Drifting Toward Disunion, 1854–1861

It is an irrepressible conflict between opposing and enduring forces.

William H. Seward, 1858

Prologue: Popular sovereignty in Kansas degenerated into unpopular savagery. Embattled free-soilers fought embittered proslaveryites, as the complaisant pro-southern administrations of Presidents Franklin Pierce and James Buchanan continued to drift. Irate northerners, resenting the Kansas-Nebraska grab, increasingly turned the Fugitive Slave Act into a dead letter. At the same time, the newly born Republican party, sired by the same Kansas-Nebraska Act, gathered such amazing momentum in the North as to give the Democrats a real scare in the presidential election of 1856. The sectional tension was heightened by a series of inflammatory incidents, including Representative Preston Brooks’s brutal beating of Senator Charles Sumner, the proslavery Dred Scott decision, and John Brown’s fantastic raid at Harpers Ferry. Southerners also reacted angrily against the overwhelming approval in the North of such antislavery propaganda as Uncle Tom’s Cabin and Helper’s Impending Crisis of the South (see p. 376). And the imminent election of the Republican Lincoln in 1860 foreshadowed both secession and shooting.

A. The Impact of Uncle Tom’s Cabin

1. Tom Defies Simon Legree (1852)

Harriet Beecher Stowe, a busy mother and housewife then living in Maine, was aroused by the recent gains of slavery to write—partly on old wrapping paper—her heart-tugging novel Uncle Tom’s Cabin. Reared in New England as the daughter of famed preacher Lyman Beecher, and having lived for seventeen years in Ohio on the route of the Underground Railroad, she had developed an abhorrence of the “peculiar institution.” Oddly enough, her firsthand observations of slavery were limited to a brief visit to Kentucky. In her best-selling book, she sought to mollify the South to some extent by representing the saintly slave Uncle Tom as having two kind masters;

1Harriet B. Stowe, Uncle Tom’s Cabin (Boston: J. P. Jewett, 1852), chap. 33.
by featuring the whimsical Topsy and the angelic little Eva (who died); and by portraying the monster Simon Legree, who finally ordered Uncle Tom beaten to death, as a Yankee from Vermont. In the following scene, the cotton-picking slaves have just returned from the fields, and Legree orders Tom to flog one of the sickly women for not having picked enough. What details of this episode would most offend the anti-slavery North? the proslavery South?

"And now," said Legree, "come here, you Tom. You see, I telled ye I didn't buy ye jest for the common work. I mean to promote ye, and make a driver of ye; and tonight ye may jest as well begin to get yer hand in. Now, ye jest take this yer gal and flog her; ye've seen enough on't [of it] to know how."

"I beg Mas'r's pardon," said Tom; "hopes Mas'r won't set me at that. It's what I an't used to—never did—and can't do, no way possible."

"Ye'll larn a pretty smart chance of things ye never did know, before I've done with ye!" said Legree, taking up a cowhide and striking Tom a heavy blow across the cheek, and following up the infliction by a shower of blows.

"There!" he said, as he stopped to rest; "now, will ye tell me ye can't do it?"

"Yes, Mas'r," said Tom, putting up his hand, to wipe the blood that trickled down his face. "I'm willin' to work, night and day, and work while there's life and breath in me. But this yer thing I can't feel it right to do; and, Mas'r, I never shall do it—never!"

Tom had a remarkably smooth, soft voice, and a habitually respectful manner that had given Legree an idea that he would be cowardly and easily subdued. When he spoke these last words, a thrill of amazement went through everyone. The poor woman clasped her hands and said, "O Lord!" and everyone involuntarily looked at each other and drew in their breath, as if to prepare for the storm that was about to burst.

Legree looked stupefied and confounded; but at last burst forth:

"What! ye blasted black beast! tell me ye don't think it right to do what I tell ye! What have any of you cussed cattle to do with thinking what's right? I'll put a stop to it! Why, what do ye think ye are? May be ye think ye're a gentleman, master Tom, to be a telling your master what's right, and what an't! So you pretend it's wrong to flog the gal!"

"I think so, Mas'r," said Tom; "the poor crittur's sick and feeble; 'twould be downright cruel, and it's what I never will do, nor begin to. Mas'r, if you mean to kill me, kill me; but, as to my raising my hand agin any one here, I never shall—I'll die first!"

Tom spoke in a mild voice, but with a decision that could not be mistaken. Legree shook with anger; his greenish eyes glared fiercely, and his very whiskers seemed to curl with passion. But, like some ferocious beast, that plays with its victim before he devours it, he kept back his strong impulse to proceed to immediate violence, and broke out into bitter raillery.

"Well, here's a pious dog, at least, let down among us sinners!—a saint, a gentleman, and no less, to talk to us sinners about our sins! Powerful holy crittur, he must be! Here, you rascal, you make believe to be so pious—didn't you never hear, out of yer Bible, 'Servants, obey yer masters? An't I yer master? Didn't I pay down
twelve hundred dollars, cash, for all there is inside yer old cussed black shell? An't yer mine, now, body and soul?” he said, giving Tom a violent kick with his heavy boot; “tell me!”

In the very depth of physical suffering, bowed by brutal oppression, this question shot a gleam of joy and triumph through Tom’s soul. He suddenly stretched himself up, and, looking earnestly to heaven, while the tears and blood that flowed down his face mingled, he exclaimed,

“No! no! no! my soul an’t yours, Mas’r! You haven’t bought it—ye can’t buy it! It’s been bought and paid for by One that is able to keep it. No matter, no matter, you can’t harm me!”

“I can’t!” said Legree, with a sneer; “we’ll see—we’ll see! Here, Sambo, Quimbo, give this dog such a breakin’ in as he won’t get over this month!”

