

Unit 5: 1844-1877

Covers the road to disunion and its aftermath, from Manifest Destiny and the Mexican-American War through the Civil War, Emancipation, and Reconstruction's rise and failure. CED topics 5.2 through 5.11.

AP U.S. History

1844-1877

10-17% of the exam

About 14 minutes to read

How to use this guide

Read straight through the first time, in order, so you can follow how expansion led to conflict over slavery. The country pushes west (Manifest Destiny, the Mexican-American War), the new land forces the slavery question into the open, compromise after compromise fails, the party system breaks, the war comes, and the attempt to rebuild the South fails. Each topic leads into the next one, so keeping that sequence in mind will help you follow the unit.

After that first read, study the chain in both directions. The trap boxes flag the single most dangerous confusion in each section, especially the abolitionist-versus-free-soiler split and the compromise terms whose real contents now sit behind the framework's pattern. Use the table in 5.5 to keep the four camps straight. Then close the guide and answer the two practice questions without peeking, write a Brain Dump on Reconstruction's rise and fall, and finish with the six-question recall check.

What this unit is worth. Unit 5 makes up 10-17% of the AP U.S. History exam. It is also the unit the exam leans on hardest for causation, asking why the war came, why the Union won, and why Reconstruction failed, so its arguments matter beyond its already heavy weight.

5.2 Manifest Destiny

Manifest Destiny was the belief, held by advocates of annexing western lands, that Manifest Destiny and the superiority of American institutions compelled the United States to expand its borders westward to the Pacific Ocean. Two claims are doing the work here, a sense of destiny and a claim that American institutions were superior to what they would replace. Both licensed expansion, and the expansion frequently provoked competition and violent conflict.

The expansionist push came with machinery. New legislation promoted western transportation and economic development, and the country pursued economic, diplomatic, and cultural initiatives to create more ties with Asia. These laws, roads, and outreach efforts were the practical side of the belief, since they gave expansion the transportation and economic support it needed.

Trap: Manifest Destiny is a belief that motivated action, not a policy that was enacted. Questions test what the belief claimed and what it caused, competition and violent conflict, not a list of laws passed under its name.

This topic starts the unit's chain reaction. Westward expansion did not just add land. It also added the question of what labor system the new land would carry, and every later topic in this unit is, in part, an attempt to answer that question.

Expansion provoked conflict so reliably because every westward step moved American settlers into lands already claimed by Mexico, by Native peoples, or by rival powers, and the belief in American superiority made compromise feel unnecessary. When settlers were confident that expansion was justified, they were less willing to negotiate, and that pattern of expansion followed by violent friction and then a political crisis over the new land repeats through the unit.

5.3 The Mexican-American War

The **Mexican-American War** ended with a U.S. victory that, along with diplomatic negotiations, added large territories in the West to the United States. The victory created new questions about the status of slavery, American Indians, and Mexicans in the newly acquired lands, and governing those lands turned out to be more difficult than winning the war.

Trap: keep the war's consequences in three parts, slavery, American Indians, and Mexicans, because questions bundle them. Students who remember only the slavery half miss the framework's wider point about peoples caught inside newly drawn borders.

This is where the costs of Manifest Destiny became concrete. Expansion provoked conflict, the war settled the conflict by force, and the settlement then raised a new form of the slavery question. The issue was no longer only whether slavery could continue where it already existed, but also whether it could spread into lands where it had never been.

5.4 The Compromise of 1850

The **Mexican Cession** was the large territories in the West acquired from Mexico through the war and diplomatic negotiations. Its acquisition led to heated controversies over whether to allow slavery in the newly acquired territories, because each new territory had to be assigned a labor system.

The **Compromise of 1850** was an 1850 package of congressional measures that counted as one of several attempts by Congress to resolve the issue of slavery in the territories acquired from Mexico. Note what this definition does and does not do. It tells you when, what kind of thing it was, and which problem it tried to solve. It does not describe its provisions, because the course framework does not describe them either.

