

**“The Three-Fifths Compromise:
Tearing America Apart”**

**Elizabeth L. Berger
Junior Division
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The Three-Fifths Compromise was a clause of the U. S. Constitution (see Appendix A) created by the Constitutional Convention in 1787 to keep the nation together, but actually had a role in tearing it apart many years later. Proposed by James Wilson of Pennsylvania and Roger Sherman of Connecticut, this compromise gave states representation in Congress for three-fifths of their slave population¹. It is largely responsible for the continuation of the slave trade that many believe would have died out eventually, and encouraged the importation of more slaves by creating political reasons for slavery as well as the already present financial gain for slave owners.² It created a conflict over slavery that would eventually evolve into the Civil War.³

When this compromise was introduced, the delegates of the Constitutional Convention were split on the subject of slavery; many of the Northern states didn't want to allow slavery to continue, while many Southern states refused to allow slavery to be outlawed for economic reasons.⁴ In 1784, Newport Mercury, a Rhode Island Newspaper, wrote "the abolition of [slavery] is not only required by the calls of justice and humanity, but is also consistent with found policy"⁵ John Jay wanted to abolish slavery, saying that "to contend for our own liberty, and to deny that blessing to others, involves an inconsistency not to be excused" in a letter he wrote to Mr. R. Lushington in 1786. James Madison wrote a letter to Robert J. Evans, saying that "if slavery, as a national evil, is to be abolished, and it be just that it be done at the national expense, the amount of the expense is not a paramount consideration."⁶ However, other

¹ *The Three-Fifths Clause of the United States Constitution (1787) | The Black Past: Remembered and Reclaimed*, www.blackpast.org/aah/three-fifths-clause-united-states-constitution-1787.

² "The 'Three-Fifths' Compromise." *The "Three-Fifths" Compromise | African American Registry*, 2013, www.aaregistry.org/historic_events/view/three-fifths-compromise.

³ "Causes and Effects of the Civil War." *Causes and Effects of the Civil War* «, mnrussbaum.com/civil-war/causes/.

⁴ Carter, Alden R. *Birth of the Republic*. F. Watts, 1988.

⁵ "Newport Mercury." *Newport Mercury*, 10 Jan. 1784, p. 2.

⁶ *What the Founders Said About Slavery*, econfaculty.gmu.edu/wew/quotes/slavery.html.

delegates did not believe that slavery should be abolished at the cost of the nation, and it soon became clear that the cost would be exactly that. Delegates from the Northern states realized that if they wanted to have Southern support for the Constitution, they would need to allow slavery to continue, and most were not willing to sacrifice the nation to prevent slavery.⁷ When the issue of whether slavery would be allowed was solved, there were new questions that needed to be answered, particularly how slaves should be counted when determining the number of Representatives each state would have in Congress. For every thirty-thousand inhabitants of a state, that state receives one additional Representative in the House of Representatives and one additional electoral college vote, but the delegates couldn't decide whether to count slaves in that number.⁸ When the arrangement of the representation in the House of Representatives was decided, the delegates were again split between Northern and Southern states over the issue of whether slaves would be counted. The Southern states argued that the slaves should be counted with whites, while Northerners said that they should not be counted because they are considered property.⁹

The debate over whether slaves would be represented in the House of Representatives was a major issue that threatened to undo the Constitution.¹⁰ Charles Pinckney from South Carolina wanted slaves to be counted, saying "blacks ought to stand on an equality with whites..." but his statement wasn't considered valid by most due to the treatment of slaves in his

⁷ Carter, Alden R. *Birth of the Republic*. F. Watts, 1988.

⁸ "The Constitution of the United States: A Transcription." *National Archives and Records Administration*, National Archives and Records Administration, www.archives.gov/founding-docs/constitution-transcript#toc-section-2.

⁹ *The Three-Fifths Clause of the United States Constitution (1787) | The Black Past: Remembered and Reclaimed*, www.blackpast.org/aah/three-fifths-clause-united-states-constitution-1787.

