

A Dividing Nation

21.1 Introduction

In 1860, after one of the strangest elections in the nation's history, a tall, plain-spoken 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 slavery and was preparing for war. The survival of the United States of America, and the fate of four million slaves, rested in Lincoln's large, strong hands.

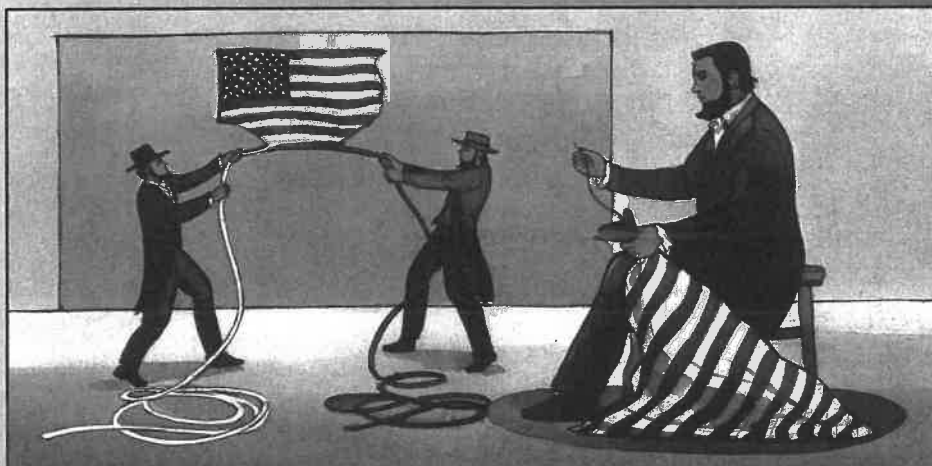
The troubles Lincoln faced were not new. The issue dividing the nation could be traced back to 1619, when the first slave ship arrived in Virginia. Since that time, slavery had ended in half of the United States. The question was, could the nation continue half-slave and half-free?

For decades, Americans tried to avoid that troubling question. Many hoped that 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. Each compromise, however, created new problems and new divisions.

Lincoln understood why. Slavery was not simply a political issue to be worked out through compromise. It was a deeply moral issue. As Lincoln wrote in a letter to a friend, "If slavery is not wrong, nothing is wrong."

In this chapter, you will learn how Americans tried to keep the United States united despite their deep divisions over slavery. And you will find out how they finally answered that most troubling question: Could a nation born in freedom endure half-slave and half-free?



Graphic Organizer: Visual Metaphor

You will use a visual metaphor of an unraveling flag to understand the compromises and decisions made to preserve the Union.

the Union The United States as one country, united under a single government. During the Civil War, "the Union" came to mean the government and armies of the North.

21.2 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, restless settlers had formed seven new states west of the Appalachians.

Congress had established a process for forming new states in the Northwest Ordinance of 1787. Besides 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—were free states. The four states that were formed south of the Ohio River—Kentucky, Tennessee, Louisiana, and Mississippi—all 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. Alabama 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. The admission of Illinois as a free state in 1818 had upset this balance. By accepting Alabama with slavery, Congress was able to restore the balance between slave and free states.

Missouri, however, was another matter.

In 1819, the number of slave states and free states stood at 11 apiece. This balance was threatened when Missouri applied for statehood as a slave state.

Georgia	Pennsylvania
South Carolina	New Jersey
North Carolina	New York
Virginia	Connecticut
Maryland	Rhode Island
Delaware	Massachusetts
Kentucky (1792)	New Hampshire
Tennessee (1796)	Vermont (1791)
Louisiana (1812)	Ohio (1803)
Mississippi (1817)	Indiana (1816)
Alabama (1819)	Illinois (1818)

Slave States

Free States

- Original 13 States
- States Entering the Union, 1791–1819

Questions about Missouri Some northerners in Congress questioned whether Missouri should also be admitted as a slave state. Most of Missouri, they observed, 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. Shouldn't the same ban also be applied west of the Mississippi?

This question led to another one. If Missouri was 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 decided to keep that nightmare from coming true. Tallmadge proposed an amendment to the statehood bill. The amendment said that Missouri could join the Union, but only as a free state.

