

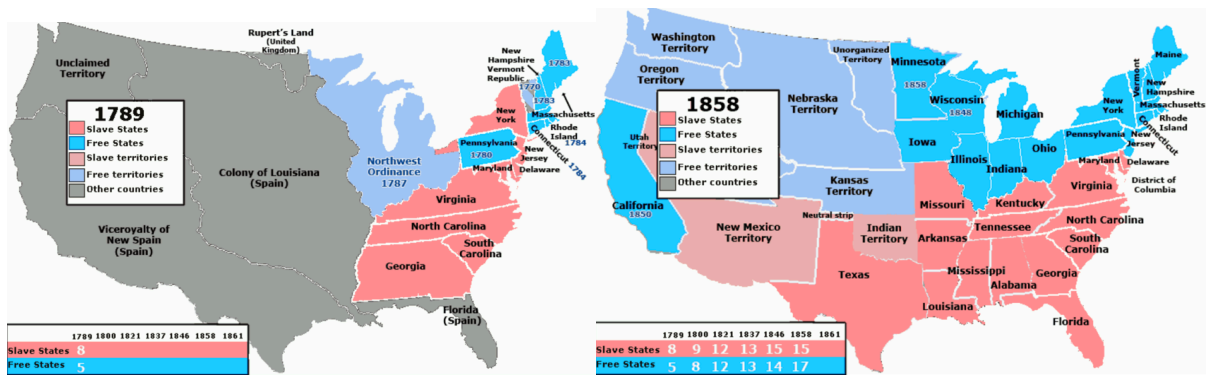
G. Abolitionism and the Rejection of Compromise

1. From the point of view of the average American, the rise of their independent country under the leadership of the Founding Fathers produced a beneficent “Era of Good Feelings.” Life in the United States had become everything it had been promised to be.
2. In addition to the well-secured independence of the country, new technologies—especially the steam engine—promised an era of growth and general prosperity.
3. Meanwhile, however, slavery continued in the southern states, which disturbed many Americans, who were no longer willing to make excuses for the perpetuation of a way of life that was in contradiction to the ideas of the *Declaration of Independence*.
4. The abolitionist movement was born of this conviction. (“Abolitionism” was a social movement based on the belief that slavery is wrong, and should be *abolished*.)
5. One of the most famous abolitionists was William Lloyd Garrison of Massachusetts, who started a newspaper called the *Liberator* and the *New England Anti-slavery Society*.
6. In a famous speech that he gave, Garrison explained that the *Declaration of Independence* was more important than the Constitution. “I am a believer in that portion of the Declaration of American Independence,” he said, “in which it is set forth, as among self-evident truths, that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Hence, I am an abolitionist.”
7. Among Garrison’s allies, was the greatest example of the noble potential of every black slave: Frederick Douglass, a slave who had taught himself to read, and who as an adult had escaped to the free Northern states.
8. Douglass gave a speech entitled “*What, to the Slave, is the 4th of July*” in which he explained his view that while Americans could rightly take pride in the celebration of their independence, they could not rightly ignore the fate of slaves in the southern states, who were held so unjustly in captivity.
9. Douglass was particularly critical of church leaders who failed to denounce the immorality of slavery on the excuse that slavery is not condemned in the Bible.
10. The challenge of convincing people that something *normal* can also be *wrong* was the tortuous mission of the abolitionists.
11. In the 1850s, there was a growing sense that the original American social contract could not last much longer. Compromise was simply becoming unacceptable to both believers in freedom *and* to slave holders who refused to abandon their way of life. Looking back, we can see how the abolitionist movement contributed to the coming of the *Civil War*.

H. The Constitution as an Obstacle to the Abolition of Slavery

1. Although some abolitionists like Frederick Douglass were supportive of the Constitution, others, such as William Lloyd Garrison, were not. They denounced the moral compromise embedded in it.
2. Sadly, there is some truth to the idea that the Constitution permitted the continuation of slavery because of how rigid it is.

3. The rigid character of the Constitution comes from the fact that the Founding Fathers wished to prevent the majority of the population from easily changing the laws. They recognized that in a true democracy (where the majority *rules*) it is all too easy for the majority to *legally* oppress any minority by controlling the government.
4. To prevent the majority from violating the rights of the minority, the Founders made the process of changing the Constitution very difficult.
5. The creation of “amendments” (i.e. additions, or other changes) to the Constitution required the willingness of 2/3 of the states to *initiate* a change, or 2/3 of the representatives in the federal government.
6. Ultimately, to have a change *accepted* as a part of the Constitution, the agreement (or “ratification”) of 3/4 of the states was needed. Such a large proportion is known as a “supermajority,” which as the concept suggests, would indicate an overwhelming desire of the people to change the social contract.
7. Unfortunately, the initial ratio of free states to slaves states was 5 to 8, so only 5/13 would want abolition, and as the country grew, it continued to be impossible to find support for an *amendment* to abolish slavery. By the time of the *Civil War*, the ratio of free to slave states was 17 to 15, so even though a majority of states would have supported it, 17/32 was not enough to change the Constitution.
8. Ironically, therefore, a system designed to protect minority rights from the majority actually made the continued violation of a minority’s rights by the majority possible.



The original mix of five free states to eight slave states became seventeen to fifteen by the time of the *Civil War*, but that was still not enough to change the Constitution.

I. The Civil War (1861-5)

1. The disintegration of the original American social contract was triggered by the presidential election of Abraham Lincoln in 1860.
2. Lincoln was a moderate abolitionist. In a famous debate against another prominent politician named Stephen Douglas Lincoln said, “This declared indifference...for the spread of slavery, I cannot but hate. I hate it because of the monstrous injustice of slavery

itself. I hate it because it deprives our republican example of its just influence in the world—enables the enemies of free institutions, with plausibility, to taunt us as hypocrites—causes the real friends of freedom to doubt our sincerity, and especially because it forces so many really good men amongst ourselves into an open war with the very fundamental principles of civil liberty—criticizing the Declaration of Independence.”

3. Although Lincoln explained his views that he did not think there was anything the Federal government could do to stop slavery, Southerners were still alarmed.
4. In late 1860, South Carolina decided to leave the Union, and other states followed in a mass *secession* from the United States.
5. These states soon joined together to form the “Confederate States of America.” The constitution of this new group of states explicitly defended slavery.
6. In April of 1861, Ft. Sumter (a fort in South Carolina belonging to the federal government) was bombarded by southern militia. This attack signaled the willingness of the South to fight for secession, and triggered the war itself.
7. Because the states that had seceded were technically in a state of rebellion, Abraham Lincoln issued a presidential proclamation on behalf of the *Union*, which said, “all persons held as slaves within any State...the people whereof shall be in rebellion against the United States shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free.” This *Emancipation Proclamation* of 1863 began the process of freeing the slaves in a way that was only possible because of the civil war.
8. Later in 1863, the greatest battle of the war was fought at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, after which President Lincoln gave his famous speech known as the *Gettysburg Address*, which begins “Four score and seven years ago...” In it he explained that the Civil War would prove whether or not a government “of the people, by the people, for the people” could survive.
9. The war continued until 1865, with the famous General William Tecumseh Sherman marching his army throughout the South and destroyed its infrastructure, including the entire city of Atlanta.
10. Ultimately, the Confederate commander General Lee realized there was no way to win, and he surrendered to Union general Ulysses S. Grant at Appomattox Court House in Virginia on April 9, 1865.
11. The war was over, but just five days later, Abraham Lincoln was shot and killed by a Southerner, John Wilkes Booth, while attending a play. The country would have to be rebuilt without the president who had led the cause of Union through the war.

