Which events of the mid-1800s kept the nation together, and which events pulled it apart?

Introduction

In 1860, after one of the strangest elections in the nation’s history, an Illinois lawyer named Abraham Lincoln was elected president. On learning of his victory, Lincoln said to the reporters covering the campaign, “Well, boys, your troubles are over; mine have just begun.”

Within a few weeks, it became clear just how heavy those troubles would be. By the time Lincoln took office, the nation had split apart over the issue of states’ rights regarding slavery and was preparing for civil war. The survival of the United States of America, and the fate of 4 million slaves, rested in Lincoln’s hands.

The issues Lincoln faced could be traced back to 1619, when the first slave ship arrived in Virginia. Since that time, slavery had ended in half of the United States, and the question remained whether the nation could continue being half-slave and half-free.

For decades, Americans tried to avoid this question, and many hoped slavery would simply die out on its own. Instead, slavery began to expand into new territories, and the question could no longer be ignored.

Between 1820 and 1860, Americans tried to fashion several compromises on the issue of slavery, but these compromises created new problems and new divisions. Slavery was not simply a political issue to be worked out through compromise. Rather it was a deeply moral issue, which is something Lincoln understood. As he wrote in a letter to a friend, “If slavery is not wrong, nothing is wrong.”

In this lesson, you will learn how Americans tried to keep the United States united despite their deep divisions over slavery. Some events during this period kept the nation together, whereas others pulled it apart. You will also find out how Americans finally answered the question of whether a nation founded on the idea of freedom could endure half-slave and half-free.

Social Studies Vocabulary

Compromise of 1850
Dred Scott decision
fugitive
Kansas-Nebraska Act
Lincoln-Douglas debates
Missouri Compromise
Union
Wilmot Proviso

In 1850, U.S. senators debated the issue of whether California should enter the Union as a free state or a slave state.
1. Confronting the Issue of Slavery

A traveler heading west across the Appalachians after the War of 1812 wrote, “Old America seems to be breaking up and moving westward.” It was true. By 1819, settlers had formed seven new states west of the Appalachians.

In the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, Congress had established a process for forming new states. In addition to outlining the steps leading to statehood, this law also banned slavery north of the Ohio River. As a result, the three western states that were formed north of the river—Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois—became free states, and the four states that were formed south of the Ohio River—Kentucky, Tennessee, Louisiana, and Mississippi—permitted slavery.

In 1819, Alabama and Missouri applied to Congress for statehood as slave states. No one in Congress questioned admitting Alabama as a slave state, as it was located far south of the Ohio River and was surrounded by other slave states.

Congress had another reason for admitting Alabama with no debate. For years, there had been an unspoken agreement in Congress to keep the number of slave states and free states equal, a balance that had been upset by the admission of Illinois as a free state in 1818. By accepting Alabama with slavery, Congress was able to restore the balance between slave and free states. Missouri, however, was another matter.

**Questions About Missouri** Some Northerners in Congress questioned whether Missouri should be admitted as a slave state because most of Missouri lay north of the point where the Ohio River flows into the Mississippi. On the eastern side of the Mississippi, slavery was banned north of that point. Should this ban not also be applied west of the Mississippi?

This question led to another one. If Missouri were allowed to enter the Union as a slave state, some asked, what would keep slavery from spreading across all of the Louisiana Territory? The vision of a block of new slave states stretching from the Mississippi to the Rocky Mountains was enough to give some Northerners nightmares.

**The Tallmadge Amendment** When the bill to make Missouri a state came before Congress, Representative James Tallmadge of New York proposed an amendment to the bill. The amendment said that Missouri could join the Union, but only as a free state.

Southerners in Congress protested Tallmadge’s amendment. What right, they asked, did Congress have to decide whether a new state should be slave or free? According to the theory of states’ rights favored by many Southerners, Congress had no power to impose its will on a state, old or new.
Instead, Southerners argued that the people of each state should decide whether to permit slavery. The fight over slavery thus involved a basic question about the powers of the federal and state governments under the Constitution.