Trap: the tested idea is the attempt-and-failure pattern, so lead with that. The real provisions behind the name were that the Compromise of 1850 admitted California as a free state, settled the Texas-New Mexico boundary, organized New Mexico and Utah territories under popular sovereignty, banned the slave trade (but not slavery) in Washington D.C., and imposed a harsh new Fugitive Slave Act. Every section got something and nobody got satisfaction, which is why the exam focuses on the pattern of an attempt followed by failure. It helps to know the provisions so you understand the case, and then answer questions by naming the pattern.

It helps to read the two terms together, with the Cession creating the crisis and the Compromise as the first of several tries at resolving it. Those tries kept failing, and that repeated failure is what topic 5.6 covers.

The first half of the unit follows a clear sequence. The Cession creates the crisis, the Compromise of 1850 tries to settle it, the Kansas-Nebraska Act and the Dred Scott decision try again, and every attempt fails to reduce conflict. The exam tests this sequence as a process, so being able to explain why each attempt failed to hold will help you explain how the war came about.

5.5 Sectional Conflict: Regional Differences

By the 1850s the country held four incompatible positions on slavery, and this topic asks you to keep them straight. The immigration wave of the period, from Europe and Asia, mainly Ireland and Germany, added a fifth pressure in the **nativist movement**, strongly anti-Catholic, aimed at limiting new immigrants' political power and cultural influence. Immigration and slavery tangled together because both weakened old party loyalties.

The **free-soil movement** drew Northerners who saw the contrast between the North's free-labor manufacturing economy and the South's dependence on enslaved labor. They argued that expanding slavery was incompatible with free labor and would undermine the free labor market. Their concern was the Northern worker's economic world, not only the enslaved person's moral claim.

The **abolitionists**, African American and white opponents of slavery and a minority in the North, mounted a highly visible campaign against the institution itself, using moral arguments, assistance to escapes, and sometimes a willingness to use violence. Free-soilers focused on stopping slavery's spread, while abolitionists worked to end slavery itself.

The defenders answered with **states' rights**, the belief that slavery and states' rights were protected by the Constitution, backed by racial doctrines and the **proslavery positive-good argument** that slavery was a positive social good. Their defense combined a constitutional claim, a racial claim, and a moral claim.

THE CAMP	ITS CORE CLAIM
Free-soilers	Slavery must not expand, because its expansion would undermine free labor.
Abolitionists	Slavery is a moral evil and must be opposed, by argument, escape aid, and sometimes violence.
States'-rights defenders	The Constitution protects slavery and states' rights; slavery is defended by racial doctrines and the proslavery positive-good argument.
Nativists	New immigrants, especially Catholics, must have their political power and cultural influence limited.

Trap: the free-soil versus abolitionist split is the most tested confusion in the unit. Free-soil is an economic argument against expansion; abolitionism is a moral campaign against the institution. If a question's speaker talks about labor markets, think free-soil; if the speaker talks about sin and fugitives, think abolitionist.

Trap: nativism looks like a side issue, but the framework ties it to the main plot because slavery and anti-immigrant nativism together weakened the old parties. Immigration did not cause the sectional crisis, but it helped break the party system that had been containing it. Keep nativism in the causal chain, not in a separate box.

The Unit 5 flashcards in Rycal include cards on this split, so if you mix up free-soil and abolitionist while you read, plan to drill those two cards first when you open the deck.

5.6 Failure of Compromise

The **Kansas-Nebraska Act** and the **Dred Scott decision** join the Compromise of 1850 as attempts to resolve the issue of slavery in the territories, by Congress in the first two cases and by the Supreme Court in the third. These attempts ultimately failed to reduce conflict, and the question would not stay settled.

The failures broke the party system. The **Second Party System**, the era of two major political parties, ended when the issues of slavery and anti-immigrant nativism weakened loyalties to the two major parties and fostered the emergence of sectional parties. Parties that could not contain the slavery question were replaced by parties organized around it.

