

# Understanding the American Civil War. Dr. Paul Craig Roberts

Mike Whitney Interviews Paul Craig Roberts

By [Dr. Paul Craig Roberts](#) and [Mike Whitney](#)

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*Paul Craig Roberts: Before I answer the questions it needs to be clearly stated that my answers are not merely my opinion, but hard facts supported in the historical record. Like John Maynard Keynes, I like to keep my views in accordance with the facts. In the case of what is called "the Civil War," the facts are clear enough.*

Lincoln and the Republicans understood that the 2 March 1861 Morrill Tariff would result in secession of Southern states from the Union. On the same day in an effort to prevent secession, the Republicans passed and President Abraham Lincoln endorsed the Corwin Amendment. The Corwin Amendment would have made it impossible for slavery to be abolished.

"On 2 March 1861, in a futile attempt to prevent the secession of the slaveholding states, Congress proposed, and sent to the states for ratification, [a constitutional amendment](#) designed to protect slavery in the states where it existed."

If the Republicans invaded the South to overthrow slavery, why did they pass a constitutional amendment that would have preserved slavery forever? If the South went to war in defense of slavery, why did the South not ratify the Corwin Amendment and remain in the Union?

Image: Dr. Paul Craig Roberts



These questions have been evaded by dishonest historians ever since the end of the war.

The war was a bloody business. The Union generals William Tecumseh Sherman and Philip Sheridan targeted not only Southern armies but civilians and their shelter and food supplies. As the war came to an end, the devastated condition of the South was creating northern sympathy, something the extreme Republicans pushing more punishment and humiliation under their Reconstruction policy, did not want. The Republicans saw the need to turn the explanation of the war into a moral project to free the slaves from the iniquity of white Southerners. Reconstruction went beyond the South's defeat and inflicted brutal humiliation. This required creation of an immoral image of the South fighting to keep people in slavery.

As the victors write the histories, the reconstructed account prevailed.

Mike Whitney: Help me understand the origins of the Civil War. I was taught that the Union went to war to end slavery and that slavery was the primary cause of the Civil War? Is that true?

Paul Craig Roberts: **As all historical documentation shows, slavery had little to do with the so-called Civil War.** Let's get this straight at the beginning. IT WAS NOT A CIVIL WAR. A civil war is when two sides fight over the control of the government. **The South made no fight to take over the government. The South merely used its Constitutional right to secede from the US.**

Secession resulted in war because Lincoln was determined to "preserve the Union." He proclaimed repeatedly that he invaded the South to "preserve the Union," not to free the slaves. He said that he had no power to free the slaves because the US Constitution made slavery a states' rights issue.

In his inaugural address **Lincoln said: "I have no purpose, directly or indirectly, to interfere with the institution of slavery in the States where it exists. I believe I have no lawful right to do so, and I have no inclination to do so."**

The North had no intention of going to war over slavery. The same day that the Republican Congress passed the tariff, the Republican Congress passed the Corwin Amendment that added more constitutional protection to slavery.

Lincoln said that the South could have all the slavery that it wanted as long as the Southern states paid the tariff. **The North would not go to war over slavery, but it would to collect the tariff.** Lincoln said that "there needs to be no bloodshed or violence" over collecting the tariff, but that he will use the government's power "to collect the duties and

imposts.”

The South did not invade the North. The North invaded the South.

President Lincoln made the reason clear time after time. **The War of Northern Aggression was to preserve the Union and to make the Southern states pay the tariff to finance Northern industrialization. The South fought because the South was invaded.**

Until modern times serious historians, such as Charles Beard, who were not fighting ideological battles explained the conflict between the Northern and Southern states as being economic. The North wanted a tariff against British imports that would raise the cost of British imports above what the same goods could be produced for in northern factories.

The Southern states objected to being forced to pay in order to subsidize higher priced Northern manufactures. The Southern states were also concerned that the British in retaliation would impose tariffs on the Southern export of cotton and tobacco.

As territories were taken from native Americans and became incorporated as states, the difference between North and South, resulting, for example, in the Missouri Compromise, was not over the expansion of slavery, but over keeping the balance in Congress between North and South equal so that the North could not impose tariffs on the South.