**A Deadlocked Congress**  Southerners' protests were based on their view that if Congress were allowed to end slavery in Missouri, it might try to end slavery elsewhere. The North already had more votes in the House of Representatives than the South. But in the Senate, the two sections had equal voting power. As long as the number of free states and slave states remained equal, Southern senators could defeat any attempt to interfere with slavery. However, if Missouri entered the Union as a free state, the South would lose its power to block antislavery bills in the Senate, which would mean disaster for the South.

In the North, the Tallmadge Amendment awakened strong feelings against slavery. Many people sent petitions to Congress, condemning slavery as immoral and unconstitutional. Arguing in favor of the amendment, New Hampshire representative Arthur Livermore spoke for many Northerners when he said,

> An opportunity is now presented . . . to prevent the growth of a sin which sits heavy on the souls of every one of us. By embracing this opportunity, we may retrieve the national character, and, in some degree, our own.

The House voted to approve the Tallmadge Amendment, but Southerners were able to defeat it in the Senate. The two houses were now deadlocked over the issue of slavery in Missouri, and they would remain so as the 1819 session of Congress drew to a close.

This illustration shows African Americans being sold at a slave auction in the South in 1861. Scenes like this added to the moral outrage many people felt toward slavery.
2. The Missouri Compromise

When Congress returned to Washington in 1820, it took up the question of Missouri statehood once again. By then, the situation had changed, for Maine was now asking to enter the Union as a free state.

For weeks, Congress struggled to find a way out of its deadlock over Missouri. As the debate dragged on and tempers wore thin, Southerners began using such dreaded words as secession and civil war.

“If you persist,” Thomas Cobb of Georgia warned supporters of the Tallmadge Amendment, “the Union will be dissolved. You have kindled a fire which . . . a sea of blood can only extinguish.”

“If disunion must take place, let it be so!” thundered Tallmadge in reply. “If civil war . . . must come, I can only say, let it come!”

A Compromise Is Reached  Rather than risk the breakup of the Union, Congress finally agreed to a compromise crafted by Representative Henry Clay of Kentucky. The Missouri Compromise of 1820 admitted Missouri to the Union as a slave state and Maine as a free state. In this way, it maintained the balance of power between slave and free states.

At the same time, Congress drew an imaginary line across the Louisiana Purchase at latitude 36°30’. North of this line, slavery was to be banned forever, except in Missouri, whereas slaveholding was permitted south of the line.

Reactions to the Compromise  The Missouri Compromise kept the Union together, but it pleased few people. In the North, congressmen who voted to accept Missouri as a slave state were called traitors, and in the South, slaveholders deeply resented the ban on slavery in territories that might later become states.

Under the Missouri Compromise, Missouri entered the Union as a slave state, while Maine entered as a free state. North of the 36°30’ parallel, slavery was prohibited, except for in Missouri. South of this parallel, slavery would be allowed.

The Missouri Compromise, 1820
Meanwhile, as Secretary of State John Quincy Adams recognized, the compromise had not settled the future of slavery in the United States as a whole. "I have favored this Missouri compromise, believing it to be all that could be effected [accomplished] under the present Constitution, and from extreme unwillingness to put the Union at hazard [risk]," wrote Adams in his diary. "If the Union must be dissolved, slavery is precisely the question on which it ought to break. For the present, however, the contest is laid asleep."

3. The Missouri Compromise Unravels

As John Quincy Adams predicted, for a time the "contest" over slavery was settled. However, a powerful force was building that soon pushed the issue into the open again: the Second Great Awakening. Leaders of this early-1800s religious revival promised that God would bless those who did the Lord's work. For some Americans, the Lord's work was the abolition of slavery.

The "Gag Rule" During the 1830s, abolitionists flooded Congress with antislavery petitions, but they were told that Congress had no power to interfere with slavery in the states. Abolitionists also wondered about the status of the District of Columbia: did Congress have the power to ban slavery in the nation's capital?

