbolic terrorism, a media war over a distant territory.

There can be little doubt that the North embodied many elements of what we would now see as modern: high literacy, rapidly growing towns and cities, early and widespread adoption of industrial methods, innovation in transportation and communication, the dominance of market values, and strong political engagement by a broad electorate of white men. The new Republican party combined these various notions in a potent ideology. The slave South generated fewer towns and factories than the North, to be sure, and its lower population density sustained fewer schools and newspapers. On the other hand, the white South welcomed political parties, nationalism, and political mobilization; it welcomed print, rapid change in ideas, and intimate connection to the cultural centers of Europe and the North; it welcomed the adoption of useful machinery of production and transportation, openness to immigration, rapid growth in churches, higher education, and missionary societies.⁶

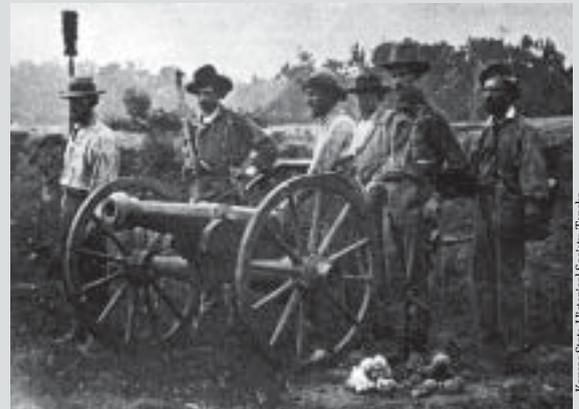
Make no mistake: Southern slavery was, as W.E.B. DuBois put it, “a cruel, dirty, costly and inexcusable anachronism, which nearly ruined the world’s greatest experiment in democracy,” a system of oppression that created “widespread ignorance, undeveloped resources, suppressed humanity and unrestrained passions.”⁷ But the American South created prosperity for much of its white population, a sophisticated means of communication and governance, and a sense among white Southerners of themselves as an advanced and enlightened Christian people. The slave South, in other words, was modern in precisely the ways that encouraged white Southerners to think of themselves as members of a new nation with a destiny



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Above: “A slave auction at the south” (c. 1861) by Theodore R. Davis depicts black men, women, and children being auctioned off for sale.

Right: A group of Free Staters, who battled with proslavery forces in Bleeding Kansas.



Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka

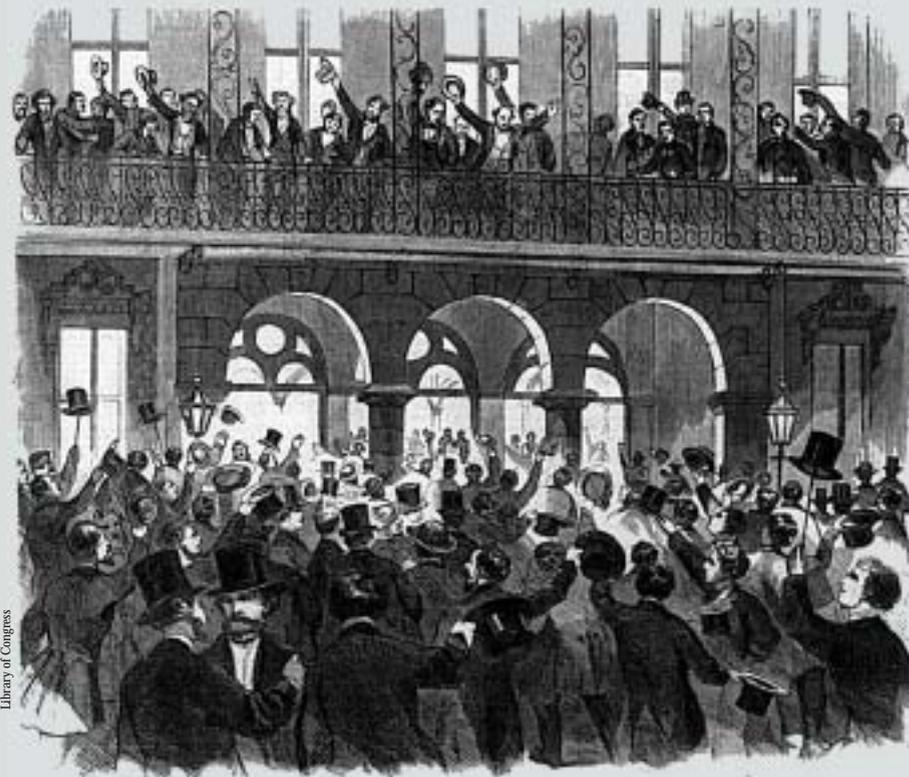
all their own, that allowed the Confederacy to form an enormous army out of almost nothing, and that permitted them to wage effective war against the most thoroughly modern state in the world for four years. Slavery was not accidental in this process, not a mere drag on progress, but gave the Confederacy its only reason for existence.

