
What Caused the Civil War?

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A Document Based Question (DBQ)

STUDENT GUIDE SHEET

What Caused the Civil War?

Directions: In April 1861, the 33 states that made up the United States of America went to war against each other. The war was to last four long, heart-wrenching years and cost the lives of more than 600,000 Northern and Southern soldiers. The reasons for the war have been debated by historians and citizens ever since. This DBQ asks the classic question, “What Caused the Civil War?”

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It is suggested that you follow these steps:

1. Do the Hook Exercise.
2. Read the Background Essay.
3. Skim through the 14 documents to get a sense of what they are about.
4. Read the documents slowly. In the margins, or on a Document Analysis Sheet, record the main idea of each document.
5. Organize the documents by analytical category or bucket.
6. Develop a thesis and, using the evidence in the documents, argue what caused the Civil War.

The Documents:

- Document A: Railroads and Slave Density / Cotton (Maps)
- Document B: Resources of the Union and the Confederacy, 1861: (Chart)
- Document C: Two Economies: The Impending Crisis of the South
- Document D: Cotton is King: James H. Hammond
- Document E: The Compact Theory of Government
- Document F: Lincoln on the Union
- Document G: Frederick Douglass
- Document H: Cannibals All!
- Document I: The Reaction to John Brown
- Document J: Kansas - Nebraska Act (Map)
- Document K: The Caning of Charles Sumner (Cartoon)
- Document L: The Dred Scott Decision
- Document M: House Divided
- Document N: The Election of 1860 (Map)

What Caused the Civil War?

On September 11, 2001, terrorists attacked and killed nearly 3000 Americans. Over 2700 died in the Trade Towers alone. These violent acts led to American involvement in wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. By mid-July, 2007, coupled with the September 11 disaster, the war on terror had claimed over 6000 American lives. Seeing no end to the crisis, many Americans were confused and troubled.

Now step back to another time, and another war. It is early morning September 17, 1862. Dawn is breaking along Antietam Creek, near Sharpsburg, Maryland. 55,000 Confederate troops under Robert E. Lee are squared off against an even larger Union force led by George McClellan.

Hell breaks loose – and in the space of several hours in the West Woods, along Bloody Lane, in the false cover of Miller’s 20-acre cornfield – 4800 Confederate and Union soldiers lie dead on the field. Another 18,000 are wounded. Though particularly bloody, Antietam is just one day in a war that by 1865 will claim over 600,000 Yankee and Rebel lives. The death toll of the Civil War is equivalent to a Trade Tower disaster occurring every Tuesday for four years.

This comparison is not to minimize the horror of September 11, or the tragedy of the war in Iraq. It is meant to underscore the fearful devastation of the Civil War. This DBQ asks how such a war came to be.

Preserving the Delicate Balance

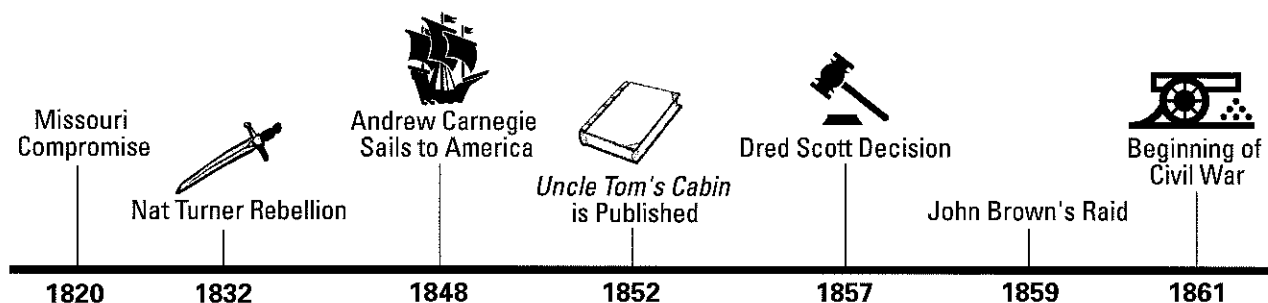
The United States had been divided, North

