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# From Compromise to Secession, 1850–1861





**EDMUND RUFFIN** (*Library of Congress*)

**ON APRIL 12, 1861**, Edmund Ruffin, a sixty-seven year old agricultural reformer and political pundit who had joined the Palmetto Guards, a volunteer military company, stood by a cannon on Morris Island in the bay of Charleston, South Carolina. With flowing white hair that dropped below his shoulders, he cut a striking figure among the Guards. Although young enough to be his grandchildren, many of the

volunteers knew him as a champion of secession. The only way to save the South's civilization, he had argued for decades, was for the southern states to leave the United States and start a new nation. Led by South Carolina, seven states in the Lower South had already done so, and in February, 1861, they had formed the Confederate States of America. Now, the question became, who would commit the first hostile act, Union or Confederacy? President Abraham Lincoln, whose election had triggered South Carolina's secession, had vowed to defend federal property in the seceding states, including **Fort Sumter** in Charleston Bay. Gunfire had turned back one supply ship, and the fort would soon run out of food. Impatient Confederate leaders demanded its immediate surrender; the fort's commander refused. At 4:30 A.M., Ruffin pulled the cannon's lanyard and commenced the bombardment which compelled the fort's surrender the next day. Lincoln responded by calling for 75,000 volunteers to suppress the rebellion. The Civil War had begun.

Just over four years later and back in his native Virginia, Ruffin breakfasted with his family and then went to his room to compose a farewell message: "I hereby declare my unmitigated hatred to Yankee rule—to all political, social, and business connections with Yankees—& to the Yankee race. Would that I could impress these thoughts on every living southerner, & bequeath them to everyone yet to be born! May such sentiments be held universally in the outraged and downtrodden South, although in silence

**SOUTHERN RIGHTS FLAG** Proslavery forces carried this flag while attacking the anti-slavery stronghold of Lawrence in the Kansas Territory. The raiders flew this flag over the local newspaper's offices and the Free State Hotel before burning each to the ground. (*Kansas State Historical Society*)

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and stillness, until the now far-distant day shall arrive for just retribution for Yankee usurpation, oppression, & atrocious outrages—and for deliverance and vengeance for the now ruined, subjugated, & enslaved Southern States.” Putting his pen down, Ruffin then put the muzzle of a rifle inside his mouth, rested its butt on a trunk, and used a forked stick to pull the trigger.

Irony marked Ruffin’s dramatic suicide in the name of the “South.” White southerners long had revered him for his advice on how to grow better crops but were less admiring of his cranky politics. Before 1860, few listened to his ranting, less because of his defense of slavery as the finest labor system for both whites and blacks than because of his insistence that northerners, regardless of what they said, were hell-bent on destroying slavery.

Other southerners, more willing to take northerners at their word, felt considerably less threatened, even by the purely northern Republican party. Formed in the mid-1850s, the Republican party dedicated itself to stopping the extension of slavery into the territories, but the party’s leaders insisted that they lacked constitutional authority to interfere with slavery in the southern states. Most white southerners trusted their influence in national institutions, especially the Democratic party, to secure slavery.

However, sectional conflicts over slavery extension eroded the appeal of national parties during the 1850s. Then, in October, 1859, a fanatical abolitionist named **John Brown** led a small band in seizing the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia, in the hope of igniting a slave insurrection. An abject failure, Brown’s raid nevertheless brought to the surface all the white South’s doubts about the “real” intentions of the North. Ruffin, long the prophet without honor in his own country, became the man of the hour and secession a bright star on the horizon.

## FOCUS Questions

- How did the Fugitive Slave Act lead to the undoing of the Compromise of 1850?
- Why did the Whig party collapse after the Kansas-Nebraska Act while the Democratic Party survived?
- How did the Republican doctrine of free soil unify northerners against the South?
- Why did southerners conclude that the North was bent on extinguishing slavery in southern states?

