

Essential Question: How did the events following the election of 1860 force the newly elected Abraham Lincoln to demonstrate his leadership abilities in a time of crisis?

The Multiple Dilemmas of Abraham Lincoln

The Contextualization: The presidential election of 1860 culminated more than a decade of increasing sectional conflict between the North and South, and, simultaneously, precipitated a new crisis that ultimately severed the Union. The election of the Republican Party's candidate, Abraham Lincoln, on November 6, 1860, began a chain of events that included the secession of seven deep South states, the establishment of the Confederate States of America, and the assumption of authority over federal property, such as custom houses and forts. The Confederacy's attempt to extend its sovereignty over forts that remained in Union hands, notably Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor, South Carolina, and Fort Pickens at Pensacola, Florida, placed the rival governments on a collision course. These events transpired during the 120 days between Lincoln's election in early November 1860 and his inauguration on March 4, 1861.

The Stakes: Shortly after Lincoln's election, Congress assembled, and the following months leading up to Lincoln's inauguration were marked by events of profound significance for the country. Seven states left the Union, formed a new government, and took over federal property; eight slaveholding states precariously walked a tightrope between Union and secession; the Buchanan administration, after conceding the loss of most federal posts, held firm at Forts Pickens and Sumter; and moderates formulated compromise proposals to resolve the crisis and provide a means for the peaceable reconstruction of the country.

Officially, Lincoln had no more authority in this situation than any other American. Due to a constitutional requirement, he would not take office until March 4, 1861. In the meantime, power remained in the hands of a lame-duck President and Congress. Yet unofficially, Lincoln possessed considerable influence, and what he decided to do about the various compromise proposals during this period would be as fateful as any decision he made after he became President.

In making decisions, Lincoln had to consider:

- His own principles and ideals
- The demands of his party and constituents
- The situation in the upper South
- The strength of the secessionist movement in the deep South
- The likely consequences of any decision on the future course of events



Dilemma Directions:

As the secession crisis unfolded, Lincoln was presented with a number of suggestions for handling it. Some ideas were urged upon him personally. Others were offered in newspapers, letters, in Congress, or public meetings. Inevitably, this advice differed.

In order to understand the choices Lincoln confronted, consider the various options below, and the nature of the crisis faced by the Union. Each historical figure represents a different policy recommendation. ***Within your team, discuss: If you were Lincoln, what would you do? Why would you choose this particular course of action?***

Dilemmas of Compromise:



John J. Crittenden: Remix the Missouri Compromise.

Crittenden's plan was a comprehensive package designed to remove permanently the slavery issue from federal jurisdiction. Its most important features provided for a constitutional amendment securing slavery in the South for all time, and a permanent extension of the Missouri Compromise line of 36 degrees, 30 minutes in all territories now held or hereafter acquired. It recognized slavery as existing south of the line, and prohibited it north of the line.

As a variant of the Missouri Compromise, the *Crittenden Compromise* had the weight of tradition on its side. Its proponents argued that dividing the country into free and slave areas provided an equitable compromise of existing territories, and would likely prevent the addition of new territory in the future since each section would oppose annexing lands that would reward the other. Further, the permanent protection of slavery through a constitutional amendment promised greater security to the South and, along with other provisions, might lure the secessionist states back into the Union.

Americans had, throughout their history, avoided bitter political and sectional conflict through compromise. Crittenden's plan, therefore, had considerable popular backing as the best means of securing the Union. Petitions flooded Congress urging its adoption, public meetings endorsed it, and a majority of the Republican Party seemed to favor it.



Thurlow Weed: Restore the Missouri Compromise.

Thurlow Weed, New York's powerful Republican boss, editor, and ally of William H. Seward (Lincoln's designated secretary of state), recommended the restoration of the Missouri Compromise line. At times, he even suggested extending the Missouri Compromise line to all the remaining territories, though he rejected the Crittenden Compromise package as "partial and one sided" in favoring the South. He explained that given the inhospitability of the "soil and climate" of the present territories to slavery and given Republican control of the presidency and the administration of the territories, he was "palmest prepared to say, that Territories may be safely left to take care of themselves." While thus tilting towards popular sovereignty once Lincoln was safely elected, Weed and his newspaper, the *Albany Evening Journal*, insisted that they did not favor the surrender of any free territory to slavery. Under the conditions presented by Lincoln's election, no territory would be lost to the South. During a visit to Lincoln in Springfield, Illinois, in December 1860, and in editorials in his newspaper, Weed urged that Republicans offer concessions in light of the seriousness of the secession crisis and the increased likelihood of war.

Weed especially thought that conciliation was necessary to hold the upper South in the Union and unite the North. He doubted that the cotton South would change its course, but he hoped that the effect of concessions on the border South and North would halt secession's momentum and avert war. And if war came, the North would be more united and have the moral advantage of having favored compromise.

