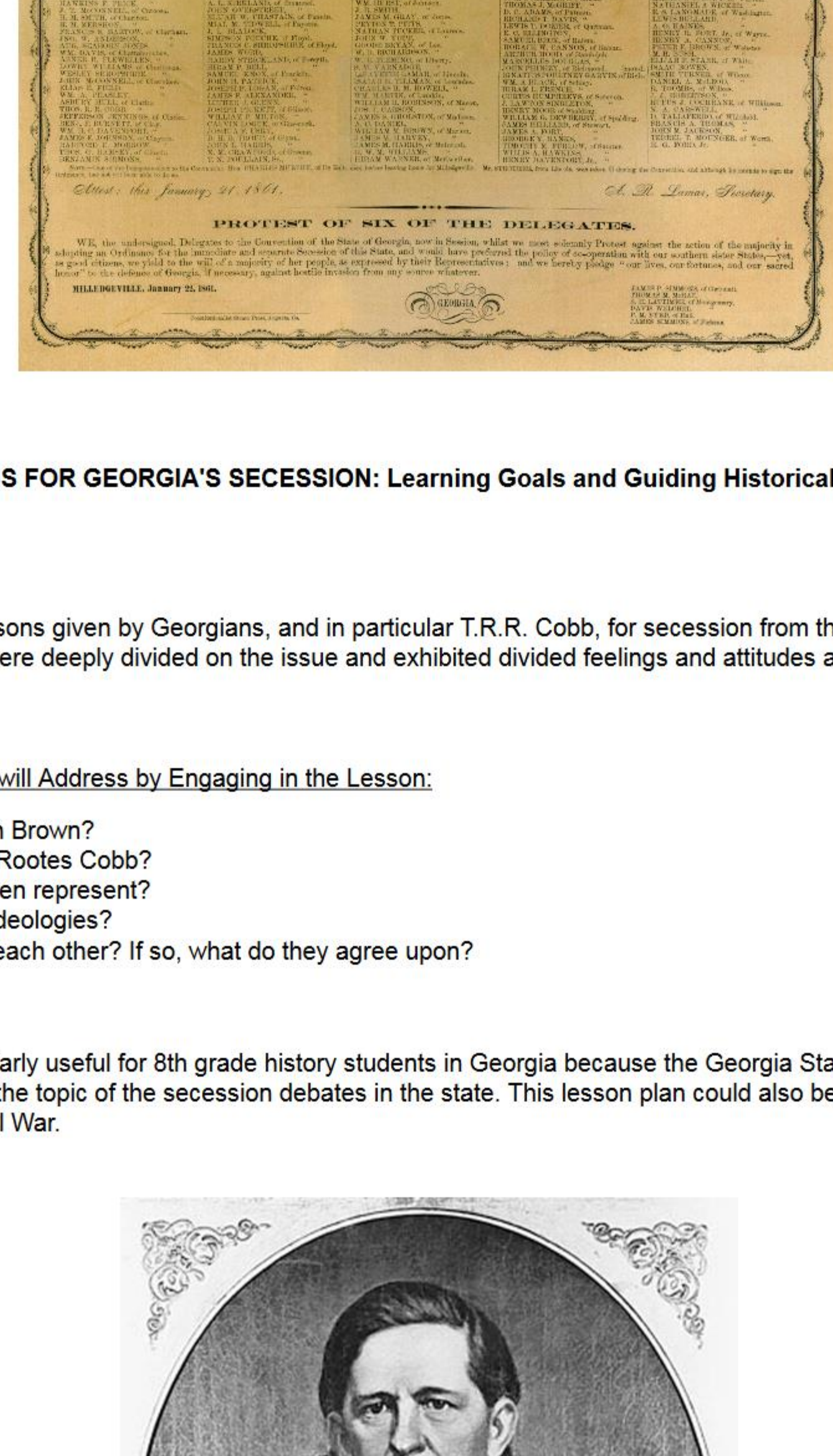


THE GEORGIA SECESSION DEBATES AND THE ROLE OF THOMAS R.R. COBB

A LESSON PLAN FOR SECONDARY HISTORY TEACHERS By Lindsay McMichael

Although South Carolina took early steps to secede from the Union, the success of this historic move depended on the other states joining South Carolina. And it was no foregone conclusion. The role Georgia played, and in particular, one Georgian statesman, T.R.R. Cobb, was crucial. This lesson plan for middle and high school American history students suggests ideas and provides resources for teaching about the debates that led to Georgia's agreement to join South Carolina.



REASONS FOR GEORGIA'S SECESSION: Learning Goals and Guiding Historical Questions

Overall Learning Goal:

