

THE POLITICAL QUADRILLE

by Michael R. Potts
CWH Staff Writer



The sound was victory as Springfield church bells rang shortly after midnight on 7 November, 1860. The citizens of the Illinois capital, still alert from the previous morning's Election Day spirit, could now rejoice. Abraham Lincoln, the tall, awkward looking attorney whom most in the city considered a friend, was now the President-elect of the United States. With all of the tallies in, Lincoln, too, could rejoice and finally unwind from the trying day.



The election of 1860 was a microcosm of the social and political attitudes of the country...it was filled with division and divisiveness, with greed and rivalries



The task at hand for Lincoln, a daunting one to be sure, was to bridge the split in his country. But perhaps when he finally laid down his head that night, he rested easier knowing that he had just triumphed over such division on a smaller scale. The election of 1860 was a microcosm of the social and political attitudes of the country. One of the most pivotal elections in the history of our nation, the election of 1860 was filled with division and divisiveness, with greed and rivalries.

Advances in technology played a large role in the country's division. As technology increased in the North, so too did urbanization and immigration, fanning the flames lit by anti-

foreign born nativists. Simultaneously, the improvement of transportation continued westward expansion. The South also felt the changes of technological advancement. Improved technology gave way to a higher production of cotton, thus intensifying the region's reliance on slavery.¹ For decades, the social and economic differences highlighted by the advance of technology had given rise to a whole host of sectional issues. Now these issues had entrenched themselves in the political season of 1860, and just as they had long been pulling at the masses of American citizens, they now threatened to pull apart the very political parties representing those citizens.

Perhaps the one issue most dominating the discourse of the presidential campaign was that of slavery. The institution of slavery was not addressed in the Constitution; rather, it was danced around with a compromise of fractions. Whether or not the founders of our nation tackled the issue directly, it was understood that slavery would be accepted – at least for a time. But Americans were an expansionist lot, and every time the nation expanded her boundaries, she was confronted with the question of expanding slavery's boundaries as well.²

This is precisely the issue that confronted Democrats as they descended on Charleston, South Carolina for the opening of their national convention. While Stephen A. Douglas was the clear front-runner as the meeting got underway on 23 April 1860, it was still uncertain which man would come away with his party's nomination. Douglas himself was more than aware of his likelihood of being nominated, but as the Illinois Senator kept tabs of the convention from his home in Washington, he also held no illusions of the difficulty of obtaining it.



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It was Douglas who championed the idea of popular sovereignty, offering that newly admitted states should determine for themselves whether or not to allow slavery within their borders. Although nationally known, Douglas carried with him a long list of enemies. Southern Democrats, who vehemently opposed the doctrine, migrated to Charleston to work tirelessly to block the Little Giant's nomination.

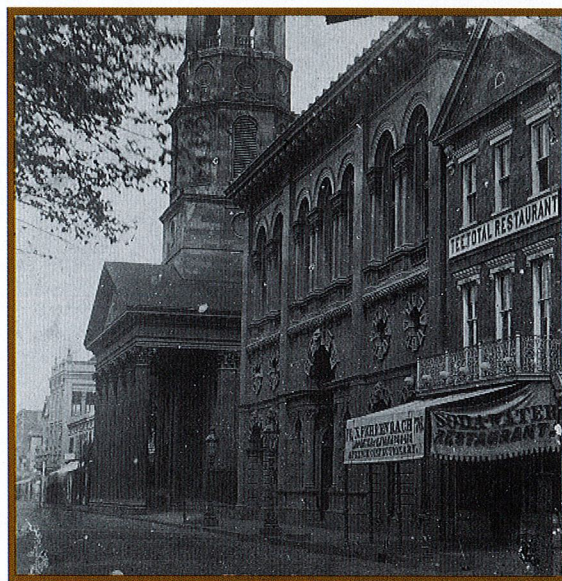
Douglas' strategy for the convention was as simple as it was primal. "He would take the nomination by force and on his terms." He believed he had a "solid base of support" from the Northwestern states, and much of the Eastern states. "He would seek to impress the South not by his talents as a compromiser or an appeaser, but with his power."³

