

# THE UNION IN PERIL, 1848–1861

*The real issue in this controversy—the one pressing upon every mind—is the sentiment on the part of one class that looks upon the institution of slavery as a wrong, and of another class that does not look upon it as a wrong.*

Abraham Lincoln, 1858

Nobody disagrees about the sequence of major events from 1848 to 1861 that led ultimately to the outbreak of the Civil War between the Union and the Confederacy. Facts in themselves, however, do not automatically assemble themselves into a convincing interpretation of *why* war occurred when it did. Historians have identified at least four main causes of the conflict between the North and the South: (1) *slavery*, as a growing moral issue in the North, versus its defense and expansion in the South; (2) *constitutional disputes* over the nature of the federal Union and states' rights; (3) *economic differences* between the industrializing North and the agricultural South over such issues as tariffs, banking, and internal improvements; (4) *political blunders and extremism* on both sides, which some historians conclude resulted in an unnecessary war. This chapter summarizes the events leading up to Lincoln's election and the secession of eleven Southern states from the Union.

## Conflict Over Status of Territories

The issue of slavery in the territories gained in the Mexican War became the focus of sectional differences in the late 1840s. The Wilmot Proviso, which excluded slavery from the new territories, would have upset the Compromise of 1820 and the delicate balance of 15 free and 15 slave states. The proviso's defeat only intensified sectional feelings. On the issue of how to deal with these new western territories, there were essentially three conflicting positions.

### **Free-Soil Movement**

Northern Democrats and Whigs supported the Wilmot Proviso and the position that all African Americans—slave and free—should be excluded from the Mexican Cession (territory ceded to the U.S. by Mexico in 1848). While abolitionists advocated eliminating slavery everywhere, many Northerners who opposed the westward expansion of slavery did not oppose slavery in the

South. They sought to keep the West a land of opportunity for whites only so that the white majority would not have to compete with the labor of slaves or free blacks. In 1848, Northerners who opposed allowing slavery in the territories organized the Free-Soil party, which adopted the slogan “free soil, free labor, and free men.” In addition to its chief objective—preventing the extension of slavery—the new party also advocated free homesteads (public land grants to small farmers) and internal improvements.

### ***Southern Position***

Most whites viewed any attempts to restrict the expansion of slavery as a violation of their constitutional right to take and use their property as they wished. They saw the Free-Soilers—and especially the abolitionists—as intent on the ultimate destruction of slavery. More moderate Southerners favored extending the Missouri Compromise line of 36°30’ westward to the Pacific Ocean and permitting territories north of that line to be nonslave.

### ***Popular Sovereignty***

Lewis Cass, a Democratic senator from Michigan, proposed a compromise solution that soon won considerable support from both moderate Northerners and moderate Southerners. Instead of Congress determining whether to allow slavery in a new western territory or state, Cass suggested that the matter be determined by a vote of the people who settled the territory. Cass’s approach to the problem was known as squatter sovereignty, or popular sovereignty.

### ***The Election of 1848***

In 1848, the Democrats nominated Senator Cass and adopted a platform pledged to popular sovereignty. The Whigs nominated Mexican War hero General Zachary Taylor, who had never been involved in politics and took no position on slavery in the territories. A third party, the Free-Soil party, nominated former president Martin Van Buren. It consisted of “conscience” Whigs (who opposed slavery) and antislavery Democrats; the latter group were ridiculed as “barnburners” because their defection threatened to destroy the Democratic party. Taylor narrowly defeated Cass, in part because of the vote given the Free-Soil party in such key Northern states as New York and Pennsylvania.

### ***The Compromise of 1850***

The gold rush of 1849 and the influx of about 100,000 settlers into California created the need for law and order in the West. In 1849, Californians drafted a constitution for their new state—a constitution that banned slavery. Even though President Taylor was a Southern slaveholder himself, he supported the immediate admission of both California and New Mexico as free states. (At this time, however, the Mexican population of the New Mexico territory had little interest in applying for statehood.)