The two gigantic Negroes that now laid hold of Tom, with fiendish exultation in their faces, might have formed no unapt personification of powers and darkness. The poor woman screamed with apprehension, and all rose, as by a general impulse, while they dragged him unresisting from the place.

2. The South Scorns Mrs. Stowe (1852)

Northern abolitionists naturally applauded Mrs. Stowe’s powerful tale; the poet John Greenleaf Whittier now thanked God for the Fugitive Slave Act, which had inspired the book. The few northern journals that voiced criticism were drowned out by the clatter of the printing presses running off tens of thousands of new copies. Southern critics cried that this “wild and unreal picture” would merely arouse the “fanaticism” of the North while exciting the “indignation” of the South. They insisted that the slave beatings were libelously overemphasized; that the worst slave drivers were imported northerners (like Legree); that the southern black slave was better off than the northern wage slave; and that relatively few families were broken up—fewer, in fact, than among soldiers on duty, Irish immigrants coming to America, sailors going to sea, or pioneers venturing West. Why did the Southern Literary Messenger of Richmond find it important to refute Mrs. Stowe’s “slanders” as follows?

There are some who will think we have taken upon ourselves an unnecessary trouble in exposing the inconsistencies and false assertions of Uncle Tom’s Cabin. It is urged by such persons that in devoting so much attention to abolition attacks we give them an importance to which they are not entitled. This may be true in general. But let it be borne in mind that this slanderous work has found its way to every section of our country, and has crossed the water to Great Britain, filling the minds of all who know nothing of slavery with hatred for that institution and those who uphold it. Justice to ourselves would seem to demand that it should not be suffered to circulate longer without the brand of falsehood upon it.

2Southern Literary Messenger 18 (1852): 638, 731.
Let it be recollected, too, that the importance Mrs. Stowe will derive from Southern criticism will be one of infamy. Indeed she is only entitled to criticism at all as the mouthpiece of a large and dangerous faction which, if we do not put down with the pen, we may be compelled one day (God grant that day may never come!) to repel with the bayonet.

There are questions that underlie the story of Uncle Tom’s Cabin of far deeper significance than any mere false coloring of Southern society. . . . We beg to make a single suggestion to Mrs. Stowe—that, as she is fond of referring to the Bible, she will turn over, before writing her next work of fiction, to the twentieth chapter of Exodus and there read these words—“Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor.” . . .

We have not had the heart to speak of an erring woman as she deserved, though her misconduct admitted of no excuse and provoked the keenest and most just reprobation. We have little inclination—and, if we had much, we have not the time—to proceed with our disgusting labor, to anatomize minutely volumes as full of poisonous vermin as of putrescence, and to speak in such language as the occasion would justify, though it might be forbidden by decorum and self-respect.

We dismiss Uncle Tom’s Cabin with the conviction and declaration that every holier purpose of our nature is misguided, every charitable sympathy betrayed, every loftier sentiment polluted, every moral purpose wrenched to wrong, and every patriotic feeling outraged, by its criminal prostitution of the high functions of the imagination to the pernicious intrigues of sectional animosity, and to the petty calumnies of willful slander.

3. Mrs. Stowe Inflames the Southern Imagination (1853)

Uncle Tom’s Cabin touched the imaginations of millions of readers. Few Americans, North or South, could regard slavery calmly; the “peculiar institution” inflamed the hearts and even the dreams of Americans on all sides of the issue. For southerners, Mrs. Stowe’s novel could unleash frightful images. This print, first published in Louisville, Kentucky, illustrated a dream supposedly “caused by the perusal” of Mrs. Stowe’s novel. Why would a novel critical of slavery prompt such a vision? Was this nightmarish vision confirmed by events? What do the images here suggest were the South’s deepest fears about slavery and abolitionism? What is the artist’s view of Mrs. Stowe?

4. The London Times Demurs (1852)

Uncle Tom’s Cabin was also a sensational success abroad, even prompting some Russian noblemen to free their serfs. Lord Palmerston, who had not read a novel in thirty years, devoured this one three times. But the lordly London Times, reputedly the semiofficial mouthpiece of the government, was one of the few important journals in England to express strong reservations. In this portion of the lengthy review in the Times, how sound is the argument that the book was self-defeating because it would hinder the peaceful abolition of slavery?

The gravest fault of the book has, however, to be mentioned. Its object is to abolish slavery. Its effect will be to render slavery more difficult than ever of abolishment. Its very popularity constitutes its greatest difficulty. It will keep ill-blood at boiling point, and irritate instead of pacifying those whose proceedings Mrs. Stowe is anxious to influence on behalf of humanity.

*London Times, September 3, 1852.*
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Uncle Tom’s Cabin was not required to convince the haters of slavery of the abomination of the “institution”; of all books, it is the least calculated to weigh with those whose prejudices in favour of slavery have yet to be overcome, and whose interests are involved in the perpetuation of the system. If slavery is to cease in America, and if the people of the United States, who fought and bled for their liberty and nobly won it, are to remove the disgrace that attaches to them for forging chains for others which they will not tolerate on their own limbs, the work of enfranchisement must be a movement, not forced upon slaveowners, but voluntarily undertaken, accepted, and carried out by the whole community.

There is no federal law which can compel the slave states to resign the “property” which they hold. The states of the South are as free to maintain slavery as are the states of the North to rid themselves of the scandal. Let the attempt be made imperiously and violently to dictate to the South, and from that hour the Union is at an end.

