The Presidential Campaign of 1860
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The growing tensions between north and south, which had increased throughout the 1850s, culminated in 1860 with perhaps the most momentous election in American History. In less than two months the first southern state would secede from the Union. The nation's political landscape had changed dramatically in the past decade, with the collapse of the Whig Party and the rise of the new Republican and American Parties. The former was strictly northern and opposed to the expansion of slavery in the territories, while the latter took a moderate stance on the slavery issue while focusing on an anti-immigrant platform. The Democratic Party, meanwhile, attempted to maintain a national base, but more and more it became dominated by southern interests.

The Democrats held their April 1860 convention in Charleston, South Carolina—a location not likely to result in the nomination of a moderate candidate. Northerner Stephen Douglas was the front-runner and the best known contender at the national level. His statements during the 1858 Illinois senatorial election, however, when he argued that slavery might be kept out of the western territories despite the Supreme Court's recent Dred Scott Decision, had angered many southern Democrats. They demanded a platform that clearly supported the rights of southerners to take their slaves into all areas of the country. After a fight over the platform, fifty delegates from the Deep South stormed out of the convention, and the remainder could not agree on a nominee after fifty-seven ballots. The convention adjourned with plans to reassemble in Baltimore in mid-June. There disagreements continued between northern and southern delegates, and a number again left the convention. Ultimately those remaining nominated

Douglas, but the controversy had weakened the party and his candidacy. Southern delegates met in yet another convention in Baltimore later that same month and nominated John C. Breckinridge of Kentucky, the current vice-president, for the presidency. Breckinridge essentially supported the principles of the Dred Scott decision, which seemed essentially to allow the expansion of slavery into the territories, regardless of the wishes of the inhabitants.

The Democratic Party's split increased the chances of a Republican triumph, providing the party could leave its Chicago convention united. Organized in the mid-1850s following the collapse of the Whig Party, the Republicans had performed credibly in the presidential election of 1856, and had gained the largest number of seats in the House of Representatives in addition to electing numerous officials at the state level. The front-runner for the nomination was William Seward of New York, while other contenders included Salmon Chase of Ohio and Simon Cameron of Pennsylvania. Some delegates viewed these candidates as too radical because of their extreme anti-slavery leanings. Seward proved unable to win the nomination on the first ballot, and delegates quickly moved their allegiances to Abraham Lincoln of Illinois, who won on the third ballot. A former one-term Whig congressman, Lincoln was opposed to the expansion of slavery in the territories, but did not have the abolitionist background of the other contenders. The fact he had long lived in Illinois, and might bring that critical state into the Republican column in November, also factored into his nomination.

A fourth candidate in the election came from the newly-organized Constitutional Union Party. Comprised of remnants of the Whig and the American Parties, which had both fallen apart over the slavery issue, the new party was strongest in the Border States. They nominated John Bell of Tennessee, hoping that an additional candidate might keep anyone from receiving a majority in the Electoral College, thus throwing the election into the House of Representatives,

where a compromise might be worked out to avoid secession. As the days crept towards

November, both northerners and southerners anxiously awaited the outcome.