

## Political Cartoons of the Civil War



**A "RAIL" WESTERN GENTLEMAN**  
*(Leslie's Illustrated, July 1860)*

American visual satire—political cartoons—embarked on the road towards artistic maturity during the Civil War. Increasingly sophisticated, extremely popular, published cartoons reflected the most wrenching episode of American history in a light at once humorous, tragic, and disquieting.

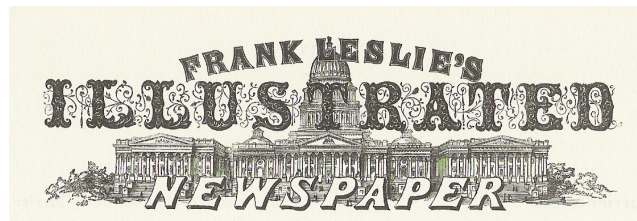
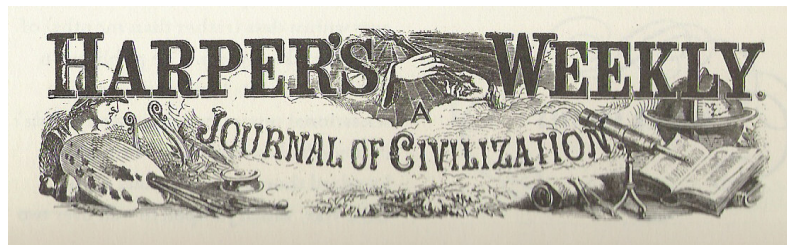
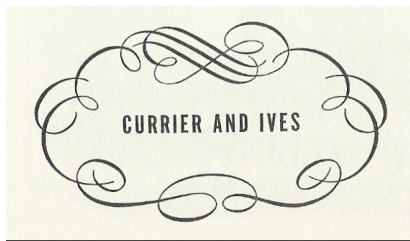
A number of overlapping developments in the antebellum years combined to elevate both the currency and influence of political prints. The rising literacy rate among whites (91% in 1840—the first time census takers asked question about literacy) meant that cartoons' textual content became a viable element of the overall criticism. At the same time, improved printing technologies such as the steam press sparked a tremendous growth in the number and distribution of American newspapers: the number of active publications quadrupled between 1825 and 1860, to approximately 3,300. Along with the numerous propaganda leaflets circulated in this era, these newspapers served as the primary setting for political satire.

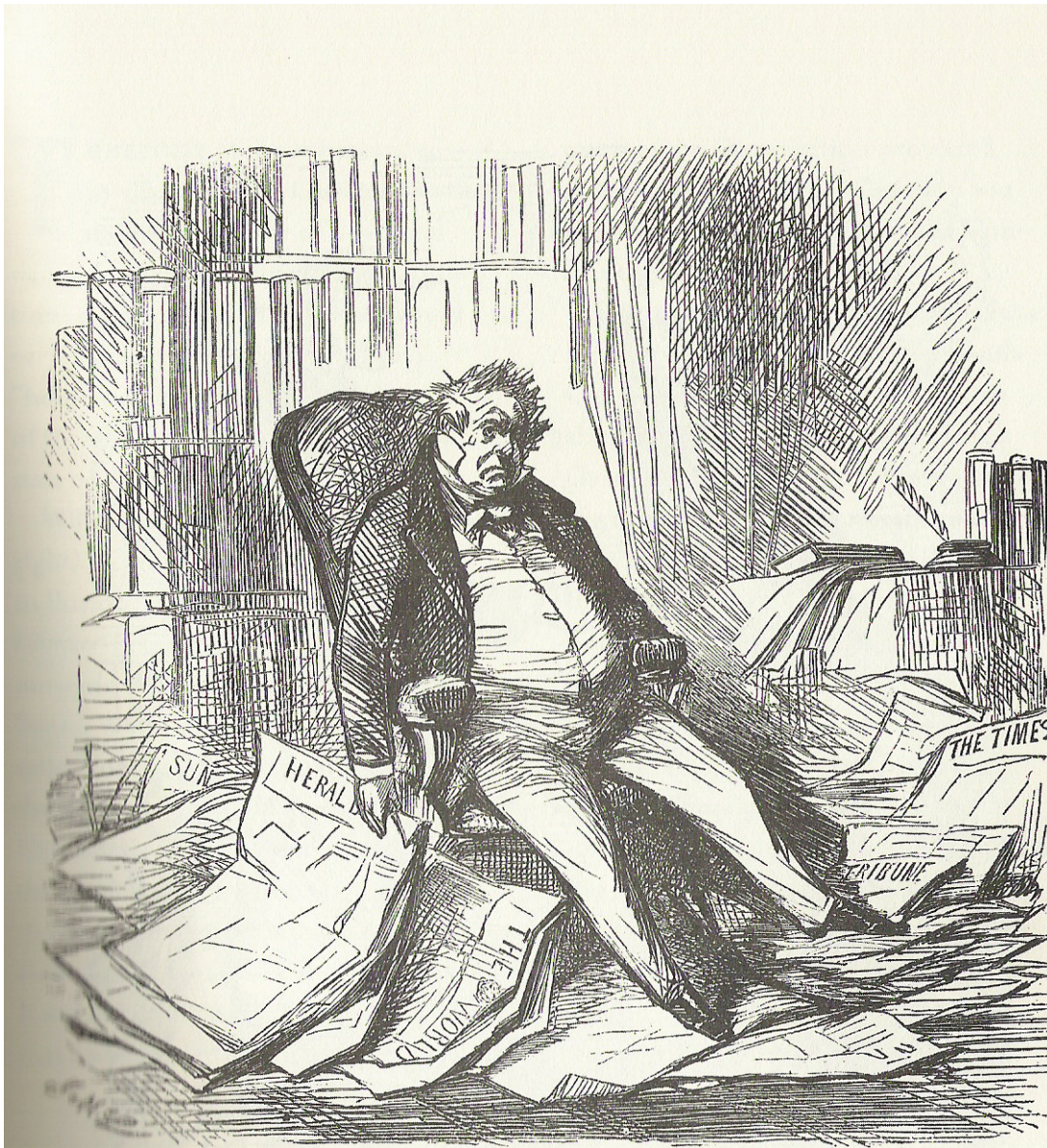
The images included here can only begin to suggest the variety of viewpoints and media of all the political art that appeared during the Civil War years. Unfortunately they do not form a perfectly representative cross-section of the era's political art. Most of the satire of the period was published in New York City, where a thriving newspaper and lithograph industry—as well as a large market of readers—could support the work of full-time artists. The Southern states, on the other hand, did not produce much visual satire at all until the 1870s and 1880s.

However important the satire of the Civil War actually was, political prints had not yet reached their zenith when General Robert E. Lee surrendered his Confederate Army of Virginia to General Ulysses S. Grant at Appomattox Court House on April 9, 1865. Political cartoons actually enjoyed their greatest currency during the late nineteenth century, coinciding with both Reconstruction and the Gilded Age. Successful magazines such as *Harper's Weekly* and *Puck*, which were widely distributed throughout the nation, featured talented artists, none so more popular than Thomas Nast (credited with refining the elephant and donkey symbols of the Republican and Democratic parties and developing the modern interpretation of Santa Claus). Most of these cartoonists began their careers as correspondents during the Civil War; their own intellectual and artistic development paralleled that of the medium that they helped popularize. Nevertheless, the success and influence of visual satire during the Civil War shows the period to be a significant landmark in the history of American political art.

The images reproduced here allow us to study the ways in which the Civil War, while significantly transforming American society, was itself transformed in the minds and pens of political cartoonists.

