SOURCES BOOKLET

Introduction: Was slavery the cause of the civil war in the USA?

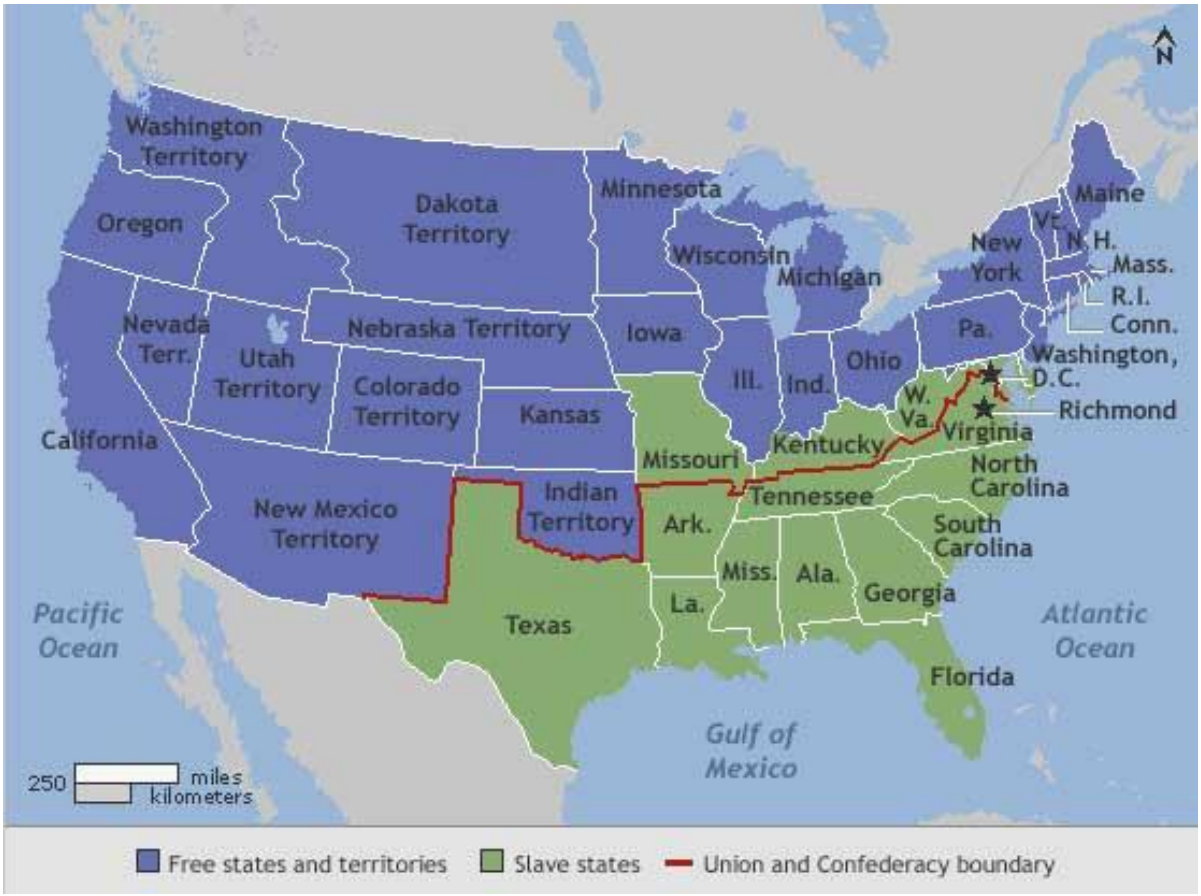
In November 1860 Abraham Lincoln was elected President of the United States of America. Lincoln was the candidate of the Republican political party. The Republican party was opposed to slavery but opinion within the party varied. Some radical Republicans favoured the abolition (ending) of slavery wherever it existed in the USA and cared little about how this was achieved. Other Republicans believed that the federal government of the USA (the national government in Washington consisting of the President, Congress and the Supreme Court) did not have the legal power to abolish slavery in southern states where it already existed. Regardless of their personal hostility to slavery, they wanted simply to prevent the extension of slavery into other parts of the USA which had not yet been organised into states. The federal government had this power, they believed. This was the position put forward by Lincoln and the Republican party in the 1860 election. The party's official electoral programme affirmed the right of individual states to manage their own affairs, i.e. decide for themselves on the issue of slavery.

