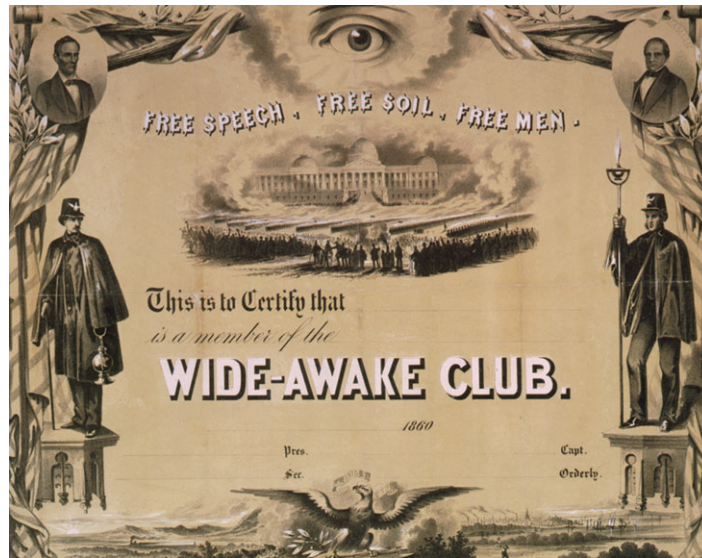


# The Political Origins of the Civil War

Between late January and Election Day of 1860, 23-year-old Charles O'Neill, Jr. of New Haven, Connecticut spent his free time practicing military maneuvers. But he was not preparing to face the Army of Northern Virginia—the Civil War didn't start until April 12, 1861. O'Neill, an elected first lieutenant of the Washington Wide Awakes, a Republican Party-affiliated paramilitary campaign organization (Figure 1), was instead readying for electoral battle against Democrats like the rival Douglas Invincibles. To the young laborer the torch-lit processions, serenades, and occasional brawls were an important part of the most important political campaign of his life: "You may imagine me in a silver and green cape, blue lantern in one hand, a yellow cane in the other, trooping though the mud giving orders, file left, march, shoulder arms, &c.," he wrote his fiancée the week of the momentous election. "Hurrah for old Abe. We are going to win, true as you live" (1).

While O'Neill and his men rarely carried a live firearm or intended to continue drilling after election day, the very public military display of the Wide Awakes further unnerved Southerners already panicked about the election (Figure 1). Formerly moderate newspapers like the *Baltimore Sun* splattered their pages with secessionist arguments. In the halls of Congress, Texas Senator Louis Wigfall accused New Yorker William Seward of encouraging his "John-Brown, Wide-Awake Praetorians" to remain organized following Lincoln's election. "One half million of men uniformed and drilled, and the purpose of their organization . . . to sweep the country in which I live with fire and sword" (2).

O'Neill and Wigfall were hardly alone that fateful year in ascribing particular significance to an election and, to a larger degree, politics in general. After all, it was a *political* act—the election of Abraham Lincoln, the first overtly antislavery candidate, to the presidency—that sparked first secession and then war itself. While few historians would disagree that the Civil War had important economic, social, and cultural causes, the fact remains that the Southern states didn't secede because the



**Figure 1.** Founded in the spring of 1860 in Hartford, Connecticut, the Wide-Awake Club was a Republican Party-affiliated paramilitary organization whose members paraded in support of the Lincoln-Hamlin ticket. Their mass displays of guns, flags, and torches at political rallies—reflected in the martial symbolism of this membership certificate—intensified the nation's sectional split and help us to understand the political origins of the Civil War. (Courtesy of Library of Congress)

North had built a vast, industrial economy and wanted to expand it to the West, or because more people read Northern rather than Southern books and periodicals. Secession was a response to a new political reality: the collapse, after many decades, of Southern slaveholders' iron-fisted control of federal power. The voters of the United States selected a president and a party committed first to containing and, finally, ending slavery. As James M. McPherson put it, "the losers refused to yield and precipitated a war that ended by giving America a new lease on life and a new birth of freedom" (3).

