In a famous speech at Rochester, New York, in October 1858, Seward sounded similar alarms. Condemning southern attempts to pervert "a republican constitution [into] an aristocratic one," he proclaimed that an "irrepressible conflict" existed between slavery and free labor and that the United States would become "either an entirely slaveholding nation, or entirely a free-labor nation." Slaveholders, he charged, meant to spread slavery not just to the West but to the northern free states as well. "The designs of the slaveholders can and must be defeated," declared Seward, and there was only one way to do so. "The Democratic party must be permanently dislodged from the Government," because the Democratic Party "is identical with the Slave Power." Sectional conflict over slavery extension, in short, was inseparable from partisan conflict between Republicans and Democrats. To defeat the South, Northerners must elect Republicans. Irrefutably correct on the facts, this analysis illustrates once again how politicians readily exploited the slavery extension issue for partisan purposes.

Even more famous to Americans today is the tack that Lincoln took in his now-legendary campaign against Douglas for Illinois's Senate seat in 1858. The legislature, rather than voters at large, chose U.S. senators, but at their state convention in the

summer of 1858 Illinois Republicans proclaimed Lincoln as their candidate to replace Douglas in the Senate if Republicans won that fall's state legislative elections. In his speech accepting that nomination, Lincoln told the Republican convention that "a house divided against itself cannot stand" and that "this government cannot endure, permanently half *slave* and half *free*." He did not expect the nation to rupture. Instead, "either the *opponents* of slavery, will arrest the further spread of it, and place it where the public mind shall rest in the belief that it is in course of ultimate extinction; or its *advocates* will push it forward, till it shall become alike lawful in *all* the States, *old* as well as *new*—*North* as well as *South*." As he had said in 1854 and would prove again in the secession winter of 1860–61, Lincoln was concerned far more about the *extension* of slavery beyond the existing slave states than about its *existence* within them.

Lincoln made clear in this speech and his subsequent debates with Douglas that those advocates of slavery included Douglas, Pierce, Buchanan, and Taney, who were softening up the North to accept another Supreme Court decision that would legalize slavery throughout the North. That, he iterated and reiterated, was what was so invidious about Douglas's popular sovereignty doctrine, which Douglas had fought to defend when he joined Republicans' battle against the Lecompton Constitution. Douglas was morally neutral about slavery. He and Democrats like him did not care whether residents of a territory accepted or rejected slavery, as long as those residents had a fair vote. Republicans, in contrast, "*do care* for the result." Republicans believed that slavery was deeply immoral and that the entire nation, not just residents of a territory, had a fundamental stake in whether slavery expanded. To allow that heinous institution any chance to spread—whether by popular sovereignty, a federal slave code, as southern Democrats would soon insist on, or a decision by

pro-slavery Democratic judges on the Supreme Court—was to betray the legacy of the nation's Founders who dedicated the United States to freedom, not slavery.

Here we see why Lincoln adamantly opposed any Republican compromise on the slavery extension issue in the secession winter of 1860–61, even as he accepted the proposed thirteenth amendment to the Constitution that winter. Moral principle and faithfulness to the nation's Founders were at stake. Yet precisely because Republicans invested so much more importance in this matter of principle than in the perpetuation of slavery where it already existed, southern Democrats in Congress that secession winter insisted that Republicans make a concession of principle on slavery's extension, not just in the existing Southwest but also in future territories in Central and South America some Southerners hoped to acquire.

Here we see why the nation foundered and split apart on the issue of slavery extension that politicians—some deeply principled, some shortsighted, and some simply selfish—had done so much to shape between 1844 and 1858. Northerners and Southerners rushed to arms in the spring of 1861, after Lincoln called up troops in response to the firing on Fort Sumter on April 12, because of long-accumulated mistrust, fear, and loathing for each other. But these reciprocal popular hatreds did not spring out of whole cloth. Nor were they simply products of the undeniable differences between the social systems of the North and the South and the contrasting value systems those different societies spawned. Rather, they had intensified in response to a series of political decisions and actions in Washington regarding slavery extension and other matters involving slavery. The Civil War was not exclusively a politicians' war. Far too many young Americans fought and died during it for that claim ever to be made. Nonetheless, how politicians in Washington and elsewhere

had dealt with the question of slavery extension since the mid-1840s played an undeniable role in causing the bloody conflagration that erupted in 1861 and in which so many Americans gave their lives. What politicians did during those decades had crucial consequences. Their decisions today still do. The fate of their, and, more important, our, nation is still at stake.