

Chapter 16

The Civil War Begins

The bitter feelings Southerners harbored against the Union and the Republican party were expressed in this November, 1860 editorial raging against the results of the election which the South had just lost:

*They have robbed us of our property, they have murdered our citizens, they have set at naught the decrees of the Supreme Court, they have invaded our States and killed our citizens, they have declared their determination to exclude us altogether from the Territories, and they have capped this mighty pyramid of insults by electing Abraham Lincoln to the Presidency, on a platform and by a system which indicates nothing but the subjugation of the South and the complete ruin of her social, political, and industrial institutions.*⁷¹

The sentiments expressed here go a long way to explaining why South Carolina and six sister states left the union shortly after Lincoln's election. But they do not explain whether actions by the North actually deserved such a fierce condemnation. This chapter tells of the events leading to secession and allows readers to form their own opinions.

The Democratic Party Splits

John Brown's raid increased the determination of many Southerners and their sympathizers to guarantee Southerners' rights to take their slaves into the territories. In 1859, President James Buchanan urged that Congress pass such legislation. This demand was echoed on the Senate floor by Jefferson Davis of Mississippi. Meanwhile, the Alabama legislature, looking ahead to the Democratic convention, ordered its delegates to fight for the following plank in its platform:

*Resolved that it is the duty of the General Government to secure an entry into those territories to all citizens of the United States, together with their property of every description, and that the same should be protected by the United States while the Territories are under its authority.*⁷²

Stephen Douglas, the Democrats' leading candidate for the presidential nomination, would and could not endorse this platform. He would not because it violated the principle of popular sovereignty to which he had been committed since 1850; and he could not because it would cause him to lose the support of the Northern states necessary to be elected. Nevertheless, Southern strategists decided to oppose Douglas unless he endorsed their doctrine of Federal protection for slavery, which he refused to do.

That was all the Southern delegates needed to hear. Amidst cheering from the galleries, William Yancy of Alabama walked out of the Convention. He had done the same thing in 1848 over the same issue. But in 1848 he had walked out alone. This time he was followed by delegates from Mississippi,

⁷¹ New Orleans *Daily Crescent*, (November 13, 1860), quoted in Kenneth M. Stampp, ed. *The Causes of the Civil War*, Prentice-Hall, Inc., Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1965, p. 35.

⁷² Roy Franklin Nichols, *The Disruption of American Democracy*, The Free Press, New York, 1967, p. 280.

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Louisiana, South Carolina, Florida, and Texas. The delegates from the deep South were determined to nominate their own candidate at their own convention, a man who believed in Southern principles.

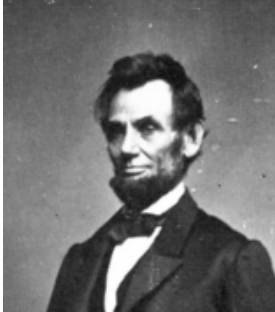
Six weeks later, the Northern Democrats met again and nominated Stephen Douglas on a platform of popular sovereignty. The Southern Democrats nominated Vice-President John Breckinridge of Kentucky on a platform of Federal protection for slavery in the territories.

The Republican Party: Man and Platform

Nothing could have delighted the Republicans more than the split among the Democrats. They had come within 35 electoral votes of winning in 1856 and could smell victory. They needed only to hold the states they had won before, pick up Pennsylvania with its 27 electoral votes, and add either Indiana, Illinois, or New Jersey to their 1856 totals.

As the Republicans convened in Chicago, they were wise enough to seek a candidate who could carry the doubtful states. They therefore deserted William Seward, the leading candidate for the nomination, because he had antagonized too many people with his Higher Law speech in 1850 that reflected his strong condemnations of slavery. Better to select a candidate not as unwavering in his anti-slavery views. With strong support in Illinois, a nationwide fame stemming from his debates with Douglas in 1858, Abraham Lincoln fit this formula. He was nominated on the third ballot.

On slavery, the Republican Party platform appealed both to abolitionists and to those who merely wanted to exclude slavery from their state or the territories. On economic issues, the platform closely resembled Henry Clay's American system. Its major planks are summarized below.



Abraham Lincoln

1. Opposition to the spread of slavery.
2. The right of each state to order and control its own institutions.
3. Immediate and efficient aid in building a Pacific railroad.
4. Internal improvements financed by the Federal government.
5. A tariff to promote the development of the industrial interests of the whole country.
6. Passage of a homestead act, giving free land to settlers.

The Election of 1860

As if to add to the general confusion, another political party made its appearance in 1860. Calling itself the Constitutional Union Party, it claimed to stand firmly behind the Constitution and the Union. The party simply ignored the whole question of slavery. The Constitutional Unionists had little effect on the outcome of the election, but their candidate, John Bell of Tennessee, drew enough votes away from Breckinridge in the South to show that many Southerners did not support the extreme position taken by the Southern Democrats.

