



# **Year of Meteors: Stephen Douglas, Abraham Lincoln, and the Election that Brought on the Civil War**

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In early 1860, pundits across America confidently predicted the election of Illinois senator Stephen A. Douglas in the coming presidential race. Douglas, after all, led the only party that bridged North and South. But the Democrats would split over the issue of slavery, leading Southerners in the party to run their own presidential slate. This opened the door for the upstart Republicans, exclusively Northern, to steal the Oval Office. Dark horse Abraham Lincoln, not the first choice even of his own party, won the presidency with a record-low 39.8 percent of the popular vote.

Acclaimed scholar Douglas R. Egerton chronicles the contest with a historian's keen insight and a veteran political reporter's eye for detail. Vividly, Egerton re-creates the cascade of unforeseen events that confounded political bosses, set North and South on the road to disunion, and put not Stephen Douglas, but his greatest rival, in the White House.

We see Lincoln and his team outmaneuvering more prominent Republicans, like New York's grandiose William Seward, while Democratic conventions collapse in confusion. And we see the gifted, flawed Douglas marking his finest hour in defeat, as he strives, and fails, to save the Union. Year of Meteors delivers a teeming cast of characters, minor and major, and a breakneck narrative of this most momentous year in American history.

## Year of Meteors: Stephen Douglas, Abraham Lincoln, and the Election that Brought on the Civil War Details

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# **From Reader Review Year of Meteors: Stephen Douglas, Abraham Lincoln, and the Election that Brought on the Civil War for online ebook**

## **Jill says**

The United States presidential election of 1860 was possibly the most seminal in our history. Egerton follows the election with great care, giving the bulk of his attention to Democratic party politics. He articulates the positions of Stephen Douglas, John Breckenridge, and John Bell, and describes what happened at the various party conventions held to select these candidates.

This excellent book covers only a small slice of antebellum politics, but is rich in detail. It is especially valuable for its focus on Douglas and his southern rivals rather than on Lincoln. I enjoyed it a great deal, but I wouldn't recommend it to a reader unfamiliar with the broader context, or with the constitutional, territorial, and sectional issues that were roiling the nation.

Rating: 3.5/5

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## **Sean O'Hara says**

It's always refreshing in an election year to look back on past political campaigns and realize that, no, American politics haven't gotten worse. They've always been this screwed up.

Unfortunately that's not going to work this year. When looking back on electoral history, there are really only two good comparisons -- 1968 and 1860. The first, of course, gave us Nixon and his strategy of appealing to Southern racists through dogwhistle politics and appeals to the "Silent Majority" -- indeed, in many ways 2016 is shaping up to be the last hurrah of that Silent Majority before demographics render them irrelevant forevermore. But the second is far more worrisome.

Let's review 1860 -- at the start of the election cycle, everyone assumed the two major parties would nominate solid establishment candidates, Stephen Douglas for the Democrats and William Seward for the Republicans, but a disaffected contingent within the Democratic Party felt that the establishment was taking their support for granted, so they revolted and nominated the radical reaction John Breckinridge. The Democratic establishment freaked out and nominated Stephen Douglas on what they supposed was a centrist platform, though in the wake of Breckinridge's fire-eating rhetoric, a lot of voters lurched towards the Republican Party.

The Republicans, meanwhile, were questioning whether a stodgy establishment figure like Seward, who had a history of compromising his principles for political expediency, had what it took to win a national election. Convention delegates revolted and coalesced around the more radical figure of Abe Lincoln.

And while all this was going on, a bunch of old line Whigs who hadn't joined the Republican party decided to put forth their own candidate on a platform of, "Hey, can we just pretend that this whole slavery thing isn't an issue and everyone gets along?"

