

THE CHANGES IN THE INTERPRETATIONS OF THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR

Tung-hsun Sun

Abstract

In this article, the author traces the changes in the interpretations of the American Civil War from the last decade of the nineteenth century, when professional historians of the United States began to write about the history of their own country, until the nineteen-seventies. He finds that during this period, the historians' view about the Civil War had undergone at least five changes, and that each interpretation was closely related to the dominant outlook of the age in which it prevailed. Thus, when nationalism dominated the general outlook of the decades around the turn of this century, the nationalist historians emphasized national unity and sectional reconciliation in their interpretation of the Civil War. When Progressivism became prevailing after 1900, the Progressive historians tended to interpret the coming of the Civil War in terms of some inhuman factors such as socio-economic or geo-economic forces. During the period between the two world wars, the revisionist historians, reflecting the general disillusionment with the First World War, viewed the Civil War as a needless repressible tragedy. When American opinion turned right during the 1950's, the neo-conservative historians saw the coming of the Civil War in the general inability of the American people to deal with the slavery problem either because they were unwilling to pay the terrible price for peaceful emancipation or because excessive individualism made them unable to face the problem in a practical way. Finally, this conservative interpretation was replaced during the 1960's by the view of the New-Left historians who, considering the negligible benefit it actually brought to the Negro, denounced the Civil War as unworthy of the great sacrifice both in life and property.