We are aware that to the mind of the “philanthropist” the alternative brings no alarm, but to the rational thinkers, to the statesman, and to all men interested in the world’s programs, the disruption of the bond that holds the American states together is fraught with calamity, with which the present evil of slavery—a system destined sooner or later to fall to pieces under the weight of public opinion and its own infamy—bears no sensible comparison.

The writer of Uncle Tom’s Cabin and similar well-disposed authors have yet to learn that to excite the passions of their readers in favour of their philanthropic schemes is the very worst mode of getting rid of a difficulty which, whoever may be to blame for its existence, is part and parcel of the whole social organization of a large proportion of the states, and cannot be forcibly removed without instant anarchy, and all its accompanying mischief.

B. Bleeding Kansas and “Bully” Brooks

I. Charles Sumner Assails the Slavocracy (1856)

The erasing of the Missouri Compromise line in 1854 touched off a frantic tug-of-war between South and North to make Kansas either a slave or a free state. “Border ruffians,” pouring into Kansas from slaveholding Missouri by the hundreds, set up a fraudulent but legal government. Resolute pioneers from the North, some of them assisted by the New England Emigrant Aid Company, countered by founding Lawrence, setting up an extralegal free-soil government, and seeking admission as a free state. Aroused by the resulting civil war, Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts—a handsome, egotistical, and flamboyantly outspoken abolitionist—assailed the slavery men in a savage two-day speech (“The Crime Against Kansas”). He singled out the slaveholding state of South Carolina, and in particular her well-liked Senator Andrew P. Butler, who, declared Sumner, had taken as his “mistress” “the harlot, slavery.” What aspects of the speech would be most offensive to a South Carolina “gentleman”?

1Congressional Globe, 34th Congress, 1st session (May 19–20, 1856), Appendix, pp. 530, 543.
If the slave states cannot enjoy what, in mockery of the great Fathers of the Republic, he [Butler] misnames equality under the Constitution—in other words, the full power in the national territories to compel fellow men to unpaid toil, to separate husband and wife, and to sell little children at the auction block—then, sir, the chivalric Senator will conduct the state of South Carolina out of the Union! Heroic knight! Exalted Senator! A second Moses come for a second exodus!

But not content with this poor menace... the Senator, in the unrestrained chivalry of his nature, has undertaken to apply opprobrious words to those who differ from him on this floor. He calls them “sectional and fanatical”; and opposition to the usurpation in Kansas he denounces as “an uncultivating fanaticism.” To be sure, these charges lack all grace of originality, and all sentiment of truth; but the adventurous Senator does not hesitate. He is the uncompromising, unblushing representative on this floor of a flagrant sectionalism, which now domineers over the Republic...

With regret, I come again upon the Senator from South Carolina [Butler], who, omnipresent in this debate, overflowed with rage at the simple suggestion that Kansas had applied for admission as a state; and, with incoherent phrases, discharged the loose expectoration of his speech,* now upon her representative, and then upon her people. There was no extravagance of the ancient parliamentary debate which he did not repeat. Nor was there any possible deviation from truth which he did not make, with so much of passion, I am glad to add, as to save him from the suspicion of intentional aberration.

But the Senator touches nothing which he does not disfigure—with error, sometimes of principle, sometimes of fact. He shows an incapacity of accuracy, whether in stating the Constitution or in stating the law, whether in the details of statistics or the diversions of scholarship. He cannot open his mouth but out there flies a blunder...

[Sumner next attacks South Carolina, with its “shameful imbecility” of slavery, for presuming to sit in judgment over free-soil Kansas and block the latter’s admission as a free state.]

South Carolina is old; Kansas is young. South Carolina counts by centuries; where Kansas counts by years. But a beneficent example may be born in a day, and I venture to say that against the two centuries of the older state may be already set the two years of trial, evolving corresponding virtue, in the younger community. In the one is the long wail of Slavery; in the other, the hymns of Freedom. And if we glance at special achievements, it will be difficult to find anything in the history of South Carolina which presents so much of heroic spirit in an heroic cause as appears in that repulse of the Missouri invaders by the beleaguered town of Lawrence, where even the women gave their efforts to Freedom...

Were the whole history of South Carolina blotted out of existence, from its very beginning down to the day of the last election of the Senator to his present seat on this floor, civilization might lose—I do not say how little; but surely less than it has already gained by the example of Kansas, in its valiant struggle against oppression, and in the development of a new science of emigration. Already in Lawrence alone there are newspapers and schools, including a high school, and throughout this infant territory there is more mature scholarship far, in proportion to its inhabitants,

*Butler suffered from a slight paralysis of the mouth.
than in all South Carolina. Ah, sir, I tell the Senator that Kansas, welcomed as a free state, will be a “ministering angel” to the Republic when South Carolina, in the cloak of darkness which she hugs, “lies howling.”

2. The South Justifies Yankee-Beaters (1856)

Southern fire-eaters had already used abusive language in Congress, but Sumner’s epithets infuriated Congressman Brooks of South Carolina. Resenting the insults to his state and to his cousin (Senator Butler), he entered the Senate chamber and broke his cane over the head of Sumner, then sitting at his desk. The senator fell bleeding to the floor, while several other members of Congress, perhaps thinking that he was getting his just deserts, made no effort to rescue him. His nervous system shattered, Sumner was incapacitated for about three years; Brooks resigned his seat and was unanimously reelected. A resolution passed by the citizens of his district applauded his exhibition of “the true spirit of Southern chivalry and patriotism” in “chastising, coolly and deliberately, the vile and lawless Sumner.” The same group sent him a new cane inscribed, “Use knock-down arguments.” What does the following editorial in an Alabama newspaper suggest about the general attitude of the white South and what it portended for the Union?