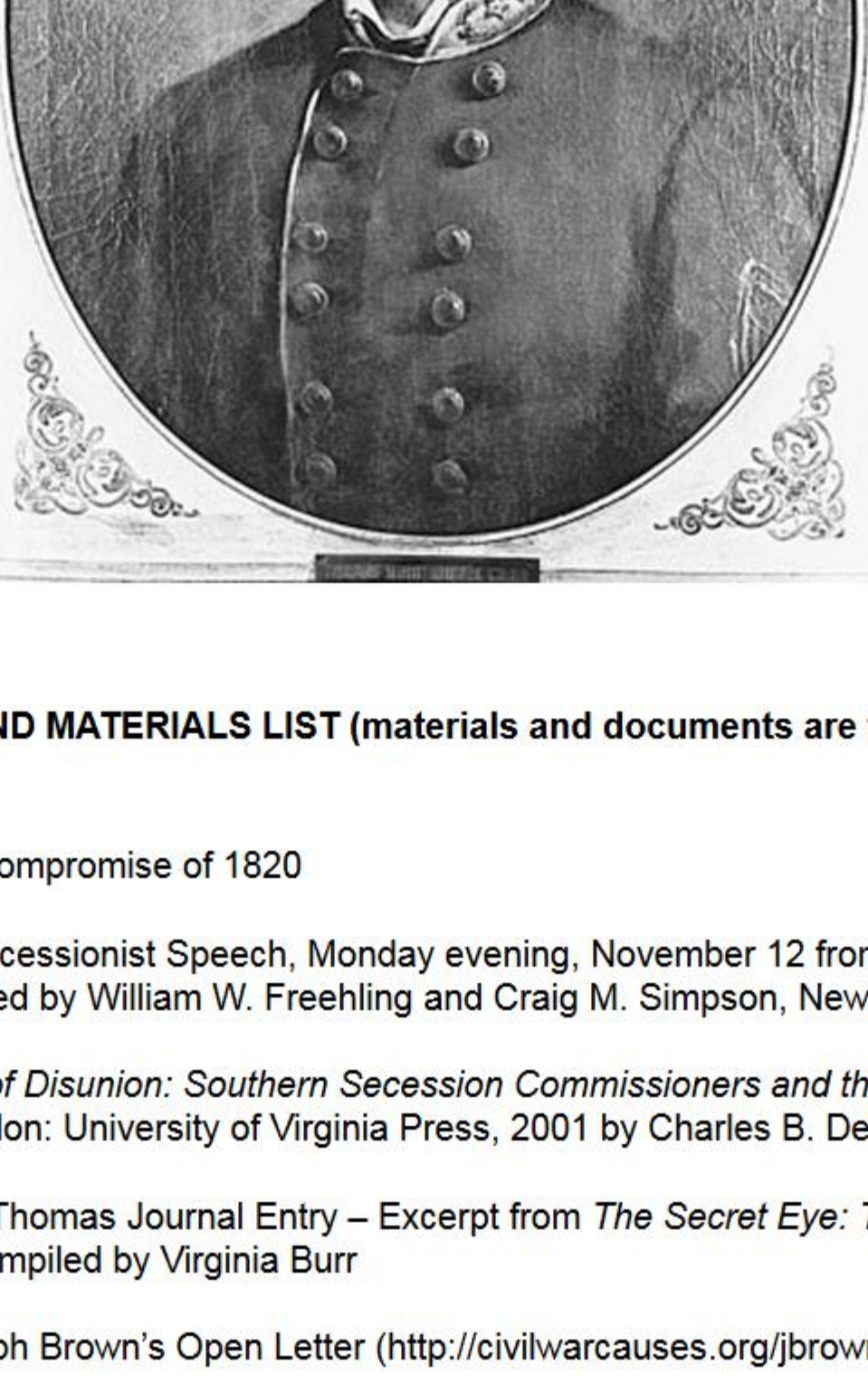
Students will understand reasons given by Georgians, and in particular T.R.R. Cobb, for secession from the Union. Students will also understand that Georgians were deeply divided on the issue and exhibited divided feelings and attitudes as they debated whether to secede.

Specific Questions Students will Address by Engaging in the Lesson:

- Who is Joseph Emerson Brown?
Who is Thomas Reade Rootes Cobb?
What groups do each men represent?
What are their political ideologies?
Do the men agree with each other? If so, what do they agree upon?

Note to Teachers:

This lesson would be particularly useful for 8th grade history students in Georgia because the Georgia State Social Studies Standards include indicators relating to the topic of the secession debates in the state. This lesson plan could also be used at the High School level when teaching about the Civil War.



ACCOUNTS, DOCUMENTS, AND MATERIALS LIST (materials and documents are found at the end of the lesson)

- 1. Map of the outcome of the Missouri Compromise of 1820
2. Document I: Thomas R.R. Cobb's Secessionist Speech, Monday evening, November 12 from Secession debated: Georgia's Showdown in 1860, edited by William W. Freehling and Craig M. Simpson, New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.
3. Document II: Excerpts from Apostles of Disunion: Southern Secession Commissioners and the Causes of the Civil War, Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2001 by Charles B. Dew (p. 64-67)
4. Document III: Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas Journal Entry - Excerpt from The Secret Eye: The Journal of Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas, 1848-1889 compiled by Virginia Burr
5. Document IV: Excerpt from Gov. Joseph Brown's Open Letter (http://civilwarcauses.org/brown.htm)
6. Document V: Thomas R.R. Cobb's letter to his wife Marion Lumpkin, October 11, 1860 (full text)