The Southern Democrats would have none of this. In the waning days of 1859 they warned the rest of their party, "that [they] would insist on a slave-code plank" at the convention.⁴ Even before the convention met, the Alabama delegation "had formally resolved to leave the convention" if Douglas was able to force the "adoption" of his popular sovereignty platform.⁵

On 30 April, when the convention adopted the minority, or Douglas, platform with no slave code, the Alabama delegation made good on its promise. The Alabamans rose to their feet and walked from Institute Hall. Mississippi, Florida, Texas, and most of the delegates from Louisiana, South Carolina, and Arkansas followed. By the next day, two-thirds of the Georgia delegation had also bolted. In all, forty-nine votes had marched from the convention.

Jefferson Davis later conceded that the platform "did not really deny any Southern rights, it just didn't sustain them vigorously enough." In fact, it was perhaps the most pro-Southern platform the party had adopted for some time, leaving some speculation that the Southern bolters did not flee from the platform, but from Douglas himself. In an address to the Senate, Davis validated this claim by explaining that he "would sooner have an honest man on any sort of rickety platform you could construct, than to have a man I did not trust on the best platform which could be made."⁶

If the Southern bolt was not surprising, for whatever reason, then what John Howard of Tennessee proposed next certainly was. Howard proposed a resolution demanding that any candidate must receive two-thirds of all the *original* votes. Douglas and his men had hoped that they would only need two-thirds of the *remaining* votes. Their hopes were dashed when Howard's resolution passed. Even if Douglas managed to secure every vote from all other states, he would still need nineteen from the South.⁷



Charleston's Institute Hall. *Library of Congress*

The official balloting began in Charleston on 1 May, and for two days the delegates "labored through fifty-seven ballots." Douglas led every one of them, but he could only reach 152 ½ votes, well short of the 303 needed. The convention was deadlocked. Finally, on 3 May, the Democratic Party adjourned its convention and agreed to try again, this time in Baltimore.⁸

Six days later, it was not the Democrats who flooded Baltimore, but a new party. The Constitutional Union Party, created in 1860, met in Baltimore for its own nominating convention.

