

Lincoln and the Republicans: The Cause of the War?

Introduction & National History Standards

Author: John Soos, Sudbrook Middle Magnet, Baltimore County Public Schools

Grade Level: Middle

Duration of lesson: 1 Period

Overview:

This lesson explains the origins of the Republican Party in the 1850s as a conglomeration of several factions, which held a common belief in the importance of “free labor.” Drawn from elements in the Free Soil, Liberty, and even Democratic Parties, the new Republicans idealized the industrial worker who sold his own labor and, through thrift and hard work, achieved independence and social position. Students will learn that a national crisis emerged when both the Northern Republicans and Southern Democrats realized that free labor and slavery could not co-exist, especially in the new western territories won from Mexico in 1848. Republicans strove to recognize the dignity of labor by separating it from slavery; Southern Democrats, on the other hand, did not wish to be part of a nation that enriched northern industrialists while impoverishing southern farmers with tariffs. By 1860, all the elements for southern secession were in place, and the election of a Republican President ensured it. By the end of the lesson, students will also discover that, while the Civil War was certainly provoked by pro- and anti-slavery factions, few if any of the leading actors believed in racial equality.

Related **National History Standards:**

Era 5: Civil War and Reconstruction (1850-1877)

Standard 3: How various reconstruction plans succeeded or failed

Historical Thinking Skills:

Standard 2: Historical Comprehension

- A. Reconstruct the literal meaning of a historical passage.
- B. Identify the central question(s) the historical narrative addresses.

Standard 3: Historical Analysis and Interpretation

- E. Analyze cause-and-effect relationships and multiple causation, including the importance of the individual, the influence of ideas, and the role of chance.
- J. Hypothesize the influence of the past.

Objectives:

- Students will evaluate the impact of the Republican party in creating a Southern philosophy of secession.
- Students will analyze causation concerning the Southern philosophy of secession.

Topic Background

Introduction

The sectional strife that led to the American Civil War can and should be considered a contest of political ideology between a Northern, free-labor, pro-manufacturing party—the Republicans—and Southern slaveholders, represented by the Southern wing of the Democratic Party. The Republican Party was formed in the mid 1850s, but the free labor ideas basic to its platform had been developing during the period known as the Second American Party system. That is, the anti-slavery, free soil, free labor, pro-industry, pro-internal improvements stance of the Republican Party in the 1850s developed during the decades in which the Democratic Party squared off against the Whig Party, with members of both parties (along with Free Soil Party adherents) ultimately contributing members to the new Republican Party.

The Republican worldview of the 1850s was so at odds with the interests of the Southern planter, the so-called Slave Power, that it is no surprise that the “Irrepressible Conflict,” as William Seward called it, came when it did. The Republican Party, though ostensibly opposed to the *spread* of slavery into the territories, sought the ultimate extinction of slavery, while Southern slave owners sought to preserve and extend the institution. The anti-slavery ideology of the Republican Party, however, was not religiously based, nor did the Party’s opposition to slavery rest upon moral grounds as often put forward by abolitionists such as William Lloyd Garrison. It was a political and economic ideology whose biggest proponent was Salmon Chase, Lincoln’s Secretary of the Treasury and, later, the Chief Justice of the United States.

The free labor ideology

Central to the Republican Party’s ideology was the concept of free labor. Free labor represented a model society, one that was superior to all others (especially the slave based society in the South), and one which represented, at least in Republicans’ eyes, the direction the United States would and should take in the future. In contrast with the South, a free labor society offered the average worker the opportunity to reap the fruit of his labor, to move up in the world, and to create wealth for himself and economic opportunities for others. The free labor, capitalistic society of the North was a dynamic society that offered reward for one’s labor, unlike the South where, in contrast, the laboring class (slaves) did not profit from its labor and whose members had no hope of advancing up the socio-economic ladder. In the static Southern economic system, the slave laborer remained a slave all of his life, and all the fruit of his labor went to his owner. According to the ideology of the Republicans, this was an affront to the dignity of labor and was a hindrance to economic progress. Such a system did not encourage industry, innovation, or creativity. Quite the opposite: It encouraged sloth, discouraged economic growth, and it implied that labor was undignified—that it was worthy of the slave only.

