

☰ Topic Page: [Uncle Tom's Cabin](#)

Definition: **Uncle Tom's Cabin** from *The Hutchinson Unabridged Encyclopedia with Atlas and Weather Guide*

Best-selling US novel by Harriet Beecher Stowe, published 1851–52. A sentimental but powerful portrayal of the cruelties of slave life on Southern plantations, it promoted the call for abolition. The heroically loyal slave Uncle Tom has in the 20th century become a byword for black subservience.

Abraham Lincoln acknowledged that it had stirred Northern sentiments and helped precipitate the American Civil War.

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Image from: [Written in response to the Fugitive Slave Law of... in The Underground Railroad: An Encyclopedia of People, Places, and Operations](#)

Summary Article: **UNCLE TOM'S CABIN**
From *Encyclopedia of U.S. Political History*

"So you're the little woman who wrote the book that made this great war," Abraham Lincoln purportedly remarked to Harriet Beecher Stowe upon meeting her at the White House in 1862. Although the influence of Stowe's best-selling novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, is difficult to measure, Lincoln and others clearly believed the novel garnered widespread support for the antislavery Republican Party and increased sectional tension in the years leading up to the Civil War. The great irony of Lincoln's legendary comment, however, is that Stowe's intent was not to alienate Southerners or to facilitate political action. Rather, Stowe's novel critiqued the American political process, and male politicians in general, for failing to root out the evils of slavery.

The daughter and wife of prominent Protestant preachers, Harriet Beecher Stowe was a model nineteenth-century Christian housewife. Although a few of her female contemporaries had begun advocating for women's rights, most notably at the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention in New York, Stowe believed that a woman's role was in the home. In addition to condemning female activism, Stowe at a young age became a critic of slavery. After moving to Cincinnati in the 1830s, she and her family saw firsthand how slavery operated. The city was separated from the South by only a river, and it had become a haven for both fugitive slaves and slave catchers. Stowe herself was moved more than once to take in a fugitive. Still, Stowe shunned any female political activism against slavery, and her family favored a more conservative approach to the "peculiar institution," namely, colonizing former slaves in Africa.

Stowe's hesitation to become involved with the slavery issue began to change after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act as part of the Compromise of 1850. Among other provisions, the law gave federal marshals incentives to recapture fugitive slaves, and it gave these marshals the power to enlist the help of Northern citizens in enforcing the act. Stowe and many other Northerners were furious that

they might be forced to comply with such federal laws. In particular, Stowe believed that the congressmen who passed the law had put their own self-interest ahead of a Christian duty to care for all human beings.

In the summer of 1851, Stowe began to submit her novel in short segments to an abolitionist newspaper, the *National Era*. The novel gained an enormous following once published in hardback in 1852, selling an astounding 20,000 copies in just the first three weeks after its publication. The book told the story of "Uncle Tom" and various other slave characters as they struggled to survive amid the hardships of the Southern plantation system. Through these characters, Stowe illustrated the greatest evil of slavery: its tendency to tear mothers from their children and break up families. "On the shores of our free states are emerging the poor, shattered, broken remnants of families," Stowe told her readers in her "Concluding Remarks," "from a system which confounds and confuses every principle of Christianity and morality."

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And yet, Stowe's appeal was not aimed at Northern politicians. On the contrary, her novel showed contempt for the political process, and particularly for those politicians who passed the Fugitive Slave Act. For Stowe, the act was just another example of how American men did not put their Christian conscience first. Stowe made her feelings clear in a crucial chapter, depicting an exchange between an Ohio senator and his wife in reference to a state fugitive slave law. While Mary Bird is appalled that her husband would vote for such a law, Senator Bird tells his wife, "there is such a state of public agitation rising, that we must put aside our private feelings." But when the fugitive Eliza and her young family arrive at the Birds' house seeking shelter, the reader realizes the great injustice of Senator Bird's position and feels compassion for the slave runaways.



Rather than politicians, Stowe's novel was primarily aimed at women, whose Christian sensibilities would allow them to appreciate the slaves' plight. Stowe's target audience helps to explain why *Uncle Tom's Cabin* sold well throughout the North but had little immediate impact on lawmakers. For example,

in the congressional session immediately following *Uncle Tom's Cabin's* publication, only three members of Congress made reference to the novel. And throughout the North, state and city governments generally abided by the new Fugitive Slave Act. In fact, politicians' behavior closely mirrored that of Stowe's "Senator Bird": they "put aside their feelings" to "quiet the excitement" over slavery.

Historians still fiercely debate the true influence of Stowe's momentous work on the coming of the Civil War. All would agree, however, that it affected many Northerners' hearts and minds, if not their political behavior. Thousands of Northerners may have thought of poor Uncle Tom when supporting Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation or the Reconstruction Amendments that officially gave African Americans their freedom.

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