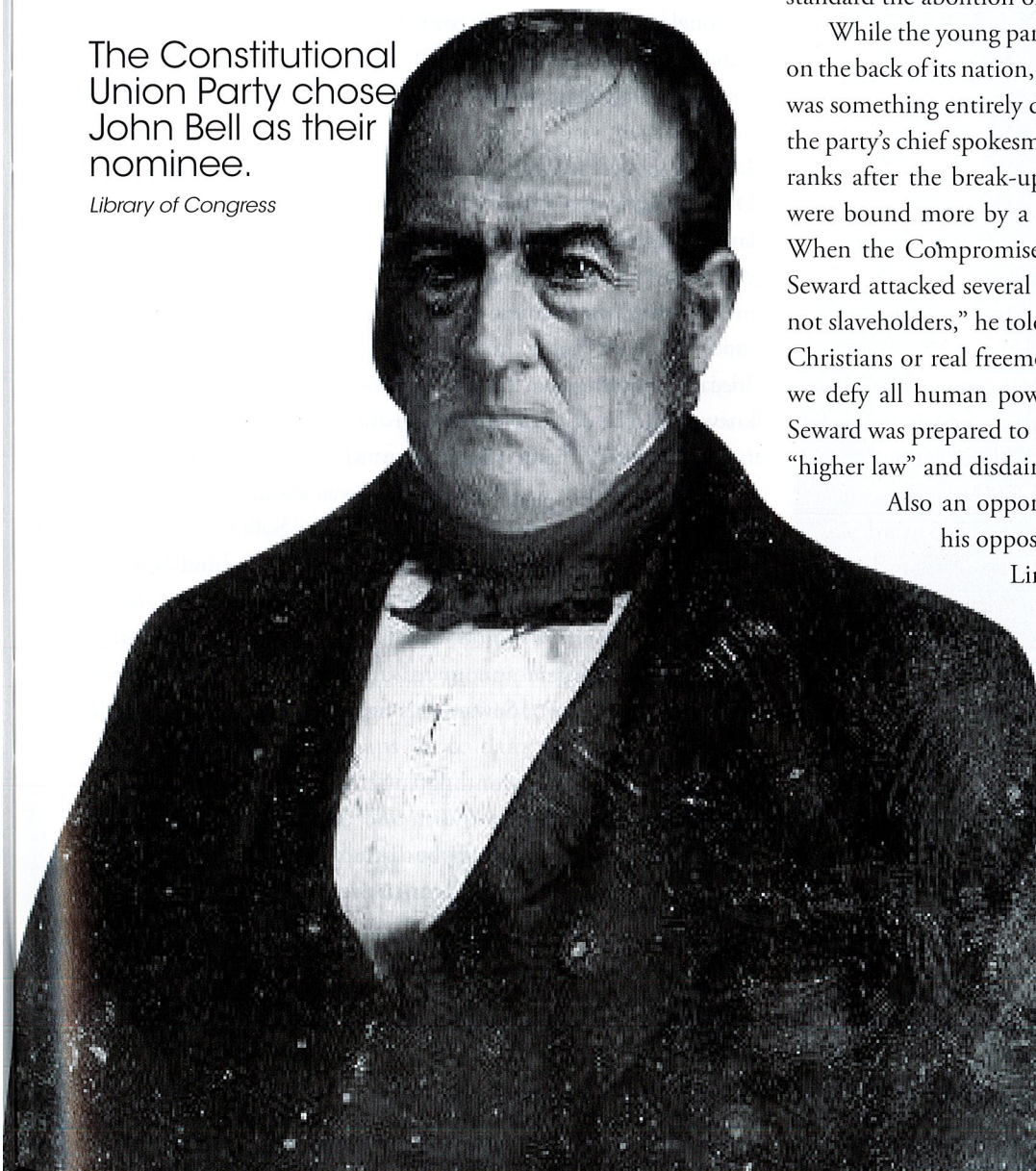
Comprised of former Whigs and Know-Nothings who hoped to avoid disunion, the Constitutional Unionists met in the old Presbyterian Church on Fayette and North Streets.⁹

Sam Houston of Texas, John Crittenden of Kentucky, and John Bell of Tennessee all surfaced to the top of the list of possible nominees. But while it was still unclear who the obvious front-runner would be, what was made clear was the new party's straight-forward platform. The Constitutional Unionists believed, and so resolved that "it is both the part of patriotism and duty to recognize no political principles, other than the Constitution of the Country, the Union of the States, and the Enforcement of the Laws."¹⁰

As the balloting began on the first day, Bell emerged as the clear favorite, but his sixty-eight and a half votes to Houston's fifty-seven was not enough for victory. Throughout the night of 9 May "there was the usual political jockeying." When balloting resumed on the second day, Bell's count rocketed to 138, thus clinching the nomination. Edward Everett of Massachusetts received the Party's nod for vice-president.¹¹

The Constitutional Union Party chose John Bell as their nominee.

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The Constitutional Unionists now had their man, even if the more powerful Democrats could not decide on theirs