This Republican view of labor, however, did not begin with the birth of the party in 1854. It had been developing for some time. As Alexis de Tocqueville observed during his brief stay in the United States (1831-1832), Americans were driven to improve the

condition of their lives. Social position was based on economic advancement. Hard work and frugality—hallmarks of the Protestant work ethic—were values held in high esteem in American culture, and it was believed that such a course would result in social mobility for the individual and economic growth for the nation. The free laborer included the independent farmer, craftsman, and small businessman. *Independent* is the key word here, for wage labor in and of itself was looked down upon only if one did not move up the ladder, so to speak, from that condition. In the ideal cycle of the free labor ideology, the wage laborer would take control of his future. He was expected to save his money for a time and move on to be an independent businessman, artisan, or farmer, eventually employing other wage laborers. The Southern slave-based labor system was the antithesis of this free labor philosophy for the obvious reason that it prevented control of one's destiny, denied free choice (a Northern laborer could theoretically reject his employment conditions if he so desired), and prohibited upward mobility.

The Republican critique of the South

Not only was the slave-based society in the South considered backward as compared to that developing in the North, it was considered harmful to the South and to the economic development of the nation as a whole. William H. Seward, one of the leading Republicans of the 1850s, commented on the South after several visits to Virginia:

It was necessary that I should travel in Virginia to have any idea of a slave State.... An exhausted soil, old and decaying towns, wretchedly-neglected roads, and, in every respect, an absence of enterprise and improvement, distinguish the region through which we have come, in contrast to that in which we live. Such has been the effect of slavery. [1]

In other visits to the South, New Orleans for instance, he saw the same thing. "Commerce and political power, as well as military strength, can never permanently reside, on this continent, in a community where slavery exists." [2] Other leading anti-slavery politicians and newspapers echoed similar sentiments. Where slavery existed, they said, there was poverty and economic stagnation. Statistics backed them up. Where there was free labor, they said, there was a growing population, industry, opportunity, wealth, and general social progress. Substitute free labor for slavery in the South, Republicans would say, and that region would experience a remarkable transition.

Bad enough as it was that slavery existed in the South, Republicans feared that its spread westward into the territories would be far worse. A blight in its present location, slavery's expansion to the territories would be devastating to the nation and would mark the end of the free labor ideology. If slavery were allowed to infest the West, then the same characteristics that marked the South would mark that region too. As Salmon Chase said, if the West was settled by free laborers there would be "freedom not serfdom; freeholds not tenancies; democracy not despotism; education not ignorance...progress, not stagnation or retrogression." [3] If slavery were allowed to

spread, the free North would be surrounded on the South and West by the Slave Power. It would lead to free labor's demise, or so thought the Republicans. Thus it was critical for the West to be closed to slavery.

It was the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 which galvanized anti-slavery forces, combining into one powerful organization able to challenge the planter-dominated Democrats. Until then, anti-slavery forces were spread throughout various parties. Some were members of overtly anti-slavery parties such as the Liberty and Free Soil Parties. The rest were members of the Whig Party. A number of Northern Democrats were also against the spread of the peculiar institution. Not until the formation of the Republican Party were the party lines drawn, for the most part, across sectional lines: The Republicans in the North, and the splintered Democratic Party dominated by the Southern planter class.

