Chapter 16 Lesson 3

Secession and War

ESSENTIAL QUESTION Why does conflict develop?

 When Abraham Lincoln was elected president, the Southern states decided to break away from the Union.

The 1860 Election

SS.8.A.1.2, SS.8.A.1.7, SS.8.A.5.1, SS.8.A.5.2, SS.8.A.5.3, SS.8.A.5.4, SS.8.A.5.7

What was the importance of the election of 1860?

In the presidential election of 1860, the big question was whether the Union would continue to exist. Regional differences divided the nation.

The issue of slavery split the Democratic Party. Northern Democrats supported popular sovereignty. They nominated Stephen Douglas. Southern Democrats vowed to uphold slavery. Their candidate was John C. Breckinridge.

Moderates from the North and South formed the Constitutional Union Party. The Constitutional Unionists took no position on slavery. They chose John Bell as their candidate.

The Republicans nominated Abraham Lincoln. They wanted to leave slavery alone where it existed—but also to ban it in the territories. Still, white Southerners feared that a Republican victory would promote slave revolts as well as interfere with slavery.

With the Democrats divided, Lincoln won a clear majority of electoral votes. Voting followed sectional lines. Lincoln's name did not even appear on the ballot in most Southern states. He won every Northern state, however. So in effect, the more populous North outvoted the South.

Looking for Compromise

The Republicans had promised not to stop slavery where it already existed. Yet white Southerners did not trust the Republicans to protect their rights. On December 20, 1860, South Carolina voted to secede from the Union.

In other Southern states, leaders debated the question of secession, or withdrawal from the Union. Meanwhile, members of Congress tried to find ways to prevent it. Senator John Crittenden of Kentucky suggested a series of amendments to the Constitution. They included a protection for slavery south of 36°30' N latitude—the line set by the Missouri Compromise—in all territories "now held or hereafter acquired."

Republicans rejected, or refused to accept, Crittenden's idea. They had just won an election by promising to stop slavery's spread into any territories. "Now we are told . . ." Lincoln wrote, "the government shall be broken up unless we surrender to those we have beaten."

Leaders in the South also rejected the plan. "We spit upon every plan to compromise," exclaimed one Southern leader. "No human power can save the Union," wrote another.

The Confederacy Established

By February 1861, Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Florida, and Georgia had joined South Carolina and seceded. Delegates from these states met to form a new nation. Calling themselves the Confederate States of America, they chose Jefferson Davis as their president.

Southerners used states' rights to justify secession. Each state, they argued, had voluntarily chosen to enter the Union. They defined the Constitution as a contract among the independent states. They believed the national government had broken the contract by refusing to enforce the Fugitive Slave Act and by denying Southern states equal rights in the territories. As a result, Southerners argued, the states had a right to leave the Union.

The Public Reacts to Secession

Not all white Southerners welcomed secession. Church bells rang and some people celebrated in the streets. To other Southerners, the idea of secession was alarming. Virginian Robert E. Lee expressed concern about the future. “I only see that a fearful calamity is upon us,” he wrote.

Some Northerners approved of the Southern secession. If the Union could survive only by giving in to slavery, they declared, then let the Union be destroyed. Still, most Northerners believed that the Union had to be preserved. As Lincoln put it, the issue was “whether in a free government the minority have the right to break up the government whenever they choose.”

Lincoln Takes Over

As always, several months passed between the November election and the start of the new president's term. Buchanan would remain in office until March 4, 1861. In December 1860, Buchanan sent a message to Congress. He said that the Southern states had no right to secede from the Union. He added that he had no power to stop them from doing so.

As Lincoln prepared for his inauguration, people throughout the United States wondered what he would say and do. They wondered, too, what would happen in Virginia, North Carolina, Kentucky, Tennessee, Missouri, Delaware, Maryland, and Arkansas. These slave states had not yet seceded, but their decisions were not final. If the United States used force against the Confederates, the remaining slave states also might secede.

In his Inaugural Address, Lincoln spoke to the seceding states directly. He said that he could not allow secession and that "the Union of these States is perpetual [forever]." He vowed to hold federal property in the South, including a number of forts and military installations, and to enforce the laws of the United States. At the same time, Lincoln pleaded with the South:

"In your hands, my dissatisfied fellow countrymen, and not in mine, is the momentous issue of civil war. The Government will not assail you. You can have no conflict without being yourselves the aggressors. . .

. . . We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection."

—Abraham Lincoln, First Inaugural Address

Explaining What was John Crittenden's proposal to save the Union?

Florida CONNECTION

Florida Votes for Secession

In January 1861, a special convention of delegates met in Tallahassee to debate the issue of secession. On January 10, a 62-to-7 "Yes" vote meant Florida would withdraw from the Union. A formal Ordinance of Secession was signed in a public ceremony the following day. This made Florida the third state to secede. SS.8.A.5.7

Fighting at Fort Sumter

SS.8.A.5.1, SS.8.A.5.3, SS.8.A.5.6, LA.8.1.6.1

What did the attack on Fort Sumter signify?

The day after taking office, Lincoln received a message from the commander of Fort Sumter, a U.S. fort on an island guarding Charleston Harbor. The message warned that the fort was low on supplies and the Confederates demanded its surrender.

Lincoln responded in a message to Governor Francis Pickens of South Carolina that he was sending an unarmed group to the fort with supplies. He promised Union forces would not "throw in men, arms, or ammunition" unless they were fired upon.

Jefferson Davis ordered his forces to attack Fort Sumter before the Union supplies could arrive. Confederate guns opened fire on April 12, 1861. Union captain Abner Doubleday witnessed the attack from inside the fort:

"Showers of balls . . . and shells poured into the fort in one incessant stream, causing great flakes of masonry to fall in all directions."

—quoted in Fort Sumter

Meanwhile, high seas kept Union ships from reaching the fort. Facing a hopeless situation, the Union surrendered the fort on April 14. Despite heavy bombardment, no one had died.

With the loss of Fort Sumter, Lincoln decided he had to act. He issued a call for troops. Volunteers quickly signed up. In reaction to Lincoln's call, Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Arkansas voted to join the Confederacy. The Civil War had begun.

Explaining Why did Lincoln decide not to send armed troops to Fort Sumter?