14.2: The Election of 1860 and Secession

The 1860 presidential election was chaotic. In April, the Democratic Party convened in Charleston, South Carolina, the bastion of secessionist thought in the South. The goal was to nominate a candidate for the party ticket, but the party was deeply divided. Northern Democrats pulled for Senator Stephen Douglas, a pro-slavery moderate championing popular sovereignty, while southern Democrats were intent on endorsing someone other than Douglas. The parties’ leaders’ refusal to include a pro-slavery platform resulted in southern delegates walking out of the convention, preventing Douglas from gaining the two-thirds majority required for a nomination. The Democrats ended up with two presidential candidates. A subsequent convention in Baltimore nominated Douglas, while southerners nominated the current vice president, John C. Breckinridge of Kentucky, as their presidential candidate. The nation’s oldest party had split over differences in policy toward slavery.

Initially, the Republicans were hardly unified around a single candidate themselves. Several leading Republican men vied for their party’s nomination. A consensus emerged at the May 1860 convention that the party’s nominee would need to carry all the free states—for only in that situation could a Republican nominee potentially win. New York Senator William Seward, a leading contender, was passed over. Seward’s pro-immigrant position posed a potential obstacle, particularly in Pennsylvania and New Jersey. Abraham Lincoln of Illinois, as a relatively unknown but likable politician, rose from a pool of potential candidates and was selected by the delegates on the third ballot. The electoral landscape was further complicated through the emergence of a fourth candidate, Tennessee’s John Bell, heading the Constitutional Union Party. The Constitutional Unionists, composed of former Whigs who teamed up with some southern Democrats, made it their mission to avoid the specter of secession while doing little else to address the issues tearing the country apart.

Abraham Lincoln’s nomination proved a great windfall for the Republican Party. Lincoln carried all free states with the exception of New Jersey (which he split with Douglas). Of the voting electorate, 81.2 percent came out to vote—at that point the highest ever for a presidential election. Lincoln received less than 40 percent of the popular vote, but with the
field so split, that percentage yielded 180 electoral votes. Lincoln was trailed by Breckinridge with his 72 electoral votes, carrying eleven of the fifteen slave states; Bell came in third with 39 electoral votes; and Douglas came in last, only able to garner 12 electoral votes despite carrying almost 30 percent of the popular vote. Since the Republican platform prohibited the expansion of slavery in future western states, all future Confederate states, with the exception of Virginia, excluded Lincoln’s name from their ballots.³


The election of Lincoln and the perceived threat to the institution of slavery proved too much for the deep southern states. South Carolina acted almost immediately, calling a convention to declare secession. On December 20, 1860, the South Carolina convention voted unanimously 169–0 to dissolve their union with the United States.⁴ The other states across the Deep South quickly followed suit. Mississippi adopted their own resolution on January 9, 1861, Florida followed on January 10, Alabama on January 11, Georgia on January 19, Louisiana on January 26, and Texas on February 1. Texas was the only state to put the issue up for a popular vote, but secession was widely popular throughout the South.

Confederates quickly shed their American identity and adopted a new Confederate nationalism. Confederate nationalism was based on several ideals, foremost among these being slavery. As Confederate vice president Alexander Stephens stated, the Confederacy’s “foundations are laid, its cornerstone rests, upon the great truth that the negro is not equal to the white man; that slavery . . . is his natural and normal condition.”⁵ The election of Lincoln in 1860 demonstrated that the South was politically overwhelmed. Slavery was omnipresent in the prewar South, and it served as the most common frame of reference for unequal power. To a southern man, there was no fate more terrifying than the thought of being reduced to the level of a slave. Religion likewise shaped Confederate nationalism, as southerners believed that the Confederacy was fulfilling God’s will. The Confederacy even veered from the American constitution by explicitly invoking Christianity in their founding document. Yet in every case, all rationale for secession could be thoroughly tied to slavery. “Our position is thoroughly identified with the institution of slavery—the greatest material interest of the world,” proclaimed the Mississippi statement of secession.⁶ Thus for the original seven Confederate states (and the four that would subsequently join), slavery’s existence was the essential core of the fledging Confederacy.
Figure \(\PageIndex{2}\): The emblems of nationalism on this currency reveal much about the ideology underpinning the Confederacy: George Washington standing stately in a Roman toga indicates the belief in the South’s honorable and aristocratic past; John C. Calhoun’s portrait emphasizes the Confederate argument of the importance of states’ rights; and, most importantly, the image of African Americans working in fields demonstrates slavery’s position as foundational to the Confederacy. A five and one hundred dollar Confederate States of America interest bearing banknote, c. 1861 and 1862. Wikimedia.

Not all southerners participated in Confederate nationalism. Unionist southerners, most common in the upcountry where slavery was weakest, retained their loyalty to the Union. These southerners joined the Union army, that is, the army of the United States of America, and worked to defeat the Confederacy. Black southerners, most of whom were slaves, overwhelmingly supported the Union, often running away from plantations and forcing the Union army to reckon with slavery.

President James Buchanan would not directly address the issue of secession prior to his term’s end in early March. Any effort to try to solve the issue therefore fell upon Congress, specifically a Committee of Thirteen including prominent men such as Stephen Douglas, William Seward, Robert Toombs, and John Crittenden. In what became known as “Crittenden’s Compromise,” Senator Crittenden proposed a series of Constitutional amendments that guaranteed slavery in southern states and territories, denied the federal government interstate slave trade regulatory power, and offered to compensate owners of unrecovered fugitive slaves. The Committee of Thirteen ultimately voted down the measure, and it likewise failed in the full Senate vote (25–23). Reconciliation appeared impossible.

The seven seceding states met in Montgomery, Alabama on February 4 to organize a new nation. The delegates selected Jefferson Davis of Mississippi as president and established a capital in Montgomery, Alabama (it would move to Richmond in May). Whether other states of the Upper South would join the Confederacy remained uncertain. By the early spring of 1861, North Carolina and Tennessee had not held secession conventions, while voters in Virginia, Missouri, and Arkansas initially voted down secession. Despite this temporary boost to the Union, it became abundantly clear that these acts of loyalty in the Upper South were highly conditional and relied on a clear lack of intervention on the part of the federal government. This was the precarious political situation facing Abraham Lincoln following his inauguration on March 4, 1861.