

Unit 13 - The Sectional Crisis

Focus Questions

1. What factors contributed to the polarization of northern and southern views on slavery and its westward expansion? How did the federal government attempt to resolve or compromise on the issue after the U.S.-Mexican War?
2. What political parties and/or factions comprised the new Republican party, and how did their 1860 presidential candidate, Abraham Lincoln, appeal to northern voters?
3. How did southern states justify their decision to secede from the Union following the 1860 election?

Key Terms

Abraham Lincoln

Wilmot Proviso

Stephen A. Douglas

Compromise of 1850

Fugitive Slave Act

Uncle Tom's Cabin

John Brown

"Bleeding Kansas"

Dred Scott decision

Introduction

Slavery's western expansion created problems for the United States from the very start. Battles emerged over the westward expansion of slavery and over the role of the federal government in protecting the interests of slaveholders. Northern workers felt that slavery suppressed wages and stole land that could have been used by poor white Americans to achieve economic independence. Southerners feared that without slavery's expansion, the abolitionist faction would come to dominate national politics and an increasingly dense population of slaves would lead to a bloody insurrection and race war. Constant resistance from enslaved men and women required a strong pro-slavery government to maintain order. As the North gradually abolished human bondage, enslaved men and women headed north on an underground railroad of hideaways and safe houses. Northerners and southerners came to disagree sharply on the role of the federal government in capturing and returning these freedom seekers. While northerners appealed to their states' rights to refuse capturing runaway slaves, white southerners demanded a national commitment to slavery. Enslaved laborers meanwhile remained vitally important to the nation's economy, fueling not only the southern plantation economy but also providing raw materials for the industrial North. Differences over the fate of slavery remained at the heart of American politics, especially as the United States expanded. After decades of conflict, Americans north and south began to fear that the opposite section of the country had seized control of the government. By November 1860, an opponent of slavery's expansion arose from within the Republican Party. During the secession crisis that followed, problems nearly a century in the making at last devolved into bloody war.

13.1 – Slavery and the Rise of Sectionalism



This mural, created over eighty years after Brown's death, captures the violence and religious fervor of the man and his era. John Stuart Curry, Tragic Prelude, 1938-1940, Kansas State Capitol.

The national breakdown over slavery occurred over a long timeline and across a broad geography. Debates over slavery in the expanding American West proved especially important. As the United States had pressed westward since the Revolutionary war, new questions arose as to whether those lands ought to be slave or free. The framers of the Constitution did a little, but not much, to help resolve these early questions. Article VI of the 1787 Northwest Ordinance banned slavery north and west of the Ohio River.¹ Many took it to mean that the founders intended for slavery to die out: why else would they prohibit its spread across such a huge swath of territory? Debates over the framers' intentions often led to confusion and bitter debate, but the actions of the new government left better clues as to what the new

nation intended for slavery. Congress authorized the admission of Vermont (1791) and Kentucky (1792), with Vermont coming into the Union as a free state and Kentucky coming in as a slave state. Though Americans at the time made relatively little of the balancing act suggested by the admission of a slave state and a free state, the pattern became increasingly important. By 1820, preserving the balance of free states and slave states would be seen as an issue of national security.

New pressures challenging that delicate balance repeatedly surfaced in the West. The Louisiana Purchase of 1803 more than doubled the size of the United States, and questions immediately arose as to whether these lands would be made slave or free. Yet even with the booming cotton economy, many Americans, including Thomas Jefferson, believed that slavery was a temporary institution and would soon die out. Tensions rose with the Louisiana Purchase, but a truly sectional national debate remained mostly dormant.

The Missouri Compromise marked another major turning point in America's sectional crisis because it exposed to the public just how divisive the slavery issue had grown. The debate filled newspapers, speeches, and congressional records. Antislavery and pro-slavery positions from that point forward repeatedly returned to points made during the Missouri debates. Legislators battled for weeks over whether the Constitutional framers intended slavery's expansion, and these contests left deep scars. Even seemingly simple and straightforward phrases like "all men are created equal" were hotly contested all over again. Questions over the expansion of slavery remained open, but nearly all Americans concluded that the Constitution protected slavery where it already existed.

Southerners at that time were not yet advancing arguments that slavery was a positive good, but they did insist during the Missouri Debate that the framers had supported slavery and wanted to see it expand. In Article I, Section 2, for example, the Constitution enabled representation in the South to be based on rules defining an enslaved person as three-fifths of a voter, meaning white men from slaveholding states would be overrepresented in Congress. The Constitution also stipulated that Congress could not interfere with the slave trade before 1808 and enabled Congress to draft fugitive slave laws.

Antislavery participants in the Missouri debate argued that the framers never intended slavery to survive the Revolution and in fact hoped it would disappear through peaceful means. Tellingly, the framers of the Constitution never used the word "slave" in that document. Slaves were referred to as "persons held in service," perhaps referring to English [common law](#) precedents that questioned the legitimacy of "property in man." Antislavery activists also pointed out that while Congress could not pass a law limiting the slave trade before 1808, the framers had also recognized the flip side of the debate and had thus opened the door to legislating the slave trade's end once the deadline arrived. Language in the Tenth Amendment, they claimed, also said slavery could be banned in the territories. Finally, they pointed to the due process clause of the Fifth Amendment, which said that property could be seized through appropriate legislation.² The bruising Missouri debates ultimately transcended arguments about the Constitution. They became an all-encompassing referendum on the American past, present, and future.

