

What would life be like today had Abraham Lincoln not won the Presidency in 1860?

In 1860 New York Senator William Seward was expected to be the nominee of the new Republican Party, but when the Party convention met in Chicago, to almost everyone's surprise the delegates threw their votes to the upstart candidate Abraham Lincoln. Seward was shocked, but he accepted the decision gracefully, and loyally campaigned for Lincoln in the fall campaign.

But, to provide a plausible alternate scenario, let's say Seward was insulted by the convention vote. Seward was one of the main founders of the Republican Party, and he knew he was by far more qualified to be president. The nomination should have gone to him. Let's say Seward's supporters considered Lincoln to be utterly unqualified to be president. Seward had been governor of the largest state in the Union, and was a longtime member of Congress. In sharp contrast, Lincoln had served in only one term in Congress, back in 1848 and 1849, and he had zero administrative experience.

With these feelings, Seward could have legitimately feared that if Lincoln was elected he would make such a fool of himself the Republican Party would be discredited for a generation. It would be quite believable that Seward's supporters might have influenced several state delegations to stay home and not vote for Lincoln in the general election in November. The Republican party leadership was evenly split, and many of them might not do much work to turn out the votes.

In 1860, what actually happened is that the Democratic Party was sharply split. At their party convention, held in Charleston, South Carolina, the Southern delegates rammed through their candidate, the current Vice President John C. Breckinridge of Kentucky. He had only lukewarm support from President James Buchanan, but intense opposition by the followers of Illinois Senator Stephen Douglas. Democratic delegates from the northern states reconvened a second party convention in Baltimore, and even though the Southerners boycotted it, this second convention nominated Douglas for president. After that, some of the delegates did not like either nominee, so they called themselves the Constitutional Union Party, and nominated Senator John Bell of Tennessee as their candidate.

Never in the history of the United States had the Democratic Party been so divided. In alarm that they would surely lose the election with this three-way split, party leaders tried to forge a compromise. Mississippi Senator Jefferson Davis tried his best to get the three headstrong candidates to unite, but he failed in the attempt.

Let's say, in this alternate history, that Davis succeeded. Let's say Davis convinced Bell to become the vice presidential candidate, but to support Breckinridge to be the

Democratic candidate for the presidency. That was a big accomplishment by itself, but an even more difficult task was to get the support of Douglas.

In reality, the biggest issue of division among the candidates was their reaction to the 1857 Dred Scott Supreme Court decision. Both Davis and Breckinridge liked the decision written by Chief Justice Roger Taney. But Jefferson Davis was so worried about the split within the Democratic Party that he arranged a deal wherein Breckinridge would be the Democratic nominee, but he would renounce his prior support for the decision and tell everyone he was now supporting Stephen Douglas' position.

Davis was successful in preventing a fracture between the supporters of Breckinridge and Bell, but it was going to be much more difficult to construct a rapprochement with Stephen Douglas. Breckinridge and Douglas had been good friends in the early 1850s, but they had split over the Supreme Court Dred Scott case. Breckinridge was strongly pro-slavery, and he supported the decision, written by Chief Justice Roger Taney, which stated flatly that black people have no rights under the United States Constitution, and that a white U.S. citizen had every right to take a black slave into all U.S. territories. Taney said the government had no more ability to restrict this right than it could to restrict the right of citizens to take their horses or cows to any territory. Enslaved persons, Taney said, were like domesticated animals, simply a form of property.

Breckinridge had supported the Dred Scott decision, but that made him very unpopular in the North. Many Northerners wanted the new lands in the western territories to be opened for small farmers, not for big wealthy Southern planters to bring their gangs of slaves to settle the land.

Davis was himself a big planter with over 200 slaves, and he favored Taney's decision. But Davis was a political realist. He bluntly told his Kentucky friend that if he did not reject his former stance, he would never be able to get enough votes in the North to be elected president. Plus, Davis revealed that Stephen Douglas would not drop his opposition to Breckinridge unless Breckinridge publicly supported Douglas' plan called 'popular sovereignty,' which allowed local settlers in each territory to vote whether they wanted slavery to be supported or prohibited in their area.