### Notable Publishers of Civil War Political Cartoons



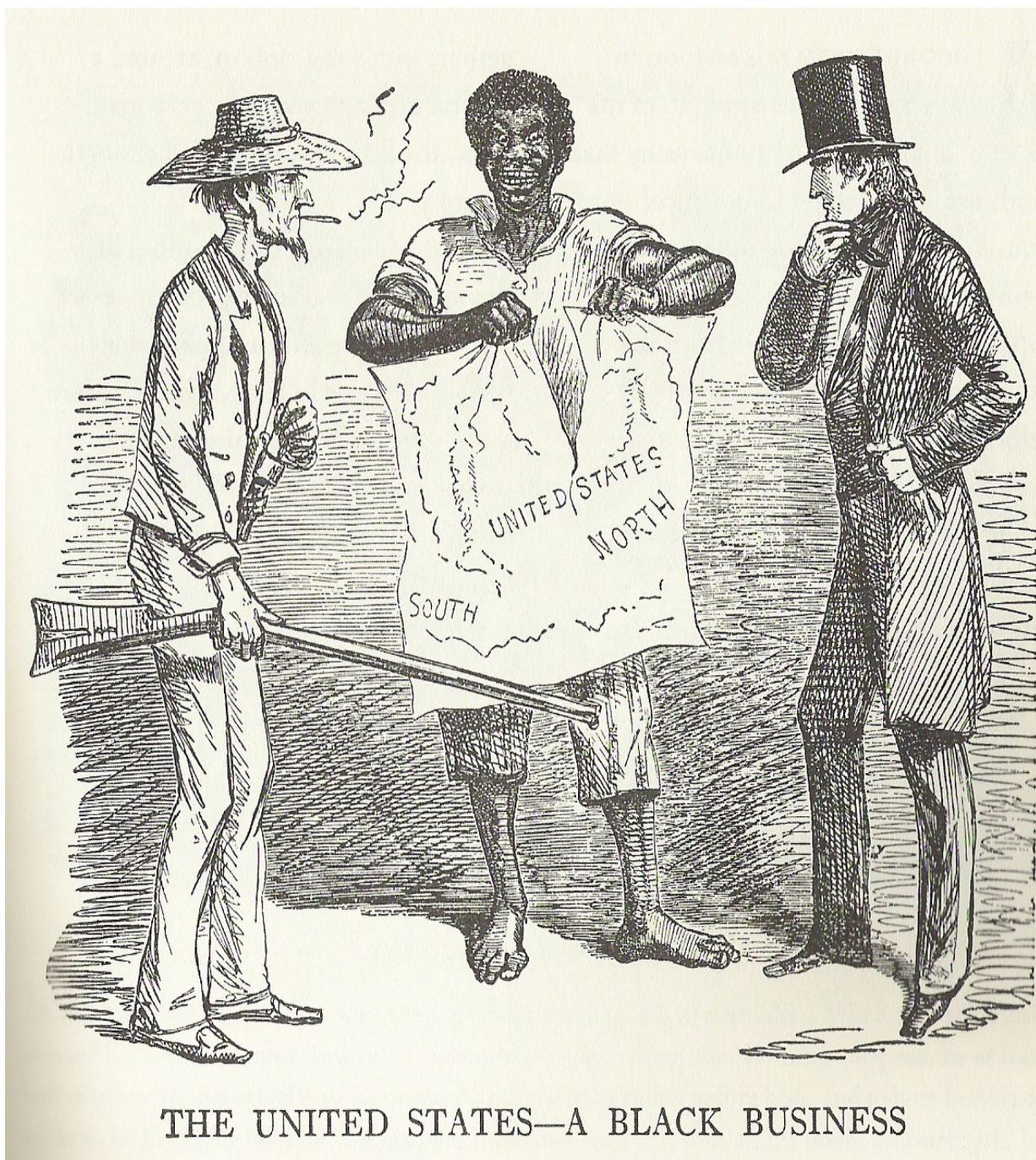


#### READS THE PAPERS.

Our Friend, Mr. JONES, who is deeply interested in the condition of the country, takes all the Papers, and reads them thoroughly. The following Dispatches puzzle him somewhat: The Cabinet have issued the orders for the Evacuation of Fort Sumter.—*Herald*.  
It is at last decided that Fort Sumter shall be reinforced.—*Times*.  
Orders were sent off last evening to Reinforce Major ANDERSON at all costs.—*Tribune*.  
It is believed that Major ANDERSON Evacuated Fort Sumter by order of the Government last evening.—*World*.

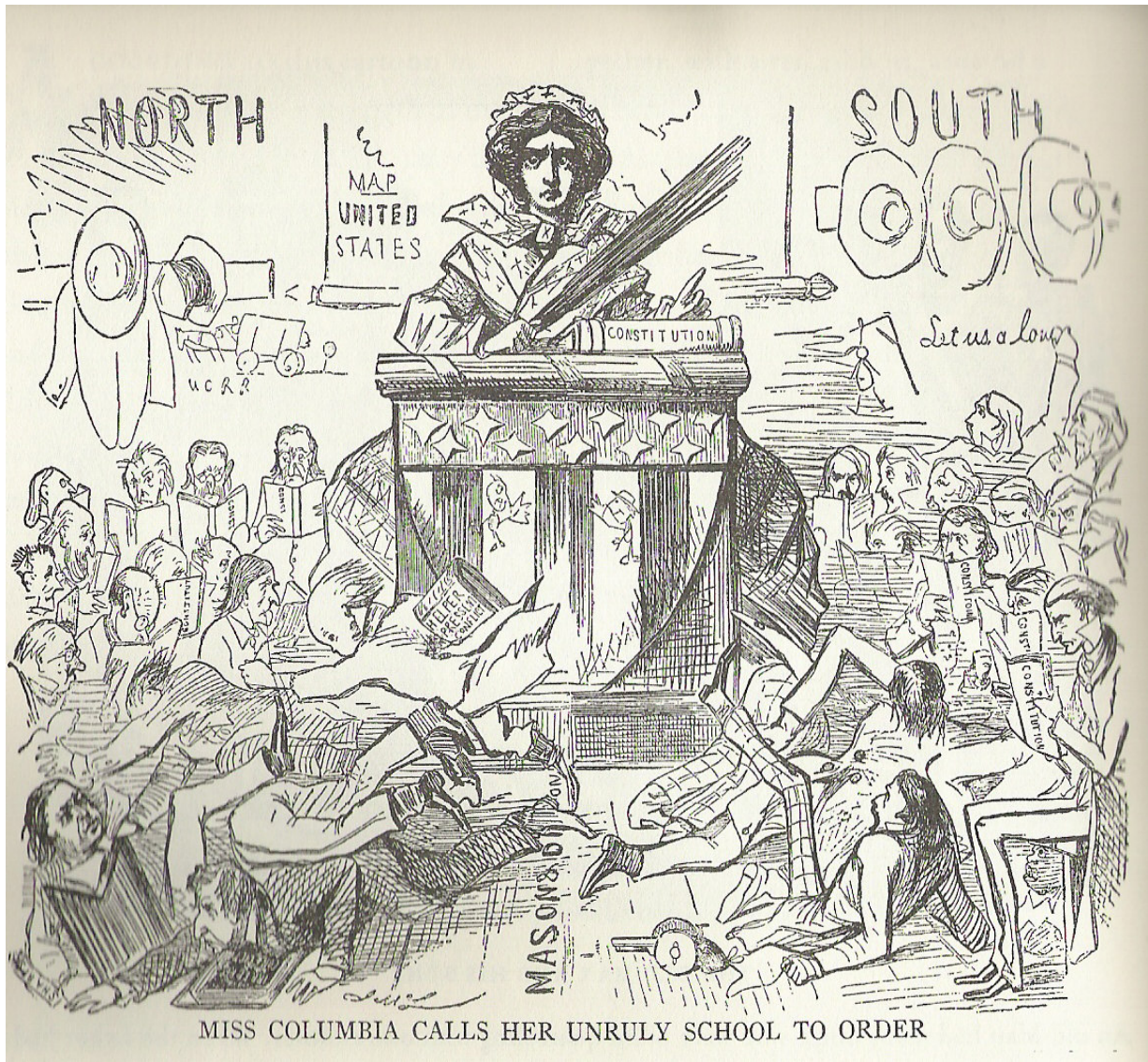
(*Harper's Weekly*, April 13, 1861)

Many Americans, like the fictitious Mr. Jones pictured here, were understandably confused by various newspapers that reported contradicting reports, such as, with developments in Charleston Harbor and Fort Sumter on the eve of the Civil War.



*(Punch, November 8, 1856)*

*Punch*, a London magazine, accurately predicted, as many in America were beginning to realize, that the business of slavery was tearing the nation apart. Here, a slave, standing between a southern planter (rough-hewn and armed) and a contemplative businessman from the North, tears apart a map of the United States, seeming to follow the Mason-Dixon Line (the boundary between Maryland and Pennsylvania, a geographic, if not political, dividing line between North and South).

