

Ceylon and American Communalism :

An Essay on Student Historiography

THE secession of the Southern States after the election of Abraham Lincoln and the four years of civil war which followed were the great breakdown of American society. For the only time in the history of the United States, the constitutional system could not contain a conflict within its structure and the spirit of American nationality could not bridge a conflict within that society. No topic has more interested the historians of the United States than why this failure took place. Even in this centennial year of the outbreak of that war, the books still pour forth. Disagreement still rages about the causes and as to whether or not, given the causes, war was the inevitable outcome.

Historical interpretation does not operate in a vacuum and to an important degree subsequent national moods, if they have not determined conclusions, have at least sharpened the changing lines of inquiry. During the years after the War, the heated passions cooled only slowly, and the historians, both of North and South of the newly reunited nation, sought to establish the purity of their own section and place personal blame on the other. The Southern historian saw the causes of war in the assault of the abolitionist on the social system of the South and upon the liberties of the Southern people guaranteed by the constitutional rights of the states. The triumphant Northern historian explained that the Southern slaveholders had entered into evil compact to destroy the Union if they could not succeed in foisting chattel slavery upon it.

As the distance from the war lengthened and the emotional reconciliation of the sections took place, the historians shifted from blaming individuals to expounding the thesis that the growing divergence of the sections made the war, if not inevitable, at least the fault of neither section. During boom and depression years of the late 1920s and 1930s the historians sought the economic forces that underlaid society and attributed the War to the conflict between an agrarian South, which sat in the seats of power in the national government, and the rising industrial North whose way it barred.

In the years after the Twentieth Century's two World Wars, the battle-sickened historians, perhaps unconsciously seeking peace, found

themselves unwilling to accept the irrepressibility of war. They sought the causes for the internecine struggle in the failure of the party system, the breakdown of communication, and the failure of leadership. Increasingly historians, as their researches in social and intellectual history broaden, have tended to describe the war as resulting from the development of two distinct and conflicting cultures within the national boundaries of the United States. New viewpoints and books continue to proliferate, and to sell, to the extent that even a field of the history of the histories of the Civil War has developed.¹

To what degree is the American a captive of his emotions and his times when he looks at his own great fraternal struggle? What would be the views and insights of other peoples belonging to other lands and cultures when they examine the same evidence? What would be the conclusions of an investigation by Asian students who would approach the events in America from a vantage point of greater detachment? The ideas expressed, and perhaps even their phrasing, would be likely to be fairly dependent on the available secondary sources, and a completely new synthesis would not be probable. However, the combination of factors, the choice exercised, and the values applied might well be both stimulating and revealing.

A class of students preparing for a paper in "The History of the United States" was assigned the tutorial topic: "Was the Civil War an 'irrepressible' conflict," and permission was requested to make a general summary of the conclusions of the individual papers. Nineteen papers were subsequently offered for the summary. In the preparation of their tutorials, the students used a number of special studies on the coming of the War including works by Frederic L. Paxson, Arthur C. Cole, James G. Randall, Avery Craven, Kenneth Stampp, Walter G. Shotwell, a large number of text books, and an article by Marcus Cunliffe to which most students made reference.² The student papers were completed prior to the classroom lectures covering the same field.

1. See particularly: Howard K. Beale, "What Historians Have Said About the Causes of the Civil War," Social Science Research Council Bulletin 54, *Theory and Practice in Historical Study*, (New York, 1946, 53-102; Thomas J. Pressly, *Americans Interpret Their Civil War* (Princeton, 1954): Marcus Cunliffe, "The Causes of the American Civil War," *History Today*, 3 (1953), 753-761.

2. To greatly oversimplify the careful scholarship and imaginative synthesis that went into these works, Frederic Paxson's *The Civil War* (New York, 1911) and Arthur C. Cole's *The Irrepressible Conflict, 1850-1865* (New York, 1934) picture the war as the clash of honest men and irreconcilable sectional differences; James G. Randall's *Civil War and Reconstruction*, (New York, 1937) and Avery Craven's *The Coming of the Civil War*, (New York, 1942) and *The Repressible Conflict*, (University, La., 1950) blame the war on a "blundering generation"; Kenneth Stampp's *And the War Came*, (Baton Rouge, La., 1950) accepts secession as a desirable alternative to war; Marcus Cunliffe's article on "The Causes

The students in their papers were not given to an acceptance of unitary causation or deterministic interpretations. They showed little interest in an explanation of the War as a class struggle between a slave and a free labor system, between slavocracy and capitalism, or a step on the eventual path toward world revolution. There was no tendency to expound on the wrongness of slavery or racial inequality. At the same time they rejected, sometimes specifically but usually by disinterest, an ideological or constitutional argument as the basis of conflict. Constitutional propositions such as "states rights," they felt, were primarily the rationalizations of a conflict of interests and arose after, not anterior to this conflict. As one paper explained it, the sectional dispute finally became a constitutional issue once all the forces at work brought the conflict to the fore. Men are not moved by ideology, the feeling seemed to be, but events move them toward ideology.