All this is what really happened in 1860, and Breckinridge refused to renounce his support for the pro-slavery Supreme Court decision. The Democrats remained divided, and with the Southern votes divided three ways, the Republicans were united behind Lincoln. But in this alternate scenario, let's say that Breckinridge meekly agreed to change his stance and support Douglas' "popular sovereignty." idea.

But Stephen Douglas was a headstrong politician, and he wanted something else: let's say that, in this alternate history, he confided to Jefferson Davis that he would withdraw his candidacy for the presidency, and throw his support to Breckinridge, if in return Breckinridge would choose him to be appointed to the Supreme Court. Chief

Justice Roger Taney was quite elderly, and Davis convinced him to retire if Breckinridge won and then promised to choose Douglas to be the new Chief Justice.

In this alternate history, let's say Breckinridge saw this as his golden opportunity to unite the Democrats, so he swallowed hard and agreed. He knew he was compromising his ideals, but he badly wanted to be president.

In the fall campaign, Breckinridge announced his support for popular sovereignty, and Douglas campaigned in his behalf. Not every voter in the North believed Breckinridge, but enough did that they held their nose and voted for him. Many Northerners also recognized that Lincoln's lack of experience would not equip him to be an effective president.

So, to few peoples' surprise, with the Democrats united and the Republicans divided, John Breckinridge would have been elected as president in the November 1860 election.

Southerners would have been jubilant. Breckinridge was a strong supporter of slavery, so Southern threats to secede if Lincoln was elected now fell flat. Democrats heaved a great sigh of relief, and the plans of the fireeaters to take their state out of the union fizzled. Even South Carolina, the state with the strongest support for secession, would have cancelled their state convention.

In this scenario, if the Democrats had united, Lincoln would have lost the election. But, even with his inexperience, Lincoln attracted many voters in the North. He turned out to be a very good speaker, and he certainly had a way with words. Even William Seward admired Lincoln's speeches.

Lincoln was gracious in his loss, and congratulated President-elect Breckinridge sincerely. Lincoln could be proud that, even though he did not win, he did everything he could to help other Republican candidates win. The Republican Party had been founded in 1856, and 1860 was only the second time they had even put forth a presidential candidate.

Now, even though there was a pro-slavery Democrat in the White House, and six out of nine Supreme Court justices came from slaveholding families, Republicans were happy that a majority of Congressmen in the House of Representatives were Republicans. And even in the Senate, where the South was strongest, there were now fifteen slave states but nineteen free states. And with the admission of Kansas in January 1861 as a state without slavery, that was one more success. Every new state that had been admitted since 1850 was a free state: California, Wisconsin, Iowa, Minnesota, Oregon, and now Kansas. Every one of those states had voted Republican.

In reality, both Lincoln and Seward realized there was one reason, and one reason only, for Republican success. Their secret was to appeal to immigrants. This was a change for the Republican Party, which had started off with an anti-immigrant flavor. However, both Seward and Lincoln led the party to drop its xenophobic rhetoric, and to embrace ethnic diversity.

For the past two decades the United States was the recipient of a massive influx of immigrants. Almost all of them were poor, and coming from poor countries in Europe, but they were anxious to succeed and grateful to be living in a democracy. Scandinavian farmers, German industrial workers, British ship builders, and anyone from Ireland who managed to escape the horrible potato famine, were happy to come to America. And they were almost universally united in their opposition to slavery. Few of them wanted to settle in the South, where labor-class jobs were virtually non-existent because almost all the labor was done by slaves.

The immigrants might be poor, but they were proud they were free, and they had little desire to compete with enslaved persons for jobs.

Immediately after the election, what really happened is that Lincoln began a regular correspondence with Republican leaders like Senator William Seward of New York, Governor Salmon Chase of Ohio, Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts, Congressman Preston Blair of Missouri, Governor John Andrew of Massachusetts, Congressman Thaddeus Stevens of Pennsylvania, and Lincoln's running mate Senator Hannibal Hamlin of Maine.

If Lincoln had lost the election, I think it is plausible that they would have decided that they could have the most impact by building anti-slavery majorities in more states. For example, they had seen the almost complete transformation of Missouri, which used to be a strongly pro-slavery state. After two decades of German and Irish settlers, however, Missouri was now almost evenly split between pro-slavery and anti-slavery populations. Fully half of the entire state's population lived in St. Louis. The leaders agreed that within a decade there should be enough anti-slavery voters to make slavery illegal in Missouri.