Rather than confront this question, Congress voted in 1836 to table—or set aside indefinitely—all antislavery petitions. Outraged abolitionists called this action the "gag rule," because it gagged, or silenced, all congressional debate over slavery.

In 1839, the gag rule prevented consideration of an antislavery proposal by John Quincy Adams, who was now a member of Congress. Knowing that the country would not agree on abolishing slavery altogether, Adams proposed a constitutional amendment saying that no one could be born into slavery after 1842. Congress, however, refused to consider his proposal.

Southern Fears Abolitionists were far from silenced by the refusal of Congress to debate slavery. They continued to attack slavery in books, in newspapers, and at public meetings.

White Southerners deeply resented the abolitionists' attacks as an assault on their way of life. After Nat Turner's slave rebellion in 1831, resentment turned to fear. Southern states adopted strict new laws to control the movement of slaves. Many states tried to keep abolitionist writings from reaching slaves. Mississippi even offered a reward of $5,000 for the arrest and conviction of any person "who shall utter, publish, or circulate" abolitionist ideas.

Many Northern periodicals and newspapers detailed the horrors of slavery.
Fugitive Slaves  Nat Turner’s rebellion was one of the largest slave revolts, but individual slaves also continued to rebel by running away to freedom in the North. These fugitives from slavery were often helped in their escape by sympathetic people in the North.

To slaveholders, these Northerners were no better than bank robbers because they saw a slave as a valuable piece of property. Every time a slave escaped, it was like seeing their land vanish into thin air. Slaveholders demanded that Congress pass a fugitive slave law to help them recapture their property.

Slavery in the Territories  The gag rule kept the slavery issue out of Congress for ten years. Then, in 1846, President James Polk sent a bill to Congress asking for funds for the war with Mexico. Pennsylvania representative David Wilmot added an amendment to the bill known as the Wilmot Proviso. (A proviso is a condition added to an agreement.) The Wilmot Proviso stated that “neither slavery nor involuntary servitude shall ever exist” in any part of the territory that might be acquired from Mexico as a result of the Mexican-American War.

Southerners in Congress strongly opposed Wilmot’s amendment and maintained that Congress had no right to decide where slaveholders could take their property. The Wilmot Proviso passed the House, but it was rejected by the Senate.

Statehood for California  For the next three years, Congress debated what to do about slavery in the territory gained from Mexico. Southerners wanted all of the Mexican Cession open to slavery, but Northerners wanted all of it closed.

As a compromise, Southerners proposed a bill that would extend the Missouri Compromise line all the way to the Pacific. Slavery would be banned north of that line and allowed south of it. Northerners in Congress rejected this proposal.

Then, late in 1849, California applied for admission to the Union as a free state. Northerners in Congress welcomed California with open arms, but Southerners rejected California’s request. Making California a free state, they warned, would upset the balance between slave and free states. The result would be unequal representation of slave states and free states in Congress.

The year ended with Congress deadlocked over California’s request for statehood. Once again, Southerners spoke openly of withdrawing from the Union. And once again, angry Northerners denounced slavery as a crime against humanity.
4. The Compromise of 1850

On January 21, 1850, Henry Clay, now a senator from Kentucky, trudged through a Washington snowstorm to pay a call on Senator Daniel Webster of Massachusetts. Clay, the creator of the Missouri Compromise, had a new plan to end the deadlock over California, but he needed Webster's support to get his plan through Congress.

**Something for Everyone**  Clay's new compromise had something to please just about everyone. It began by admitting California to the Union as a free state, which would please the North. Meanwhile, it allowed the New Mexico and Utah territories to decide whether to allow slavery, which would please the South.

In addition, Clay's plan ended the slave trade in Washington, D.C. Although slaveholders in Washington would be able to keep their slaves, human beings would no longer be bought and sold there. Clay and Webster agreed that this compromise would win support from abolitionists without threatening the rights of slaveholders.

Finally, Clay's plan called for passage of a strong fugitive slave law. Slaveholders had long wanted such a law, which would make it easier to find and reclaim runaway slaves.

