



Written by [Steve Byas](#) on May 3, 2017

Was Trump Right on the Civil War and Andrew Jackson?

“He was really angry that he saw what was happening with regard to the Civil War,” President Donald Trump said earlier this week of his distant predecessor in the White House, Andrew Jackson.



Not surprisingly, Trump’s off-the-cuff speculation that Jackson’s skill in making political deals could have averted the war that took more than 600,000 lives generated immediate criticism. Some of the critics even implied that Trump was not even aware that Jackson had died 16 years before the first shots were fired in the War Between the States.

While Trump can certainly make some controversial remarks at times, this particular criticism says more about the critics’ efforts to find something to ridicule about the president than anything else. Clearly, Trump was not saying that Jackson was president on the eve of the war. Rather, his point was that a more skillful politician such as Jackson could have struck a compromise to avoid the war — unlike the politicians in office at the time of the war.

“I mean, had Andrew Jackson been a little later, you wouldn’t have had the Civil War,” Trump said Tuesday, expanding on his thesis. “He was a very tough person, but he had a big heart, and he was really angry that he saw what was happening with regard to the Civil War. He said, ‘There’s no reason for this.’ People don’t realize, you know, the Civil War, you think about it, why? People don’t ask that question. But why was there the Civil War? Why could that one not have been worked out?”

Naturally, the media ran to some historians who would obligingly criticize Trump’s alleged lack of understanding about American history.

For example, Kevin Kruse, a liberal professor at Princeton, jumped at the chance to challenge the president’s speculation, asserting,

First of all, historians have actually talked about the reasons for the Civil War quite a bit. Second, there’s an overwhelming consensus among historians that the Civil War came about because of slavery. Simply put, the war came because the Southern states seceded, and they seceded — as they quite clearly said themselves at the time, over and over again — because of slavery.

Another liberal professor, Jon Meacham, who authored *American Lion: Andrew Jackson in the White House*, even stated on MSNBC’s *Morning Joe* Tuesday that Trump’s comments are just “a projection of the president’s fundamental and enveloping narcissism.”

Speaking on CNN, commentator Tara Setmayer was particularly harsh, declaring, “Why can’t you guys just stop and say what the president said was stupid?”

But was he stupid?

First of all, we should understand that Meacham and Kruse are not simply disinterested “scholars” who



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are looking at Trump's speculation objectively. Meacham is not above a little bit of "speculation" of his own. For example, in his book *Thomas Jefferson, The Art of Power*, Meacham is so determined to prove Jefferson fathered children by his slave Sally Hemings that he wrote that he "suspects" that Jefferson was "in his imagination" thinking of Sally when he saw the painting of Abraham and his servant woman Hagar during his visit to Dusseldorf while in Europe. In another place, Meacham asserted, with no evidence, "In this tempestuous time, Jefferson apparently began a sexual relationship" with her.

This is what passes for "scholarly analysis" among some left-wing historians. For those who dared to deny the Jefferson-Hemings Thesis, Meacham basically dismissed them as racists, labelling the supposed liaison as one "long denied by mainstream white historians."

And what is the background of Kruse, the Princeton historian who dismissed Trump's speculations concerning what Jackson could have done about the Civil War? Not surprisingly, Kruse is a strong opponent of conservative politics. In his book *One Nation Under God*, Kruse asserts that "Christian America" is an invention of corporate interests in the 1930s. According to Kruse, these titans of industry created the "religious right" as a part of an alliance of money, religion, and politics, which has caused the modern divisions of American politics.

In another book of his, *White Flight*, Kruse argues that modern conservatism had its roots in the white resistance to segregation, which helped spawn, among other things, the tax revolt.

It is fair to say that both of these historians are on the liberal side of the political spectrum, yet the liberal media offers them up as objective analysts of the veracity of Trump's comments about the Civil War and Andrew Jackson.

Having said all that, are Trump's speculations actually that far outside the mainstream of what professional historians have to say? And was the CNN commentator right to declare that Trump's assertions are just "stupid"?