In fact, the overwhelming centrality of politics among the causes of the sectional crisis and, ultimately, the Civil War was clear well before the first shots were fired. In 1858, Senator William H. Seward of New York famously described what he called an "irrepressible conflict between opposing and enduring forces" that could only end once the United States became "entirely a slaveholding nation, or entirely a free labor nation" (4). Despite notable attempts to forge a political compromise over the issue of slavery and its extension in 1787, 1821, 1850 and 1854, successive generations of American leaders simply failed to come up with a workable permanent solution to this particular conundrum. This essay will discuss these various attempts to find a political solution to the slavery issue, and the diminishing returns of success each successive compromise had on soothing the nation's increasingly polarized sections. By the 1850s, when significant new lands were added to the United States as a result of the war with Mexico, compromise-minded politicians in Washington were no match for those in both sections determined to prevail completely in forcing the other to accept its vision of slavery. For the South, it was a federal code guaranteeing slavery in the territories and paving the way for new slave states, coupled with a Fugitive Slave Law that fully swung the weight of the federal government behind the interests of slaveholders. For an increasingly antislavery North, it was, at the very least, the containment of slavery where it already existed. But with the rise of a Republican Party committed not just to containing slavery, but bringing it to an end, political compromises like those attempted before and after Lincoln's election

in 1860 were doomed to failure. Politics—and political failure—stands firmly atop the long list of causes of the Civil War.

### The “Compromise of 1787”

The first attempt at a grand political compromise over slavery took place at the moment of the republic’s birth, during debates over the federal constitution. Delegates to the Philadelphia Convention of 1787 clashed over how to count slaves for enumeration purposes regarding the distribution of taxes and apportionment of the new House of Representatives. During the previous decade most northern states had either ended slavery outright (as in Massachusetts) or gradually abolished it by statute (as in New York) in what historians call the “first emancipation.” Delegates opposed to slavery, mostly from the northern states, proposed to count only the free inhabitants of each state for apportionment purposes. On the other hand, those more supportive of the institution preferred to count each state’s actual population, including slaves, and since slaves could not vote, their owners would reap the benefit of increased representation in both Congress and the Electoral College.

The solution arrived upon by the delegates, called the “three-fifths compromise,” counted every five slaves as three people, thereby reducing the power of the slave states relative to their initial proposal. But, as pointed out in recent work by Garry Wills and Leonard Richards, the compromise vastly increased the South’s power in the federal government by granting the region “bonus” seats in Congress and more electoral votes based on a completely disfranchised slave population. This imbalance, according to Wills, helped Southern presidential candidates like Thomas Jefferson win landslide victories in the Electoral College while also padding Southern representation on the Supreme Court and in Congressional leadership positions. Slaveholders also gained a clause in the U.S. Constitution guaranteeing the return of fugitive slaves. The results were enough to commence a long-running conspiracy theory in the North about a “Slave Power” which, like many conspiracy theories, contained an element of truth. A slaveholder occupied the White House for fifty of the sixty-two years between 1788 and 1850; eighteen of thirty-one U.S. Supreme Court justices owned slaves, and each of the three longest-serving Speakers of the House did, too. The smaller of the two sections seemed firmly in control (5).

### The Missouri Compromise

After Jefferson’s 1803 purchase of French Louisiana doubled American territory, it became clear that the earlier political compromises over slavery would have to be renegotiated. For the two decades after the ratification of the U.S. Constitution, the addition of new states to the Union occurred in an almost perfect one-for-one North/South ratio: Vermont/Kentucky, Tennessee/Ohio, Louisiana/Indiana, and Mississippi/Illinois. When Alabama was admitted in December of 1819, the number of slave and free states was, once again, in perfect symmetry, with eleven of each.

Settlers of the territory of Missouri, most of whom had come from the South, had also reached the specified number to warrant statehood, and applied for admission as a slave state. A bitter series of debates erupted in Congress on the subject of Missouri’s admission, brazenly emphasizing what so many politicians of the era wished to avoid: deep sectional divisions within the United States.

For the second time in the nation’s history, a grand political compromise was attempted over the issue of slavery and its expansion, and Kentucky’s Henry Clay, the Whig Speaker of the House, brokered it (Figure 2). Clay’s Compromise granted each section a new state—Maine for the North, and Missouri for the South—and slavery was forbidden in the vast lands of the Louisiana Purchase north of 36° 30’

(the southern border of the new state of Missouri). The immediate problem of Missouri was solved, but the larger question of whether slavery should be allowed to expand further was postponed for another day (6). The debates and threats of disunion went to the core issue of the struggle for power in Congress between representatives of the northern and southern states and, related to that, the ability of Congress itself to decide the fate of the territories added to the United States. These were difficult issues to solve, and incidentally ones put off into the future by the founders. This is why the aging Thomas Jefferson confided to a correspondent his fears that the line created by the Compromise would endanger the future of the nation: “this momentous question, like a fire bell in the night, awakened me and filled me with terror. I considered it at once as the knell of the Union . . . a geographical line, coinciding with a marked principle, moral and political, once conceived and held up to the angry passions of men, will never be obliterated” (7).