The replacement was the **Republican Party**, a sectional party that emerged in the North as the old system collapsed. In 1860 it nominated Abraham Lincoln on a free-soil platform. The term sectional party matters here because the Republicans drew their support from one region and built their platform around that region's answer to the slavery question.

Trap: the exam tests their shared role as failed attempts at resolving slavery in the territories, so lead with that. The **Kansas-Nebraska Act** of 1854 organized the Kansas and Nebraska territories and let settlers decide on slavery by popular sovereignty, effectively repealing the Missouri Compromise's 36 degrees 30 minutes line and producing the bloody scramble for Kansas. The **Dred Scott decision** of 1857, in *Dred Scott v. Sandford*, ruled that Black people could not be American citizens and that Congress had no power to ban slavery in the territories, killing the Missouri Compromise by judicial decree. Both were meant to settle the question and both inflamed it instead, so it helps to know the contents for understanding and then answer by naming the pattern.

5.7 Election of 1860 and Secession

Abraham Lincoln won the **Election of 1860** as the Republican candidate on the party's free-soil platform, and he did it without any Southern electoral votes, which meant a president had been elected by one section alone. After contested debates about **secession**, most slave states voted to secede from the Union, precipitating the **Civil War**.

Trap: the framework's chain is election, then debates about secession, then secession votes, then war. Students sometimes compress this into election causing war directly. Keep the middle steps in mind, since the contested debates and the state votes are what turned a sectional election into a national rupture.

This topic connects the two halves of the unit. Everything before it explains why the election broke the country, and everything after it deals with the consequences, so being able to narrate the chain from 5.2 to 5.7 will help you with the first two-thirds of the unit.

5.8 Military Conflict in the Civil War

The **Civil War** pitted the **Union**, the Northern side, against the **Confederacy**, the Southern side. Both mobilized their economies and societies to wage the war despite considerable home front opposition. Total war reached past the armies into farms, factories, and households, and civilians on both sides lived with the costs of mobilization.

The Confederacy showed military initiative and daring early in the war, but the Union ultimately prevailed through improved leadership and strategy, key victories, greater resources, and the wartime destruction of the South's infrastructure. The exam asks you to explain the outcome using those four factors together, leadership and strategy, victories, resources, and the grinding down of Southern infrastructure.

Trap: the framework explains the outcome without naming a single battle. If your study of the war is a list of battles, you are studying what the course does not test. It helps to connect any battles you know to the four factors by asking which victories mattered, whose resources lasted longer, and what leadership changed.

The home-front sentence matters as well. Both sides mobilized economies and societies despite considerable home-front opposition, which tells you the war demanded more than armies could supply, including taxes, production, conscription, and political will from populations that did not uniformly support the cause. That combination of total mobilization and domestic dissent helps explain why leadership and strategy mattered as much as resources.

5.9 Government Policies During the Civil War

Lincoln's wartime decision to issue the **Emancipation Proclamation** reframed the Civil War's purpose, from preserving the Union to ending slavery. It also helped prevent the Confederacy from gaining full diplomatic support from European powers, so the same proclamation changed the war's meaning at home and limited Confederate diplomacy abroad.

The **Gettysburg Address** carried the reframing further, portraying the Union's struggle against slavery as the fulfillment of America's founding democratic ideals, as part of Lincoln's effort to reunify the country. Lincoln was offering that interpretation of the war while the fighting was still underway.

Trap: the Proclamation reframed the war's purpose; it was the 13th Amendment that abolished slavery. Students who credit the Proclamation with ending slavery collapse two topics into one and lose the distinction the framework preserves.

It helps to read the Proclamation and the Address together. The Proclamation changed policy and diplomacy, and the Address gave that change a meaning rooted in the founding, so together they turned a war to preserve the Union into a war to fulfill the Union's promises. The exam can ask about either document, and stronger answers connect the two by showing how the war gained a new purpose and a new language for describing it.

5.10 Reconstruction

Reconstruction was the 1865-1877 period of rebuilding and reordering the South after the Civil War. It altered relationships between the states and the federal government and forced debates over new definitions of citizenship, particularly regarding the rights of African Americans, women, and other minorities. The war had settled secession, but Reconstruction still had to work out what the peace would mean in practice.