There are but two papers in the state that we have seen that denounce the chastisement of Sumner by Mr. Brooks as a shameful outrage. One of them is the Mobile Tribune, one of the editors of which is a Yankee, and the other is a sheet, the name of which we shall not mention.

With the exception of the papers alluded to, the press of the entire state have fully approved of the course Mr. Brooks pursued, under the circumstances, and recommended that other Southern members of Congress adopt the same method of silencing the foul-mouthed abolition emissaries of the North. Indeed, it is quite apparent, from recent developments, that the shillalah [club] is the best argument to be applied to such low-bred mongrels.

More than six years ago, the abolitionists were told that if they intended to carry out their principles, they must fight. When the Emigrant Aid Societies began to send their [Yankee] tools to Kansas, they were told that if their object was to establish a colony of thieves under the name of “Free State Men,” on the border of Missouri, for the purpose of keeping out Southerners and destroying slavery, they must fight. And let them understand that if they intend to carry their abolitionism into Congress, and pour forth their disgusting obscenity and abuse of the South in the Senate Chamber, and force their doctrines down the throats of Southerners, they must fight.

Let [editor Horace] Greeley be severely cowhided, and he will cease to publish his blackguardism about Southern men. Let [Senators] Wilson and Sumner and Seward, and the whole host of abolition agitators in Congress, be chastised to their heart’s content, and, our word for it, they will cease to heap abuse upon our citizens.

We repeat, let our Representative in Congress use the cowhide and hickory stick (and, if need be, the bowie knife and revolver) more frequently, and we’ll bet our old hat that it will soon come to pass that Southern institutions and Southern men will be respected.

2Autauga (Alabama) Citizen, in The Liberator (Boston), July 4, 1856.
C. The Dred Scott Decision

I. The Pro-Southern Court Speaks (1857)

Dred Scott, an illiterate Missouri slave, was taken by his master for several years (1834–1836) to the free state of Illinois and then to a portion of Wisconsin Territory now located in the state of Minnesota. The Minnesota area was then free territory, since it lay north of the line of 36° 30' established by the Missouri Compromise of 1820 (subsequently repealed in 1854). Scott, taken in hand by interested abolitionists, sued

3Chicago Historical Society, #Chi-06440.

for his freedom on the grounds of residence on free soil. The case was appealed from the circuit court to the Supreme Court, which grappled with several basic questions: Was a slave a citizen under the Constitution? (If not, he was not entitled to sue in the federal courts.) Was Dred Scott rendered free by residence in Wisconsin Territory, under the terms of the Missouri Compromise? The Court, headed by the pro-southern Chief Justice Roger Taney of the slaveholding state of Maryland, ruled as follows.

How were the basic questions answered? What were their implications for the future?

Now... the right of property in a slave is distinctly and expressly affirmed in the Constitution. The right to traffic in it, like an ordinary article of merchandise and property, was guaranteed to the citizens of the United States, in every state that might desire it, for twenty years. And the government in express terms is pledged to protect it in all future time, if the slave escapes from his owner. This is done in plain words—too plain to be misunderstood. And no word can be found in the Constitution which gives Congress a greater power over slave property, or which entitles property of that kind to less protection, than property of any other description. The only power conferred is the power coupled with the duty of guarding and protecting the owner in his rights.

Upon these considerations, it is the opinion of the Court that the Act of Congress [Missouri Compromise] which prohibited a citizen from holding and owning property of this kind in the territory of the United States north of the line [of 36° 30'] therein mentioned is not warranted by the Constitution, and is therefore void; and that neither Dred Scott himself, nor any of his family, were made free by being carried into this territory; even if they had been carried there by the owner with the intention of becoming a permanent resident...

Upon the whole, therefore, it is the judgment of this Court that it appears by the record before us that the plaintiff in error [Dred Scott] is not a citizen of Missouri, in the sense in which that word is used in the Constitution; and that the Circuit Court of the United States for that reason had no jurisdiction in the case, and could give no judgment in it.

2. A Virginia Newspaper Gloats (1857)

The South was overjoyed at the Dred Scott decision. The sanctity of slave property was ringing reaffirmed. A slave could be taken with impunity into the territories and perhaps also into the free states. Even if the territory of Kansas should vote slavery down under popular sovereignty, slaveowners could still keep their slaves. Also pleasing to the South was Chief Justice Taney's observation that in 1776 the blacks were "so far inferior that they had no rights which the white man was bound to respect." This dictum, torn out of context and applied to the present, enraged the abolitionists. What did the following editorial in a Virginia newspaper portend for an amicable solution of the slave-race problem?

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2Southside (Virginia) Democrat, in The Liberator (Boston), April 3, 1857.
C. The Dred Scott Decision

The highest judicial tribunal in the land has decided that the blackamoors, called by the extreme of public courtesy the colored population, are not citizens of the United States. This decision must be followed by other decisions and regulations in the individual states themselves. Negro suffrage must, of course, be abolished everywhere.

Negro nuisances, in the shape of occupying promiscuous seats in our rail-cars and churches with those who are citizens, must be abated. Negro insolence and domineering arrogance must be rebuked; the whole tribe must be taught to fall back into their legitimate position in human society—the position that Divine Providence intended they should occupy. Not being citizens, they can claim none of the rights or privileges belonging to a citizen. They can neither vote, hold office, nor occupy any other position in society than an inferior and subordinate one—the only one for which they are fitted, the only one for which they have the natural qualifications which entitle them to enjoy or possess.