13.2 – The Crisis Joined

Missouri's admission to the Union as a slave state in 1821 had exposed deep fault lines in American society. But the compromise created a new sectional consensus that most white Americans, at least, hoped would ensure a lasting peace. Through sustained debates and arguments, white Americans agreed that the Constitution could do little about

slavery where it already existed and that slavery, with the State of Missouri as the key exception, would never expand north of the 36°30' line.

Once again westward expansion challenged this consensus, and this time the results proved even more damaging. Tellingly, enslaved southerners were among the first to signal their discontent. The revolt planned by Denmark Vesey in 1822 had threatened lives and property throughout the Carolinas, and Nat Turner's rebellion in Virginia in 1831 confirmed in many southerners' minds that northern abolitionists condoned, if not actively encouraged, such lawbreaking and violence. The nation's religious leaders also expressed a rising discontent with the new status quo.³ The Second Great Awakening further sharpened political differences by promoting schisms within the major Protestant churches, schisms that also became increasingly sectional in nature. Between 1820 and 1846, sectionalism drew on new political parties, new religious organizations, and new reform movements.

Inspired by the social change of Jacksonian democracy, white men regardless of status gained not only land and jobs but also the right to vote, the right to serve on juries, the right to attend public schools, and the right to serve in the militia and armed forces. In this post-Missouri context, leaders arose to push the country's new expansionist desires in aggressive new directions. As they did so, however, the sectional crisis again deepened. The Democratic Party initially seemed to offer a compelling answer to the problems of sectionalism by promising benefits to white working men of the North, South, and West, while also uniting rural, small-town, and urban residents. Indeed, huge numbers of western, southern, and northern voters rallied behind Andrew Jackson during the 1828 presidential election. The Democratic Party tried to avoid the issue of slavery and instead sought to unite Americans around shared commitments to white supremacy and desires to expand the nation.

Democrats were not without their critics. Northerners seen as especially friendly to the South had become known as "Doughfaces" during the Missouri debates, and as the 1830s wore on, more and more Doughface Democrats became vulnerable to the charge that they served the southern slave oligarchs better than they served their own northern communities. Whites discontented with the direction of the country used the slur and other critiques to help chip away at Democratic Party majorities. The accusation that northern Democrats were lapdogs for southern slaveholders had real power.⁴

The Whigs offered an organized major-party challenge to the Democrats. Whig strongholds often mirrored patterns of westward migration out of New England. Whigs drew from an odd coalition of wealthy merchants, middle- and upper-class farmers, planters in the Upland South, and settlers in the Great Lakes. Because of this diverse coalition, the party struggled to bring a cohesive message to voters in the 1830s. Their strongest support came from places like [Ohio's Western Reserve](#), the rural and Protestant-dominated areas of Michigan, and similar parts of Protestant and small-town Illinois, particularly the fast-growing towns and cities of the state's northern half.⁵

Whig leaders stressed Protestant culture and federal-sponsored internal improvements and courted the support of a variety of reform movements, including temperance and antislavery, though few Whigs believed in racial equality and often espoused nativist sentiments. These positions attracted a wide range of figures, including a young convert to politics named **Abraham Lincoln**. Lincoln admired Whig leader Henry Clay of Kentucky, and by the early 1830s, Lincoln certainly fit the image of a developing Whig. A veteran of the Black Hawk War, Lincoln had relocated to New Salem, Illinois, where he worked a variety of odd jobs, living a life of thrift, self-discipline, and sobriety as he educated himself in preparation for a professional life in law and politics.

The Whig Party blamed Democrats for defending slavery at the expense of the American people, but antislavery was never a core component of the Whig platform. Several abolitionists grew so disgusted with the Whigs that in 1839 they formed their own party, the antislavery Liberty Party, in Warsaw, New York. Liberty leaders demanded the end of slavery in the District of Columbia, the end of the interstate slave trade, and the prohibition of slavery's expansion into the West. But the Liberty Party also shunned women's participation in the movement and distanced themselves from visions of true racial egalitarianism. Unsurprisingly, few Americans voted for the party.

The Democrats and Whigs continued to dominate American politics and fostered a period of relative calm on the slavery debate, partially aided by gag rules prohibiting discussion of antislavery petitions. Arkansas (1836) and Michigan (1837) became the newest states admitted to the Union, with Arkansas coming in as a slave state, and Michigan coming in as a free state. Michigan gained admission through provisions established in the Northwest Ordinance, while Arkansas came in under the Missouri Compromise. Since its lands were below the line at 36°30', the admission of Arkansas did not threaten the Missouri consensus. The balancing act between slavery and freedom continued.

13.3 – Debating the Role of the Federal Government

Events in Texas would shatter the balance. Independent Texas soon gained recognition from a supportive Andrew Jackson administration in 1837. But Jackson's successor, President Martin Van Buren, also a Democrat, soon had reasons to worry about the Republic of Texas. Texas struggled with ongoing conflicts with Mexico and Indian raids from the powerful Comanche. The 1844 democratic presidential candidate James K. Polk sought to bridge the sectional divide by promising new lands to whites north and south. Polk cited the annexation of Texas and the Oregon Territory as campaign cornerstones.⁶ Yet as Polk championed the acquisition of these vast new lands, northern Democrats grew annoyed by their southern colleagues, especially when it came to Texas. For many observers, the sectional crisis had taken an ominous and perhaps irredeemable turn.

