

Slavery and Polarization, 1819-1860

Investigation: Abolitionism

When people disagree about something important to them, polarization can grow. Those involved choose sides and begin to see events and situations as “us” versus “them.” The driving force for polarization is emotion, which generally increases on both sides.

In the period before the Civil War, people in the North and South disagreed about tariffs on imports, about how power should be divided between the state and national governments, and about slavery. Opposition to slavery in the North became the most important “trigger” of the Civil War.

Simple, strong shared ideas about what’s right and fair form the “ideology” of the group holding the ideas.

In the following data, identify the ideology of the groups involved.

Opposition to Slavery

Opposition to slavery started during the colonial period. Efforts to abolish it were led by a few religious groups who felt that slavery was morally wrong. Even in the South there had been opposition to slavery.

In the 1830s more and more people began to speak out in favor of **abolition**—ending slavery—and it soon became a “movement” in the North. Abolitionists organized societies, gave speeches, published articles, and mailed literature throughout the country, including the South.

The view of the American Anti-Slavery Society, an abolitionist group founded in 1833:

We believe that no man has the right to enslave his brother, or to hold him as a piece of merchandise. No man has a right to earn wages for someone else’s work. No man has the right to deny another a chance to improve his mind, his way of life, or his morals.

The right to liberty cannot be taken away without violating God’s laws. We believe that the slaves ought to be set free immediately and protected by law.

We believe that those who are colored ought to possess all the privileges and rights as anyone else.

Theodore Weld was a well-known member of the American Anti-Slavery Society. In 1839 he published a book called *Slavery As It Is: Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses*.

Excerpts from Weld's book:

Floggings

The slaves are terribly beaten with whips, paddles, etc.; red pepper and salt are rubbed into their mangled flesh; hot salt water and turpentine are poured into their gashes; and many other tortures are inflicted on them. I can prove with a cloud of witnesses that slaves are whipped inhumanly, leaving scars and ridges. After this, we will present testimony concerning a great many other kinds of tortures. For the most part, the testimony will come from the slaveowners themselves, in their own words. Much of it will be taken from advertisements in their own newspapers.

In the column under the word "witnesses" is the name of the person who placed the advertisements. Opposite the name of the witness is an excerpt from their advertisement.

Witnesses

Testimony

Mr. Robert Nicoll, Dauphin St., Mobile, Alabama, in the *Mobile Commercial Advertiser*.

"Ten dollars reward for my woman Siby, very much scarred about the neck and ears by whipping."

Mr. Bryant Johnson, Fort Valley, Georgia, in the *Standard of the Union*, Milledgeville, Georgia.

"Ranaway, a Negro woman named Maria, some scars on her back from the whip."

Mr. James Noe, Red River Landing, La., in the *Sentinel*, Vicksburg, Miss.

"Ranaway, a Negro fellow named Dick—has many scars on his back from being whipped."

Brandings, Maimings, Gunshot Wounds, etc.

The slaves are often branded with hot irons, chased with firearms and shot, hunted with dogs and torn by them, shockingly maimed with knives, have their ears cut off, their eyes knocked out, their bones dislocated and broken, their fingers and toes cut off.

Witnesses

Testimony

Mr. Micajah Ricks, Nash County, North Carolina, in the *Raleigh Standard*.

"Ranaway, a Negro woman and two children; a few days before she went off, I burnt her with a hot iron, on the left side of her face. I tried to make the letter M."

Mr. R. P. Carney, Clark County, Alabama, in the *Mobile Register*.

"One hundred dollars reward for a Negro fellow, Pompey, 40 years old. He is branded on the left jaw."

Abolitionists published books and newspapers with illustrations like this:



Many abolitionists were active in the “Underground Railroad.” It was neither underground nor a railroad, but a network of people who provided assistance, protection, food and shelter as escaped slaves traveled from “station to station” northward to Canada.