and South, from its beginning. The framers of the Constitution did not even use the word “slave” in the document, fearing that the Southern states would not then join the new government. They devised the awkward Three-fifths Compromise which gave slave states the right to count slaves as three-fifths of a person in order to pad their representation in the House but denied any right of citizenship to those slaves. Thus began a pattern whereby the United States’ leaders chose to compromise rather than take a chance on tearing the new nation apart.

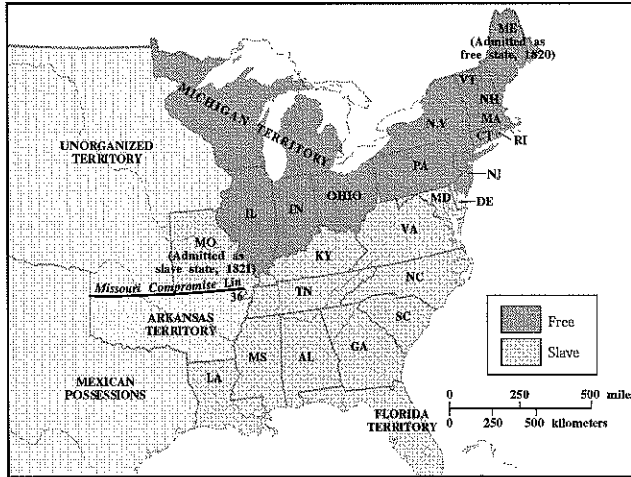
For the next seventy years the United States was like a teacup sitting close to the edge of a shelf. Whenever American politicians forgot to leave their heavy boots at the door, the teacup would rattle and shiver ever closer to the edge. This happened quite regularly when new states applied for admission to the Union. North and South both feared that the other would overpower it in Congress. The balance between slave and free states had to be maintained.

The Northwest Ordinance of 1787 excluded slavery from the area north of the Ohio River known as the Northwest Territory, but slave holders moved west to new Southern states like Alabama and Mississippi. The teacup rocked but stayed on the shelf.

In 1820 Congress solved a new crisis by admitting Maine to the Union as a free state to balance the admission of Missouri as a slave state. This was the famous Missouri Compromise. At the same time it was decided that slavery would henceforth be prohibited



north of the southern boundary of Missouri – 36 degrees 30 minutes.



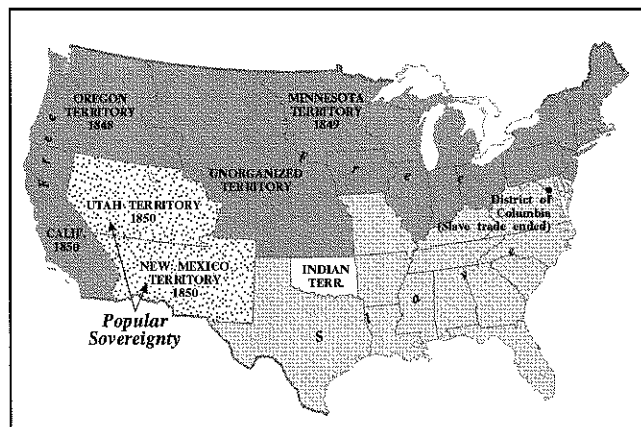
After eight years of relative calm, tension between North and South soon arose in a different form – economic conflict. In 1828, and again in 1832, the issue of tariffs threatened to tear the United States apart. A tariff is an import tax on goods coming into a country. It is designed to protect domestic producers. When foreign businesses have to pay a tax on what they sell, they must raise the prices they charge, making locally produced goods more attractive to buy. The South had little industry. It bought many manufactured goods either from Europe or from protected Northern businesses. The South felt overcharged and cheated.

