

**Volume 18**

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**A House Divided: (84) The Great  
Congress – I**

**Lead: One hundred and fifty years ago the Republic was facing its greatest crisis. This continuing series examines the American Civil War. It is "A House Divided."**

**Intro.: *A Moment in Time* with Dan Roberts.**

**Content: The position of a legislature in a republic is essentially conservative. Elected representatives tend to reflect the sentiments of their constituents who are not particularly inclined toward revolutionary enterprise. This is not difficult to**

**understand as voters are usually required to pay the price in blood and treasure for their leaders' ambitions. In U.S. history this has tended to insure that Congress has acted as a brake on Executive pretension. Presidents propose, Congresses dispose, or more often reject, the motivations of Chief Executives.**

**Yet, periodically a Congress comes along that makes history, that moves the Republic into new realms of achievement. Congresses elected in 1912, 1936, 1964, 1980, and 2008 were extraordinarily industrious in terms of public policy. One of the most productive Congresses in U.S. history was that elected in 1860. That portion of Congress which remained after the**

**departure of the Confederate states worked what historians Charles and Mary Beard called the “Second American Revolution.” Indeed, it was the absence of the Southerners - conservative, agrarian, opposed to internal improvements, jealous of state sovereignty, devoted to chattel slavery – and the South’s crushing defeat, some assert, that created modern America. The Great Congress began to accomplish in significant measure the dreams of Founding Father Alexander Hamilton and his allies who believed the Federal government could become a major and beneficent actor in transforming American social and economic life.**

**This Congress transformed the tax code, protected middle and working classes from confiscatory taxes, created the Internal Revenue system, and re-ordered the monetary structure of the United States to benefit those creating a powerful war apparatus. It then began the distribution of free public lands in the West to people, a massive section of the continent. It expanded higher education by creating land-grant colleges such as Cornell, the Universities of Wisconsin, Illinois, California and more, and laid the groundwork for a national system of transportation - by first creating a transcontinental railroad - all designed specifically to support the growth of industrial enterprise. It also took the first tentative steps toward the**

**eradication of the curse of slavery.  
And all of this done during the  
Republic's greatest crisis, an horrific  
war. Next time: The Great Congress at  
work.**

**At the School of Professional and  
Continuing Studies, University of  
Richmond, this is Dan Roberts.**

## Resources

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- Curry, Leonard P. *Blueprint for Modern America: Nonmilitary Legislation of the First Civil War Congress*. Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 1968.**
- Hammond, Bray. *Sovereignty and an Empty Purse: Banks and Politics in the Civil War*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970.**
- McPherson, James M. *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1988.**
- Sharkey, Robert P. *Money, Class, and Party: An Economic Study of the Civil war and Reconstruction*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1959.**
- <http://eh.net/encyclopedia/article/ransom.civil.war.us>**