Of course we all know that at the end of the day Lincoln won -- but more importantly, he won in such a way that he still would've been the victor even if the Democrats had stayed united and the Constitutional Union party hadn't been around. The demographics and electoral college were against the South, just as they're against Trump's neo-Silent Majority today. The Southrons knew the only way they could retain power in national politics was if they expanded slavery westward into the territories, and when that possibility was foreclosed to them, they revolted. And today Trump supporters know that the only way they can remain relevant is if they shut down immigration, and if they don't get their way ... well, we can probably expect a lot more Dylann Roofs and Robert Dears in the next four to eight years.

Insert Santayana quote here.

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## **Michael Austin says**

The Election of 1860 is one of the moments of our history that Americans need to understand before saying silly things like "the election between Obama and Romney reached new heights in nastiness and incivility." Every time I see a "secession petition" on Facebook, or read about somebody saying that the election/re-election of Barack Obama is the worst thing that has ever happened to the country, I sigh and think "somebody needs to read a history book." And, very likely, this is the history book that they need to read.

In 1860, secession was not a social media meme. It was a deadly real threat that had been openly discussed in the Southern States since the 1820s, when measures such as the Missouri Compromise had postponed the ultimate reckoning over the issue of slavery for a generation. With the collapse of the compromise-friendly Whig Party in 1852, and the rise of the explicitly anti-slavery Republican Party in 1856, there did not appear to be any way to prevent the block secession of at least the Lower South. Southern radicals ("fire-eaters") understood that and worked intentionally to split the Democratic Party into two factions in 1860, thus ensuring a Republican victory and a Southern secession.

*The Year of Meteors*, which takes its title from a poem by Walt Whitman, opens with Stephen Douglas's futile attempts to save the union after his fourth-place electoral finish in the five-way contest that was the election of 1860. It then goes back in time to describe the conventions that produced the largest number of major-party candidates ever to run in an American election. Egerton describes the five parties, and their candidates, very well, and very succinctly:

**LIBERTY** (Garrit Smith): The abolitionist party, led by Smith, a wealthy philanthropist who had partially financed John Brown's raid. The Liberty Party did not have a reasonable chance of winning, but could play the spoiler by taking votes away from Lincoln in New York and New England, thus throwing those states' electoral votes to Douglas.

**REPUBLICAN** (Abraham Lincoln): The Party of Lincoln opposed slavery on moral grounds and opposed the expansion of slavery into any state or territory where it did not already exist (the "free-soil" position). They did not believe that the federal government had the Constitutional authority to end slavery in the 15 states that already permitted slavery. Unwilling to compromise on the extension of slavery, but willing to compromise on "personal liberty laws" in Northern states that prevented the recapture of escaped slaves.

**NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC** (Stephen Douglas): After the North-South split in the Democratic Party, Douglas was left with little chance of winning. In the end, he captured electoral votes only in Missouri and in part of New Jersey. Douglas, who had spent years in the Senate crafting compromises between slavery and

anti-slavery positions, ran on the principle of "popular sovereignty," which allowed the residents of each new territory to choose for themselves whether they would allow slavery.

**SOUTHERN DEMOCRATIC** (John C. Breckenridge): The Southern Democratic Party, whose candidate was the sitting vice president, insisted on a "no-compromise" position on the expansion of slavery. They insisted that all territories of the United States be open to settlement by slaveholders, that the Constitution explicitly recognize the legality of slavery, that the Atlantic slave trade be reopened, and that all Northern "personal liberty" laws be nullified. Southern fire-eaters understood that these terms would never be accepted by the North and that the only course of action when the election ended would be secession. Breckenridge received all of the votes of the lower South.

**CONSTITUTIONAL UNION** (John Bell): Constitutional Unionists were, in the most part, the remnants of the old Whig party with its strong belief in compromise. Constitutional Unionists insisted that slavery was only an abstract disagreement and that no position on slavery justified the dissolution of the Union. They conspicuously avoided even talking about slavery during their campaign. Bell captured the electoral votes of Tennessee, Kentucky, and Virginia.