When high protective tariffs were passed by Congress in 1828 and 1832, South Carolina, led by John Calhoun, threatened to nullify them, making them null and void within that state. This raised the issue of states' rights. Did states have the right to ignore federal laws they didn't like? Calhoun claimed that the states had the final say on which laws they will obey. There were threats of secession from Southern congressmen. After long and bitter debate, a bill with lower tariffs was passed. Again, a compromise kept the teacup from crashing to the floor, but the cloud of states' rights hung over the country.

The Compromise of 1850

In 1850 the United States was evenly divided

with fifteen free states and fifteen slave states. With the recent addition of new territory resulting from the war with Mexico, this balance was again in jeopardy. California pressed Congress for admission as a free state. In the midst of threats of secession from Southerners who feared a loss of political power, Congress, under the leadership of Henry Clay and Stephen Douglas, reached yet another compromise. A deal was made. For the North, California was admitted as a free state and the slave trade (but not slavery) was abolished in the District of Columbia. For the South, a new and stricter Fugitive Slave law was enacted and the remainder of the Mexican Cession – the territories of New Mexico and Utah – would be formed into states without restrictions on slavery. The people in those states would have the right to decide for themselves whether to be slave or free by a



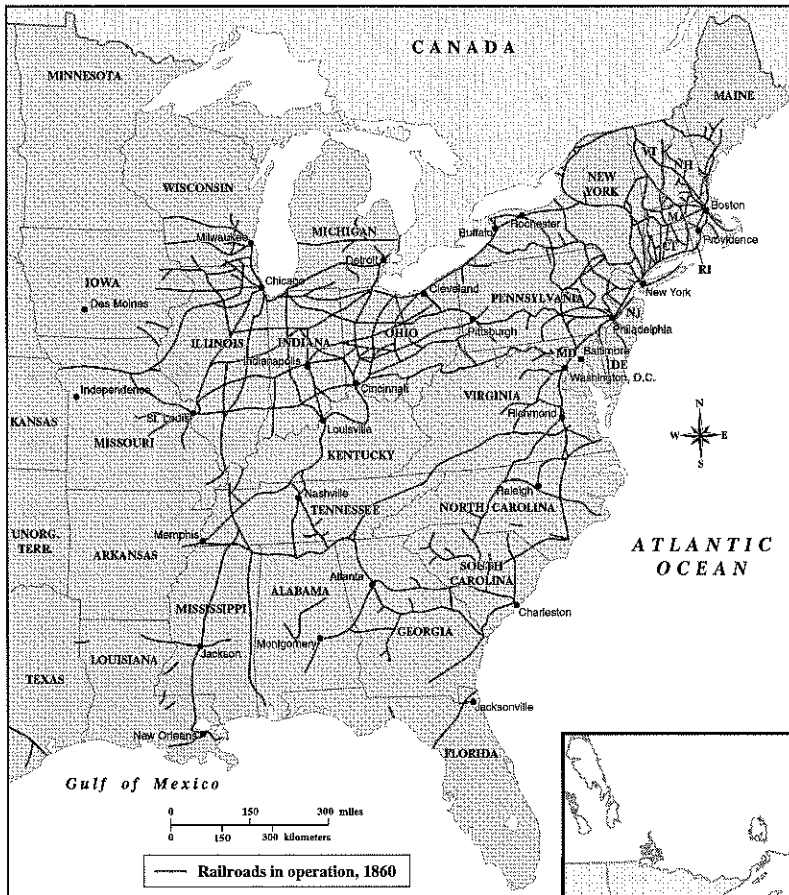
vote, a process called popular sovereignty. The tea cup was saved once again.

Compromises, by their nature, rarely totally satisfy anyone, but as the 1850s began, the United States had weathered several sectional crises and remained intact. Yet, by 1861 the country was at war. What follows are 14 documents which help explain why the Civil War was fought. It is not intended that the documents tell the whole story. History – and the Civil War – is more complicated than that. However, the documents do tell important parts of the story. Use them as best you can to answer the question before us, “What Caused the Civil War?”