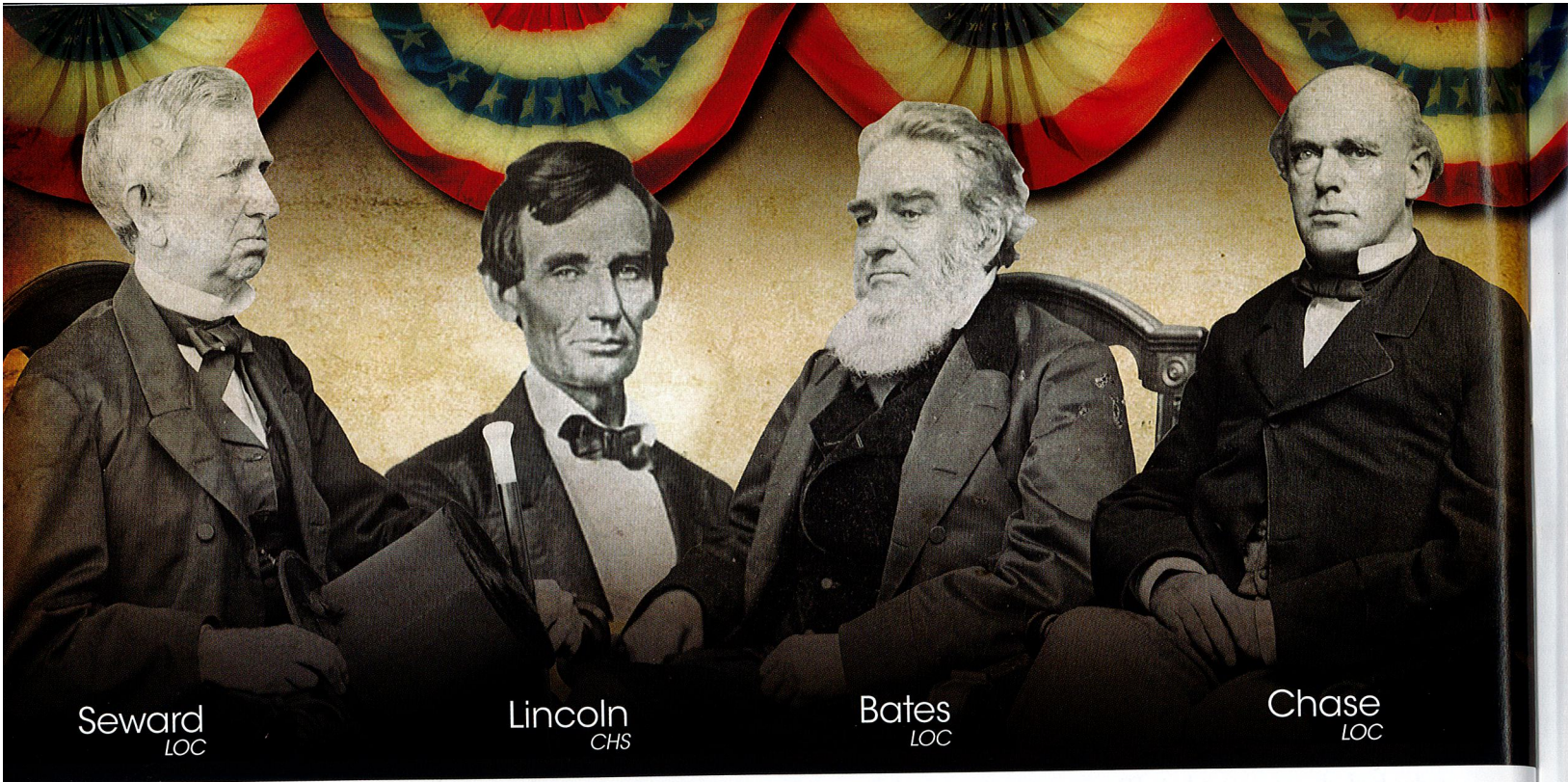
"Closeting himself" in Nashville's City Hotel, Bell began writing his acceptance speech. In it, he fully endorsed his party's "brief platform" and held that he would oppose "all measures which threatened to arouse sectional animosity, and devotion to the Union, harmony, and prosperity of these States."¹² The Constitutional Unionists now had their man, even if the more powerful Democrats could not decide on theirs.

The Constitutional Union Party may have hedged on the issue of slavery in its platform, but its stance to uphold the laws of the land – if nothing else – signaled that they would be willing to accept it. Conversely, the Republican Party had raised as its standard the abolition of slavery.