However, Lincoln's election, which was solely a result of his popularity in northern, non-slave-holding states, was seen as a threat to slavery in the south. Southerners also asserted the importance of States' Rights which was the belief in the limited power of the federal government and the superiority of individual state governments over the federal government. Between December 1860 and May 1861, 11 of the 15 slave-holding states decided to leave the USA and set up their own nation called the Confederate States of America. Although slavery existed in Missouri, Kentucky, Maryland and Delaware, these states remained loyal to the Union (as the USA was sometimes called). Lincoln became President in March 1861 (there was always a large gap between the election and the start of a President's term of office). He repeated his promise not to interfere with slavery where it already existed but declared that the Union was unbreakable and that the actions of those states that had left the Union to form the Confederate States of America was illegal. In April 1861 civil war broke out when Lincoln attempted to resupply a Union army base on an island off the coast of one of the largest cities of the new Confederate States of America.

At the start of the Civil War, Lincoln believed that the secession (departure) of the southern states had been the result of the actions of a small minority of southern people. He was also concerned to prevent further secession by the four slave-holding states still in the Union. Northern opinion was also divided on the issue of slavery, with many northerners fearing that the abolition (ending) of slavery would result in southern blacks migrating north to compete for jobs with white workers. By July 1862 Lincoln decided that he would issue an Emancipation Proclamation freeing all slaves in Confederate States if they did not return to the Union voluntarily. This plan was announced publicly in September 1862 and came into force in January 1863. By the start of 1865 the victory of the Union over the Confederate States of America was not in doubt. In January 1865 Lincoln secured an amendment to the constitution banning slavery throughout the USA. This was only legally possible because so many of the slave-owning states had left the Union in 1860-1 and therefore could not block the constitutional amendment. The civil war ended in April 1865 with the Union restored and slavery abolished.

SOURCES

SOURCE A



Map showing the division of the USA into slave and non-slave areas in 1861 and the boundary of those states that formed the Confederate States of America.

SOURCE B

The people of Georgia, having dissolved their political connection with the Government of the United States of America, present to their confederates and the world, the causes which have led to the separation. For the last ten years we have had numerous causes of complaint against non-slave-holding states with reference to the subject of African slavery. These states have endeavoured to weaken our security, to disturb our peace, and have placed the two sections of the Union for many years past in the condition of virtual civil war. The people of Georgia have declared with equal firmness that they shall not rule over them.

The prosperity of the North was greatly dependent on the Federal Government, that of the South not at all. In the first years of the Republic [i.e. the USA] the commercial and manufacturing interests of the North began to seek profit and growth at the expense of the agricultural interests. Not content with these great and unjust advantages, they have sought to throw the burden of their business as much as possible upon the public. The manufacturing interest entered into the same struggle early, and has demanded from the Government special favours. This interest was confined mainly to the Eastern and Middle non-slave-holding states. It held great power and influence, and its demands were in full proportion to its power.

A declaration by the state of Georgia on 29 January 1861.

