The Election of 1860 & the Road to Disunion: Crash Course US History #18

Crash Course: U.S. History
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=====Intro (0:00)=====

Hi, I'm John Green, this is Crash Course US History, and today we discuss one of the most confusing questions in American history: What caused the Civil War?

Just kidding, it's not a confusing question at all; slavery caused the civil war.

Past John: Mr. Green, Mr Green, what about, like, state's rights, and nationalism, economics?

Present John: Me from the past, your senior year of high school, you will be taught American Government by Mr. Fleming, a white Southerner who will seem to you to be about a hundred eight-two years old, and you will say something to him in class about state's rights, and Mr. Fleming will turn to you and he will say

"A state's right to what, sir?"

And for the first time in your snotty little life you will be well and truly speechless.

(Intro)

=====The Fugitive Slave Law (0:46)=====

The road to the Civil War leads to discussions of state's rights (to slavery), and differing economic systems (specifically whether those economic systems should involve slavery), and the election of Abraham Lincoln (specifically how his election impacted slavery), but none of those things would have been issues without slavery!

So lets pick up with the most controversial section of the Compromise of 1850: The Fugitive Slave Law. Now, long time Crash Course viewers will remember that there was already a fugitive slave law written into the United States Constitution, so what made this one so controversial?

Under this new law, any citizen was required to turn in anyone he or she knew to be a slave to authorities, and that made, like, every person in New England into a sheriff, and it also required them to enforce a law they found abhorrent.

So they had to be sheriffs, and they didn't even get little gold badges. Thought Bubble, can I have a gold badge? Aw... awesome, thank you.

This law was also terrifying to people of color in the North because even if you, say, been born free in Massachusetts, the courts could send you into slavery if even one person swore before a judge that you were a specific slave. And many people of color responded to The Fugitive Slave Law by moving to Canada, which at the time was still technically an English colony, thereby further problematizing the whole idea that England was all about tyranny, and the United States was all about freedom.

But anyway, the most important result of The Fugitive Slave Law was that it convinced some Northerners that the government was in the hands of a sinister "Slave Power." Sadly, "Slave Power" was not a heavy metal band, or Britney Spears's new single, or even a secret cabal of powerful slaves, but rather a conspiracy theory about a secret cabal of pro-slavery Congressmen.

That conspiracy theory is going to grow in importance, but before we get to that, let us discuss railroads: underrated in Monopoly, and underrated in the Civil War. Let's go to the Thought Bubble.

=====Thought Bubble (2:26)=====

Railroads made shipping cheaper and more efficient, and allowed people to move around the country quickly, and they had a huge backer, and also a tiny backer, in the form of Illinois Congressman Stephen Douglas, who wanted a transcontinental railroad because: 1) He felt it would bind the Union together (at a time when it could use some binding), and 2) He figured it would go through Illinois, which would be good for his home state. But there was a problem.

To build a railroad, the territory through which it ran need to be organized, ideally as states, and if the railroad was gonna run through Illinois, then the Kansas and Nebraska territories would need to become state-like, so Douglas pushed forward the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854.

The Kansas-Nebraska Act formalized the idea of popular sovereignty, which basically meant that white residents of states could decide for themselves whether the state should allow slavery. Douglas felt this was a nice way of avoiding saying whether he favored slavery. Instead, he could just be in favor of letting other people be in favor of it.

Now, you'll remember that the previously bartered Missouri Compromise banned slavery in new states north of this here line, (3:28) and since in theory, Kansas or Nebraska could have slavery if people there decided they wanted it under the Kansas-Nebraska Act, despite being north of that there line, this in practice repealed the Missouri Compromise. As a result, there was quite a lot of violence in Kansas, so much so that some people say the Civil War really started there in 1857. Also, the Kansas-Nebraska Act led to the creation of a new political party: The Republicans. Yes, those Republicans. Thanks, Thought Bubble.

=====Northern Opinions, and the Republicans (3:54)=====

So Douglas's law helped to create a new coalition party dedicated to stopping the extension of slavery. It was made of former Free Soilers, Northern anti-slavery Whigs, and some Know-Nothings. It was also a completely sectional party, meaning that it drew supporters almost exclusively from the free states in the North and West, which, you'll remember from like two minutes ago, were tied together by common economic interests, and the railroad.

I'm telling you, don't underestimate railroads. By the way, we are getting to you, Dred Scott.

And now, we return at last to Slave Power. For many Northerners, the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which repealed the Missouri Compromise, was yet more evidence that Congress was controlled by a sinister slave-power group, doing the bidding of rich plantation owners. Which, as conspiracy theories go, wasn't the most far-fetched.

