

Talking Points The Civil War: Why did the South secede?

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History is usually written by the victors, said Gregory Lamb in *The Christian Science Monitor*. But in the case of the U.S. Civil War, the losing side's perspective is still very much alive. This week marked the 150th anniversary of the beginning of that brutal and bloody conflict, when Confederate forces began firing on Fort Sumter in Charleston, S.C. Across the South, the proposition that the Confederate states were fighting not to preserve slavery but to defend the "noble principle" of states' rights is still widely held, and may even be gaining currency with the rise of the anti-government Tea Party movement. Some Southern conservatives are trying to reframe the Civil War "as a struggle against Big Government," said Jon Meacham in the Knoxville, Tenn., *News Sentinel*, "with only tangential connections to slavery." On a topic of such magnitude, Americans cannot afford to indulge in a blinkered editing of our own history. Slavery was a monstrous evil, and the Civil War was fought because "it had to be defeated."

Slavery certainly played a role in the Southern rebellion, said Jack Hunter in the Charleston, S.C., *City Paper*. But it is not fair to say, as many liberals and Northerners routinely do, that the men of the South were motivated to fight and die by simple racism. The vast majority of men who fought for the Confederacy did not own slaves; in their hearts, they were fighting for the same principles "the American colonists fought for in 1776"—political and economic freedom, the right to self-govern, and the right to defend their home turf against foreign armies.

That's not what they said at the time, said Leonard Pitts Jr. in *The Miami Herald*. South Carolina's official Declaration of the Causes of Secession said the state was leaving the Union because the Northern states "have denounced as sinful the institution of slavery." Alexander Stephens, vice president of the Confederacy, said the South was fighting to defend "the great truth that the negro is not equal to the white man," and that "slavery is his natural and moral condition." Some Southerners today would prefer "to spin grand, romantic fables of a 'Lost Cause'" of lofty principle. But the ugly truth is that Confederates were traitors who seceded from the union to protect their property rights—"property being defined as 4 million human beings." If that truth "makes someone uncomfortable, good. It should."