### CIVIL WAR CAUSES: A HISTORIOGRAPHY

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# Three eras of explanation of Civil War causation

- 1. Partisan accounts (1861-1890s)
- 2. Nationalist interpretations/New History (1890s-1950s)
  - 3. Modernization (1950s-)



#### Alexander Stephens, Vice President, CSA, March 21, 1861

- "(N)ew constitution has put at rest all the agitating questions relating to our peculiar institution African slavery
- "This was the immediate cause of the late rupture and present revolution.
- "(according to) Jefferson the enslavement of the African was in violation of the laws of nature
- "Those ideas, however, were fundamentally wrong. They rested upon the assumption of the equality of races.

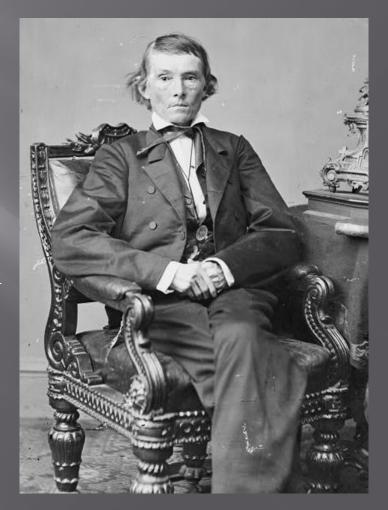
#### Alexander Stephens, Vice President, CSA, March 21, 1861

- "Our new government is founded upon exactly the opposite idea;
- "its foundations are laid, its corner- stone rests, upon the great truth that
- "the negro is not equal to the white man; that [a] slave's subordination to the superior race is his natural and normal condition."

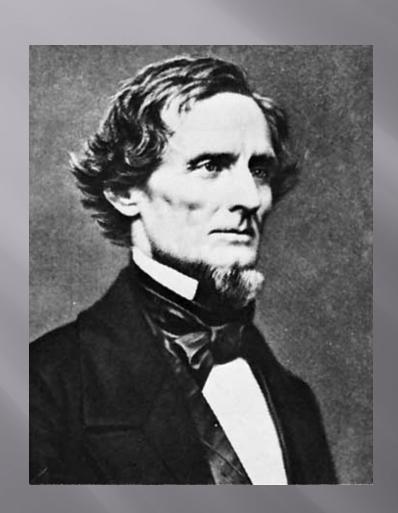
#### Alexander Stephens 1868

Secession "a strife between the principles of Federation, on the one side, and Centralism, or or Consolidation, on the other.

"Slavery was but the question on which these antagonistic principles were brought into active collision"



### Jefferson Davis 1881



"To whatever extent the question of slavery may have served as an occasion, it was far from being the cause of the conflict."

Secession a protest against
"the systematic and
persistent struggle to
deprive the Southern States
of equality in the Union."

#### J. E. Cairnes 1862

Who deserves blame for causing the Civil War?

The Slave Power "that system of interests, industrial, social and political springing from slavery which...seeks admission as an equal member into the community of civilized nations." J.E. Cairnes (1862)

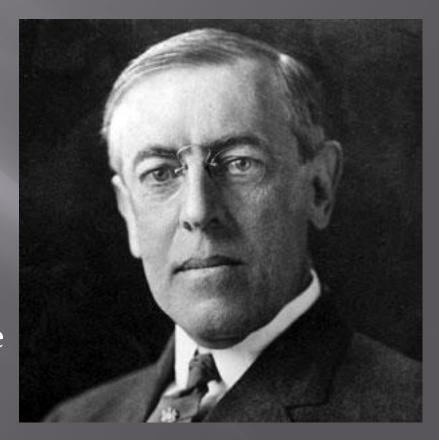
Secession's "great moving cause was the desire of power – slavery the platform on which they worked their diabolical machinery." Joel Headly (1863)



## Woodrow Wilson & Reconciliation (1907)

Secessionists "stung most intolerably" by abolitionist moralizing and determined to "make good their rights under the federal arrangement"

Lincoln's "reverence for the Constitution" and noble attempt at conciliation



### Frederick Jackson Turner & New History (1896)



"Only the historian who has the insight and power rightly to analyze and interpret the economic and social evolution of American society will correctly write its history."



