Before the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln had warned, “A house divided against itself cannot stand.” But the nation did divide. People took sides, North or South. For most of them, the choice was clear. But for some, especially in the border states, the decision was difficult and painful. Not only was the country divided, but many families were, too.

Even as the Civil War began, Benjamin Hardin Helm had the prospect of a bright future in front of him. President Lincoln had offered him a good job with the Union army. The position paid well and would not require Helm to fight. It was a job many people wanted. “The position you offer me is beyond what I had expected in my most hopeful dreams,” Helm told the president. Still, he could not decide.

Helm was from Kentucky, a border state divided in its loyalties between North and South. He came from a prominent family and had served in the state legislature. He had also been an officer in the U.S. Army. Helm favored the South, and many of his family members and friends did, too. But he also had friends and family who supported the North. Even his father, a former governor, backed the Union.
There was a further complication. Helm was married to Emilie Todd, a sister of Mary Todd Lincoln, President Lincoln’s wife. That made Helm the president’s brother-in-law. He and Emilie were close to the Lincolns.

Helm struggled with his decision. Lincoln’s offer was generous. By accepting it, however, Helm would be turning against much of his family, including members who had joined the Confederate army. By refusing it, he would cut himself off from other members of the family, such as the Lincolns. “I had a bitter struggle with myself,” he told a friend.

In the end, Helm turned down the president’s offer. It was “the most painful moment of my life,” he said, but he felt he could not take up arms against the South. Instead, he joined the Confederate cause and fought against the Union.

Helm’s dilemma, though difficult, was not unusual. Many people found themselves torn between competing loyalties during the Civil War. This was especially true in border states like Kentucky, Maryland, Missouri, and Delaware. Although these states remained in the Union, many of their citizens felt sympathy for the South. Families in border states were often deeply divided over the war.

Robert E. Lee was a brilliant soldier who left the U.S. Army to fight for his home state. He became the Confederacy’s top general and personal military adviser to the Confederate president, Jefferson Davis.

Lee’s Decision

Virginia was also a border state, but one that joined the Confederacy. Robert E. Lee was one of its military heroes. Like Hardin Helm, Lee faced a tough decision. He, too, was offered a key position in the Union army. And like Helm, he turned it down, with great misgivings.

Before the war, Lee was one of the most promising officers in the U.S. Army. A graduate of West Point, he had served with distinction during the Mexican War. As the Civil War began, Lincoln sent word to Lee offering him command of the Union army.

Lee was honored by the president’s offer. He supported the Union and thought secession was a mistake. But he was a loyal Virginian above all and would not turn against his home state. “With all my devotion to the Union,” he wrote, “I have not been able to . . . raise my hand against my relatives, my children, my home.”

Lee resigned his position and became a Confederate general. The man who might have led the Union army eventually became the top commander of the Confederate forces.

Lincoln’s Family Troubles
Robert E. Lee’s decision probably came as little surprise to Lincoln. He knew that Southern officers had divided loyalties in the same way that states and families did. Lincoln’s own family was a case in point.

The president actually had little immediate family of his own. But his wife’s family, the Todds, was quite large. Mary Todd Lincoln had 14 brothers and sisters, all from Kentucky. Of these, 6 supported the Union and 8 backed the Confederacy. Several of her brothers fought in the Confederate army.

The Todds were important to Lincoln, and he did everything in his power to help them, even when they turned against him. Just as he tried to hold the nation together, he tried to keep the family together. But this was too much for even the president to accomplish.

As Kentucky Goes, So Goes the Nation

President Lincoln saw Kentucky as a symbol of the nation’s divisions. In fact, the Union and Confederate leaders—Lincoln and Jefferson Davis—were both from Kentucky. They were born just 100 miles apart. The state’s white soldiers were split almost evenly between North and South. Two-fifths fought for the Confederacy and three-fifths for the Union. No other state was so evenly divided.

Lincoln believed it was essential to keep Kentucky in the Union. “I think to lose Kentucky is nearly the same as to lose the whole game,” he said, “Kentucky gone, we cannot hold Missouri, nor, as I think, Maryland.” Officially, Kentucky remained neutral in the war, and Lincoln did what he could to keep it from seceding. “I hope to have God on my side,” he supposedly said, “but I must have Kentucky.”

Fathers and Sons Divided

Among Kentucky families, some of the bitterest divisions arose between fathers and sons. The Crittenden family was one example.

John J. Crittenden was a respected member of Congress who had worked hard to prevent the Civil War. Early in the war, he wrote to his oldest son, George, urging him to remain loyal to the Union. Kentucky “loves the Union,” he wrote, “and will cling to it as long as possible. And so, I hope, will you.” His words were in vain. George joined the Confederate army and, in turn, Crittenden cut off all contact with his son.

Another case involved the Breckenridge family. Robert J. Breckenridge was a strong Union supporter. But his son Robert Jr. decided to join the Confederacy. He wrote his father, “Be . . . as lenient as possible in your thoughts of me.” Breckenridge was stunned. He wrote his other son, Willie, saying, “[Your brother] has hopelessly ruined himself.” Then Willie joined the Confederacy, too. Breckenridge was doubly stricken.

One young Kentuckian, Henry Lane Stone, ran away from home to join the rebel forces. He did so in secret because he knew his father and brothers would object. One of his brothers had already joined the Union army. A month later, Stone wrote home to his father. “I can imagine how your feelings are, one son in the Northern and another in the Southern army,” he wrote. “But so it is . . . Your rebelling son, Henry.”

Brother Against Brother

Henry Stone and his brother fought on opposing sides in the war. This was not uncommon. In fact, the Civil War was sometimes called the “brothers’ war.” One notable case of brother against brother involved the Campbell brothers from Scotland.

James and Alexander Campbell came to America in the 1850s. James settled in Charleston, South Carolina. Alexander chose New York. When the war began, both signed up to fight, though on opposite sides.

In June 1862, Alexander’s regiment was part of an invasion force sent to retake Charleston from the Confederates. At the Battle of Secessionville, Union troops attacked Ft. Lamar, one of the forts guarding the city. Although neither brother knew it at the time, they were both involved in the battle. Alexander held the U.S. flag at the base of the fort’s walls, while James stood above, firing down on the attackers. James later wrote his brother,
At the end of the Civil War, grateful families welcomed the soldiers home. In divided families, the homecomings were not always easy.

_I was astonished to hear from the prisoners that you [were] color Bearer of the Regiment that assaulted the Battery . . . I hope you and I will never again meet . . . on the Battlefield but if such should be the case . . . I will strive to discharge my duty to my country and my cause._

The two brothers fought in other battles of the war, but never again in the same place. After the war, they corresponded with each other and remained on good terms.

Another soldier, Matthew H. Peters, later recounted his own experience of the brothers’ war in a poem:

_Both of us fought for what we thought right,_
_But of duty each took a different view;_  
_Both of us entered the perilous fight_  
_And did our duty as patriots do—_  
_But he wore the gray and I wore the blue._

—Matthew H. Peters, “My Brother and I,” 1893

Unlike these soldiers, Hardin Helm did not survive the war. He was killed at the Battle of Chickamauga in 1863. When Lincoln got the news, he was devastated. “I never saw Mr. Lincoln more moved than when he heard of the death of his young brother-in-law,” said a friend. Helm had died fighting for the Confederacy, but he was still family.

For Lincoln, Helm’s death was yet another tragedy of the divided nation. Families and communities had been torn apart by the war. It would take years for the wounds to heal.