Counterfactual Essay: Preventing the American Civil War

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The American Civil War is included among events that left the greatest impact on American history. The aftermath of the war not just changed America but carried global implications. It is common to see historians argue that the civil war was inevitable, yet a deeper look into the events which led to the war allows us to pinpoint a set of identifiable reasons which came together to influence the outcome. In many instances, one event led to the other and converged with other seemingly isolated events to eventually bring the confederates and the unionists into war. However, before the matters crossed a particular threshold, the civil war could have been avoided. The Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 served as a major catalyst in the war by creating a significant shift in the balance of power between the South and the North. The paper will examine how eliminating the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 from history could have reduced the buildup of tensions which eventually led to the outbreak of the civil war.

It is evident that the sharp and conflicting political, economic, and ideological views of the North and South had deeply polarized the nation. The Southern states were adamant on continuing with slavery whereas the North called for abolishment. The polarization process started from the day American achieved its independence, and became more evident in a few decades after a clear difference in habits, views, and income generation methods could be seen. The North favored industrialization and less menial work, and thus, there was an economic incentive to abolishment besides the human rights issue. The Southern states relied on farms and plantations which required manual labor to sustain production (Woods, 2017). The complexities which surrounded the issue of slavery indicate that polarization between the North and the South extended beyond the moral and ideological debate with regards to slaves. The underlying causes had more to do with regional economics and balance of power, and hence, any move interpreted as a shift in power could potentially lead to confrontation.

As the 18th century ended, the North had gained considerable economic superiority owing to its industrialization. Furthermore, the South had doubts about whether cotton and agriculture alone could sustain their economies. Hence, without the need of manual labor, slaves would have lost their use. However as Eli Whitney invented cotton gin, the industry was reinvigorated and became profitable again. Consequently, it led to an increased demand of slave labor to work in the exceptionally profitable industry. Any threats to the industry, therefore, was seen as a threat to the Southerner way of life.

Despite tensions over slavery, a political compromise was still possible. However, in 1854 Stephen Douglas presented the Kansas-Nebraska Act to the Congress which proposed to build a trans-continental railroad to boost the economy. The Act set the stage for conflict because it directly aimed at overturning the Missouri compromise, which had so far managed to keep the union integrated. The Act came in the wake of various entrepreneurs and settlers who repeatedly expressed desire to move their business into Nebraska in the 1850s. However, Nebraska was still not formally organized as a territory and thus settlers could not make a legal claim on the land. Since Nebraska was situation north of the 36°30' parallel, which marked areas where slavery had been prohibited by the 1820 Missouri Compromise, the South’s congressional members did not see a benefit in claiming the land (Woods, 2017). The Kansas-Nebraska Act was set to change that at a time when the South and the North were already in an uneasy balance. The passage of the Act is among the most significant events which led to the Civil War as it opened fresh wounds.

As part of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, settlers of the new territory were allowed to decide their position on the slavery issue on basis of popular sovereignty. However, allowing slavery in Kansas and Nebraska meant that the Missouri Compromise would be violated. In doing so, a decades long compromise between the North and the South would be compromised. Nevertheless, the bill was passed by the Congress and signed into law in 1854 which allowed for territory North of the 36°30' line to decide its position on slavery on basis of popular sovereignty. The idea of voting to legalize slavery in a position which was technically ‘the North’ outraged the Northerners. The outrage was intensified as slave owners shifted to Kansas. To counter-act the shift in balance, the Northerner Abolitionists also shifted to Kansas which further fueled tensions. The result was that two legislatures became established in different towns of the same state in opposition. Skirmishes between Abolitionists and pro-slavery farmers started breaking out even before the Civil War had started. The time period is known by the name of ‘Bleeding Kansas’, which was a time when anti-slavery and pro-slavery settlers clashed violently in the aftermath of the Kansas-Nebraska Act (Woods, 2017). Consequently, the buildup of tensions paved the way for an all-out Civil War.

The political aftermath of the Act was also significant. The Act, which aimed at railroad building and economic growth, ended up polarizing the two main political parties besides inciting South-North tensions. The Whig Party was split by the Act has nearly all Southerner members of the Whig Party voted for the bill while the Northerner members opposed it. It was hard to find a common ground, and eventually the Northern Whigs joined other abolitionists to form the Republican Party. At the same time, the Democratic Party continued to operate across sectional lines even as the Southern Whig joined it. The Northerner members were of the view that ignoring the 1820 Missouri compromise would cause the Compromise of 1850 to fail as well. Amidst a divided political atmosphere, the Fugitive Slave Law started became routinely violated which also played a part in brewing trouble (IHAP, 2008).

The result of the heightened tensions between the South and the North, and between political parties, caused a severe lack of trust for the other. Neither side showed willingness to trust the other or accept even a moderate proposal for reducing tensions. Hence, Abraham Lincoln’s view was also rejected by most of the Southerners. Eventually as time passed, the South felt an increasing sense of victimization especially at the hands of the new Republican administration that they saw as bent on abolishing slavery. Moreover, Abraham Lincoln’s outreach to the non-slave owning Southern population also fueled those sentiments. Eventually, the increased mistrust came to the point where no assurance from Lincoln could satisfy the Southerners, who began to mistrust any Northerner in office regardless of his/her political affiliations (Foner, 2003). This heightened mistrust served as the final nail in the coffin and it was only time before the Civil War broke out.

To conclude, the 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act served as a major catalyst in the War. Removing this event from American history could open up the possibility for subsequent compromise building up on the Missouri Compromise of 1820. However, as the initial Compromise was reversed, the practice of slavery began to enter areas that were symbolically considered as the North. The resulting shift in the region’s balance of power in an already uncertain situation led to political alarm and anxiety. The Northerners feared that slave owners would begin dominating the newer states, and the South would domineer the Northerners into a permanent political minority. It is evident that the issue of slavery, as a moral and human rights issue, was only part of the problem. Regional economics and clash over control of the new states served as a major factor, which worsened with the Kansas-Nebraska Act. Looking at these various connected historical events, it is not far-fetched to assume that removing this Act from history could have significantly altered the course of events and possibly prevented the Civil War.

# References

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