## The Compromise of 1850

Ralph Waldo Emerson’s grim prediction that an American victory in the Mexican-American War would be like swallowing arsenic proved disturbingly accurate. When the war ended in 1848, the United States contained an equal number of free and slave states (fifteen each), but the vast territory acquired by the war threatened to upset this balance. Any solution to the question of slavery in the Mexican cession ensured controversy. The doctrine of **free soil**, which insisted that Congress prohibit slavery in the territories, horrified southerners. The idea of extending the Missouri Compromise line of 36°30’ to the Pacific angered free-soilers because it would allow slavery in New Mexico and southern California, while it angered southern proslavery extremists because it conceded that Congress could bar slavery in some territories. A third solution, **popular sovereignty**, which promised to ease the slavery extension issue out of national politics by allowing each territory to decide the question for itself, pleased neither free-soilers nor proslavery extremists.

As the rhetoric escalated, events plunged the nation into crisis. Utah and then California, both acquired from Mexico, sought admission to the Union as free states. Texas, admitted as a slave state in 1845, aggravated matters by claiming the eastern half of New Mexico, where the Mexican government had abolished slavery.

By 1850, these territorial issues had become intertwined with two other concerns. Northerners increasingly attacked slavery in the District of Columbia, within the shadow of the Capitol; southerners complained about lax enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1793. Any broad compromise would have to take both troublesome matters into account.

### Zachary Taylor’s Strategy

President Zachary Taylor believed that the South must not kindle the issue of slavery in the territories because neither New Mexico nor California was suited to slavery. In 1849, Taylor asserted that “the people of the North need have no apprehension of the further extension of slavery.”

Taylor’s position differed significantly from the thinking behind the still controversial Wilmot Proviso, which insisted that Congress bar slavery from territories ceded by Mexico. Taylor’s plan, in contrast, left the decision to new states. He prompted California to apply for admission as a free state, bypassing the territorial stage, and he strongly hinted that New Mexico do the same.

Taylor's strategy appeared to guarantee a quick, practical solution to the problem of slavery extension. It would give the North two new free states. At the same time, it would acknowledge a position upon which all southerners agreed: a state could bar or permit slavery as it chose.

But southerners rejected Taylor's plan. It would effectively ban slavery in the Mexican cession, and it rested on the shaky assumption that slavery could never take root in California or New Mexico. Both areas already contained slaves, who could be employed profitably in mining gold and silver. "California is by nature," a southerner proclaimed, "peculiarly a slaveholding State." Calhoun trembled at the thought of adding more free states. "If this scheme excluding slavery from California and New Mexico should be carried out—if we are to be reduced to a mere handful... wo, wo, I say to this Union." Disillusioned with Taylor, nine southern states agreed to send delegations to a southern convention that was scheduled to meet in Nashville in June 1850.

## Henry Clay Proposes a Compromise

Taylor might have been able to contain mounting southern opposition if he had held a secure position in the Whig party. But such leading Whigs as Daniel Webster of Massachusetts and Henry Clay of Kentucky, each of whom had presidential aspirations, never reconciled themselves to Taylor, a political novice. Early in 1850, Clay boldly challenged Taylor's leadership by forging a set of compromise proposals to resolve the range of contentious issues. Clay proposed (1) the admission of California as a free state; (2) the division of the remainder of the Mexican cession into two territories, New Mexico and Utah (formerly Deseret), without federal restrictions on slavery; (3) the settlement of the Texas-New Mexico boundary dispute on terms favorable to New Mexico; (4) as an incentive for Texas, an agreement that the federal government would assume the considerable public debt of Texas; (5) the continuance of slavery in the District of Columbia but the abolition of the slave trade there; and (6) a more effective fugitive slave law.

Clay rolled all of these proposals into a single "omnibus" bill, which he hoped to steer through Congress. The debates over the omnibus during the late winter and early spring of 1850 witnessed the last major appearances on the public stage of Clay, Webster, and Calhoun—the trio of distinguished senators whose lives had mirrored every public event of note since the War of 1812. Clay played the role of the conciliator, as he had during the controversy over Missouri in 1820 and again during the

nullification crisis in the early 1830s. Warning the South against secession, he assured the North that nature would check the spread of slavery more effectively than a thousand Wilmot Provisos. Gaunt and gloomy, a dying Calhoun listened as another senator read his address for him, a repetition of what he had been saying for years: the North's growing power, enhanced by protective tariffs and by the Missouri Compromise's exclusion of slaveholders from the northern part of the Louisiana Purchase, had created an imbalance between the sections. Only a decision by the North to treat the South as an equal could now save the Union. Three days later, Daniel Webster, who believed that slavery, "like the cotton-plant, is confined to certain parallels of climate," delivered his memorable "Seventh of March" speech. Speaking not "as a Massachusetts man, nor as a Northern man, but as an American," Webster chided the North for trying to "reenact the will of God" by legally excluding slavery from the Mexican cession and declared himself a forthright proponent of compromise.