Missouri slaveholders rejoiced, but Congress had, for the first time since 1787, excluded slavery from a public territory. The Missouri Compromise held sway (and kept the sections at nominal peace over the issue of slavery’s extension) for three decades. But the failure of the members of the Fifteenth Congress to resolve these issues once and for



Figure 2. “The Great Compromiser,” Henry Clay (1777–1852) played a pivotal role in numerous congressional debates on the slavery question, helping draft the Missouri Compromise of 1820 and the Compromise of 1850. Even outside Capitol Hill, Clay could not escape controversies involving slavery. Citing an agreement with a previous owner, his slave, Charlotte Dupuy, claimed that she was legally entitled to freedom. Though the case was settled in favor of Clay, in 1840 he freed Charlotte and her daughter. (Courtesy of Library of Congress)

all ensured the issue would again creep into public discourse once there was more territory to organize and settle.

### The Mexican Cession and the Compromise of 1850

The annexation of the Republic of Texas in 1845 and the addition to the United States of 525,000 square miles of new territory as a result of the 1846–48 war with Mexico again brought the politics of slavery's future into sharp focus. The 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo forced Mexico to cede territory including the entire current states of California, Nevada, Utah and portions of Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico, and Wyoming to the United States, in exchange for \$15 million. As had happened with the petition to admit Missouri a quarter century before, antislavery Northern Congressmen tried to block the addition of new slave states. This time, Northern House Democrats like David Wilmot of Pennsylvania broke with their Southern brethren in 1846 and passed a proviso which attempted to ban slavery from any territory gained as a result of the war with Mexico. While the measure failed to pass the Senate (where the South had more representation and allies), some Southern leaders decided that the Wilmot Proviso represented a new, dangerous attack on slavery, by attempting to limit its expansion south and west. During the 1848 Presidential election, antislavery feeling coalesced in the North around the new Free Soil Party, which failed to win any electoral votes but deprived the Democratic candidate of enough electoral votes to deliver the White House to the Whig candidate Zachary Taylor (a slaveholding hero of the Mexican War) (8). Throughout 1849, increasingly disunionist rhetoric dominated political discourse in both the North and South, especially after President Taylor called for the admission of California as a free state, without even an intervening period as a territory.

Stung by Taylor's California announcement, Southerners led by Mississippi Senator Jefferson Davis demanded that their region be granted guarantees protecting slavery in the territories as well as a strong federal fugitive slave law to ensure the return of runaways to their masters. Once again Henry Clay, by 1850 an aging *éminence grise* of the Senate, tried to forge a last-ditch political compromise. This time, he proposed that a long series of measures representing each side's demands be passed as a single, colossal "omnibus" bill, which ideally would quell the sectional discord and, like the Missouri Compromise, preserve the union for another thirty years. Clay's compromise provisions included:

- Admission of California as a free state
- Organization of New Mexico and Utah Territories without mention of slavery (and the status of that institution to be later determined by the territories themselves in a process called "popular sovereignty")
- Prohibition of the slave trade (but not slavery itself) in the District of Columbia
- Settlement of various Texas boundary claims, and
- A strict new Fugitive Slave Law

Although the omnibus bill failed, Stephen Douglas, a young Democratic Senator from Illinois, used his considerable political skills to pass the Compromise of 1850 as a series of separate bills (with each section's representatives voting for the measures that were the most self-serving) in September 1850 (Figure 3). As with most backroom political deals, each party had to accept terms it found unpalatable. Observers on both sides hailed the Compromise as a "final solution" to the vexing question of slavery in the territories. But in reality the legislation pleased no one, certainly not the growing chorus of radicals in both the North and South.