In fact, by 1854, the North was far more populous than the South - it had almost double the South's Congressional representation - but in spite of this advantage, Congress had just passed a law extending the power of slave states, and potentially, because two new states meant four new senators, making the Federal Government even more pro-slavery! And to Abolitionists, that didn't really seem like democracy.

The other reason that many Northerners cared enough about Kansas and Nebraska to abandon their old party loyalties was that having them become slave states was seen as a threat to Northerners' economic self-interest.

Remember, the West was seen as a place where individuals, specifically white individuals, could become self-sufficient farmers.

As Lincoln wrote, "The whole nation is interested that the best use be made of these territories. We want them for the homes of free white people. This they cannot be, to any considerable extent, if slavery shall be planted within them... New free States are the places for poor people to go to and better their condition."

So the real question was, would these Western territories have big, slave-based plantations, like happened in Mississippi, or small family farms full of frolicking free white people, like happened in Thomas Jefferson's imagination?

So the new Republican party ran its first presidential candidate in 1856, and did remarkably well - John C. Frémont, from California, picked up 39% of the vote, all of it from the North and West, and lost to the Democrat James Buchanan, who had the virtue of having spent most of the previous decade in Europe, and thus not having a position on slavery.

I mean, let me take this opportunity to remind you that James Buchanan's nickname was "The Old Public Functionary."

=====Bleeding Kansas (6:08)=====

Meanwhile, Kansas was trying to become a state by holding election in 1854 and 1855. I say "trying", because these elections were so fraudulent that they would be funny, except that everything stopped being funny, like, 12 years before the Civil War, and it doesn't get really funny again until Charlie Chaplin. Ah, Charlie Chaplin, thank you for being in the public domain and giving us a much needed break from a nation divided against itself, discovering that it cannot stand.

Right, so part of the Kansas problem was that hundreds of so-called "Border Ruffians" flocked to Kansas from pro-slavery Missouri, to cast ballots in Kansas elections. Which led to people coming in from free states, and setting up their own rival governments. Fighting eventually broke out and more than 200 people were killed; in fact, in 1856, pro-slavery forces laid siege to anti-slavery Lawrence, Kansas, with cannons.

One particularly violent incident involved the murder of an entire family by an anti-slavery zealot form New York, named John Brown. He got away with that murder, but hold a minute - we'll get to him.

Anyway, in the end, Kansas passed to two constitutions, because, you know, that's a good way to get started as a government. The pro-slavery Lecompton Constitution was the first that went to the U.S. Congress, and it was supported by Stephen Douglas as an example of popular sovereignty at work - except that the man who oversaw the voting in Kansas called it a "vile fraud."

Congress delayed Kansas' entry into the Union - because Congress' primary business is delay - until another, more fair, referendum took place, and after that vote, Kansas eventually did join the U.S. as a free state in 1861, by which time it was frankly too late.

=====*Dred Scott v. Sanford* (7:32)=====

All right, so while all this craziness was going in Kansas and Congress, the Supreme Court was busy rendering the worst decision in its history. Oh, hi there, Dred Scott!

Dred Scott had been a slave, whose master had taken him to live in Illinois and Wisconsin, both of which barred slavery, so Scott sued, arguing that if slavery was illegal in Illinois, then living in Illinois made him definitionally not a slave.

The case took years to find its way to the Supreme Court, and eventually, in 1857, Chief Justice Roger B. Taney from Maryland handed down his decision. The Court held that Scott was still a slave, but it went even further, attempting to settle the slavery issue once and for all.

Taney ruled that black people "had for more than a century before been regarded as beings of an inferior order, and altogether unfit to associate with the white race either in social or political relations, and so far inferior that they had no rights which the white man was bound to respect, and that the negro might justly and lawfully be reduced to slavery for his benefit."

So, that is an actual quote, from an actual decision by the Supreme Court of the United States of America. Wow.

I mean, Taney's ruling basically said that all black people anywhere in the United States could be considered property, and that the Court was in the business of protecting that property. This meant that a slave owner could take his slaves from Mississippi and Massachusetts, and they would still be slaves.

Which meant that technically, there was no such thing as a free state - at least, that's how people in the North, especially Republicans, saw it. But the Dred Scott decision helped convince even more people that the entire government - Congress, President Buchanan, and now, the Supreme Court - *were in the hands of the dreaded Slave Power*.