Document A

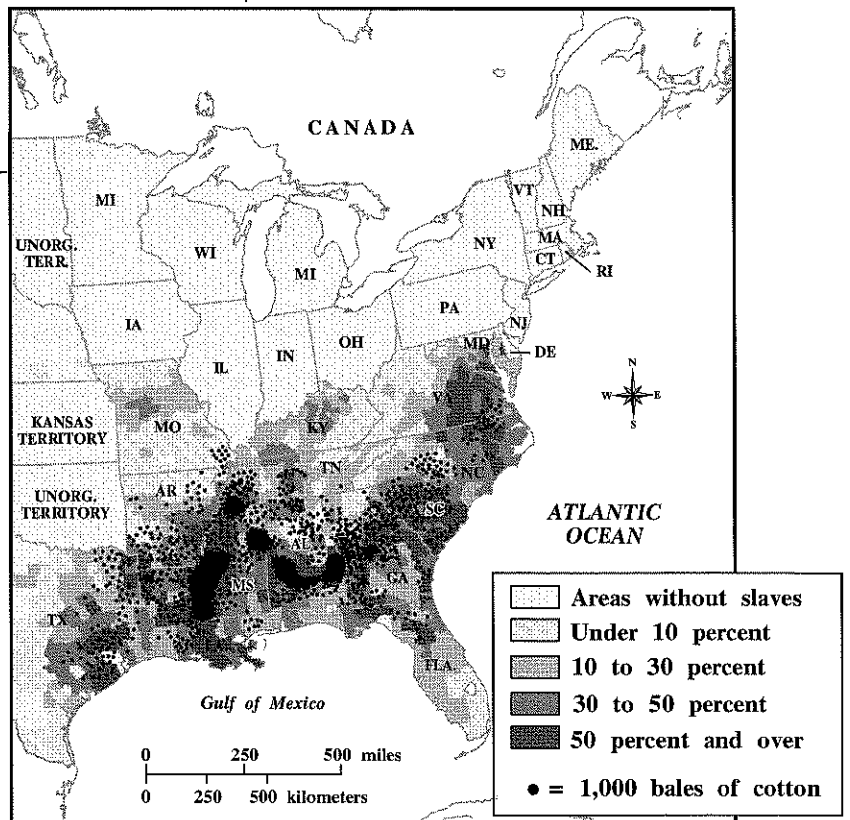
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Source: Maps created from various sources.



Railroads in 1860

Slave Density and Cotton Production, 1860

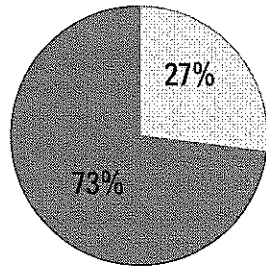


Document B

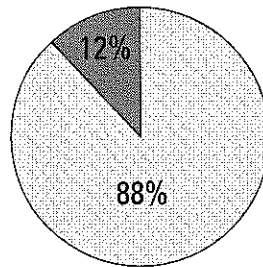
Source: Allen Weinstein and R. Jackson Wilson, *Freedom and Crisis: An American History*, New York: Random House, 1974, and Philip Roden et. al., *Life and Liberty*, Vol. 2, Scott, Foresman and Company, Glenview, Illinois, 1980.