3. The North Breathes Defiance (1857)

The antislavery North was shocked by the Dred Scott decision. If slavery could not be barred from the territories, then the constitutional basis of popular sovereignty was in doubt, and the already unpopular Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 was a gigantic hoax. Especially galling was the presence of several slaveholders on the Supreme Court. Various northern spokesmen denounced the decision as no more binding than that of a southern debating society. Horace Greeley, editor of the influential New York Tribune, insisted that the Court's findings had no more "moral weight" than the judgment of "a Washington barroom." The rising politician Abraham Lincoln, referring to the "apparent partisan bias" and the numerous dissenting opinions of the Court, branded the decision "erroneous." Judging from the following reaction in a Boston religious journal, was the South justified in feeling that the North was determined to break up the Union?

Shall this decision be submitted to? It need not be. A most righteous decision of the Supreme Court (as we believe), regarding the rights of the Cherokee nation, was made of none effect by the state of Georgia, with the connivance of President Jackson.

The people are mightier than courts or Presidents. The acts of Congress, though declared void, are not repealed. The acts of the free states, though pronounced invalid, still exist. If the people will, they can be maintained and enforced.

Is it said that this is revolutionary counsel? We answer, it is the Southern judges of the Supreme Court who are the authors of revolution. They have enacted a principle contrary to the most plain and obvious sense of the Constitution they pretend to interpret. . . . The most explicit allusion to slaves, in that instrument, describes them as held to service in the states "under the laws thereof," plainly deriving the rights of the master from local, not from common law.

\footnote{Christian Watchman and Reflector (Boston), in The Liberator (Boston), March 27, 1857.}
The decision is also opposed to the unanimous judgment of the statesmen and jurists by whom the Constitution was formed, and to the amplest recorded testimony as to their intentions. It is a doctrine not twenty years old, which those judges, conspiring with the most desperate school of Southern politicians, the men who have been for the space of a generation plotting against the Union, have dared to foist upon the Constitution. It is a sacrilege, against which the blood of our fathers cries from the ground. No man who has in his veins a drop kindred to the blood that bought our liberties can actively submit to their decree.

But if the free states will sit down in the dust, without an effort to vindicate their sovereign rights, if the majority of the people are so fallen away from the spirit of their fathers as to yield their birthright without a struggle, then it becomes the solemn duty of every conscientious freeman to regard the Union of these states as stripped henceforth of all title to his willing allegiance. If the Constitution is a charter to protect slavery, everywhere, then it is a sin against God and man to swear allegiance to it. Every man will be forced to choose between disunion and the guilt of an accomplice in the crime of slavery. May God avert such an alternative!

D. The Lincoln-Douglas Debates

I. Stephen Douglas Opposes Black Citizenship (1858)

With the Illinois senatorship at stake, "Honest Abe" Lincoln boldly challenged Senator Douglas—the "Little Giant"—to a series of joint debates, presumably on current issues. He lost the ensuing election but placed his feet squarely on the path to the White House. The first forensic encounter occurred at Ottawa, Illinois, where the gladiators exchanged the following verbal blows before some twelve thousand partisans. How did Douglas's remarks on this occasion both please and offend the South?

We are told by Lincoln that he is utterly opposed to the Dred Scott decision, and will not submit to it, for the reason that he says it deprives the Negro of the rights and privileges of citizenship. (Laughter and applause.) That is the first and main reason which he assigns for his warfare on the Supreme Court of the United States and its decision.

I ask you, are you in favor of conferring upon the Negro the rights and privileges of citizenship? ("No, no.") Do you desire to strike out of our state constitution that clause which keeps slaves and free Negroes out of the state, and allow the free Negroes to flow in ("Never.") and cover your prairies with black settlements? Do you desire to turn this beautiful state into a free Negro colony ("No, no.") in order that when Missouri abolishes slavery she can send one hundred thousand emancipated slaves into Illinois, to become citizens and voters, on an equality with yourselves? ("Never," "No.")

If you desire Negro citizenship, if you desire to allow them to come into the state and settle with the white man, if you desire them to vote on an equality with yourselves, and to make them eligible to office, to serve on juries, and to adjudge your rights, then support Mr. Lincoln and the Black [pro-Negro] Republican Party, who are in favor of the citizenship of the Negro. ("Never, never.")

For one, I am opposed to Negro citizenship in any and every form. (Cheers.) I believe this government was made on the white basis. ("Good.") I believe it was made by white men for the benefit of white men and their posterity for ever, and I am in favor of confining citizenship to white men, men of European birth and descent, instead of conferring it upon Negroes, Indians, and other inferior races. ("Good for you," "Douglas forever.")

Mr. Lincoln, following the example and lead of all the little abolition orators who go around and lecture in the basements of schools and churches, reads from the Declaration of Independence that all men were created equal, and then asks how can you deprive a Negro of that equality which God and the Declaration of Independence awards to him. He and they maintain that Negro equality is guaranteed by the laws of God, and that it is asserted in the Declaration of Independence. If they think so, of course they have a right to say so, and so vote. I do not question Mr. Lincoln’s conscientious belief that the Negro was made his equal, and hence is his brother (Laughter.), but for my own part, I do not regard the Negro as my equal, and positively deny that he is my brother or any kin to me whatever. ("Never," "Hit him again," and cheers.)...

Now, I do not believe that the Almighty ever intended the Negro to be the equal of the white man. ("Never, never.") If he did, he has been a long time demonstrating the fact. (Cheers.)... He belongs to an inferior race, and must always occupy an inferior position. ("Good," "That’s so," etc.)

I do not hold that because the Negro is our inferior that therefore he ought to be a slave. By no means can such a conclusion be drawn from what I have said. On the contrary, I hold that humanity and Christianity both require that the Negro shall have and enjoy every right, every privilege, and every immunity consistent with the safety of the society in which he lives. ("That’s so.") On that point, I presume, there can be no diversity of opinion. ... This is a question which each state and each territory must decide for itself—Illinois has decided it for herself. ...