The 1840s opened with a number of disturbing developments for antislavery leaders. The 1842 Supreme Court case *Prigg v. Pennsylvania* ruled that the federal government's fugitive slave laws superseded Pennsylvania's personal liberty law.⁷ Antislavery activists believed that the federal government only served southern slaveholders and were trouncing the states' rights of the North. A number of northern states reacted by passing new personal liberty laws in protest in 1843. The rising controversy over the status of fugitive slaves swelled partly through the influence and rhetoric of escaped former slaves like Frederick Douglass, as well as free black Americans like Maria Stewart, James McCune Smith, Martin Delaney, and numerous others.⁸ Black activists also attacked fugitive slave laws by helping thousands to escape via networks like the Underground Railroad. But the forces of slavery had powerful allies at every level of government.

After 1846, the sectional crisis raged throughout North America. Debates swirled over whether the new lands would be slave or free. The South began defending slavery as a positive good. At the same time, Democratic congressman David Wilmot submitted his **Wilmot Proviso** late in 1846, banning the expansion of slavery into the territories acquired in the U.S.-Mexican War. In Wilmot's view, the West should remain free because slavery was already illegal in the region under Mexican law, but he also sought to preserve western lands for exclusively white settlement. The proviso gained widespread northern support and even passed the House with bipartisan support, but it failed in the Senate. Opponents like South Carolina's John C. Calhoun countered the Wilmot Proviso with claims that the federal government should have any power to ban slavery in western territories, and moderate voices raised the notion of either extending the Missouri Compromise line to the Pacific Ocean or allowing [popular sovereignty](#) to determine

questions of slavery in the West. In the election of 1848, after the U.S.-Mexican War had ended, the looming question of western slavery would take center stage in an increasingly divided America.



Questions about the balance of free and slave states in the Union became even more fierce after the US acquired these territories from Mexico by the 1848 in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. Map of the Mexican Cession, 2008. Wikimedia.

13.4 – Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men

The 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo infuriated antislavery leaders in the United States. The spoils of war were impressive, but it was clear they would help expand slavery. Antislavery activists, who already judged the U.S.-Mexican War a slaveholders' plot, vowed that no new territories would be opened to slavery. But knowing that the Liberty Party was also not likely to provide a home to many moderate voters, leaders fostered a new and more competitive party, which they called the Free Soil Party. Antislavery leaders had thought that their vision of a federal government divorced from slavery might be represented by the major parties in that year's presidential election, but both the Whigs and the Democrats nominated pro-slavery southerners. Left unrepresented, antislavery Free Soil leaders swung into action.

Demanding an alternative to the pro-slavery status quo, Free Soil leaders assembled so-called Conscience Whigs. The new coalition called for a national convention in August 1848 at Buffalo, New York. A number of ex-Democrats committed to the party right away, including an important group of New Yorkers loyal to Martin Van Buren. The Free Soil Party's platform bridged the eastern and western leadership together and called for an end to slavery in Washington, D.C., and a halt on slavery's expansion in the territories.⁹ The Free Soil movement hardly made a dent in the 1848 presidential election, but it drew more than four times the popular vote won by the Liberty Party earlier. It was a promising start: in 1848, Free Soil leaders claimed just 10 percent of the popular vote but won over a dozen House seats and even managed to win one Senate seat in Ohio, which went to Salmon P. Chase.¹⁰ In Congress, Free Soil members had enough votes to swing power to either the Whigs or the Democrats. The admission of Wisconsin as a free state in May 1848 helped cool tensions after the Texas and Florida admissions, and it seemed plausible that the Free Soil movement might become a broader coalition. In some ways that is precisely what it did. But come November, the spirit of reform failed to yield much at the polls and Whig candidate Zachary Taylor bested Democrat Lewis Cass of Michigan in the presidential election.

The upheavals of 1848 came to a quick end. Taylor remained in office only a brief time before his unexpected death from a stomach ailment in 1850. While Taylor was alive, the fruits of the U.S.-Mexican War began to spoil and his

administration struggled to find a good remedy. Increased clamoring for the admission of California, New Mexico, and Utah as states pushed the country closer to the edge. Gold had been discovered in California, and thousands continued to pour onto the West Coast and through the trans-Mississippi West. In Utah, Mormons made claims to become an independent state they called Deseret. By 1850, California wanted admission as a free state. With so many competing dynamics under way, and with the president dead and replaced by Whig Millard Fillmore, the 1850s were off to a troubling start.

Congressional leaders like Henry Clay and newer legislators like Democrat **Stephen A. Douglas** of Illinois were asked to broker a compromise, but this time it was clear no compromise could bridge all the diverging interests at play in the country. Clay eventually left Washington disheartened by affairs. It fell to young Douglas, then, to shepherd the bills through Congress, which he in fact did. Legislators rallied behind the **Compromise of 1850**, an assemblage of bills passed late in 1850, which managed to keep the promises of the Missouri Compromise alive while introducing new divisions into American society.

13.5 – The Compromise of 1850

The Compromise of 1850 tried to offer something to everyone, but in the end it only worsened the sectional crisis. For southerners, the package offered a tough new fugitive slave law that empowered the federal government to deputize regular citizens in arresting runaways. The New Mexico Territory and the Utah Territory would be allowed to determine their own fates as slave or free states based on popular sovereignty. The compromise also allowed territories to submit suits directly to the Supreme Court over the status of fugitive slaves within their bounds.

The admission of California as the newest free state in the Union cheered many northerners, but even the admission of a vast new state full of resources and rich agricultural lands was not enough. In addition to California, northerners also gained a ban on the slave trade in Washington, D.C., but not the full emancipation abolitionists had long advocated. Texas, which had already come into the Union as a slave state, was asked to give some of its land to New Mexico in return for the federal government absorbing some of the former republic's debt. But the compromise debates soon grew ugly.