Resources of the Union and the Confederacy, 1861

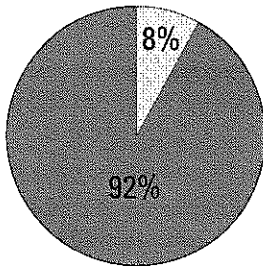
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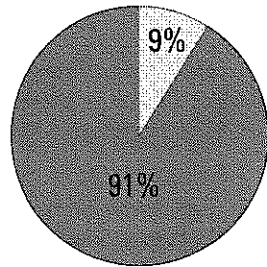
Total Population
 North: 23,000,000
 South: 8,700,000



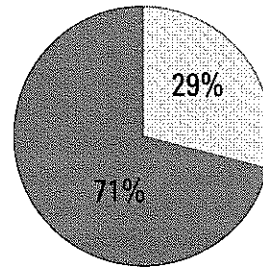
Slave Population
 North: Free States 0
 North: Border States 430,000
 South: 3,500,000



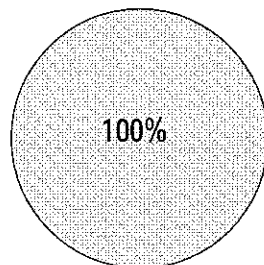
Industrial Workers
 North: 1,300,000
 South: 110,000



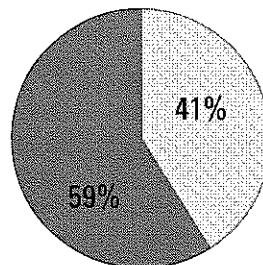
Yearly Value of Manufactured Goods
 North: \$1,500,000,000
 South: \$155,000,000



Railroad Mileage
 North: 22,000
 South: 9,000



Cotton (bales)
 North: 0
 South: 5,000,000



Corn (bushels)
 North: 396,000,000
 South: 280,000,000

Document C

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Source: Hinton Helper, *The Impending Crisis of the South*, Burdick Brothers, New York, 1857.

It is a fact well known to every intelligent Southerner that we are compelled to go to the North for almost every article of utility and adornment, from matches, shoepegs and paintings up to cotton-mills, steamships and ...; that we have no foreign trade, no princely merchants, nor respectable artists; that, in comparison with the free states, we contribute nothing to the literature, polite arts and inventions of the age; that, for want of profitable employment at home, large numbers of our native population find themselves necessitated to emigrate to the West, whilst the free states retain not only the larger proportion of those born within their own limits, but induce, annually, hundreds of thousands of foreigners to settle and remain amongst them; that almost everything produced at the North meets with ready sale, while, at the same time, there is no demand, even among our own citizens, for the productions of Southern industry; ...and that we are dependent on Northern capitalists for the means necessary to build our railroads, canals and other public improvements....

Note: Hinton Helper was a well known political writer from North Carolina.

Document D

Source: South Carolina Senator James Hammond speaking before the US Senate, March 4, 1858.
From the Letters and Speeches of the Hon. James H. Hammond of South Carolina,
New York: John F. Trow and Co, 1866.

It appears ... that last year (1857) the United States exported in round numbers \$279,000,000 worth of domestic products. Of this amount \$158,000,000 worth is the clear produce of the South; articles (like cotton and rice) that are not and cannot be made at the North.

In addition to this, we sent to the North \$30,000,000 worth of cotton, which is not counted in the exports. We sent her \$7 or \$8,000,000 worth of tobacco, which is not counted in the exports. We sent naval stores, lumber, rice, and many other minor articles. There is no doubt that we sent to the North \$40,000,000... If I am right in my calculations, ...there is not a nation on earth, with any numerous population, that can compete with us on produce per capita.

... What would happen if no cotton was furnished for three years? ... England would topple headlong and carry the whole civilized world with her.... No, you dare not make war on cotton. No power on earth dares to make war upon it. Cotton is king.

Document E

Source: John C. Calhoun, Senator from South Carolina, "A Discourse on the Constitution and Government of the United States," in *The Works of John Calhoun*, Vol. I, New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1853.

... a State, as a party to the constitutional compact, has the right to secede, – acting in the same capacity in which it ratified the constitution All this results, necessarily, from the nature of a compact between sovereign parties.

