



# Myth: The Civil War was about States' Rights

In a poll by the Pew Research Center<sup>1</sup> about the main causes of the Civil War, 48 percent of Americans said it was mostly about states' rights and just 38 percent said it was fought over slavery. Among people younger than 30, 60 percent believed states' rights was the chief cause. Even teachers regularly debate this issue. So, what are "states' rights" and what do they have to do with the Civil War?

In the early days of the United States, leaders argued over whether there should be a strong central government or one that exercised less control over the states. The 10th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, ratified in 1791, created a balance. It simply said the federal government has only those powers granted to it in the Constitution, and all other decisions belong to the states. Examples of federal powers include declaring war and coining money. States' rights include managing elections, setting traffic laws and building roads and schools. Before the Civil War, states also had the right to decide if slavery would be legal or not.

After the election of Abraham Lincoln in 1860, Southern states feared the system of slavery—which brought them tremendous wealth and power—would be undone. This was the only significant "state right" that was being debated at the time. They accused free states (in the north and west) of interfering with their rights on a number of fronts: by banning enslavers from bringing enslaved people into their states for temporary stays; by refusing to cooperate in the capture and

return of runaways; by allowing anti-slavery speeches and events; and by permitting Black men to vote in some places. Southern states were enraged by what they perceived as a threat to their way of life, and accused Northern and Western states of defying the Constitution. They called upon national law to limit the actions of free states, which was essentially at odds with a states' rights position.

When the 11 states seceded from the Union in 1860, they published statements with their reasons. The following quotes from the "Declaration of Causes of Seceding States" shows that slavery was a main concern:

**Mississippi:** "Our position is thoroughly identified with the institution of slavery—the greatest material interest of the world."

**Louisiana:** "The people of the slave holding States are bound together by the same necessity and determination to preserve African slavery."

**Texas:** "The servitude of the African race, as existing in these States, is mutually beneficial to both bond and free, and is abundantly authorized and justified by the experience of mankind."

Several states specifically mentioned the election of Abraham Lincoln and his support for abolition as a main reason for secession. Alabama claimed this was "nothing less than an open declaration of war." Others claimed that slave labor was essential to their economies. Mississippi went so far as to say that agricultural work in the hot South depended on slavery because "none



President Lincoln Entering Richmond, VA, with Emancipated Slaves (April 1865)

but the black race can bear exposure to the tropical sun." When the new Confederate States wrote their constitution, it made slavery a national rather than a local concern: "No bill...or law denying or impairing the right of property in negro slaves shall be passed."

Since the Civil War, some have attempted to reframe the main cause of the conflict by focusing on states' rights or other issues, such as taxes and tariffs. This may be because it's painful to accept the truth that millions fought to uphold a cruel and inhuman system. It may be because people want to believe the best about their state or region. Or it may be due to prejudice. The historical evidence makes it clear, however, that the Civil War was fought mainly over the issue of slavery, and that the Confederate cause was the continuation of white supremacy.

<sup>1</sup> Heimlich, Russell. "What Caused the Civil War?" Pew Research Center. May 18, 2011. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2011/05/18/what-caused-the-civil-war>.



# Roundtable Discussion

## MYTH: THE CIVIL WAR WAS ABOUT STATES' RIGHTS

- 1 After reading about this myth in more depth, how would you respond (in your own words) to someone who said, "Technically, the Civil War was fought over states' rights"?

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- 2 How did some of the actions of Southern states actually conflict with a states' rights approach?

- 3 What is your reaction to the language in the "Declaration of Causes of Seceding States"? Were you surprised that Southern states were so direct in talking about slavery? Explain.

- 4 Why do you think many Americans—even today—are unwilling to accept that slavery was the main cause of the Civil War?

- 5 How has this reading made you think about how you have been taught about slavery in the U.S.?

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