King Cotton is Dead

Video Transcript

One reason the Confederacy was so economically devastated during the Civil War was its ill-advised gamble that cotton sales would continue during the war. The Confederate government had high hopes that Great Britain and France, who both used cotton as the raw material in their textile mills, would ensure the South’s economic strength — and therefore victory — by continuing to buy. Furthermore, the Confederate government hoped that Great Britain and France would give loans to their new nation in order to ensure the continued flow of raw materials.

These hopes were never realized. Great Britain in particular did not wish to risk war with the United States, as it could result in the invasion of Canada. The Union was also Britain’s major source of grain and an important purchaser of British goods. During the American Civil War, there was a drought in England which further necessitated Britain’s reliance on American grain. The blockade additionally made Southern trade with Europe difficult, forcing Great Britain to find alternate sources in India and Egypt, and leaving the South without the income or major alliance it had anticipated.

Dissent within the Confederacy also affected the South’s ability to fight the war. Confederate politicians disagreed over the amount of power that the central government should be allowed to exercise. Many states’ rights advocates who favored a weak central government and supported the sovereignty of individual states resented President Davis’ efforts to conscript troops, impose taxes to fund the war, and requisition necessary resources.

Confederate state governors often proved reluctant to provide supplies or troops for the use of the government. Even Confederate Vice President Alexander Stephens opposed conscription, the seizure of slave property to work for the Confederacy, and the suspension of habeas corpus.
Civilians contributed to the underlying issues in the South as well. Class divisions affected the Confederacy, as poor white men resented the wealthy slaveholders who could excuse themselves from military service.

Economic struggles, divided loyalties, fundamental political disagreements, and social unrest... Even if the South survived the war, many were beginning to wonder: could they survive each other?

About this transcript:

- Transcript title: King Cotton is Dead
- Corresponding Lesson: From Stalemate and Confederate Success to Union Momentum
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