

# How to Rip a Country Apart

On May 22, 1856, a Congressman from South Carolina walked into the Senate chamber, looking for trouble.

With a cane in his hand, Preston Brooks scanned the nearly empty room and spotted the man he wanted:

Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts. Sumner was sitting at a desk, writing letters,

unaware he had a visitor. He became aware a moment later, when he

looked up from his papers just in time to see Preston Brooks's metal-tipped cane rising high above his head.



## Stop That Cane!

**S**o Preston Brooks's metal-tipped cane is about to land on a senator's head. Interesting. But before that cane actually crashes onto Charles Sumner's skull, let's step back and take a look at the events leading up to this moment. Because, believe it or not, if you can figure out why Preston Brooks was so eager to attack Charles Sumner, you'll understand the forces that ripped the United States apart and led to the Civil War.

Mr. Brooks, please hold that cane in the air for just a few minutes. We're going to run through a quick thirteen-step guide to tearing a country in two.



## Step 1: Plant Cotton

**A**fter finishing college in 1792, a young man from Massachusetts named Eli Whitney headed south in search of a teaching job. He wasn't too interested in teaching, though—he really wanted to be an inventor.

Whitney got his big chance when he met Catherine Greene, who owned a plantation in Georgia. Greene told Whitney that plantation owners wanted to grow more cotton. The problem was, cotton had to be cleaned by hand and it took forever to pick the sticky green seeds out of the fluffy white cotton. If only there was a way to clean cotton more quickly, planters could grow and sell much more of it.

Greene set up a workshop for Whitney, and he quickly came up with an invention he called the cotton gin (“gin” was short for engine). Whitney proudly announced the benefits of using his machine: “One man will clean ten times as much cotton as he can in any other way before known and also clean it much better.”

Before Whitney's invention, farmers grew cotton only along the Atlantic coast. Now they raced to plant more cotton, forming a wide belt of cotton plantations across the southern United States, from the Atlantic Ocean all the way west to Louisiana and Texas. Plantation owners made huge profits selling their cotton to clothing factories in the northern United States and in Great Britain. Cotton became so valuable to the economy that Southerners declared: “Cotton is King!”

This was great for Southern plantation owners and Northern factory owners. But it was terrible for enslaved African Americans. Planting and picking cotton took huge amounts of work, and that work was done by slaves. So as plantation owners planted more and more cotton, they decided that they needed more and more slaves. The number of people enslaved in the South jumped from just over 1 million in 1820 to about 4 million by 1860.

## Step 2: Grow Apart

**A**t the same time, the states of the North gradually ended slavery. This was partly because many Northerners thought slavery was wrong. But let's be honest: it was mainly because slavery just didn't make sense in the Northern economy. Most farmers owned small family farms, so they couldn't afford slaves. And factory owners had no interest in owning their workers—they made more money by hiring workers and paying them a few cents an hour.

Slavery was only one of many differences between the North and South in the first half of the 1800s. Most Americans still lived and worked on farms in both the North and South. But life in the North was changing as more and more people moved to cities and took jobs in factories. Immigrants from Europe were also settling in growing northern cities. Northerners were busy building canals and railroads to connect cities and farms. There was less change in the South, where more than ninety percent of the people lived on farms or in small towns. The Southern economy was based on farm products: sugar, rice, tobacco, and especially “king” cotton.

The North and South were developing different ways of life—so what? These differences mattered because they made it harder for Northerners and Southerners to agree on plans for the future. For example, take the issue of tariffs, or taxes, on imported goods. Sounds pretty boring, right? But tariffs got people excited in those days. Suppose you asked a Northern factory owner and a Southern plantation owner: “Do you support a tariff on manufactured goods imported from Europe?”

“Of course!” the factory owner might say. “Tariffs make imported goods more expensive. So Americans are more likely to buy things made here in our own factories. And that's good for American companies.”

“No way!” the plantation owner might say. “We want to buy the goods we need at the best possible prices. Why should we pay higher prices for manufactured goods just to help make Northern factory owners richer?”

### Step 3: Keep Your Balance

**N**ow that the North and South are growing apart, let’s look at another issue that’s about to cause trouble: land. To put the problem simply: What’s going to happen with all that land west of the Mississippi River?

As you probably know, the United States started out as thirteen states along the coast of the Atlantic Ocean. But the country had grown quickly:



## Two Miserable Presidents

Why is this new land important to our story?

In 1819 there were a total of twenty-two states: eleven “slave states,” or states with slavery, and eleven “free states,” or states where slavery was illegal. Most members of Congress thought it was a good idea to keep this balance between free and slave states. That way neither North nor South would get too much power in government (or get too angry at the other side).

But everyone knew that western territories would soon be divided up into states—would those new states allow slavery? That was the question Northerners and Southerners were beginning to argue about.

So when Missouri asked to join the Union as a slave state, Congress worked out a deal called the Missouri Compromise. In 1820 Missouri joined the Union as a slave state. And to keep the balance, Maine joined as a free state.

What about all the land west of Missouri? Members of Congress drew a line west from the southern border of Missouri. They agreed that the territory north of the line would someday be divided into free states, and the territory south of the line would be divided into slave states.

