

An avoidable civil war



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An Avoidable Civil War The explosion of the American Civil War was caused by a vast number of conflicting principles and prejudices, fueled by sectional differences, and set afire by a very unfortunate set of political events.

Undoubtedly, the central theme of almost all of the events that led up to the Civil War was one way or another, related to the dispute of slavery.

Throughout the nineteenth century, slavery-related tensions brewed to such an extent, that politicians often took accustom to avoiding the hot topic altogether, because they were too scared of either starting a big political feud, or losing votes from one side of the issue or the other. More specifically, three events that were most instrumental in bringing about the Civil War were the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 and the Presidential election of 1860. Because of such strong reactions to these events, the Civil War was practically unstoppable, however if the parties wanted to avoid a war altogether, they could have advocated more compromise and popular sovereignty. As previously mentioned, slavery was at the root of most tensions that arose between the North and the South, and the annexation of new land created much conflict concerning the status of slavery. Missouri Compromise dictated that the lands of the Louisiana Purchase north of the 36°30' parallel were to be free of slavery. Democratic senator Douglas, introduced a bill in early 1854 which proposed the division of the Nebraska Territory into two units, Kansas and Nebraska, and the application of his idea of "popular sovereignty" which would allow the territorial vote to decide the area's status concerning slavery. This proposal would, in effect, repeal the Missouri Compromise, which greatly angered abolitionists and Northerners. Douglas and Southern supporters won a congressional debate and shortly after, the bill was signed. With the passage of this bill, many

conflicts arose. Much personal turmoil erupted in the territories with almost immediate tragic results in "Bleeding Kansas." Also, the bill resulted in a complete realignment of the major political parties: The Democrats lost influence in the North and were to become the regional proslavery party of the South, the Whig Party, which had opposed the Kansas-Nebraska Act, died in the South and was weakened in the North, and a new Republican Party emerged as an immediate political force, drawing in anti-Nebraska Whigs and Democrats. As political issues became more specialized and regional-based, these changes in political structure greatly increased conflicts regarding slavery, creating major factors leading to an inevitable Civil War. If the parties involved wanted to avoid a war, the smartest move would have been to shoot down the bill initially. Douglas and the South should have approached the issue more subtly. Douglas could have introduced a compromise with the North, in exchange with the intentions of applying popular sovereignty in the areas. Even though it reinforces true democracy, introducing popular sovereignty contradicts the provisions of the Missouri Compromise which would only create more political drama. A bill that was intended to repeal an important slavery-related compromise would do nothing but destroy all stability between the political parties. The Missouri Compromise left much ambiguity regarding specific cases, so the rulings of the courts played a major role in the political grey areas; thus, slavery was a very sensitive issue in the Supreme courts as well as in Congress. Dred Scott, a slave, had been purchased by a citizen of Missouri. Scott and his master had spent time in Illinois and the Wisconsin Territory, where slavery was prohibited. After his master's death in 1846, Dred Scott sued for his freedom, claiming that his journey to free soil and the fact that his master

had died while he was in free soil had made him free. The Supreme Court, like the country itself, was very divided. Chief Justice Taney, ruled that Dred Scott had no standing in the court system because he was black, and blacks, regardless of whether they were free or slave, were not citizens. A slave was the property of the master and that temporary residence north of the 36°30' parallel did not grant the slave's freedom. News of the Court's decision swept the country and provoked much turmoil. The Northern Republicans were outraged and saw the decision as a threat to their party. The Democrats were split into Northern and Southern groups. If the Taney wanted to avoid a war, he should have given Dred Scott some break, and not made his blatant racism so obvious. A compromise could have been made in which Dred Scott received a sum of money in return for his denial of freedom. Also, his status of freedom broke the democratic idea of popular sovereignty, and that angered Northerners greatly. Had Dred Scott been given a fair trial, the results would not have been so disputed, and this war factor could have been reduced. In 1860, the American people looked for a new President to lead them and to represent their specific respective political beliefs, however because of the regional differences, each area had their own President in mind. Two Illinois politicians, Abraham Lincoln and Stephen A. Douglas competed extensively in the North, while incumbent Vice President John Breckinridge and John Bell stumped throughout the southern states. While Lincoln captured less than forty percent of the popular vote, the four-way split allowed him to easily win the presidency by capturing the most electoral votes. The election of Abraham Lincoln made South Carolina's secession from the United States an easy decision; the state was long waiting for an excuse to secede and unite the southern states against the

anti-slavery forces. First of all, had the parties not split initially, there would have been less conflict after the election. Because of so many sectional differences, each region of America had its own intended President, creating a situation in which the losers of the election would already be organized for revolt. However, given that the parties were what they were, President Lincoln could have proposed a quick but strong compromise, right after he won the election, which would keep the Southerners and other non-supporters satisfied with the new political situation. Unfortunately, slavery-issues had been brewing for far too long for this situation to have an easy way out. The American Civil War was caused by an explosion of conflicts, provoked by regional and sectional differences and an unfortunate sequence of political events. As explained earlier, the central theme of almost all of the events that brought about the Civil War was related to slavery. The Kansas-Nebraska Act, the Dred Scott Case, and the Election of 1860 were three events that played very instrumental roles in causing the Civil War, however each could have been handled differently by the parties involved. The approaches of the parties could have been more subtle, using compromises to settle disputes, in order to avoid a war.