Southerners in Congress greeted Tallmadge's amendment with a roar of protest. 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, 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.

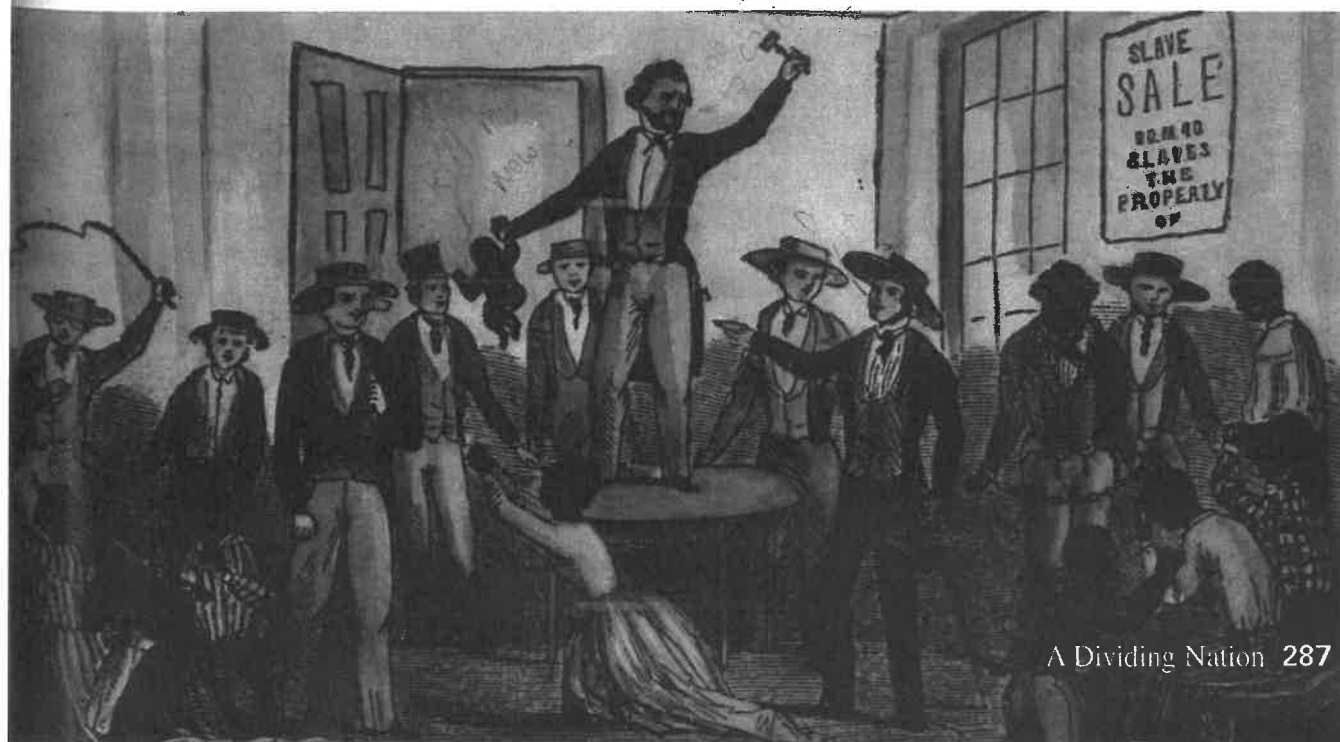
A Deadlocked Congress Southerners' protests were based on their fear that if Congress was allowed to end slavery in Missouri, it might try to end slavery elsewhere. The North already had more votes in the House of Representatives than the South. Only in the Senate did the two sections have equal voting power. As long as the number of free states and slave states remained equal, southern senators could defeat any attempt to interfere with slavery. But if Missouri entered the Union as a free state, the South would lose its power to block anti-slavery bills in the Senate. If that happened, southerners warned, it would be a disaster for the South.

In the North, the Tallmadge Amendment awakened strong feelings against slavery. Many towns 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 soul 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. In the Senate, however, southerners were able to defeat it. The two houses were now deadlocked over the issue of slavery in Missouri. They would remain so as the 1819 session of Congress drew to a close.