It is impossible to read this (or any other serious history of the time) and have any intellectual respect for the modern revisionist claim that the South's secession and the Civil War were about anything other than slavery. None of the principles (other than the Constitutional Unionists) believed this. Slavery was the defining issue of this election, and where one stood on it determined who one voted for.

But Egerton also does a good job of showing that there were a lot of people in the South who did not support the open secessionist candidate. And there were a lot of people in the North who did not support the abolition or free-soil candidates. The country was not as polarized as its leaders were or as our memories make it out to be, which is why the ultimate abolition of slavery required the delicate, multi-front political maneuvering portrayed so brilliantly in Spielberg's "Lincoln" and in Doris Kearns Godwin's *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln*, to which *Year of Meteors: Stephen Douglas, Abraham Lincoln, and the Election that Brought on the Civil War* is a worthy companion.

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## **Jerome says**

A pretty good book on the 1860 election and the run-up to the war. Edgerton gives good treatment on all the happenings surrounding this period, such as Stephen Douglas's trip South, the Peace Convention, and the formation of the rebel government, and brings all of these events to life.

Edgerton's treatment of the time period is colorful and insightful, and very well-researched and coherent. The prose is solid and makes the book very easy to read. He provides a great portrait of Stephen Douglas, who was, of course, indifferent or mildly supportive of slavery but a devoted unionist, doing everything he could to bend the northern Democrats to a pro-Union position. We also get a good portrait of the ambitious William Seward, who nevertheless put aside his ambition to run as secretary of state.

We get a good portrait of the secessionist "fire-eaters" like William Yancey, who contributed mightily to disunion and the unionists whose patriotism was rather more conditional than Douglas's: Jefferson Davis, Alexander Stephens, and all the other southerners who explicitly defended their right to own slaves and were willing to risk it all on their disunionist gambit. It was these fire-eaters that ultimately rejected compromise; anti-slavery northerners like Lincoln and Seward tried relentlessly to bring about some sort of compromise,

only to be frustrated by these radicals.

One of the most interesting parts of the book is the machination of these fire-eaters, who disrupted their own Democratic Party nomination process: they actually wanted Lincoln to win so that the South would be forced into a situation where they had no choice but to secede. They deliberately sabotaged the convention in pursuit of this goal.

The book seems to blame the coming of war entirely on these southern secessionists: probably an accurate statement since they were, in fact, stubbornly bull-headed secessionists.

In all, a great book, despite some minor errors: Edgerton writes that Dean Richmond headed the Illinois delegation at the Democratic convention, when he was, in fact, the DNC chairman. He claims that Carl Schurz was not at Cooper Union when Lincoln gave his speech there, when in fact, he was. Francis Blair was not nicknamed Frank, nor did Lincoln welcome his wife's advice on political appointments. But, these issues are rather unimportant and do not disrupt an otherwise enjoyable book.

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## **dave semrud says**

### **This Ain't It**

If you want to read a good book about the politics of the year before Ft. Sumter this Ain't it. My search continues.

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## **Michael Lewyn says**

This book is a blow-by-blow history of the 1860 election. What I learned from this book, more than anything else, is that Southern "fire eaters" (pro-slavery extremists) wanted to secede from the Union long before Lincoln's election, and that at least some of them actually wanted Lincoln to prevail so that they could get the rest of the South to agree. At the Democratic convention, Southerners made platform demands unacceptable to the North, and then walked out of the convention to choose their own nominee- thus ensuring that neither the Northern Democratic nominee (Stephen Douglas) or the Southern nominee (John Breckinridge) could beat the Republicans. Radicals didn't necessarily believe that Lincoln would abolish slavery; however, they believed that if victorious Republicans limited slavery to the states where it was already legal (rather than allowing slavery to spread to the West, or better yet, invading Cuba to create another slave state), there would be a surplus of slaves, driving down slave prices.

