What Led the Southern States to Secede From the Union in 1860-1861?

Around the late 1850’s and early 1860, The United States were on the brink of secession. One side being the North and the other side being the South. What could’ve led to this? Slavery, the rights of the South, and the election of Abraham Lincoln is what caused the Southern states to secede from the Union.

Slavery was one of the things that tore the United States apart. Unlike Britain, the United Mississippi politician and said in his speech “The North is accumulating power and it means to use that power to emancipate your slaves” [Doc.2] Near the end of his speech Albert Gallatin Brown said, “Disunion is a fearful thing, but emancipation is worse”. [Doc.2] This shows that slavery meant everything to the South, so much that they were willing to secede from the rest of the country. With the issue of slavery came distrust between the Northern and Southern states. The Missouri Compromise of 1820 is one example of where Northern and Southern states picked sides. With the North wanting Missouri as a free state and the South wanting the Missouri as a slave state. Even when it came to presidential elections, the country would still be divided. When the presidential election of 1860 was over, and Abraham Lincoln won, South Carolina seceded, and in the South Carolina ordinance of secession, one of the reasons of South Carolina seceding was because Lincoln “ has declared that that Government cannot endure permanently half slave, half free”. [Doc.6] For South Carolina not having slavery was like their own freedom being taken away, and that’s what caused them to secede, like the rest of the southern states, which caused more distrust between the two sides.

One of the other reasons the South decided to secede, was because of their rights, and because they were being taken away. During the 1860 presidential campaign the republicans said “we deny the authority of congress of a territorial legislature or of any individuals to give existence to slavery in any territory of the United States”. [Doc.1] Saying this alone caused distrust between the two sides, and for the south, took away their rights. The Democrats said in the 1860 presidential campaign, that “all citizens of the United States have an equal right to settle with their property in the territory”. [Doc.1] Judging from the two parties platforms each side cared only for their rights. Their pride and disagreement over each others rights is one of the reasons why the South seceded from the Union in the first place. Now when Abraham Lincoln was elected, George Templeton Strong, who was a New York attorney kept diaries from when Lincoln was elected to when states from the south started to secede. In his last entry on November 29th George Templeton Strong talks about how the North and South have had their differences and how he knew that the country wasn’t going to stay as one country forever. [Doc.5] Judging from his writings, it seemed like the North and South weren’t willing to make compromises, and if they did, the compromise wouldn’t last very long. It just goes to show both sides wanted a change that was permanent, they didn’t care about each others interests they just wanted their rights. As far as rights go, Jefferson Davis believed that it wasn’t the election that caused secession, but “raids of organized bodies sustained by contributions of northern society furnish to us sufficient cause”. [Doc.7] So not only did the South feel like their rights were being taken away, but in their eyes they felt they weren’t being treated fair, and that’s what led them to secede.

During the election of 1860, all of the North wanted was, a presidential candidate who was against slavery, and they found that in Abraham Lincoln. By the time the election was over most of the North, and the states of Oregon and California had voted for him, while most of the South voted for the Democrat nominee Breckinridge. While Lincoln had 1,865,600 of the popular vote, Douglas had 1,382,700, Breckinridge had 848,350 and Bell had 592,900. For the Electoral vote Lincoln had 180, Douglas 12, Breckinridge 72 and Bell 39. The obvious choice for President was Abraham Lincoln, and when he was elected President, the southern states would start to secede. When South Carolina seceded, in their ordinance of secession, they claimed that his “opinions and purposes are hostile to Slavery”. [Doc.6] This fact alone forced most of the southern states to secede. Even before the election of 1860 the Pittsburgh Press said in their newspaper, that “If Lincoln were President, the Union would be endangered from that hour.”. [Doc. 3] A President who would go against slavery, and their beliefs, is what the South feared , and eventually seceded.

With the disagreement over slavery, and territories the final straw for the South was when Abraham Lincoln was elected president. What could’ve led to this? Slavery, the rights of the south, and the election of a man who was against slavery and that was Abraham Lincoln and that is what caused the southern states to secede from the Union.

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