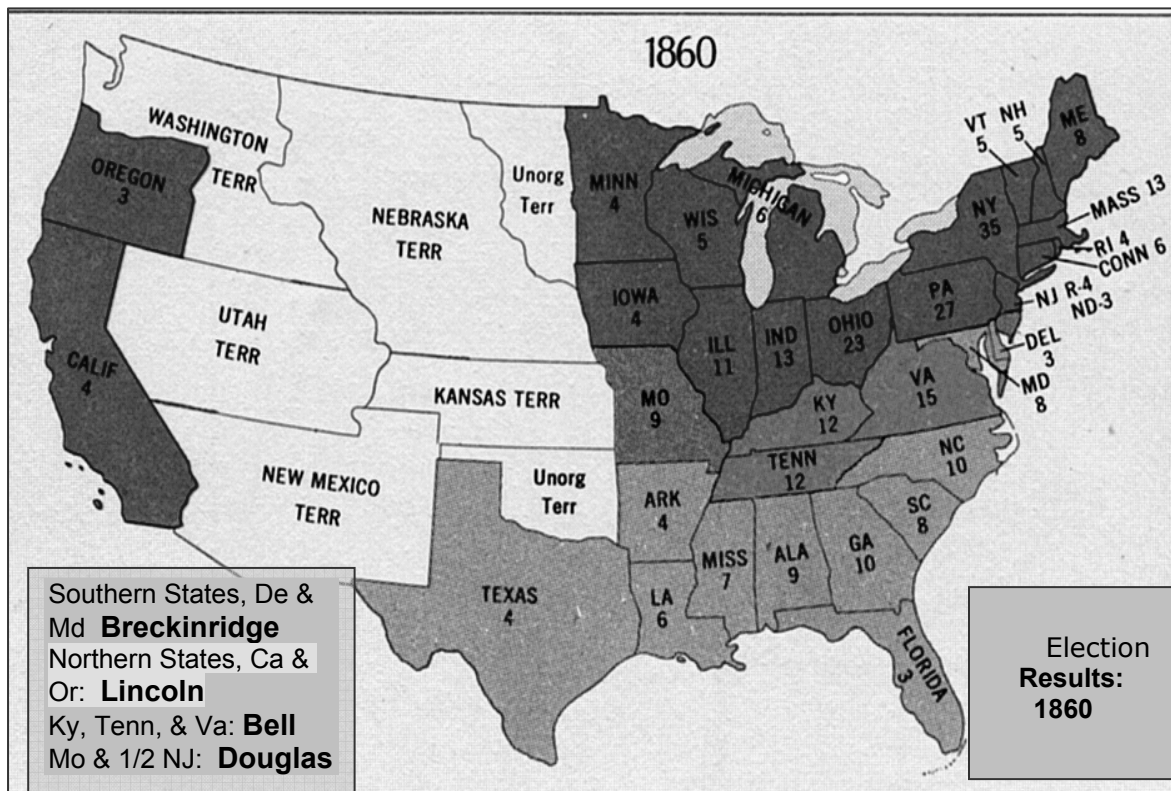
The election of 1860 could be characterized as three different contests: in the North between Lincoln and Douglas; in the border states, between Douglas and Bell; and in the South, between Bell and Breckinridge. Because Lincoln's name did not appear on the ballot in any of the ten Southern most states, not one vote was cast for him in the South. Stephen Douglas was the only candidate who campaigned in all parts of the country. In the South, he denounced secessionism and cautioned against Civil War. In the North, he warned his countrymen that the South would secede if Lincoln were elected. Audiences in neither part of the country took him seriously enough. Lincoln's managers in the meantime followed a long standing political tradition and kept their candidate at home. Lincoln gave no speeches during the

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entire campaign. Republican orators played down the threat of secession and the party faithful were entertained, serenaded, and exhorted, but seldom informed. The election was held on November 6, 1860, and shortly afterwards the entire nation knew the results:

Candidates	Electoral Votes	Popular Votes	% Popular vote
Abraham Lincoln (Republican)	180	1,866,000	40
Stephen Douglas (Democrat)	12	1,383,000	29
John Breckinridge (S.Democrat)	72	848,000	18*
John Bell (Const. Union)	39	593,000	100



The Confederacy is Formed

South Carolina soon gave concrete proof that the South's threats were deadly serious. Four days after the election, the South Carolina legislature called for a special state convention. The Convention met six weeks later, and on December 20th, 1860, South Carolina took the fateful step of declaring itself out of the Union. This dramatic and decisive action inspired other states. By the first of February, six had followed South Carolina's example. These seven states from the deep South - South Carolina, Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana and Texas then drew up a Constitution and proclaimed themselves the Confederate States of America. On February 18th this self-proclaimed nation inaugurated Jefferson

Davis as its first chief executive and Alexander Stephens as his Vice-President. Two weeks later Abraham Lincoln took his oath of office as President of the remaining states.