Now, I hold that Illinois had a right to abolish and prohibit slavery as she did, and I hold that Kentucky has the same right to continue and protect slavery that Illinois had to abolish it. I hold that New York had as much right to abolish slavery as Virginia has to continue it, and that each and every state of this Union is a sovereign power, with the right to do as it pleases upon this question of slavery, and upon all its domestic institutions.

2. Abraham Lincoln Denies Black Equality (1858)

Lincoln, in his high-pitched voice, parried Douglas’s charges, to the delight of his noisy Ottawa supporters, who outnumbered the Douglasites about two to one. When this particular debate ended, the Republicans bore their awkward hero in triumph

from the platform—with his drawn-up trousers, said one observer, revealing the edges of his long underwear. Douglas later claimed that his opponent, beaten and exhausted, was unable to leave under his own power—a charge that angered Lincoln. In the following portion of Lincoln’s contribution to the interchange at Ottawa, what portion of his stand was most offensive to northern abolitionists? to the white South?

My Fellow Citizens: When a man hears himself somewhat misrepresented, it provokes him—at least, I find it so with myself. But when the misrepresentation becomes very gross and palpable, it is more apt to amuse him. (Laughter.) . . .

. . . Anything that argues me into his [Douglas’s] idea of perfect social and political equality with the Negro is but a specious and fantastic arrangement of words, by which a man can prove a horse chestnut to be a chestnut horse. (Laughter.)

I will say here, while upon this subject, that I have no purpose directly or indirectly to interfere with the institution of slavery in the states where it exists. I believe I have no lawful right to do so, and I have no inclination to do so. I have no purpose to introduce political and social equality between the white and the black races. There is a physical difference between the two, which in my judgment will probably forever forbid their living together upon the footing of perfect equality, and inasmuch as it becomes a necessity that there must be a difference, I, as well as Judge Douglas, am in favor of the race to which I belong having the superior position.

I have never said anything to the contrary, but I hold that, notwithstanding all this, there is no reason in the world why the Negro is not entitled to all the natural rights enumerated in the Declaration of Independence, the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. (Loud cheers.) I hold that he is as much entitled to these as the white man. I agree with Judge Douglas he is not my equal in many respects—certainly not in color, perhaps not in moral or intellectual endowment. But in the right to eat the bread, without leave of anybody else, which his own hand earns, he is my equal and the equal of Judge Douglas, and the equal of every living man. (Great applause.)

E. John Brown at Harpers Ferry

I. The Richmond Enquirer Is Outraged (1859)

The fanatical abolitionist John Brown plotted a large slave insurrection at Harpers Ferry in western Virginia. Purchasing arms with about $3,000 provided by sympathetic northern abolitionists, he launched his abortive enterprise with a score of men, including two of his own sons. Wounded and captured, after the loss of several innocent lives, he was given every opportunity to pose as a martyr while being tried. He was found guilty of three capital offenses: conspiracy with slaves, murder, and treason. Most of the abolitionists who had financed his enterprise ran for cover, although

many of them had evidently not known of his desperate plan to attack a federal arsenal and bring down on himself the Washington government. The southerners were angered by the widespread expressions of sympathy for Brown in the North. A week after the raid, the influential Richmond Enquirer wrote as follows. What is the most alarming aspect of this editorial?

The Harper’s Ferry invasion has advanced the cause of Disunion more than any other event . . . since the formation of the government; it has rallied to that standard men who formerly looked upon it with horror; it has revived, with tenfold strength, the desire of a Southern Confederacy. The heretofore most determined friends of the Union may now be heard saying, “If under the form of a Confederacy [Union] our peace is disturbed, our state invaded, its peaceful citizens cruelly murdered . . . by those who should be our warmest friends. . . . and the people of the North sustain the outrage, then let disunion come.”

2. Governor J. A. Wise Refuses Clemency (1859)

It is perhaps surprising that Brown was not lynched instead of being hanged after an orderly, if hurried, trial. Ten of his own men had been killed; six more were tried and hanged. Other casualties that his raid inflicted included seven dead and ten wounded. Pressures of various kinds converged on Governor Wise to extend clemency, and he explained to the legislature as follows why he could not do so. What was the basis for his reasoning?

During the trial of . . . [the Harpers Ferry raiders] and since, appeals and threats of every sort . . . have been made to the Executive. I lay before you the mass of these, it being impossible to enter into their details.

Though the laws do not permit me to pardon in cases of treason, yet pardons and reprieves have been demanded on the grounds of: 1st, insanity; 2nd, magnanimity; 3rd, the policy of not making martyrs.

As to the first, the parties themselves or counsel put in no plea of insanity. No insanity was feigned even; the prisoner Brown spurned it . . . .

As to the second ground . . . . I know of no magnanimity which is inhumane, and no inhumanity could well exceed that to our society, our slaves as well as their masters, which would turn felons like these . . . loose again on a border already torn by a fanatical and sectional strife . . . .

As to the third ground . . . . to hang would be no more martyrdom than to incarcerate the fanatic. The sympathy would have asked on and on for liberation, and to nurse and soothe him, while life lasted, in prison. His state of health would have been heralded weekly, as from a palace . . . ; the work of his hands would have been sought as holy relics . . . .

There is no middle ground of mitigation. To pardon or reprieve at all was to proclaim a licensed impunity to the thousand fanatics who are mad only in the guilt and folly of setting up their individual supremacy over life, law, property, and civil

liberty itself. The sympathy with the leader was worse than the invasion itself. The appeal was: it is policy to make no martyrs, but disarm murderers, traitors, robbers, insurrectionists, by free pardon for wanton, malicious, unprovoked felons!