Attempts at compromise over the issue of slavery

Since the second decade of the nineteenth century, pro- and anti-slavery forces had compromised on the issue of slavery. In 1820 the Missouri Compromise allowed for the entrance into the Union of Missouri as a slave state and Maine as a free state. More importantly, it forbade slavery in the territories of the Louisiana Purchase north of the 36° 30' parallel. This compromise kept the slavery issue at bay until the 1840s, when war broke out between the United States and Mexico. Before the war was over, Congressman David Wilmot of Pennsylvania unsuccessfully proposed his famous Proviso forbidding slavery in any territories won by the U.S. in that war. The United States won that war, of course, and victory brought new lands and new conflicts over slavery. What was to become of the lands won in the Mexican Cession? Would they become slave or free? Ultimately, with the series of legislation known as the Compromise of 1850, California was admitted as a free state, and the newly created territories of Utah and New Mexico were left with no restrictions on slavery. The slave trade was barred from the District of Columbia and a stronger Fugitive Slave Act (one that repealed the Fugitive Slave Act of 1793) was enacted. Like previous compromises, the Compromise of 1850 shelved the slavery issue temporarily, but it satisfied neither pro- or anti-slavery forces. Then came Stephen Douglas and his proposals regarding the unorganized Nebraska territory. Wanting to pass legislation that would allow a future transcontinental railroad to pass through this territory (with its terminus being in Chicago), the Illinois Senator knew that he would need Southern support in Congress to see his plans realized. Wanting to leave these lands open for slavery, Southern Democrats forced Douglas to abandon the Missouri Compromise and, instead, push for popular sovereignty. The citizens of newly organized territories of Nebraska and Kansas were to decide, upon admission, whether they were to be slave or free. The repeal of the Missouri Compromise outraged anti-slavery men. They were convinced that the Slave Power, so long a dominant force in American government, had again succeeded in using its influence within the Democratic Party to perpetuate the life of the peculiar institution. It seemed to them that slavery was in the ascendancy, not decline. It was in this atmosphere that the Republican Party was born in 1854.

The West as a “safety valve” for free labor

The West simply could not succumb to slavery. The Republicans, like most white people in the United States at that time, were racists. They, like their fellow countrymen, could not countenance free white labor and black slave labor working side-by-side, so to speak, in the western states. These states, therefore, needed to be free of slavery. Waves of immigrants also provided urgency to the Republican cause, for if these immigrants were allowed to overcrowd the cities, depressing wages in the inevitable competition for jobs, the economic consequences and social strife would bring disaster. The West, therefore, had to remain a “safety valve” for the Northern labor force. If a man could not find a job in the cities of the North, so the reasoning went, he could stake his claim (a homestead) in the West and become a yeoman farmer. But a West consisting of slave states did not seem much of an incentive to the free laborer. One only needed to look at the lack of free laborers moving South to understand why the Republicans demanded free territories in the West. Thus, the Republican Party fought for free territories (which would turn into free states), and for that purpose encouraged a homestead act offering incentives for Easterners to move west and plant roots as yeoman farmers.

The tariff and its benefit to labor and industry

The tariff crisis of the late 1820s and early 1830s was another event which pitted sectional interests against each other, and until the secession crisis immediately prior to the Civil War, it was the antebellum period’s greatest flirtation with the ideas of nullification and secession. South Carolina’s John Calhoun was the architect of the argument that, in summary, went as follows:

The Tariff of 1828 was a tax that benefited only Northern manufacturers. Taxing imported goods made these goods at least as expensive as domestic manufactures or, in many cases, more expensive. This was beneficial to Northern manufacturers because it allowed them to compete with foreign manufacturers who, otherwise, would put them out of business. This was unfair to the South because Southerners would have to pay higher prices, regardless of whether they purchased domestically-produced or foreign-produced goods. The South’s biggest export was cotton, and the biggest purchaser of cotton (outside of the North) was England. In a trade war, England might retaliate by refusing to purchase American cotton. This would be disastrous for the Southern economy. Calhoun argued that a tariff was meant only to raise revenue for the government; it was not meant to do damage to trade.