¹⁰ "The 'Three-Fifths' Compromise." *The "Three-Fifths" Compromise | African American Registry*, 2013, www.aaregistry.org/historic_events/view/three-fifths-compromise.

home state. Many Northerners did not want to support slavery by counting slaves and creating political reasons for continuing slavery. Delegates from the Southern states argued that slaves were still people, and therefore should be counted along with free blacks and whites. James Madison and Edmund Randolph supported this and argued that slaves contributed to society, and therefore should be counted for representation purposes.¹¹ Delegates from the Northern states disagreed with this claim, stating that slaves were considered property, and therefore should not receive representation. Some Northerners considered the claim to be a joke, stating that if the Southerners counted their slaves for representation, then the Northerners would be entitled to count their cattle, clothing, and other possessions.¹²

This argument continued to what seemed to be an impasse until James Wilson of Pennsylvania and Roger Sherman of Connecticut proposed the Three-Fifths Compromise.¹³ This compromise, later known as Article I, Section II, of the United States Constitution, states that “Representatives and direct Taxes shall be apportioned among the several States which may be included within this Union, according to their respective Numbers, which shall be determined by adding to the whole Number of free Persons, including those bound to Service for a Term of Years, and excluding Indians not taxed, three fifths of all other Persons.”¹⁴ This compromise was supported by some delegates, but others opposed it. Gouverneur Morris of Pennsylvania was one of those who opposed it, saying he could not support slaves being represented because

¹¹ *The Three-Fifths Clause of the United States Constitution (1787) | The Black Past: Remembered and Reclaimed*, www.blackpast.org/aah/three-fifths-clause-united-states-constitution-1787.

¹² “The ‘Three-Fifths’ Compromise.” *The “Three-Fifths” Compromise | African American Registry*, 2013, www.aaregistry.org/historic_events/view/three-fifths-compromise.

¹³ *The Three-Fifths Clause of the United States Constitution (1787) | The Black Past: Remembered and Reclaimed*, www.blackpast.org/aah/three-fifths-clause-united-states-constitution-1787.

¹⁴ “The Constitution of the United States: A Transcription.” *National Archives and Records Administration*, National Archives and Records Administration, www.archives.gov/founding-docs/constitution-transcript#toc-section-2-.

he did not want to encourage slave trade. Many Southerners were in favor of the compromise because it would give them a disproportionate amount of representation in Congress.

Northerners were not as happy with this compromise, due to the fact that they would receive less representation in Congress, but they knew that if they blocked this compromise, the Constitutional Convention would likely fall apart, and the nation with it. Because of what was at stake, the Convention approved the Three-Fifths Compromise, and with this, they paved the way for a future conflict that could have been avoided.¹⁵

This conflict began to take form with the new century as the slave population continued to rise. Many historians believe that slavery would have ended on its own if not for this compromise. However, with the signing of the Constitution, slavery was given a new life-a political life. The importation of slaves to Southern states became important for gaining more representation in Congress as well as for financial gain.¹⁶ When the Constitution was signed in 1787, there were about 575,000 slaves in the United States. Fifty years later, in 1837, there were over 2,000,000 slaves in the country, almost four times more than when the Constitution was signed.¹⁷ By 1860, there were almost 4,000,000 slaves in the country, making up 13% of the population.¹⁸

The Three-Fifths Compromise also had other effects. Because of the Southern states increased power in the electoral college, the outcome was changed in many presidential elections including the election of 1800, in which Thomas Jefferson would have lost if not for the

¹⁵ *The Three-Fifths Clause of the United States Constitution (1787) | The Black Past: Remembered and Reclaimed*, www.blackpast.org/aah/three-fifths-clause-united-states-constitution-1787.

¹⁶ "The 'Three-Fifths' Compromise." *The "Three-Fifths" Compromise | African American Registry*, 2013, www.aaregistry.org/historic_events/view/three-fifths-compromise.

¹⁷ "Growing the Nation." *PBS*, Public Broadcasting Service, www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part3/map3.html.

¹⁸ *American Civil War Census Data*, www.civil-war.net/census.asp?census=Total.

additional Southern representatives. The compromise also played a role in making countless political decisions in Congress. And, of course, it made it extremely difficult for any action to be made in Congress that would threaten the existence of slavery, and the source of the Southerner's extra representation.¹⁹

The continued growth of the slave population is what caused many religious and political groups in the North begin to push for abolition. Abolitionist feelings had been strong in the North and upper South starting in the American Revolution, but it wasn't until the 1830's, after a religious movement called the Second Great Awakening, that the Abolitionist Movement began to take hold. The growing conflict about slavery continued throughout the 1840's and 1850's, and the growth of the Underground Railroad continued to anger slave owners. The topic began to gain political influence as more people, especially Northerners, began to vote for anti-slavery politicians. Many Northerners feared for their own civil liberties as more laws began to be put in place that limited many possibilities for escaped slaves, and dictated penalties for those caught helping slaves escape. Many free Americans, both white and black, were jailed and fined after being caught helping escaped slaves. Many of these laws were put into effect because of the large amount of Southern representation in Congress. However, there were many Americans who were willing to risk everything to help slaves escape.²⁰

Tensions between North and South continued to rise, until, on December 20, 1860, South Carolina declared its secession from the Union. Within six weeks, Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, and Louisiana had all followed South Carolina to secession. In February of

¹⁹ "The 'Three-Fifths' Compromise." *The "Three-Fifths" Compromise | African American Registry*, 2013, www.aaregistry.org/historic_events/view/three-fifths-compromise.

