The Nation Divides

If YOU were there...

You work for the weekly newspaper in Harpers Ferry, Virginia. You strongly oppose slavery, but you think the question ought to be resolved by laws, not bloodshed. Now your paper has sent you to interview the famous abolitionist John Brown in prison. His raids in “Bleeding Kansas” killed several people. Now he is in jail for attacking a federal arsenal and taking weapons.

What questions would you ask John Brown?

Building Background Unpopular compromises and court decisions deepened the divisions between pro-slavery and antislavery advocates. The Lincoln-Douglas debates attracted more attention to the issue. As the disagreements grew, violence increased, though many Americans hoped to avoid it. But it was too late to keep the nation unified.

Raid on Harpers Ferry

In 1858 John Brown tried to start an uprising. He wanted to attack the federal arsenal in Virginia and seize weapons there. He planned to arm local slaves. Brown expected to kill or take hostage white southerners who stood in his way. He urged abolitionists to give him money so that he could support a small army. But after nearly two years, Brown’s army had only about 20 men.

On the night of October 16, 1859, John Brown’s raid began when he and his men took over the arsenal in Harpers Ferry, Virginia, in hopes of starting a slave rebellion. He sent several of his men into the countryside to get slaves to join him. However, enslaved African Americans did not come to Harpers Ferry, fearing punishment if they took part. Instead, local white southerners attacked Brown. Eight of his men and three local men were killed. Brown and some followers retreated to a firehouse.

Federal troops arrived in Harpers Ferry the following night. The next morning, Colonel Robert E. Lee ordered a squad of marines to storm the firehouse. In a matter of seconds, the marines killed two more of Brown’s men and captured the rest—including Brown.

Brown was quickly convicted of treason, murder, and conspiracy. Some of his men received death sentences. John A. Copeland, a
fugitive slave, defended his actions. “If I am dying for freedom, I could not die for a better cause.” Convinced that he also would be sentenced to death, Brown delivered a memorable speech.

“Now, if it is deemed [thought] necessary that I should forfeit [give up] my life for the furtherance of the ends of justice, and mingle [mix] my blood ... with the blood of millions in this slave country whose rights are disregarded by wicked, cruel, and unjust enactments, I say, let it be done.”

—John Brown, quoted in John Brown, 1800–1859 by Oswald Garrison Villard

As expected, the judge ordered Brown to be hanged. The sentence was carried out one month later on December 2, 1859.

Many northerners mourned John Brown’s death, but some abolitionists criticized his extreme actions. Abraham Lincoln said Brown “agreed with us in thinking slavery wrong.” However, Lincoln continued, “That cannot excuse violence, bloodshed, and treason.”

Most southern whites—both slaveholders and non-slaveholders—felt threatened by the actions of John Brown. They worried that a “John Brown the Second” might attack. One South Carolina newspaper voiced these fears: “We are convinced the safety of the South lies only outside the present Union.” Another newspaper stated that “the sooner we get out of the Union, the better.”

**Reading Check** Drawing Conclusions

Why did John Brown’s raid lead some southerners to talk about leaving the Union?

**Election of 1860**

In this climate of distrust, Americans prepared for another presidential election in 1860. The northern and southern Democrats could not agree on a candidate. Northern
Democrats chose Senator Stephen Douglas. Southern Democrats backed the current vice president, John C. Breckinridge of Kentucky, who supported slavery in the territories.

Meanwhile, a new political party emerged. The Constitutional Union Party recognized “no political principles other than the Constitution of the country, the Union of the states, and the enforcement of the laws.” Their platform was a reaction against the idea of states’ rights. Members of this new party met in Baltimore, Maryland, and selected John Bell of Tennessee as their candidate. Bell was a slaveholder, but he had opposed the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854.

Senator William Seward of New York was the Republicans’ leading candidate at the start of their convention. But it turned out that Lincoln appealed to more party members. A moderate who was against the spread of slavery, Lincoln promised not to abolish slavery where it already existed.

Douglas, Breckinridge, and Bell each knew he might not win the election. They hoped to win enough electoral votes to prevent Lincoln from winning in the electoral college. But with a unified Republican Party behind him, Lincoln won. Although he received the highest number of votes, he won only about 40 percent of the overall popular vote.

Lincoln won 180 of 183 electoral votes in free states. Douglas had the second-highest number of popular votes, but he won only one state. He earned just 12 electoral votes. Breckinridge and Bell split electoral votes in other slave states.

The election results angered southerners. Lincoln did not campaign in their region and did not carry any southern states, but he became the next president. The election signaled that the South was losing its national political power.