Taylor’s plan sparked talk of secession among the “fire-eaters” (radicals) in the South. Some Southern extremists even met in Nashville in 1850 to discuss

secession. By this time, however, the astute Henry Clay had proposed yet another compromise for solving the political crisis:

- Admit California to the Union as a free state
- Divide the remainder of the Mexican Cession into two territories—Utah and New Mexico—and allow the settlers in these territories to decide the slavery issue by majority vote, or popular sovereignty
- Give the land in dispute between Texas and the New Mexico territory to the new territories in return for the federal government assuming Texas's public debt of \$10 million
- Ban the slave trade in the District of Columbia but permit whites to hold slaves as before
- Adopt a new Fugitive Slave Law and enforce it rigorously

In the ensuing Senate debate over the compromise proposal, the three congressional giants of the age—Henry Clay of Kentucky, Daniel Webster of Massachusetts, and John C. Calhoun of South Carolina—delivered the last great speeches of their lives. (Webster and Calhoun, who were both born in 1782, died in 1850; Clay died two years later.) Webster argued for compromise in order to save the Union, and in so doing alienated the Massachusetts abolitionists who formed the base of his support. Calhoun argued against compromise and insisted that the South be given equal rights in the acquired territory.

Northern opposition to compromise came from younger antislavery lawmakers, such as Senator William H. Seward of New York, who argued that a higher law than the Constitution existed. Opponents managed to prevail until the sudden death in 1850 of President Taylor, who had also opposed Clay's plan. Succeeding him was a strong supporter of compromise, Vice President Millard Fillmore. Stephen A. Douglas, a politically astute young senator from Illinois, engineered different coalitions to pass each part of the compromise separately. President Fillmore readily signed the bills into law.

**Passage** The passage of the Compromise of 1850 bought time for the Union. Because California was admitted as a free state, the compromise added to the North's political power, and the political debate deepened the commitment of many Northerners to saving the Union from secession. On the other hand, parts of the compromise became sources of controversy, especially the new Fugitive Slave Law and the provision for popular sovereignty.

## Agitation Over Slavery

For a brief period—the four years between the Compromise of 1850 and the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854—political tensions abated slightly. However, the enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Act and the



publication of a best-selling antislavery novel kept the slavery question in the forefront of public attention in both the North and South.

### ***Fugitive Slave Law***

The passage of a strict Fugitive Slave Law persuaded many Southerners to accept the loss of California to the abolitionists and Free-Soilers. Yet the enforcement of the new law in the North was bitterly and sometimes forcibly resisted by antislavery Northerners. In effect, therefore, enforcement of the new law drove a wedge between the North and the South.

**Enforcement and Opposition** The law's chief purpose was to track down runaway (fugitive) slaves who had escaped to a Northern state, capture them, and return them to their Southern owners. The law placed fugitive slave cases under the exclusive jurisdiction of the federal government and authorized special U.S. commissioners to issue warrants to arrest fugitives. Captured persons who claimed to be a free African American and not a runaway slave were denied the right of trial by jury. Citizens who attempted to hide a runaway or obstruct enforcement of the law were subject to heavy penalties.

### ***Underground Railroad***

The Underground Railroad, the fabled network of “conductors” and “stations,” was a loose network of Northern free blacks and courageous ex-slaves, with the help of some white abolitionists, who helped escaped slaves reach freedom in the North or in Canada. The most famous conductor was an escaped slave woman, Harriet Tubman, who made at least 19 trips into the South to help some 300 slaves escape. Free blacks in the North and abolitionists also organized vigilance committees to protect fugitive slaves from the slave catchers. Once the Civil War broke out, African American leaders such as Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, and Sojourner Truth continued to work for the emancipation of slaves and to support black soldiers in the Union cause.

### ***Books on Slavery—Pro and Con***

Popular books as well as unpopular laws stirred the emotions of the people of all regions.

***Uncle Tom's Cabin*** The most influential book of its day was a novel about the conflict between an enslaved man named Tom and the brutal white slave owner Simon Legree. The publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in 1852 by the Northern writer Harriet Beecher Stowe moved a generation of Northerners as well as many Europeans to regard all slave owners as monstrously cruel and inhuman. Southerners condemned the “untruths” in the novel and looked upon it as one more proof of the North's incurable prejudice against the Southern way of life. Later, when President Lincoln met Stowe, he is reported to have said, “So you're the little woman who wrote the book that made this great war.”

***Impending Crisis of the South.*** Although it did not appear until 1857, Hinton R. Helper's book of nonfiction, *Impending Crisis of the South*, attacked slavery from another angle. The author, a native of North Carolina, used

statistics to demonstrate to fellow Southerners that slavery weakened the South’s economy. Southern states acted quickly to ban the book, but it was widely distributed in the North by antislavery and Free-Soil leaders.