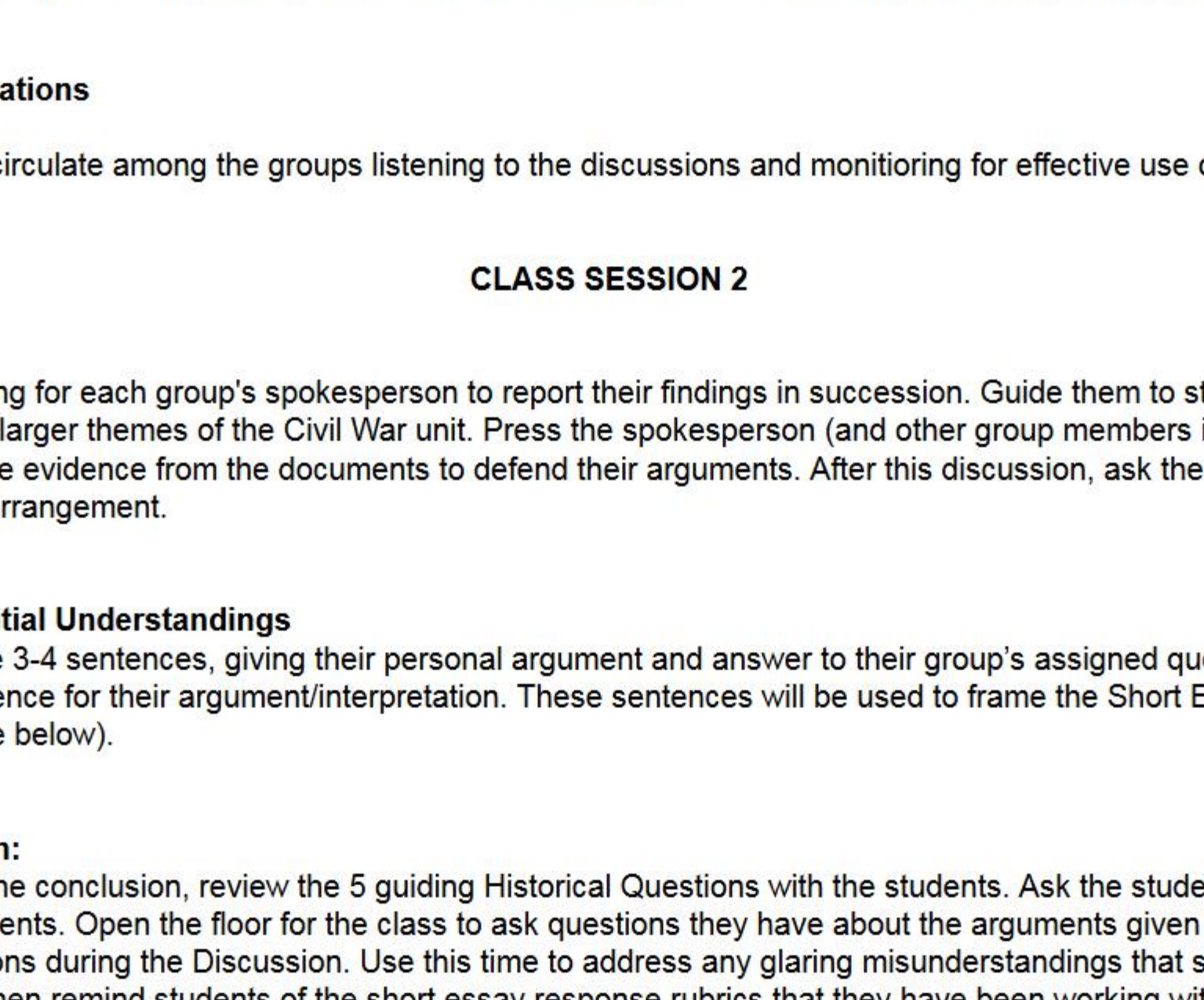
Investigating the Past, Learning American History: A Research-Based Approach to Lesson Design

The approach and design of this lesson plan is rooted in several decades of research on how students learn history. It has been customary for history teachers to tell students the story of the past as a means of getting them to reproduce what they hear. However, research consistently presents evidence that such an approach seldom succeeds. Simply put, students seem to quickly forget what they hear.

In studying how students learn history more deeply, researchers have found that students are far more likely to understand the past and therefore reproduce their understandings later if they have authentic opportunities to investigate the past themselves (i.e., to do history). As a result, history teachers who structure lessons around questions, accounts (firsthand and secondary), and investigations into those accounts as a means of answering the questions posed are far more likely to help students attain strong understandings of the past.

This lesson is designed to draw from the research by structuring its sequencing in an investigative way. It poses crucial questions for students to address, invites them to dig into the accounts that might help provide answers to those questions, draw evidence from them, and make claims about what the past means and what happened back then. Such claims represent students' growing understandings of history. By "doing history" themselves, students come to understand it much more deeply and are prone then to remember what they learn.

Lesson Sequence



Explanatory Note:

The 2-part lesson is connected to a larger unit on the Civil War, and takes 50-minute class periods at the causes for secession according to Southerners, and particularly Georgians. The structure assumes typical 50-minute class periods and spans two of them. It can easily be modified to fit a 90 minute block schedule.

CLASS SESSION 1

Step 1: Building Historical Context

Open the lesson by projecting the map depicting the Compromise of 1820 onto the screen. Students will have previously learned about the Compromise and its ramifications. They will have about 5 minutes to look at the map and respond to the question: Why would the admission of California as a free state upset the tenuous balance between the North and South that was present in Congress? Could this lead to increased calls for secession from the Southern states?

Step 2: Setting the Investigative Focus

After the students have shared their answers, give students instructions about group assignments. The class will be divided into 5 groups of 5 students each, and each will be given one of the 5 questions from the list of Historical Questions. Review the guiding historical Questions, as well as the Learning Goals with the class to give further context to the investigations.

In order to give each student background knowledge and further context for the questions surrounding the Georgia secession debates, give each student a packet containing 5 documents. Go over directions that ask them to read all of the documents in the packet and decide which evidence is relevant to answering their group's question. Remind the groups that they have 30 minutes to read the documents, determine the most useful evidence, and write an argument based on the evidence to answer their question.

Step 3: Group Investigations

During the 30 minutes, circulate among the groups listening to the discussions and monitoring for effective use of time.

CLASS SESSION 2

Step 4: Discussion

Begin session 2 by asking for each group's spokesperson to report their findings in succession. Guide them to stay on the topic of their question, as well as the larger themes of the Civil War unit. Press the spokesperson (and other group members if they choose to assist the spokesperson) to cite evidence from the documents to defend their arguments. After this discussion, ask the students to return to their individual seating arrangement.

Step 5: Writing Out Initial Understandings

Instruct students to write 3-4 sentences, giving their personal argument and answer to their group's assigned question. They must cite at least two pieces of evidence for their argument/interpretation. These sentences will be used to frame the Short Essay students will turn in as their assignment (see below).

Concluding the Lesson:

For several minutes at the conclusion, review the 5 guiding Historical Questions with the students. Ask the students to share themes that they found in the documents. Open the floor to questions they have about the arguments given by the groups in answer to their assigned questions during the Discussion. Use this time to address any glaring misunderstandings that stood out from their 3-4 sentence responses. Then remind students of the short essay response rubrics that they have been working with from the beginning of the year. Having these in place holds students accountable to the learning goals.

Short Essay Instructions:

Students should then take about the remaining class time to write a 2-paragraph essay answering a question you select. Instruct them to use their document packets to support their claims with at least two pieces of evidence. Essays will be collected the following class session. Their responses can serve as a transition to the next topic in the unit.