#### U.B. Phillips & the Lost Cause 1902/1939

New history + confederate apologetics = Lost Cause

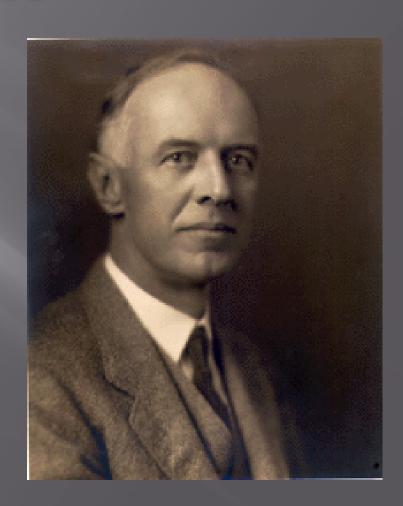
Social Darwinist

Europe's cold winters trained whites for conquest

Africa's environment made blacks inferior to whites

Secession caused by racial conflict

"the South must be and remain a white man's country"



Charles and Mary Beard & New History (1930)



Slavery "not the fundamental issue...

"the roots of the controversy lay ...in the social groupings, founded on differences in climate, soil, industries, and labor systems, in divergent social forces."

### W.E.B. DuBois, Black Reconstruction, 1935

"It was the black worker as the founding stone of a new economic system...who brought the civil war."

The Civil War as a "general strike."

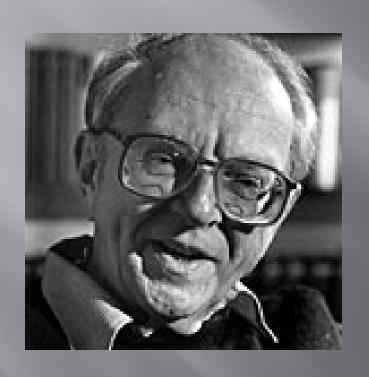
"(t)he South was fighting for the protection and expansion of its agrarian feudalism."



#### New history and "the needless war"

- Early C20 historians argued that slavery "had reached its limits in both profits and land"
- Social determinants pointed to slavery's eventual and peaceful demise
- War was "needless" and resulted from exploitation of emotions
- WWII and Cold war = American "exceptionalism"
- Civil rights movement = segregation as a contradiction of America's liberal tradition
- Southern distinctiveness, South resistant to change

### David Donald (1956), New History, needless war



Abolitionism as an "anguished protest" against lost social status

"Hysterical fears and paranoid suspicions marked this shift for Americans to 'other directedness.'

"Never was there a field so fertile before the propagandist, the agitator, the extremist."

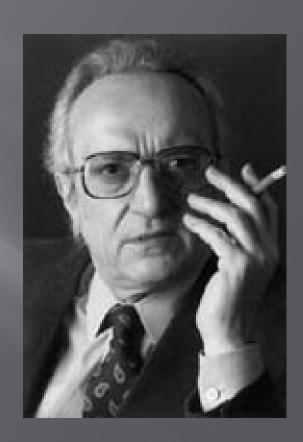


### Eugene Genovese (1965), modernization

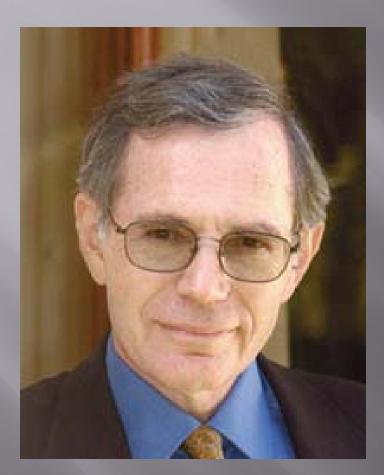
Slave owner paternalism "the closest thing to feudal lords imaginable in a nineteenth century bourgeois republic"

