



Half Slave and Half Free: The Roots of Civil War

Bruce Levine

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Revised Edition

With a New Preface and Afterword

In a revised edition, brought completely up to date with a new preface and afterword and an expanded bibliography, Bruce Levine's succinct and persuasive treatment of the basic issues that precipitated the Civil War is as compelling as ever. Levine explores the far-reaching, divisive changes in American life that came with the incomplete Revolution of 1776 and the development of two distinct social systems, one based on slavery, the other on free labor--changes out of which the Civil War developed.

Half Slave and Half Free: The Roots of Civil War Details

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Case Tatro says

This book provides an excellent analysis of the underlying causes of the Civil War. It goes beyond the slavery/free split to explain how this divide transformed from a differing ideology to a cause of war. The authors discuss the spreading of the slavery debate from economic to political, including southern interpretations of northern politicians promoting manufacturing through protective tariffs and the perception that the north could dictate national politics without any southern support. Overall, a very well-written book that is both interesting to read and very informative.

Kathryn says

The second half of the book was more interesting. The earlier sections provided only a general background on Southern and Northern society almost as a collection of quotations and statistics. There did not appear to be much narrative driving the arguments.

This did not add much to my understanding of the "roots" of the Civil War, despite the promise of the title.

Caitlin Gette-king says

The chapters I found most interesting were the ones on Northern and Southern Victorian culture and how that played into motivations for the war and why soldiers enlisted. Overall, interesting information.

Judy says

Bruce Levine views the American Revolution of 1776 as an incomplete revolution because it permitted the continued development of two entirely different social and economic systems to coexist in the United States--one based on free labor and one based on slavery. As a result, he argues that the issue of slavery made differences, both interstate and intrastate, so pronounced and emotionally charged that the outbreak of the Civil War was inevitable. A well-written, well-documented work with an extensive bibliography.

Chris Weigl says

One of the very best (and most concise) books on civil war causation, Half Slave, Half Free builds on the underlying themes in Apostles of Disunion and makes the most persuasive case for the modern narrative of causation.

Kevin says

A little bit on the dense side, but nonetheless an interesting journey into the life and politics of the antebellum United States.

Brasof says

Broad overview of the social, cultural, political, and economic forces that shape the outbreak of the civil war. I love the focus on the philosophy and impact of free soilers and the way in which author Levine characterizes the civil war. Was the civil war about slavery?

Serjeant Wildgoose says

There will be some (Many) who would continue to be enraged by the thrust of Levine's view that the roots of America's civil war lay in slavery, but it is very difficult for any reasoned mind to conclude otherwise when much of his primary source evidence is drawn from the pre-revisionist pens of senior southern politicians, planters and soldiers.

Those who argue that the causes of the war were economic, cultural or social miss the somewhat inconvenient fact that the very foundation of these differences was slavery. Those who champion the cause of 'States Rights' conveniently ignore the truth that the states right for which the south was prepared to fight, was the right to perpetuate and expand Negro slavery.

Discuss?

Jeremy says

Levin's book really only picks up steam in Chapter 10 and in the afterward, in which Davis, Stephens and others tacitly or otherwise admit that slavery was more or less the root cause of the war. The first half of the book doesn't break much new ground, and even people who purport the faulty state's rights argument don't deny the political turmoil caused by the institution in the 80 years leading up to 1861. For a more targeted handling of the subject, see Eric Foner's "Free Soil Free Labor Free Men."

Wisteria Leigh says

2008-Spring,TAH,American history,American Civil War,antebellum,Reform,

Michael VanZandt says

Levine provides us with a very concise version of the sectional struggle between the slave states and the free states leading up to the Civil War. At no point does his prose drift into a monotonous droning of historical diction. He hits his points swiftly, and shining light with intriguing anecdotes and primary sources, from not only the leading lights of politics and literature, but also from the mechanics and the immigrants and the enslaved.

Levine reserves his vitriolic best for a number of characters in this pageant of hypocrisy and political compromise. Dressed in academic propriety, he exposes Jefferson Davis, Millard Fillmore and James Buchanan for the eternal boobs that they are. The indictments always come in their own words -- never projected from our stage. Levine gives a broad contextualization of society -- political, social, religious, economic and racial -- which marked by both the North and the South.

It is exceptionally readable, in my estimation (though I'm a dork for this sort of reading), and evaporates any lingering notions of whether slavery was at the heart of the Civil War, which unfortunately still plagues the American citizenry.

Sarah Peterson says

This book is very content heavy, but if you are up to the task, it is a thorough and multifaceted account of the events, conditions, and attitudes that contributed to the Civil war.

Woodrow says

More of a survey than a deep-dive into a broad and complex era, it is nonetheless a very useful work.

Melinda says

It was very complex, but it really helps nail down the ideas that kept the conflict between the north and south alive. I read this for my civil war class, but found it absolutely fascinating.

Joseph Stieb says

Although this book didn't revolutionize my understanding of the roots of the Civil War, it still does a pretty good job explaining the cultural and political factors that provoked the conflict. Levine covers a lot of social and cultural history in the first half of the 20th century. I found this section frustrating because it was so distanced from politics and I knew a lot of it already. If I was a newcomer to antebellum history, I would have found this section more useful and interesting, so it isn't really Levine's fault. His basic argument is that over the course of the 19th century, the North and the South drifted apart socially and culturally to the point where their views of slavery, especially its expansion, became incompatible. This process split partisan politics into sectional politics, splitting the major parties and reforming ones that were much more sectionally rooted and more focused on extending or containing slavery. Levine puts culture and society first and argues that shifts in popular opinion drag politics along. I'm not sure if I really buy this argument or if it's

just a reflection of the cultural turn's tendency to assume that politicians are following popular movements. However, Levine makes a good point that these societies were drifting apart in ways that made them see slavery very differently and eventually in incompatible ways.