**The Compromise Is Accepted**  Hoping that Clay's compromise would end the crisis, Webster agreed to help it get passed in Congress. However, despite Webster's support, Congress debated the **Compromise of 1850** for nine frustrating months. As tempers frayed, Southerners talked of simply leaving the Union peacefully. Webster dismissed such talk as foolish. "Peaceable secession!" he exclaimed.

"Your eyes and mine are never destined to see that miracle... I see it as plainly as I see the sun in heaven—I see that [secession] must produce such a war as I will not describe."

A war over slavery was something few Americans wanted to face. In September 1850, Congress finally adopted Clay's plan. Although most Americans were happy to see the crisis end, some Southerners remained wary of the compromise. Moreover, the compromise led to the demise of one of the country's main political parties, the Whig Party—Clay and Webster's party—because members had moral objections to slavery.

**Compromise of 1850**  the agreements made in order to admit California into the Union as a free state. These agreements included allowing the New Mexico and Utah territories to decide whether to allow slavery, outlawing the slave trade in Washington, D.C., and creating a stronger fugitive slave law.

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**The Compromise of 1850**  California as a free state and allowed the southwestern territories to be set up without restriction on slavery. The compromise was finally adopted after nine months of debate from Congress, but tensions still remained.
5. The Compromise of 1850 Fails

Henry Clay and Daniel Webster hoped the Compromise of 1850 would quiet the slavery controversy for years to come. In fact, it satisfied almost no one—and the debate grew louder each year.

The Fugitive Slave Act   People in the North and the South were unhappy with the Fugitive Slave Act, though for different reasons. Northerners did not want to enforce the act; whereas Southerners felt the act did not do enough to ensure the return of their escaped property.

Under the Fugitive Slave Act, a person arrested as a runaway slave had almost no legal rights. Many runaways fled all the way to Canada rather than risk being caught and sent back to their owners. Others decided to stand and fight. Reverend Jermain Loguen, a former slave living in New York, said boldly, “I don’t respect this law—I don’t fear it—I won’t obey it... I will not live as a slave, and if force is employed to re-enslave me, I shall make preparations to meet the crisis as becomes a man.”

The Fugitive Slave Act also said that any person who helped a slave escape, or even refused to aid slave catchers, could be jailed. This provision, people complained, would force many northerners to become slave catchers.

Opposition to the act was widespread in the North. When slave catchers came to Boston, they were hounded by crowds of angry citizens shouting, “Slave hunters—there go the slave hunters.” After a few days of this treatment, most slave catchers decided to leave.

Northerners’ refusal to support the act infuriated slaveholders, and it also made enforcement of the act almost impossible. Of the tens of thousands of fugitives living in the North during the 1850s, only about 300 were captured and returned to their owners during this time.

The Fugitive Slave Act was passed as part of the Compromise of 1850. This 1851 poster warned free African Americans in Boston to watch out for slave catchers looking for escaped slaves. Even people who helped escaped slaves could be jailed.

Uncle Tom’s Cabin   Nothing brought the horrors of slavery home to Northerners more than Uncle Tom’s Cabin, a novel by Harriet Beecher Stowe. The novel grew out of a vision Stowe had while sitting in church on a wintry Sunday morning in 1851. The vision began with a saintly slave, known as Uncle Tom, and his cruel master, Simon Legree, who, in a furious rage, had the old slave whipped to death. Just before Uncle Tom’s soul slipped out of his body, he opened his eyes and whispered to Legree, “Ye poor miserable critter! There ain’t no more ye can do. I forgive ye, with all my soul!”
Racing home, Stowe scribbled down what she had imagined. Her vision of Uncle Tom's death became part of a much longer story that was first published in installments in an abolitionist newspaper. In one issue, readers held their breath as the slave Eliza chose to risk death rather than be sold away from her young son. Chased by slave hunters and their dogs, Eliza dashed to freedom across the ice-choked Ohio River, clutching her child in her arms. In a later issue, Stowe's readers wept as they read her account of how the character of Uncle Tom died at the hands of Simon Legree.