### Making Kansas Bleed

Stephen Douglas's encore to the Compromise of 1850 was the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, which provided for the settlement and organiza-

tion of the parts of the old Louisiana Purchase north of Indian Territory (present day Oklahoma). Douglas, a nationalist and Democrat looking ahead to his party's nomination for the presidency in 1856, hoped both to populate the upper Midwest with settlers and win political favor in the South. His legislation nullified the twenty-three-year-old Missouri Compromise barring slavery from parts of the original Louisiana Purchase north of 36° 30' and replaced it with "popular sovereignty." Douglas famously claimed to "care not" whether Kansas would remain free or become a refuge for slavery. But thousands of Americans on both sides of the slavery issue *did* care, and pro- and anti-slavery supporters flooded the fertile river valleys in the eastern part of the territory in 1854 and 1855. Violent clashes soon occurred, especially once proslavery Missourians (called "Border Ruffians" by their foes) crossed the man-made border to steal a territorial election for their side (9).

During the spring of 1856, Border Ruffians led in person by one of Missouri's U.S. Senators sacked the antislavery town of Lawrence; one day later violence stalked the U.S. Capitol building itself when Congressman Preston Brooks of South Carolina attacked Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts with a heavy cane in response to Sumner's speech blaming Southerners for crimes in Kansas. The Senate floor, the site of so many formal compromises over slavery, had by 1856 become the scene of bloody physical aggression. In response to the



**Figure 3.** Memorialized with a statue in Freeport, Illinois, the "Little Giant," U.S. Senator Stephen Douglas (1813–1861) was for years the most prominent northern face of the Democratic Party. During a debate with Abraham Lincoln at this site, Douglas pronounced the Freeport Doctrine, a commitment to "popular sovereignty" to decide the slavery question in the new territories of the Union. Douglas became a source of division within his party as many Southern Democrats attacked his attempt at compromise. This split led to Douglas's defeat in the 1860 presidential election. (Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)

sack of Lawrence (and, perhaps, also for the caning of Sumner) the radical abolitionist and recent Kansas arrival John Brown dragged five proslavery settlers from their beds and split open their heads with broadswords. Later that summer, Brown and his men engaged with proslavery settlers and Missourians on the battlefield at both Black Jack and Osawatimie. In the words of the New York editor Horace Greeley, the territory had become “bleeding Kansas,” and politicians seemed powerless to stem the tide of violence on the prairie.

One of the main legacies of the border wars in Kansas was the formation of a new political party that only added to the sectional tension separating North and South. Organized in 1854, the new Republican Party grew out of a loose coalition of antislavery Whigs and Free Soil Democrats who had mobilized in opposition to Stephen Douglas’s Kansas-Nebraska Act. In addition to opposing slavery and its expansion into new territories, the party put forward a vision for remaking the United States on Northern values, emphasizing free homesteads for settlers, assistance to railroads and industry, and bank reform. They vigorously argued that the free labor system of the Northern states was superior in every way to slavery and, in fact, the very foundation of civic virtue in a republic such as the United States. The new party immediately took root in New England and the Old Northwest, and nominated John C. Frémont for President in 1856 with the slogan “free soil, free labor, free speech, free men, Frémont.” Although he received virtually no support in the South (where he and the Republicans were excoriated as divisive forces who would likely bring on civil war) and lost to Democrat James Buchanan, the political neophyte won big in New England, New York, and the northern Midwest.

### The Election of 1860 and the Coming of the Civil War

The election of 1860 showed just how frayed the nation’s political system had become after a decade of uninterrupted sectional turmoil, and how unlikely a Henry Clay-style grand compromise would be at the start of the new decade. The campaign had barely gotten underway when John Brown resurfaced by invading the slave state of Virginia and occupying the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry in October, 1859. The raid was over just thirty-six hours after it had begun, and Brown and six of his surviving followers were hastily convicted and sentenced to hang after a sensational trial in Charles Town, Virginia. Harpers Ferry polarized the United States as no previous event ever had, and set in motion a dizzying spiral of actions and reactions. At the start of 1860, the raid and some Northerners’ responses to it threatened to cost the Republican Party at the polls. “The quicker they hang him and get him out of the way, the better,” said Republican Charles H. Ray. “We are damnably exercised here about the effect of Old Brown’s retched *fiasco* . . . upon the moral health of the Republican Party!” (10)

In the South, newspapers declared that Brown’s actions were simply the logical (and inevitable) outcome of Republican agitation over slavery restriction. The *Baltimore Sun*, heretofore the voice of border state moderation, announced that the South could not afford to “live under a government, the majority of whose subjects or citizens regard John Brown as a martyr and a Christian hero, rather than a murderer and a robber” (11).