After the Compromise of 1850, antislavery critics became increasingly certain that slaveholders had co-opted the federal government, and that a southern Slave Power secretly held sway in Washington, where it hoped to make slavery a national institution. These northern complaints pointed back to how the three-fifths compromise of the Constitution gave southerners proportionally more



Henry Clay ("The Great Compromiser") addresses the U.S. Senate during the debates over the Compromise of 1850. The print shows a number of incendiary personalities, like John C. Calhoun, whose increasingly sectional beliefs were pacified for a time by the Compromise. P. F. Rothermel (artist), c. 1855. Wikimedia.

representatives in Congress. In the 1850s, antislavery leaders increasingly argued that Washington worked on behalf of slaveholders while ignoring the interests of white working men.

None of the individual measures in the Compromise of 1850 proved more troubling to antislavery Americans than the **Fugitive Slave Act**. Though a legal mandate to return runaway slaves had existed in U.S. federal law since 1793, the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 harshly penalized officials who failed to arrest runaways as well as private citizens who tried to help them. It created special federal commissioners to determine the fate of alleged fugitives without the benefit of a jury trial or even court testimony. Under its provisions, local authorities in the North could not interfere with the capture of fugitives. Northern citizens, moreover, had to assist in the arrest of fugitive slaves when called upon by federal agents.

13.6 – Opposition to the Fugitive Slave Act

The Fugitive Slave Act created the foundation for a massive expansion of federal power, including an alarming increase in the nation's policing powers. Many northerners were also troubled by the way the bill undermined local and state laws. The law itself fostered corruption and, potentially, the kidnapping and enslavement of free black northerners. The federal commissioners who heard these cases were paid \$10 if they determined that the defendant was a slave and only \$5 if they determined he or she was free.¹¹ Many black northerners responded to the new law by heading farther north to Canada.



Anthony Burns, the fugitive slave, appears in a portrait at the center of this 1855 image. Burns' arrest under the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act became a rallying cry to protest the injustice of the slave system. Burns' treatment spurred riots and protests by abolitionists and citizens of Boston in the spring of 1854. John Andrews (engraver), "Anthony Burns," c. 1855. Library of Congress.

Ordinary Americans in the North increasingly resisted what they believed to be a pro-slavery federal government on their own terms. The rescues and arrests of fugitive slaves Anthony Burns in Boston and Joshua Glover in Milwaukee, for example, both signaled the rising vehemence of resistance to the nation's 1850 fugitive slave law. The case of Anthony Burns illustrates how the Fugitive Slave Law radicalized many northerners. On May 24, 1854, twenty-year-old Burns, a preacher who worked in a Boston clothing shop, was clubbed and dragged to jail. One year earlier, Burns had escaped slavery in Virginia, and a group of slave catchers had come to return him to Richmond. Word of Burns's capture spread rapidly through Boston, and a mob gathered outside the courthouse demanding his release. Two days after the arrest, the crowd stormed the courthouse and shot a deputy U.S. Marshal to death.

News reached Washington, and the federal government sent soldiers. Boston was placed under martial law. Federal troops lined the streets of Boston as Burns was marched to a ship, where he was sent back to slavery in Virginia. After spending over \$40,000, the U.S. government had successfully re-enslaved Anthony Burns.¹² A short time later, Burns was redeemed by abolitionists who paid \$1,300 to return him to freedom, but the outrage among Bostonians only grew. And Anthony Burns was only one of hundreds of highly publicized episodes of the federal government imposing the Fugitive Slave Law on

rebellious northern populations. In the words of Amos Adams Lawrence, “We went to bed one night old-fashioned, conservative, compromise Union Whigs & woke up stark mad Abolitionists.”¹³

The 1852 presidential election gave the Whigs their most stunning defeat and effectively ended their existence as a national political party. Whigs captured just 42 of the 254 electoral votes needed to win. With the Compromise of 1850 and plenty of new lands, peaceful consensus seemed to be on the horizon. Antislavery feelings continued to run deep, however, and their depth revealed that with a Democratic Party misstep, a coalition united against the Democrats might yet emerge and bring them to defeat.

Uncle Tom's Cabin intensified an already hot debate over slavery throughout the United States. The book revolves around Eliza (the woman holding the young boy) and Tom (standing with his wife Chloe), each of whom takes a very different path: Eliza escapes slavery using her own two feet, but Tom endures his chains only to die by the whip of a brutish master. The horrific violence that both endured melted the hearts of many northerners and pressed some to join in the fight against slavery. Full-page illustration by Hammatt Billings for Uncle Tom's Cabin, 1852. Wikimedia.



One measure of the popularity of antislavery ideas came in 1852 when Harriet Beecher Stowe published her best-selling antislavery novel, ***Uncle Tom's Cabin***. Sales for *Uncle Tom's Cabin* were astronomical, eclipsed only by sales of the Bible.¹⁴ The book became a sensation and helped move antislavery into everyday conversation for many northerners. Despite the powerful antislavery message, Stowe's book also reinforced many racist stereotypes. Even abolitionists struggled with the deeply ingrained racism that plagued American society. While the major success of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* bolstered the abolitionist cause, the terms outlined by the Compromise of 1850 appeared strong enough to keep the peace.

Democrats by 1853 were badly splintered along sectional lines over slavery, but they also had reasons to act with confidence. Voters had returned them to office in 1852 following the bitter fights over the Compromise of 1850. Emboldened, Illinois senator Stephen A. Douglas introduced a set of additional amendments to a bill drafted in late 1853 to help organize the Nebraska Territory, the last of the Louisiana Purchase lands. In 1853, the Nebraska Territory was huge, extending from the northern end of Texas to the Canadian border. Altogether, it encompassed present-day Nebraska, Wyoming, South Dakota, North Dakota, Colorado, and Montana. Douglas's efforts to amend and introduce the bill in 1854 opened dynamics that would break the Democratic Party in two and, in the process, rip the country apart.