Comparing the Free and Slave States in the 1850s			
Category	Free States	Slave States	Slave States as Percentage of Free States
Population	18,484,922	9,612,979	52 percent
Patents for New Inventions	1,929	268	14 percent
Value of Church Buildings	\$67,778,477	\$21,674,581	32 percent
Newspapers and Periodicals	1,790	740	41 percent
Bank Capital	\$230,100,840	\$109,078,940	47 percent
Value of Exports	\$167,520,098	\$107,480,688	64 percent

**Source:** Hinton R. Helper, *Impending Crisis of the South*, 1857. Data from various years between 1850 and 1856.

**Southern Reaction** Responding to the Northern literature that condemned slavery as evil, proslavery Southern whites counterattacked by arguing that slavery was just the opposite—a positive good for slave and master alike. They argued that slavery was sanctioned by the Bible and was firmly grounded in philosophy and history. Southern authors contrasted the conditions of Northern wage workers—“wage slaves” forced to work long hours in factories and mines—with the familial bonds that could develop on plantations between slaves and master. George Fitzhugh, the boldest and best known of the proslavery authors, questioned the principle of equal rights for “unequal men” and attacked the capitalist wage system as worse than slavery. Among his works were *Sociology for the South* (1854) and *Cannibals All!* (1857).

**Effect of Law and Literature**

The Fugitive Slave Law, combined with the antislavery and proslavery literature, polarized the nation even more. Northerners who had earlier scorned abolition became more concerned about slavery as a moral issue. At the same time, a growing number of Southerners became convinced that the North’s goal was to destroy the institution of slavery and the way of life based upon it.

## National Parties in Crisis

The potency of the slavery controversy increased political instability, as shown in the weakening of the two major parties—the Democrats and the Whigs—and in a disastrous application of popular sovereignty in the territory of Kansas.

### *The Election of 1852*

Signs of trouble for the Whig party were apparent in the 1852 election for president. The Whigs nominated another military hero of the Mexican War, General Winfield Scott. Attempting to ignore the slavery issue, the Whig campaign concentrated on the party's innocuous plans for improving roads and harbors. But Scott quickly discovered that sectional issues could not be held in check. The antislavery and Southern factions of the party fell to quarreling, and the party was on the verge of splitting apart.

The Democrats nominated a safe compromise candidate, Franklin Pierce of New Hampshire. Though a Northerner, Pierce was acceptable to Southern Democrats because he supported the Fugitive Slave Law. In the electoral college vote, Pierce and the Democrats won all but four states in a sweep that suggested the days of the Whig party were numbered.

### *The Kansas-Nebraska Act (1854)*

With the Democrats firmly in control of national policy both in the White House and in Congress, a new law was passed that was to have disastrous consequences. Senator Stephen A. Douglas of Illinois devised a plan for building a railroad and promoting western settlement (while at the same time increasing the value of his own real estate holdings in Chicago). Douglas needed to win Southern approval for his plan to build a transcontinental railroad through the central United States, with a major terminus in Chicago. (Southern Democrats preferred a more southerly route for the railroad.) To obtain Southern approval for his railroad route, Douglas introduced a bill to divide the Nebraska Territory into two parts, the Kansas Territory and Nebraska Territory, and allow settlers in each territory to decide whether to allow slavery or not. Since these territories were located *north* of the 36°30' line, Douglas's bill gave Southern slave owners an opportunity to expand slavery that previously had been closed to them by the Missouri Compromise of 1820. Northern Democrats condemned the bill as a surrender to the "slave power."

After three months of bitter debate, both houses of Congress passed Douglas's bill as the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, and President Pierce signed it into law.

## Extremists and Violence

The Kansas-Nebraska Act, in effect, repealed the Missouri Compromise that had kept a lid on regional tensions for more than three decades. After 1854, the conflicts between antislavery and proslavery forces exploded, both in Kansas and on the floor of the United States Senate.