Keywords for Internet/library investigation: Benjamin Lundy, Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, Harriet Beecher Stowe, William Lloyd Garrison, Lucretia Mott, Angelina and Sarah Grimké, Harriet Tubman, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.

How did people in the North react to the abolition movement? There was no one "Northern reaction," but the data which follows suggests general attitudes and feelings.

One Northern abolitionist, a young minister, described an 1836 event in a small Ohio town where previous abolition speakers had been kept from holding meetings. The event is an example of how many Northerners felt at that time.

Describe the polarization (changes in ideas, feelings, and actions) taking place.

Brother Weld:

After the abolition lecture was announced, many people here in Middlebury began to show their anger.

The arrangements committee came to us and said they were frightened and advised us not to have a meeting. We went down anyway but the church was locked. An audience soon gathered, and we went over to a school to decide what to do. Two church trustees were with us, and after awhile they left with a growl. In a few minutes we heard the church bell ringing like fire and one of the trustees came back to invite us over. We found the door burst in.

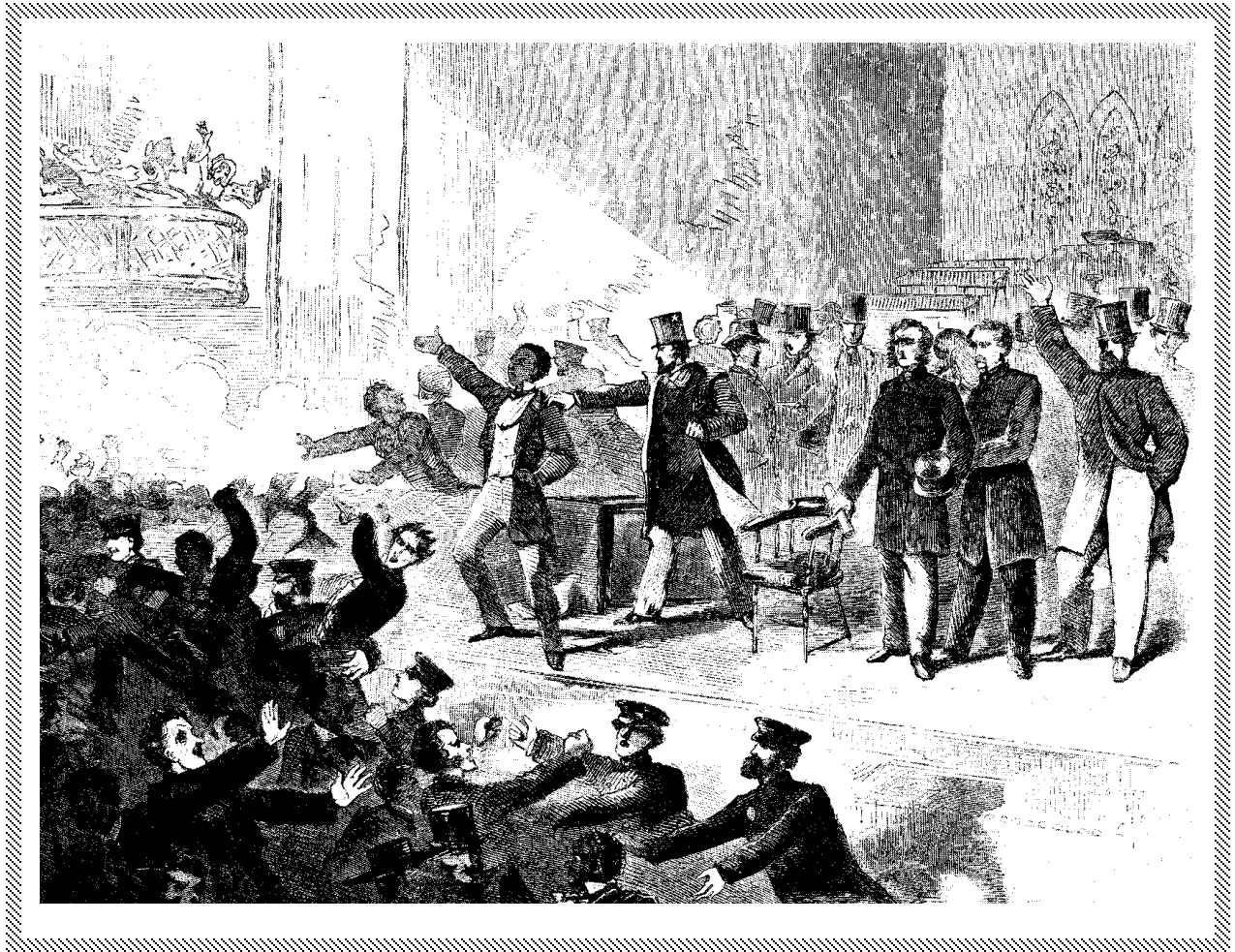
A good number soon gathered, and Brother Thorne proceeded to lecture. All was quiet until about eight, when in through the church windows came a broadside of eggs. Glass, eggshells, whites and yolks flew everywhere. I have been trying to clean off this morning but can't get rid of the stink. Brother Thorne dodged like a stoned gander, then got down behind a desk. This morning he says he thought the stove was exploding!!! Mr. Kent, a local merchant, tried to go out, but got hit in the eye with an egg. I understand that he says this morning he is an abolitionist.