13.7 – The Kansas-Nebraska Act

Douglas proposed a bold plan in 1854 to cut off a large southern chunk of Nebraska and create it separately as the Kansas Territory. Douglas had a number of goals in mind, but foremost he wanted to organize the territory to facilitate the completion of a national railroad that would flow through Chicago. But before he had even finished introducing the bill, opposition had already mobilized. Salmon P. Chase drafted a response in northern newspapers that exposed

the Kansas-Nebraska Bill as a measure to overturn the Missouri Compromise and open western lands for slavery. Kansas-Nebraska protests emerged in 1854 throughout the North, with key meetings in Wisconsin and Michigan. Kansas would become slave or free depending on the result of local elections, elections that would be greatly influenced by migrants flooding to the state to either protect or stop the spread of slavery. For Douglas and his supporters, the popular sovereignty solution seemed like the ultimate compromise: westerners could decide for themselves on the issue of slavery without interference from Congress, and the question would resolve itself. However, that question had become even more polarizing since the Compromise of 1850, and pro- and antislavery factions throughout the nation looked to Kansas not as a compromise, but as an ideological battleground.

As northerners radicalized, organizations like the New England Emigrant Aid Company provided guns and other goods for pioneers willing to go to Kansas and establish the territory as antislavery through popular sovereignty. Meanwhile, pro-slavery Missourians armed themselves and crossed the border to influence 1855 Kansas elections by terrorizing antislavery voters with the threat of violence. Free Kansas advocates created a separate, unauthorized legislature in the town of Topeka. By early 1856, there were two governments operated in Kansas, each refusing to recognize the legitimacy of the other, and both sides were armed and poised to fight. On all sides of the slavery issue, politics became increasingly militarized and violent. **“Bleeding Kansas”** was the first place to demonstrate that the sectional crisis could easily be, and in fact already was, exploding into a full-blown national crisis. As the national mood grew increasingly grim, Kansas attracted militants representing the extreme sides of the slavery debate.

The year 1855 nearly derailed the northern antislavery coalition. A resurgent anti-immigrant movement briefly took advantage of the Whig collapse and nearly stole the energy of the anti-administration forces by channeling its frustrations into fights against the large number of mostly Catholic German and Irish immigrants in American cities. The Know-Nothing Party had made impressive gains in 1854 and 1855, particularly in New England and the Middle Atlantic, but the anti-immigrant movement simply could not capture the nation’s attention in ways the antislavery movement already had.¹⁵



“The Caning of Charles Sumner,” 1856. Wikimedia.

Neither the tensions nor violence of Kansas were limited to that territory. Following an explosive speech about the pro-slavery “Crime Against Kansas” before Congress on May 19–20, 1856, Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts was violently beaten with a cane by Representative Preston Brooks of South Carolina on the floor of the Senate chamber. Among other accusations, Sumner accused Senator Andrew Butler of South Carolina, Brooks’s cousin, of

defending slavery so he could have sexual access to black women.¹⁶ Brooks felt that he had to defend his relative's honor and nearly killed Sumner as a result.

The violence in Washington pales before the many murders occurring in Kansas.¹⁷ Pro-slavery raiders attacked Lawrence, Kansas in the spring of 1856, destroying the town's hotel and two printing presses. Radical abolitionist **John Brown** retaliated, murdering several pro-slavery Kansans at Pottawatomie Creek in retribution. By that autumn, about two hundred people had been killed in Kansas, which had become the stage for a dress rehearsal of the Civil War. As all of this played out, the House failed to expel Brooks. Brooks resigned his seat anyway, only to be reelected by his constituents later in the year. He received new canes emblazoned with the words "Hit him again!"¹⁸

13.8 – The Formation of the Republican Party

The antislavery political movements that started in 1854 coalesced with the formation of a new political party. Harking back to the founding fathers, its organizers named it the Republican Party and, with sectional tensions at a breaking point, both Democrats and Republicans readied for the coming presidential election. In June 1856, the Republican Party held its nominating convention at Philadelphia and selected Californian John Charles Frémont. Frémont's antislavery credentials may not have pleased many abolitionists, but his dynamic and talented wife, Jessie Benton Frémont, appealed to more radical members of the coalition. The Kansas-Nebraska debate, the organization of the Republican Party, and the 1856 presidential campaign all energized a new generation of political leaders, including Abraham Lincoln. Beginning with a speech at Peoria, Illinois, in 1854, Lincoln carved out a message that encapsulated better than anyone else the main ideas and visions of the Republican Party.¹⁹ Lincoln himself was slow to join the coalition, yet by the summer of 1856, Lincoln had fully committed to the Frémont campaign.

Frémont lost, but Republicans celebrated the fact that he won eleven of the sixteen free states. This showing, they urged, was truly impressive for any party making its first run at the presidency. Yet northern Democrats in crucial swing states remained unmoved by the Republican Party's appeals. Ulysses S. Grant of Missouri, for example, worried that Frémont and the Republicans signaled trouble for the Union itself. Grant voted for the Democratic candidate, James Buchanan, believing a Republican victory might bring about disunion. In abolitionist and especially black American circles, Frémont's defeat was more than a disappointment. Believing their fate as permanent noncitizens had been sealed, some African Americans considered foreign emigration and colonization. Others began to explore the option of more radical and direct action against the Slave Power.