## THE UNITED STATES AFTER THE KANSAS-NEBRASKA ACT OF 1854



### ***"Bleeding Kansas"***

Stephen Douglas, the sponsor of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, expected the slavery issue in the territory to be settled peacefully by the antislavery farmers from the Midwest who migrated to Kansas. These settlers did in fact constitute a majority of the population. But slaveholders from the neighboring state of Missouri also set up homesteads in Kansas chiefly as a means of winning control of the territory for the South. Northern abolitionists and Free-Soilers responded by organizing the New England Emigrant Aid Company (1855), which paid for the transportation of antislavery settlers to Kansas. Fighting soon broke out between the proslavery and the antislavery groups, and the territory became known as "bleeding Kansas."

Proslavery Missourians, mockingly called "border ruffians" by their enemies, crossed the border to create a proslavery legislature in Lecompton, Kansas. Antislavery settlers refused to recognize this government and created their own legislature in Topeka. In 1856, proslavery forces attacked the free-soil town of Lawrence, killing two and destroying homes and businesses. Two days later, John Brown, a stern abolitionist who was born in Connecticut and living in New York, retaliated. He and his sons attacked a proslavery farm settlement at Pottawatomie Creek, killing five settlers.

In Washington, the Pierce administration kept aloof from the turmoil in Kansas. It did nothing to keep order in the territory and failed to support honest elections there. As “bleeding Kansas” became bloodier, the Democratic party became ever more divided between its Northern and Southern factions.

**Caning of Senator Sumner** The violence in Kansas spilled over into the halls of the U.S. Congress. In 1856, Massachusetts Senator Charles Sumner verbally attacked the Democratic administration in a vitriolic speech, “The Crime Against Kansas.” His intemperate remarks included personal charges against South Carolina Senator Andrew Butler. Butler’s nephew, Congressman Preston Brooks, defended his absent uncle’s honor by walking into the Senate chamber and beating Sumner over the head with a cane. (Brooks explained that dueling was too good for Sumner, but a cane was fit for a dog.) Sumner never fully recovered from the attack.

Brooks’ action outraged the North, and the House voted to censure him. Southerners, however, applauded Brooks’ deed and sent him numerous canes to replace the one he broke beating Sumner. The Sumner-Brooks incident was another sign of growing passions on both sides.

## ***New Parties***

The increasing tensions over slavery divided Northern and Southern Democrats, and it completely broke apart the Whig party. In hindsight, it is clear that the breakup of truly national political parties in the mid-1850s paralleled the breakup of the Union. The new parties came into being at this time—one temporary, the other permanent. Both played a role in bringing about the demise of a major national party, the Whigs.

**Know-Nothing Party** In addition to sectional divisions between North and South, there was also in the mid-1850s growing ethnic tension in the North between native-born Protestant Americans and immigrant Germans and Irish Catholics. Nativist hostility to these newcomers led to the formation of the American party—or the Know-Nothing party, as it was more commonly known (because party members commonly responded “I know nothing” to political questions). The Know-Nothings drew support away from the Whigs at a time when that party was reeling from its defeat in the 1852 election. Their one core issue was opposition to Catholics and immigrants who, in the 1840s and 1850s, were entering Northern cities in large numbers.

Although the Know-Nothings won a few local and state elections in the mid-1850s and helped to weaken the Whigs, they quickly lost influence, as sectional issues again became paramount.

**Birth of the Republican Party** The Republican party was founded in Wisconsin in 1854 as a direct reaction to the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act. Composed of a coalition of Free-Soilers and antislavery Whigs and Democrats, its overriding purpose was to oppose the spread of slavery in the territories—not to end slavery itself. Its first platform of 1854 called for the repeal of both the Kansas-Nebraska Act and the Fugitive Slave Law. As violence increased in Kansas, more and more people, including some abolitionists, joined the



Republican party, and it was soon the second largest party in the country. But because it remained in these years strictly a Northern or sectional party, its success alienated and threatened the South.

### ***The Election of 1856***

The Republicans' first test of strength came in the presidential election of 1856. Their nominee for president was a senator from California, the young explorer and "Pathfinder," John C. Frémont. The Republican platform called for no expansion of slavery, free homesteads, and a probusiness protective tariff. The Know-Nothings also competed strongly in this election, with their candidate, former President Millard Fillmore, winning 20 percent of the popular vote.