SOURCE C

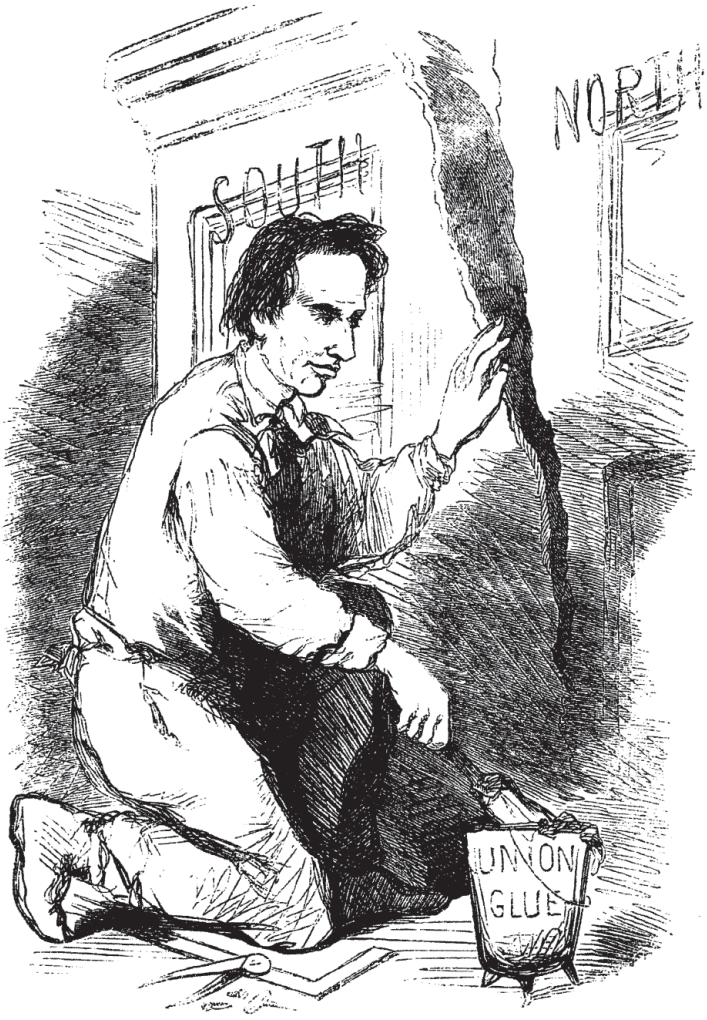
Texas has consented to become one of the Confederated Union to promote her welfare and insure the blessing of peace and liberty to her people. The Federal Government has almost entirely failed to protect the lives and property of the people of Texas against the Indian savages on our border, and the murderous bandits form the neighbouring territory of Mexico.

In all the non-slave-holding states, the people have formed themselves into a party based upon an unnatural feeling of hostility to the southern states and their system of African slavery. They have trampled upon our rights and encouraged lawless organisations to steal our slaves and prevent their recapture. They have sent pamphlets and papers among us to stir up slave rebellion. They have impoverished the slave-holding states by unequal legislation [i.e. laws], thereby enriching themselves.

And, finally, they have elected as president and vice-president two men whose chief claims to such high positions are their approval of these schemes for the ruin of the slave-holding states. The servitude [i.e. slavery] of the African race, as existing in these states, is mutually beneficial to both the bonded and the free, and is justified by the revealed will of the Almighty God.

A declaration by the state of Texas on 2 February 1861.

SOURCE D



A JOB FOR THE NEW CABINET MAKER.

A cartoon published in a northern newspaper in February 1861. The caption at the bottom reads 'A JOB FOR THE NEW CABINET MAKER.' It shows Lincoln, the newly elected Republican president. The group of advisers chosen by the President was called the Cabinet.

SOURCE E

My main object in this struggle is to save the Union, and is not either to save or to destroy slavery. If I could save the Union without freeing any slave I would do it, and if I could save it by freeing all the slaves I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone I would also do that. I have here stated my purpose according to my view of official duty and I intend no modification of my often-expressed personal wish that all men everywhere could be free.

From a letter by Lincoln published in a newspaper, 22 August 1862.
He was replying to a demand in another newspaper for the immediate and total abolition of slavery.

SOURCE F

One-eighth of the whole population were coloured slaves. Not distributed generally over the union but localised in the Southern part of it. All knew that slavery was, somehow, the cause of the war. To strengthen, perpetuate and extend slavery was the object for which the rebels would break the Union, even by war, while the government claimed no right to do more than to restrict the territorial enlargement of it.

From Lincoln's speech after being re-elected as president, March 1865.

END OF SOURCES