**President Lincoln said repeatedly that slavery was a state’s rights issue for which there was no federal authority to abolish, and that he did not intend to exceed his powers by abolishing slavery.** In the North only the abolitionists who did not have much of Lincoln’s ear saw the war as a campaign to end slavery.

As Southern states were seceding because of the tariff that had passed, the Northern Republicans on the eve of Lincoln’s inauguration as president passed **the Corwin Amendment which made it impossible for the United States to ever abolish slavery. Lincoln endorsed the Corwin Amendment.** Today historians have to obscure this fact in order to protect their explanation of the war. They say that Lincoln neither opposed nor supported the Corwin Amendment, but here are Lincoln’s direct words accepting the Amendment in his inaugural address: “I have no objection to its being made express and irrevocable.”

President Lincoln made the deal clear to the South: Stay in the Union and slavery is guaranteed by the government of the United States of America for ever.

If the war was over slavery, why did the South not avoid the war by accepting Lincoln’s guarantee? Indeed, why was the guarantee even necessary as Lincoln admitted that slavery was a state’s right issue, not a federal one. So here is the South with two guarantees against the abolishment of slavery and the South still wants to fight for slavery?!

**If the Union invaded the South to free the slaves, why did the Union pass the Corwin Amendment guaranteeing the permanent existence of slavery?**

**Clearly, slavery was not the issue.**

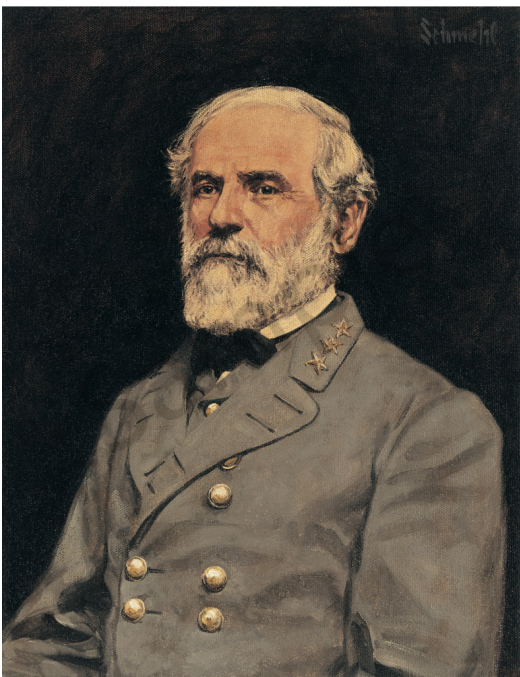
The war was caused by the passage of the tariff and by the South’s refusal to pay the tariff by seceding. When the South could not be bribed by the Corwin Amendment to remain in

the Union, Lincoln invaded.

Historians of the slavery explanation of the war find their support in Southern arguments for secession. The South in order to avoid war wanted to leave the Union on Constitutional grounds, thinking naively that the North would respect the Constitution.

In the US Constitution tariffs are a FEDERAL issue, not a STATES RIGHTS ISSUE. The South could not make a Constitutional case for secession on the basis of opposition to the Tariff. But the South could make a case for secession on slavery grounds, because the Constitution required northern states to return runaway slaves, and some northern states, in defiance of the US Constitution, refused to return the runaway property. Thus northern states were violating the US Constitution. This gave constitutional grounds to the Southern states for secession. They argued that Northern states had broken the Constitutional pact by violating it.

In order to show that they were acting in accordance with the Constitution and not committing treason or an act of rebellion by seceding, some of the states' secession documents made the argument that Northern states that did not return slaves had voided the constitutional pact. This is the basis for the historians' claim that the war was fought over slavery. I have written at length about this. See, ([here](#)) and ([here](#)).



Mike Whitney: On January 1, 1863, President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation which declared “that all persons held as slaves” ...”henceforward shall be free.” What do Americans need to know about the Emancipation Proclamation that they weren’t taught in school? Was Lincoln really the “great American hero” he’s made-out to be?