Thaddeus Stevens, who came from the Pennsylvania Deutsch area, revealed that he had started a quiet campaign to persuade Pennsylvania Quakers, who were strong abolitionists, to move over their nearby border and establish residency in Maryland. Once they were qualified voters, he predicted, they could help to change Maryland from a slave state to a free state. And if Maryland made that change, then Delaware would have to make that change as well. Delaware could ill afford to keep slaves when the nearby borders around them were without slavery.

By this plan (which is actually exactly what Republicans did in fact accomplish in Kansas) Republicans could pick up three new states just by encouraging anti-slavery voters to move to either Maryland or Missouri.

If Republicans had focused on increasing the number of free states, one way to add another state was to split California. What actually happened is that in late 1860 the California state legislature voted to split the large state in half. However, when the secession crisis overtook the federal government, Congress did not enact the Californians' wishes. If Lincoln had not won the election, there would have been no secession crisis, and it is likely that Congress would have voted to split the Golden State

into North California and South California. Southerners like Senator Jefferson Davis hoped that the new state would vote to recognize slavery, but he was disappointed that the state legislature submitted a constitution that prohibited slavery.

Senator Hannibal Hamlin had another idea as a way to increase the number of free states. In reality, after his wife died he had married his wife's younger sister, who looked almost exactly like her. Some people snidely accused Hamlin of being a polygamous Mormon. In this scenario, he would confide to Lincoln that he loved both his first wife and his new wife equally, and if his first wife were to come back alive he would want to be able to love them both. So he said he understood the ideas of the Mormons, about why they accepted polygamy.

Hamlin said he thought it was not government's business to be policing intimate relationships like marriage. But he felt the Mormons had made a mistake moving to Utah Territory, where they were under the direct governing of Congress. Lincoln agreed, knowing that polygamy was such a hot-button issue, it could never survive Congressional oversight. It would be much easier if Mormons were in a state, where if they could gain political power they could write their own state laws about marriage. Since every state wrote their own laws, Mormons could accomplish their goals if they were part of a governing coalition.

Hamlin suggested Arkansas, the sparsely-populated southern state. The eastern and southern parts of the state, in the Mississippi River lowlands, consisted of plantation lands with much of the labor being done by enslaved persons. However the western and northern part of the state, in the Ozarks hill country, was not suitable for large plantations. As a consequence, most of the population was small farmers.

Hamlin told Lincoln that Mormon leader Brigham Young had almost total control over LDS settlements. He said Republicans should make a deal with Young to move Mormon settlements from Utah to Arkansas, being careful to establish good relations with the non-slaveholding small farmers of the Ozarks. And if they could bring in enough Mormon settlers to establish residency in Arkansas, and build an anti-slavery alliance with the small farmers, they could end slavery that way, on the state level.

In December 1860, outgoing Democratic President James Buchanan had advocated admitting Indian Territory as a new state, with the tribal governments of the Cherokees, Creeks, Seminoles, Chickasaw, and Choctaw continuing to operate as county governments. Some of those tribesmen owned black slaves, and so before being approached for statehood, Hamlin told Lincoln, Republican members of Congress should tell the tribes they would be happy to vote in favor of statehood, on condition that the Indians vote to end slavery in their territory.

Lincoln agreed that a state-by-state strategy would be the best approach for Republicans to work on for the next several years. Even if Democrats won control of the White House, it would not matter so much as long as Republicans could keep majority control of Congress.

Lincoln agreed that his lack of administrative experience was his greatest weakness. That weakness would have been eliminated if, in this alternate scenario, the governor of Illinois had a sudden heart attack, and had to step down from his office. If Lincoln had lost the presidential election of 1860, the state legislators would likely have asked Lincoln if he would agree to take that position. And Lincoln, no doubt, would have happily agreed. Since he had been in the state legislature for years, he knew all the important officials.

If Lincoln had assumed the governorship of Illinois, he would most likely have stated that his primary focus would be what his mentor Henry Clay called "internal improvements." Governor Lincoln would have embarked on a program building canals and improving ports on Lake Michigan as well as along the Mississippi River. In actual fact, Lincoln was enamored with the new invention of the telegraph, and he would have installed a telegraph in the state capitol building so he could send and receive messages immediately. And of course, his main work would have been to encourage the building of more railroads across the state.