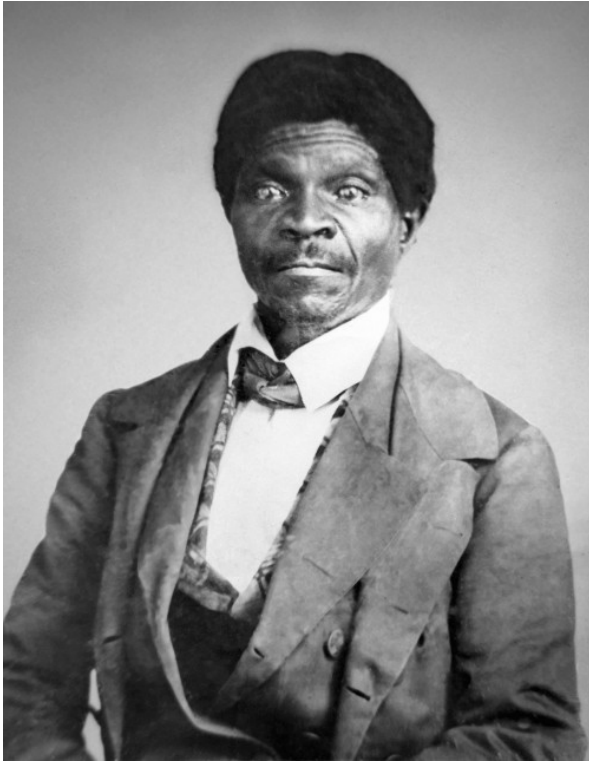
White antislavery leaders hailed Frémont's defeat as a "glorious" one and looked ahead to the party's future successes. For those still in slavery or hoping to see loved ones freed, the news was much harder to take. The Republican Party had promised the rise of an antislavery coalition, but voters rebuked it. The lessons seemed clear enough. Kansas loomed large over the 1856 election, darkening the national mood. Noting this, critics at the time attacked the Pierce administration for not living up to the ideals of popular sovereignty by ensuring fair elections in the territory. From there, the crisis only deepened. Kansas voted to come into the Union as a free state, but the federal government refused to recognize their votes and instead recognized a sham pro-slavery legislature.

13.9 – From Sectional Crisis to National Crisis

In the days after the 1856 presidential election, Buchanan made his plans for his time in office clear. He talked with Chief Justice Roger Taney on inauguration day about a court decision he hoped to see handled during his time in office. Indeed, not long after the inauguration, the Supreme Court handed down a decision that would come to define Buchanan's presidency. The **Dred Scott decision**, *Scott v. Sandford*, ruled that black Americans could not be citizens

of the United States.²⁰ This gave the Buchanan administration and its southern allies a direct repudiation of the Missouri Compromise. The court ruled that Scott, a Missouri slave, had no right to sue in United States courts. The Dred Scott decision signaled that the federal government was now fully committed to extending slavery as far and as wide as it might see fit.

The Dred Scott decision seemed to settle the sectional crisis by making slavery fully national, but in reality, it just exacerbated sectional tensions further. In 1857, Buchanan sent U.S. military forces to Utah, hoping to subdue Utah's



Dred Scott's Supreme Court case made clear that the federal government was no longer able or willing to ignore the issue of slavery. More than that, all black Americans, Justice Taney declared, could never be citizens of the United States. Though seemingly a disastrous decision for abolitionists, this controversial ruling actually increased the ranks of the abolitionist movement. Photograph of Dred Scott, 1857. Wikimedia.

Mormon communities. This action, however, led to renewed charges, many of them leveled from within his own party, that the administration was abusing its powers. Far more important than the Utah invasion, however, were the ongoing events in Kansas. It was Kansas that at last proved to many northerners that the sectional crisis would not go away unless slavery also went away.

The Illinois Senate race in 1858 put the scope of the sectional crisis on full display. Republican candidate Abraham Lincoln challenged the influential Democrat Stephen Douglas. Pandering to white supremacy, Douglas hammered the Republican opposition as a "Black Republican" party bent on racial equality.²¹ The Republicans, including Lincoln, were thrown on the defensive. Democrats hung on as best they could, but the Republicans won the House of Representatives and picked up seats in the Senate. Lincoln actually lost his contest with Stephen Douglas but in the process firmly established himself as a leading national Republican. After the 1858 midterm elections, all eyes turned to 1860. Given the Republican Party's successes since 1854, it was expected that the 1860 presidential election might produce the nation's first antislavery president. It is hard to imagine that the Republican candidate, Abraham Lincoln, could have been elected president in 1860 without the ground prepared by antislavery advocates, but he also benefitted from the presence of radical abolitionists against whom he could be cast as a moderate alternative.

In the troubled decades since the Missouri Compromise, the nation slowly tore itself apart. Congressmen clubbed each other nearly to death on the floor of Congress, and by the middle of the 1850s Americans were already at war on the Kansas and Missouri plains. Across the country, cities and towns were in various stages of revolt against federal authority. Fighting spread even farther against Indians in the Far West and against Mormons in Utah. The nation's militants anticipated a coming breakdown and worked to exploit it. In all, the 1850s was a highly volatile and violent period of American antislavery. Reform took a backseat as armed mobs protected runaway slaves in the North and fortified abolitionists engaged in bloody skirmishes in the West. After two decades of agitation, many Americans were convinced that the issue of slavery was pushing the nation to the brink of sectional cataclysm.

