

DBQ 10: WHAT CAUSED SECESSION?

Historical Context

No event affected the United States and its people more significantly than the secession of eleven Southern states and the Civil War that followed. Four years of bloody warfare, over one-half million deaths, untold misery and destruction, and long-lasting racial and sectional hatreds resulted. Even today, almost one and a half centuries later, America is still marked – politically, economically, and socially – by these awful events.

Americans who witnessed the secession of the Southern states, and historians ever since, have argued over the causes. Why, after eighty-five years of unity and common nationhood, did the United States break apart? Were the differences between North and South so great that unity was no longer possible? Or was secession an accident, the result of mistakes, political misjudgments, and passions that overwhelmed reasonable compromise? What parts did slavery, the debate over its expansion into the territories, and the rancorous conflict of its supporters and opponents play in bringing on secession? How much blame can be placed on President Buchanan’s indecisiveness? Or on Lincoln’s refusal to accept the Crittenden Compromise? And what about the Kansas conflict, Dred Scott, John Brown, and other divisive factors? What were the causes? Who was to blame?

- **Directions:** The following question is based on the accompanying documents (1–7). As you analyze the documents, take into account both the source of each document and the author’s point of view. Be sure to
1. Carefully read the document-based question. Consider what you already know about this topic. How would you answer the question if you had no documents to examine?
 2. Now, read each document carefully, underlining key phrases and words that address the document-based question. You may also wish to use the margin to make brief notes. Answer the questions that follow each document.
 3. Based on your own knowledge and on the information found in the documents, formulate a thesis that directly answers the question.
 4. Organize supportive and relevant information into a brief outline.
 5. Write a well-organized essay proving your thesis. The essay should be logically presented and should include information both from the documents and from your own knowledge outside of the documents.

Question: What led the Southern states to secede from the Union in 1860 and 1861?

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**PART
A**

The following documents deal with the secession of the Southern states in 1860 and 1861, providing explanations or clues why secession occurred. Examine each document carefully, and answer the question or questions that follow.

Document 1

The following are excerpts from political party platforms during the 1860 presidential campaign. Both platforms were adopted during the summer months.

From the Republican Party platform:

. . . we deny the authority of Congress, of a territorial legislature, or of any individuals, to give legal existence to slavery in any territory of the United States.

From the (Southern) Democratic Party platform:

[Speaking of any territory of the United States] . . . all citizens of the United States have an equal right to settle with their property in the Territory, without their rights, either of person or property, being . . . impaired. . . .

Over what issue did the Southern Democratic and the Northern Republican parties seem totally at odds? _____

Do you feel that either side was willing to compromise? _____

Document 2

This excerpt is from a speech given by Albert Gallatin Brown, a Mississippi politician, on September 26, 1860. (From Samuel P. McCutchen, "The Political Career of Albert Gallatin Brown," Doctoral Thesis, University of Chicago, 1930; quoted from Dorothy S. Arnof, *A Sense of the Past: Readings in American History*, Macmillan Publishing Company, 1973, p. 222.)

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[The Northerners] hate us now, and they teach their children in their schools and churches to hate our children. . . . The John Brown raid, the burning of Texas, the stealthy tread of abolitionists among us, tell the tale. . . . The North is accumulating power, and it means to use that power to emancipate your slaves. When that is done, no pen can describe . . . the horrors that will overspread this country. . . . Disunion is a fearful thing, but emancipation is worse. Better leave the Union in the open face of day, than be lighted from it at midnight by the [arsonist's] torch.

Why did this Mississippi politician advocate secession? _____

How does this statement help to explain why so many non-slaveholding Southerners supported secession? _____

Document 3

This excerpt is from an editorial in the *Pittsburgh Press*, dated October 10, 1860. This newspaper endorsed Senator Stephen Douglas for president in the 1860 election.

. . . there is much, if not more, of the rampant spirit of disunion in the Black Republican ranks of the North, as there is in the South. . . . [These Republicans] claim the right to make a code of laws for the South, not only in the States, but in the Territories, which shall control or prohibit slavery. . . . If Lincoln were President . . . the Union would be endangered from that hour.

What do you think of this Pittsburgh newspaper's accusation that Lincoln and his Republican Party are the major threats to the disunion of the country?