And, let's say, Governor Lincoln transformed the Illinois state militia into multiple crews of steam riverboats along the Mississippi River. Only to a few confidants did Lincoln reveal his plan for the state to be prepared, just in case the southern states tried to secede in the future.

Lincoln was especially concerned about Louisiana, and he wanted his state to be ready to blast their way down the Mississippi River to New Orleans, if necessary. He even established an Illinois state port in New Orleans, especially for Illinois farmers who wanted to float their crops in flatboats down to New Orleans.

The Republican Party platform opposed the spread of slavery into US territories, but promised not to interfere with slavery in the states where it already existed. If they would be successful in adding new non-slaveholding states, Republicans knew they could eventually get to the point where three-fourths of the states would be free states. At that future time they could pass a constitutional amendment ending slavery.

Until that time, Lincoln thought they should not try to end slavery on a national level. But, many Republicans supported the idea that, instead of the federal government paying slave catchers to try to capture and hold a trial to establish whether a black person accused of being a runaway, they should take that money and simply pay the slaveholder the value of that slave. By this means, at least the number of slaves could gradually be reduced. And, by avoiding having to pay slavecatchers, it would not cost the federal government much more money to just pay for the escaped slave. And, of course, it meant more people could escape enslavement without being returned to the horrors of bondage.

Another option would be for abolitionists to establish a private corporation to go into Kentucky and offer to buy enslaved pregnant teenage girls. That way, since the laws of every slave state specified that the status of an infant would be the same as its



mother, if the mother was freed the newborn infant would be free as well. Furthermore, the price to buy teenage girls would cost less than the price of adult males.

Slavery would not be ended under such a plan, but if the rate of enslavement could be reduced, then Kentucky might end slavery on the state level. In order to free the maximum number of teenage girls, the corporation would hire the girls out to be domestic workers in abolitionist homes and shops. Half of their salary would be paid to the corporation, to help defray part of the cost of their purchase, and the other half would be put into a trust fund for the girl's future. Also, the employer would be responsible for teaching the girl how to read and how to do basic math and money management.

Finally, the corporation would give financial incentives to free black families residing in the North to adopt the teenage girls and infants, rather than reproducing on their own. The reason for this provision would be to better provide for the future of the infants and to give the girls an adoptive family so they would not be turned out on their own. The corporation would also encourage the more intelligent girls to gain higher education, so they could become schoolteachers, nurses, or other professionals when reaching adulthood.

By focusing on the state level, over the next four years the states of Maryland, Delaware, and Missouri adopted new state constitutions that ended slavery in their state. And relocated Mormons were successfully moving to Arkansas, and doing missionary work to convert as many small farmers in the Ozarks as possible, so they could build a strong alliance of anti-slavery Mormons and farmers, to take control of the state government. They had given Arkansas slaveholders notice of their intent, to encourage as many as possible to move out of state. Those slaveholders took their slaves with them, but at least the number of slaveholders was reduced. By 1864 it was becoming clear that Arkansas would soon become a free state.

One of the most surprising political changes to occur was the transformation of Florida. In the Census of 1860, there were only about 75,000 whites in the state. As soon as the election was over, white abolitionists started moving to Florida. Most did this to get away from the brutal winters in the North, so they would relocate to Florida in November, after the end of the hurricane season. They remained in Florida until May, whereupon they returned to their homes in the North during the summer. What was crucial, though, is that since they were in Florida for more than half the year, they established their legal residency in the Sunshine State. After enough Northerners relocated, by the elections of 1862 they outvoted the Southern whites, so Florida was represented in Congress by anti-slavery men.

Once Republicans in Congress had enough votes to override a presidential veto, they passed a law to abolish slavery in all U.S. territories and in Washington DC. The main area to be affected was Indian Territory, but less than ten percent of tribal members owned slaves, and they did not object to giving up their slaves when Congress offered

to purchase them. The tribal members were grateful to have full Republican support for Indian Territory to be admitted as a state.

By 1864, it was becoming obvious that the number of free states had increased to 26, while the number of slave states had been reduced to 10.