A committee was appointed to try and bring the rioters to justice. None of the committee are abolitionists, but are well on the way. I think this will bring the people here to stand. Abolitionists have always been mobbed out of here before this. We must try to carry the day this time, if possible.

Your Brother Affectionately,

J. W. Alvord

On December 3, 1860, an abolitionist meeting in Boston was broken up by a mob and the police. The engraving below illustrates the scene. *In your opinion, was the artist giving an objective view of events, or taking sides? Explain your position.*



The next two sources suggest some reasons why many people in the North opposed the Abolitionists. Describe these reasons in your own words.

Catherine E. Beecher, from a prominent religious and literary family in the North (1837):

While Abolition Societies did not exist, men could talk and write, in the South, against the evils of slavery, and northern men had free access and liberty of speech, both in the South and at the North. But now all is changed. Every avenue of approach to the South is shut. No paper, pamphlet, or preacher that says anything about elimination of slavery is permitted there. Their own citizens, who once expressed opinions publicly, are now silenced. This is all because of Abolitionism.

But suppose the Abolitionists succeed, not only in making northern men Abolitionists, but also in sending a portion of light into the South, such as to form a body of Abolitionists there also. What is the thing that is to be done to end slavery at the South? It is to *alter the laws*, and to do this, a small minority must begin a long, bitter, terrible conflict with a powerful and exasperated majority...How will the exasperated majority act, according to the known laws of mind and of experience? Instead of lessening the evils of slavery, they will increase them. (Adapted)

Abraham Lincoln expressed his view on abolition in a Peoria, Illinois speech on October 16, 1854. At that time, many Northerners agreed with him.

When Southern people tell us they are no more responsible for the origin of slavery than we are, I agree. When it is said that slavery exists and that it is very difficult to get rid of it in any satisfactory way, I can understand and appreciate the saying. I surely will not blame them for not doing what I should not know how to do myself.

If all earthly power were given to me, I should not know what to do about slavery. My first impulse would be to free all the slaves and send them to Liberia, to their own native land. But a moment's reflection would convince me that this is impossible. If they were all landed there in a day, they would all perish in the next ten days. What then? Free them all and keep them among us as underlings? Is it quite certain that this betters their condition? I think I would not hold one in slavery, at any rate; yet the point is not clear enough for me to denounce people upon.

What next? Free them and make them politically and socially our equals? My own feelings will not agree to this. Even if mine would, we well know that those of the great mass of white peoples will not. A universal feeling, whether well- or ill-founded, cannot be safely disregarded. We cannot then, make them equals. But it does seem to me that systems of gradual emancipation might be adopted.