John Brown, fresh from his actions in Kansas, moved east and planned more violence in response to the Dred Scott decision. Assembling a team from across the West, including black radicals from Oberlin, Ohio and throughout

communities in western Canada, Brown devised a plan to attack Harper's Ferry, a federal weapons arsenal in Virginia (now West Virginia). He would use the weapons to lead a slave revolt based in the Shenandoah Mountains. Brown approached Frederick Douglass, though Douglass refused to join. Brown's raid embarked on the night of October 16, 1859 and on October 18, an elite unit of U.S. Marines under Robert E. Lee's command had crushed the revolt. Many of Brown's men, including his own sons, were killed, but Brown himself survived and was imprisoned. Brown prophesied from prison that the nation's crimes would only be purged with blood. He went to the gallows in December 1859 following his conviction for treason. Northerners made a stunning display of sympathy on the day of his execution. Southerners took their reactions to mean that the coming 1860 election would be, in many ways, a referendum on [secession](#) and disunion.

13.10 – The Election of 1860 and its Aftermath

Republicans wanted little to do with Brown and instead tried to portray themselves as moderates opposed to both abolitionists and pro-slavery expansionists. In this climate, the parties opened their contest for the 1860 presidential election. The Democratic Party fared poorly as its southern delegates bolted its national convention at Charleston and ran their own candidate, Vice President John C. Breckenridge of Kentucky. Hoping to field a candidate who might nonetheless manage to bridge the broken party's factions, the Democrats decided to meet again at Baltimore and nominated Stephen A. Douglas of Illinois.

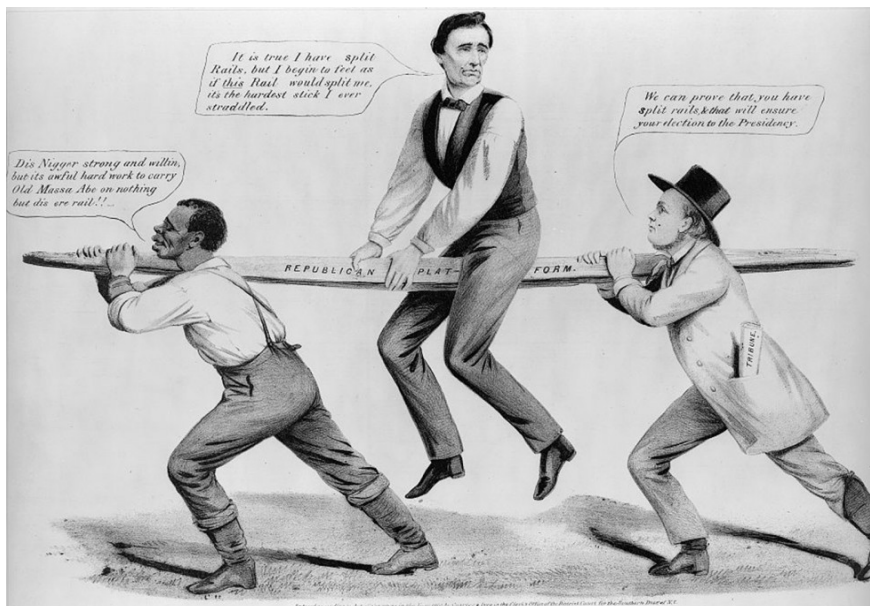
The Republicans, meanwhile, held their boisterous convention in Chicago. The Republican platform made the party's antislavery commitments clear, also making wide promises to its white constituents, particularly westerners, with the promise of new land, transcontinental railroads, and broad support of public schools.²² Initially, the Republicans were hardly unified around a single candidate themselves. Several leading Republican men vied for their party's nomination. A consensus emerged at the May 1860 convention that the party's nominee would need to carry all the free states—for only in that situation could a Republican nominee potentially win. New York Senator William Seward, a leading contender, was passed over. Seward's pro-immigrant position posed a potential obstacle, particularly in Pennsylvania and New Jersey. Abraham Lincoln of Illinois, as a relatively unknown but likable politician, was far less polarizing than the other options on the ballot. He rose from a pool of potential candidates and was selected by the delegates on the third ballot; with the Democrats in disarray, Republicans knew their candidate Lincoln had a good chance of winning.



The execution of John Brown made him a martyr in abolitionist circles and a confirmed traitor in southern crowds. Both of these images continued to pervade public memory after the Civil War, but in the North especially (where so many soldiers had died to help end slavery) his name was admired. Over two decades after Brown's death, Thomas Hovenden portrayed Brown as a saint. As he is lead to his execution for attempting to destroy slavery, Brown poignantly leans over a railing to kiss a black baby. Thomas Hovenden, The Last Moments of John Brown, c. 1882-1884. Wikimedia.

The 1860 presidential election was chaotic. In April, the Democratic Party convened in Charleston, South Carolina, the bastion of secessionist thought in the South. The goal was to nominate a candidate for the party ticket, but the party was deeply divided. Northern Democrats pulled for Senator Stephen Douglas, a pro-slavery moderate championing popular sovereignty, while southern Democrats were intent on endorsing someone other than Douglas. The party leaders' refusal to include a pro-slavery platform resulted in southern delegates walking out of the convention, preventing Douglas from gaining the two-thirds majority required for a nomination. The Democrats ended up with two presidential candidates. A subsequent convention in Baltimore nominated Douglas, while southerners nominated the current vice president, John C. Breckinridge of Kentucky, as their presidential candidate. The nation's oldest party had split over differences in policy toward slavery.²³ The electoral landscape was further complicated through the emergence of a fourth candidate, Tennessee's John Bell, heading the Constitutional Union Party. The Constitutional Unionists, composed of former Whigs who teamed up with some southern Democrats, made it their mission to avoid the specter of secession while doing little else to address the issues tearing the country apart.

