

Why did America have a civil war?

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Drawing on the popular political theory from John Locke of the 1600s, in 1776 Thomas Jefferson stated the following in the American Declaration of Independence.

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, having its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness."

On July 4, 1776, the Second Continental Congress approved the declaration as a statement to inform the world why the 13 American colonies were declaring independence from their mother country Great Britain.

85 years later, in 1861, the southernmost states copied the example established in 1776 by declaring independence from the United States of America. But rather than accept the southern declaration as justified by the 1776 declaration, the United States government — led by Abraham Lincoln — declared the southern declaration to be an act of treason.

What did slavery have to do with this? Nothing. That is, according to Lincoln, the conflict was not over slavery. The 1776 declaration had been signed by the southern, slaveholding states, and in his inaugural address of 1861, Lincoln bent over backward to ensure the southern states that slavery was irrelevant to the conflict and that the conflict was based only on the idea that it is illegal for a state to declare its independence.

Which side of the argument do you think makes sense? Were the southern states justified in declaring independence or not?

The United States constitution is notably silent about the issue of a state withdrawing from the union, and as a result, in 1861 it became a matter of debate as to whether withdrawal is permissible under the constitution. What do you think makes sense?

Do you think that the constitution should have made a statement on the topic, and if so, what should the statement have been? Had the constitution made such a statement, do you think there would have been a civil war in 1861? Why do you think the constitution didn't make such a statement?