

The period between 1830 and 1860 was characterized by the Second Great Awakening. Religious revival spread out across the nation and through New York's "burned over district." Similar to the First Great Awakening, revival meetings sprung up as people again turned to religion. The Second Great Awakening launched several American movements, including reform movements such as Dorthea Dix's prison reform crusade and abolitionism (led by figures such as Harriet Beecher Stowe, who wrote Uncle Tom's Cabin, and William Lloyd Garrison, who was the publisher of the abolitionist newspaper the "Liberator"). The emotionalism and energized spirit from the Second Great Awakening also pushed America into its period of Manifest Destiny, in which the US felt it was their fate and right to extend itself across the continent. With each expansion, first into the Northwest Territories, then into Great Plains, and finally all the way across to West Coast and California, the question of slavery rose up. The debate surrounding slavery hardened to the point that eventually a gag rule was passed in congress because the issue of slavery became so prohibitive to progress on any other issue). Whereas slavery advocates had previously seen slavery as a necessary evil, they increasingly began to view it as a positive good that supported the Southern economy and was beneficial to the slaves themselves; meanwhile, abolitionists increasingly denounced the moral evils of slavery as contradictory to freedom and harmful to the overall economy.

In Document A, Governor George McDuffie speaks to the South Carolina legislature and defends slavery as a positive good. Speaking to South Carolina, where slavery is an integral part of both society and its cash-crop dependent economy, Governor McDuffie has a motive to rationalize slavery. Governor McDuffie does just this, and even more: he provides a moral argument to slavery and postulates that slavery is good for the slaves themselves. This demonstrates that slavery was seen not just as a fact of life, a necessary evil, but as a beneficial institution to society, a positive good. To support his point, McDuffie cites the poor conditions of factory workers in the North, comparing slavery to these workers and concluding that slaves are better off.

Indeed, many agreed with McDuffie's point, largely because it was true that the working conditions of factory workers in the North were horrible. Industrialization had fully emerged, yet society was not ready to tame it. Later in 1890, Jacob Riis would publish How the Other Half Lives, revealing these squalid conditions. The developments, which wrought this suffering, began during this time period of 1830-1860. As factories replaced guilds, individuals lost their sense of purpose. They were now working on a clock for wages rather than the "price" of their services, and skilled labor was replaced by monotonous work. Urbanization began to crowd bifurcated cities and dumbbell tenements characterized the dirtiness of slums. The labor movement was not ready. Unions, which would later garner much leverage, such as the Knights of Labor, the American Federation of Labor, and the socialist Industrial Workers of the World (aka the Wobblies), were not yet ready to take the scene.

In contrast to these bleak scenes, many romanticized the Old South plantations, pointing to imagery, such as the picture in Document C. In this picture a slave nurse holds a child slave master. If the context and race of the woman and child were unknown, it would almost be like a normal photo of a mother holding her child. These relationships that slaves formed with their masters, many slave supporters argued, were proof that slavery benefited slaves by providing them with relationships with masters who would protect and feed them.

Beyond defending slavery as a positive good for slaves themselves, many also took a more practical route, defending slavery as necessary for the Southern economy. In Document B, William Harper notes that the end of slavery would spell the end of cotton. Through this argument, Harper aims to defend the institution of slavery through economic arguments, possibly targeting Northern merchants, who gained great wealth through cotton. In this way, cotton, which was a staple crop of the south garnering much wealth for the US, is used to justify slavery as a positive good for America.

Although many, such as Harper, argued that slavery was necessary for the economy, others flipped this argument on its head, postulating that slavery must be abolished because it actually *hurt* the economy. In Document E, Hilton Helper writes that the Southern economy is dependent, a “tributary,” to the Northern economy. To end this dependency, Helper argues that slavery must be ended. As a Southerner himself, Helper provides an interesting perspective because he is inherently tied to Southern prosperity, yet still advocates the abolishment of slavery on the grounds that it would improve Southern commerce by making it more independent.

Beyond the economic debate, many other abolitionists cited the moral injustice of slavery. In a speech in Illinois, Abraham Lincoln posits that slavery is a flagrant violation of America’s ideals of freedom. As a politician who would later become president in 1860 and whose election would spark the Civil War because he was known as an abolitionist (although he did not run for presidency on the promise of abolition, but rather the prevention of slavery extending in the west), his perspective is extremely important to understand because it has such a great impact on American history. Speeches such as these, before Lincoln ran for president, let the nation know how Lincoln felt about slavery, and would later contribute to the South’s secession during the Civil War.

Many others joined Lincoln in the argument that slavery was morally reprehensible. Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote Uncle Tom’s Cabin, which focused on the emotional bruises slavery inflicted when it tore families apart. Stowe’s novel humanized slavery for many Northerners, causing them to see the South’s slavery in a new light. Through her effective use of strong pathos, Uncle Tom’s Cabin persuaded many that slavery was not a positive good, but rather undeniably morally wrong, pushing abolitionism to the forefront of many Northerners’ political agenda. (In fact, her book so effectively pointed out the moral injustice of slavery, that much of the South would ban her book.)

In many ways, the debate of slavery--whether it was a positive good or an evil--can be compared to the debate over the role of government. During the ratification of the Constitution, two camps emerged: federalists (led by the authors of the Federalist Papers, James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, and John Jay) and anti-federalists (notables included Patrick Henry and Thomas Jefferson). While many federalists wanted a larger central government and more involvement, believing government to be more of a positive good, anti-federalists believed less government to be better government, a necessary evil. (Centuries later, FDR would lead the country decidedly into big government, using his power as a positive good to help the nation out of the Great Depression.) But similar to the debate surrounding the government (that in many ways is ongoing, but is now really just a question of the degree of big government because of FDR), during the period between 1830-1860, the debate over slavery formed as supporters

viewed slavery as a positive good for slaves and the economy, while abolitionists argued that slavery hurt the economy and was a morally evil.