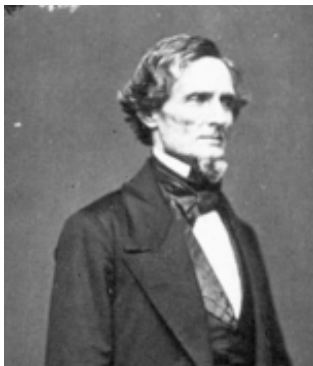
Abraham Lincoln's Dilemma

Whether the Southern states legally seceded from the Union is still a matter of debate. In 1861, of course, the South claimed that right and the North never recognized it. While not recognizing the South's right to secede, President James Buchanan nevertheless did not believe he had the right to force the Confederate states back into the Union. During four months, from November to February, the indecisive President seemed incapable of taking action to stop the spreading crisis for fear of driving the remaining eight slave states out of the Union.

With the advantage of hindsight, historians generally agree that Abraham Lincoln had three major alternatives open to him when he became President. He could try finding a compromise with the South that would entice it back into the Union. Or he could concede in theory, the right to secession and allow it in fact. Finally, he could attack the Confederate states to force them back. Lincoln's Secretary of State, William Seward, thought of a fourth alternative which was to pick a quarrel with either Spain, France, or England. With the first sign of an attack on the Union by a foreign country, Seward reasoned, "all the hills of South Carolina would pour forth their population for the rescue."⁷³

The nation waited with great expectations on inauguration day, March 4, 1861, for a sign of Lincoln's policy. Lincoln told the Confederates:

*In your hands and not mine, is the momentous issue of civil war. The Government will not assail you. You can have no conflict without being yourselves the aggressors. You have no oath registered in heaven to destroy the Government, while I shall have the most solemn one to preserve, protect, and defend it.*⁷⁴



**Confederate President
Jefferson Davis**

President Lincoln Acts

When the Southern states seceded, they naturally had taken over Federal property remaining within their borders. Two Federal forts, however, Pickens in Florida and Sumter in South Carolina, remained under control of the National government. After his inauguration, Lincoln turned his attention to Fort Sumter. Built on an island in Charleston, South Carolina, Sumter had been intended to defend that city from foreign enemies. Now the small Union garrison under Major Robert Anderson was considered the enemy, and shore batteries in Charleston were trained on the Fort.

When Lincoln learned that he could only hold out for a few more weeks, the President resolved to re supply the Fort. To emphasize that his intentions were peaceful, President Lincoln telegraphed the Governor of South Carolina that he would attempt to send ships to Sumter "with provisions only," and would make "no effort to reinforce the Fort with men, arms, or ammunition."⁷⁵

⁷³ *ibid.*, p. 563

⁷⁴ Richard B. Morris, *Great Presidential Decisions*, Fawcett Publications, Inc., New York, 1960, p. 244.

⁷⁵ David M. Potter, *op. cit.*, p. 579.

Lincoln's message was quickly relayed to the Confederate capital in Montgomery, Alabama. At a cabinet meeting on April 9th, the Southern leaders made a fateful decision. They would prevent Union supplies from reaching Fort Sumter. General Pierre Beauregard, Commander of the Charleston district, was ordered to fire on Sumter if necessary to prevent arrival of reinforcements.

On the morning of April 12th, at precisely 4:30, the first Confederate shell arched its way toward the Union Fort in Charleston Harbor. Short on ammunition, Anderson's small band waited for daylight before returning fire. Over the next 33 hours, 5,000 shells were hurled across the harbor. With the Fort in ruins, his men tired and hungry and all but out of ammunition, Anderson surrendered on the 14th. Residents who had watched the action from rooftops of their houses, cheered the victory. The next day, President Lincoln called for 75,000 volunteers to serve for three months and put down the rebellion in South Carolina. One hundred and fifty thousand men volunteered their services. Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Arkansas joined the Confederacy, while Maryland, Kentucky, Delaware, Missouri and newly formed West Virginia, joined the North. The bloody war would drag on for four bitter years, and over 600,000 Americans would die before the Union was restored.

Suggested Student Exercises:

1. Summarize the main events of this chapter leading to the secession and war. Pay special attention to the Republican Party platform, the reason for the split in the Democratic party, Lincoln's choices upon assuming the Presidency, and the events preceding the attack on Ft. Sumter.
2. After the first seven states seceded, a New York journalist denounced Confederate leaders as follows:

There never was such a set of arrogant and imperious rulers as the slave-driving captains of this Republic, since the world began. Of all men, they most need the discipline of reverses and the humiliation of defeat. It is their foolish temper that forbids them to submit to being fairly beaten in a Presidential election. They will not take the position of a defeated party. They will rule or they will ruin. They will govern the country or they will destroy it, if they can. They will remain in control of the Government, or they will drag it down about our ears, and bury all in a common destruction.⁷⁶

Do you agree either with the New Orleans paper (see first page of this chapter) that the South was driven out of the Union or with the New York paper that the South would destroy the government if they could not control it? Support your opinion by showing what actions on either side, North or South, were irresponsible and provocative.

⁷⁶ James Pike, *New York Tribune*, January 17, 1861, quoted in Kenneth Stampp, *op. cit.*, p. 19.