First of all, historians speculate all the time about what *might have happened* had this or that event not occurred. It's common for historians to contend that had Abraham Lincoln lived, Reconstruction after the Civil War would have played out much differently. Others argue that the "Radical Republicans" in power in Congress would have gone after Lincoln every bit as much as they did Andrew Johnson, if Lincoln had gotten in their way. But it is all speculation. The old joke about the question, what would have happened had Lincoln not died is that the only thing we know for sure is that today he would have been a very old man.

In other words, we do not know what would have happened had Andrew Jackson been president in 1861, and neither does Trump. But neither do Kruse or Meacham, or the reporter Setmayer.

The truth is, many academic historians have actually stated much of what Trump said about averting the Civil War, albeit in a much less colorful way. It is actually common for the assertion to be made that the political leaders of Jackson's generation — Jackson himself, Henry Clay, Daniel Webster, and others — were a cut above those at the time of the outbreak of the Civil War.

In the 1830s, South Carolina announced that it would not allow the collection of the tariff at the port of Charleston — in effect, nullifying federal law. Southerners clearly understood that the protective tariff involved a transfer of wealth from the agricultural South to the industrial North, all brought about by the North using the power of the federal government to the disadvantage of Southern states such as South Carolina. It appeared that there might actually be a civil war — having absolutely nothing to do with slavery — between the federal government and South Carolina over the hated tariff. And any such



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war would likely have led to other states rising to the defense of South Carolina, had President Andrew Jackson sent troops into that state.

Jackson certainly declared that the tariff would be collected, even if he had to hang some people, but the reality is that Jackson worked with his hated political rival, Henry Clay, to pass a compromise tariff that averted a civil war one generation earlier than the one we eventually had.

Perhaps this incident, in which Jackson and Clay kept our country from a civil war, was on Trump's mind. It is no doubt a well-known incident in U.S. history, and Kruse and Meacham should have known about it as well.

Did Andrew Jackson fear a civil war might tear the country apart, if sectional issues such as the tariff and slavery could not be settled politically? There is little question that he feared such an eventuality. American politicians wrestled with sectional issues for decades.

"I fear we have the wolf by the ears," former President Thomas Jefferson said in 1820, when Henry Clay's Missouri Compromise avoided disunion over the issue of slavery expansion. Jefferson was afraid that if the nation could not resolve its slavery issue, then it would be torn asunder. Only a historical illiterate could conclude that Jefferson was alone in this concern, or that Jackson did not share that fear.

Then there is the assertion that the Civil War was fought over secession, and that secession was over the issue of slavery and nothing else. There is no doubt that slavery was one of the issues dividing the sections — perhaps even the principal issue. But it was not the only issue. The protective tariff was another. And there were many others. For example, in 1854, despite engineering studies that indicated a southern route made the most sense for the first transcontinental railroad, Illinois Senator Stephen Douglas introduced a law (the Kansas-Nebraska Act) that would force a *northern* route. Southerners were angry at northern politicians' continued use of the federal government to their own advantage and to the disadvantage of the South.

It should also be noted that, while slavery was no doubt mentioned prominently in the secession of South Carolina, when Lincoln called for 75,000 volunteers to invade the South in 1861, *a majority of the states where slavery was still legal had remained in the Union*. Clearly, Lincoln was not invading the South to abolish slavery, but his stated intention to invade seven seceded states quickly precipitated the exodus of four other southern states — Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Arkansas — which had previously explicitly rejected secession. They did *not* secede over slavery, but rather because Lincoln was using military force on sister states.

We can only speculate along with Trump whether 1861 politicians such as Lincoln and Jefferson Davis failed where the earlier generation of political leaders had succeeded in holding the nation together. But that is all it is: speculation. And Trump's speculation is just as valid as that put forward by Kruse and Meacham — and perhaps more so.

Steve Byas is a professor of history at Randall University, and the author of History's Greatest Libels. Both in his book and in his classes, he does a lot of speculating about the past, as is typical of history teachers.



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