As one of the most powerful figures in the Republican Party, and a close associate of Seward, Weed's recommendation of an accommodation more satisfactory to the North than the Crittenden proposals received considerable attention in the press and needed to be taken seriously.



Salmon P. Chase - Reject any compromise and maintain the Union.

Salmon P. Chase, Ohio senator and Republican leader, would soon be tapped by Lincoln as his secretary of the treasury. He represented the more radical, anti-slavery wing of the party. Chase urged Lincoln and other Republicans to adhere fixedly to their principles and reject any compromise. He wanted the Constitution upheld, the Union maintained, and the laws obeyed. Only after assuming power would the Republicans offer proposals, and these adjustments would not involve any compromise of basic party ideology. "Inauguration first--adjustment afterwards," he insisted.

To Chase, Lincoln's victory was a triumph for the Republican Party's principles, particularly that of restricting slavery within its present state limits. Not only were these principles morally correct, but their triumph in the presidential election was secured by "a fair and unquestionable majority." To abandon the party's platform would violate the ideal of majority rule and would be denounced by the people as a subversion of the electoral process. To make concessions, furthermore, would threaten, and perhaps even destroy the party as an institution. The party would also appear weak and vacillating to the South. This could even encourage further militancy and disunionist activity in that section.



Horace Greeley - Let the Southern states "go in peace."

The prominent journalist, Horace Greeley, editor of the *New York Tribune* and a leading Republican spokesman, expressed the view that the disgruntled cotton states should be permitted to "go in peace" if they wished. "Whenever a considerable section of our Union shall deliberately resolve to go out, we shall resist all coercive measures designed to keep it in."

Greeley rejected the idea of compromising with the South. The Crittenden plan, he argued, would only encourage the South to seek further extensions of slavery and would not save the Union. Instead, he recommended a slow, complicated process of peaceful separation, including for example, the calling of a constitutional convention. During this period, the South would cool off and realize the drawbacks of separation. In the meantime, it was essential for the North to avoid concessions or inflammatory actions.

Directions:

As a team, discuss the various options and the nature of the crisis faced by Lincoln.

What Should Lincoln Do? Why?



Primary Source Analysis: Lincoln's First Inaugural Address (March 4, 1861)

Historical Situation: Lincoln was elected on November 6, 1860, and inaugurated March 4, 1861. In between these dates, seven states of the American Union that legalized slavery announced their secession, to create the Confederate States of America.

“Secession is unconstitutional...This conclusion is confirmed by our nation's history; no state can simply choose to leave the Union on its own; these states' secession ordinances are void; and the Confederacy is a violent insurrection. Descending from these general principles, we find the proposition that, in legal contemplation, the Union is perpetual, confirmed by the history of the Union itself...It follows from these views that no State, upon its own mere motion, can lawfully get out of the Union, that resolves and ordinances to that effect are legally void; and that acts of violence, within any State or States, against the authority of the United States, are insurrectionary or revolutionary... Secession equals anarchy; if any part of a nation can leave whenever it wants, no nation can survive; in a republic, elections matter, and majorities rule, within the constraints laid out in the Constitution. Plainly, the central idea of secession is the essence of anarchy.”	 POV: What does the excerpt reveal about Lincoln's beliefs? HIGHLIGHT EVIDENCE
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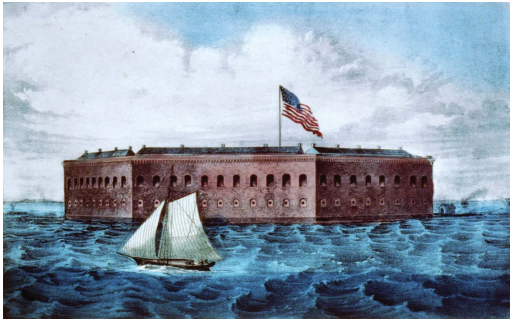
Audience: Reactions to Lincoln's First Presidential Speech

Secessionists	Non-Secessionists	Compromisers	Unionists	Abolitionists

The Issue: Crisis at Fort Sumter (March 1861)

History is not simply a series of inevitable events, each unfolding one after the other. Rather, history consists of the difficult choices that people make in response to challenging problems. When people make a choice, that decision can affect the lives of people and nations for generations to come.

Walking into the White House office, Lincoln was startled by news from Fort Sumter's commanding officer, Robert Anderson. “The first thing that was handed to me after I entered this room, when I came from the inauguration, was the letter from Major Anderson saying their provisions would be exhausted before an expedition could be sent to their relief,” Lincoln recalled. The secession crisis had been largely peaceable. All of that could change quickly in Charleston Harbor.



Refer to the section “Focus on Fort Sumter” (pages 16-17) in *A Nation Divided* text or more information on the issue.