

## Document-Based Question

Evaluate the extent to which sectional differences over the institution of slavery led to the Civil War by 1861.

Use the following documents to support your argument. Your response should:

- Contain a thesis or claim that responds to the prompt
- Support your argument using at least four of the provided documents
- Provide evidence beyond the documents (outside evidence)
- Explain how the document’s point of view, purpose, historical situation, or audience is relevant (sourcing) for at least two documents

**Document A:** Excerpt from the Missouri Compromise (1820)

**Document B:** William Lloyd Garrison, *The Liberator*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (1831)

**Document C:** John C. Calhoun, Speech on the Slavery Question (1850)

**Document D:** Excerpt from the Kansas-Nebraska Act (1854)

**Document E:** Abraham Lincoln, “House Divided” Speech (1858)

**Document F:** Declaration of Causes of Seceding States — South Carolina (1860)

**Document G:** Frederick Douglass, “The Mission of the War” (1864)

From the founding of the republic, slavery existed as a fault line in American political life but it was the steady intensification of sectional disagreements over slavery's expansion, moral legitimacy and constitutional status that drove the nation toward civil war by 1861. While economic, cultural and political differences between North and South contributed to disunion, these factors were inextricably bound to the institution of slavery itself. To a great extent, sectional differences over slavery were the primary cause of the Civil War, because every major political crisis from 1820 to 1861 revolved around whether slavery would expand, whether it could be criticized, and whether the federal government had the authority or the will to protect it.

The sectional crisis over slavery first reached a boiling point with the Missouri Compromise of 1820 (Document A). When Missouri applied for statehood as a slave state, it threatened to upset the balance of power between free and slave states in the Senate. Congress resolved the crisis by admitting Missouri as a slave state and Maine as a free state, and by drawing a line at 36° 30' north latitude above which slavery would be prohibited in the Louisiana Territory. This compromise shows that as early as 1820, slavery was already the defining issue dividing North and South. The historical situation is critical here: the rapid westward expansion following the Louisiana Purchase forced the question of whether new lands would be slave or free, and both sections understood that control of the Senate meant control over the future of the institution. Thomas Jefferson famously called the Missouri crisis a "fire-bell in the night," recognizing that the geographic division of slavery foreshadowed deeper conflict. The compromise held for a generation, but it established the dangerous precedent that slavery's expansion was a zero-sum sectional contest.

The rise of radical abolitionism in the 1830s sharpened sectional hostility dramatically. William Lloyd Garrison launched *The Liberator* in 1831 (Document B), demanding the immediate and unconditional emancipation of all enslaved people. Garrison's purpose was not to negotiate or compromise but to condemn slavery as a moral abomination and to shame the nation into action. His audience was primarily Northern reformers, many of whom were inspired by the religious fervor of the Second Great Awakening, which taught that individuals had a duty to purge society of sin. Garrison's uncompromising tone — he famously declared, "I will not retreat a single inch — AND I WILL BE HEARD" — enraged Southern slaveholders and made compromise increasingly difficult. The significance of Document B is that it shows how the slavery debate moved beyond pragmatic political bargaining into the realm of moral absolutes. Southern leaders responded by tightening slave codes, censoring abolitionist mail, and passing gag rules in Congress to suppress anti-slavery petitions, further poisoning sectional relations.

By 1850, the fragile balance was cracking. John C. Calhoun's *Speech on the Slavery Question* (Document C) laid bare the Southern position: the South could no longer remain in the Union unless the North ceased its agitation against slavery, enforced the return of fugitive slaves, and accepted slavery's right to expand into new territories. Calhoun's point of view is that of a Southern planter-class politician who saw the growing Northern population and free-state majority as an existential threat to Southern political power and the slave system that sustained it. His speech is important because it shows that by 1850, leading Southern statesmen were already framing the debate in terms of secession and disunion. The Compromise of 1850, which included a stricter Fugitive Slave Act, temporarily eased the crisis but inflamed Northern opinion. The spectacle of accused runaways being dragged back to bondage from the streets of Boston and other Northern cities radicalized many moderates who had previously been indifferent to slavery.

The Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 (Document D) shattered what remained of sectional peace. By repealing the Missouri Compromise line and introducing popular sovereignty — letting settlers in Kansas and Nebraska decide for themselves whether to allow slavery — Senator Stephen Douglas

reopened the question that the 36 30' line had supposedly settled. The act's historical situation is key: Douglas wanted to organize the Nebraska territory to facilitate a transcontinental railroad but to win Southern support he had to offer the possibility of slavery's expansion into previously free territory. The result was "Bleeding Kansas," a miniature civil war between proslavery and antislavery settlers that included the Pottawatomie massacre carried out by John Brown. The Kansas-Nebraska Act also destroyed the Whig Party and gave birth to the Republican Party, a purely sectional Northern party dedicated to stopping slavery's spread. This political realignment meant that national parties could no longer bridge the sectional divide.

Abraham Lincoln's "House Divided" speech of 1858 (Document E) captured the sense that compromise was no longer possible. Lincoln argued that the nation could not endure permanently half slave and half free and that it would eventually become all one thing or the other. Lincoln's purpose was to rally the new Republican Party by framing the contest as a fundamental struggle over the nation's future. He was careful to say he did not advocate abolition where slavery already existed, only its restriction from new territories, but Southerners heard his words as a declaration of war against their way of life. The Dred Scott decision of 1857, in which the Supreme Court ruled that Congress had no power to ban slavery in the territories and that Black people had no rights as citizens, had already convinced many Northerners that a "Slave Power" conspiracy was taking over the federal government. Lincoln's speech channeled that fear into a political movement.

When Lincoln won the presidency in November 1860 without carrying a single Southern state, the slaveholding South saw the writing on the wall. South Carolina's Declaration of Causes (Document F) made the reason for secession explicit: the Northern states had failed to uphold the constitutional protections of slavery, particularly the Fugitive Slave Clause, and the election of a president hostile to slavery threatened the institution's survival. The point of view of this document is that of South Carolina's planter elite who had the most to lose from any interference with slavery. Their declaration is essentially a catalog of grievances about slavery — not tariffs, not states' rights in the abstract, but the specific right to own human beings as property. This document is powerful evidence that the seceding states themselves understood the war as being about slavery above all else.

Frederick Douglass's "The Mission of the War" (Document G), delivered in 1864, reinforced the idea that slavery was the war's root cause and argued that the war could only be justified if it resulted in slavery's complete destruction. As a formerly enslaved person and the most prominent Black abolitionist in America, Douglass had a unique authority to speak on the subject. His purpose was to push the Lincoln administration and the Northern public to make emancipation the explicit goal of the war, not just a military strategy. Douglass's argument connects back to Garrison's moral framing decades earlier and shows that by 1864, the logic of the conflict had forced even reluctant Northerners to confront slavery as the central issue.

Beyond the documents, other evidence confirms the extent to which slavery drove sectional conflict. Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) galvanized Northern antislavery sentiment and infuriated the South. John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry in 1859 terrified slaveholders and convinced many that the North was willing to incite slave rebellion. The economic divergence between the industrializing North and the cotton-dependent South was real, but it was slavery that made Southern agriculture distinctive and that shaped Southern society, politics, and culture. Even the tariff disputes that some historians have cited as a cause of sectional tension were intertwined with slavery because the South's reliance on exporting slave-produced cotton made it favor free trade while the North's manufacturing interests favored protection.

In conclusion, sectional differences over slavery were the primary cause of the Civil War to a great

extent. Every major political crisis between 1820 and 1861 — Missouri, the Compromise of 1850, Kansas-Nebraska, Dred Scott and the election of 1860 — centered on whether slavery would expand, contract, or be left alone. The documents show a clear trajectory: from attempted compromise (Documents A and D), to moral condemnation and political entrenchment (Documents B and C), to the recognition that compromise had failed (Document E), to secession explicitly in defense of slavery (Document F), and finally to a war understood as a battle over human freedom (Document G). While other factors contributed to sectional tension, they were deeply entangled with slavery and it was slavery that made those tensions irreconcilable.