Even though President Breckinridge was pro-slavery, during the course of his presidency he did at least try to compromise with Republicans. He and Governor Abraham Lincoln had become personal friends. Over the four years of his presidency, he had become more aware that the continued existence of slavery was having a negative impact on American foreign relations. The fact was that, bit by bit, in each new year, slavery was becoming less and less popular in the world as a whole.

As the election of 1864 approached, President Breckinridge agreed to serve another term. He liked being president, and he was pleased that after his election the secessionist movement in the South fizzled out. Being from Kentucky, which was almost evenly split between pro-slavery and anti-slavery factions, he genuinely saw both sides of the issue. He was proud that his presidency had compromised on the thorny issues relating to slavery. Americans recognized this, and except for extremists on both ends of the political spectrum, the consensus was that the public mood was grateful that a civil war had not broken out during the last four years.

Shortly after Breckinridge announced his intention to run for reelection in 1864, he received a visit from Senator William Seward and Governor Abraham Lincoln. They proposed to him that when the Republican Party convention met, Lincoln would announce that he would remain as governor of Illinois, and would not run for the presidency. Then, when the convention would nominate Seward to run for president, he would issue statements encouraging voters to reelect President Breckinridge. They would agree to do this, essentially throwing the election to Breckinridge, on the following conditions.

First, Breckinridge must agree to sign a Transcontinental Railroad Act, which was a major plank in the Republican Party Platform. Breckinridge said he would be happy to sign such an act if the railroad could be built through his home state of Kentucky. Lincoln pointed out that would be a logical route, coming from southern California through Indian Territory to southern Missouri, and from there through southern Kentucky to the Cumberland Gap, and thence to the Atlantic. Seward said Republicans would be happy to support the Kentucky route if Breckinridge would agree for the federal government to purchase large numbers of enslaved African Americans to do the construction work, with the provision that they would be freed in southern California when the railroad was completed there.

Second, Breckinridge must agree to sign a Homestead Act, another main plank of the Republican Party Platform, using federal funds to purchase large plantations in the



South, and turn those lands over for settlement by small farmers who would commit to hiring only free people as laborers.

Third, Breckinridge must agree to sign a Republican-sponsored act to announce sugar to be a dangerous threat to Americans' health, increasing obesity, diabetes, and dental problems. This act would declare sugar to be a federally-controlled substance, making it illegal.

Once sugar was illegal, sugarcane plantation owners would take their slaves either to Texas or Mississippi. Governor Lincoln had plotted with governors from Wisconsin, Iowa and Minnesota to encourage anti-slavery people from their states to establish winter residences in Louisiana. The collapse of the sugar industry, combined with this new influx of anti-slavery Midwesterners, would produce a transformation in Louisiana comparable to Florida, with the result that within a few more years Republicans could hope for the end of slavery in Louisiana.

Lastly, Breckinridge must agree not to intervene when Florida, Louisiana, or other states abolished slavery, and if massive numbers of slaves escaped to seek refuge in free states. This last requirement, to avoid helping fellow slaveholders retrieve their property, was the most difficult for President Breckinridge to accept.

But after much deep thinking Breckinridge agreed to this provision, because he recognized that slaveholders would at least be paid for the loss of their escaped slaves. Over the course of his presidency, in learning to work effectively with Republican leaders in the Congress, Breckinridge was gradually moving away from his earlier defense of slavery. Increasingly, his focus was shifting from defending slavery to defending slaveholders' interest. He was a member of the planter class, and he wanted the United States to continue to favor their interests. And in a world becoming increasingly hostile to human bondage, he felt it might be better for slaveholders to allow their slaves to escape, and then they would qualify for a federal payment. Breckinridge would make sure they received a generous payment. To the end, he intended to be loyal to the interests of his class.

Thus, with this agreement Seward endorsed his Democratic opponent as president. And Stephen Douglas was happy with his appointment as chief justice in the United States Supreme Court. Having no strong enemies, Breckinridge sailed to an easy renomination and then to an even easier victory in the election of 1864. Voters did like that the Breckinridge administration was not mired in corrupt scandals, and they saw that the Kentucky gentleman did at least try to compromise with Congress.

In writing a counterfactual account of past events, it is necessary to avoid complete fabrications, but that does not mean there can't be surprises, if history happened

differently. In this very positivist alternate history, the result of Lincoln's 1860 election loss, in retrospect, could have resulted in better opportunities for Americans and avoidance of a Civil War.