But all this, in my opinion, is no excuse for permitting slavery to go into our own free territory.

Like Lincoln, many Northerners were opposed to Abolitionism, but they also opposed the spread of slavery into new territory. *Suggest reasons for this attitude.*

Investigation: Ideology in Arguments about Territories

When a new territory was occupied in the West, the question of whether slavery would be allowed in it was raised. If the territory became a state, two more senators would sit in Congress, possibly upsetting the balance of power.

Beginning with Missouri in 1820, every discussion of government or statehood for western territories became a problem for Congress. However, as polarization between North and South increased, the arguments advanced by both sides changed.

Following are four arguments—two by Northerners and two by Southerners. Note the date associated with each argument.

Describe ways in which arguments are changing as polarization increases.

Richmond, Virginia newspaper *Enquirer* (1819):

The people who wish to keep slaves out of the territory say they want to do this because they love humanity. This is just an excuse so they can gain their political goals.

They are resisting the only possible way of freeing slaves in the future. Can we expect the slaves to be set free in the Southern states, when there are many more of them than whites?

If many slaves are sent into the West to reduce the excess population, someday they might be set free.

Ohio Congressman Joshua Giddings (1844):

Let us admit this territory [Texas] to the Union, and we shall place the balance of power in the hands of the people in the new state. They, with the Southern states, will control the policy and destiny of this nation. Our tariff will then be held at the will of the supporters of free trade. Are our friends of the North prepared to deliver over this great national policy to the people of this territory? Are the liberty-loving Democrats of Pennsylvania ready to give up our tariff—to strike off all protection from iron and coal, and other productions of that state in order to purchase a slave market for their neighbors, who, in the words of Thomas Jefferson Randolph, "breed men for the market like oxen"?

Giddings refers to the "tariff"—a tax on imported coal, iron and manufactured goods. Why would Northerners and Southerners disagree about this? (Note that textile mills in England bought much of the cotton raised in the South.)

Southern magazine *DeBow's Review* (1856):

The crisis is here! The slaveholding states must act now, or farewell to Southern rights and independence.

What should we do? We should settle this territory [Kansas] with Southerners. Right now the population is about equal—as many proslavery settlers as abolitionists—but the fanatics have representatives all over the North and are raising money and men to gain power over us. Will Southern men give in without resistance? Never!

Let us, then, form societies to help Southerners settle in the territory. If we permit the North to make it an abolitionist state, the whole South will be controlled by the North.

Southern farmers, come to this territory and bring your slaves. We must not allow this rich and beautiful country to be overrun by our abolitionist enemies. They have spies in almost every town, village, and city in the South, watching our movements and tampering with our slaves. Be careful.

Massachusetts Senator Charles Sumner (1856):

Everything said or done in this vast circle of crime comes from the one idea that this territory [Kansas], at any cost, must be made a slave state.

To accomplish this result, these three things were attempted: first, by outrages of all kinds to drive the friends of freedom already there out of the territory; second, to keep others from coming; and, third, to gain the complete control of the government.

Thus was the crime committed. Slavery now stands erect, clanking its chains on the territory, surrounded by a code of death, and trampling upon all cherished liberties, whether of speech, the press, the bar, the trial by jury, or the right to vote.

It has been done for the sake of political power, in order to bring two new slaveholding senators upon this floor and thus to strengthen in the national government the desperate chances of a declining wealthy class in the South.

(There's more about Kansas on page 10.)

Investigation: Government Actions

Time after time, the national government tried to keep polarization and conflict under control by maintaining a balance between North and South.

For each of the following sources, describe (1) the probable reactions of people in the North and South, (2) likely changes in level of emotions, and (3) whether the action would increase or decrease polarization. Give reasons for your answers.

Compromise of 1850

By 1850 there were 15 Northern and 15 Southern states in the Union. Gold had been discovered in California in 1848 and thousands of Americans had gone there looking for riches. Now California was requesting admission as a state—a *free* state.