Most of this book was focused on the actions of Lincoln, Douglas and their political rivals. I do wish the book had explained President Buchanan's (pro-slavery) actions in a little more detail- why, for example, did Buchanan favor admitting Kansas as a slave state when most northern Democrats disagreed? I also wish the author had explained the historical background of the Republican Party in more detail; he discusses its birth, but doesn't explain why the Whig Party disappeared between 1852 and 1856 rather than surviving to fight the Republicans in the latter election.

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## **Lauren Albert says**

How complicated it all was. The Southern extremists actually wanted Douglas to lose because he promoted compromise. They felt that Lincoln's election would scare the slave-holding states enough to secede--which is what they wanted in the first place. They thought that slavery would only be "safe" as an institution if they had their own country in which slavery was legal everywhere. Egerton doesn't believe the trade and tariff argument that takes the point of view that the South seceded in large part because of trade differences (they suffered from tariffs that the North benefited from). He thinks that that argument was put into place in years after the war to separate the South a bit from the slavery argument.

Egerton makes it clear that there was a wide spectrum of opinions on the issues of the day--it was not simply a "pro-slavery" and "abolition" argument. Within the two "groups" there were disagreements, sometimes large. Only the most "extreme", like Garrison, actually wanted emancipation. He thought that any compromise on that point was immoral. Many just wanted to stop the expansion of slavery into new territories. Similarly, it was only the "fire breathers" or Southern extremists who didn't want reconciliation at all.

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## **Joni says**

What an interesting read. It amazes me how history can repeat itself. I have to say parts were pretty dry, but I love history, and it was very interesting. If only history books could tell these stories in school!

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## **Porter Broyles says**

1. How well written is it?

Year of Meteors is a very well written book. It is now one of my "Must Reads".

2. How interesting is the subject?

The Civil War was one of the most studied periods in American history is the Civil War. There are literally thousands of books on the Civil War and on the causes of the Civil War. Most books look at the superficial level---Slavery vs States Rights. A number of books go beyond the superficial level to discuss the broader history. IMHO, one of the best in that genre is Elizabeth Varon's Disunion.

Egerton takes a completely different view, which creates a fascinating theory.

3. Does the book offer novel insight into the subject or is it just regurgitating already known facts?

Egerton's basic hypothesis is that the forces leading to secession were well defined before the Republican convention in 1860. That Southerners were dead set on seeing the South secede, so it was only a matter of manipulating events to lead to that result.

Egerton looks at the cause of the Civil War not as an issue of Slavery/State Right, but as the process by which the elected officials engaged in activities that wittingly/unwittingly made such an action a preordained



event. In this approach, the specifics about slavery/states rights become ancillary.

The issues, in Egerton's opinion, had become so pronounced that both sides were ready for a fight. There was nothing that Lincoln (or anybody) could have done to prevent secession. This book is about how a few hundred elected leaders controlled the destiny of the country and actively manipulated what happened to ensure that secession occurred.

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### **Karla says**

Since it appears there was absolutely no way to prevent the Civil War other than by the North capitulating 100% to the Southern elite planter class, the biggest Might Have Been in American History is if Reconstruction hadn't been cut off at the knees in 1877. We're still dealing with the fallout from that cowardly surrender to white supremacy. Thanks for nothing.

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### **Sharon Barrow Wilfong says**

Douglas Egerton is a professor of History and he does an impeccable job describing the presidential campaign that elected Lincoln in 1860.

In 1857, Dr. Emerson moved to Missouri with his slave Dred Scott, where he hired him out on lease. Missouri was a free state and by hiring Scott out there Emerson effectively brought the institution of slavery into a state that had outlawed slavery.

Scott sued for his freedom and while many people assisted him, he ultimately lost. The question was whether an African slave had the same rights as white citizens and if so what did that portend?

This created a domino effect in both the North and the South. What about the states that had come or were coming into the United States? Would they be free or slave holding?