**Reading Check** Analyzing Why was Lincoln viewed by many as a moderate candidate during his campaign for the presidency?
The South Secedes

Lincoln insisted that he would not change slavery in the South. However, he said that slavery could not expand and thus would eventually die out completely. That idea angered many southerners.

Southerners’ Reactions

People in the South believed their economy and way of life would be destroyed without slave labor. They reacted immediately. Within a week of Lincoln’s election, South Carolina’s legislature called for a special convention. The delegates considered secession. Southern secessionists believed that they had a right to leave the Union. They pointed out that each of the original states had voluntarily joined the Union by holding a special convention that had ratified the Constitution. Surely, they reasoned, states could leave the Union by the same process.

Critics of secession thought this argument was ridiculous. President Buchanan said the Union was not “a mere voluntary association of States, to be dissolved at pleasure by any one of the contracting parties.” President-elect Abraham Lincoln agreed, saying, “No State, upon its own mere motion, can lawfully get out of the Union.” Lincoln added, “They can only do so against [the] law, and by revolution.” The states’ rights debate over the meaning of the Constitution had reached its tensest moment. Congress worked urgently for yet another compromise to ease the tension.

While the South Carolina representatives were meeting in Charleston to discuss secession, Congress examined a plan to save the Union. Senator John J. Crittenden of Kentucky proposed a series of constitutional amendments that he believed would satisfy the South by protecting slavery. Crittenden hoped the country could avoid secession and a civil war.

Lincoln disagreed with Crittenden’s plan. He believed there could be no compromise about the extension of slavery. Lincoln wrote, “The tug has to come and better now than later.” A Senate committee voted on Crittenden’s plan, and every Republican rejected it, as Lincoln had requested.

Rebel Government

This photograph is of the inauguration of Jefferson Davis as the president of the Confederate States of America. A former U.S. secretary of war, Davis was elected president of the Confederacy in 1861.

How does this photo show the state of the southern government?
The Confederate States of America

South Carolina elected to dissolve “the union now subsisting [existing] between South Carolina and other States” on December 20, 1860. Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, and Texas also seceded to form the Confederate States of America, also called the Confederacy. Its new constitution guaranteed citizens the right to own slaves.

Delegates from seceded states elected Jefferson Davis of Mississippi as president of the Confederacy. Davis had hoped to be the commanding general of Mississippi’s troops. He responded to the news of his election with reluctance.

When the southern states seceded, the question of who owned federal property in the South arose. For instance, the forts in the harbor of Charleston, South Carolina, were federal property. However, Confederate president Davis and the Confederacy were ready to prevent the federal army from controlling the property.

Lincoln Takes Office

President Lincoln was inaugurated on March 4, 1861. In writing his inaugural address, Lincoln looked to many of the nation’s founding documents. Referring to the idea that governments receive “their just powers from the consent of the governed,” a line from the Declaration of Independence, Lincoln stated, “This country, with its institutions, belongs to the people who inhabit it. Whenever they grow weary of the existing Government, they can exercise their constitutional right of amending it or their revolutionary right to dismember [take apart] or overthrow it. I can not be ignorant of the fact that many worthy and patriotic citizens are desirous [wanting] of having the National Constitution amended . . .”

While he believed that U.S. citizens had the power to change their government through majority consent, he opposed the idea that southern states could leave the Union because they were unhappy with the government’s position on slavery.

He announced in his inaugural address that he would keep all government property in the seceding states. However, he also tried to convince southerners that his government would not provoke a war. He hoped that, given time, southern states would return to the Union.

Reading Check Drawing Conclusions Why did some southern states secede from the Union?

Summary and Preview The secession of the southern states hinted at the violence to come. In the next chapter you will read about the Civil War.

Section 4 Assessment

Reviewing Ideas, Terms, and People

1. a. Recall Why did John Brown want to seize the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry? b. Explain Why did some abolitionists disagree with Brown’s actions?

2. a. Identify List the candidates in the presidential election of 1860, and what party each supported. b. Predict How might Abraham Lincoln’s victory in the election of 1860 lead to future problems?

3. a. Identify What states made up the Confederate States of America? b. Explain Why did Lincoln disagree with John J. Crittenden’s plan to keep the Union together? c. Elaborate Do you believe that the southern states had the right to secede? Why or why not?

Critical Thinking

4. Summarizing Review your notes on the significant people in the section. Then copy the graphic organizer below and use it to summarize the causes of secession.

Focus on Writing

5. Taking Notes on Secession Make some notes on the raid on Harpers Ferry, the election of 1860, and the secession of the South. Decide how your character feels about each of these. How do these events affect your character?