As in the case of Missouri, this created a problem in Congress. California's admission would upset the balance of power in the Senate. The problem resulted in the **Compromise of 1850**, admitting California as a free state, and putting in place the “Fugitive Slave Law” everywhere in the United States.

September 18, 1850

Section 5:

All marshals and deputy marshals must obey this act and issue warrants as required. If a fugitive in the custody of a marshal or deputy marshal escapes, with or without the help of the marshal or deputy, the marshal will be prosecuted for the full price of the service of the slave.

Marshals, officers, or others authorized to capture fugitives may, if necessary, order bystanders or other persons to help capture fugitives. All good citizens are commanded to assist whenever their services may be needed.

Section 7:

Any person who hinders the capture and arrest of a fugitive, or tries to rescue any fugitive after he is captured, or hides and helps any fugitive, shall be fined not more than 1,000 dollars. Such person will be imprisoned for not more than six months, and will forfeit, to the person claiming the fugitive, 1,000 dollars for each fugitive lost.

Mexico had given up territory which now makes up the southwestern United States (including California) in 1848. The other important terms of the Compromise of 1850:

The rest of the territory obtained from Mexico (that is, excluding Texas and California) was divided into the New Mexico Territory and Utah Territory. The question of slavery was left to those who settled there. The people were to decide for themselves whether slavery should be permitted.

Slaves were not to be bought or sold in the District of Columbia.

Kansas and Nebraska Act

In 1854 the question of whether slavery should be allowed in the territories of Kansas and Nebraska was raised in Congress. A solution was proposed by Senator Stephen A. Douglas of Illinois. His plan, described below, came to be called **popular sovereignty**, and was written into the “Kansas-Nebraska Act.”

Whenever it becomes necessary, in our growth and progress, to add more territory, I am in favor of it, without considering the question of slavery. When we have added it, I will leave the people in the territory free to do as they please, either to make it slave or free territory, as they prefer.

Unintended consequences: New laws and similar actions of government sometimes create surprises. Shortly after the Kansas-Nebraska Act was passed, both North and South sent settlers into Kansas to try to gain control of the territory. Most were opposed to slavery.

However, in 1855 the first territorial election was held to select a legislature. With the help of proslavery men from Missouri who crossed into Kansas and voted illegally, the candidates who favored slavery were elected. Tension then grew between proslavery and antislavery settlers, violence erupted, and the territory became known as "Bleeding Kansas."

For further investigation: Keywords “John Brown abolitionist.”

The Dred Scott Decision

In 1857 the United States Supreme Court made a decision which it hoped would solve the problem of slavery in the territories.

Dred Scott was an enslaved person who had lived with his owner in the free state of Illinois and in Wisconsin (free territory) for five years. When his master took him back to the slave state of Missouri, Scott sued for his freedom. Because he had lived in free territory, he believed he ought to be considered a free man. Supported by abolitionists, Scott carried his case to the Supreme Court.

In its decision, the Supreme Court said:

There are two clauses in the Constitution which refer to the Negro race as a separate class of persons. They show clearly that Negroes were not considered citizens of the government then formed.

Upon careful consideration, the court is of the opinion that, based on the facts stated, Dred Scott was not a citizen of Missouri within the meaning of the Constitution of the United States. He was therefore not entitled to sue in its courts.

(Continued)

Also, the right to hold slaves as property is distinctly recognized in the Constitution. The Constitution protects the rights of individuals to private property. An act of Congress which takes away the property of a citizen merely because he brought his property into a particular section of the United States is certainly not legal.

It is the opinion of the court that the Act of Congress which prohibited a citizen from holding and owning slaves in the northern United States is not supported by the Constitution. Therefore, this law is declared void. Neither Dred Scott himself, nor any of his family, were made free by being carried into Northern territory, even if their owner had taken them there intending to become a permanent resident.