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Document F

Source: Abraham Lincoln, "First Inaugural Address," March 4, 1861. From A. Craig Baird, (Ed.), *American Public Addresses, 1740-1952*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1956.

I hold that, in contemplation of universal law and of the Constitution, the Union of these States is perpetual. Perpetuity is implied, if not expressed, in the fundamental law of all national governments. It is safe to assert that no government proper ever had a provision in its organic law for its own termination.



Document G

Source: Frederick Douglass, "The Meaning of July Fourth for the Negro," a speech delivered in Rochester, New York, July 5, 1852.

Document Note: This passage is from a speech given by the famous African-American abolitionist, Frederick Douglass. Douglass was himself an escaped slave from Maryland. His audience was almost entirely white Northerners. Douglass was 34 at the time.

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What, to the American slave, is your 4th of July? I answer, a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim. To him, your celebration is a sham; your boasted liberty, an unholy license; your national greatness, swelling vanity; your sounds of rejoicing are empty and heartless; your denunciation of tyrants brass fronted impudence; your shout of liberty and equality, hollow mockery; your prayers and hymns, your sermons and thanks-givings, with all your religious parade and solemnity, are to him, mere bombast, fraud, deception, impiety, and hypocrisy – a thin veil to cover up crimes which would disgrace a nation of savages. There is not a nation on the earth guilty of practices more shocking and bloody than are the people of the United States, at this very hour.

Document H

Source: George Fitzhugh, *Cannibals All! Or Slaves Without Masters*, Richmond, Virginia, 1857.

The Negro slaves of the South are the happiest, and, in some sense, the freest people in the world. The children and the aged infirm work not at all, and yet have all the comforts and necessities of life provided for them. They enjoy liberty, because they are oppressed neither by care nor labor. The women do little hard work, and are protected from the despotism of their husbands by their masters. The Negro men and stout boys work, on the average, in good weather, not more than nine hours a day. The balance of their time is spent in perfect abandon. Besides, they have their Sabbaths and holidays. White men, with so much of license and liberty would die of ennui; but Negroes luxuriate in corporeal and mental repose. With their faces upturned to the sun, they can sleep at any hour; and quiet sleep is the greatest of human enjoyments....

...We do not know if free laborers ever sleep. They are fools to do so; for whilst they sleep, the wily and watchful capitalist is devising means to ensnare and exploitate (sic) them. The free laborer must work or starve. He is more of a slave than the Negro, because he works longer and harder for less allowance than the slave, and has no holiday, because the cares of life begin when its labors end. He has no liberty, and not a single right.... Free laborers have not a thousandth part of the rights and liberties of the Negro slaves. Indeed, they have not a single liberty, unless it be the right or liberty to die.

Note: Fitzhugh was a sociologist from North Carolina. *Cannibals All!* was one of his most famous books.

Document I

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Source: Gerald Danzer et al, *The Americans*, Evanston, Illinois, McDougall Littell, 1998.

The Reaction to John Brown

... On the night of October 16, 1859, (John Brown) led a band of 18 men, black and white, into Harpers Ferry, Virginia (now West Virginia). His aim was to seize the federal arsenal there, distribute the captured arms to slaves in the area, and start a general slave uprising.

No such uprising occurred, though. Instead, local troops killed eight of Brown's men. Then a detachment of U.S. marines, commanded by Colonel Robert E. Lee, ...killed two more of the raiders, and captured Brown. Brown was turned over to Virginia to be tried for treason.

... On December 2, 1859, Brown was hanged for treason in the presence of federal troops and a crowd of curious observers. Public reaction was immediate and intense in both sections of the country. Although Lincoln and (Stephen) Douglas condemned Brown as a murderer, many other Northerners expressed admiration for him or his cause. The raid itself may have been the work of a madman, they acknowledged, but Brown's motive was "sublime." Bells tolled at the news of his execution, guns fired salutes, and large crowds gathered to hear fiery speakers denounce the South. Some Northerners began to call Brown a martyr for the sacred cause of freedom.

