

Chicago History Museum

The Union is Perpetual: Lincoln is Elected

LESSON 2

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Lincoln wins the presidency in a hotly contested election

As a result of his performance in the series of debates against Stephen A. Douglas in 1858, Lincoln emerged as a potential presidential candidate. In May 1860, the Republican Party nominated him to run for president over several leading contenders with stronger antislavery views. Lincoln opposed slavery on moral, political, and social grounds, but he did not think it could be immediately abolished without disrupting the Union. Instead, Lincoln believed that slavery should be confined to the South, where it would gradually die out on its own. His moderate stance held greater appeal to the party's membership base, and he secured the nomination.

A few weeks after the Republican Convention, the Democratic Party split over the slavery issue, resulting in a northern wing that nominated Stephen A. Douglas for president and a southern wing that nominated John C. Breckenridge. A third party, the Constitutional Union Party, emerged with John Bell as its nominee.

In the November general election, Lincoln won 39 percent of the popular vote and 180 electoral votes, all from states in the North. Douglas won 29 percent of the popular vote but only 12 electoral votes. Breckinridge won most of the Southern states and 72 electoral votes. Bell won Virginia, Kentucky, and Tennessee, securing 39 electoral votes but finishing last in popular voting. Despite Lincoln's presidential victory, America was clearly a house divided.

FEATURED RESOURCES

- The Railsplitter campaign painting, 1860
- Anti-Lincoln political cartoon, 1860
- Note to Mrs. Elizabeth E. Atwater, signed by Lincoln, January 1, 1861
- Anonymous hate note to Lincoln, February 20, 1861
- Analysis worksheet

Copies of these materials are provided at the end of the lesson. All primary sources are from the Chicago History Museum collection.

ILLINOIS STATE LEARNING STANDARDS

English Language Arts

Goal 3: Write to communicate for a variety of purposes.

Goal 4: Listen and speak effectively in a variety of situations.

Goal 5: Use the language arts to acquire, assess, and communicate information.

Social Science

Goal 16: Understand events, trends, individuals, and movements shaping the history of Illinois, the United States, and other nations.

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PRIMARY SOURCES: DESCRIPTIONS AND SUGGESTED ANALYSIS QUESTIONS

Use the worksheet (provided at the end of the lesson) to introduce your students to the primary sources. The questions below are provided for a more in-depth analysis.

• The Railsplitter, 1860

A week before the Republican Convention was held in Chicago, party leaders met for two days in Decatur, Illinois. They chose Lincoln as their favorite candidate and nicknamed him the Railsplitter, a reference to his youth. By then, Lincoln was a prosperous urban lawyer, not a frontiersman, but he approved of the nickname, knowing that the familiar image would connect with northern voters (all male) who shared similar experiences.

This larger-than-life portrait elaborates the nickname. It depicts Lincoln as a self-reliant, hard-working young man of the western frontier on his way to the top (note the White House on the distant horizon). It is believed that the painting was displayed during Lincoln campaign rallies. Its imagery would have appealed to many northern voters with similar backgrounds, cultural values, and dreams of future success.

- · How does this painting portray Lincoln's life story?
- How does it try to convince people to vote for Lincoln?
- Would this painting convince you to vote for Lincoln? Why or why not?

Anti-Lincoln political cartoon, 1860

As illustrated by this cartoon, the antislavery Republican ticket (Lincoln for president and Senator Hannibal Hamlin of Maine for vice president) raised concerns that a civil war would erupt if they won the election. In this case, Lincoln "the Railsplitter" is depicted as a destructive agent rather than a strong protector of the Union.

- How is the Railsplitter imagery used in a negative fashion in this cartoon? (Hint: Look closely at the log.)
- What future does the cartoon predict if the Lincoln/Hamlin ticket wins the election?
- Would this cartoon convince you to vote against Lincoln? Why or why not?

