

The Union at Risk: From the Birth of the Nation to the Civil War

Theme:

In our final unit, we will survey the 90 year period from the birth of the nation in 1776 to the conclusion of the Civil War in 1865. As we proceed, we will focus our attention on the preconditions, precipitants, and triggers that led to the Civil War. What were the long-term preconditions that made the Civil War a possibility? What were the mid-term precipitants that turned the prospects of political breakdown and secession from a possibility to a probability? And finally, what were the short-term triggers that turned the probability into a certainty?

Guidance:

This is a broadly interpretative topic in which we will examine the causes of the Civil War.

I. First, we will consider the long term preconditions that made the war possible. Here we will focus on the period from 1776 to 1803. As we examine this era, we will ask the following questions:

- a. Was a divide between the North and the South evident during this period?
- b. If so, what divided the regions?
- c. What conditions made Civil War a possibility in the future?

II. Second, we will consider the mid-term precipitants that turned the prospects of political breakdown and secession from a possibility to a probability. Here we will focus on the period from 1803 to 1859. As we examine this era, we will ask the following questions:

- a. What issues complicated the divide between the North and South between 1803 and 1850?
- b. What key compromises were struck during the period in an attempt to solve these issues?
- c. How did the Kansas-Nebraska Act destroy the old system of compromise?
- d. How did the Republican Party and its Northern supporters view slavery in the territories after 1854?
- e. How did the Supreme Court and its Southern supporters view slavery in the territories in 1857?
- f. How had the slavery issue changed – had the compromise spirit been replaced by something else?

III. Third, we will consider the triggers that turned the probability of war into a certainty. Here we will focus on the period from 1860-65, as we examine the causes and course of the Civil War.

Available Sources:

George Tindall and David Shi, *America: A Narrative History*.

Peter Kolchin, *American Slavery*.

William W. Freehling, "The Founding Fathers and Slavery"
<http://www.littlejohnexplorers.com/foundingfathersandslavery.pdf>

James McPherson, "The Differences Between the Antebellum North and South"
<http://www.littlejohnexplorers.com/mcphersonnorthandsouth.pdf>

Jeff Littlejohn, "The Civil War," *The Encyclopedia of American Political History*.
<http://www.littlejohnexplorers.com/jeff/americanrepublic/civilwar.htm>

Brooks D. Simpson, "'The Doom of Slavery': Ulysses S. Grant, War Aims, and Emancipation, 1861–63"
<http://www.dushkin.com/olc/genarticle.mhtml?article=20714>

Ronald C. White, Jr., "Absence of Malice," *Smithsonian*, April 2002.
<http://www.dushkin.com/olc/genarticle.mhtml?article=37025>

Anne Wortham, "America's Birth at Appomattox," *The World & I*, May 1999
<http://www.dushkin.com/olc/genarticle.mhtml?article=37026>

PRECONDITIONS

1. The nation was born divided on the issue that caused the Civil War – slavery
 - a. Northern states gradually abolished slavery during the American Revolution (Freehling, 86-87)
 - b. Southern states maintained their slave system after the Revolution (Kolchin, figures; McPherson)
 2. There were revolutionary attempts to limit slavery's expansion into the West
 - a. Thomas Jefferson's failed 1784 attempt to outlaw slavery in all U.S. territories (Freehling, 87-88)
 - b. The successful Northwest Ordinance of 1787 (Freehling, 87-88)
 3. Even though the North and South were divided, they compromised on slavery at the Constitutional Convention
 - a. 3/5 clause
 - b. The so-called "fugitive slave" clause
 - c. The international slave trade provision
 - d. Both sides saw slavery as a "necessary evil" -- thus "slave" and "slavery" don't appear in the Constitution
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PRECIPITANTS

1. Growing divide between the North and South after 1800
 - a. Northern states become increasingly "modern"
 - 1) greater urbanization (McPherson, 24)
 - 2) fewer people involved in agricultural production (McPherson, 24)
 - 3) more mechanized production (McPherson, 24)
 - 4) more investment in manufacturing (McPherson, 24)
 - 5) positive attitude of North toward "change" or "modernization" (McPherson, 24)
 - b. Southern states become increasingly suspicious of change or "modernization"
 - 1) praise farming (McPherson, first full paragraph p. 25)
 - 2) oppose manufacturing (McPherson, 24-25)
 - 3) oppose urbanization (McPherson, 24-25)
 - 4) lag in literacy (McPherson, 27)
 - 5) negative attitude toward "change" or "modernization" (McPherson, 25)
 2. Greatest demographic and cultural divide between North and South resulted from slavery
 - a. Northern slavery dying after 1800
 - b. Eli Whitney's cotton gin (1793) revitalizes slavery in the South
 - c. See first two paragraphs p. 26 from McPherson
 - d. For figures see Kolchin
 3. The growth of the United States (1803) and resulting struggle over slavery in the West
 - a. 1803 Louisiana Purchase
 - b. 1820 Missouri Struggle: Tallmadge Amendments, Gridlock, Compromise
 4. Growing aggressiveness of Northern Abolitionists after Missouri Compromise
 - a. William Lloyd Garrison, *The Liberator*
 - b. New England Anti-Slavery Society
 - c. American Anti-Slavery Society
 5. Increasingly defensive stance of Southern slave apologists in face of abolitionists
 - a. Thomas Dew, *A Review of the Debates* (1832); response to Nat Turner Rebellion (1831)
 - b. Gag Rule in Congress on discussion of slavery
 6. The growth of the United States (1845-48) and resulting struggle over slavery in the West
 - a. 1845 Texas
 - b. 1846 Oregon
 - c. 1848 Mexican Cession
 - d. Mexican Cession struggle: Wilmot Proviso, Gridlock, Compromise of 1850
 7. The 1850s – the decade that broke the Spirit of Compromise (Brinkley, 347-355)
 - a. Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1851-2)
 - b. The Kansas-Nebraska Act (1854)
 - c. Formation of the Republican Party (1854-56)
 - d. G. Fitzhugh, *Sociology for the South* (1854)
 - d. The Dred Scott case (1857)
 - e. John Brown's Raid on Harper's Ferry (1859)
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TRIGGERS

1. The Election of Abraham Lincoln in November 1860
2. The secession of South Carolina in December 1860, followed by Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, and Texas by February 1861.
3. The establishment of the Confederate States of America on March 11, 1861
4. The firing on Fort Sumter, South Carolina by the Confederates on April 12, 1861.
5. Lincoln's call for 75,000 federal troops to stop the Southern rebellion (April 15, 1861)
6. The secession of the upper South: Virginia, Tennessee, North Carolina, and Arkansas (April 1861).
7. The First Battle of Bull Run (July, 1861): Though four slave states -- Delaware, Maryland, Missouri, and Kentucky -- remained in the Union, the North and South went to war. The North had 23 states and a population of 22 million, while the Confederacy had 11 states and 9 million people, including 3.5 million slaves.