While the young party agreed that slavery was a festering sore on the back of its nation, coming up with solutions to the problem was something entirely different. William Henry Seward, one of the party's chief spokesmen, and an up-and-comer in Republican ranks after the break-up of his Whig Party, believed that men were bound more by a "higher law" than by the Constitution. When the Compromise of 1850 was introduced in Congress, Seward attacked several of its pro-slavery components. "We are not slaveholders," he told Congress. "We cannot...be either true Christians or real freemen if we impose on another a chain that we defy all human power to fasten on ourselves."¹³ By 1860, Seward was prepared to make a run for the presidency, taking his "higher law" and disdain for slavery with him.

Also an opponent of slavery, Abraham Lincoln based his opposition within the Constitution. By 1860,

Lincoln, too, was prepared to run for the presidency. Although Lincoln did not favor the institution of slavery, he made his bid for the White House with the assurance that the institution would go untouched where it already existed. In 1860, the ranks of Republican candidates for president swelled. Among Seward and Lincoln were Salmon Chase of Ohio, and Edward Bates of Missouri. The path to the Republican nomination would be an uphill fight.



If Lincoln was not as certain of his own chances, he at least hoped to give Seward a fight

William Seward was optimistic about his chances. He was well-known and well-respected. Having served in the Senate since 1849 – first as a Whig, then a Republican – he felt he had the experience and the name recognition to clinch the nomination. Seward was not the only one with this belief. Thurlow Weed, a Seward intimate and political operative, wrote in 1858 that making his friend president was “a purpose which for twenty years, engrossed my thoughts and controlled my action.”¹⁴

As the Republican Convention in Chicago drew nearer, both Seward and Weed grew more confident. Seward was so confident, that just days before the convention began he wrote the first draft of his farewell speech to the Senate.¹⁵ If Lincoln was not as certain of his own chances, he at least hoped to give Seward a fight.

The Republican Convention opened in Chicago on 16 May 1860, at the Wigwam. Delegates from the North poured into the city, hoping to nominate their man for president. The platform the Republicans adopted on the second day was meant to lessen its offensiveness to the South. Instead, it offended staunch Republicans and abolitionists. Whereas five-sixths of the platform addressed the wickedness of slavery four years prior, now less than one-third even mentioned it.¹⁶

The offense taken by radical Republicans and abolitionists should have played well for Seward. He was their hero, the

national star who rode the anti-slavery cause to the top. But, like Douglas, and eventually Bell, Seward's national prominence was a double-edged sword. Although he had the support of the radicals, there were scores of others who despised him. While Lincoln gained some national attention with his debates with Douglas and his Cooper Union Speech in New York, he was largely unknown. This “obscurity,” wrote Emerson David Fite, was Lincoln's “greatest asset.” He had not the time in public life to offend the amount of people Seward had. Lincoln could unite “mutually jealous and antagonistic leaders,” explained Fite, “because nothing that he had ever said or done, so far as they knew, could be object of offense to any man.”¹⁷

At the end of the first ballot, Seward held a comfortable lead, but his 173 ½ votes to Lincoln's 102 was about sixty votes shy of the nomination. By the end of the second ballot, the tide had turned to Lincoln, putting him only 3 ½ votes behind Seward. When the third ballot ended with Lincoln only 1 ½ votes short of the nomination, “a profound stillness fell upon the Wigwam,” as one Ohio delegate announced a switch of four votes from Chase to Lincoln. For Seward, his fight was over; for Lincoln, it had just begun.¹⁸

It would be over a month later before the Democrats would reconvene in Baltimore. With the Southern radicals gone, Douglas hoped there would be little resistance to his party's popular sovereignty platform, or to even himself. On the first ballot, Douglas received 173 ½ votes of 191 ½ cast. But, just as in Charleston, Douglas would need two-thirds of the original delegates. Thus it would require 196 votes to clinch the nomination.