In 1852, Uncle Tom's Cabin was published as a novel. Plays based on the book toured the country, thrilling audiences with Eliza's dramatic escape to freedom. No other work had ever aroused such powerful emotions about slavery. In the South, the novel and its author were scorned and cursed. However, in the North, Uncle Tom's Cabin made millions of people even angrier about the cruelties of slavery.

The Ostend Manifesto and the Kansas-Nebraska Act Northerners who were already horrified by slavery were roused to fury by two events in 1854: the publication of the so-called Ostend Manifesto and the Kansas-Nebraska Act.

The document known as the Ostend Manifesto was a message sent to the secretary of state by three American diplomats who were meeting in Ostend, Belgium. President Franklin Pierce, who had taken office in 1853, had been trying to purchase the island of Cuba from Spain, but Spain had refused the offer. The message from the diplomats urged the U.S. government to seize Cuba by force if Spain continued to refuse to sell the island. When the message was leaked to the public, angry Northerners charged that Pierce's administration wanted to buy Cuba in order to add another slave state to the Union.

Early that same year, Senator Stephen A. Douglas of Illinois introduced a bill in Congress that sparked an uproar. Douglas wanted to get a railroad built to California. He thought the project was more likely to happen if Congress organized the Great Plains into the Nebraska Territory and opened the region to settlers. This territory lay north of the Missouri Compromise, and Douglas's bill said nothing about slavery. But Southerners in Congress agreed to support the bill only if Douglas made a few changes—and those changes had far-reaching consequences.
The Kansas-Nebraska Act outraged Northerners because it abolished the Missouri Compromise. Under the terms of the act, the question of slavery would be decided by settlers in the newly organized territories of Kansas and Nebraska.

Douglas’s final version of the bill, known as the Kansas-Nebraska Act, was passed in 1854 and created two new territories, Kansas and Nebraska. It also abolished the Missouri Compromise by leaving it up to the settlers themselves to vote on whether to permit slavery in the two territories. Douglas called this policy popular sovereignty, or rule by the people.

The Kansas-Nebraska Act hit the North like a thunderbolt. Once again, Northerners were haunted by visions of slavery marching across the plains. Douglas tried to calm their fears by saying that the climates of Kansas and Nebraska were not suited to slave labor, but when Northerners studied maps, they were not so sure. Newspaper editor Horace Greeley charged in the New York Tribune,

*The pretense of Douglas & Co. that not even Kansas is to be made a slave state by his bill is a gag [joke] ... Ask any Missourian what he thinks about it. The Kansas Territory ... is bounded in its entire length by Missouri, with a whole tier of slave counties leaning against it. Won't be a slave state! ... Gentlemen! Don't lie any more!*

**Bloodshed in Kansas** After the Kansas-Nebraska Act was passed in 1854, settlers poured into Kansas. Most were peaceful farmers looking for good farmland, but some settlers moved to Kansas either to support or to oppose slavery. In the South, towns sent their young men to Kansas, and in the North, abolitionists raised money to send weapons to antislavery settlers. Before long, Kansas had two competing governments in the territory, one for slavery and one against it.

The struggle over slavery soon turned violent. On May 21, 1856, proslavery settlers and so-called “border ruffians” from Missouri invaded Lawrence, Kansas, the home of the antislavery government. Armed invaders burned a hotel, looted several homes, and tossed the printing press of an abolitionist newspaper into the Kaw River. As the invaders left Lawrence, one of them boasted, “Gentlemen, this is the happiest day of my life.”
The raid on Lawrence provoked a wave of outrage in the North. People raised money to replace the destroyed presses, and more “Free-Soilers,” as antislavery settlers were called, prepared to move to Kansas.

Meanwhile, a fiery abolitionist named John Brown plotted his own revenge. Days after the Lawrence raid, Brown and seven followers, including four of Brown’s sons and his son-in-law, invaded the pro-slavery town of Pottawatomie, Kansas. There, they dragged five men they suspected of supporting slavery from their homes and hacked them to death with swords.

