

Joint Read Project Compares Student Attitudes in North and South Toward the Civil War

Five Madison Fellows from five states, four of them in the MAHG program, joined together in the fall of 2015 in a project requiring all their American history students to read the same historical text. The idea was hatched when MAHG student **Ray Tyler** (who teaches at York Preparatory Academy in Fort Mill, South Carolina) told **Amy Parker** (just graduated from MAHG, Parker teaches at Gulf Breeze High School in the panhandle of Florida) that he planned to assign Charles B. Dew's slender but powerful study, *Apostles of Disunion: Southern Secession Commissioners and the Causes of the Civil War*, in his APUSH class.

The book makes a compelling argument against a longstanding theme of the historiography on the American Civil War: the claim that Southern states seceded in 1861, and fought a war defending their right to secede, because of their commitment to states' rights. Dew examines previously neglected primary documents that offer evidence of the conversation Southerners had among themselves when debating whether to secede—the speeches made by commissioners sent from already-decided states to the secession conventions being held in other Southern states during the winter of 1861. These speeches plainly argue that secession was necessary in order to preserve the institution of slavery. (An appendix usefully reprints the documents on which Dew bases his study.)

Parker, like Tyler, had read the book for a MAHG course *Secession and Civil War*. Like Dew himself, Parker is a Southerner who had grown up accepting the states' rights view of the war. Dew had been shocked to discover the frankly racist speeches of commissioners like William L. Harris of Mississippi to the Georgia General Assembly, who assured his audience that Mississippi

had rather see the last of her race, men, women and children, immolated in one common funeral pile, than see them subjected to the degradation of civil, political and social equality with the negro race.

Parker's understanding the war was profoundly changed by Dew's book. She decided to assign it to her class also, then found herself thinking about how the book might shed light on the current domestic controversy over the Confederate flag. Why not pair this historical study with an inquiry into current attitudes to the Civil War, its causes and its consequences?

Through Facebook, Parker asked other Madison Fellows to join a project that would probe how far the states' rights thesis had influenced thinking in both North and South. Three other teachers agreed to join the project. **Adena Barnette** of Ripley High School in West Virginia (2014 MAHG graduate) would bring in the perspective of a border state; MAHG student **Robin Deck**, of Catholic High School in Baton Rouge, Louisiana would add another Southern perspective to that represented by

the South Carolina and Florida schools; and **Evan McLaughlin**, of Mountain View Middle School in Mendam Borough, New Jersey, would add a northern perspective.

Prior to reading the book, students conducted surveys in their home schools, assessing the attitudes of students and faculty toward the causes of the Civil War, the social and political legacy of that war and of slavery, and the display of the Confederate flag. Survey responses were collected from throughout the schools, not just from those taking the Madison Fellows' courses, and *before* the latter students had read Dew's book. Hence the results reflected received opinion students brought from their family and community upbringing. These results were shared among the schools, so that students could see whether attitudes elsewhere toward the war and the Confederate flag differed from the attitudes in their communities.

Interestingly, survey findings on the core issues did not differ strikingly among the schools. Two schools allowed respondents to mark more than one cause of the Civil War. In New Jersey as well as Louisiana, students named slavery, states' rights, and "economic differences among the states" as causes of the war. South Carolina, West Virginia, and Florida students could cite only one cause of the Civil War. In both Florida and West Virginia, around half the students cited slavery, while fewer than 15% of South Carolina students named slavery as the war's cause. However, responding to later questions asking students to "rate the significance of" various factors as causing the war, South Carolina students pointed to *both* slavery and states' rights.

Other survey questions probed opinion on whether the nation still suffered from the legacy of the Civil War and whether current racial tensions in the country are caused by "unresolved issues from the Civil War and Reconstruction" or are instead the effect of "people being too sensitive." The overall results suggested that students from all the represented states bring mixed opinions to study of America's most traumatic war. Some of those more willing to acknowledge slavery as the cause of the war were also inclined to dismiss current racial tensions as due to oversensitivity. It seems that students in both North and South are uncertain how to deal with the fact that our democracy coexisted first with slavery, then with discriminatory racial practices, for nearly two centuries.

After students in the five classes read Dew's book, Millikin University Professor **Dan Monroe**, who teaches in Ashbrook's Masters program, facilitated a webinar. The teachers had aimed to join classes from all five schools in a single webinar experience, with students from all schools posing questions and listening for Monroe's response. Due to differences of schedule over two time zones, only three of the schools actively participated, but a recording of the webinar was shared with all five groups.

Monroe's comments outlined a reason for the ambivalence seen in responses to the survey. In the 80 years after the Civil War, influential Southern historians argued the South seceded "for noble reasons rather than to preserve slavery," Monroe said; that

is, to protect states' rights to self-govern independently of federal authority. This "Lost Cause" ideology dominated historiography until after World War II—not just among Southerners, but among Northern historians as well, Monroe told the students. He recounted historian David Blight's argument that this happened because, following the painful and bloody Civil War, Americans of both North and South wanted to embrace sectional reconciliation.

Yet, before the war as well as after it, "what southerners said publicly to the North and to the world differed from what they said to each other," Monroe told the students. The President of the Confederacy, Jefferson Davis, had stressed the theme of states' rights throughout the war because he hoped to gain British and French recognition of the Confederacy.

Responding to a South Carolina student's question about attitudes toward the Confederate flag in the North, Monroe reported that although few embraced it, he had sometimes seen it flying in rural areas of Illinois. Those who fly the flag "think it is a symbol of limited government," Monroe explained. He added that a more appropriate symbol for this view would be the "Don't Tread on Me" flag used during the Revolutionary War.

Following the project, the teachers composed a letter to historian Charles Dew to tell him how his book had provided material for an interdisciplinary and inter-school collaboration. Dew, who was delighted to hear about the project, agreed to an interview. During it he spoke about his own approach to teaching the history of slavery at Williams College, where he has served 39 years as a professor of history. You can read an edited transcript of the interview [here](#).