As the one major national party, the Democrats expected to win. They nominated James Buchanan of Pennsylvania, rejecting both President Pierce and Stephen Douglas because they were too closely identified with the controversial Kansas-Nebraska Act. As expected, the Democratic ticket won a majority of both the popular and electoral vote. But the Republicans made a remarkably strong showing for a sectional party. In the electoral college, Frémont carried 11 of the 16 free states. People could predict that the antislavery Republicans might soon win the White House without a single vote from the South.

The election of 1856 foreshadowed the emergence of a powerful political party that would win all but four presidential elections between 1860 and 1932.

### **Constitutional Issues**

Both the Democrats' position of popular sovereignty and the Republicans' stand against the expansion of slavery received serious blows during the Buchanan administration (1857–1861). Republicans attacked Buchanan as a weak president.

#### ***Lecompton Constitution***

One of Buchanan's first challenges as president in 1857 was to decide whether to accept or reject a proslavery state constitution for Kansas submitted by the Southern legislature at Lecompton. Buchanan knew that the Lecompton constitution, as it was called, did not have the support of the majority of settlers. Even so, he asked Congress to accept the document and admit Kansas as a slave state. Congress did not do so, because many Democrats, including Stephen Douglas, joined with the Republicans in rejecting the Lecompton constitution. The next year, 1858, the proslavery document was overwhelmingly rejected by Kansas settlers, most of whom were antislavery Republicans.

#### ***Dred Scott v. Sandford (1857)***

Congressional folly and presidential ineptitude contributed to the sectional crisis of the 1850s. Then the Supreme Court worsened the crisis when it infuriated many Northerners with a controversial proslavery decision in the case of a slave named Dred Scott. Scott had been held in slavery in Missouri and then taken to the free territory of Wisconsin where he lived for two years before

returning to Missouri. Arguing that his residence on free soil made him a free citizen, Scott sued for his freedom in Missouri in 1846. The case worked its way through the court system. It finally reached the Supreme Court, which rendered its decision in March 1857, only two days after Buchanan was sworn in as president.

Presiding over the Court was Chief Justice Roger Taney, a Southern Democrat. A majority of the Court decided against Scott and gave these reasons:

- Dred Scott had no right to sue in a federal court because the Framers of the Constitution did not intend African Americans to be U.S. citizens.
- Congress did not have the power to deprive any person of property without due process of law; if slaves were a form of property, then Congress could not exclude slavery from any federal territory.
- The Missouri Compromise was unconstitutional because it excluded slavery from Wisconsin and other Northern territories.

The Court's ruling delighted Southern Democrats and infuriated Northern Republicans. In effect, the Supreme Court declared that all parts of the western territories were open to slavery. Republicans denounced the Dred Scott decision as "the greatest crime in the annals of the republic." Because of the timing of the decision, right after Buchanan's inauguration, many Northerners suspected that the Democratic president and the Democratic majority on the Supreme Court, including Taney, had secretly planned the Dred Scott decision, hoping that it would settle the slavery question once and for all. The decision increased Northerners' suspicions of a slave power conspiracy and induced thousands of former Democrats to vote Republican.

Northern Democrats such as Senator Douglas were left with the almost impossible task of supporting popular sovereignty without repudiating the Dred Scott decision. Douglas's hopes for a sectional compromise and his ambitions for the presidency were both in jeopardy.

### ***Lincoln-Douglas Debates***

In 1858, the focus of the nation was on Stephen Douglas's campaign for reelection as senator from Illinois. Challenging him for the Senate seat was a successful trial lawyer and former member of the Illinois legislature, Abraham Lincoln. The Republican candidate had served only one two-year term in Congress in the 1840s as a Whig. Nationally, he was an unknown compared to Douglas (the Little Giant), the champion of popular sovereignty and possibly the best hope for holding the nation together if elected president in 1860.

Lincoln was not an abolitionist. Even so, as a moderate who was against the expansion of slavery, he spoke effectively of slavery as a moral issue. ("If slavery is not wrong, nothing is wrong.") Accepting the Illinois Republicans' nomination, the candidate delivered his celebrated "house-divided" speech that won him fame. "This government," said Lincoln, "cannot endure permanently

half slave and half free,” a statement that made Southerners view Lincoln as a radical. In seven campaign debates held in different Illinois towns, Lincoln shared the platform with his famous opponent, Douglas. The Republican challenger attacked Douglas’s seeming indifference to slavery as a moral issue.