"If this scheme excluding slavery from California and New Mexico should be carried out... wo, wo, I say to this Union."

However eloquent, the conciliatory voices of Clay and Webster made few converts. Strident voices countered these attempts at conciliation. The antislavery New York Whig William Seward, for example, enraged southerners by talking of a "higher law" than the Constitution—namely, the will of God against the extension of slavery. Clay's compromise faltered as Clay broke with President Taylor, who attacked Clay as a glory-hunter.

As the Union faced its worst crisis since 1789, a series of events in the summer of 1850 eased the way toward a resolution. When the Nashville convention assembled in June, the nine of fifteen slave states that sent delegates were primarily in the Lower South. Despite the reckless pronouncements of the "fire-eaters" (extreme advocates of "southern rights"), moderates dominated. Then Zachary Taylor, after eating and drinking too much at an Independence Day celebration, fell ill with gastroenteritis and died on July 9. His successor, Vice President Millard Fillmore of New York, supported Clay's compromise. Finally, Illinois Democrat **Stephen A. Douglas** took over the floor leadership from the exhausted Clay. Recognizing that Clay's "omnibus" lacked majority support in Congress, Douglas chopped it into a series of separate measures and sought to secure passage of each bill individually. To secure support from Democrats, he included the principle of popular sovereignty in



**MAP 14.1 THE COMPROMISE OF 1850** The Compromise of 1850 admitted California as a free state. Utah and New Mexico were left open to slavery or freedom on the principle of popular sovereignty.

the bills organizing New Mexico and Utah. By summer's end, Congress had passed each component of the **Compromise of 1850**: statehood for California; territorial status for Utah and New Mexico, allowing popular sovereignty; resolution of the Texas-New Mexico boundary disagreement; federal assumption of the Texas debt; abolition of the slave trade in the District of Columbia; and a new fugitive slave law (see Map 14.1).

### Assessing the Compromise

President Fillmore hailed the compromise as a “final settlement” of sectional divisions, and Clay’s reputation for conciliation reached new heights. Yet the compromise did not bridge the underlying differences between the two sections. Far from leaping forward to save the Union, Congress had backed into the Compromise of 1850; the majority of congressmen in one or another section opposed virtually all of the specific bills that made up the compromise. Most southerners, for example, voted against the admission of California and the abolition of the slave trade in the District of Columbia; the majority of northerners opposed the Fugitive Slave Act and the organization of New Mexico and Utah without a forthright congressional prohibition of slavery. These measures passed only because the minority of congressmen who genuinely desired compromise

combined with the majority in either the North or the South who favored each specific bill.

Each section both gained and lost from the Compromise of 1850. The North won California as a free state, New Mexico and Utah as likely future free states, a favorable settlement of the Texas-New Mexico boundary (most of the disputed area was awarded to New Mexico, a probable free state), and the abolition of the slave trade in the District of Columbia. The South’s benefits were cloudier. By stipulating popular sovereignty for New Mexico and Utah, the compromise, to most southerners’ relief, had buried the Wilmot Proviso’s insistence that Congress formally prohibit slavery in these territories. But to southerners’ dismay, the compromise left open the question of whether Congress could prohibit slavery in territories outside of the Mexican cession.

The one clear advantage gained by the South, a more stringent fugitive slave law, quickly proved a mixed blessing. Because few slaves had been taken into the Mexican cession, the question of slavery there had a hypothetical quality. However, the new fugitive slave law authorized real southerners to pursue real fugitives on northern soil. Here was a concrete issue to which the average northerner, who may never have seen a slave and who cared little about slavery a thousand miles away, would respond with fury.

## Enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Act

Northern moderates accepted the **Fugitive Slave Act** as the price of saving the Union. But the law contained features distasteful to moderates and outrageous to staunchly antislavery northerners. It denied alleged fugitives the right of trial by jury, did not allow them to testify in their own behalf, permitted their return to slavery merely on the testimony of the claimant, and enabled court-appointed commissioners to collect ten dollars if they ruled for the slaveholder but only five dollars if they ruled for the fugitive. In authorizing federal marshals to raise posses to pursue fugitives on northern soil, the law threatened to turn the North into “one vast hunting ground.” In addition, the law targeted all runaways, putting at risk fugitives who had lived in the North for thirty years or more. Above all, the law brought home to northerners the uncomfortable truth that the continuation of slavery depended on their complicity. By legalizing the activities of slave-catchers on northern soil, the law reminded northerners that slavery was a national problem, not merely a peculiar southern institution.

Antislavery northerners assailed the law as the “vilest monument of infamy of the nineteenth century.” “Let the President . . . drench our land of freedom in blood,” proclaimed Ohio Whig congressman Joshua Giddings, “but he will never make us obey that law.” His support for the law turned Senator Daniel Webster of Massachusetts into a villain in the eyes of the very people who for years had revered him as the “godlike Daniel.” The abolitionist poet John Greenleaf Whittier wrote of his fallen idol,

*All else is gone; from those giant eyes  
The soul has fled;  
When faith is lost, when honor dies,  
The man is dead*

Efforts to catch and return fugitive slaves inflamed feelings in both the North and the South. In 1854, a Boston mob, aroused by antislavery speeches, broke into a courthouse and killed a guard in an abortive effort to rescue the fugitive slave Anthony Burns. Determined to prove that the law could be enforced “even in Boston,” President Franklin Pierce sent a detachment of federal troops to escort Burns to the harbor, where a ship carried him back to slavery. No witness would ever forget the scene. As five platoons of troops marched with Burns to the ship, some fifty thousand people lined the streets. As the procession passed, one Bostonian hung from his window a black coffin bearing the words “THE FUNERAL OF LIBERTY.” Another draped an American flag

upside down as a symbol that “my country is eternally disgraced by this day’s proceedings.” The Burns incident shattered the complacency of conservative supporters of the Compromise of 1850. “We went to bed one night old fashioned conservative Compromise Union Whigs,” the textile manufacturer Amos A. Lawrence wrote, “and waked up stark mad Abolitionists.” A Boston committee later successfully purchased Burns’s freedom, but other fugitives had worse fates. Margaret Garner, about to be captured and sent back to Kentucky as a slave, slit her daughter’s throat and tried to kill her other children rather than witness their return to slavery.

In response to the Fugitive Slave Act, “vigilance” committees spirited endangered blacks to Canada. Lawyers dragged out legal proceedings to raise slave-catchers’ expenses, and nine northern states passed **personal-liberty laws**. By such techniques as forbidding the use of state jails to incarcerate alleged fugitives, these laws aimed to preclude state officials from enforcing the law.

The frequent cold stares, obstructive legal tactics, and occasional violence encountered by slaveholders who ventured north to capture runaway slaves helped demonstrate to southerners that opposition to slavery boiled just beneath the surface of northern opinion. In the eyes of most southerners, the South had gained little more from the Compromise of 1850 than the Fugitive Slave Act, and now even that northern concession seemed a phantom. After witnessing riots against the Fugitive Slave Act in Boston in 1854, a young Georgian studying law at Harvard wrote to his mother, “Do not be surprised if when I return home you find me a confirmed disunionist.”

## Uncle Tom’s Cabin

The publication in 1852 of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel **Uncle Tom’s Cabin** aroused wide northern sympathy for fugitive slaves. Stowe, the daughter of the famed evangelical Lyman Beecher and the younger sister of Catharine Beecher, the stalwart advocate of domesticity for women, greeted the Fugitive Slave Act with horror. In a memorable scene from the novel, she depicted the slave Eliza, clutching her infant son, bounding across ice floes on the Ohio River to freedom.

Slavery itself was Stowe’s main target. Much of her novel’s power derives from its view that good intentions mean little against so evil an institution.

“Let the President . . .  
drench our land of  
freedom in blood, but he  
will never make us obey  
that law.”

The good intentions of a kindly slaveowner die with him, and Uncle Tom is sold to the vicious Yankee Simon Legree, who whips him to death.