²⁰ History.com Staff. "Abolitionist Movement." *History.com*, A&E Television Networks, 2009, www.history.com/topics/black-history/abolitionist-movement.

1861, these states convened and agreed to form a unified government called the Confederate States of America. On April 12, 1861, the war that had been in the making since the Constitutional Convention began when Confederate troops attacked Fort Sumter, which was under Union control.²¹

The Civil War stretched four years, from 1861-1865, and the costs were devastating. Overall, there were over six hundred thousand dead after the war, including those who died in battle, of disease, and as prisoners. It is estimated that there were more American deaths in this war than in World War I, World War II, and the Vietnam War combined. The war also resulted in the destruction of many towns being destroyed and a century of Jim Crow laws segregating the Southern states.

When discussing the causes of the Civil War, historians often note topics such as the Missouri Compromise, the Compromise of 1850, and the Fugitive Slave Acts. The Nat Turner Rebellion, the Underground Railroad, and Dred Scott Decision are also commonly listed, as are many other occurrences of the early 19th century. But at the core of all of these events is one broad topic - slavery.²² And, as previously stated, slavery would not have been an issue if not for the Three-Fifths Compromise, which is given credit for creating reason for slavery where there should have been none, and extending the life of a practice that many believe could have been eliminated in the early 1800's,²³ sparing us from years of needless bloodshed and saving the lives of over 600,000 people. The Civil War, the war that cost more American lives than any other

²¹ "The Civil War Begins." *History.com*, A&E Television Networks, www.history.com/this-day-in-history/the-civil-war-begins.

²² "Causes and Effects of the Civil War." *Causes and Effects of the Civil War* «, mnrussbaum.com/civil-war/causes/.

²³ *The Three-Fifths Clause of the United States Constitution (1787) | The Black Past: Remembered and Reclaimed*, www.blackpast.org/aah/three-fifths-clause-united-states-constitution-1787

war in history, could have been completely nonexistent if the Constitutional Convention, which took place 74 years prior to the beginning of the war, had not approved the Three-Fifths Compromise.²⁴

The Constitutional Convention delegates had no way of knowing that their attempt to keep the nation together would cause so much death and destruction. In fact, the delegates from the Southern states threatened to succeed during the Constitutional Convention if any laws were passed in the Constitution that prevented slavery. However, South Carolina delegates later said that their state had never seriously considered succession, making it clear that the Constitution need not have encouraged, or even allowed, slavery to continue.²⁵ It was a mistake that caused hundreds of thousands of deaths and many years of suffering.²⁶ We have no way of knowing how much this affected the past, and therefore there is no way to measure the effects on the present, but it is possible that preventing the Three-Fifths Compromise could have prevented the widespread racial tension present today and eliminated 600,000 deaths that could have resulted in over 6,000,000 more people alive today.²⁷

The debate over whether the Three-Fifths Compromise was necessary continues today. While it had a role in creating the devastation caused by the Civil War, it is possible that not making this compromise could have resulted in an earlier conflict. The Three-Fifths

²⁴ "Causes and Effects of the Civil War." *Causes and Effects of the Civil War* «, mrusbaum.com/civil-war/causes/.

²⁵ Carter, Alden R. *Birth of the Republic*. F. Watts, 1988.

²⁶ "Causes and Effects of the Civil War." *Causes and Effects of the Civil War* «, mrusbaum.com/civil-war/causes/.

²⁷ "The 'Three-Fifths' Compromise." *The "Three-Fifths" Compromise | African American Registry*, 2013, www.aaregistry.org/historic_events/view/three-fifths-compromise.

Compromise seemed to be necessary to keep the nation together, but was responsible for the extension of slavery, and, in extending the slave trade, tearing the nation apart.

Appendix A



“US Constitution Fast Facts.” *CNN*, Cable News Network, 28 Sept. 2017, www.cnn.com/2013/10/31/us/u-s-constitution-fast-facts/index.html. This image shows the beginning of the United States Constitution.

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This secondary source provides information about the delegates making compromises, including the population of slaves being counted for representation in Congress. It also includes that most of the delegates didn't want slavery to continue, but they understood that trying to abolish it would tear the nation apart.

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