Two thirds of the papers maintained that the Civil War was not irrepressible, and among those which took the position of inevitability, it was for human rather than, for the most part, deterministic reasons. A few did take the latter stand, maintaining that the sections had grown too far apart, with divergent economic and cultural interests which made them mutually self-contained and irreconcilable units.

All of the papers saw the development of a strong communal feeling within the South, based upon a common agricultural mode which, like the social system, rested upon Negro slavery. Only an occasional caution was added that this sense of community cloaked many divergent interests within the section. As to whether a growingly communal South was faced in conflict with an equally homogeneous and unified North, there was not agreement. A number of papers tended to find an easy equation of the North with industrialism and wage labor, while a few sought with more studied examination the grounds of a sectional consciousness and unity. Some of these saw the conflict as one between a Southern fragment and the idea and needs of the whole, as a clash between Southern and American nationalism. One paper perceptively offered the conclusion that what unified the North was a sentiment for the Union.

Sectional differences, however the nature of the sections was to be explained, were presented as the basic conflict, and slavery was the under-

Contd. from Page 41.

of the American Civil War" in *History Today*, 3 (1953), 733-761, concludes that "The war, when it came, was about Negro slavery," while Walter G. Shotwell's *The Civil War in America*, (London, 1923), feels that the responsibility for conflict should be placed upon the reckless politicians of the South.

lying circumstance which had done the most to create the sentiment and organization of difference. It was also slavery which made the reconciliation of the difference more difficult. Conflict over slavery, one paper explained, not the Civil War was the "irrepressible" conflict. Was war then, the necessary outcome of such a conflict? It was on this point that the papers offered the greatest unity of outlook. Differences, particularly between industrial and agricultural regions, need not be settled by clash of arms. Such sectional dissimilarities, it was suggested, are often a source of national strength, complimentary rather than antagonistic. "Sectional differences arise in most countries," one paper explained, "and they are not of such a nature so as to be irrepressible or unsettleable."

Why then, did war come? Why was it not prevented? The bulk of the papers inclined toward placing the blame on a "blundering generation" which let itself fall victim to circumstance and chance, heightened feelings and growing tension, inadequate institutions, and a failure of leadership. They noted that as the sectional feeling grew more intense, the leadership became increasingly sectional in its outlook, and over a third of the papers commented on the lack of a more statesman-like national leadership. The theme of institutional failure was frequently touched upon. Its use, to judge from the repetition of phrases, was primarily derived from Marcus Cunliffe's article and it was not well handled in the papers. They picked up the phrase "political inefficiency" with which Cunliffe describes the decentralized American party structure—in an unspoken comparison with the disciplined political parties of Great Britain—but they evidenced little interest in describing how either system might have operated or failed to operate to create national unity.

Rising antagonism between the sections was singled out as the primary culprit, with the mounting attack on the slave system in the South creating an unreasoning defensive solidarity that was the primary communal bond of that section. Defensiveness was described as the fuel of a sense of distinctiveness. As the channels of communication between the sections became clogged by emotion, a growing fanaticism, which the papers considered to be the dominant force, was operating to bring on the armed clash. "War came," one paper summed it up, "because the sections failed to understand each other."

Through what paths did the American people come to actual warfare? Here again, as on other topics dealing with a detailed examination of process,

CEYLON AND AMERICAN COMMUNALISM

the papers were often vague when dealing with the mechanics of political life. Although most papers mentioned the conflict over westward expansion, only a minority saw the mounting tension, of which all wrote, as a result of a growing series of irritations and issues, compromises and new clashes. Given the general agreement that tension between groups and sections can turn those disputants into emotionally tightly-knit communities and thereby bring about even otherwise repressible wars, how then might the war have been prevented? Although the students did not accept the thesis of their most frequently used source, Marcus Cunliffe, that the war itself was about Negro slavery, slavery did seem to lie at the root of the differences. How might its problematic existence have been compromised or handled? While not considering such specifics, the papers reached out for the hope that slavery was a declining institution. They sought evidence for its increasing weakness in its abandonment abroad and the possibility that it had reached its natural limits at home. There was a strong tendency to seize upon the somewhat questionable contention that the absence of slaves in the disputed state of Kansas indicated that slavery could no longer expand. None of the papers sought to project ahead, however, and test the "necessity" of slavery against the knowledge that the South has lived successfully without it since the War. Yet if the papers tended to avoid pursuing the actual paths of sectional, and even communal, reconciliation, yet their dominant judgement was that such a reconciliation could have been achieved by men of good will.³ As one paper phrased it, after recounting the mounting tensions which finally erupted into armed conflict, "yet there is nothing that cannot be solved by compromise and concession." Probably most of the papers would have agreed with the comment of one that war is a "very crude means of settling problems."

DAVID CHALMERS

3. In their later tutorials on the postwar reconstruction attempts, student opinion, almost without exception, hailed the approach taken by Presidents Abraham Lincoln and Andrew Johnson. While it would not have brought solutions to many of the problems, they admitted, it sought to achieve the reconciliation of the sections which the students considered prerequisite condition for the settlement of these problems.