Note to Mrs. Elizabeth E. Atwater, signed by Lincoln, January 1, 1861

President-elect Lincoln received an avalanche of fan mail from people across the country. Lincoln's personal secretary John Nicolay and his assistant John Hay were responsible for organizing Lincoln's daily schedule and handling all of his mail.

- What did Mrs. Atwater request from Lincoln?
- How did Lincoln respond to Mrs. Atwater?
- What can you infer about Mrs. Atwater? What can you infer about Lincoln?
- Anonymous hate note to Lincoln, February 20, 1861

In early 1861, emotions ran high across the country. After Lincoln's election but before he took office, several southern states seceded from the Union. While in New York City, en route to his inauguration, Lincoln received this message. The next day, after learning of an alleged plot to kill him in Baltimore, Lincoln secretly took an overnight train to Washington, D.C. For unknown reasons, Lincoln decided to keep this letter.

- What does the writer of the letter blame Lincoln for?
- How do you think Lincoln felt when he read this? (Keep in mind that he received this letter before even taking office.)

Analysis questions for this collection

- Which depiction of the Railsplitter is more effective? Why?
- The two letters reveal divergent opinions of Lincoln and represent the tensions and differing viewpoints of citizens across the country in 1861. How do these letters illustrate the conditions Lincoln faced as he took office?

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SUGGESTED INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

Choose the instructional strategy that works best for your classroom and feel free adapt the activity to meet the needs of your students. Please duplicate these materials to share with other educators.

Option 1: Primary source laboratory

Set up stations around your classroom. At each, place copies of one of the primary sources and magnifying glasses (optional). Give each student four copies of the analysis worksheet. Ask them to rotate through the stations and complete a worksheet for each source. Afterward, hold a class discussion, first touching on the laboratory experience. How does learning history using primary source materials differ from reading a text book? What source did students find to be the most emotionally powerful? Why? What primary sources exist in students' own lives? Next, discuss the content of the primary sources, using the completed worksheets and the suggested analysis questions (see page 2).

Option 2: For Lincoln, against Lincoln

Divide your class in half. One half will work with sources expressing a favorable view of Lincoln; the other, with sources expressing an unfavorable view of Lincoln. Distribute copies of *The Railsplitter* painting and the note to Mrs. Atwater to one half of the class and copies of the political cartoon and anonymous hate note to the other. Give students time to analyze their sources; this work may be done individually or in pairs. Ask students to present their findings to classmates representing the opposing side. This may be done during a class discussion or in small jigsaw groups. Conclude with a discussion using the suggested analysis questions for this collection (see page 2).

Option 3: Flip side of the same coin

Choose to work with either the Railsplitter images or the letters. Distribute copies of the sources to students and hold a class discussion using the analysis worksheet and the suggested analysis questions (see page 2). Give students time to formulate a creative response to the sources.

- Responding to the letters: Ask students to reply to the writer of the anonymous hate note as if they were Lincoln. How might he respond to the charge that he was "destroying this country"? Or, ask students to write the original letter from Mrs. Atwater requesting Lincoln's autograph. What might Mrs. Atwater have admired about Lincoln's policies and ideas?
- Responding to the Railsplitter images: Ask students to create their own campaign poster or political cartoon for (or against) Lincoln. Challenge them to incorporate iconic imagery beyond that of the Railsplitter.

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JOURNAL PROMPTS

Option 1: How do visual images, such as the Railsplitter painting and cartoon, shape voters' perceptions of political candidates? Discuss the positive and negative effects of these types of materials on the campaign process.

Option 2: How do the campaign techniques of the 1860s compare with those of today?

LISTENING TO HISTORY

The Union is Perpetual history soundscape

Available at http://www.chicagohistory.org/lincolnjuarezaudio

This short audio file portrays the scene at one of Lincoln's campaign rallies. You may play the soundscape at the start of the lesson to set the mood or prior to journal writing to inspire students' entries.