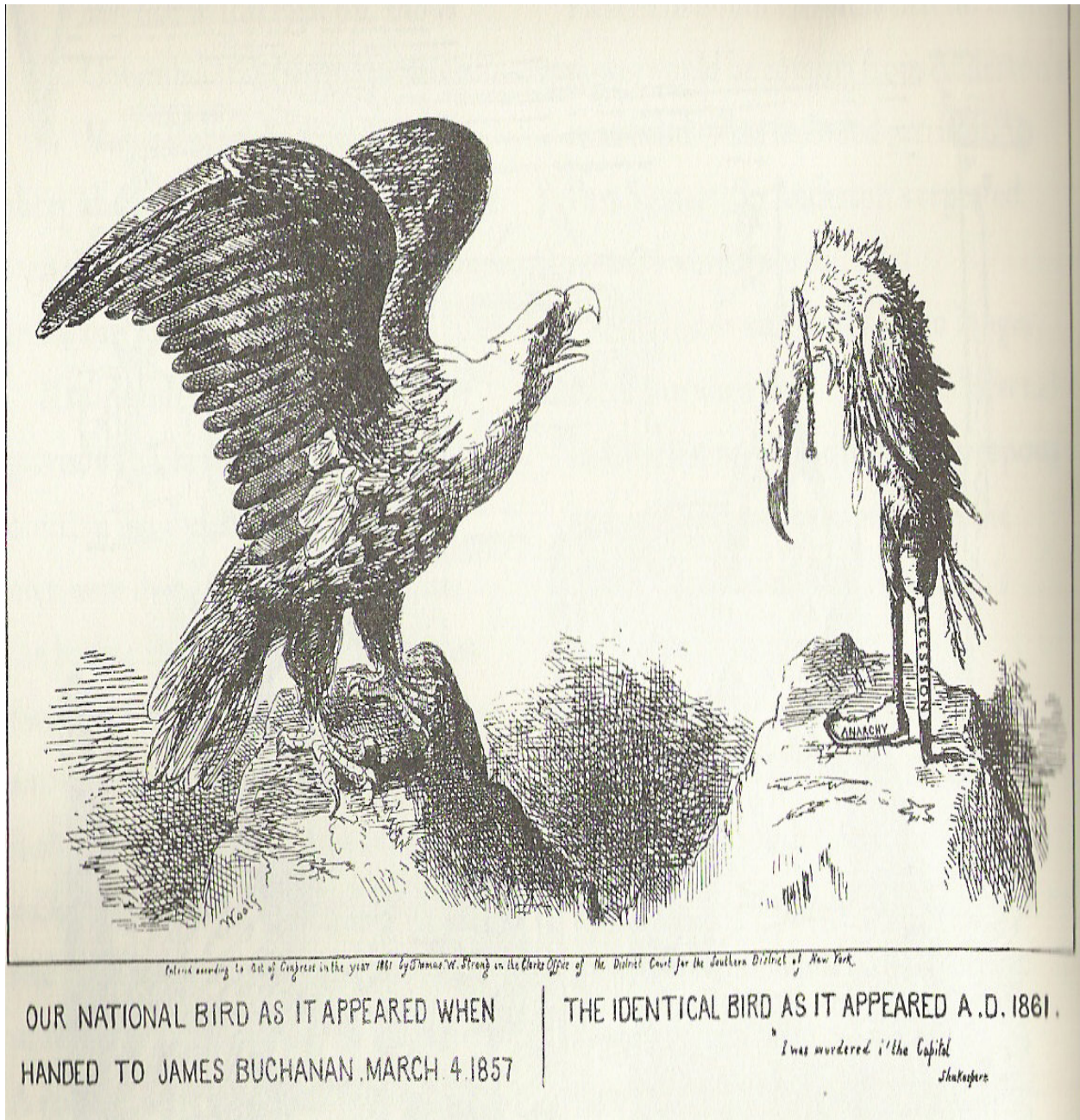


MISS COLUMBIA CALLS HER UNRULY SCHOOL TO ORDER

*(Leslie's Illustrated, January 7, 1860)*

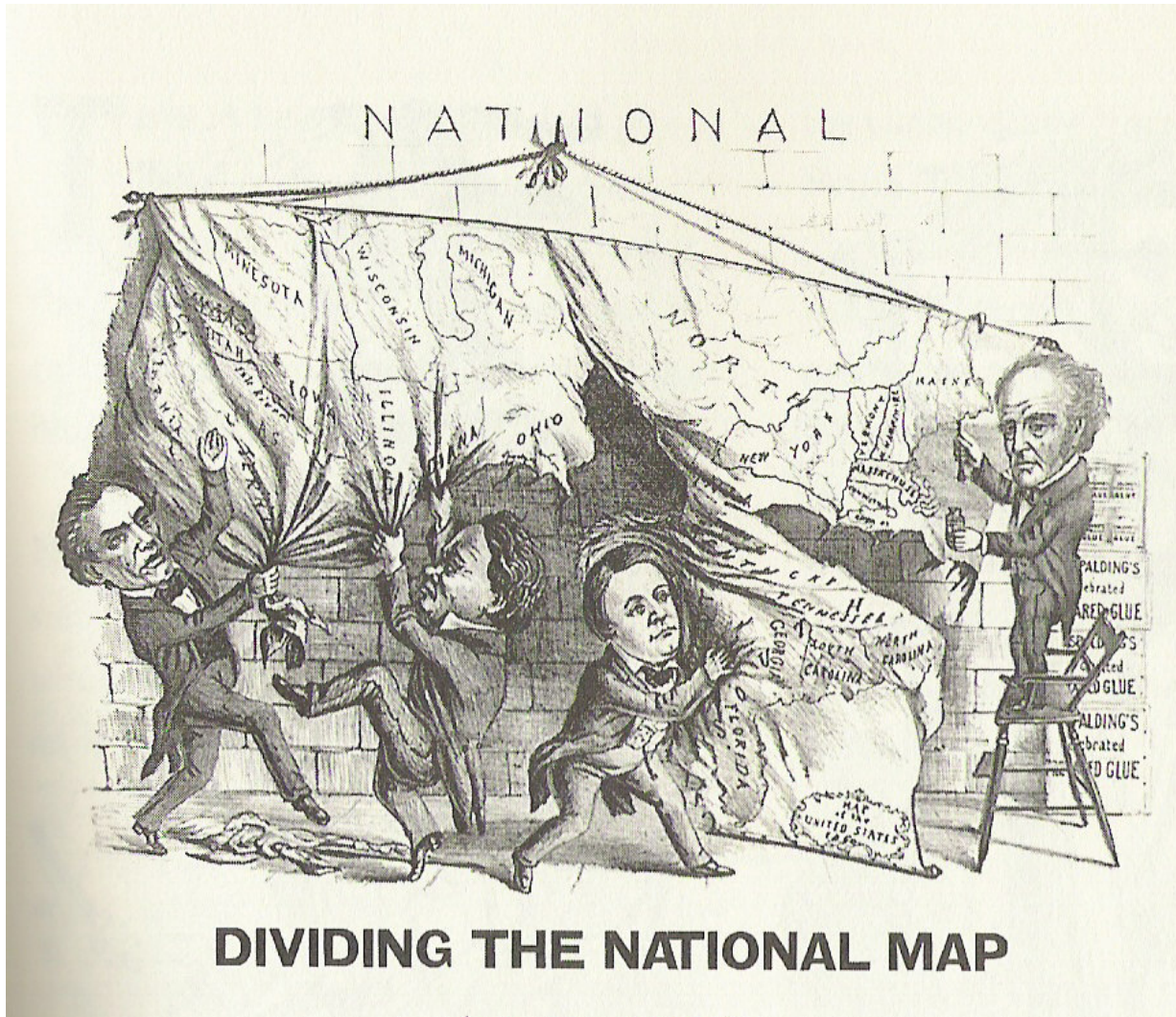
Miss Columbia appears to be annoyed with the students in her classroom. The lesson she has prepared is on the Constitution. The Constitution, the law of the land, sits on her desk, while many of her students have already opened it and are giving it close study. The Mason-Dixon line runs right through the middle of her classroom.

There is a disruption right in front of her desk. Horace Greeley, New York Tribune publisher and ardent abolitionist, stumbles back to his side of the classroom with William Seward. In the background, under the planter's hats, a student scrawls, "Let us alone," on the wall of the classroom. Peace was the plea of southerners as they began to call for secession; however, peace does not appear to reign in Miss Columbia's classroom.



*(Strong's Dime Caricatures, 1861)*

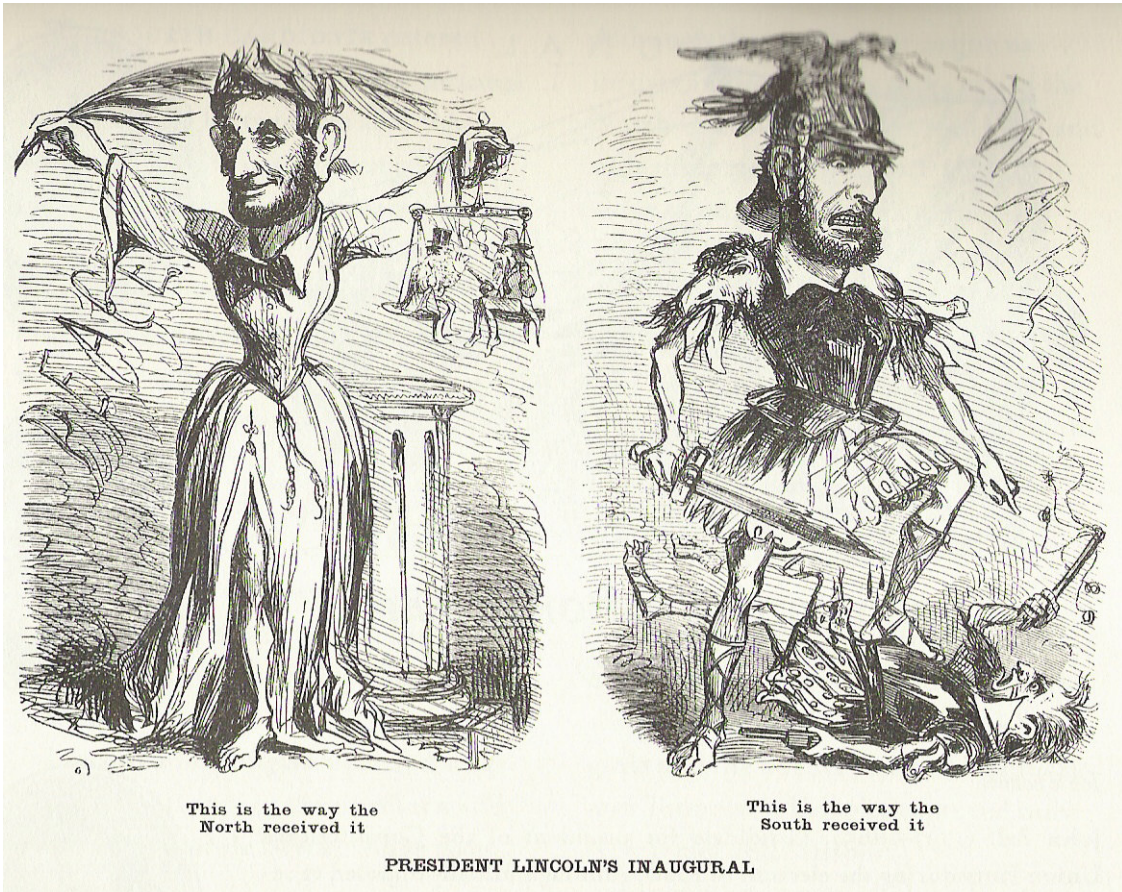
This broadside reflects commentary on the general health of the United States. The country was, according to this Strong's Dime Caricature, apparently sound and in fine feather when James Buchanan assumed the office of the presidency in March 1857; however, some four years later, the national emblem looks worn and tired, having suffered the loss of one leg to secession and was hobbled in the other by anarchy.