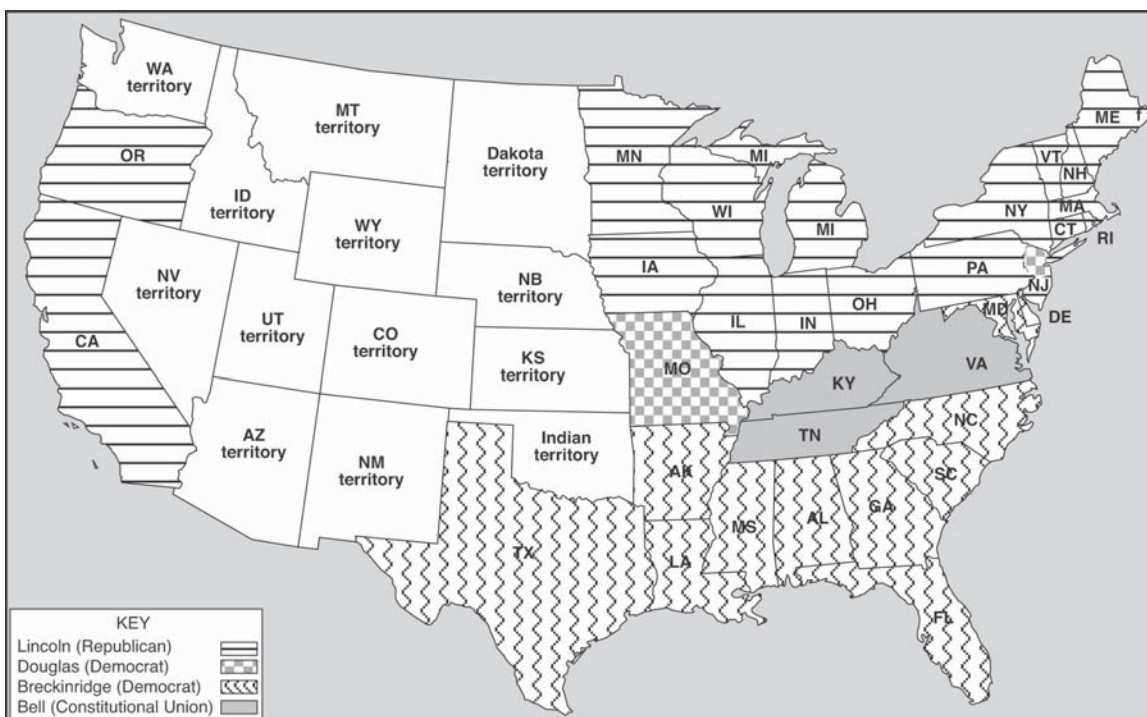
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Document 4

The results of the 1860 presidential election:

Candidate	Popular Vote	Electoral Vote
Lincoln (Republican)	1,865,600	180
Douglas (Democrat)	1,382,700	12
Breckinridge (Democrat)	848,350	72
Bell (Constitutional Union)	592,900	39



From which region did most of Lincoln’s support come? _____

How does Document 2 help to explain this regional voting? _____

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Document 5

These are diary entries by George Templeton Strong, a prominent New York attorney. (Reprinted with the permission of Simon & Schuster from *The Diary of George Templeton Strong* by Allan Nevins and Milton Halsey Thomas. Copyright 1952 by Macmillan Publishing Company; copyright renewed © 1980 by Milton Halsey Thomas.)

November 7, 1860. Lincoln is elected. Hooray . . . The next ten days will be a critical time. If no Southern state commit itself to treason within a fortnight [two week period] or so, the urgent danger will be past.

November 10. . . . News from the South continues to be menacing and uncomfortable.

November 12. No material change in the complexion of Southern news. Unless writers of telegraph items lie loudly, secession is inevitable.

November 15. . . . We are generally reconciling ourselves to the prospect of secession by South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, . . . Florida, and perhaps Mississippi, too.

November 29. Thanksgiving Day . . . There's a bad prospect for both sections of the country. Southern ruffianism and brutality are very bad, but the selfishness, baseness, and corruption of the North are no good at all. Universal suffrage . . . [is] at the root of our troubles . . . [the] nucleus [of the crisis] was the abolition handful that . . . till about 1850, was among the more insignificant of our isms. Our feeling at the North till that time was not hostility to slavery, but indifference to it, and reluctance to discuss it. . . . But the clamor of the South about the admission of California ten years ago introduced the question of slavery. . . . That controversy taught us that the two systems could not co-exist in the same territory. It opened our eyes to the fact that there were two hostile elements in the country, and that if we allowed slaves to enter any territorial acquisition, our own free labor must be excluded from it. The question was unfortunate for our peace. But we might have forgotten it had not S. A. Douglas undertaken to get Southern votes by repealing the Missouri Compromise. That was the final blow.

What, according to George Templeton Strong, were the major factors that in the autumn of 1860 were about to split the nation? _____

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Document 6

This excerpt is from the South Carolina ordinance of secession, unanimously approved by the State Legislature on December 20, 1860.

A geographical line has been drawn across the Union, and all the States north of that line have united in the election of a man to the high office of President of the United States whose opinions and purposes are hostile to Slavery. . . . he has declared that that "Government cannot endure permanently half slave, half free," and that the public mind must rest in the belief that Slavery is in the course of ultimate extinction.

What reason did the state of South Carolina give for seceding from the Union?

Document 7

This excerpt is from a letter that Jefferson Davis wrote to George Lunt on January 17, 1861. Davis, a U.S. Senator from Mississippi, was a leader of the Southern states-rights movement. In January 1861, he resigned his seat in the Senate, hoping that he might be chosen commander of the newly formed Confederate army. Instead, he was chosen President of the Confederate States of America, a position he held until the South's defeat in the Civil War. (Reprinted with the permission of Louisiana State University Press from *The Papers of Jefferson Davis*, Vol. 7, edited by Haskell M. Monroe, Jr., and James T. McIntosh, © 1991.)

The Election was not the Cause [of secession] it was but the last feather which you know breaks the Camel's back. Sectional hostility manifested in hostile legislation by states and raids of organized bodies sustained by Contributions . . . of northern Society furnish to us sufficient cause. . . .

What did Jefferson Davis say caused the South to secede? _____

What did he mean by "raids of organized bodies"? _____

PART B

What led the Southern states to secede from the Union in 1860 and 1861?