Violence in Congress The violence in Kansas greatly disturbed Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts. To Sumner, it was proof of what he had long suspected—that Senator Stephen Douglas had plotted with Southerners to make Kansas a slave state.

In 1856, Sumner voiced his suspicions in a passionate speech called “The Crime Against Kansas.” In harsh, shocking language, Sumner described the “crime against Kansas” as a violent assault on an innocent territory, “compelling it to the hateful embrace of slavery.” He dismissed Douglas as “a noisome [offensive], squat, and nameless animal.” Sumner also heaped abuse on many Southerners, including Senator Andrew P. Butler of South Carolina.

Just what Sumner hoped to accomplish was not clear. However, copies of his speech were quickly printed up for distribution in the North. After reading it, New England poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow congratulated Sumner on the “brave and noble speech you made, never to die out in the memories of men.”

Certainly, it was not about to die out in the memories of enraged Southerners. Two days after the speech, a relative of Senator Butler, South Carolina representative Preston Brooks, attacked Sumner in the Senate, beating him with his metal-tipped cane until it broke in half. By the time other senators could pull Brooks away, Sumner had collapsed, bloody and unconscious.

Reactions to the attack on Sumner showed how divided the country had become. Many Southerners applauded Brooks for defending the honor of his family and the South. From across the South, supporters sent Brooks new canes to replace the one he had broken on Sumner’s head.
Most Northerners viewed the beating as another example of Southern brutality. One Connecticut student was so upset that she wrote to Sumner about going to war. "I don't think it is of very much use to stay any longer in the high school," she wrote. "The boys would be better learning to hold muskets, and the girls to make bullets."

6. The Dred Scott Decision

In 1857, the slavery controversy shifted from Congress to the Supreme Court, which was about to decide a case concerning a Missouri slave named Dred Scott. Years earlier, Scott had traveled with his owner to Wisconsin, where slavery was banned by the Missouri Compromise. When he returned to Missouri, Scott went to court to win his freedom, arguing that his stay in Wisconsin had made him a free man.

Questions of the Case  There were nine justices on the Supreme Court in 1857. Four justices were from the South, four were from the North, and Chief Justice Roger Taney was from Maryland, a border state that permitted slavery. The justices had two key questions to decide. First, as a slave, was Dred Scott a citizen who had the right to bring a case before a federal court? Second, did his time in Wisconsin make him a free man?

Chief Justice Taney hoped to use the Scott case to settle the slavery controversy once and for all. So he asked the Court to consider two additional questions: Did Congress have the power to make any laws at all concerning slavery in the territories? And, if so, was the Missouri Compromise a constitutional use of that power?

Nearly 80 years old, Taney had long been opposed to slavery. As a young Maryland lawyer, he had publicly declared that "slavery is a blot upon our national character and every lover of freedom confidently hopes that it will be . . . wiped away." Taney had gone on to free his own slaves, and many observers wondered whether he and his fellow justices would now free Dred Scott as well.

Two Judicial Bombshells  On March 6, 1857, Chief Justice Taney delivered the Dred Scott decision. The chief justice began by reviewing the facts of Dred Scott's case, and then he dropped the first of two judicial bombshells. By a vote of seven to two, the Court had decided that Scott could not sue for his freedom in a federal court because he was not a citizen. Nor, said Taney, could Scott become a citizen because no African American, whether slave or free, was an American citizen—or could ever become one.

Second, Taney declared that the Court had rejected Scott's argument that his stay in Wisconsin had made him a free man. The reason was simple. The Missouri Compromise was unconstitutional.
Taney argued that slaves were property and that the Fifth Amendment to the Constitution said that property could not be taken from people without due process of law—that is, a proper court hearing. Taney reasoned that banning slavery in a territory was the same as taking property from slaveholders who would like to bring their slaves into that territory, which was unconstitutional. Rather than banning slavery, he said, Congress had a constitutional responsibility to protect the property rights of slaveholders in a territory.