In a debate in Freeport, Illinois, Lincoln challenged Douglas to reconcile popular sovereignty with the Dred Scott decision. In what became known as the Freeport Doctrine, Douglas responded that slavery could not exist in a community if the local citizens did not pass laws (slave codes) maintaining it. His views angered Southern Democrats because, from their point of view, Douglas did not go far enough in supporting the implications of the Dred Scott decision.

Douglas won his campaign for reelection to the U.S. Senate. In the long run, however, he lost ground in his own party by alienating Southern Democrats. Lincoln, on the other hand, emerged from the debates as a national figure and a leading contender for the Republican nomination for president in 1860.

## **The Road to Secession**

Outside Illinois, the Republicans did well in the congressional elections of 1858, which alarmed many Southerners. They worried not only about the anti-slavery plank in the Republicans’ program but also about that party’s economic program, which favored the interests of Northern industrialists at the expense of the South. The higher tariffs pledged in the Republican platform could only help Northern business and hurt the South’s dependence on the export of cotton. Therefore, Southerners feared that a Republican victory in 1860 would spell disaster for their economic interests and also threaten their “constitutional right,” as affirmed by the Supreme Court, to hold slaves as property. If this were not enough cause for alarm, Northern radicals provided money to John Brown, the man who had massacred five farmers in Kansas in 1856.

### ***John Brown’s Raid at Harpers Ferry***

John Brown confirmed the South’s worst fears of radical abolitionism when he tried to start a slave uprising in Virginia. In October 1859, he led a small band of followers, including his four sons and some former slaves, in an attack on the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry. His impractical plan was to use guns from the arsenal to arm Virginia’s slaves, whom he expected to rise up in general revolt. Federal troops under the command of Robert E. Lee captured Brown and his band after a two-day siege. Brown and six of his followers were tried for treason, convicted, and hanged by the state of Virginia.

Moderates in the North, including Republican leaders, condemned Brown’s use of violence, but Southerners were not convinced by their words. Southern whites saw the raid as final proof of the North’s true intentions—to use slave revolts to destroy the South. Because John Brown spoke with simple eloquence at his trial of his humanitarian motives in wanting to free the slaves, he was hailed as a martyr by many antislavery Northerners. (A few years later, when civil war broke out, John Brown was celebrated by advancing Northern armies singing: “Glory, glory, hallelujah! His soul is marching on.”)



## ***The Election of 1860***

After John Brown's raid, more and more Americans understood that their country was moving to the brink of disintegration. The presidential election of 1860 would be a test if the union could survive.

**Breakup of the Democratic Party** As 1860 began, the Democratic party represented the last practical hope for coalition and compromise. The Democrats held their national nominating convention in Charleston, South Carolina. Stephen Douglas was the party's leading candidate and the person most capable of winning the presidency. However, his nomination was blocked by a combination of angry Southerners and supporters of President Buchanan.

After deadlocking at Charleston, the Democrats held a second convention in Baltimore. Many delegates from the slave states walked out, enabling the remaining delegates to nominate Douglas on a platform of popular sovereignty and enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law. Southern Democrats then held their own convention in Baltimore and nominated Vice President John C. Breckinridge of Kentucky as their candidate. The Southern Democratic platform called for the unrestricted extension of slavery in the territories and the annexation of Cuba, a land where slavery was already flourishing.