Northern people of any political persuasion, while not necessarily agreeing to granting slaves equal status as white people, nevertheless, did not want future states or western states becoming slave states.

Conversely, southern politicians were concerned that they be allowed to expand their slave trade west. In Egerton's brilliant account, we learn of both Northern and Southern players that caused a furious presidential race that has probably not been equaled, although our most recent election certainly gave it a run for its money.

The trash talking between delegates had an acuity and eloquence that I marvel at. It was a different time period where politicians had sophisticated vocabularies and powers of expression that surpass any modern novelist.

Their passion surpasses today's as well. Our politicians can get ugly, but these guys were bringing knives and guns into the Senate and House.

We learn of the end of the Whig party and the birth of the Republican party, the Southern Democrats and

who were the real orchestrators of the Southern states' secession.

Egerton gives us a step by step account of each area of the 1860 election, thorough and interesting descriptions of the different people running and if he gets bogged down in numbers and polls, that's a minor quibble for a good and wild ride through one of the most turbulent times in America.

If you like history and specifically Civil War history this is an invaluable source.

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### **Geoff Sebesta says**

First off, 1860 really was a year of meteors and strange astronomical phenomena, and outside of the title, the book never mentions them! Poor organization.

Like a lot of histories, it starts extremely strong and trails off. The information about how Slave Power hijacked and derailed the Democratic primary of 1860, on purpose, was complete news to me. The book also does a wonderful job of putting Douglas and Strathairn, I mean Seward, in their historical places. Some distressing oversights and mistakes (describing one representative as elderly when he was 32 at the time), and a lot of glancing mentions of things that the author clearly didn't appreciate the full significance of (like the events surrounding the inauguration or the significance of the Wide-Awakes), but on the whole, an extremely worthy read.

I've often wondered if the cranial trauma had something to do with Sumner's erratic behavior in this era.

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### **Keith says**

I am of the generation that was taught that the Civil War was not about slavery – it was about “states’ rights.” Really. Now 150 years after the Civil War, let’s put that notion to rest at once and forever.

But, as the Year of Meteors points out, the Civil War was not about abolition in the South either. None of the major candidates (Democratic, Republican or Constitutional Union) of the 1860 election advocated the abolition of slavery in states where it existed. The southern states seceded because Lincoln wanted to stop slavery’s expansion into the territories. The Civil War was essentially fought over the expansion of slavery into the West.

It’s highly unlikely that Lincoln by himself could have prevented it from ever happening, but he certainly would have delayed it. But that was enough for the southern slave holders to secede from the Union. Of course, Lincoln hadn’t even taken office when the most of the states seceded – just the thought of him possibly delaying slavery’s expansion in the West was enough for them.

As the book shows, the southern states were used to getting their way. They were not accustomed to losing any argument or giving any ground, so the election loss was a novel experience. Also, they were looking for an excuse to secede and they manipulated the election of 1860 to create the pretense.

The book shows how William Yancey from Alabama plotted the destruction of the Democratic Party (at the time the conservative pro-slavery party) by creating a party platform that was so pro-slavery, so pro-south

that he knew the northern free-soil states could never support it.

Right up to the Lincoln's inauguration, however, the lame-duck Congress was preparing a compromise that offered the slave holding states a Constitutional amendment saying that slavery could never be abolished and that allowed slavery in the southwestern territories. Yes, I said that was a compromise. Apparently, the free soil states got the pleasure of having the slave holding states stay in the Union. The Republicans managed to kill the compromise before Lincoln took office.

This is a very interesting book. It is a dry subject, but if you are interested in the political history and the Civil War, this is an excellent read. People may complain of the gridlock and rigid ideological differences today, but this is heaven compared to the 1850s. I found it compelling reading.

