



# HISTORICAL SNAPSHOT

A CIVIL WAR CAUSES READING INVESTIGATION



## BACKGROUND

**W**hen Abraham Lincoln took the oath of office for the second time on March 4, 1865, Americans had been at war with one another for nearly four years. Although the Union's campaign against the Confederacy was nearing its brutal end, Lincoln offered no predictions about how or when hostilities would cease. He did, however, reflect upon the origins of the conflict, noting that slavery had always represented "a peculiar and powerful interest" in the Southern states and that "this interest was somehow the cause of the war."

For generations, most Americans had avoided the deep contradiction between the principles of the American Revolution and the reality that "Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness" had been denied to millions of enslaved blacks. In the decades leading up to the Civil War, however, economic, cultural, and territorial changes in the United States provoked a confrontation that ultimately killed as many as 800,000 people and transform the nation forever.

## ABOLITION AND PROSLAVERY IDEAS

From the 1830s onward, a small number of Americans began calling for the abolition of slavery, which was concentrated in the Southern states. They claimed it was a brutal institution that stifled liberty and offended God. Southern leaders become increasingly worried that abolitionists might one day succeed in destroying slavery. They were outraged that many northern whites helped slaves escape to Canada (where slavery was illegal), and they were horrified that some northern states refused to assist in the capture and return of fugitives. They feared slave

revolts and warned of a "race war" if the right to own slaves was taken away. Abolitionists seemed to be dangerous radicals with violent intentions — not God-fearing humanitarians who embraced liberty. They argued that slavery was a positive, wholesome institution that benefitted masters and the enslaved alike.

## SLAVERY AND NATIONAL EXPANSION

Much as many Northern whites imagined that freedom and opportunity existed in the west, slaveholders argued that the survival of their institution (and their liberty to own slaves) also depended on westward growth. The Missouri Compromise (1820), however, had forbidden slavery in the old Louisiana Territory, and the question of slavery's expansion appeared settled. But when the United States expanded in the 1840s (annexing Texas in 1845 and acquiring more territory after the Mexican War), the issue of slavery erupted into national politics once again.

Southern whites demanded that slaveholders' rights be protected in the new territories, while a growing number of whites in the North insisted that the West remain "free soil," with slavery limited to where it already existed. Advocates of the "free soil" position did not necessarily seek freedom for slaves; rather, they believed slavery interfered with white opportunity in the western territories. The debate was bitter, and a few Southern leaders began warning that *secession* (leaving the union of states) might be the only way to preserve a nation based on slavery. The Compromise of 1850 temporarily resolved the issue. Congress admitted California as a free state while allowing the new territories of New Mexico and Utah to decide for themselves at some later date

whether to allow slavery to take root.

The South also received a stronger Fugitive Slave Law, which required free states and citizens to aid in the capture of men and women who had fled their masters. The law proved extremely controversial in the North, where abolitionists vowed to interfere with its execution. Opposition to the Fugitive Slave Act further convinced many Southern whites that the North was hostile to their interests.

### ***KANSAS, DRED SCOTT, AND THE REPUBLICANS***

In 1854, a Democratic Senator from Illinois named Stephen Douglas wrote a bill that allowed the Kansas and Nebraska territories — where slavery had been forbidden by the 1820 Missouri Compromise — to legalize slavery if their people desired. The Kansas-Nebraska Act infuriated many white Northerners who believed that a conspiracy was afoot to reintroduce slavery everywhere the nation. Slaveholders and abolitionists alike flocked to Kansas and fought each other openly in an effort to control the territorial government. “Bleeding Kansas” eventually claimed as many as 200 lives over the next two years

The Supreme Court added its own voice to the controversy in 1857, when it ruled that Congress could not prohibit slavery from expanding into Kansas or anywhere else. The *Dred Scott* decision also argued that enslaved Americans had never been viewed as equal citizens and that the nation had no obligation to protect their rights. Defenders of slavery celebrated the decision; abolitionists and “free soil” Northerners seethed.

Anger over these developments fueled the rise of a new political party. Calling for the repeal of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, the overturning of *Dred Scott*, and the restoration of the Missouri Compromise, the Republican Party quickly gained support and began winning elections. They took 11 of 16 free states in the presidential election of 1856. Two years later, a relatively unknown lawyer from Illinois Abraham Lincoln nearly defeated Stephen Douglas for re-election to the Senate. In that same election, Republicans won enough seats to take control of the US House.

### ***THE ELECTION OF 1860 AND SECESSION***

Slaveholders viewed the Republicans as a grave threat. If they gained power, it was feared, the party would restrict slavery’s growth and set upon a path to destroy it forever. They also feared that African Americans might gain political and social equality (something most whites regarded as intolerable). When a radical abolitionist named *John Brown* — a veteran of the guerilla war in Kansas — tried to

spark a slave uprising in Virginia in 1859 by seizing the federal arsenal at Harper’s Ferry, slaveholders blamed Republicans and abolitionists, viewing his act as a sign of things to come. Brown’s raid was a failure, but it stoked fear throughout the South.

The Democratic Party, however, was deeply divided. Democrats had dominated American politics since Andrew Jackson’s election in 1828, but controversies over slavery had taken their toll. In 1860, Southern Democrats demanded new protections for slaveholders, including a Constitutional amendment to guarantee slaveholders’ rights forever. Some even called for the reintroduction of the Atlantic slave trade. Northern Democrats knew their voters would never accept these measures. The party disintegrated. Unable to agree on a single leader, Northern and Southern Democrats each nominated candidates for the presidency.

Democratic divisions all but guaranteed victory for the Republicans, who prevailed in November with *Abraham Lincoln* as their candidate. Viewing Lincoln’s victory as a direct insult and a threat, states of the Deep South (beginning with South Carolina) began enacting ordinances of secession. Although the Constitution did not allow states to leave the union, seven attempted to do so before Lincoln’s inauguration. By March 1861, the Confederate States of America had written a new constitution that protected slavery explicitly.

The outgoing president, James Buchanan, argued that secession was illegal but claimed he could do nothing to stop it. In January 1861, when South Carolinians fired on a civilian ship trying to bring food and clothing to soldiers at Fort Sumter (in Charleston harbor), Buchanan backed down.

### ***THE WAR COMES***

Many Northerners expected that secession was a bluff and that the disgruntled states would soon return. Even so, the national mood was anxious. Efforts in Congress to reach another compromise failed to bear fruit. Although Lincoln tried to soothe the concerns of Southern whites, the tide of secession did not recede after his inauguration in March 1861.

A month later, Lincoln ordered unarmed supply ships to bring aid to Fort Sumter. South Carolina responded by bombarding the fort and forcing its surrender on April 14, 1861. Lincoln called for 75,000 volunteers to put down the rebellion. Four more states — Tennessee, Arkansas, North Carolina, and Virginia — quickly joined the Confederacy, and the nation was soon at war that would either preserve or sever the union (and perhaps resolve the issue of slavery) forever.