The constitutional core came in three amendments. The **13th Amendment** abolished slavery. The **14th Amendment** granted African Americans citizenship and equal protection under the laws. The **15th Amendment** granted African Americans voting rights. It helps to learn them as a sequence that moves from freedom to citizenship and legal equality and then to the vote.

The politics were factional. **Radical and moderate Republicans** tried to change the balance of power between Congress and the presidency and to reorder race relations in the defeated South. Their efforts yielded some short-term successes, opening political opportunities and leadership roles to formerly enslaved persons. Reconstruction ultimately failed, and the framework names two causes for that failure, determined Southern resistance and the North's waning resolve.

The amendments also shook the **women's rights movement**, which was both emboldened and divided by the 14th and 15th amendments. A movement that had fought for universal rights saw those rights defined in ways that left women out, and the resulting split shaped the movement during this period.

Trap: Reconstruction's failure has two named causes, Southern resistance and Northern waning resolve. Answers that blame only one side are telling half the story the framework tells.

AMENDMENT	WHAT IT DID	THE STEP IN THE SEQUENCE
13th	Abolished slavery.	Freedom: the institution ends.
14th	Granted African Americans citizenship and equal protection under the laws.	Belonging: the freed person becomes a citizen with legal equality.
15th	Granted African Americans voting rights.	Power: the citizen gains the vote.

5.11 Failure of Reconstruction

Failure also had an economic side in **sharecropping**, an exploitative and soil-intensive system of farming that limited formerly enslaved Black people and poor whites' access to land in the South. Freed people sought land ownership but generally fell short of self-sufficiency under it, and without land of their own, many remained poor even after slavery ended.

Failure also worked through **segregation**, the racial segregation in the South which, together with violence, Supreme Court decisions, and local political tactics, progressively stripped away African American rights after Reconstruction. Because segregation, violence, court decisions, and local political tactics worked together, the rollback proved durable.

Trap: sharecropping was not slavery, but it was not freedom either. The precise wrong answer is either extreme. The framework's word is exploitative, and its mechanism is blocked access to land. Keep both.

It helps to read 5.10 and 5.11 together as a single arc that moves from a genuine attempt to reorder the South, through real but brief gains, to a rollback built from economics, violence, courts, and local politics. The exam tests that overall arc more than any single event inside it.

The rollback proved durable because it worked on several levels at once. Sharecropping controlled labor and land, violence enforced the hierarchy, courts legitimized segregation, and local political tactics locked in the results, and because those systems reinforced each other, they shaped the conditions the next unit inherits.

Your 20-minute plan for this unit

- Minutes 0-5. Open your Rycal flashcards for Unit 5 and run the due cards, oldest first. For the compromise terms (Compromise of 1850, Kansas-Nebraska Act, Dred Scott), recite the framework's pattern first, failed attempts at resolving slavery in the territories, then the real contents as the story behind it.

- Minutes 5-10. Do a Brain Dump on the road to the Civil War and write the chain from Manifest Destiny through secession without stopping, then check the 5.2 through 5.7 sections for links you dropped.
- Minutes 10-16. Work the AP-style questions for this unit in Rycal, then answer this guide's two practice questions on paper without peeking. For every miss, write the trap in one sentence.
- Minutes 16-20. Run one FRQ drill on Reconstruction (its goals, its amendments, its failure), then answer the six self-check questions out loud. Anything you cannot say fluently goes back into tomorrow's flashcard queue.

Where students lose points

Most lost points in this unit come from blurring positions that the framework keeps distinct.