An auctioneer holds a baby during a slave auction, while the child's mother begs not to be separated from her child. Scenes like this fueled the moral outrage many felt toward slavery.



secession the act of withdrawing from an organization or alliance, such as the withdrawal of the southern states from the Union

21.3 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.”

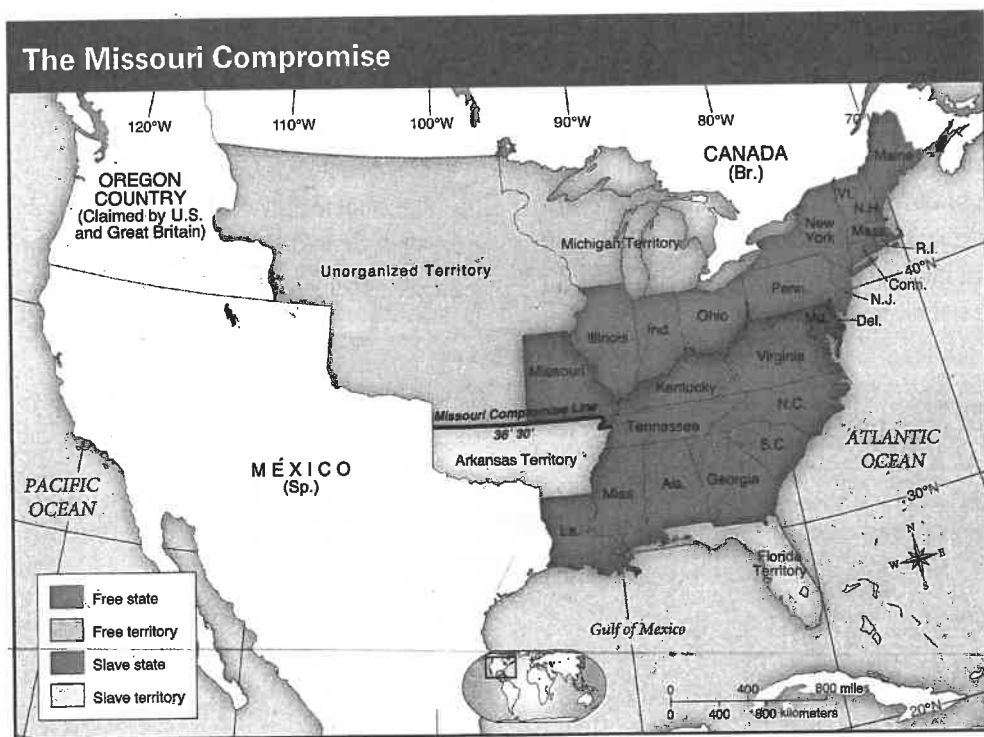
“If you persist,” Thomas Cobb of Georgia warned supporters of the amendment, “the Union will be dissolved. You have kindled a fire which only a sea of blood can extinguish.”

“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.”

As a result of the Missouri Compromise, Missouri entered the Union as a slave state, while Maine entered as a free state. In addition, a line was drawn at the 36°30' parallel, below which slavery would be allowed. Above this line, slavery was prohibited.

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 compromise 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 Territory at latitude 36°30'. North of this line, slavery was to be banned forever, except in Missouri. South of the line, slaveholding was permitted.



Reactions to the Compromise

The Missouri Compromise kept the Union together. But it pleased no one. In the North, congressmen who voted to accept Missouri as a slave state were called traitors. In the South, slaveholders deeply resented the ban on slavery in part of the Louisiana Territory.

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.”

21.4 The Missouri Compromise Unravels

As John Quincy Adams predicted, for a time the "contest" over slavery was laid to rest. But a powerful force was building that soon pushed the issue of slavery into the open again: the Second Great Awakening. As you read in Chapter 18, leaders of the religious revival of the 1820s and 1830s promised that God would grant salvation to those who did the Lord's work. And for some Americans, the Lord's work was the abolition of slavery.

The horrors of slavery were detailed in many northern newspapers and periodicals such as this one.

The "Gag Rule" During the 1830s, abolitionists flooded Congress with anti-slavery petitions. Congress, they were told, had no power to interfere with slavery in the states. Then what about the District of Columbia? asked the abolitionists. Surely Congress had the power to ban slavery in the nation's capital.