Assessing Historical Understanding

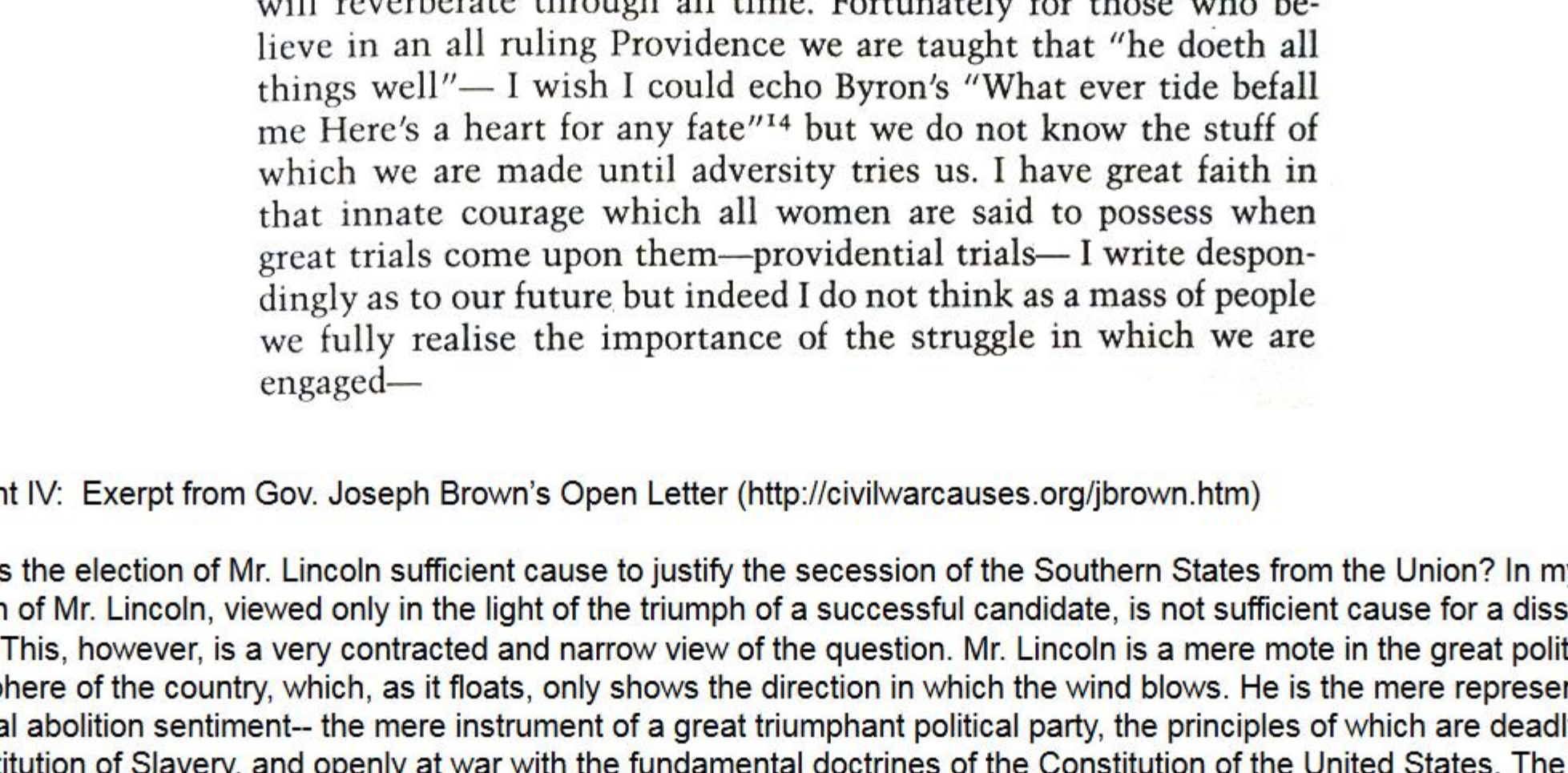
Assessment is a crucial part of the lesson. In this case, the assessment of student understanding constructed through the investigation of T.R.R. Cobb's contribution to the secession debates is represented in the Short Essay.

There are two main rubric categories that can be applied to the Essays:

- 1. Does the student create a solid argument in her/his essay that demonstrates a clear understanding of and response to the key historical question to which he/she was assigned?
2. Does the student succeed in using at least two relevant and applicable pieces of evidence drawn from the documents and accounts to support her/his argument?

Lesson Resources

- 1. Map of the outcome of the Missouri Compromise of 1820



- 2. Document I: Thomas R.R. Cobb's Secessionist Speech, Monday evening, November 12 from Secession debated: Georgia's Showdown in 1860, edited by William W. Freehling and Craig M. Simpson, New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.

Thomas R. Cobb—Nov. 12, 1860

Lincoln is in violation of the spirit of the Constitution of the United States. And am I told this spirit is too indefinite and shadowy an abutment to be made the basis of resistance? And can there be a Georgian who will never resist so long as the form and letter of the Constitution is not broken? Let us inquire. The inter-State Slave Trade is within the letter of the Constitution. Should Congress abolish it will my objector submit? The amendment of the Constitution itself is within the letter of that instrument. If it is so amended in accordance with its letter as to carry out Lincoln's announcement that the States must be all free, will my objector submit? Why not? Because these are violative of its spirit. True, my friends, in the word of inspiration, "the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life." To the spirit then we must look, and a violation of that spirit renders this election unconstitutional.

I come now to consider this question in its political light, and it rises in importance much above the mere legal question. I must confess that the mere election of a candidate to the Presidency, in a manner legally unconstitutional, does not in my judgment, justify secession from the Union. The wise man and the statesman, to say nothing of the patriot, will always weigh well whether "it is better to bear the ills we have than fly to others that we know not of." And, hence, arises the political question, does this election justify and require a disruption of the ties which bind us to the Union? As much as I would dislike the triumph of a free state candidate upon a purely sectional platform, I am free to say I should hesitate even then to risk the consequences of a dissolution, provided that sectional platform was upon issues not vital in themselves, or were temporary in their nature. Such would it be of protective tariffs and homestead bills—the acquisition of territory—peace or war with foreign powers. And if the election of Lincoln, unconstitutional though it may be, was upon a temporary issue, or a question not vital in importance, I should

hesitate to declare it ground for Disunion. But my countrymen, I cannot so view the triumph of Black Republicanism. It is a question vital in itself, and by no means, of a temporary character. To see it in its breadth and enormity, to see its dangerous propensities and its threatening aspects, it becomes necessary for us to go back a little in history, and to trace the slavery agitation as connected with our Government. Shortly after its organization, we find a petition from the Quakers of Philadelphia, asking the abolition of slavery. We see that petition greeted with "laughter," according to a reporter present. "Is it to be supposed that the white race will stand that?" Benning asked. "It is not a supportable case."