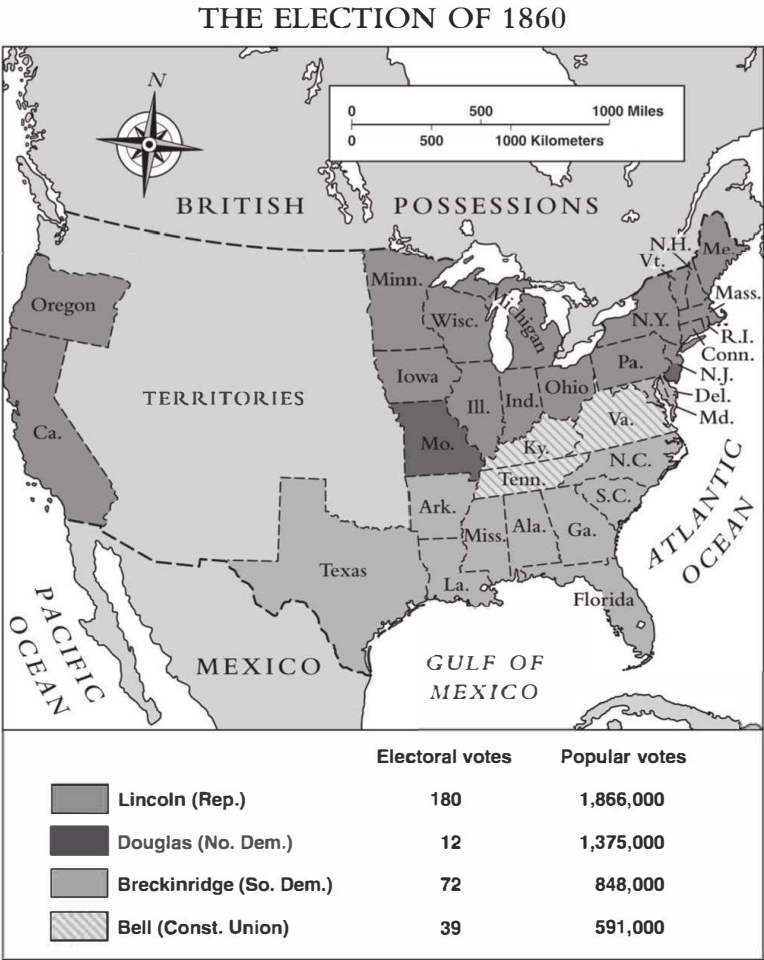
**Republican Nomination of Lincoln** When the Republicans met in Chicago, they enjoyed the prospect of an easy win over the divided Democrats. They made the most of their advantage by drafting a platform that appealed strongly to the economic self-interest of Northerners and Westerners. In addition to calling for the exclusion of slavery from the territories, the Republican platform promised a protective tariff for industry, free land for homesteaders, and internal improvements to encourage western settlement, including a railroad to the Pacific. To ensure victory, the Republicans turned away from Senator William H. Seward, a well-known leader but more radical on slavery, to the strong debater from Illinois, Abraham Lincoln—a candidate who could carry the key Midwestern states of Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio.

One cloud on the horizon darkened the Republicans' otherwise bright future. In the South, secessionists warned that if Lincoln was elected president, their states would leave the Union.

**A Fourth Political Party** Fearing the consequences of a Republican victory, a group of former Whigs, Know-Nothings, and moderate Democrats formed a new party: the Constitutional Union party. For president, they nominated John Bell of Tennessee. The party's platform pledged enforcement of the laws and the Constitution and, above all, preserving the Union.

**Election Results** While Douglas campaigned across the country, Lincoln confidently remained at home in Springfield, Illinois, meeting with Republican leaders and giving statements to the press. The election results were predictable. Lincoln carried every one of the free states of the North, which represented a solid majority of 59 percent of the electoral votes. He won only 39.8 percent of the popular vote, however, and would therefore be a minority president. Breckinridge, the Southern Democrat, carried the Deep South, leaving Douglas and Bell with just a few electoral votes in the border states.

Together, the two Democrats, Douglas and Breckinridge, received many more *popular* votes than Lincoln, the Republican. Nevertheless, the new political reality was that the populous free states had enough electoral votes to select a president without the need for a single electoral vote from the South.



**Secession of the Deep South**

The Republicans controlled neither the Congress nor the Supreme Court. Even so, the election of Lincoln was all that Southern secessionists needed to call for immediate disunion. In December 1860, a special convention in South Carolina voted unanimously to secede. Within the next six weeks, other state conventions in Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas did the same. In February 1861, representatives of the seven states of the Deep South met in Montgomery, Alabama, and created the Confederate States of America. The constitution of this would-be Southern nation was similar to the U.S. Constitution, except that the Confederacy placed limits on the government’s power to impose tariffs and restrict slavery. Elected president and vice president of the Confederacy were Senator Jefferson Davis of Mississippi and Alexander Stephens of Georgia.

**Crittenden Compromise.** A lame-duck president (a leader completing a term after someone else has been elected to his or her office), Buchanan had five months in office before President-elect Lincoln was due to succeed him. Buchanan was a conservative who did nothing to prevent the secession of the seven states. Congress was more active. In a last-ditch effort to appease the South, Senator John Crittenden of Kentucky proposed a constitutional amendment that would guarantee the right to hold slaves in all territories south of 36°30'. Lincoln, however, said that he could not accept this compromise because it violated the Republican position against extension of slavery into the territories.