*(Broadside, 1860)*

In 1860, there were four candidates, Abraham Lincoln (Republican), Stephen Douglas (Northern Democrat), John C. Breckenridge (Southern Democrat), and John Bell (Constitutional Union), vying for the nation's highest political office. This broadside, printed in Cincinnati, pictures Bell (at far right) with a pot of glue poised to begin repairs while the other three candidates do their best to rip the map of the United States to pieces. Lincoln and Douglas, pictured at far left, are fighting over the northern and western states while Breckenridge takes the South. Although there were four candidates for president in 1860, only 3 ran in the North (Lincoln, Douglas, and Bell) and only 3 ran in the South (Breckenridge, Douglas, and Bell). Lincoln's name did not even appear on the ballot in 9 Southern states.

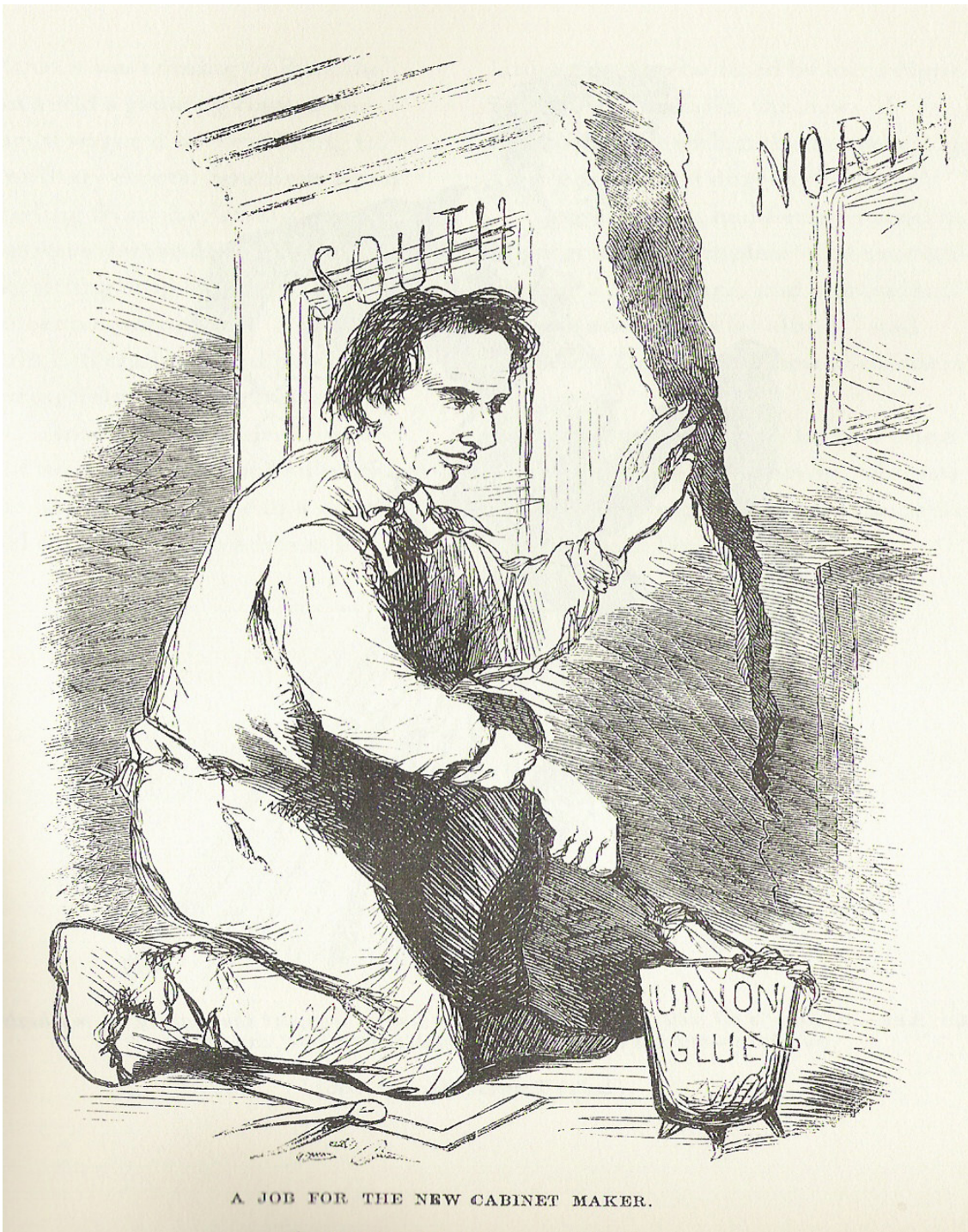
	<u>Popular Vote</u>		<u>Electoral College Vote</u>
	Count	Percentage	
Lincoln	1,865,908	39.8%	180
Douglas	1,380,202	29.5%	12
Breckenridge	848,019	18.1%	72
Bell	590,901	12.6%	39



*(New York Illustrated News, March 9, 1861)*

Prior to being hired by *Harper's Weekly*, Thomas Nast published cartoons for the *New York Illustrated News*. In this cartoon, Nast's first, represents the differing images of Lincoln as perceived by both northerners and southerners. In the North, Lincoln was hailed as a man of reason who would stand on legal principle, keeping the peace throughout the land by weighing carefully the claims of both the North and the South. But in the South, Lincoln was portrayed as an oppressor, the uncompromising Black Abolitionist whose intentions were to make war against southerners and subjugate the region to the rule of the North.

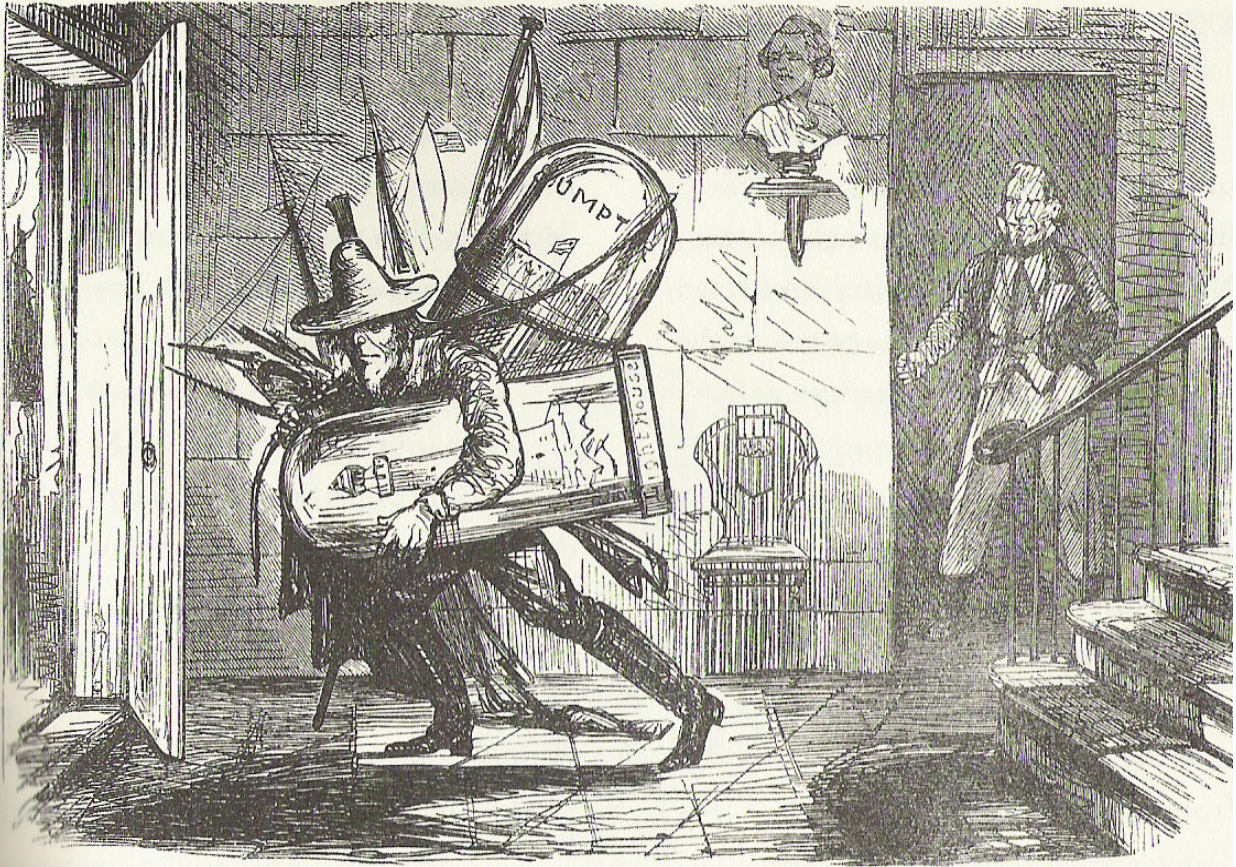




A JOB FOR THE NEW CABINET MAKER.

*(Leslie's Illustrated, February 2, 1861)*

Although by the time this political cartoon appeared, several southern states had seceded from the Union, there was still hope in both the North and the South that Lincoln, seen here with a pot of glue, could somehow repair the damage and pull the two regions back together.



UNCLE SAM. "Hallo there, you Rascal! Where are you going with my Property, eh?"