Investigation: Stereotyping

Stereotypes are oversimplified ideas about a group of people; stereotyped opinions generally assume that most or all members of the group share the same (usually negative) characteristics. As polarization grew between the North and South, each side developed stereotyped opinions of the other.

Stereotyped opinions can be described in pictures as well as words. ***Study the materials that follow, and identify stereotyped opinions.***

From William Lloyd Garrison's newspaper *The Liberator*, published on May 31, 1844:

Three million American people are crushed under the American Union! They are held as slaves—sold as merchandise—registered as goods! The government gives them no protection—the government is their enemy—the government keeps them in chains! There they lie bleeding. The Union which grinds them to the dust rests upon us, and with them we will struggle to overthrow it! The Constitution which subjects them to hopeless bondage, is one that we cannot swear to support! Our motto is, "NO UNION WITH SLAVEHOLDERS," either religious or political. They are the fiercest enemies of mankind, and the bitterest foes of God!

Rev. J. H. Thornwell, President of the University of North Carolina, commenting on the Compromise of 1850:

The parties in this conflict are not merely abolitionists and slaveholders —they are atheists, communists, red republicans, Jacobins on the one side, and the friends of order and regulated freedom on the other. In one word, the world is the battleground—Christianity and atheism the combatants; and the progress of humanity the stake.

In 1856 Massachusetts Senator Charles Sumner made a speech in the Senate accusing slave interests of evil and corrupt actions in Kansas. (Part of this speech is on page 8.) Representative Preston Brooks of South Carolina went into the Senate two days after the speech and beat Senator Sumner with a cane until it broke. Sumner was severely injured and didn't recover for several years.

How does this drawing reflect the opinion of the artist? Do you think this is a stereotyped version of the event?



An Alabama newspaper commented on the beating:

This newspaper recommends that other Southern members of Congress adopt the same method of silencing the foul-mouthed abolition agents of the North. Indeed, it is quite apparent, from recent developments, that the club is the best argument to be used with such low-bred mongrels.

More than six years ago, the abolitionists were told that if they intended to carry out their ideas, they must fight. When the northern organizations began to send people to Kansas, they were told that if their object was to establish a colony of thieves under the name of "Free State Men," for the purpose of keeping out Southerners and destroying slavery, they must fight. And let them understand that if they intend to carry their abolitionism into Congress, and pour forth their disgusting obscenity and abuse of the South in the Senate Chamber, and force their doctrines down the throats of Southerners, they must fight.

We repeat, let our Representative in Congress use the cowhide and hickory stick (and, if need be, the bowie knife and revolver) more frequently, and we'll bet our old hat that it will soon come to pass that Southern institutions and Southern men will be respected.

The above editorial, originally printed in Alabama, was reprinted in the abolitionist newspaper *The Liberator*. ***In which region, South or North, might this have had the most polarizing effect on readers?***

Stereotyped opinions are an effect of polarization. Could they also be a cause of increased polarization? Explain.

The Republican Party and Abraham Lincoln

Opponents of the Fugitive Slave Law and the Kansas-Nebraska Act formed the *Republican* political party in 1854. Republicans didn't call for the abolition of slavery, and most didn't want to free the slaves immediately, but they were determined to stop the spread of slavery into the territories. The Republican Party quickly gained support.

Abraham Lincoln was an Illinois lawyer opposed to slavery, although he never became an abolitionist (See page 7). A Republican nominee for the United States Senate in 1858, he ran against Senator Stephen A. Douglas. Lincoln felt that Douglas's popular sovereignty plan wasn't a good solution to the slavery problem and the polarization slavery had created.

Here's part of Lincoln's 1858 Senate nomination acceptance speech. The first sentence below refers to the Kansas-Nebraska Act (page 10). The "house divided" sentence is a quote from the Bible (Mark 3:25):

... We are now far into the fifth year since a policy was initiated with the avowed object and confident promise of putting an end to slavery agitation. Under the operation of that policy ...agitation has not only not ceased but has constantly augmented [increased]. In my opinion, it will not cease until a crisis shall have been reached and passed.

