Background

What follows are brief descriptions of the key figures (and their related political parties) leading up to the 1860 presidential election:

**William Lloyd Garrison** (1805-1879) was an abolitionist orator and editor of The Liberator. He began as a moderate abolitionist, arguing for gradual emancipation and somewhat open to colonization of black Americans. But his association with Quaker abolitionist Benjamin Lundy brought a greater urgency and fervor to Garrison's abolitionism. He believed the U.S. Constitution was more hindrance than help in the cause of emancipation because it tolerated slavery in southern states and called it "a covenant with death and an agreement with hell." By 1844, Garrison and his American Anti-Slavery Society welcomed disunion so free states would not have to enforce the federal fugitive slave law and no longer have to work with slaveholding states. He employed an inflammatory rhetoric that made rebuke rather than persuasion the hallmark of his appeals to the nation's conscience. "I have need to be all on fire," he once remarked, "for I have mountains of ice about me to melt." Despite his militant abolitionism, he was a pacifist who did not believe politics or any coercion could achieve God's purposes on earth.

**Frederick Douglass** (1818-1895) was an escaped slave who joined William Lloyd Garrison as an abolition speaker and journalist. They eventually parted ways when he rejected Garrison's pro-slavery view of the Constitution. "I hold that *in* the Union," Douglass wrote in 1855, "this very thing of restoring to the slave his long-lost rights, can better be accomplished than it can possibly be accomplished *outside* of the Union." Douglass acknowledged the constitutional compromises with slavery, at least in its application, but he viewed it as a document that "leaned toward freedom." He argued that a pro-liberty interpretation of the Constitution committed the federal government to no more concessions to the southern slaveholding interest. That said, after Lincoln's election, Douglass did toy with the idea of accepting southern secession so that renegade runs into the South ("the John Brown way") could spur the liberation of fugitive slaves, who would no longer be returned from the North. During the Civil War, he was perhaps Lincoln's most famous loyal opposition, urging him at every stage of the conflict to do more for emancipation and to arm the freedmen. He eventually considered Lincoln the savior of both the Union and black Americans.

**Stephen Douglas** (1813-1861) believed that his "popular sovereignty" policy, enshrined in the 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act see Lesson Plan Three in this unit, ([The Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854](http://edsitement.neh.gov/lesson-plan/kansas-nebraska-act-1854-popular-sovereignty-and-political-polarization-over-slavery)), solved the slavery controversy by removing it from national discussion and placing it in the hands of the territorial settlers themselves. What could be more American, more democratic, than what he called "the sacred right of self-government"?! He believed that this also positioned him as the only truly national candidate for the presidency. After all, the Republican Party stood with the abolitionists against slavery, which made them a sectional (northern) party due to their anti-southern slave interest. Similarly, southern Democrats sought stronger federal protection of slavery in all federal territories, making them a sectional faction—a conviction that eventually led to their bolting from the first national Democratic Convention in 1860.

In short, Stephen Douglas was a free-state Democratic senator and 1860 Northern Democratic presidential nominee who believed the following about slavery and the Constitution, and the American union: (1) neutral toward slavery, i.e., his "don't care," federal non-intervention policy toward slavery in the territories; (2) pro-Constitution with a "popular sovereignty" interpretation of self-government that applied at the territorial level as well as the state level, with Congress leaving states and now territories to protect or exclude slavery as they sought fit; and (3) pro-Union, as witnessed by his fervent campaigning on Lincoln's behalf after he saw both that Lincoln's election was inevitable and that southern states would use his election as reason to secede from the union.

**Jefferson Davis** (1808-1889) and **William Lowndes Yancey** (1814-1863) were southern, slaveholding, Democratic senators who believed in a pro-slavery Constitution to the point of demanding in 1860 that Congress protect by law the property right of a slaveholder to take his slaves into a federal territory. In addition, they supported the Constitution, but believed that states retained their sovereignty within a federal structure. This "states' rights" view held that each state delegated only a portion of its powers to the national government and thus could leave or "secede" from the union if it deemed that sufficient violations of the federal compact were committed by other states: for example, a few free states passed personal liberty laws to prevent local enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850.

**Abraham Lincoln** (1809-1865) thought that the future of self-government was at stake in how American citizens decided to resolve the slavery controversy. Against the Garrisonian abolitionists, who hoped to purify the nation of the admitted blot of slavery, Lincoln thought Americans should neither disparage the rule of law nor encourage their erring southern brethren to "secede" from or leave the Union. Nor should they adopt Stephen Douglas's "Don't Care" policy of popular sovereignty, for this would teach them that there exist no principles upon which to base their vote or their very constitutional regime. It would turn republican self-government—which is based upon the natural equality of human beings that gives rise to government by consent of the governed—into crude majoritarianism, where the only principle of governance is mere self-interest.

In short, Abraham Lincoln was a former Illinois Whig congressman and 1860 Republican presidential nominee who believed the following about slavery, the Constitution, and the American union: (1) anti-slavery in principle and in practice, who argued against slavery's extension into federal territories but tolerated it where it already existed in American states as a domestic (i.e., non-federal) institution and one who hoped and worked for emancipation by state initiative and eventually a federal amendment, but emphatically not an abolitionist because they elevated emancipation above preserving the Constitution and the rule of law; (2) pro-Constitution, which he saw as a pro-liberty document, and pro-Union as long as it embodied and operated according to the principles of the Declaration of Independence.

Against the view of southern Democrats like Jefferson Davis and William Lowndes Yancey, Lincoln believed in restricting the extension of slavery in hopes that this would put slavery "on the course of ultimate extinction." Specifically, he supported Congress' right to do so under the federal constitution and made this the newly formed Republican Party's reason for being, which he saw as the linchpin that secured the various elements of the fusionist party of Free-Soilers, former Whigs, and Nativists. But he acknowledged the legal right to own slaves under state constitutions that already permitted it and which the U.S. Constitution respected through compromises that helped produce "a more perfect union." To this end, Lincoln recognized both the constitutional imperative to return fugitive slaves to their claimants and the fractious condition of the country, and hence did not seek the repeal of the notorious fugitive slave act of 1850, which was part of the Great Compromise of 1850.

The future would show that as president, Lincoln attempted to preserve a constitutional regime from the physical force of rebellious southerners, as well as the rhetorical force of impatient abolitionists: the former were unwilling to obey a duly-elected Republican administration, while the latter were unwilling to support a constitutional union that respected the right of southern citizens to hold slaves.