THE MIX-UP	THE FIX
Answering the compromise terms with only the framework's thin definition	Lead with the pattern, attempts that failed to reduce conflict. Then know the real contents: the 1850 provisions, Kansas-Nebraska's popular sovereignty, Dred Scott's citizenship and territory rulings, as the story that makes the pattern stick.
Calling free-soilers abolitionists or vice versa.	Free-soil is an economic argument against slavery's expansion; abolitionism is a moral campaign against slavery itself.
Crediting the Emancipation Proclamation with abolishing slavery.	The Proclamation reframed the war's purpose and blocked European support for the Confederacy. The 13th Amendment abolished slavery.
Explaining Union victory with battle names instead of the framework's factors.	Improved leadership and strategy, key victories, greater resources, and destruction of Southern infrastructure. Name factors, not just battles.
Blaming Reconstruction's failure on only Southern resistance or only Northern fatigue.	The framework names both: determined Southern resistance and the North's waning resolve.
Treating sharecropping as either slavery continued or genuine economic freedom.	It was an exploitative system that blocked land access and kept freed people short of self-sufficiency. Neither extreme is accurate.
Forgetting that the Mexican-American War's consequences included American Indians and Mexicans, not just slavery.	The framework lists three affected groups. Questions bundle them.
Compressing the secession crisis into election causing war.	The chain is election, contested debates about secession, state secession votes, then war. Keep the middle steps.

These same mix-ups are in the Unit 5 deck in Rycal under AP U.S. History as flashcards. If you see your own mistake in the table above, find that card and drill it until you can state the fix without looking.

Practice Questions

Original questions written for this guide in the style of the AP exam. Answers and explanations follow. Do not peek.

1. Two Northern critics of slavery argue in the 1850s. The first says slavery's expansion would ruin the free labor market. The second calls slavery a moral evil, helps fugitives escape, and says violence may be justified. Which identification is correct?
- A. The first is a free-soiler and the second is an abolitionist.
 - B. Both are abolitionists.
 - C. The first is an abolitionist and the second is a free-soiler.
 - D. The first is a nativist and the second is a states'-rights defender.
2. The Compromise of 1850, the Kansas-Nebraska Act, and the Dred Scott decision are best grouped together as which of the following?
- A. They were attempts to resolve the issue of slavery in the territories, and they failed to reduce conflict.
 - B. They were laws that abolished slavery in the territories.
 - C. They were causes of the Compromise of 1850.
 - D. They were policies that strengthened the Second Party System.

Answer Key

1. **A.** A is correct because it matches the framework's definitions, with free-soilers arguing that slavery's expansion was incompatible with free labor and would undermine the free labor market, while abolitionists mounted a moral campaign that included assisting escapes and a willingness to use violence. B flattens the two positions and erases the free-soil argument, which was economic rather than moral. C swaps the speakers and reverses which speaker belongs to which movement. D names the wrong camps, since nativists targeted immigrants and states'-rights defenders justified slavery, and neither matches either speaker.
2. **A.** A is correct because the framework groups exactly these three as attempts to resolve slavery in the territories, two by Congress (the Compromise of 1850, the Kansas-Nebraska Act) and one by the courts (the Dred Scott decision), and states that the attempts ultimately failed to reduce conflict. B is incorrect because none of the three ended slavery. C scrambles the chronology, since the Compromise of 1850 preceded the other two and was not caused by them. D reverses the effect, because these failures helped end the Second Party System rather than strengthen it.

If you missed one, write the distinction you missed as a flashcard in the Unit 5 deck in Rycal under AP U.S. History and drill it spaced over the next few days. The card should hold the one idea you got wrong, not the whole paragraph.

Six questions to answer without looking

Say each answer out loud or write it down. Peeking first turns this into rereading, and rereading builds recognition of the page instead of recall of the ideas.

1. What belief drove Manifest Destiny, and what did westward expansion provoke?
2. Why did acquiring the Mexican Cession intensify the debate over slavery?
3. Contrast the free-soil movement with the abolitionist campaign in one or two sentences each.
4. What two forces ended the Second Party System, and what sectional party replaced it?

5. How did the Emancipation Proclamation change the Civil War's purpose, and what diplomatic effect did it have?
6. Name the three Reconstruction amendments and what each did, then give the framework's two causes of Reconstruction's failure.