"A house divided against itself cannot stand." I believe this government cannot endure permanently half slave and half free. I do not expect the Union to be dissolved; I do not expect the house to fall; but I do expect it will cease to be divided. It will become all one thing, or all the other. Either the opponents of slavery will stop its spread, and begin to eliminate it, or supporters of slavery will push till it becomes lawful in all the states, old as well as new, North as well as South.

Lincoln is making a prediction about polarization. Do you think he was right? Explain your opinion.

Although Lincoln lost the 1858 Senate election, the Republican Party nominated him for president in 1860. Lincoln wasn't abolitionist, but many Southerners believed that most Republicans wanted to abolish slavery everywhere. They threatened to leave the Union if Lincoln became President.

Lincoln was elected in a vote split between candidates of four different parties. In December 1860 South Carolina, in a special convention, voted unanimously to secede from the United States. Eventually, 11 states left the Union and formed the Confederate States of America. When the Southern states left the Union, war soon followed.

Keywords for Internet/library investigation: Southern secession, Abraham Lincoln, Civil War,

Acknowledgements/Sources:

Page 1: W. P. Garrison and F. J. Garrison, *William Lloyd Garrison, 1805-1879*, 1885. **2:** Theodore D. Weld, *Slavery As It Is: Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses*, 1839. **4:** Gilbert H. Barnes and Dwight L. Dumond, eds., *The Letters of Theodore Dwight Weld, Angelina Grimke Weld, and Sarah Grimke* (Washington, D.C., American Historical Association) vol. I. **6t:** Catherine E. Beecher, *An Essay on Slavery and Abolitionism, with Reference to the Duty of American Females*, 2nd ed., pp. 82-25 **6b:** *The Writings of Abraham Lincoln*. **7t:** *Richmond Enquirer*, Dec. 23, 1819. **7b:** Joshua Giddings, *Congressional Globe*, 28th Congress, 1st session, May 21, 1844. **8t:** Charles Sumner, *Congressional Globe*, 34th Congress, 1st session, May 19-20, 1856 **8b:** "Kansas Matters-Appeal to the South" *DeBow's Review*, May 1856. **9:** US. Statutes at Large, vol. IX, p. 462 ft. **10t:** *The Writings of Abraham Lincoln*. **10b, 11t:** *Dred Scott vs. Sanford*, 1857. **11b:** *The Liberator*, May 31, 1844. **13t:** Autauga (Alabama) *Citizen*, in the *Liberator*, July 4, 1856 278, 286t. **14t:** *The Writings of Abraham Lincoln*.

Notes for Teachers and Mentors:

This optional unit expands investigation of polarization begun in Part 9, the section on Polarization in *Investigating American History*. The final investigation in Part 9 (the Charleston harbor situation in 1861 that led to the firing on Fort Sumter) may be delayed until completion of this unit, along with the Follow-Up that focuses on present-day polarization.

The characteristics of polarization developed in *IAH* are:

1. Choosing sides; movement of opinions away from moderate positions
2. Growing intensity of feelings on both sides
3. Growing unity of people at each pole
4. Failure to recognize valid positions taken by opponents
5. Growth of ideology—simplified shared opinions about favored issues
6. Growth of stereotyping—oversimplified shared opinions about opponents
7. Selective perception; e.g. view of own group’s actions as “defensive,” and opponents actions as “offensive.”

Initially many Northerners opposed the “immediate emancipation” position of the Abolitionists, which was considered extreme, but many supported more moderate anti-slavery positions, and opposed positions of Southerners for other reasons. Eventually, of course, the force of polarization led more and more people in the north to accept the Abolitionists arguments. See the discussion at <http://www.history.com/topics/abolitionist-movement>.

Optional expansion: Viewing a video version of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. This enormously-popular 1852 novel was an important pre-war influence on northern polarization, but also, more recently, has been seen as promoting unfortunate stereotypes of African-Americans.