EXTENSION ACTIVITY

History Lab: Through the Camera's Lens

Available at www.chicagohistory.org/education/resources/history-lab

Analyze a variety of photographs depicting naval scenes, battlefields, and camp life, and explore how our understanding of the Civil War is affected by these famous images: How are photographs different than artwork? How do they depict reality? Do they represent the "truth"? How do photographs affect public opinion and support of war? Are these images journalistic or artistic?

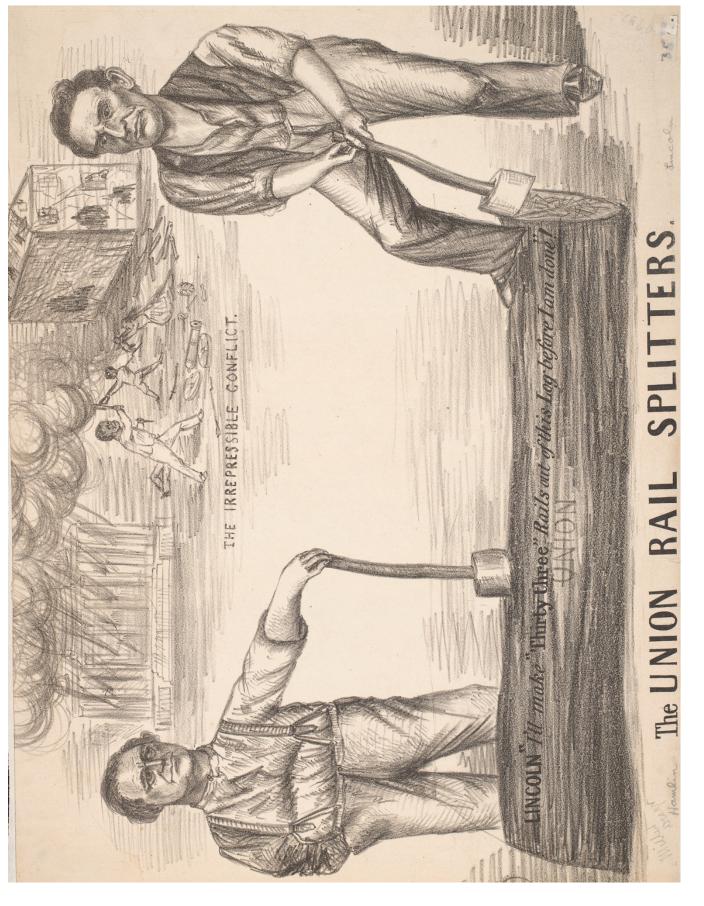


The Railsplitter campaign painting, 1860

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Anti-Lincoln political cartoon, 1860



Springfield Ile Jany. 1st 1861. Mrs. Abroater Dear madan Accounts Send you my autograph, which you desire. Yours Truly ALincolu

Transcription Springfield III January 1st 1861 Mrs. Atwater Dear Madame—Herewith I send you my autograph, which you desire. Yours Truly A. Lincoln

Note to Mrs. Elizabeth E. Atwater, signed by Lincoln, 1861

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Feb 20, 1061 Mr. Louide the devil state agos down before you are destroy county you you heath you Hand of Siel aquit you

Transcription Feb 20, 1861 Mr Lincoln – May the hand of the devil strike you down before long – you are destroying this country Dam you – every breath you take – Hand of God against you

Anonymous hate note to Lincoln, 1861

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SOURCE:

1. Describe the source you are analyzing. What is it? When and where was it produced and by whom?

- **2.** Examine it closely. What do you discover? List its powerful qualities, including colors, objects, figures, or words.
- 3. What message(s) is this source promoting? How?
- 4. Who is the intended audience?

5. What does this source tell you about life in the United States?

6. On a scale of 1 to 10, rank the truth or accuracy of this source (1 is not reliable, 10 is very reliable).
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 (not reliable) (very reliable)
Explain your rank.