Like other commissioners, Benning saw a nightmarish scenario ahead for the South. War would "break out everywhere like hidden fire from the earth," he predicted, and "an every-day rider from the North as well as thousands of Northern 'volunteers and Wide-Awakes'"—a reference to the Republican marching clubs that had filled the streets of Northern cities during the recent presidential campaign—would descend upon the South to assist the slaves engaged in mortal combat with their masters. The result of this unequal struggle were not in doubt: "We will be overpowered and our men will be compelled to wander like vagabonds all over the earth," he said his audience, "and as for our women, the horrors of their state we cannot contemplate in imagination." This, then, was "the fate which Abolition will bring upon the white race." Benning closed this portion of his speech with a solemn forecast: "We will be completely exterminated," he told the Virginians, "and the land will be left in the possession of the blacks, and then it will go back to a wilderness and become another Africa or St. Domingo."

After spending several minutes sketching a glowing picture of Virginia's commercial and manufacturing prosperity in a new Southern Confederacy, Benning reached the emotional and oratorical climax of his address. "Join the North, and what will become of you?" he asked the delegates. "They will hate you and your institutions as much as they do now, and treat you accordingly," he warned. "Suppose they elevated [Charles] Sumner to the Presidency? Suppose they elevated Fred. Douglass, your escaped slave, to the Presidency?" There were "hundreds of thousands at the North who would do this for the purpose of humiliating and insulting the South," he insisted.

"What would be your position in such an event?" Benning had his own clear and unequivocal answer to this question: "I say give me abundance and famine sooner than that."

At the conclusion of his lengthy speech, Benning assured the Richmond audience that slavery was final. To emphasize this point, he turned dramatically to John Janney, the president of the convention, and handed him a copy of Georgia's Ordinance of Secession. "Above all, we have a cause—the cause of honor, and liberty, and property, and self-preservation," Benning told the Virginians. "Sir, in such a cause, cowards will become men, men heroes, and heroes gods." 14

- 3. Document II: Excerpts from Apostles of Disunion: Southern Secession Commissioners and the Causes of the Civil War, Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2001 by Charles B. Dew (p. 64-67)

Benning, a native Georgian, a prominent judge and lawyer, a lifelong Democrat, and a man of considerable wealth (he owned ninety slaves in 1860), always believed that he deserved a better fate at the hands of the voters of Georgia. In 1834 he had graduated first in his class at the University of Virginia. He was a triumph from which he apparently never recovered. He could not understand why classmates like Howell Cobb and Herschel V. Johnson won victory after victory at the polls while his political aspirations were almost always thwarted. He consistently took a strong Southern rights position in the early 1850s but failed to win a seat in Congress as a Democrat, and most of the South, initially rallied behind the Compromise of 1850.

"What was the reason that induced Georgia to take the step of secession?" Benning asked as he opened his speech to the Virginia delegates. "This reason may be summed up in a single proposition," he answered. "It was a conviction, a deep conviction on the part of Georgia, that a separation from the North was the only thing that could prevent the abolition of her slavery."

Benning then proceeded to lay out a series of propositions intended to prove that Lincoln's election was a death sentence for the nation of slavery.

First, "the Black Republican party of the North" embraced "a sentiment of hatred to slavery as extreme as hatred can exist."

Second, the Republicans were "in a permanent majority" in the North. "Sir, you cannot overthrow such a party as that," he added. "As well might you attempt to lift a mountain out of its bed and throw it into the sea."

Third, "the North has invariably exerted against slavery, all the power which it had at the time." He cited the abolition of slavery in the Northern states, the fight over the Missouri Compromise and the Wilmot Proviso, and John Brown's raid as proof of this claim.

Benning's final proposition was by far the most interesting. The North was already well along the road to "acquiring the power to abolish slavery." To establish this argument, he went well beyond the usual subjects—new free states carved out of the territories and the passage of a constitutional amendment emancipating the South's slave population. These things would indeed happen, Benning argued. But, he asked, what about slavery in border areas like Delaware and Maryland? "The anti-slavery feeling has got[ten] to be so great at the North that the owners of slave property in these states have a presentiment that it is a doomed institution," he claimed, "and the instincts of self-interest impels them to get rid of that property which is 'damned.'" As a result slavery would be pushed "lower and lower, until all gone to the Cotton States." Benning maintained, "There is the weight of a continent forcing it down." When the day arrived that the institution was confined to the lower South, "slavery shall be abolished, and if a master refuses to yield to this policy, he shall doubtless be hung for his disobedience." 14

- 4. Document III: Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas Journal Entry - Excerpt from The Secret Eye: The Journal of Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas, 1848-1889 compiled by Virginia Burr

What boots it now to wonder what the coming year may bring forth? Well for us perhaps that we do not know. . . . But reality calls me to look around me, to see our country agonised in a struggle for an existence, and deeper, still deeper settles the conviction that we are upon the eve of some great struggle, the echo of which will reverberate through all time. Fortunately for those who believe in an all ruling Providence we are taught that "he doeth all things well." I wish I could echo Byron's "Whosoever thee befall me Here's a heart for any fate!" but we do not know the stuff of which we are made until adversity tries us. I have ever faith in that innate courage which all women are said to possess when great trials come upon them—providential trials—I write despondingly as to our future but indeed I do not think as a mass we people will fully realise the importance of the struggle in which we are engaged.