#### Side Notes:

1. Possibly one the best/funniest quotes I've ever read: On hearing of South Carolina's vote to secede, state native James Petigru said the state was "too small to be a nation and too large for an insane asylum." (p. 230) State motto?
  2. Was the Civil War fought over slavery? Did Union troops see themselves as fighting for the abolition of slavery? Technically no. But everyone understood the stakes of the 1860 election, and the free-soil states – and the voters for Lincoln – knew the key issue was stopping the expansion of slavery in the territories. They were not naïve. They fought for the Union, and they knew that slavery was tearing it apart.
  3. The question is sometimes asked: Were secessionist traitors? The argument has been made that the secessionists did not want to overthrow the U.S. government so they weren't technically traitors. Here, though, is an interesting perspective of Alabama's William Yancey: "Who shall dare oppose the [secession] of Alabama, when she assumed her independence out of the Union, will become traitors – rebels against its authority and will be dealt with as such." (237)
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#### **Jerry says**

Tremendous detail on the myriad political parties (and their agendas) in the 1860 presidential nominating process.

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#### **Nathan Albright says**

It ought to surprise no one that I am fond of reading books about the complex relationship between Lincoln and Douglas and also about the tense atmosphere in the period before the beginning of the Civil War [1]. I was admittedly a bit surprised that the title itself played so little a role in the book itself, considering there was really no discussion of meteors in a literal sense in 1860 in this particular book. What there was instead was a thoughtful discussion of the conflicting demands of statesmanship and moderation in a period where there was little room to maneuver on the side of the political class who wanted peace and reconciliation and a general populace that had grown increasingly partisan. It is hard not to read this and think of our own

troubled times and the question of legitimacy in government. The author, who makes his own sympathies abundantly plain, clearly looks at this period with a sense of anxiety with concern to our own history, although the work does not draw that conclusion out explicitly very often, to the relief of this reader at least.

In terms of its contents, this book certainly fits within the genre of political history and within the large body of works about Abraham Lincoln and about the Civil War in general. The author tries to add a bit of uniqueness by doing some research on the campaign of Garrit Smith that year, which is little noted or recognized, as well as highlighting the busy travels of the indefatigable Murat Halstead, who traveled to seven of the eight major political conventions that year, which cannot have been a very enviable experience. Besides these flourishes the book is largely a chronological look at the political context of 1860 and the bad omens that year had for the fate of the United States at large. The author notes, with a surprising degree of fairness, the level of stubbornness in both the northern and southern sections of the country, and how that inflexibility of thought left no room for compromise. For the most part, this is a book that can be broadly enjoyed by readers who have an interest in those times and who are prepared to draw their own conclusions about the contemporary relevance of the late 1850s for our own time.

Where the book took on a problematic nature for me, at least, was not in the book's harsh treatment of fire-eaters, but rather in the way that the author showed his hand and perspective in the epilogue and appendix to the book. He shows his hand in two ways that particularly offended me. For one, the author commented on the correlation between the Republican vote in 2008 with the lingering effects of the Civil War as a way of delegitimizing the Republican party as a whole. Second, the author stated in a brief closing bit of praise to failed 1972 Democratic standard-bearer McGovern that he was vindicated by what happened later. I happen to disagree. However bad Nixon was, and I think he is viewed harsher than he deserves to be, McGovern was a terrible option for the leader of our country. No amount of criminality on the part of Nixon's presidency makes McGovern a good option for president. As the election of 1860 makes plain, one does not only vote against people, but one has to vote for them either, and a worthwhile president has a good vision for a country, a vision that includes fidelity to the principles of our nation as well as a concern for the well-being of all and a combination of idealism and pragmatism. The contemporary politicians that the author seems to admire the most are those that simply have the wrong principles, and that makes this book a good deal less enjoyable to read as a result.

[1] See, for example:

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.blog/2015...>

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.blog/2017...>

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.blog/2016...>

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.blog/2016...>

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.blog/2015...>

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.blog/2015...>

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.blog/2010...>

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.blog/2016...>

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