Time and again, Southern criticism fell on those considered more “radical” opponents of slavery, men like William H. Seward and Horace Greeley. “Brown may be insane,” wrote the editor of the *Richmond Enquirer*, “but there are other criminals, guilty wretches, who instigated the crime perpetrated at Harpers Ferry . . . bring Seward, Greeley, Hale, and Smith to the jurisdiction of Virginia and Brown and his deluded victims in the Charlestown [sic] jail may hope for a pardon.” Suddenly the political futures of Republicans *not* heretofore known as “radicals,” men like Abraham Lincoln, were looking up.

If the Republicans were worried, the Democratic Party was itself full of disunionists. The Democrats had survived the 1850s with their party intact—making it one of the last bi-sectional institutions to break into Northern and Southern factions. But the long-delayed split finally occurred in early 1860 at the party’s nominating convention, with Southern Democrats unwilling to support Stephen A. Douglas of Illinois, its leading candidate and the only Democrat with potentially national appeal. Southern delegates to the convention walked out and nominated the sitting vice president John C. Breckinridge of Kentucky on a proslavery platform. That left a bitter husk of the party of Jefferson and Jackson to nominate Douglas to run on the same platform the party used in 1856. What remained of the old Whig Party of Henry Clay formed the Constitutional Union Party and nominated John Bell of Tennessee on a platform of preserving the Union at all costs.

Faced with this scenario, Republicans, who had studied the map of the last Presidential election, concluded they could win the White House by reversing Democratic victories in just two or three Northern states like Pennsylvania, Illinois, and Indiana. Its leading candidate, William Seward of New York, had been a U.S. Senator for many years, and had made enemies across the political spectrum with antislavery addresses like the famous “Higher Law” (1850) and “Irrepressible Conflict” (1858) speeches, each of which was made out to be more radical than they actually were. When Seward failed to muster the votes necessary to capture the Presidential nomination on the first ballot in Chicago, many delegates turned instead to their favorite “second choice,” the railroad lawyer and former one-term Congressman Abraham Lincoln. Lincoln won the nomination on the third ballot (Figure 4).

The centerpiece of the Republican Party’s electoral appeal, cemented at the center of its platform, was unequivocal opposition to the expansion of slavery. “No new slave states” was a constant cry on the campaign trail. Slavery, for Republicans, was an immoral institution and a relic of “barbarism.” Most party members believed that by confining the institution within its present boundaries, it would be placed on the road to eventual extinction. The party was, therefore, a genuine anti-slavery party. This is not to say that most (or even many) Republicans were abolitionists. Indeed, party candidates and opinion-makers labored incessantly to separate themselves from abolitionists who agitated for an immediate, uncompensated end to slavery. But a key reason many Southerners believed a Republican victory would mean a certain end to their “peculiar institution” was because so many Republicans made this very point, repeatedly and unceasingly. First and foremost was Lincoln himself. In the Cooper Union address in February 1860 he claimed that “[a]n inspection of the Constitution will show that the right of property in a slave is not ‘distinctly and expressly affirmed’ in it” (12). After Lincoln won the nomination and, citing custom, withdrew from the campaign trail, his surrogates made the point even more explicitly. Future Vice President Henry Wilson of Massachusetts, for example, explained in detail how, when in office, the Republicans would accomplish their chief aim: “We shall arrest the extension of slavery and rescue the Government from the grasp of the slave power,” he said. “We shall blot out slavery from the national capital. We shall surround the slave states with a cordon of free states. We shall then appeal to the hearts and consciences of men and in a few years we shall give liberty to the millions in bondage” (13). Southerners should be excused if they feared for slavery’s future within a Republican-led Union. Republicans themselves told them what to expect.