- 5. Document IV: Excerpt from Gov. Joseph Brown's Open Letter (http://civilwarcauses.org/brown.htm)

"First, is the election of Mr. Lincoln sufficient cause to justify the secession of the Southern States from the Union?" In my opinion the election of Mr. Lincoln, viewed only in the light of the triumph of a successful candidate, is not sufficient cause for a dissolution of the Union. This, however, is a very contracted and narrow view of the question. Mr. Lincoln is a mere mite in the great political atmosphere of the country, which is the whirlwind blowing in the face of a fanatical abolition sentiment—the mere instrument of a great triumphant political party, the principles of which are deadly hostile to the institution of Slavery, and openly at war with the fundamental doctrines of the Constitution of the United States. The rights of the South, and the institution of Slavery, are not endangered by the triumph of Mr. Lincoln, the man; but they are in imminent danger from the triumph of the powerful party which he represents, and of the fanatical abolition sentiment which brought him into power, as the candidate of the Northern section of the Union, over the united opposition of the Southern section against him.

The party embracing that sentiment, has constantly denied, and still denies, our equality in the Union, and our right to hold our slaves as property, and avows its purpose to take from us our property, so soon as it has the power. Its ability to elect Mr. Lincoln as its candidate, shows it now has the power to control the Executive branch of the Government. As the President, with the advice and consent of the Senate, appoints the Judges of the Supreme Court of the United States, when vacancies occur; its control of the Executive power will, in a few years, give it the control of the Judicial Department, while the constant increase of abolition sentiment, in the Northern States, now largely in the majority in Congress, together with the admission of other free States, will very soon, give it the power in the Legislative Department. The whole Government will then be in the hands of our enemies.

The election of Mr. Lincoln is the first great step in this programme. It is the triumph of the Northern over the Southern section of the Union: of Northern fanaticism over Southern equality and Southern rights. While, therefore, the election of Mr. Lincoln, as a man, is no sufficient cause to justify secession, the triumph of the Northern section of the Union over the Southern section, upon a platform of avowed hostility to our rights, and, in my opinion, afford ample cause to justify the South in withdrawing from a confederacy where her equality, her honor, and the rights of her people, can no longer be protected."

- 6. Document V: Thomas R.R. Cobb's letter to his wife Marion Lumpkin, October 11, 1860 (full text)

Thursday, Oct. 11, 1860.

Dearest Marion:

I am up again before breakfast to send you a message of love. All the day yesterday and until a late bed-hour we were hard at work preparing for the committee. They organized yesterday afternoon and we are able to meet them this morning at 8 1/2 o'clock. There are present only eight members out of the fifteen. Poor I wish were one -- and his uniformly end leaves only fourteen. Those present are -- of the Senate -- Holt and Pringle, of the House -- Lester, Farnin, Williams, Lewis, Deloney and Broles. Lawton I hear will be here to-day. -- I have no doubt will give us a vast amount of trouble. He is worse than ever, as I am told he is drinking again. If you knew what a concealed ass he was sober you might imagine what a troublesome fool he would be drunk, but my duty is plain, I should discharge it and leave the result to God.

The news of the success of the Black Republicans in Pennsylvania on the 9th reached us yesterday and I confess it sounded to me as the death-knell of the Republic. I can see no earthly hope of defeating them in November and their success then, whether we will it or not, is inevitable disunion. And calmly and coolly, my dear wife, is it not best? These people hate us, annoy us, and would have us assassinated by our slaves if they dared. I know there are good people among them, but I speak of the masses. They are a different people from us, whether better or worse and there is no love between us. Why then continue to together? No outside pressure demands it, no internal policy or public interest requires it. Separation is desirable, peaceably if we can, forcibly if we must. If all the South would unanimsly say "we separate," it would be as peaceably done as a summer's morn. The result, if tumult there be, will come from our people. Looking out on our State House grounds yesterday I saw a man playing with a little child, tossing her up in the air. I thought I could hear her laugh and see her smile. Don't you know what thoughts passed through my mind? What would I have given then to have slipped from the library into the sitting room for five minutes and fondled my own little darling? Don't let her forget me Marion! I hear by Kitty White has named her baby Marion Givens. Do you know that? I have not been over yet to see her, nor have I seen Dr. White. Tell your father the painter is just finishing painting your Uncle's front steps and porch. The first coat was put on just one year ago when I was here. We have to come in by the back door. I am called to breakfast and it is full time. Kiss sweet Sally and Callie for me, hug wee little Marion, squeeze yourself. Love to all.

Your own,

Additional Sources:

- Chronology of Southern State Secession (http://www.museumsofthehistory.com/theoradtosecession.html)

MISSOURI COMPROMISE OF 1820-1821



2. Document I: Thomas R.R. Cobb's Secessionist Speech, Monday evening, November 12

Thomas R. R. Cobb—Nov. 12, 1860

15

I am compelled to decide that the election of Lincoln is in violation of the spirit of the Constitution of the United States. And am I told this spirit is too indefinite and shadowy a substance to be made the basis of resistance? And can there be a Georgian who will never resist so long as the form and letter of the Constitution is not broken? Let us inquire. The inter-State Slave Trade is within the letter of the Constitution. Should Congress abolish it will my objector submit? The amendment of the Constitution itself is within the letter of that instrument. If it is so amended in accordance with its letter as to carry out Lincoln's announcement that the States must be all free, will my objector submit? Why not? Because these are violative of its spirit. Truly, my friends, in the words of inspiration, "the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life." To the spirit then we must look, and a violation of that spirit renders this election unconstitutional.

I come now to consider this question in its *political* light, and it rises in importance much above the mere legal question.