Three hundred thousand copies of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* were sold in 1852, and 1.2 million by the summer of 1853. Stage dramatizations, which added dogs to chase Eliza across the ice, eventually reached perhaps fifty times the number of people as the novel itself. As a play, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* enthralled working-class audiences normally indifferent, if not hostile, to abolitionism. A reviewer of one stage performance observed that the gallery was filled with men “in red woollen shirts, with countenances as hardy and rugged as the implements of industry employed by them in the pursuit of their vocations.” Astonished by the silence that fell over these men at the point when Eliza escapes across the river, the reviewer turned to discover that many of them were in tears.

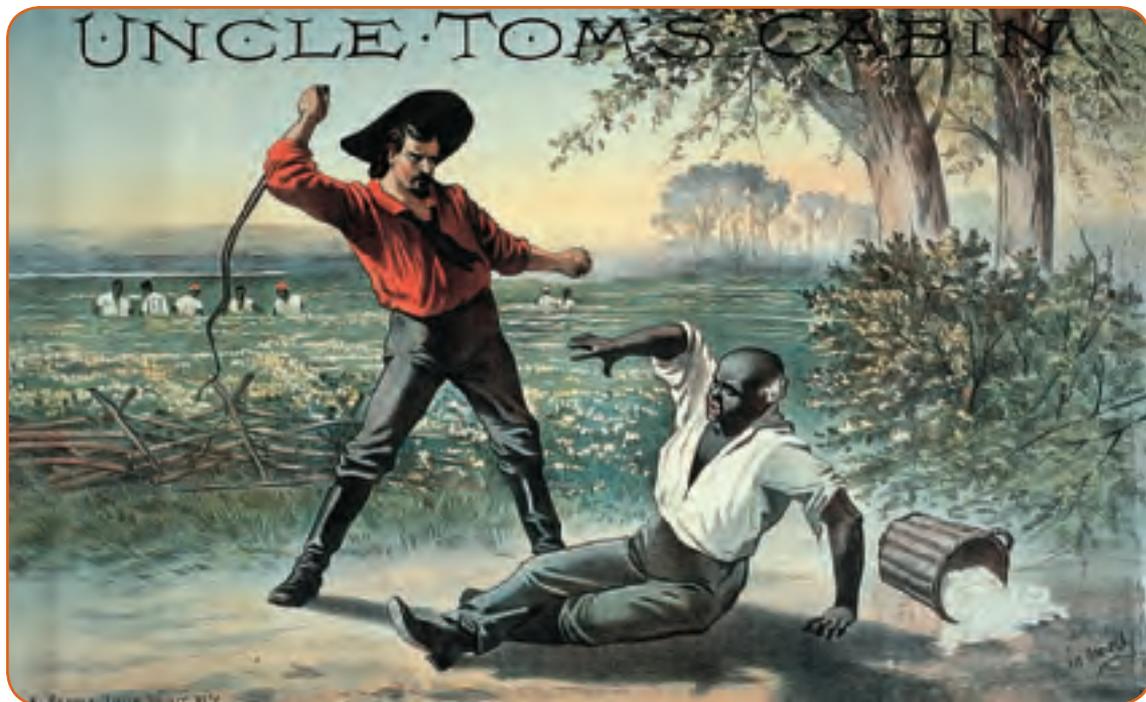
Although *Uncle Tom's Cabin* hardly lived up to a proslavery lawyer's prediction that it would convert two million people to abolitionism, it did push many waverers to an aggressive antislavery stance. Indeed, fear of its effect inspired a host of southerners to pen anti-Uncle Tom novels. As historian David Potter concluded, the northern attitude toward slavery “was never quite the same after *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.”

## The Election of 1852

The Fugitive Slave Act fragmented the Whig party. By masterminding defiance of the law, northern Whigs put southern Whigs, who long had come before the southern electorate as the party best able to defend slavery within the Union, on the spot.

In 1852, the Whigs' nomination of Mexican War hero Winfield Scott as their presidential candidate widened the sectional split within the party. Although a Virginian, Scott owed his nomination to the northern free-soil Whigs. His single feeble statement endorsing the Compromise of 1850 undercut southern Whigs trying to portray the Democrats as the party of disunion and themselves as the party of both slavery and the Union.