3. Horace Greeley Hails a Martyr (1859)

Reactions in the North to Brown’s incredible raid ranged from execration to adulation. The most devoted abolitionists, who believed that slavery was so black a crime as to justify violence, defended Brown. The orator Wendell Phillips cried (amid cheers), “John Brown has twice as much right to hang Governor Wise as Governor Wise has to hang him.” Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau publicly likened the execution to the crucifixion of Jesus. Eccentric Horace Greeley, the influential antislavery editor of the New York Tribune, was denounced by southerners for having given editorial aid and comfort to John Brown. Greeley replied as follows in an editorial that no doubt reflected the views of countless moderate antislavery people, who deplored the method while applauding the goal. How effectively did Greeley make the point that Brown’s crime was no ordinary felony, and to what extent was he anti-Brown?

John Brown knew no limitations in his warfare on slavery—why should slavery be lenient to John Brown, defeated and a captive?

War has its necessities, and they are sometimes terrible. We have not seen how slavery could spare the life of John Brown without virtually confessing the iniquity of its own existence. We believe Brown himself has uniformly taken this view of the matter, and disclaimed and all appeals in his behalf for pardon or commutation, as well as everything savouring of irritation or menace. There are eras in which death is not merely heroic but beneficent and fruitful. Who shall say that this was not John Brown’s fit time to die?

We are not those who say, “If slavery is wrong, then John Brown was wholly right.” There are fit and unfit modes of combating a great evil; we think Brown at Harper’s Ferry pursued the latter. . . . And, while we heartily wish every slave in the world would run away from his master tomorrow and never be retaken, we should not feel justified in entering a slave state to incite them to do so, even if we were sure to succeed in the enterprise. Of course, we regard Brown’s raid as utterly mistaken and, in its direct consequences, pernicious.

But his are the errors of a fanatic, not the crimes of a felon. It were absurd to apply to him opprobrious epithets or wholesale denunciations. The essence of crime is the pursuit of selfish gratification in disregard of others’ good; and that is the precise opposite of Old Brown’s impulse and deed. He periled and sacrificed not merely his own life—that were, perhaps, a moderate stake—but the lives of his beloved sons, the earthly happiness of his family and theirs, to benefit a despised and downtrodden race—to deliver from bitter bondage and degradation those whom he had never seen.

Unwise, the world will pronounce him. Reckless of artificial yet palpable obligations he certainly was, but his very errors were heroic—the faults of a brave, im-

1New York Tribune, December 3, 1859.
pulsive, truthful nature, impatient of wrong, and only too conscious that “resistance to tyrants is obedience to God.” Let whoever would first cast a stone ask himself whether his own noblest act was equal in grandeur and nobility to that for which John Brown pays the penalty of a death on the gallows.

And that death will serve to purge his memory of any stain which his errors might otherwise have cast upon it. Mankind are proverbially generous to those who have suffered all that can here be inflicted—who have passed beyond the portals of the life to come. John Brown dead will live in millions of hearts—will be discussed around the homely hearth of toil and dreamed of on the couch of poverty and trial.

Admit that Brown took a wrong way to rid his country of the curse, his countrymen of the chains of bondage, what is the right way? And are we pursuing that way as grandly, unselfishly, as he pursued the wrong one? If not, is it not high time we were? Before censuring severely his errors, should we not abandon our own?

4. Lincoln Disowns Brown (1860)

The South quickly seized upon the John Brown raid as a club with which to belabor the fast-growing Republican party, which allegedly had connived with the conspirators. Rough-hewn Abraham Lincoln, Republican presidential aspirant, came east from Illinois for his make-or-break speech before a sophisticated eastern audience at Cooper Union in New York City. During the course of his address, which was a smashing success, he dealt with the Brown raid. How convincingly did he meet the accusation of Republican complicity, and to what extent was he both pro-Brown and anti-Brown?

You [southerners] charge that we [Republicans] stir up insurrections among your slaves. We deny it; and what is your proof? Harper’s Ferry! John Brown!!

John Brown was no Republican; and you have failed to implicate a single Republican in his Harper’s Ferry enterprise. If any member of our party is guilty in that matter, you know it, or you do not know it. If you do know it, you are inexcusable for not designating the man and proving the fact. If you do not know it, you are inexcusable for asserting it, and especially for persisting in the assertion after you have tried and failed to make the proof. You need not be told that persisting in a charge which one does not know to be true is simply malicious slander.

Some of you admit that no Republican designedly aided or encouraged the Harper’s Ferry affair, but still insist that our doctrines and declarations necessarily lead to such results. We do not believe it.

Slave insurrections are no more common now than they were before the Republican Party was organized. What induced the Southampton [Nat Turner’s] insurrection, twenty-eight years ago, in which at least three times as many lives were lost as at Harper’s Ferry? You can scarcely stretch your very elastic fancy to the conclusion that Southampton was “got up by Black Republicanism.” In the present state of things in the United States, I do not think a general, or even a very extensive, slave insurrection is possible.

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John Brown’s effort was peculiar. It was not a slave insurrection. It was an attempt by white men to get up a revolt among slaves, in which the slaves refused to participate. In fact, it was so absurd that the slaves, with all their ignorance, saw plainly enough it could not succeed. That affair, in its philosophy, corresponds with the many attempts, related in history, at the assassination of kings and emperors. An enthusiast broods over the oppression of a people till he fancies himself commissioned by Heaven to liberate them. He ventures the attempt, which ends in little else than his own execution.