JEFF. DAVIS. "Oh, dear Uncle! ALL I WANT IS TO BE LET ALONE!"

*(Harper's Weekly, June 1, 1861)*

Confederate President Jefferson Davis is portrayed here, as the South, which, as a thief in the night, runs away loaded down with Federal property claiming to be left alone by the federal government.



*(Currier & Ives, July 1861)*

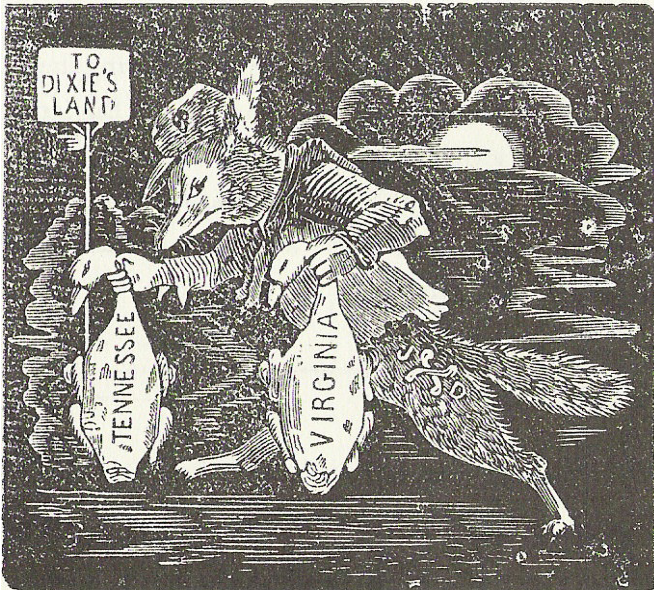
The United States had a bulldog in General Winfield Scott, who had first rose to prominence in the War of 1812 and later commanded the United States Army during the invasion of Mexico in the United States-Mexican War. However, at the outbreak of the war, he was 75 years old and too fat to mount a horse to lead the federal army in battle. Still, he is pictured here as the bulldog fronting the might of the North. Munitions, supplies, and financial resources back him as he taunts the Southern greyhound wearing a collar labeled “Jeff.” Indicating a juicy bone labeled “Washington Prize Beef,” Scott asks, “Why don’t you take it?” as Davis skulks off, tail between his legs, back to his lonely bales of cotton. The cartoon indicates that the South had cotton, but not much else, and didn’t have the strength to wrest the bone from the Union’s bulldog.

Jeff. Davis going to War.



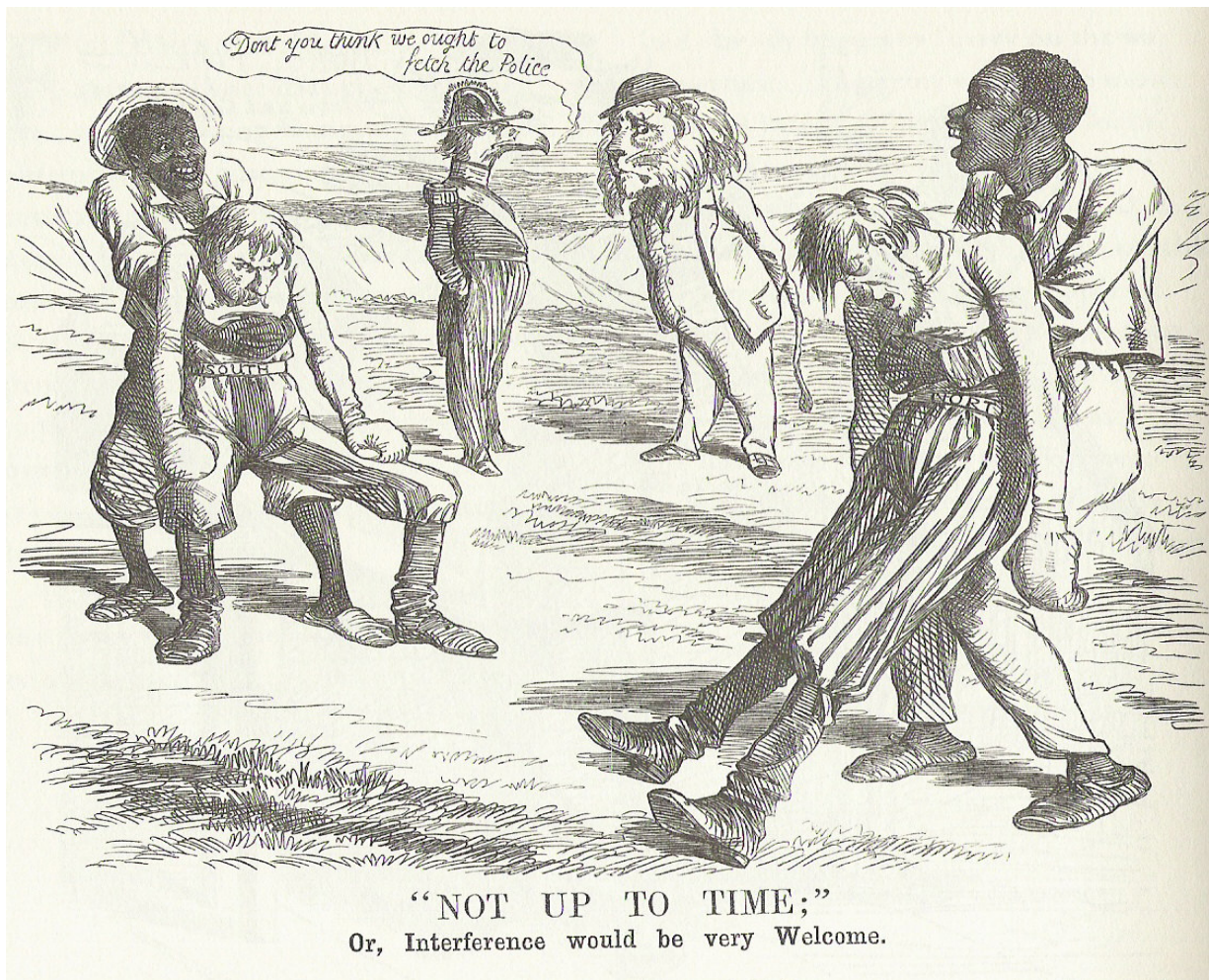
Jeff. returning from War  
AN

Entered, according to Act of Congress, in the year 1861, by E. Rogers,  
In the Clerk's Office of the District Court of the United States,  
In and for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania.



JEFF. DAVIS ON A SCOUTING EXPEDITION

*(Patriotic Envelopes, 1861)*



*(Punch, September 13, 1862)*

In the background, France, a slightly portly eagle and Great Britain, a worried-looking lion, wonder if it is time to intervene in the Civil War, especially since the participants appear to be made weary by the fight. This cartoon, which appeared days before the battle of Antietam, indicates that Europeans believed both the North and the South were nearly played out. Neither European power had taken an official position, although both were keenly interested in the outcome for economic and political reasons, and both leaned ever so slightly towards recognition of the Confederate States of America.

Both Great Britain and France eagerly sought a resumption of shipments of Southern cotton. Britain's industry relied on these shipments as their supplies were running low and its textile mills were beginning to lay off workers. At the same time, Britain also imported wheat from the North and needed an uninterrupted supply. Thus, Britain was more reluctant than France to pick sides. France's Napoleon III had designs on Mexico. He wanted to establish a puppet government there and hoped, as an ally, the South would permit it do so without interference. But France, like Britain, did not want to upset the North and therefore waited for the Confederacy to achieve a great victory over the Union army.



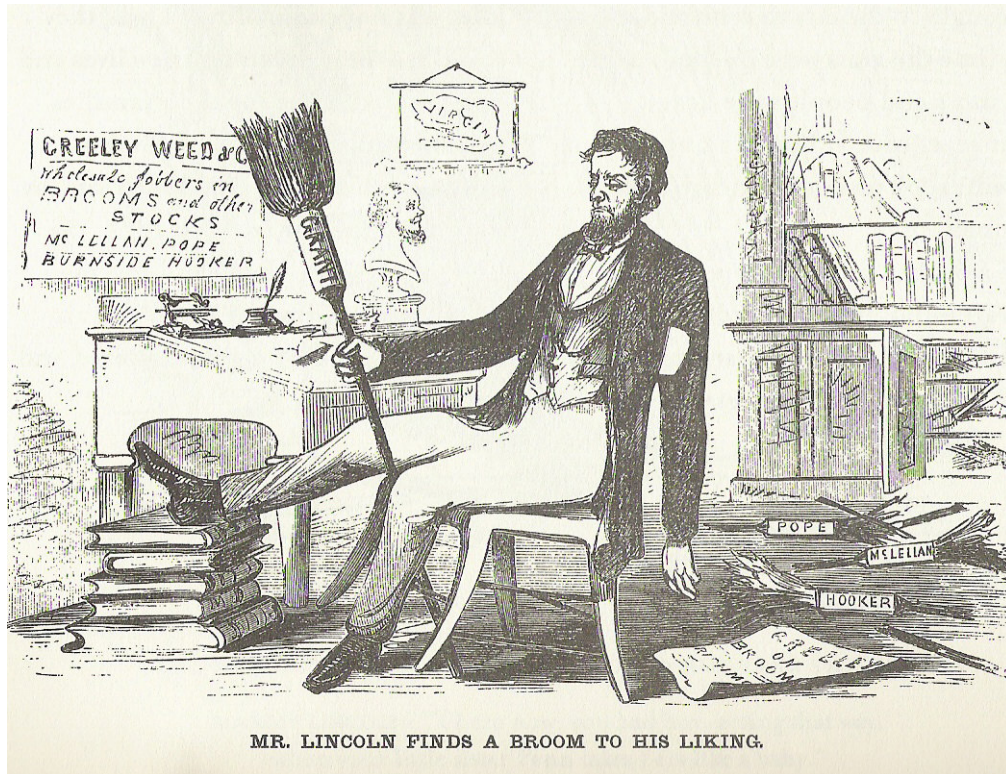
COLUMBIA. "Where are my 15,000 sons—murdered at Fredericksburg?"