Anything you cannot say out loud goes into the Unit 5 deck in Rycal under AP U.S. History. Make a flashcard for it and let spaced repetition bring it back over several days instead of rereading the guide.

Questions students ask about Unit 5

How is the APUSH exam structured?

Section I: 55 multiple-choice questions in 55 minutes (40% of the score), then 3 short-answer questions in 40 minutes (20%). Starting with the May 2027 exam, all 3 short-answer questions are required, no choosing, and each includes a specified kind of source. Section II: one document-based question with 7 documents in 60 minutes, including a 15-minute reading period (25%); the 2027 DBQ draws evidence from a wider stretch of the course. Then one long essay in 40 minutes (15%), a single required prompt instead of a choice of three. Total exam time is 3 hours 15 minutes.

How much of the exam is Unit 5?

Unit 5 is 10-17% of the AP U.S. History exam, tied for the heaviest weight on the test. It is also the unit the exam leans on for causation questions about why the war came, why the Union won, and why Reconstruction failed.

What did the Compromise of 1850, the Kansas-Nebraska Act, and the Dred Scott decision actually do?

The Compromise of 1850 admitted California as a free state, settled the Texas boundary, organized New Mexico and Utah under popular sovereignty, banned the slave trade in D.C., and created a harsh Fugitive Slave Act. The Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 organized two territories under popular sovereignty, repealing the Missouri Compromise line and triggering the fight for Kansas. The Dred Scott decision of 1857 denied Black citizenship and barred Congress from prohibiting slavery in the territories. The framework groups all three as failed attempts to resolve slavery in the territories, by Congress (the Compromise of 1850, the Kansas-Nebraska Act) and the courts (the Dred Scott decision), and the exam tests that pattern of repeated attempts followed by failure and rising conflict. The details help you remember each case, and the pattern is what you will need to explain in your answers.

What is the difference between abolitionists and the free-soil movement?

Abolitionists opposed slavery itself on moral grounds and acted on that opposition, through visible campaigns, moral argument, assisting escapes, and sometimes violence. Free-soilers opposed the expansion of slavery because they believed it was incompatible with free labor and would undermine the free labor market. Abolitionists worked to end the institution itself, while free-soilers worked to stop its spread in order to protect Northern workers' economic world.

Why do the Republicans get a whole topic right after the Second Party System collapses?

The Republicans get their own topic because their emergence followed directly from the collapse of the old parties. The Second Party System ended when slavery and anti-immigrant nativism weakened loyalties to the two major parties and sectional parties emerged. The Republicans were the sectional party that resulted, Northern in base and free-soil in platform, so party collapse and the creation of a new party are closely linked in this part of the unit.

The framework names no Civil War battles. How do I study the war itself?

The framework explains Union victory through improved leadership and strategy, key victories, greater resources, and wartime destruction of the South's infrastructure, and it explains Reconstruction's failure through determined Southern resistance and the North's waning resolve. Both are causation arguments rather than battle lists, so it helps to study them by listing the factors and then practicing how you would explain the contribution of each one.

Where to go next

Turn every missed item above into a flashcard and drill it spaced out over several days rather than in one sitting. In Rycal, use the Unit 5 deck under AP U.S. History. The deck covers the terms from this guide, and the practice questions there target the same traps named in the boxes here, including the free-soil and abolitionist split and the pattern behind the compromise terms. Set your test date in the Test Planner so the cards come back on a schedule, and begin the next session with a Brain Dump on the chain from Manifest Destiny through secession before you open the deck.

Key terms for this unit

Manifest Destiny, Mexican–American War, Mexican Cession, Compromise of 1850, Nativist movement, Free-soil movement, Abolitionists, States' rights, Proslavery "positive good" argument, Kansas–Nebraska Act, Dred Scott decision, Second Party System, Republican Party, Abraham Lincoln, Election of 1860, Secession, Union, Confederacy, Civil War, Emancipation Proclamation, Gettysburg Address, Reconstruction, 13th Amendment, 14th Amendment, 15th Amendment, Radical and moderate Republicans, Sharecropping, Segregation.