Two critical components of modernity shared by the North and the South—print and popular politics—created the necessary contexts for the war. Print permitted people to cast their imaginations and loyalties beyond the boundaries of their localities, to identify with people they had never met, to see themselves in an abstract cause. People learned to imagine consequences of actions, to live in the future.⁸

Print shaped everything we associate with the coming of the Civil War. Although Bleeding Kansas was far removed from the East and John Brown’s raid freed no slaves, these events gained critical significance because they were amplified and distorted by newspapers. Without the papers, many events we now see as decisive would have passed without wide

consequence. With the papers, events large and small stirred the American people every day. The press nurtured anticipation and grievance. Americans of the 1850s grew newly self-conscious, deeply aware of who they were and who others said they were. The “North” and the “South” took shape in words before they were unified by armies and shared sacrifice.

It was surely no accident that a long-brewing sectional animosity boiled over when railroads, telegraphs, and newspapers proliferated in the 1840s and 1850s. Suddenly, local bargains and gentlemen’s agreements in Washington could not stand. Politicians could no longer get away with saying one thing in one place and something altogether different somewhere else, for their speeches raced ahead of them by telegraph and newspapers. Rival editors wrenched the most inflammatory words out of context, underlining their danger, amplifying their threat. Territorial expansion took on a new meaning when railroads and steamboats accelerated America’s frantic rush in every



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Secession meeting in front of the Mills House on Meeting Street in Charleston, South Carolina. *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, December 1, 1860.

direction, when American Indians were removed and foreign threats faded.

The Civil War was brought on by people imaginatively constructing chains of action and reaction beyond the boundaries of their own time and space. In distinctly modern ways, people North and South in 1860 and 1861 anticipated events, made warnings and threats, imagined their responses, imagined the responses of others. This is one reason the Civil War seems to have, as Lincoln put it, “come,” why the war seemed both inevitable and surprising, easily explainable yet somehow incomprehensible. People on both sides were playing out future scenarios even as they responded to immediate threats. They recognized how deeply contingency could run and how quickly things could shift; a Supreme Court decision or a presidential election could change the evolution of vast structures of slavery and economic development.

The political system joined print in teaching Americans to think of themselves as connected to places beyond their communities. Long before an integrated national economy evolved, political parties welded American places together. The Democrats, Whigs, and Republicans gave Americans common cause with people who lived thousands of miles away while

dividing them against their neighbors and relatives. The political system existed for such connections, for cooperation and division. The system created policy to help feed the machinery, created controversy to attract the undecided, created positions to reward the faithful. The system was the end as well as the means.⁹

The role of modernity in the American Civil War, in short, was exactly the opposite of what we usually take it to be. A modern North did not go to war to eradicate an antimodern South. Instead, modernity was a shared catalyst between North and South, a shared medium, a necessary precondition for anything like the war that began in 1861.

What caused the Civil War? If you have to offer a one-word answer, go ahead and just say slavery. But you should know what you mean by that answer. The Civil War did not come from the sheer intolerable existence of slavery in a nation built on the ideals of freedom, or from the past and the future caught in a death struggle, or from a familiar sequence of political events that crashed into one another in a chain reaction like so many billiard balls. Rather, you mean slavery as the key catalytic agent in a volatile new mix of democratic politics and accelerated communication,

a process chemical in its complexity and subtlety. You mean, in short, history, the living connection among fundamental structures, unfolding processes, and unpredictable events.

In one field of human understanding after another, a cultural historian has recently reminded us, causality has come to be understood in terms of “increasing specificity, multiplicity, complexity, probability, and uncertainty.”¹⁰ Historical understanding needs the same perspective, what I have called deep contingency. The perspective argues for the intricate interplay of the structural and the ephemeral, the enduring and the emergent. Simple stories of intrinsic qualities and unfolding inevitability are not worthy of history. We should simply refuse to settle for simple explanations for complex problems.

Deep contingency should be distinguished from what we might call surface contingency, the familiar historical staples of accident, personality, and timing, the clichés of what ifs and almos. By itself, a recognition of surface contingency leads only to the predictable observation that battles and elections are unpredictable. While surface contingency can sometimes trigger deep contingency, the great majority of unpredictable events come and go without much consequence; deep contingency reverberates throughout the recesses of the social order. To understand deep contingency we must try to comprehend a society as a whole, its soft structures of ideology, culture, and faith as well as its hard structures of economics and politics. All structures must be put into motion and motion put into structures. It is hard, of course, perhaps impossible, to **portay** deep contingency in a fully satisfactory way, but that should not stop us from trying.

