CHAPTER 19

Drifting Toward Disunion, 1854–1861

# Focus Questions

1. Who authored literature related to slavery that aroused sympathy in the North and ire in the South?

2. How did events unfold in Kansas after the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act?

3. What was the decision of the Supreme Court in the Dred Scott case?

4. How did John Brown’s actions further entrench sectional differences?

5. Who were the candidates for president in 1860, where did each get most of his support, and what were the results of the election?

6. What happened in the time between the election of 1860 and the inauguration of the new president?

# Chapter Themes

**Theme:** A series of major North-South crises in the late 1850s culminated in the election of the antislavery Republican Lincoln to the presidency in 1860. His election caused seven southern states to secede from the union and form the Confederate States of America.

chapter summary

The 1850s were punctuated by successive confrontations that deepened sectional hostility, until it broke out in the Civil War.

Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* fanned northern antislavery feeling. In Kansas, proslavery and antislavery forces fought a bloody preview of the Civil War. Buchanan’s support of the proslavery Lecompton Constitution alienated moderate northern Democrats such as Douglas. Congressman Brooks’s beating of Senator Sumner aroused passions in both sections.

The 1856 election signaled the rise of the sectionally based Republican Party. The *Dred Scott* case delighted the South, while northern Republicans pledged defiance. The Lincoln-Douglas debates of 1858 deepened the national controversy over slavery. John Brown’s raid on Harpers Ferry made him a heroic martyr in the North but caused outraged southerners to fear a slave uprising.

The Democratic Party split along sectional lines, allowing Lincoln to win the four-way 1860 election. Seven southern states quickly seceded and organized the Confederate States of America.

As southerners optimistically cast off their ties to the hated North, lame-duck President Buchanan proved unable to act. The last-minute Crittenden Compromise effort failed because of Lincoln’s opposition.

# developing the chapter: suggested lecture or discussion topics

* Explain how the events of the late 1850s developed in a chain reaction, with each crisis deepening sectional hatreds, thus paving the way for another critical event.

REFERENCE: David M. Potter, *The Impending Crisis, 1848–1861* (1976).

* Analyze the Kansas conflict as a small-scale rehearsal for the Civil War. The focus might be on the way sectional violence fed on itself, producing extremist figures such as Brown and the border ruffians.

REFERENCE: James A. Rawley, *Race and Politics: “Bleeding Kansas” and the Coming of the Civil War* (1969).

* Use the Lincoln-Douglas debates to explain the rise of Lincoln and the Republican Party, and the issues in the northern debate about how to deal with slavery. Focus on Lincoln’s rise to national prominence in relation to the slavery issue.

REFERENCE: Don E. Fehrenbacher, *Prelude to Greatness: Lincoln in the 1850s* (1962).

* Examine the 1860 election and its consequences. Emphasize the Democratic split, the sectional character of the voting, and the Deep South’s clear determination to secede as soon as Lincoln won, even before he took office.

REFERENCE: Steven A. Channing, *Crisis of Fear* (1970).

# for further interest: additional class topics

* Use Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin,* and the southern reaction to it, to demonstrate the growing division of outlook between the sections. Compare and contrast the criticisms and their effects of Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and Helper’s *The Impending Crisis of the South*. (See boxed quote on page 400 and section Examining the Evidence on page 401.)
* Focus on John Brown as a crucial character in two of the major events of the decade, bleeding Kansas and Harpers Ferry.
* Trace the rise of Lincoln through the events of the decade, from the Kansas-Nebraska Act to the Lincoln-Douglas debates to the 1860 election. (See boxed quotes on pages 408 and 410.)
* Consider the southern decision to secede and the last-minute Crittenden Compromise effort.
* Assess the textbook authors’ assertion that it was fortunate that Republican presidential candidate Fremont did not win in 1856 because the “North was more willing to let the South depart in peace than in 1860.”
* Did lame duck President Buchanan or President-elect Lincoln have any responsibility to act once South Carolina announced its secession after the election? What options did each have in dealing with the crisis? What results seemed likely from each option?
* Was civil war inevitable by 1850? Was there a point in time after 1850 where something different might have prevented civil war, or would civil war just have been delayed?

# character sketches

## Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811–1896)

A member of the famous Beecher family, Stowe wrote *Uncle Tom’s Cabin,* the book that more than anything else deepened northern hostility to slavery.

Stowe was closer to her brother Henry, later a famous preacher, than to her father or her older sister Catharine. She was very fond of her parents’ free black servants, particularly one kind woman who may have been a model for characters in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.

Although she had published a few stories before marrying Calvin Stowe, a professor at her father’s seminary, she then gave up writing. For eighteen years, she was a housewife who struggled to raise her seven children on a very limited income. She visited slaveholding areas of Kentucky during that time and knew abolitionists at her father’s seminary but at first was not very sympathetic to them.

Her brother urged her to write against slavery, and she submitted *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in serial form to a magazine. Although the magazine paid her only $300, the book sold 10,000 copies the first week, 300,000 the first year, and eventually millions in the United States and abroad.

**Quote:** “As long as the baby sleeps with me nights I can’t do much of anything—but I shall *do it at last*. I shall write it if I live.…” (Letter to Calvin Stowe, 1850)

REFERENCE: Joan Hedrick, *Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Life* (1994).

## John Brown (1800–1859)

Brown was the militant abolitionist whose violent attacks at Osawatomie, Kansas, and Harpers Ferry, Virginia, helped to bring on the Civil War.

An unsuccessful tanner, cattle driver, and sheep raiser, Brown was frequently in financial difficulty. He had twenty children—seven by his first wife and thirteen by his second.