The campaign of 1860 was actually two separate elections, one in the North and one in the South. In the North, Lincoln and Douglas faced off against each other; in the South the contest was largely one



**Figure 4.** This presidential campaign button featuring Abraham Lincoln on one side and vice-presidential nominee Hannibal Hamlin (not shown) on the other, signals the use of photography, a recent technological development, in the practice of political advertising. Though Lincoln withdrew from the campaign trail, artifacts carrying his image were widely circulated throughout the nation with the purpose of increasing Lincoln's national appeal. (Courtesy of Library of Congress)

between Bell and Breckinridge. These sectionally segregated elections were almost completely insulated from each other. In fact, Lincoln did not even appear on ballots across most of the South, and Breckinridge garnered little support north of the Mason-Dixon line. Lincoln won the election with just thirty-nine percent of the popular vote, by carrying seventeen free states and their 180 electoral votes. Breckinridge won eleven slave states and their seventy-two electoral votes; neither leading candidate captured a single state in the opposite section. Bell and Douglas—the only two candidates who possessed national appeal—trailed far behind, with thirty and twelve electoral votes, respectively. Vast majorities of Americans voted for candidates who promised less, not more, compromising spirit over the future of slavery.

#### Secession Winter and a Final Attempt at Compromise

Just six weeks after Lincoln's triumph in the election of 1860, South Carolina seceded from the Union. As James Loewen explains in this issue, the South Carolina *Declaration of Immediate Causes* explained explicitly that it was the election of Lincoln and other Republicans that triggered their action: "[Northerners] have united in the election of a man to the high office of President of the United States, whose opinions and purposes are hostile to slavery," read the *Declaration*. "On the 4th of March next this [Republican] party will take possession of the government. It has announced that the South shall be excluded from the common territory; that the judicial tribunals shall be made sectional, and that a war must be waged against slavery until it shall

cease throughout the United States." The document goes on to mention slavery, slaves, or slaveholding eighteen times (14). Before Lincoln even took the oath of office, six additional states declared their secession from the Union. They established a Southern government, the Confederate States of America, on February 4, 1861. Six weeks later, Alexander Stephens, once a Whig U.S. Senator from Georgia who voted for the Compromise of 1850 but now vice president of the breakaway nation, delivered what came to be known as the "Cornerstone Speech." He explained that "the cause of the late rupture" was a political disagreement over the "proper status of the Negro in our form of civilization." Stephens's new boss, Confederate President Jefferson Davis, another veteran of the U.S. Senate, justified the dissolution of the Union as an act of self-defense against the victorious Republicans.

Yet during that bleak "secession winter" the nation's remaining unionist politicians tried one more time to avert the breakup of the United States by forging a compromise. Known by the name of one of its attempted architects, Senator John J. Crittenden of Kentucky, this last attempt at compromise consisted of six proposed constitutional amendments and four proposed Congressional resolutions. These included the permanent existence of slavery in the Southern states; Southern demands for a mighty fugitive slave code and slavery in the District of Columbia; and, perhaps most importantly (and certainly ironically), the un-amendable and un-repealable reestablishment of the old Missouri Compromise line: slavery would be prohibited north of the 36° 30' parallel and guaranteed south of it. The idea of Southerners and conservative Unionists turning once again to Henry Clay's Missouri Compromise to turn back the past seven years of sectional agitation, violence, and electioneering showed how dissipated and dilapidated the nation's political institutions had become. But even the reintroduction of the Missouri line would be anathema to the central tenet of Republicanism, and Lincoln urged his allies to reject the compromise if it meant abandoning the principle of nonextension. "Let there be no compromise on the question of *extending* slavery," he wrote during the secession crisis. "If there be, all our labor is lost. . . Stand firm. The tug has to come, & better now, than any time hereafter" (15). Both the House and the Senate soundly rejected Crittenden's compromise. The new president and congressional Republicans, after all, had been elected on a platform explicitly dedicated to halting the expansion of slavery. This political act, accomplished by voters across the North, triggered the dire crisis of the Union during the winter of 1860–61. And, as the president himself would memorably say four years later, the war came. □

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Jonathan Earle is associate professor of history at the University of Kansas. He is the author of numerous books and articles including *Jacksonian Antislavery and the Politics of Free Soil* (University of North Carolina Press, 2004), winner of the Society of Historians of the Early American Republic’s 2005 Broussard prize, *John Brown’s Raid: A Brief History With Documents* (Bedford/St. Martin’s Press, 2008), and *The Routledge Atlas of African American History* (Routledge, 2000). He is currently working on a book on the election of 1860 for the Pivotal Moments in American History series published by Oxford University Press.

# Letters TO THE Editor

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