I must confess that the mere election of a candidate to the Presidency, in a manner legally unconstitutional, does not in my judgment justify necessarily a dissolution of the Union. The wise man and the statesman, to say nothing of the patriot, will always weigh well whether "it is better to bear the ills we have than fly to others that we know not of." And, hence, arises the *political* question, does this election justify and require a disruption of the ties which bind us to the Union? As much as I would dislike the triumph of a purely sectional candidate upon a purely sectional platform, I am free to say I should hesitate even then to risk the consequences of a dissolution, provided that sectional platform *was upon issues not vital in themselves, or were temporary in their nature*. Such, would I conceive to be protective tariffs and homestead bills—the acquisition of territory—peace or war with foreign powers. And if the election of Lincoln, unconstitutional though it may be, was upon a temporary issue, or a question not vital in importance, I should

16

SECESSION DEBATED

hesitate to declare it ground for Disunion. But my countrymen, I cannot so view the triumph of Black Republicanism. It is a question vital in itself, and by no means, of a temporary character. To see it in its breadth and enormity, to see its dangerous proportions and its threatening aspects, it becomes necessary for us to go back a little in history, and to trace the slavery agitation as connected with our Government. Shortly after its organization, we find a petition from the Quakers of Philadelphia, asking the abolition of slavery. We see that petition treated by an unanimous Congress as the mere ebullition of religious fanaticism, and as it is laid on the table, we smile at the folly of the broadbrim followers of Fox.⁸ In a few years we find petitions accumulating from other Sects and Societies, until, finally, by an overwhelming majority, we find the House of Representatives refusing longer to listen to their fanatical ravings, and as the 21st Rule⁹ is adopted, we fondly dreamed that the cockatrice's egg would never be hatched. In a few years we find the floor of Congress desecrated by the ravings of Giddings¹⁰ and other abolitionists, and at the same time, in the Presidential contest, an abolition candidate is presented to the people of the North.¹¹ But the Abolitionists in Congress are hissed at their ravings, and the miserable handful at the ballot-box only manifested their weakness, and we rested secure in our confidence in the protection of the Constitution.

3. Document II: Exerpts from *Apostles of Disunion: Southern Secession Commissioners and the Causes of the Civil War, Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2001* by Charles B. Dew (p. 64-67)

Benning, a native Georgian, a prominent judge and lawyer, a lifelong Democrat, and a man of considerable wealth (he owned ninety slaves in 1860), always believed that he deserved a better fate at the hands of the voters of Georgia. In 1834 he had graduated first in his class at the University of Georgia, and it was a triumph from which he apparently never recovered. He could not understand why classmates like Howell Cobb and Herschel V. Johnson won victory after victory at the polls while his political aspirations were almost always thwarted. He consistently took a strong Southern rights position in the early 1850s but failed to win a seat in Congress as Georgia, and most of the South, initially rallied behind the Compromise of 1850.

“What was the reason that induced Georgia to take the step of secession?” Benning asked as he opened his speech to the Virginia delegates. “This reason may be summed up in a single proposition,” he answered. “It was a conviction, a deep conviction on the part of

Georgia, that a separation from the North was the only thing that could prevent the abolition of her slavery.”

Benning then proceeded to lay out a series of propositions intended to prove that Lincoln’s election was a death sentence for the institution of slavery.

First, “the Black Republican party of the North” embraced “a sentiment of hatred to slavery as extreme as hatred can exist.”

Second, the Republicans were “in a permanent majority” in the North. “Sir, you cannot overthrow such a party as that,” he added. “As well might you attempt to lift a mountain out of its bed and throw it into the sea.”

Third, “the North has invariably exerted against slavery, all the power which it had at the time.” He cited the abolition of slavery in the Northern states, the fight over the Missouri Compromise and the Wilmot Proviso, and John Brown’s raid as proof of this claim.

Benning’s final proposition was by far the most interesting. The North was already well along the road to “acquiring the power to abolish slavery.” To establish this argument, he went well beyond the usual subjects—new free states carved out of the territories and the passage of a constitutional amendment emancipating the South’s slave population. These things would indeed happen, Benning argued. But, he asked, what about slavery in border areas like Delaware and Maryland? “The anti-slavery feeling has got[ten] to be so great at the North that the owners of slave property in these states have a presentiment that it is a doomed institution,” he claimed, “and the instincts of self-interest impels them to get rid of that property which is doomed.” As a result slavery would be pushed “lower and lower, until it all gets to the Cotton States,” Benning maintained. “There is the weight of a continent forcing it down.” When the day arrived that the institution was confined to the lower South, “slavery shall be abolished, and if a master refuses to yield to this policy, he shall doubtless be hung for his disobedience.”¹⁴

“If things are allowed to go on as they are, it is certain that slavery is to be abolished except in Georgia and the other cotton States, and . . . ultimately in these States also,” Benning insisted. “By the time the North shall have attained the power, the black race will be in a large majority, and then we will have black governors, black legislatures, black juries, black everything”—a comment the audience greeted with “laughter,” according to a reporter present. “Is it to be supposed that the white race will stand that?” Benning asked. “It is not a supposable case.”

Like other commissioners, Benning saw a nightmarish scenario ahead for the South. War would “break out everywhere like hidden fire from the earth,” he predicted, and “a standing army” from the North as well as thousands of Northern “volunteers and Wide-Awakes”—a reference to the Republican marching clubs that had filled the streets of Northern cities during the recent presidential campaign—would descend upon the South to assist the slaves engaged in mortal combat with their masters. The results of this unequal struggle were not in doubt: “We will be overpowered and our men will be compelled to wander like vagabonds all over the earth,” he told his audience, “and as for our women, the horrors of their state we cannot contemplate in imagination.” This, then, was “the fate which Abolition will bring upon the white race.” Benning closed this portion of his speech with a solemn forecast. “We will be completely exterminated,” he told the Virginians, “and the land will be left in the possession of the blacks, and then it will go back to a wilderness and become another Africa or St. Domingo.”

After spending several minutes sketching a glowing picture of Virginia’s commercial and manufacturing prosperity in a new Southern Confederacy, Benning reached the emotional and oratorical climax of his address. “Join the North, and what will become of you?” he asked the delegates. “They will hate you and your institutions as much as they do now, and treat you accordingly,” he warned. “Suppose they elevated [Charles] Sumner to the Presidency? Suppose they elevated Fred. Douglas[s], your escaped slave, to the Presidency?” There were “hundreds of thousands at the North who would do this for the purpose of humiliating and insulting the South,” he insisted. “What would be your position in such an event?” Benning had his own clear and unequivocal answer to this question: “I say give me pestilence and famine sooner than that.”