The response was equally extreme in the South, where outraged mobs assaulted whites who were suspected of holding antislavery views. Harpers Ferry terrified Southern whites, who were convinced the North was plotting slave uprisings everywhere. Even long-time supporters of the Union called for secession. As one former Unionist explained, "I am willing to take the chances of ... disunion, sooner than submit any longer to Northern insolence and Northern outrage."

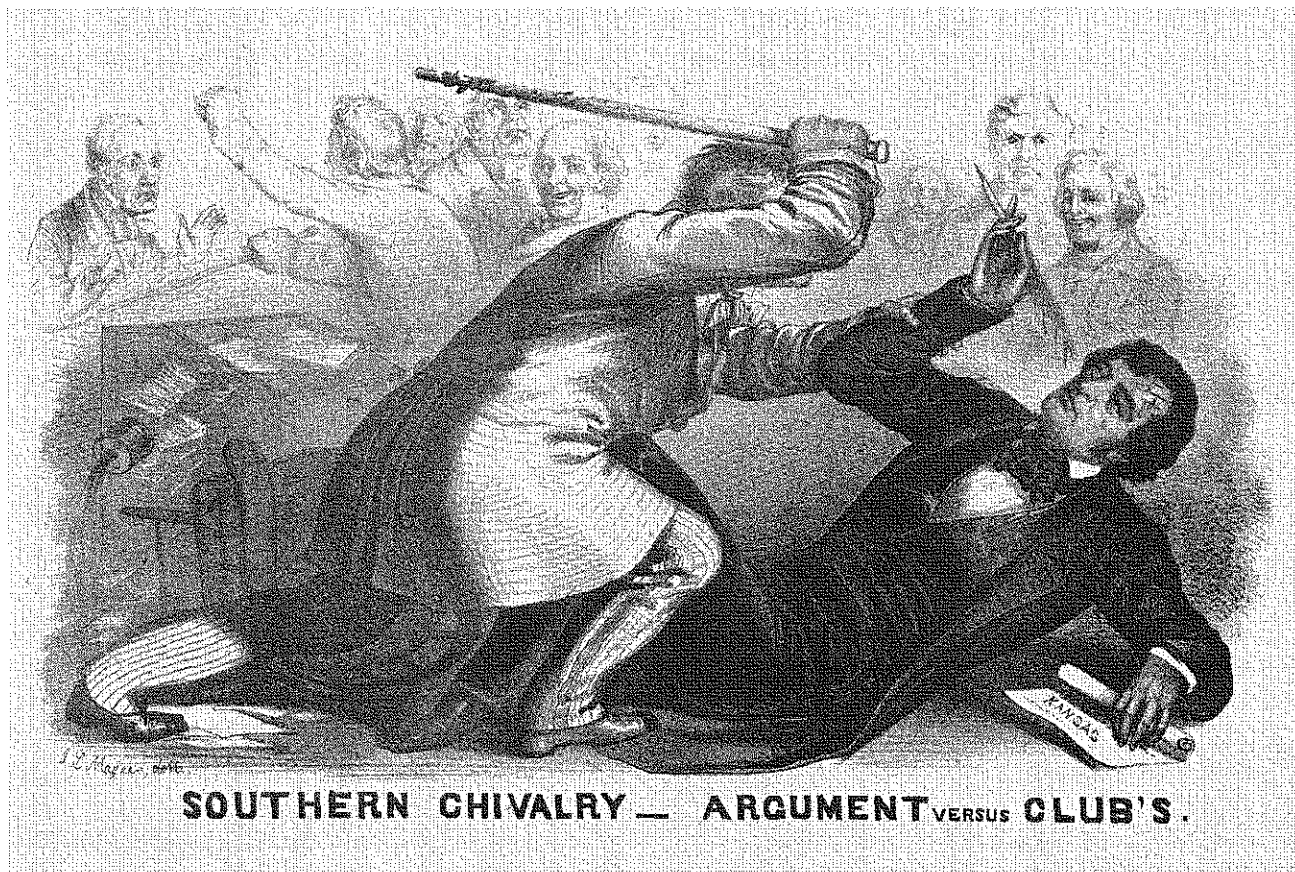
Document K

Source: Harry T. Peters, "America on Stone" Lithography Collection, National Museum of American History, Behring Center, Smithsonian Institution. Cartoon created in 1856.

