In the critical decade leading to the Civil War, the degeneration of the relationship between North and South was expedited by the questions of the expansion of slavery and the failures of leadership to control the tone of the debate. As Manifest Destiny and Polk’s expansion policies opened the west, debates ensued as to where slavery can and cannot exist in the new territories. Pressure to halt slavery’s expansion rang louder over time as by the 1840s European nations, like France and England, had already begun to abolish slavery and northern anti-slavery sentiment was growing. This created a serious concern in the South that slavery was under assault. Extreme behavior will begin to bring tensions to a fever pitch. For example, the Kansas-Nebraska Act will open those territories to popular sovereignty, negating the Missouri Compromise, which had governed slavery in the territories to that point. The ensuing violence in Kansas by radical factions trying to influence the vote led to increased distrust between the North and South. Between 1850 and 1861, northern extremists and moderate leaders unable to find compromise directly contributed to civil war because they were unwilling to listen to opposing viewpoints to reach an understanding.

Extremists in the antebellum period put their personal beliefs ahead of what was best for the maintaining national unity. Their closed-minded attitude left no room for compromise, only partisan rhetoric that move the nation towards war. Daniel Webster, a northern politician, in his 1850 speech to the Senate, argued that abolitionists’ prickly rhetoric causes great harm to the relationship between North and South. He is correct to ask if this approach serves any productive purpose. More than likely it would cause the South to entrench itself and not be willing to participate in productive dialog. (Doc 1) In his *No Compromise with the Evil of Slavery* speech, William L. Garrison’s does not try to hide his belief that there is no room for compromise, calling slave holders thieves and evil. Garrison clearly intends to provoke the South without considering that he is alienating southerners from ever considering a negotiated rollback of slavery; but instead they are likely to entrench in their ways after being lectured to by a northerner with no respect for their culture. His intended audience here is just as Webster described in his letter. Garrison preaches to the northern anti-slavery factions who become more enflamed against slavery because of his rhetoric and also he understood that southerners would see this and it would act as a warning to them that the north is not standing idly by while slavery continued to exist. This contributed to the increasing divide. (Doc 2) In Frederick Douglass’s Letter to a Group of Abolitionists, he speaks highly of John Brown and his friendship with him. John Brown was an outspoken abolitionist who led a treasonous raid on a federal armory at Harper’s Ferry, Va in an attempt to arm slaves, murder southerners and overthrow southern governments. By allying himself with Brown, Douglass demonstrates that the message he is sending to his audiences as he speaks in northern towns is that slavery must be eliminated at any cost, even the murder of countrymen. (Doc 5) The south was very sensitive to this type of rhetoric as they feared insurrection among the ranks of the slave population. Perhaps the actions of Brown or the words of Douglass would insight an uprising like the Nat Turner rebellion in 1831, where Turner and a group of followers murdered 70 white Virginians in a slave uprising before they were apprehended and killed. The South lived in fear after that event and had increasing concerns that abolitionist speeches would cause another, perhaps more sizable, revolt.

The errors of political leaders in this charged environment led to increasing misunderstanding between North and South. In Abe Lincoln’s “House Divided” speech, he said that the house cannot stand half-free and half slave. Lincoln’s purpose was to point out that we need to come to some compromise resolution on the issue of slavery because it is driving apart the country. This was a mistake as it was interpreted by southerners as a threat of conflict since they had no intention of emancipating the slaves. Southerners understood that if the house would fall without one extreme or another, then there is no room for compromise. It further cemented their fears about republicans that they were radical abolitionists. (Doc 3 ) Stephen Douglas, during his speech at Alton, Ill. will try to appear the voice of reason as he advocates for states’ rights. In the process he will undercut Lincoln, his political opponent and reaffirm Southern fears of Lincoln being a radical by being critical of the House Divided speech. This had unintended consequences as Lincoln will be elected President in 1860 and southern fears of an uncompromising Republican president will compel them to secede. (Doc 4) Southern concerns in 1860 were bolstered by the fact that the Republicans gained a majority in the House and had grown significantly in the Senate over the past three election cycles according to the US Census Bureau statistics. (Doc 7) This left the South little alternative but to secede. From their point of view, as discussed in South Carolina’s Declaration of Secession, with the Congress controlled by Northern republicans and the presidency also occupied by a republican, Southerners felt they had no chance for their institutions to be protected when radical abolitionism, which they attributed to the republican party, ran the government. This leads to South Carolina being the first of seven slave states to secede in the first few months following Lincoln’s election in 1860. (Doc 6)

The South was not without blame. The behavior of those embracing Southern interests in Kansas who illegally influenced the vote in favor of pro-slavery candidates and caused violence against freesoilers instigated tensions. The circumstances surrounding the voting of the pro-slavery Lecompton Constitution and supporters’ attempts to ram it through Congress were despicable and undemocratic. The leadership of southern fire-eaters like Robert Toombs and Edmund Ruffin did not leave room for constructive dialog with northern politicians as they stumped for secession for years before it was a reality.

Another option:

The South was not out of bounds for seceding from the Union. They believed that the United States, for some time now, was not governing in a fashion that protected their rights. They could cite the lack of enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Act or even tariff laws that favored northern interests over those of the south. Now that Lincoln was elected they felt they had no hope for the government to account for the needs of the South. Based on Locke’s philosophy of governance, that the government must protect the rights of the citizens or the citizens have the right to remove the government, they felt compelled to secede. Considering the Constitution does not address secession, it falls within a state’s right to do so. They compared their plight to that of the founding fathers during the revolution. They simply wanted to remove the yoke of oppression from a tyrannical government as the American colonies had done in 1776.