At the conclusion of his lengthy speech, Benning assured the Richmond audience that disunion was final. To emphasize this point, he turned dramatically to John Janney, the president of the convention, and handed him a copy of Georgia’s Ordinance of Secession. “Above all, we have a cause—the cause of honor, and liberty, and property, and self-preservation,” Benning told the Virginians. “Sir, in such a cause, cowards will become men, men heroes, and heroes gods.”¹⁶

4. Document III: Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas Journal Entry

What boots it now to wonder what the coming year may bring forth? Well for us perhaps that we do not know. . . . But reality calls upon me to look around me, to see our country agonised in a struggle for an existence, and deeper, still deeper settles the conviction that we are upon the eve of some great struggle, the echo of which will reverberate through all time. Fortunately for those who believe in an all ruling Providence we are taught that "he doeth all things well"—I wish I could echo Byron's "What ever tide befall me Here's a heart for any fate"¹⁴ but we do not know the stuff of which we are made until adversity tries us. I have great faith in that innate courage which all women are said to possess when great trials come upon them—providential trials—I write despondingly as to our future but indeed I do not think as a mass of people we fully realise the importance of the struggle in which we are engaged—

5. Document IV: Exerpt from Gov. Joseph Brown's Open Letter ([Link to full document](#))

"First, is the election of Mr. Lincoln sufficient cause to justify the secession of the Southern States from the Union? In my opinion the election of Mr. Lincoln, viewed only in the light of the triumph of a successful candidate, is not sufficient cause for a dissolution of the Union. This, however, is a very contracted and narrow view of the question. Mr. Lincoln is a mere mote in the great political atmosphere of the country, which, as it floats, only shows the direction in which the wind blows. He is the mere representative of a fanatical abolition sentiment--the mere instrument of a great triumphant political party, the principles of which are deadly hostile to the institution of Slavery, and openly at war with the fundamental doctrines of the Constitution of the United States. The rights of the South, and the institution of slavery, are not endangered by the triumph of Mr. Lincoln, the man; but they are in imminent danger from the triumph of the powerful party which he represents, and of the fanatical abolition sentiment which brought him into power, as the candidate of the Northern section of the Union, over the united opposition of the Southern section against him.

The party embracing that sentiment, has constantly denied, and still denies, our equality in the Union, and our right to hold our slaves as property; and avows its purpose to take from us our property, so soon as it has the power. Its ability to elect Mr. Lincoln as its candidate, shows it now has the power to control the Executive branch of the Government. As the President, with the advice and consent of the Senate, appoints the Judges of the Supreme Court of the United States, when vacancies occur, its control of the Executive power will, in a few years, give it the control of the Judicial Department; while the constant increase of abolition sentiment, in the Northern States, now largely in the majority in Congress, together with the admission of other free States, will very soon, give it the power in the Legislative Department. The whole Government will then be in the hands of our enemies.

The election of Mr. Lincoln is the first great step in this programme. It is the triumph of the Northern over the Southern section of the Union: of Northern fanaticism over Southern equality and Southern rights. While, therefore, the election of Mr. Lincoln, as a man, is no sufficient cause to justify secession, the triumph of the Northern section of the Union over the Southern section, upon a platform of avowed hostility to our rights, does, in my opinion, afford ample cause to justify the South in withdrawing from a confederacy where her equality, her honor, and the rights of her people, can no longer be protected."

6. Document V: Thomas R.R. Cobb's letter to his wife Marion Lumpkin, October 11, 1860

Thursday, Oct. 11, 1860.

Dearest Marion:

I am up again before breakfast to send you a message of love. All the day yesterday and until a late bed-hour we were hard at work preparing for the committee. They organized yesterday afternoon and we are able to meet them this morning at 8½ o'clock. There are present only *eight* members out of the *fifteen*. Poor Irwin was one -- and his untimely end leaves only *fourteen*. Those present are -- of the Senate -- *Holt* and *Printup*, of the House -- *Lester*, *Fannin*, *Williams*, *Lewis*, *Deloney* and *Broiles*. Lawton I hear will be here to-day. -- I have no doubt will give us a vast amount of trouble. He is worse than ever, as *I am told* he is drinking again. If you knew what a conceited ass he was sober you might imagine what a troublesome fool he would be drunk, but my duty is plain, I should discharge it and leave the result to God.

The news of the success of the Black Republicans in Pennsylvania on the 9th reached us yesterday and I confess it sounded to me as the death-knell of the Republic. I can see no earthly hope of defeating them in November and their success then, whether we will it or not, is *inevitable disunion*. And calmly and coolly, my dear wife, is it not best? These people hate us, annoy us, and would have us assassinated by our slaves if they dared, I know there are good people among them, but I speak of the masses. They are a *different* people from us, whether better or worse and *there is no love* between us. Why then continue together? No outside pressure demands it, no internal policy or public interest requires it. *Separation is desirable*, peaceably if we can, forcibly if we must. If all the South would unanimously say "we separate," it would be as peaceably done as a summer's morn. The tumult, if tumult there be, will come from our people. Looking out on the State House grounds yesterday I saw a man playing with a little child, tossing her up in the air. I thought I could hear her laugh and see her smile. Don't you know what thoughts passed through my mind? What would I have given then to have slipped from the library into the sitting room for five minutes and fondled my own little darling? Don't let her forget me Marion! By the by, Kitty White has named her baby Marion Grieve. Did you know that? I have not been over yet to see her, nor have I seen Dr. White. Tell your father the painter is just finishing painting your Uncle's front steps and porch. The first coat was put on just *one year* ago when I was here. We have to come in by the back door. I am called to breakfast and it is *full* time. Kiss sweet Sally and Cally for me, hug wee little Marion, squeeze yourself. Love to all.

Your own.