F. The Presidential Campaign of 1860

I. Fire-Eaters Urge Secession (1860)

The surprise nomination of Abraham Lincoln for president on the Republican ticket in 1860 precipitated a crisis. Many southern spokesmen served notice that the election of this backwoods “ape,” whose opposition to slavery was grossly exaggerated, would prove that the North no longer wanted the South in the Union. The vitriolic Charleston Mercury, which had championed nullification as early as 1832, was perhaps the foremost newspaper advocating secession. What grievances does the following editorial cite? Did they justify secession?

The leaders and oracles of the most powerful party in the United States [Republican] have denounced us as tyrants and unprincipled heathens, through the civilized world. They have preached it from their pulpits. They have declared it in the halls of Congress and in their newspapers. In their schoolhouses they have taught their children (who are to rule this government in the next generation) to look upon the slaveholder as the special disciple of the devil himself. They have published books and pamphlets in which the institution of slavery is held up to the world as a blot and a stain upon the escutcheon of America’s honor as a nation.

They have established abolition societies among them for the purpose of raising funds—first to send troops to Kansas to cut the throats of all the slaveholders there, and now to send emissaries among us to incite our slaves to rebellion against the authority of their masters, and thereby endanger the lives of our people and the destruction of our property.

They have brought forth an open and avowed enemy to the most cherished and important institution of the South, as candidate for election to the Chief Magistracy of this government—the very basis of whose political principles is an uncompromising hostility to the institution of slavery under all circumstances.

They have virtually repealed the Fugitive Slave Law, and declare their determination not to abide by the decision of the Supreme Court guaranteeing to us the right to claim our property wherever found in the United States.

And, in every conceivable way, the whole Northern people, as a mass, have shown a most implacable hostility to us and our most sacred rights; and this, too, without the slightest provocation on the part of the South. . . .

1Charleston (South Carolina) Mercury. September 18, 1860.
Has a man's own brother, born of the same parents, a right to invade the sacred precincts of his fireside, to wage war upon him and his family, and deprive him of his property? And if he should do so, the aggrieved brother has not only a right, but it is his duty, sanctioned by every principle of right, to cut off all communication with that unnatural brother, to drive him from the sanctuary of his threshold, and treat him as an enemy and a stranger. Then why should we any longer submit to the galling yoke of our tyrant brother—the usurping, domineering, abolition North!

The political policy of the South demands that we should not hesitate, but rise up with a single voice and proclaim to the world that we will be subservient to the North no longer, but that we will be a free and an independent people.

All admit that an ultimate dissolution of the Union is inevitable, and we believe the crisis is not far off. Then let it come now; the better for the South that it should be today; she cannot afford to wait.

2. The North Resents Threats (1860)

Outstanding among northern newspapers was the Springfield (Massachusetts) Republican. Edited by the high-strung Samuel Bowles, who was known at times to drive himself forty-eight hours without sleep, it featured straightforward reporting and concise writing. Can you determine, from the following editorial, the extent to which the issue of majority rule was legitimately involved in the North-South dispute?

The South, through the mouth of many of its leading politicians and journals, defies the North to elect Abraham Lincoln to the Presidency. It threatens secession in case he shall be elected. It arrogantly declares that he shall never take his seat. It passes resolutions of the most outrageous and insolent character, insulting every man who dares to vote for what they call a “Black Republican.” To make a long matter very short and plain, they claim the privilege of conducting the government in all the future, as they have in all the past, for their own benefit and their own way, with the alternative of dissolving the Union of the States.

Now, if the non-slaveholding people have any spirit at all, they will settle this question at once and forever. Look at the history of the last two administrations, in which the slave interest has had undisputed sway. This sway, the most disgraceful and shameless of anything in the history of the government, we are told must not be thrown off, else the Union will be dissolved. Let’s try it! Are we forever to be governed by a slaveholding minority? Will the passage of four years more of misrule make it any easier for the majority to assume its legitimate functions?

There are many reasons why we desire to see this experiment tried this fall. If the majority cannot rule the country without the secession of the minority, it is time the country knew it. If the country can only exist under the rule of an oligarchy [of slaveowners], let the fact be demonstrated at once, and let us change our institutions. We desire to see the experiment tried, because we wish to have the Southern people, who have been blinded and cheated by the politicians, learn that a “Black Republican” respects the requirements of the Constitution and will protect their

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2Springfield (Massachusetts) Republican, August 25, 1860.
interests. Harmony between the two sections of this country can never be secured until the South has learned that the North is not its enemy, but its best friend.

[The “Black Republican” Lincoln was elected president on November 6, 1860. Three days later a New Orleans newspaper declared, “The Northern people, in electing Mr. Lincoln, have perpetrated a deliberate, cold-blooded insult and outrage upon the people of the slaveholding states.” On December 20, a special convention in South Carolina led the secessionist parade by voting 169 to 0 to leave the Union.]

**Thought Provokers**

1. Why did the fictional *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* have more success, as propaganda, than the countless factual accounts published by abolitionists?
2. Compare the reaction of the North to the *Dred Scott* decision of 1857 with that of the South to the Supreme Court decision of 1954 ordering desegregation. To what extent is it true, as Republicans insisted in 1857, that the people are the court of last resort in this country?
3. Were both Douglas and Lincoln segregationists? Was Douglas more pro-popular sovereignty than he was proslavery? Was Lincoln, as often charged, an abolitionist?
4. In what ways may John Brown’s raid be regarded as one of the causes of the Civil War? Since John Brown in Kansas had murdered proslavery men and run off their horses and slaves, how could he be rationally compared to Jesus? Was slavery such a grievous crime, as extreme abolitionists charged, as to justify theft and murder in fighting it?
5. Was Lincoln’s election an excuse or a reason for secession? Did the white southerners have solid grounds for fearing a Republican administration?