LINGOLN. "This reminds me of a little joke—"

COLUMBIA. "Go tell your joke at Springfield!!"

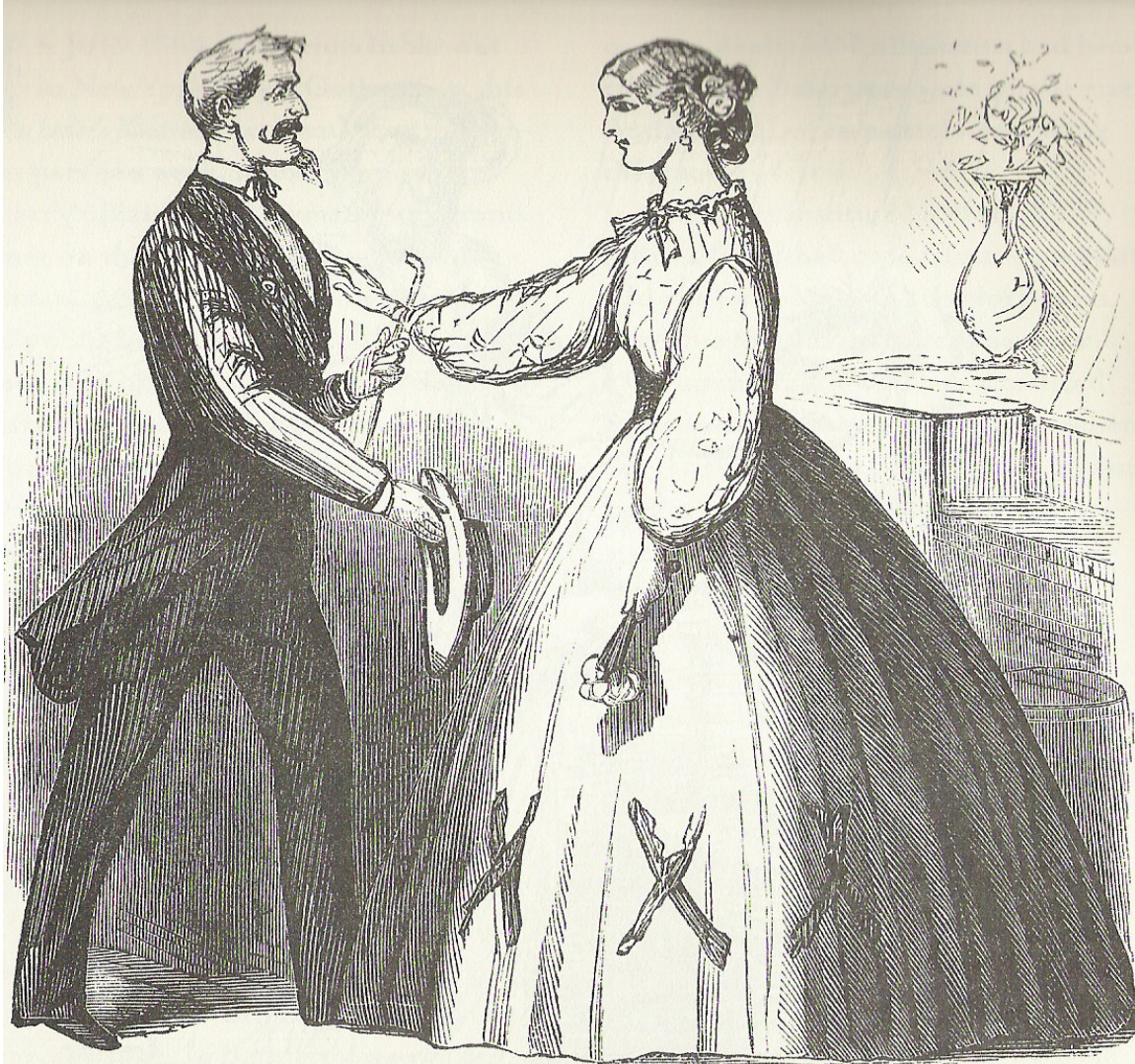
(*Harper's Weekly*, January 3, 1863)

This cartoon from *Harper's Weekly* reveals the growing frustration of the northern public with the slow progress of the Union armies and its commander-in-chief. Columbia, symbol of the mothers, wives, and sweethearts of the Union army's soldiers, demands an accounting for the thousand of dead soldiers murdered at Fredericksburg, Virginia in December 1862. Lincoln, standing next to General Henry Halleck (to the left of Lincoln) and Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton (to the right of Lincoln), attempts to respond with one of his typical jokes. But the country is tired of the jokes and growing tired of Lincoln, Columbia scorns Lincoln: "Go tell your joke at Springfield! [Lincoln's adopted hometown]."



*(Leslie's Illustrated, March 7, 1864)*

After three years of struggling to find a general to win the war, Lincoln sits in his office, holding a broom labeled “Grant,” which he finds more to his liking. Scattered on the floor behind Lincoln’s chair are broken brooms labeled “Pope,” “McClellan,” and “Hooker.” Grant became the tool that Lincoln and the Union required to win the war.



**SCENE, FIFTH AVENUE.**

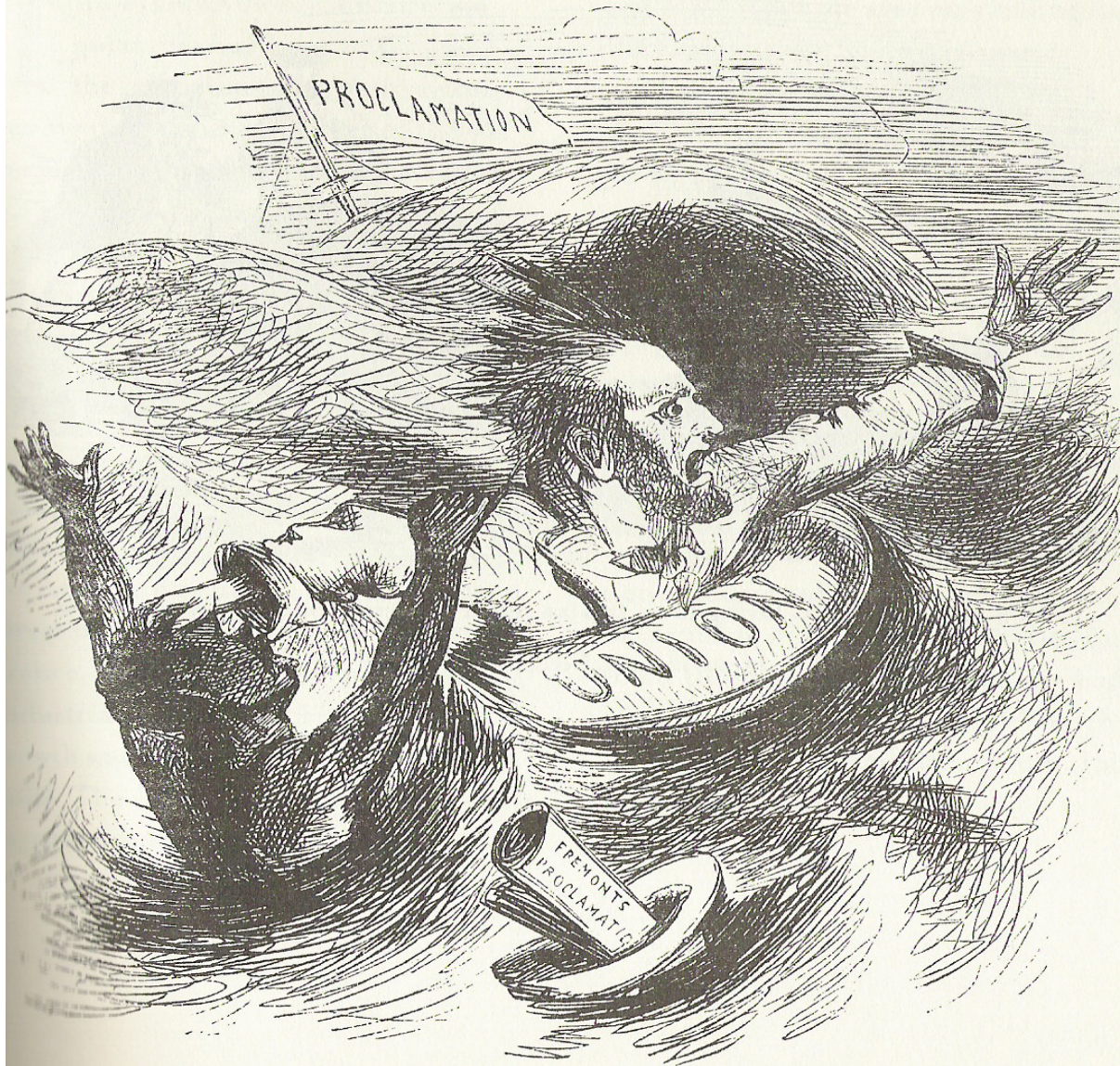
HE. "Ah! Dearest ADDIE! I've succeeded. I've got a Substitute!"