When Breckinridge got word that he was chosen unanimously as the nominee, he was mortified... and prepared for defeat for the first time in his political life

On the second ballot Douglas received 181 ½ votes out of 194 ½ cast. Again, it was close. One Virginia delegate explained that Douglas had indeed received two-thirds “of all votes given in this Convention,” and declared Douglas the winner. After a voice vote, the resolution had passed unanimously. And so Douglas was the nominee of the Democratic Party – at least half of it.¹⁹

The second half of the party – those Southern radicals who bolted from Charleston – met in Baltimore the same day their counterparts were leaving the city. On 23 June, the “Seceders” Convention met at Maryland’s Institute Hall. They would require only one day to finish their business. The “Seceders” adopted a pro-slavery platform, defending the Fugitive Slave Act, and protecting the rights of “person or property” from “being destroyed or impaired by Congressional or Territorial legislation.” While it was not included within their official platform, it was widely known that they also held the stance of disunion in the event of a Republican victory in November.

When Vice-president John C. Breckinridge got word that he was chosen unanimously as the nominee, he was “mortified.” He had put his men to work for his nomination only half-heartedly. To not accept would offend their efforts, but to accept was perhaps more damning to the country. An acceptance by Breckinridge would “hopelessly” split the Democratic Party. The vice-president knew that a split Democratic Party and a Constitutional Union Party “who shut their eyes to the sectional issue” would be no match against a united Republican Party. Lincoln’s victory was inevitable. However, after some convincing, Breckinridge accepted, and prepared for defeat for the first time in his political life.²⁰



Vice President John C. Breckinridge the “Southern” Democratic candidate, and later Confederate General. *Library of Congress*



As the general election began, it proved really to be two elections; one in the North between Lincoln and Douglas, the other in the slave states between Bell and Breckinridge. The fact that there were four major candidates made the election of 1860 unique. But the strategy implemented by Stephen Douglas only confirmed its distinction.

Political electioneering was widely unaccepted through the first century of the country's existence. "The office must seek the man" it was believed, "not the man the office." In 1860, Douglas broke the tradition. While his three opponents left their campaigns in the hands of friends and advisors, Douglas spearheaded his campaign himself.²¹

A presidential candidate "is supposed to have either friends who can speak for him; or a history which speaks for itself," wrote the *New York Times*. "Mr. Douglas ought not to lack either." In fact, Stephen Douglas did not lack either. Still, however, he felt it necessary to play a personal role in the campaign, touring the New England states.²²

Traveling through Massachusetts, New York, Vermont, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Maine, Douglas accused the Republicans and Breckinridge Democrats as "representing sectional extremes" and praised his popular sovereignty doctrine "as the only true middle ground." The strategy was no use. The Republican Party had made valuable inroads in the region and proved difficult to dislodge.

As the summer waned, and the likelihood of a Lincoln victory increased, Douglas shifted strategy once more. Recognizing that he could probably not win, he traveled to even more hostile territory – the slave-holding South. Douglas reasoned that only by siphoning votes away from the Breckinridge Democrats and "by depriving the Southern leaders of their popular support" could he stop disunion in the wake of Lincoln's victory.²³

For Lincoln, the stakes were clear. He would have to win the entire North and capture a majority to avoid sending the election to the House of Representatives. But Douglas had "considerable strength" in some of the Northwestern swing states.²⁴ Fortunately for Lincoln, slavery was not the only issue in many states. In states like Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota, immigrants played a major role in the election.

When many of the two and a half million immigrants living in the Northwest arrived in the United States, they were lured to the Democratic Party for "the supposed ideals of its patron saint, Thomas Jefferson." As they began to recognize the "close association" the Democrats had with slavery, the foreign-born

began to re-associate them with the oppression of liberties from which many fled Europe.²⁵

Homestead legislation was another reason immigrants shifted from the Democrats. With the desire to own land, many immigrants had settled in the Northwest because it "offered them the best opportunities for investment." When Republicans said that the Democrats "would open the entire Northwest to planters and their slaves," and deprive the "small land owner" of his land, the foreign-born were fearful. When President Buchanan vetoed a homestead bill after congressional approval, they were ready to move on.²⁶ The Republican Party was the clear alternative. It was obvious that the foreign-born could not turn to the Constitutional Unionists, for their ranks swelled with immigrant hating former Know-Nothings. Thus, the Lincoln campaign received a considerable boost in the Northwest.