For a time, he lived in a black community in New York on land donated by abolitionist Gerrit Smith. After five of his sons migrated to Kansas in 1855, he joined them with a wagonload of guns and ammunition and then hacked five proslavery settlers to death in the Osawatomie massacre.

After Osawatomie, he solicited money and supplies from some New England intellectuals and began planning to lead a slave uprising. He rented a farm near Harpers Ferry in the summer of 1859 and gradually accumulated weapons and his little army of twenty-one men. He could have escaped after raiding the armory, but his plans were too confused. Two of his sons died in the fighting.

**Quote:** “I John Brown am now quite certain that the crimes of this guilty land will never be purged away, but with blood. I had, as I now think, vainly flattered myself that without very much bloodshed it might be done.” (Statement before hanging, 1859)

REFERENCE: Stephen B. Oates, *To Purge This Land with Blood: A Biography of John Brown* (1970).

## Dred Scott (1795–1858)

Scott was the slave whose attempt to secure his freedom was denied by the Supreme Court, which declared that blacks “have no rights that white men are bound to respect.”

Born a slave in Virginia, Scott was later purchased by a U.S. Army doctor, who took him for three years to Illinois (a free state) and two years to Wisconsin (a free territory).

After the doctor died, Scott passed into other hands, but his former owner’s sons sympathized with him and helped carry his case through the state and federal courts.

After he lost the case, the doctor’s sons bought Scott and freed him. Although unskilled and illiterate, he was intelligent and proud of his notoriety. Scott was married, had several children, and ended his days as a janitor in a St. Louis hotel.

**Quote:** “I have no money to pay anybody at Washington to speak for me.… Will nobody speak for me at Washington, even without hope of other reward than the blessings of a poor black man and his family?… I can only pray that some good heart will be moved by pity to do that for me which I cannot do for myself; and that if the right is on my side it may be so declared by the high court to which I have appealed.” (Pamphlet containing Scott’s appeal for aid, 1854)

REFERENCE: Don E. Fehrenbacher, *The Dred Scott Case* (1978).

# questions for class discussion

1. How did each of the major crisis events of the 1850s contribute to the advent of the Civil War?

2. How could a fanatical and violent man like John Brown come to be regarded as a hero by millions of northerners?

3. Why did Douglas’s popular sovereignty approach to the slavery question prove to be unworkable in Kansas and elsewhere?

4. What did the Supreme Court decide in the Dred Scott case? Did the Court do too much in its ruling or was it within its traditional constitutional boundaries? What effect did the decision have in the territories, in the North, and in the South? (See boxed quote on page 407.)

5. Why was sectional compromise impossible in 1860, when such compromises had previously worked in 1820 and 1850? Since Lincoln had guaranteed to protect slavery in the states where it existed, why did the seven southern states secede as soon as he was elected? (See boxed quotes on pages 404, 415, 416, 417, and 418.)

**CONTENDING VOICES: HARRIET TUBMAN VS. ABRAHAM LINCOLN**

**Questions for Class Discussion**

1. How did former slave Harriet Tubman evaluate John Brown after his execution?

2. Contrast Tubman’s evaluation with the analysis offered by presidential candidate Abraham Lincoln.

# varying viewpoints

**Expanding the View**

* Charles and Mary Beard, *The Rise of American Civilization* (1927).

A view of the Civil War as an economic and social revolution:

“At bottom, the so-called Civil War…was a social war, ending in the unquestioned establishment of a new power in the government, making vast changes in the arrangement of class, in the accumulation and distribution of wealth, in the course of industrial development, and in the Constitution inherited from the Fathers.… If the series of acts by which the bourgeois and peasants of France overthrew the king, nobility, and clergy is to be called the French Revolution, then accuracy compels us to characterize by the same term the social cataclysm in which the capitalists, laborers, and farmers of the North and West drove from power in the national government the planting aristocracy of the South.… The so-called civil war was in reality a Second American Revolution, and in a strict sense, the First.”

* David M. Potter, *The Impending Crisis, 1848–1861* (1976).

A view of the 1850s as a time of irreconcilable conflict between North and South over the central issue of slavery:

“Thus slavery suddenly emerged as a transcendent sectional issue in its own right, and as a catalyst of all sectional antagonisms, political, economic, and cultural.… The slavery question became the sectional question, the sectional question became the slavery question, and both became the territorial question.…From the sultry August night in 1846 when Wilmot caught the chairman’s eye, the slavery question steadily widened the sectional rift until an April dawn in 1861 when the batteries along the Charleston waterfront opened fire on Fort Sumter.…”

* Michael Holt, *Forging a Majority: The Formation of the Republic Party in Pittsburgh, 1848–1860* (1969).

A view of the 1850s as a time when many issues besides slavery dominated national politics:

“Politics did not revolve around [slavery and the South] just as politics today does not revolve around communism, although most people dislike it. Instead, social, ethnic, and religious considerations often determined who voted for whom between 1848 and 1861. Divisions between native-born Americans and immigrants and between Protestants and Catholics, rather than differences of opinion about the tariff or the morality of slavery, distinguished Whigs and Republicans from Democrats.… Interpreting the rise of the Republican party in the North solely in terms of hostility to slavery or economic issues is, therefore, too simplified.”

# Questions for Class Disscussion

1. How does each of these views see the relationship between slavery and sectional feeling?

2. What does each of these views see as the relationship between slavery and other issues in the 1850s?

3. How would each of these historians interpret the decline of the Whigs and the rise of the Republicans in the 1850s?