=====Mystery Document (9:13)=====

Oh, we're going to do the Mystery Document now? Stan, I am so confident about today's mystery document, that I am going to write down my guess right now... and I'm going to put it in this envelope, and then when I'm right, I want a prize! All I ever get is punishment, I want prizes!

Ok, the rules here are simple: I guess the author of the mystery document. I already did that. And then I get rewarded for being right.

Alright, total confidence, let's just read this thing. And then I get my reward.

"I look forward to the days when there shall be a servile insurrection in the south, when the black man... shall assert his freedom and wage a war of extermination against his master; when the torch of the incendiary shall light up the towns and cities of the South, and blot out the last vestige of slavery. And though I may not mock at their calamity, nor laugh when their fear cometh, yet I will hail it as the dawn of a political millennium."

I was right! Right here, guessed in advance, John Brown! [buzz indicating John was wrong] What?! STAN! Ohio congressman Joshua Giddings? Seriously, Stan?

Whatever, I'm going to talk about John Brown anyway.

=====John Brown(10:25)=====

In 1859, John Brown led a disastrous raid on the federal arsenal at Harper's Ferry hoping capture guns and then give them to slaves who would rise up and use those guns against their masters. But Brown was an awful military commander and not a terribly clear thinker in general and the raid was an abject failure. Many of the

party were killed, he was captured, and he stood trial and was sentenced to death. Thus he became a martyr to the abolitionist cause which is probably what he wanted anyway. On the morning of his hanging, he wrote: "I, John Brown, am now quite certain that the crimes of this guilty land will never be purged away but with blood."

Well, he was right about that. But in general, any statement that begins "I, comma, my name" nyihhh.

=====Presidential Election(11:05)=====

And so the state was set for one of the most important presidential elections in American history: dun duh duh dun duh daaaaaaa! [holding Lincoln's head]

In 1860, the Republican party chose as its candidate, Abraham Lincoln, whose hair and upper forehead you can see here. He'd proved his eloquence, if not his electability, in a series of debates with Stephen Douglas when the two were running for the Senate in 1858. Lincoln lost that election, but the debates made him famous and he could appeal to immigrant voters because he wasn't associated with the Know-Nothings.

The Democrats on the other hand, were, to a historian term, a hot mess. The Northern wing of the party favored Stephen Douglas but he was unacceptable to voters in the Deep South so Southern Democrats nominated John C. Breckinridge of Kentucky, making the Democrats, the last remaining truly national party no longer truly a national party. A third party, the Constitutional Union Party, dedicated to preserving the Constitution, quote "as it is", i.e. including slavery, nominated John Bell of Tennessee. Abraham Lincoln received zero votes in nine American states but he won 40% of the overall popular vote, including majorities in many of the most populous states, thereby winning the Electoral College. So anytime a guy becomes president who literally did not appear on your ballot, there is likely to be a problem.

=====The Beginning of the Civil War(12:19)=====

And indeed Lincoln's election led to a number of southern states seceding from the Union. Lincoln himself hated slavery but he repeatedly said he would leave it alone in the states where it is existed. But the demographics of Lincoln's election showed Southerners and Northerners alike that slave power, to whatever extent it had existed, was over.

By the time he took office on March 1, 1861, seven states had seceded and formed the Confederate States of America and the stage was set for the fighting to begin, which it did when Southern troops fired upon the Union garrison at Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor on April 12, 1861.

So that's when the Civil War started but it became inevitable earlier, maybe in 1857 or maybe in 1850 or maybe in 1776 or maybe in 1619 when the first African slaves arrived in Virginia. Because here's the thing: In the *Dred Scott* decision, Chief Justice Taney said that black Americans had "no rights which the white man was bound to respect." But this was demonstrably false! Black men had voted in elections and held property including even slaves, they'd appeared in court on their own behalf, they'd had rights, they'd expressed those rights when given the opportunity! And the failure of the United States to understand that the rights of black Americans were as inalienable as those of white Americans is ultimately what made the Civil War inevitable. So next week, it's off to war we go. Thanks for watching.

=====Outro (13:41)=====

CrashCourse is produced and directed by Stan Muller. Our script supervisor is Meredith Danko, the show is written by my high school history teacher Raoul Meyer and myself. Our associate producer is Danica Johnson and our graphics team is Thought Café.

Usually there's a libertage but there wasn't one this week because of stupid Chief Justice Roger Taney. However, please suggest captions in the comments where you can ask questions about today's video that will be answered by our team of historians.

Thank you for watching CrashCourse: US History and as they say in my hometown of Nerdfighteria, don't forget to be awesome.