Another boost for Lincoln lay in his ability to mend bridges with Seward. Unlike his Democratic opponent, Lincoln held to the tradition of keeping silent during the campaign, and instead used Seward as his surrogate. Seward campaigned throughout the North for Lincoln, greeting thousands of supporters. When it was determined that Lincoln could not win without New York's thirty-five electoral votes, Seward was tapped again. To some in New York City, the Republicans were seen "as a threat to their commercial relations with the South." Seward agreed to "make a *soothing* speech" and helped deliver New York to Lincoln.²⁷

In the South, Bell and his Constitutional Unionists were labeling Douglas an abolitionist. Breckinridge and his party, they said, were secessionists, to which the Breckinridge men accused the Bell-Everetts as being "submissionists."²⁸ The only thing the Constitutional Unionists "proposed to do," wrote one critic, was to "fold their arms and ignore."²⁹ Both Bell and Breckinridge refuted the other's accusations, but perhaps the allegations personally affected the vice-president more deeply.

In his letter accepting the nomination, Breckinridge explained that he saw no need for a slave code, defended equality of the states, and contested the claim that his party sought secession. "The cry that we are disunionists is a bald absurdity," he later wrote. "We are the true union men."³⁰

Despite charges of electioneering, Breckinridge made speeches early in the campaign. Bell-Everett men were allying with the Douglas men in the Border States, tying Breckinridge with disunion. "I am an American citizen," the vice-president said, "a Kentuckian who never did an act...that was not full of devotion to the Constitution and the Union." But no matter



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how insistent Breckinridge was that he did not want disunion, his surrogates on the trail, men like William Yancey of Alabama, were outspoken for it.³¹

In the end, it was a number of factors that determined the election's outcome, but maybe none more than the perceived notion that Lincoln was the compromise candidate.

Lincoln's three opponents for the general election all had long political careers. While they were all admired by some, they also had rivals. It would be unfair to say that Lincoln had no critics, but at least in the North, he had not alienated large numbers of voters.

A focus on each of Lincoln's rival parties would also be helpful. Either they were singularly focused on an issue or they took no stance at all. Despite Breckinridge's denials, his faction represented disunion and the protection of slavery at any cost. Followers of Douglas held only to the doctrine of popular sovereignty, and while they felt Douglas was the true compromiser, they also contended that their doctrine was the *only* way to hold the Union together. Finally, Bell's Constitutional Unionists ignored the sectional crisis entirely.

Lincoln's Republicans may have been born of the abolition movement, but in 1860, they took a moderate stance on it. In 1860, the Republicans were not a one issue party; rather they took up the standards for homestead legislation – corralling votes of the foreign-born – and protective tariffs, thereby easing votes away from Douglas in the industrial North. Not even on the ballot in nine Southern states, Lincoln knew any efforts in the region would be useless, but his multi-issue platform appealed to a broader electorate in the North, and helped bring to light the contrasts between his Northern opponent, Douglas.

As the tallies began to pour in on 6 November, many thought the election was a foregone conclusion. It was Lincoln's to lose. To add insult to injury, Breckinridge lost his home state of Kentucky to Bell, but with the exception of Tennessee and Virginia which also went to Bell, the Vice President carried the entire South. Douglas' New England tour did not pay off. Only

capturing Missouri and New Jersey, and finishing dead last, the Little Giant's dream had once more been dashed.

Once New York fell, Lincoln's victory was complete. Though he captured only forty percent of the popular vote, Lincoln's 180 electoral votes were more than enough. Breckinridge, his closest competitor, had mustered seventy-two electoral votes, while Bell received thirty-nine and Douglas only twelve.³²

The wheels were now set in motion. Whether or not Breckinridge wanted secession, those in the deeper South gave no illusions. Winning the election of 1860 required compromise and moderation. It required an understanding of the sectional issues at hand. Lincoln possessed many of these qualities. Only now would he discover if he possessed enough of them to save the fractured Union he just inherited.



(Endnotes)

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