Paul Craig Roberts: **The Emancipation Proclamation was a war measure. Not a freedom of the slaves measure.**

**As President Lincoln’s own Secretary of State said, “We have just freed slaves in territories that we do not control and left them in slavery in territories we do control.”**

During the first two years of war Confederate generals Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson with far fewer soldiers had consistently inflicted defeats on Lincoln's large armies. Lincoln ran through general after general, all defeated by the small Army of Northern Virginia.

**Lincoln and his advisors decided that a Union proclamation freeing slaves in Southern territories would produce a slave rebellion and that Lee's invincible army would run home to protect their wives and children.**

**But no such slave rebellion occurred.**

The misrepresentation of the War of Northern Aggression as Lincoln's war to free slaves is impossible to reconcile with Lincoln's view of blacks. Here is "the Great Emancipator" in his own words:

"I have said that the separation of the races is the only perfect preventive of amalgamation [of the white and black races] . . . Such separation . . . must be effected by colonization" [sending blacks to Liberia or Central America]. (Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln vol. II, p. 409).

"Let us be brought to believe it is morally right, and . . . favorable to . . . our interest, to transfer the African to his native clime." (Collected Works, vol. II, p. 409).

**(Lincoln) "I am not nor ever have been in favor of bringing about in any way the social and political equality of the white and black races. I am not nor ever have been in favor of making voters or jurors of negroes, nor qualifying them to hold office, nor to intermarry with white people" (Collected Works, vol. III, pp. 145-146).**

How was the real Lincoln turned into "the Great Emancipator"?

Mike Whitney: **In your book "Empire Of Lies" you refer to the Civil War as The War of Northern Aggression.** I admit, I had never heard that term before, but it really helped me to realize that one's interpretation of what took place depends largely on where one was born and raised. What are the most glaring errors that Northerners make about the Civil War?

Paul Craig Roberts: **It was the North that invaded the South. The South fought only because it was invaded.** Lincoln rejected the South's constitutional argument for secession, declared the South to be in rebellion and invaded to preserve the Union.

The Union Armies under Sherman and Sheridan committed war crimes. They attacked civilians and left them starving with slaughtered livestock and burned down homes. In contrast, when Lee took the Army of Northern Virginia into Union territory in an effort to conclude the conflict, he admonished his soldiers prior to Gettysburg to remember that their purpose is to defeat the enemy's army, not to take revenge on Union civilians for what Union armies did to the South's civilians.

**The misrepresentation that the Union Army was fighting for black freedom becomes obviously absurd when we realize that at war's end this same Union army and its generals Sherman and Sheridan were unleashed on the Plains Indians to exterminate the buffalo, the Indians' food supply, and to massacre their women and children.** Books have been written and movies have been made about



this. The question always in my mind is: if saving blacks on Southern plantations is a great moral cause, what happened to the moral cause when the same army was unleashed against the Plains Indians? Why save one “people of color” and destroy another?



**Mike Whitney-** Here’s a quote from your book that I found particularly interesting:

“Before history became politicized, historians understood that the North intended for the South to bear costs of the North’s development of industry and manufacturing. The agricultural South preferred the lower priced goods from England. The South understood that a tariff on British goods would push import prices above the high northern prices and lower the South’s living standards in the interest of raising living standards in the North. The conflict was entirely economic and had nothing whatsoever to do with slavery, which also had existed in the North....”

This is a remarkable statement that suggests that our fundamental understanding of the Civil War is wrong.

**The official version of events implies that the war was launched for humanitarian reasons (ending slavery) by a benevolent leader (Lincoln) whose actions were guided by his unflinching commitment to principle. Your comment suggests that this version of history is wrong,** and that the conflict had more to do with tariffs, industry and living standards than with slavery.

Can you expand on your statement and comment on whether -in your opinion- **the US would have been better-off had Lincoln allowed the South to secede from the Union splitting the country into two separate parts forever?**

**Paul Craig Roberts-** The “official version” is not official. It is a revisionist version entirely devoid of any support in historical documents. The purposes of the “official version” are to cover up Northern war crimes and justify Reconstruction.

**If the South had prevailed, today the US would be a smaller country.** In order to protect itself from the North, the South would have competed for expansion into western territories. Mexico might have been able to hold on to parts stolen from itself.

**As a smaller entity, the US would be unable to claim hegemony over the world. We would not face the prospect of nuclear destruction from an aggressive foreign policy.**

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