SHE. "Have you? What a curious coincidence! And *I* have found one FOR YOU!"

*(Harper's Weekly, August 30, 1863)*

Hiring a substitute to fight in your place during the Civil War was perfectly legal; however, as indicated by this cartoon from *Harper's Weekly*, which supported the Union war effort, it may not have been a very wise course of action. The business of hiring out substitutes to fight in your place led to charges in the North that the Civil War was a rich man's war but a poor man's fight. The cost of a substitute, \$300.00, was equal to nearly a year's pay for the working class.





LINCOLN—"I'm sorry to have to drop you, Sambo, but this concern won't carry us both!"

*(Leslie's Illustrated, October 12, 1861)*

When Major General John C. Fremont, in command of Union forces in the West, issued a proclamation declaring all slaves within Missouri forever free, (which he failed to notify Lincoln of his decision to do so) President Lincoln revoked Fremont's proclamation and relieved the general of his command. Lincoln, whose initial main war goal was preservation of the Union, feared that if the Border States perceived the federal government's role in abolition, they would secede and take up arms against the Union. This cartoon vividly captures Lincoln's adrift and floundering through the storm Fremont created for his administration, while the president pushes a slave away since the Union life preserver cannot save them both.

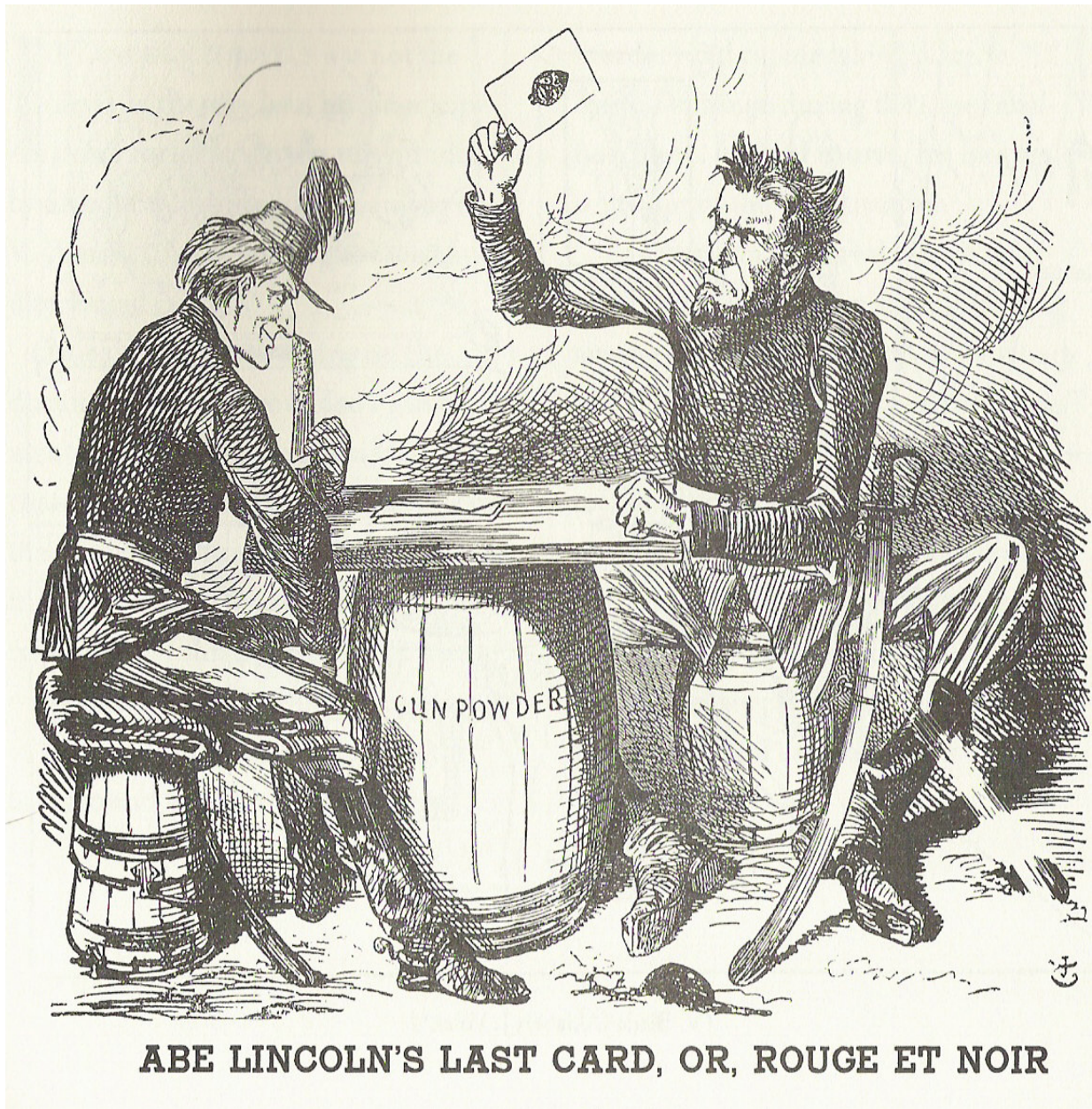


WHO ARE THE NIGGER WORSHIPERS?

Yes, my Son, you must go to War. I can't spare POMP; he cost me Twelve Hundred Dollars, and he might get shot. Besides, you know, you couldn't stoop to work like a field-hand!

*(Harper's Weekly, October 18, 1862)*

This cartoon depicts the rich man's war, poor man's fight in the South from yet another perspective. Here, the southern plantation owner, who caused the war to begin by agitating for secession, refuses to fight or send his slave (who was far too valuable) to fight. Instead, he instructs his son to go into harm's way.



**ABE LINCOLN'S LAST CARD, OR, ROUGE ET NOIR**

*(Punch, October 18, 1862)*

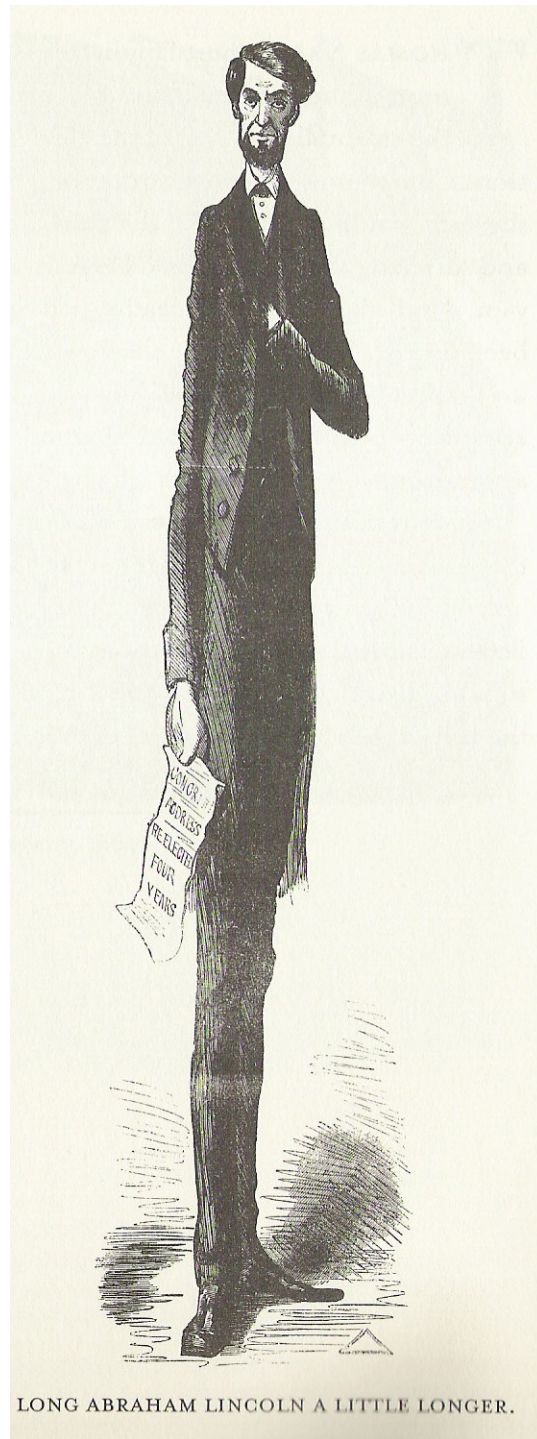
Here, London's *Punch* Magazine portrays Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation as a last act of desperation.