Rather than face that question, Congress voted in 1836 to table all anti-slavery petitions. (To *table* means to set something aside indefinitely.) Outraged abolitionists called this action the "gag rule," because it gagged (silenced) all congressional debate over slavery.

In 1839, the gag rule prevented consideration of an anti-slavery 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 1845. 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.

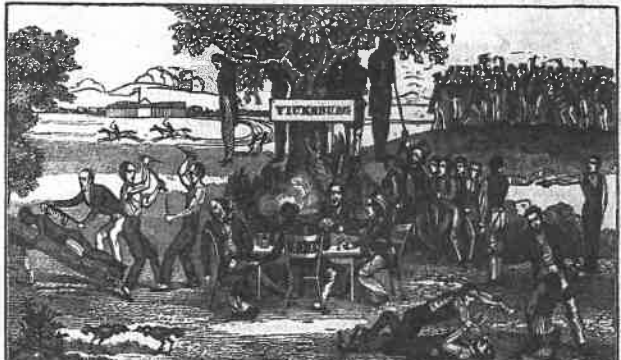
White southerners deeply resented the abolitionists' attacks as an assault on their way of life. After Nat Turner's slave rebellion in 1831, resentment turned to fear. Southern states adopted strict new laws to control the movement of slaves. Many states also tried to keep abolitionist writings from 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.

EMANCIPATOR—EXTRA.


NEW-YORK, SEPTEMBER 2, 1839.

American Anti-Slavery Almanac for 1840.


The seven cuts following, are selected from thirteen, which may be found in the Anti-Slavery Almanac for 1840. They represent well-authenticated facts, and illustrate in various ways, the cruelties daily inflicted upon three millions of native born Americans, by their fellow-countrymen! A brief explanation follows each cut.




The peculiar "Domestic Institutions of our Southern brethren."




Selling a Mother from her Child.




Mothers with young Children at work in the field.




A Woman chained to a Child, and a Man in irons at work in the field.



"They can't take care of themselves": explained in an interesting article.



Hunting Slaves with dogs and guns. A Slave drowned in the bay.



States And Slaves
Serivility of the Northern States in arresting and returning fugitive Slaves.

fugitive a person who flees or tries to escape (for example, from slavery)



Nat Turner, pictured above, led the last major slave uprising in the United States. Following the Turner revolt, southerners tightened restrictions on slaves.

Fugitive Slaves Nat Turner's rebellion was the last large-scale slave revolt. But individual slaves 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. A good slave was a valuable piece of property. Every time a slave escaped, it was like seeing five acres of 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.) Wilmot's proviso stated that "neither slavery nor involuntary servitude shall ever exist" in any part of the territory that might be acquired from Mexico.

Southerners in Congress strongly opposed Wilmot's amendment. Congress had no right, they maintained, 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. 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. Southerners, however, rejected California's request. Making California a free state, they warned, would upset the equal balance between slave and free states. The result would be to make the slave states "a fixed, dreary, hopeless minority."

The year ended with Congress deadlocked over California's request for statehood. Once again, resentful southerners spoke openly of withdrawing from the Union. And once again, angry northerners denounced slavery as "a crime against humanity... a great evil."

1.5 The Compromise of 1850

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

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. That would please the North. Meanwhile, New Mexico and Utah would be organized as territories open to 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 in the nation's capital. 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 their runaway slaves.

The Compromise Is Accepted Hoping that Clay's compromise would end the crisis, Webster agreed to help push it through Congress. But despite his support, Congress debated Clay's proposals for nine frustrating months. As tempers frayed, southerners talked of simply leaving the Union peacefully.

Webster dismissed such talk as foolish. "Secession! 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? That was something few Americans wanted to face. In September 1850, Congress finally adopted Clay's plan.

Most Americans were happy to see the crisis end. Some southerners, however, remained wary of the Compromise of 1850. A North Carolina newspaper warned the North to "let this question of Slavery alone, take it out and keep it out of Congress; and respect and enforce the Fugitive Slave Law as it stands. *If not, we leave you!*"

The Compromise of 1850 admitted California as a free state and allowed the southwestern territories to be set up with no restriction on slavery.