The pro-tariff argument, first developed under the Whigs and later taken up by the Republicans, said that such protections for industry not only benefited Northern manufacturers but, more importantly, benefited labor as well. The tariff protected American laborers from having to compete with cheaper foreign labor, therefore preserving Northern jobs. An employed labor force, it was also argued, provided a large domestic market for agriculture. Horace Greeley, in pointing this out, said that a nation lacking such a domestic market “can rarely boast a substantial, intelligent and virtuous yeomanry.... It may have wealthy Capitalists and Merchants, but never a numerous Middle Class.” [4]

Thus, despite the Southern argument against the tariff, pro-tariff proponents insisted such protection for American industry had an overall positive effect on the economy of the nation. The tariff crisis was averted only after President Jackson threatened to invade South Carolina to enforce the law and Congress, in order to diffuse the situation, drastically reduced the amount of the tariff.

The Secession Crisis

The crises that had arisen periodically since the Missouri Compromise finally came to a head in 1860 with the campaign, and then election, of Abraham Lincoln. The Democratic Party had been fractured by the sectional debate over slavery, and neither of the Democratic candidates (Stephen Douglas, representing the Northern Democrats, and John Breckinridge of the Southern faction) won as many votes, popular or electoral, as the Republican nominee. Radicals in the South who had been advocating secession in previous years now had their way. South Carolina led the Deep South in seceding first, in December, 1861, followed by Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, and Texas less than two months later.

When looking at the reasons why the South eventually decided on secession rather than conciliation or compromise, it is no surprise that they decided to break with the United States at this critical point. To put it simply, the interests of the Southern planter class were diametrically opposed to the ideology of the Republican Party. Whereas the proponents of slavery proclaimed the benefits of slavery, the Republicans preached the gospel of free labor. Each side pointed the finger at the other side's systemic shortcomings. The Republicans would claim that slave labor retarded economic growth; planters would point out that wage labor was no better than "wage slavery." The Republican Party insisted that Congress had a constitutional right to exclude slavery from the territories and it, should their candidate gain the White House, would do so. Free territory would ensure the survival of free labor; slave territory would result in its demise. The opposite was argued by the "Slave Power." Slavery as an institution, they believed, would not survive its being shut out of the territories. The Republicans supported a homestead law; the planters opposed it. Both sides knew that free labor and slavery could not co-exist in the territories. On the issue of the tariff, both sides disagreed vehemently. The Southern planter class saw no benefit for federal government assistance to industry or labor and argued that the tariff harmed not only the South, but trade in general. The Republicans insisted that the tariff would not only help Northern manufacturers, but labor too.

What seemed to be an ideological conflict on the surface was in fact a clash of societies, or in today's parlance, a clash of civilizations. For forty years, Americans had put the interests of the nation over the interests of party or section and found ways to compromise. But by the 1850s, compromise was less likely to occur. The Republicans would not compromise with the "Slave Power," and the "Slave Power" would not tolerate a Republican administration. Their respective ideologies of what American society should be like made compromise all but impossible. "And the war came...."

Endnotes

1. Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party Before the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 41
2. Foner, 41
3. Foner, 56
4. Foner, 20-21

Annotated Bibliography:

**Etheart, Antonia. "Lincoln, Labor and Liberation." *Binghamton Journal of History*, Fall 2002, Binghamton University Department of History, 2002.
Available: <http://history.binghamton.edu/resources/bjoh/Lincoln.htm>**

For those daunted by the task of reading Foner's *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men*, this short essay is a good introduction to the Republican Party "Free Labor" ideology as well as the historical antecedents of the political struggle over slavery. It's available online and is only seven pages long, including works cited and endnotes. The author relies heavily upon Foner's book (as well as recent books on the Revolutionary era by Richard D. Brown and Joseph Ellis), so anyone planning to read *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men* might want to begin with Etheart before tackling Foner.

Foner, Eric. *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party Before the Civil War*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1995.