Document Note: On May 19 and 20, 1856 Senator Charles Sumner, an abolitionist from Massachusetts, delivered a long speech entitled "The Crime Against Kansas." The occasion was the Senate debate over the Kansas-Nebraska bill. Sumner attacked pro-slavery men as "hirelings from the drunken spew and vomit of an uneasy civilization." He then went on to insult South Carolina and one of its Senators, the well-liked Senator Andrew Butler.

Two days after the speech, Butler's kinsman, Preston Brooks, himself a member of the House of Representatives, burst in to the Senate chambers and beat Sumner with a cane. Sumner's injuries were serious enough that he had to retire from the Senate for three years. Sympathetic Southerners sent Brooks dozens of gold-headed canes to replace the one he broke over Sumner's head. Northerners published thousands of copies of Sumner's speech and vilified "Bully Brooks."

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Document L

Source: The Dred Scott Decision, 1857. Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, Roger Taney.

Document Note: Dred Scott was a slave whose owner had taken him from a slave state to the free North to live for several years. After returning to Missouri, Scott sued for his freedom on the grounds that he had become free by living in free territory. His case eventually made it to the US Supreme Court where all eyes, North and South, eagerly awaited a verdict.

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The question is simply this: Can a Negro, whose ancestors were imported into this country, and sold as slaves, become a member of the political community.

... (T)he legislation and the histories of the times and the language used in the Declaration of Independence, show, that neither ... slaves, nor their descendants, whether they had become free or not, were ... a part of the people.... They had for more than a century before been regarded as beings of an inferior order, and altogether unfit to associate with the white race, whether in social or political relations; and so far inferior, that they had no rights which the white man was bound to respect.... And, accordingly, a Negro of the African race was regarded by them as an article of property....

... (T)he fifth amendment to the Constitution... provides that no person shall be deprived of life, liberty, and property without due process of law.... (I)t is the opinion of this court that the Act of Congress (the Missouri Compromise) which prohibited a citizen from holding and owning property of this kind (slaves) in the territory of the United States north of the line therein mentioned, is not warranted by the Constitution, and is therefore void.

Document M

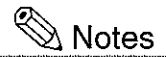
Source: Abraham Lincoln, speech when accepting the Republican nomination for US Senator from Illinois, June 16, 1858, Springfield, Illinois.

...We are now far into the fifth year since a policy (the Kansas-Nebraska Act) was initiated ... of putting an end to slavery agitation.... In my opinion, it will not cease until a crisis shall have been reached and passed. "A house divided against itself cannot stand." I believe this government cannot endure permanently half slave and half free. I do not expect the Union to be dissolved – I do not expect the house to fall – but I do expect it will cease to be divided. It will become all one thing, or all the other. Either the opponents of slavery will arrest the further spread of it, and place it where the public mind shall rest in the belief that it is in the course of ultimate extinction; or its advocates will push it forward till it shall become lawful in all the states, old as well as new, North as well as South.

Have we no tendency to the latter condition? ...Let anyone who doubts carefully contemplate ... the Nebraska doctrine and the Dred Scott decision.

... Two years ago (in the 1856 election) the Republicans of the nation mustered over thirteen hundred thousand strong. We did this under the single impulse of resistance to a common danger.... We shall not fail – if we stand firm, we shall not fail.... (S)ooner or later, the victory is sure to come.

Document N



Source: Map created from various sources.

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