Planters welcomed material comforts of modernity while rejecting "the Jacobinism, socialism, and all forms of radical democracy"

The South a distinctive culture in conflict with modernity



#### Eric Foner, (1970)



Republican egalitarian free labor ideology "an affirmation of the superiority of the social system of the North – a dynamic, expanding capitalist society"

Free labor Republicans ambivalent about modernization, but "condemned slavery as ...out of touch with the modern spirit

Free labor ideologues fought to preserve "the pre-modern world of small shop, independent farm and village artisan"

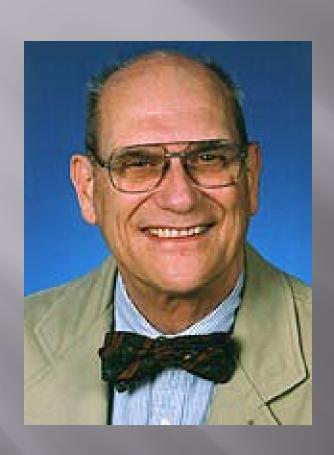
#### James McPherson (2001)

"As the North hurtled toward a future of competitive, meritocratic, free-labor capitalism...many
Southerners responded with distaste and alarm.

"Southern separatism was rooted in resistance to this Northern vision"



#### Bertram Wyatt Brown (1982)



Abolitionist moralizing one of many northern insults to southern honor

Disunion the only recourse to northern modernization which separated home from work, diminished patriarchal authority over children, and promoted ethical conduct thru individual self control

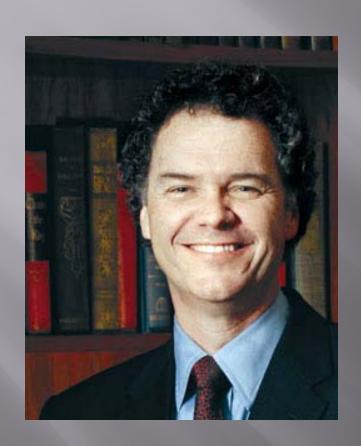
#### Stephanie McCurry (1992/1995)

The source of white men's unity – yeoman and planter – located in a patriarchal worldview "in distinct contrast to bourgeois gender ideology"

Proslavery appealed "on the common ground of gender"



#### Edward Ayers (2003), Shenandoah Valley



Progress was as much southern as northern

Slavery the underlying cause BUT slavery "connected the North and South. Its dark threads woven through Unionism as well as secession"

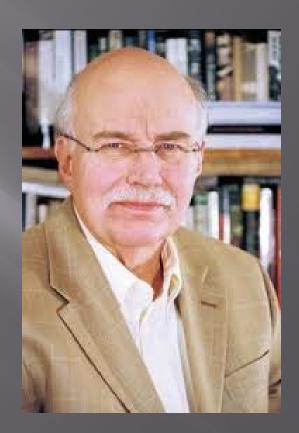
Left to themselves "the white people of the border would never have descended into such conflict"

#### Stanley Harrold (2010), long civil war

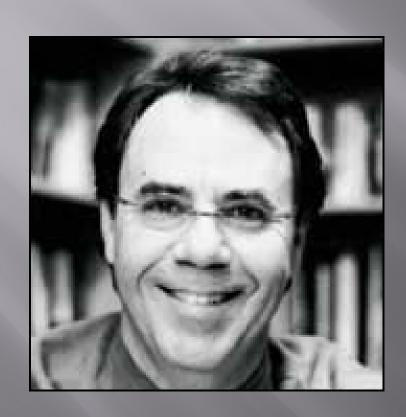
War began on the borderlands in the 1830s in battles over fugitive slaves

The border South reluctant/late to secede because slavery protected better in the Union than out

Border regions heavily militarized by the 1850s because of small battles waged over extradition



### Steven Hahn (2003) and the long Civil War



Slavery was on track to end through gradual means had the Civil War not disrupted process begun in 1770s

Slavery national not regional Free blacks in the North as maroon communities of fugitives

Foot-dragging Republican emancipationists were nation builders

Slave politics part of revolutionary effort to end institution