At 317 pages, Foner's book is possibly the best work on the subject of the Republican ideology prior to the Civil War. It's a detailed examination of the *political* anti-slavery movement (as opposed to abolitionist movement that relied more upon the moral argument against slavery) and the evolution of the Republican Party. Its most useful chapters, besides the introduction, are Chapter 1, "Free Labor: The Republicans and Northern Society," which offers a thorough examination of the concept of free labor and its importance in shaping Northern society; Chapter 2, "The Republican Critique of the South," which focuses on the economic and social deficiencies of the Southern slave-based economy and society, rather than the abolitionists' moral critique of the institution; and finally Chapter 9, "Slavery and the Republican Ideology." Chapter 3, "Salmon P. Chase: The Constitution and the Slave Power," is excellent in that it maps out the evolution of the political anti-slavery movement—a movement which drew more Northerners to the cause of anti-slavery than the oft-despised abolitionists. This book is indispensable for understanding the ideology that the Southern planter class so vehemently denounced, and which eventually led to Southern secession.

Holt, Michael F. *The Political Crisis of the 1850s*, pp. 183-259, New York, W. W. Norton & Company, 1978.

This is an excellent book for its overall treatment of the crises that led to the Civil War. Chapter 7, "Slavery, Republicanism, and the Triumph of the Republican Party" is the most relevant to the topics of Republican Party ideological development, the issue of the extension of slavery into the territories, and the ascendancy of the Republican Party. Chapter 8, "Politics, Slavery, and Southern Secession" provides an excellent account of the secession crisis of 1860-61.

Vocabulary

Platform: a document stating the aims and principles of a political party

Secede: to withdraw from an organization

Tariff: a tax placed on imports

Principles: a beginning, foundation, source, or essence from which things proceed

Teaching Procedures

1. Students should have completed a homework reading of Resource Sheet #1, "The Road to Southern Secession," to get some background of the antebellum slave-based society and economy in the South as well as the South's desire to maintain the political balance within the Senate so that their interest of spreading slavery to the territories would not be hindered. This reading makes it clear that the South was committed to the preservation and expansion of slavery, and it explains the concepts of states' rights, nullification, and the right to secede. The reading ends with the victory of Lincoln and the Republicans and the resulting secession of a number of Southern states. The reading ends without explaining *why* Southern states seceded.
2. Review the responses students came up with for the questions attached to the reading. Possible answer are:

What arguments did Southerners use to defend the institution of slavery?

Slaveholders argued the inferiority of the black slave and claimed that the system that enslaved him was the best possible one. It provided food, shelter, etc. In contrast, the free laborer of the North didn't always have the basics for survival. Thus, the slave system was superior to the free labor system in the North.

Keeping the institution of slavery in mind, explain why Southerners

insisted on maintaining a political balance within the United States Senate? Being outnumbered in the House of Representatives, it was imperative for the Southern states to maintain at least an even amount of slave state and free state Senators, so that no legislation harmful to the interests of slaveholders would come about. In order for there to be an even balance of slave state-free states representation in the Senate, Western territories had to be open to slavery so that, when they became states, they would become slave states.

Why did Northerners support the tariff while Southerners opposed it?

Northern manufacturers supported the tariff because it made their products competitive with European products that otherwise would be cheaper than the domestic ones.

Southerners traded their products (mostly cotton) to Europe for their wares, which now would be more expensive with the tariff tacked on. Southerners opposed the tariff because it served only the interests of another section (the North) and resented having to pay higher prices because of it. Southerners also feared retaliation in the form of a trade war.

What specific rights did the states say they had in relation to the federal government and federal laws? In other words, what did they say a state could do if it didn't agree with federal law? The doctrine of “states’ rights” was promoted to protect states from federal laws it deemed harmful to their interests, such as the tariff. The doctrine claimed a state had the right to nullify such a law if it was not repealed, and it also claimed that it could secede from the Union should it not be satisfied with such a repeal.

When wrapping up this part of the lesson, ask the question:

A number of Southern states began seceding from the Union after the election of the first Republican candidate, Abraham Lincoln. What was it about the Republicans that Southerners could not, and would not, tolerate, and which led them to break away from the Union and start their own country? It’s a question that will be answered by their examination of primary sources. Ask for student predictions and refer back to them later.