*(Harper's Weekly, September 3, 1864)*

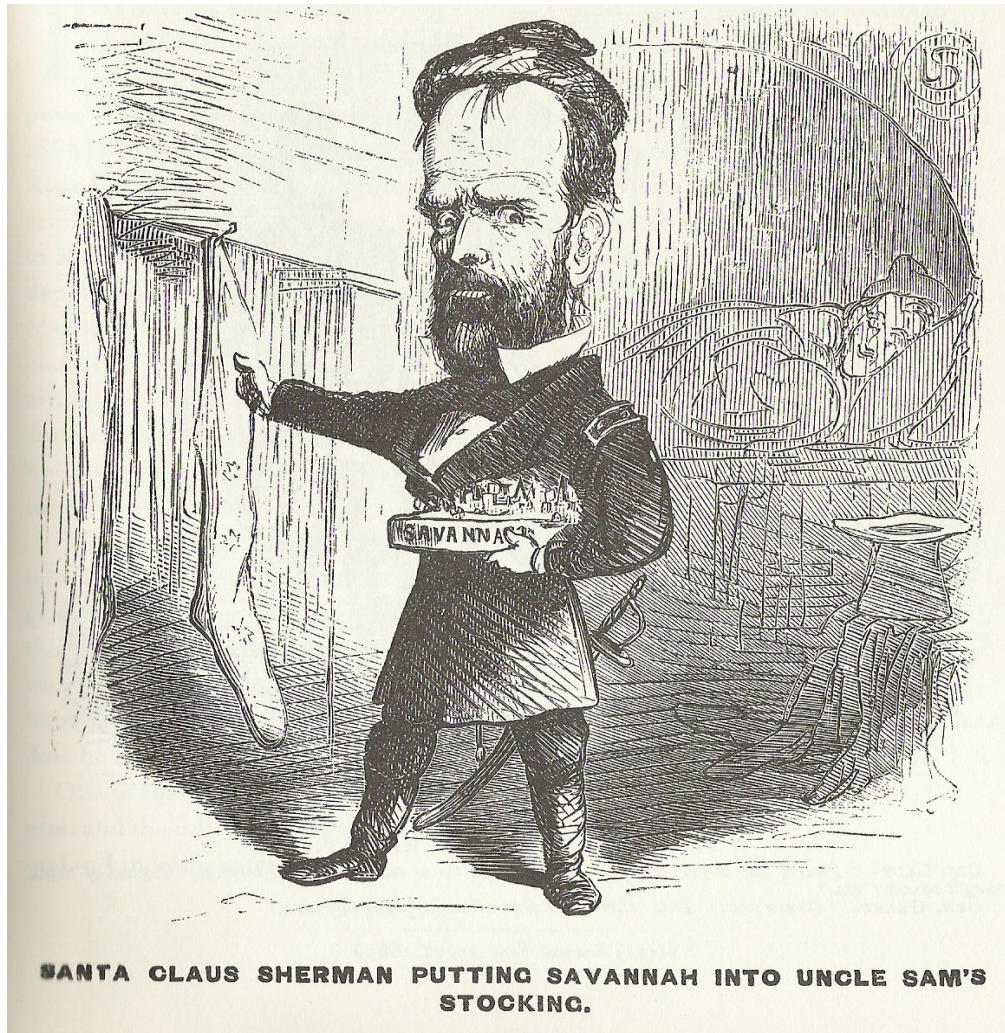
Thomas Nast's influential cartoon, a masterpiece of campaign rhetoric, on the eve of the Election of 1864 neatly summed up the essential question of the contest from an ardent supporter of Lincoln and the Union: Democratic victory was equivalent to a compromise with the South. Compromise would mean that all the pain, suffering, and sacrifice of the past 3 and half years would be all in vain. The slave owner would prevail.

Nast is not subtle as he incorporates symbols to get his point across. In the upper left corner, the federal flag flies upside down (a sign of distress). Columbia, kneeling at the feet of the Confederacy, weeps over Union dead while a veteran-amputee weakly shakes the hand of the victor. The Confederate victor is portrayed young, handsome, and strong. He carries a whip in his hand; this he will presumably use on the slaves in the background. In the upper right, the Stars and Bars flies proudly.



*(Harper's Weekly, November 26, 1864)*

Lincoln won reelection in 1864, the first president to do so since Andrew Jackson's victory in 1832. Lincoln captured 55% of the popular vote, and carried all but 3 states: New Jersey, Kentucky, and Delaware. The Union soldier's vote proved especially critical as Lincoln garnered nearly 80% of the vote. Lincoln had received a mandate from the voters, which endorsed his two principal goals: restoration of the Union and abolition of slavery.



*(Leslie's Illustrated, January 14, 1865)*

After General William T. Sherman's victory over Confederate General John Bell Hood at Atlanta in September 1864, Sherman took his army on a march to the sea. With his army consisting of 62,000 Union soldiers, Sherman abandoned his lines of supply and communication as he marched from Atlanta to Savannah, perfecting the art of total warfare along the way destroying everything of value in his path—a scorched earth policy. Sherman's army cut a 60-mile wide swath of complete destruction through the middle of Georgia. Railroads, bridges, farms, and crops were put to the torch. Livestock was captured; what couldn't be eaten as destroyed to prevent it from being used and consumed by Confederate soldiers or southern sympathizers. Sherman reached Savannah in December, capturing the city without a fight. Sherman wired Lincoln: "I beg to present you, as a Christmas gift, the city of Savannah." Sherman is seen here, putting the city of Savannah into Uncle Sam's stocking.

## Ulysses S. Grant Political Cartoons



GRANT TURNING LEE'S FLANK.

*(Harper's Weekly, June 11, 1864)*

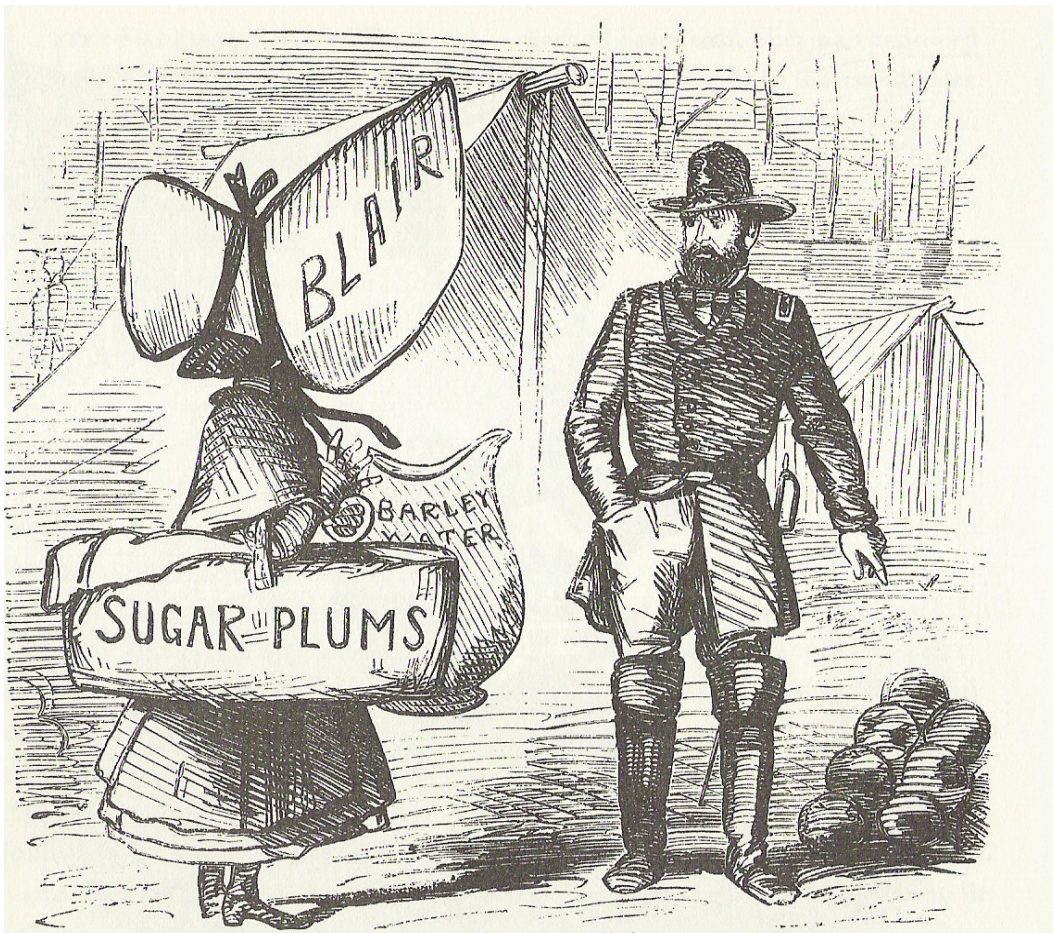


ABOUT THE SIZE OF IT.

GENERAL GRANT. "Well, and what if it should come to a Kilkenny fight?  
I guess our cat has for the longest tail."

*(Harper's Weekly, July 25, 1864)*





**A SELF-APPOINTED ENVOY.**

OLD LADY—"Please Mr. Soger, will you let me take these notions to Richmond. I kind of think ey'll convert 'em."

GEN. GRANT—"Guess not! This other is the sort of sugarplum just now."

*(Leslie's Illustrated, February 21, 1865)*

Francis P. Blair, a veteran politician, who once been a political ally with southern Jacksonians prior to the war, is portrayed here on a private mission in early 1865 to enter into negotiations with the Confederate president to bring the war to a peaceful end. Blair's plan involved both Lincoln and Davis, as well as Union and Confederate veterans, teaming together to defeat the French forces in Mexico, which had installed a puppet government in their efforts to test the Monroe Doctrine and create a French stronghold in the Western Hemisphere. Blair believed the mission would in effect bring about a speedy restoration of the Union and reconciliation. Blair is portrayed as bringing little sweets, but nothing of substance to the peace negotiations; Grant, on the other hand, is portrayed pointing at cannonballs, the only treats he intends to serve the Confederates.

**Sources:** *Frank Leslie's Illustrated, Harper's Weekly, Punch, Strong's Dime Caricatures, New York Illustrated News, Currier & Ives, & Rail Splitter*  
J.G. Lewin and P.J. Huff, *Lines of Contention: Political Cartoons of the Civil War* (2007)