There is no way to understand history except to study it, to question it, to challenge it. History does not fit on a bumper sticker. New evidence, new methods, and new perspectives necessarily change our understanding of history, and we should welcome revisionist history just as we welcome revisionist medicine and revisionist science. History that comes to us as nostalgia and fable does more harm than good. Honest history answers our questions only by asking something of us in return. □

NOTES

1. On *The Simpsons*, see the transcript for the episode "Much Apu about Nothing," written by David S. Cohen and directed by Susie Dietter, Production Code: 3F20, Original Airdate in N.A.: 5-May-96, Capsule revision C, 10-Jun-96, in "The Simpsons Archive" on the World Wide Web: <http://www.snpp.com/>. I am grateful to Scot French for calling this episode to my attention.
2. See Gary J. Kornblith, "Rethinking the Coming of the Civil War: A Counterfactual Exercise," *Journal of American History* 90 (June 2003), 76–105. Kornblith offers a useful survey of the literature on the issue.
3. See, for example, James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 255, and William W. Freehling, *The South vs. the South: How Anti-Confederate Southerners Shaped the Course of the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 22–24.
4. For a thoughtful and helpful overview of this literature, see Daniel W. Crofts, *Reluctant Confederates: Upper South Unionists in the Secession Crisis* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989). The local bases of politics in Virginia have been portrayed in Crofts, *Old Southampton: Politics and Society in a Virginia County, 1834–1869* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1992); the complexities of its state-level politics appear in William G. Shade, *Democratizing the Old Dominion: Virginia and the Second Party System, 1824–1861* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996).
5. In addition to the books described in "Worrying about the Civil War" in this volume, the issue of modernity is analyzed in considerable detail in the digital article prepared by William G. Thomas III and myself: "The Differences Slavery Made: A Close Analysis of Two American Communities," *American Historical Review* 108 (December 2003): 1298–1307 and <http://www.vcdh.virginia.edu/AHR>. In addition to the works discussed there, see Beth Barton Schweiger, *The Gospel Working Up: Progress and the Pulpit in Nineteenth-Century Virginia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Michael O'Brien, *Conjectures of Order: Intellectual*

Life and the American South, 1810–1860 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); James Huston, *Calculating the Value of the Union: Slavery, Property Rights, and the Economic Origins of the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 24–66; and Peter Carmichael, *The Last Generation: Young Virginians in Peace, War, and Reunion* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

6. A stimulating and innovative account that emphasizes the modernity of the Confederacy is Drew Gilpin Faust, *The Creation of Confederate Nationalism: Ideology and Identity in the Civil War South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989). On the projection of boundaries in time, see Peter S. Onuf, "Federalism, Republicanism, and the Origins of American Sectionalism," in Edward L. Ayers, Patricia Nelson Limerick, Stephen Nissenbaum, and Peter S. Onuf, *All over the Map: Rethinking American Regions* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996). On the South's self-image, see Michael O'Brien, *Conjectures of Order: Intellectual Life and the American South, 1810–1860* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004). Any explanation has to begin with the acknowledgment that all white Southerners possessed an enormous and rational economic interest in the institution. James Huston has demonstrated that property in enslaved people accounted for almost 19 percent of all the nation wealth in 1860 and that American slaves were worth more than American railroads and manufacturing combined. Ranked by wealth per capita for the white population, the slave states were the richest in the United States; even the poorest slaveholding state, North Carolina, ranked ahead of New York, Pennsylvania, and Ohio. Huston, *Calculating the Value of the Union*, 65.
7. W. E. B. DuBois, *Black Reconstruction: An Essay Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1800–1860* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1935), 715.
8. This is the argument of one of the most influential books to appear in recent years in the social sciences: Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (rev. and extended ed., London: Verso, 1991). By 1860 the United States had 3,725 newspapers with an annual circulation of nearly 888 million copies—up from 186.5 million copies in 1840. The number of telegraph miles in service went from 0 to 50,000 in those twenty years, and the

number of railroad miles increased from 2,818 to 36,626. Lorman A. Ratner and Dwight L. Teeter, Jr., *Fanatics and Fire-Eaters: Newspapers and the Coming of the Civil War* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 9, 18.

9. Important books that emphasize the dynamics of the political system itself in bringing on the Civil War include Michael F. Holt, *The Political Crisis of the 1850s* (New York: Wiley, 1978) and *Political Parties and American Political Development from the Age of Jackson to the Age of Lincoln* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992); William E. Gienapp, *The Origins of the Republican Party, 1852–1856* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); William W. Freehling, *The Road to Disunion: The Secessionists at Bay* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990) and *The Reintegration of American History: Slavery and the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).
10. Stephen Kern, *A Cultural History of Casualty: Science, Murder Novels, and Systems of Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 6.