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Was the Civil War necessary? A thought 150 years later

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Was the Civil War unnecessary? Contributor Doug Bandow of the Cato Institute asks this [in a column posted on Sept. 19 at Forbes.com](#). Sept. 19 was a couple of days after the 151th anniversary of the bloodiest battle in U.S. history, at Antietam.

Bandow quotes North Carolina historian David Goldfield, who writes in [“America Aflame: How the Civil War Created a Nation”](#) that slavery existed in a number of nations, but all of them except the United States and Haiti ended it peacefully. Part of the reason, he writes, is that people in those countries didn’t moralize the question as much as the Americans, who had just gone through a religious revival. Other countries treated it more as a practical problem to be solved.

I recently read a book that made the same point: [Thomas Fleming’s “A Disease of the Public Mind: A New Understanding of Why We Fought the Civil War.”](#) Fleming argues that each side had a “disease of the mind” that made it unnecessarily intransigent. For the South, the “disease” was fear of a race war, and belief that that’s what the Northern abolitionists really wanted. For the North the “disease” was the thinking of the abolitionists, who cultivated hatred of “the Slave Power” and willingness to fight it to the death.

Fleming’s argument is that there was a peaceful way out: that slaveowners could be compensated and the slaves released. That was the way it was done in some of the Caribbean colonies, apparently. You can argue that that way was wrong, because slave owners didn’t deserve any payment, it was the slaves who deserved payment, and morally you’d make a lot of sense. But paying the slaveowners, he argues, could have prevented 600,000 people from dying in the war.

It’s a thing to think about. We tend to present the Civil War as a simple contest between right and wrong, and we put ourselves on the side of right. And I believe that if they were going to have a fight, it was best that the Union won. Still—did they have to have a fight?

I have my own bit to add to this. I have been reading [Civil War newspapers from Washington Territory](#) as part of a project for the Museum of History and Industry. The Civil War wasn’t fought here, but the political arguments were made here between Republicans and Democrats of various stripes (mostly not secessionists) and you can get a feeling for both sides. And the feeling I get is that the Republican side — Lincoln’s side — was the more shrill.

I recall reading one newspaper editor at war's end calling for Jeff Davis, Robert E. Lee and all high Confederate army officers to be hanged. The pro-Lincoln side was loose with the words, "treason" and "traitor." Lincoln wanted to be magnanimous toward the South, but many on his side didn't. The Democrat papers here were more openly racist, in an off-hand, totally not-worried way that is a bit shocking to modern sensibilities, but I didn't catch them talking about stringing people up.