Abraham Lincoln's nomination proved a great windfall for the Republican Party. Lincoln carried all free states with the exception of New Jersey (which he split with Douglas). Of the voting electorate, 81.2 percent came out to vote—at that point the highest ever for a presidential election. Lincoln received less than 40 percent of the popular vote, but with



In this political cartoon, Abraham Lincoln uncomfortably straddles a rail supported by a black man and Horace Greeley (editor of the New York Tribune). The wood board is a dual reference to the antislavery plank of the 1860 Republican platform — which Lincoln seemed to uneasily defend — and Lincoln's backwoods origins. Louis Maurer, "The Rail Candidate," Currier & Ives, c. 1860. Library of Congress.

the field so split, that percentage yielded 180 electoral votes. Lincoln was trailed by Breckinridge with his 72 electoral votes, carrying eleven of the fifteen slave states; Bell came in third with 39 electoral votes; and Douglas came in last, only able to garner 12 electoral votes despite carrying almost 30 percent of the popular vote. Since the Republican platform prohibited the expansion of slavery in future western states, all future Confederate states, with the exception of Virginia, excluded Lincoln's name from their ballots.²⁴

Abraham Lincoln won the 1860 contest on November 6, gaining less than 40 percent of the popular vote and not a single southern vote in the Electoral College. The election of Lincoln and the perceived threat to

the institution of slavery proved too much for the deep southern states. Within days, southern states were organizing secession conventions. South Carolina acted almost immediately, calling a convention to declare secession. On December 20, 1860, the South Carolina convention voted unanimously 169–0 to dissolve their union with the United States and issued its "Declaration of the Immediate Causes."²⁵ The declaration highlighted the failure of the federal government to enforce the Fugitive Slave Act over competing personal liberty laws in northern states. After the war many southerners claimed that secession was primarily motivated by a concern to preserve states' rights, but the primary complaint of the very first ordinance of secession listed the federal government's failure to exert its authority over the northern states.

The other states across the Deep South quickly followed suit. Mississippi adopted their own resolution on January 9, 1861, Florida followed on January 10, Alabama on January 11, Georgia on January 19, Louisiana on January 26, and Texas on February 1. Texas was the only state to put the issue up for a popular vote, but secession was widely popular throughout the South. John J. Crittenden of Kentucky proposed a series of compromises, but a clear pro-southern bias meant they had little chance of gaining Republican acceptance. Crittenden's plan promised renewed enforcement of the fugitive slave law and offered a plan to keep slavery in the nation's capital.²⁶ Republicans by late 1860 knew that the voters who had just placed them in power did not want them to cave on these points, and southern states proceeded with their plans to leave the Union.

The year 1861, then, saw the culmination of the secession crisis. Before he left for Washington, Lincoln told those who had gathered in Springfield to wish him well and that he faced a “task greater than [George] Washington's” in the years to come. Southerners were also learning the challenges of forming a new nation. The seceded states grappled with internal divisions right away, as states with slaveholders sometimes did not support the newly seceded states. In January, for example, Delaware rejected secession. But states in the Lower South adopted a different course. The state of Mississippi seceded. Later in the month, the states of Florida, Alabama, Georgia, and Louisiana also all left the Union. By early February, Texas had also joined the newly seceded states. In February, southerners drafted a constitution protecting slavery and named Jefferson Davis of Mississippi their president. By the time Lincoln arrived in Washington for his inauguration, the Confederate States of America already considered themselves independent.

13.11 – Conclusion

Slavery had long divided the politics of the United States. In time, these divisions became both sectional and irreconcilable. The first and most ominous sign of a coming sectional storm occurred over debates surrounding the admission of the state of Missouri in 1821. As westward expansion continued, these fault lines grew even more ominous, particularly as the United States managed to seize even more lands from its war with Mexico. The country seemed to teeter ever closer to a full-throated endorsement of slavery. But an antislavery coalition arose in the middle 1850s calling itself the Republican Party. Eager to cordon off slavery and confine it to where it already existed, the Republicans won the presidential election of 1860 and threw the nation on the path to war.

Throughout this period, the mainstream of the antislavery movement remained committed to a peaceful resolution of the slavery issue through efforts understood to foster the “ultimate extinction” of slavery in due time. But as the secession crisis revealed, the South could not tolerate a federal government working against the interests of slavery's expansion and decided to take a gamble on war with the United States. Secession, in the end, raised the possibility of emancipation through war, a possibility most Republicans knew, of course, had always been an option, but one they nonetheless hoped would never be necessary. By 1861 all bets were off, and the fate of slavery, and of the nation, depended on war.

13.12 – Reference Material

This chapter was edited by Jesse Gant, with content contributions by Jeffrey Bain-Conkin, Dea Boster, Matthew A. Byron, Christopher Childers, Jesse Gant, Christopher Null, Ryan Poe, Michael Robinson, Nicholas Wood, Michael Woods, and Ben Wright.

Recommended bibliographic citation:

Bain-Conkin, Jeffrey et al. "The Sectional Crisis." Jesse Gant, ed. In *The American Yawp*. Vol. 1, Dea Boster, Christianna Hurford, and Jennifer Nardone, eds. A derivative of *The American Yawp* published by Stanford University Press. Columbus: Columbus State Community College, 2019. https://oh-cr-materials-01.s3.amazonaws.com/hist_1151_american_yawp_vol1/index.html. Licensed CC BY-SA 4.0 / A derivative from the original work.

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