3. Assign students to work in pairs. Each student should have a copy of Resource Sheet #2, “Lincoln Campaign Poster.” Ask them to identify phrases and describe

images on the poster that they might think a Southerner would oppose (reference the homework assignment if students need assistance). Write these responses on the board or on the overhead projector. These phrases are: "The Union Must and Shall Be Preserved," "Free Speech, Free Homes, Free Territory," "Protection to American Industry." Discuss with the students what these themes and phrases mean. It must be made clear to the students that the Republican Party opposed slavery in the territories ("Free Territories"), opposed secession ("The Union Must and Shall Be Preserved") and supported the tariff and other government assistance to industry ("Protection to American Industry").

4. Distribute copies of Resource Sheet #3, "The Republican Party Platforms of 1856 and 1860." Tell them that they will read excerpts from the 1856 and 1860 Republican Party Platforms. Explain to the students that a platform is a statement of principles or beliefs. Again working in pairs, students should silently read each platform statement and associate it with one of the phrases on the campaign poster. Then, ask the students to answer the question:

Would Southern slave owners agree or disagree with this statement?

Explain your answer. The student should be able to answer that the slave owner would object to all of the platform positions. They should also be able to explain why Southerners would object to these positions based on their previous night's reading about slave owners' interests in slavery.

5. Once you have reviewed the students' responses to these questions, distribute Resource Sheet #4, "A Southerner's Reaction to the Republicans." Read over the directions with the students before having them complete it as a closure activity.
6. As a possible extension activity, have students examine the entire 1856 and 1860 Republican platforms in order to get a better and more thorough understanding of Republican positions on other issues, such as Bleeding Kansas. Also, if the teacher feels the students can handle a deeper discussion of the Free Labor ideology of the Republican party, they may excerpt several quotes from Eric Foner's book, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men*, chapters 1 and 2, and 9, and have students examine these in order to get a deeper understanding as to why the Republicans did not want slavery to grow by spreading to the territories.

By getting the appropriate background through reading "The Road to Southern Secession" as well as examining the campaign poster and the excerpts of the Republican platforms of 1856 and 1860, students should not only be able to conclude that the Republican party's political philosophy was inimical to the interests of the "Slave Power," but they should also be able to identify specific points in the Republican party's ideology to which the Southern slaveholders objected. Hopefully students will gain

insights into how this ideology contributed to the sectional strife that led to secession in 1860.

Primary Source Annotation:

1860 Republican Presidential Campaign Poster.

Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division: PGA - Rease--Union must, LC-USZC4-7996

Image available at: [http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?pp/ils:@field\(NUMBER+@band\(cph+3g07996\)\)](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?pp/ils:@field(NUMBER+@band(cph+3g07996)))

This poster is an excellent starting point for students to examine the ideology of the Republican Party. It contains images of Abraham Lincoln (sans beard) and his Vice-Presidential running mate, Hannibal Hamlin. More important, however, are phrases above and between these two images: “The Union Must and Shall Be Preserved,” an obvious reference to the party’s opposition to Southern secession; “Free Speech, Free Homes, Free Territory,” a reference to Republican opposition to the spread of slavery to the territories as well as its support of a homestead law; and “Protection to American Industry,” a reference to Republican support for a protective tariff and a general pro-industry stance by the federal government. The last phrase is surrounded by images of a farmer and a mechanic. Behind the phrase one can see a smokestack, representing industry, and a ship, evidently representing trade. After reading a text which explains the interests of the Southern planter class, students will examine the poster. They should realize that the phrases and images on this poster are antithetical to the interests of the “Slave Power.”

The Republican Party Platform of 1856.

The Republican Party Platform of 1860.

Available at The American Presidency Project:

<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/platforms.php>

Both the Republican Party Platforms of 1856 and 1860 are wonderful complements to the 1860 Republican Presidential Campaign poster. The party’s positions are clearly enumerated and can be logically connected to the phrases and ideas found within the poster. Students will examine the party’s position on several issues and, along with their examination of the poster, will identify whether these provisions that would be objectionable to the Southern planter class’s interests.