

THE WHITE HOUSE HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

Classroom: Grades 9-12

President and War Powers: "Lincoln and the Civil War"

Activity - You May Stay, or You May Go

By early February 1861, South Carolina and six other states had seceded from the Union. Yet James Buchanan, the outgoing Democratic president, urged Congress to find a peaceful solution to the problem between the North and the South. The Senate and the House appointed committees to try and work out some kind of compromise. In the Senate, one idea that seemed to gather support was for the Crittenden Compromise, put forth by Senator John J. Crittenden of Kentucky, which called for a series of constitutional amendments. One would have protected slavery in the states; another would answer southerners' demands for returning fugitive slaves and resolve the issue of slavery in the District of Columbia. But the most important part of the Crittenden Compromise had to do with the issue of slavery in the territories.

Senator Crittenden wanted to re-establish the Missouri Compromise line of 36-30' in all the territories that now belonged or might in the future belong to the United States. Slavery would be permitted south of the line, forbidden north of the line. Southern members indicated they would accept this compromise if the Republicans agreed as well. President-elect Lincoln was consulted, and he said no. First of all, in his view, it would encourage slave states to embark on imperialistic ventures in Latin America where they could acquire more slave states; and, furthermore, it abandoned the basic Republican Party principle of no expansion of slavery into the territories.⁶ Thus, this compromise was rejected.

Imagine two scenarios:

1. This Crittenden Compromise is accepted, the seceding states return to the Union, and the United States avoids a Civil War. What would life have been like in the United States had there been no Civil War?
2. Abraham Lincoln is elected president in 1861 and South Carolina secedes. Confederates fire on Fort Sumter. The fort is evacuated. Lincoln calls up the militia. Six more southern states secede. These Confederate states claim they are entitled to secede from the Union. It was as sovereign states that they made the Union in 1789, and, according to them, they have a right to dissolve their allegiance to that Union if it no longer serves their needs. Lincoln, though he is thoroughly opposed to this philosophy, agrees to let these states leave the Union

in order to avoid a tragic civil war. Meanwhile, in sympathy with the views of the other southern states, Virginia, Tennessee, Arkansas, and North Carolina secede as well. They form a government called the Confederate States of America, and establish legitimate diplomatic ties to France, Britain, and other European countries. What would the United States of America and the Confederate States of America have been like if the Confederates had been allowed to go?



Activity:

Get into groups with other students in your classroom, and brainstorm what might have happened in Scenarios 1 and 2. Try to keep in mind the issues that divided the two regions, and think of how they might logically have been resolved in a different circumstance. What would have happened to slavery, for example? After you have had some time to generate ideas with your classmates, write a story. Create a character that you place in either a southern or a northern setting in the year 1870, and describe his or her life. Share your stories with your classmates. Ask your teacher to judge which creative writing seems most "authentic."

A follow-up:

Respond to these questions in a class discussion:

Did this exercise cause you to think about other approaches the leaders within the United States might have used in the late 1850s to avert a civil war?

Was the Civil War an "irrepressible conflict," or could the story have ended differently?

Was President Abraham Lincoln right to insist that "the Union is in perpetuity"?