The Dred Scott decision delighted slaveholders. They hoped that, at long last, the issue of slavery in the territories had been settled—and in their favor.

Many Northerners, however, were stunned and enraged by the Court’s ruling. The *New York Tribune* called the decision a “wicked and false judgment.” The *New York Independent* expressed outrage in a bold headline:

**The Decision of the Supreme Court Is the Moral Assassination of a Race and Cannot Be Obeyed!**
7. From Compromise to Crisis

During the controversy over the Kansas-Nebraska Act, antislavery activists from the Free-Soilers and the once-popular Whig Party formed a new political organization, the Republican Party. The Republicans were united by their beliefs that “no man can own another man . . . That slavery must be prohibited in the territories . . . That all new States must be Free States . . . That the rights of our colored citizen . . . must be protected.”

In 1858, Republicans in Illinois nominated Abraham Lincoln to run for the Senate. In his acceptance speech, Lincoln pointed out that all attempts to reach compromise on the slavery issue had failed. Quoting from the Bible, he warned, “A house divided against itself cannot stand.” Lincoln went on: “I believe this government cannot endure, permanently half-slave and half-free. I do not expect the Union to be dissolved—I do not expect the house to fall—but I do expect it will cease to be divided. It will become all one thing, or all the other.”

The Lincoln-Douglas Debates

Lincoln’s opponent in the Senate race was Senator Stephen Douglas, an Illinois senator who saw no reason why the nation could not go on half-slave and half-free. When Lincoln challenged him to debate the slavery issue, Douglas agreed.

During the Lincoln-Douglas debates, Douglas argued that the Dred Scott decision had put the slavery issue to rest, but Lincoln disagreed. In his eyes, slavery was a moral, not a legal, issue. He declared, “The real issue in this controversy . . . is the sentiment of one class [group] that looks upon the institution of slavery as a wrong, and of another class that does not look upon it as a wrong.”

Lincoln lost the election. However, the debates were widely reported, and they helped make him a national figure. His argument with Douglas also brought the moral issue of slavery into sharp focus. Compromises over slavery were becoming impossible.

John Brown’s Raid

While Lincoln fought to stop the spread of slavery through politics, abolitionist John Brown adopted a more extreme approach. Rather than wait for Congress to act, Brown planned to seize the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia. An arsenal is a place where weapons and ammunition are stored. Brown wanted to use the weapons to arm slaves for a rebellion that would end slavery.

Lincoln-Douglas debates a series of political debates between Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas, who were candidates in the Illinois race for U.S. senator, in which slavery was the main issue.
In 1859, Brown launched his raid. It was an insane scheme during which many of his men were either killed or captured. Brown himself was convicted of treason and sentenced to die. On the day of his hanging, he left a note that read, “I John Brown am now quite certain that the crimes of this guilty land will never be purged away but with Blood.”

Such words filled white Southerners with fear because it was Southern blood that would be spilled if a slave rebellion began. The fact that many Northerners viewed Brown as a hero also left white Southerners uneasy.

8. The Election of 1860 and Secession

The 1860 presidential race showed just how divided the nation had become. The Republicans were united behind Lincoln. The Democrats, however, had split between Northern and Southern factions, with Northern Democrats nominating Stephen Douglas for president and Southern Democrats supporting John C. Breckinridge of Kentucky. The election became even more confusing when a group called the Constitutional Union Party nominated John Bell of Tennessee.

Abraham Lincoln Is Elected President  With his opposition divided three ways, Lincoln sailed to victory, but it was an odd victory. Lincoln won the presidential election with just 40 percent of the votes, all of them cast in the North. In ten Southern states, he was not even on the ballot.