Southern whites who voted for secession believed they were acting in the tradition of the Revolution of 1776. They argued that they had a right to national independence and to dissolve a constitutional compact that no longer protected them from “tyranny” (the tyranny of Northern rule). Many of them also thought that Lincoln, like Buchanan, might permit secession without a fight. Those who thought this had badly miscalculated.

#### **HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES: WHAT CAUSED THE CIVIL WAR?**

Was slavery the primary cause of the Civil War? In the decades after the war, Northern historians argued emphatically that the South’s attachment to slavery was the principal, if not the only, cause. They blamed the war on a conspiracy of slave owners—a small minority of Southerners—who wanted only to expand slavery at the expense of whites and blacks alike.

Southern historians, on the other hand, viewed the conflict between the two sections, North and South, as a dispute over the nature of the Constitution. They argued that Northern abolitionists and Free-Soil politicians attempted to overturn the original compact of the states, and that the Southern states seceded to defend the constitutional rights threatened by Northern aggression.

By the early 20th century, passions had cooled on both sides, and scholars of the Progressive era (1900–1917) thought economic interests were the foundation of all political conflict. Thus, Charles Beard, a leading historian of this era, viewed the sectional conflict of the 1850s as a clash of two opposing economic systems: the industrial North versus the agricultural South. His economic interpretation of the Civil War stressed the importance of the Republicans’ commitment to the economic ambitions of Northern industrialists for high tariffs and of western farmers for free land.

American disillusionment with World War I led historians to question whether the Civil War was any more necessary or inevitable than the world war had been. Previously, people had assumed that the Civil War was, in William Seward’s words, an “irrepressible conflict between opposing forces.” Now, in the 1920s and 1930s, that assumption was



challenged by revisionist historians who argued that it was only the blundering of politicians and the rash acts of a few extremists such as John Brown that were chiefly responsible for secession and war. In an essay in 1940, James G. Randall summarized the thinking of the revisionist school: “If one word or phrase were selected to account for the war, that word would not be slavery, or states’ rights, or diverse civilizations. It would have to be such a word as fanaticism (on both sides), or misunderstanding, or perhaps politics.” Politicians of the 1850s who worked for compromise (Clay, Douglas, and Crittenden) were treated as the revisionists’ heroes, whereas Lincoln was criticized for fomenting sectional passions with his house-divided and other speeches.

In the 1950s and 1960s, the civil rights movement provided the backdrop for rethinking the causes of the Civil War. Historians who were sympathetic with African Americans’ struggles for civil rights returned to the view that slavery was the chief cause of disunion after all. They argued that moral issues such as slavery are impossible to compromise. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., a leading historian of the 1950s, wrote: “A society closed in the defense of evil institutions thus creates moral differences far too profound to be solved by compromise.” In this view, slavery as an inherently evil institution was at the root of a conflict that was indeed “irrepressible.”

## KEY TERMS BY THEME

### **Battle for the Territories (MIG, POL)**

free-soil movement  
Free-Soil party  
conscience Whigs  
“barnburners”  
New England Emigrant Aid Company  
“bleeding Kansas”  
Pottawatomie Creek  
Lecompton constitution

### **Compromising (POL)**

popular sovereignty  
Lewis Cass  
Henry Clay  
Zachary Taylor  
Compromise of 1850  
Stephen A. Douglas  
Millard Fillmore

Kansas-Nebraska Act (1854)

Crittenden compromise

### **Politics in Crisis (POL)**

Franklin Pierce  
Know-Nothing party  
Republican party  
John C. Frémont  
James Buchanan  
election of 1860  
secession

### **Slavery (POL)**

Fugitive Slave Law  
Underground Railroad  
Harriet Tubman  
*Dred Scott v. Sandford*  
Roger Taney  
Abraham Lincoln

Lincoln-Douglas debates

house-divided speech  
Freeport Doctrine

### **Violent Responses (POL)**

Sumner-Brooks incident  
John Brown  
Harpers Ferry raid

### **Writing Power (CUL)**

Harriet Beecher Stowe,  
*Uncle Tom’s Cabin*  
Hinton R. Helper,  
*Impending Crisis of the South*  
George Fitzhugh,  
*Sociology of the South*