For white Southerners, the election of 1860 delivered an unmistakable message. The South was now in the minority. It no longer had the power to shape national events or policies, and Southerners feared that, sooner or later, Congress would try to abolish slavery. And that, wrote a South Carolina newspaper, would mean “the loss of liberty, property, home, country—everything that makes life worth having.”
The South Secedes from the Union  In the weeks following the election, talk of secession filled the air. Alarmed senators formed a committee to search for yet another compromise that might hold the nation together. They knew that finding one would not be easy, but they still had to do something to stop the rush toward disunion and disaster. The Senate committee held its first meeting on December 20, 1860. Just as the senators began their work, events in two distant cities dashed their hopes for a settlement.

In Illinois, a senator named Lyman Trumbull asked President-Elect Abraham Lincoln whether he could support a compromise on slavery. Lincoln's answer was clear. He would not interfere with slavery in the South, and he would support enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Act. However, Lincoln drew the line at letting slavery extend into the territories. On this question, he declared, "Let there be no compromise."

Meanwhile, in Charleston, South Carolina, delegates attending a state convention voted that same day—December 20, 1860—to leave the Union. The city went wild as church bells rang and crowds filled the streets, roaring their approval. A South Carolina newspaper boldly proclaimed, "The Union Is Dissolved!" Six more states soon followed South Carolina's lead, and in February 1861, those states joined together as the Confederate States of America.

The Civil War Begins  On March 4, 1861, Lincoln became president of the not-so-united United States. In his inaugural address, Lincoln stated his belief that secession was both wrong and unconstitutional. He then appealed to the rebellious states to return in peace. "In your hands, my dissatisfied fellow countrymen, and not in mine," he said, "is the momentous issue of civil war."
The following month on April 12, 1861, Confederates in Charleston, South Carolina, forced the issue when they opened fire on Fort Sumter, a federal fort in Charleston Harbor. After more than 30 hours of heavy shelling, the defenders of the fort hauled down the Stars and Stripes and replaced it with the white flag of surrender.

The news that the Confederates had fired on the American flag unleashed a wave of patriotic fury in the North. All the doubts that people had about using force to save the Union vanished. A New York newspaper reported excitedly, “There is no more thought of bribing or coaxing the traitors who have dared to aim their cannon balls at the flag of the Union . . . Fort Sumter is temporarily lost, but the country is saved.”

The time for compromise was over. The issues that had divided the nation for so many years would now be decided by a civil war.

**Lesson Summary**

In this lesson, you learned how a series of compromises failed to keep the United States from splitting in two over the issue of slavery.

**Confronting the Issue of Slavery** The issue of granting Missouri statehood threatened to upset the balance of free and slave states. Northerners were concerned that if Missouri entered the Union as a slave state, other territories would also be admitted as slave states. Southerners worried that if Congress banned slavery in Missouri, it would try to end slavery elsewhere.

**The Missouri Compromise** In 1820, the Missouri Compromise resolved the issue by admitting Missouri as a slave state and Maine as a free state. It also drew a line across the Louisiana Territory. In the future, slavery would be permitted only south of that line.

**The Compromise of 1850** The furor over slavery in new territories erupted again after the Mexican-American War. The Compromise of 1850 admitted California as a free state and allowed the New Mexico and Utah territories to decide whether to allow slavery. It also ended the slave trade in Washington, D.C., and included a stronger fugitive slave law. Attitudes on both sides were hardened by Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and the Kansas-Nebraska Act.

**The Dred Scott Decision** In 1857, the Supreme Court issued a decision in the Dred Scott case: African Americans were not citizens and the Missouri Compromise was unconstitutional.

**From Compromise to Crisis** Antislavery activists formed a new political party: the Republican Party. The party nominated Abraham Lincoln for the Illinois Senate. Slavery was the focus of debates between Lincoln and opponent Stephen Douglas. Lincoln lost the election, but the debates brought slavery into sharp focus. A raid launched by abolitionist John Brown raised fears of a slave rebellion.

**The Election of 1860 and Secession** Lincoln won the presidency in 1860. Soon afterward, South Carolina and six other Southern states seceded from the Union and formed the Confederate States of America. In early 1861, Confederate troops fired on Fort Sumter in Charleston, South Carolina, marking the beginning of the Civil War.