The Democrats bridged their own sectional division by nominating **Franklin Pierce** of New Hampshire, a dark-horse candidate whose chief attraction was that no faction of the party strongly opposed him. The “ultra men of the South,” a friend of Pierce noted, “say they can cheerfully go for him, and none, none, say they cannot.” North and South, the Democrats rallied behind both the Compromise and the idea of applying popular sovereignty to all the territories. In the most one-sided election since 1820, Pierce swept to victory. Defeat



**UNCLE TOM'S CABIN THEATER POSTER** With its vivid word pictures of slavery, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* translated well to the stage. Stowe herself was among the many who wrote dramatizations of the novel. Scenes of Eliza crossing the ice of the Ohio River with bloodhounds in pursuit and the evil Simon Legree whipping Uncle Tom outraged northern audiences and turned many against slavery. Southerners damned Mrs. Stowe as a “vile wretch in petticoats.” (*Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.*)



**SOJOURNER TRUTH** Sojourner Truth was born into slavery in upstate New York and named Isabella by her Dutch owner. She was illiterate and a mystic given to hearing messages from God, including one in 1843 that told her to change her name to Sojourner Truth. By then, she had joined William Lloyd Garrison's band of abolitionists. In the 1840s and 1850s, she traveled from New England to Indiana preaching against slavery. Six feet tall and speaking English with a Dutch accent, she cut a striking figure on the platform, sprinkling humorous asides with vivid gestures, gospel songs, and clever put-downs. In one notable instance, when hecklers questioned her femininity, she bared her breasts to silence them. (*Library of Congress*)

was especially galling for southern Whigs. In 1848, Zachary Taylor had won 49.8 percent of the South's popular vote; Scott, by comparison, limped home with only 35 percent. In state elections during 1852 and 1853, moreover, the Whigs were devastated in the South; one Whig stalwart lamented "the decisive breaking-up of our party."

## The Collapse of the Second Party System, 1853–1856

Franklin Pierce had the dubious distinction of being the last presidential candidate for eighty years to win the popular and electoral vote in both the

North and the South. Not until 1932 did another president, Franklin D. Roosevelt, repeat this accomplishment. Pierce was also the last president to hold office under the second party system—Whigs against Democrats. For two decades, the Whigs and the Democrats had battled, often on even terms. Then, within the four years of Pierce's administration, the Whig party disintegrated. In its place two new parties, first the American (Know-Nothing) Party, then the Republican Party, arose.

Unlike the Whig party, the Republican Party was a purely sectional, northern party. The Democrats survived as a national party, but with a base so shrunken in the North that the Republican Party, although scarcely a year old, swept two-thirds of the free states in 1856.

For decades, the second party system had kept the conflict over slavery in check by giving Americans other issues—banking, internal improvements, tariffs, and temperance—to argue about. By the 1850s, the debate over slavery extension was pushing such issues into the background and exposing raw divisions in each party. Of the two parties, the Whigs had the larger, more aggressive free-soil wing, and hence they were more vulnerable than the Democrats to disruption. When Stephen A. Douglas put forth a proposal in 1854 to organize the vast Nebraska territory without restrictions on slavery, he ignited a firestorm that consumed the Whig party.

One Whig stalwart lamented "the decisive breaking-up of our party."

## The Kansas-Nebraska Act

Signed by President Pierce at the end of May 1854, the **Kansas-Nebraska Act** shattered the already weakened second party system and triggered renewed sectional strife. The origins of the act lay in the seemingly uncontroversial desire of farm families to establish homesteads west of Iowa and Missouri. Bills to organize this area to extinguish Indian land titles and to provide a basis of government also had the backing of railroad enthusiasts, who dreamed of a rail line linking the Midwest to the Pacific.

In January 1854, Senator Stephen A. Douglas of Illinois proposed a bill to organize Nebraska as a territory. An ardent expansionist, Douglas had formed his political ideology in the heady atmosphere of Manifest Destiny during the 1840s. Although he preferred a railroad from his hometown of Chicago to San Francisco, Douglas dwelled on the national benefits that would attend construction of a railroad from anywhere in the Midwest to the Pacific.



**MAP 14.2 THE KANSAS-NEBRASKA ACT, 1854** Kansas and Nebraska lay within the Louisiana Purchase, north of  $36^{\circ}30'$ , and hence were closed to slavery until Stephen A. Douglas introduced his bills in 1854.

Such a railroad would enhance the importance of the Midwest, which could then hold the balance of power between the older sections of the North and South, and guide the nation toward unity rather than disruption. In addition, westward expansion through Nebraska with the aid of a railroad struck Douglas as an issue, comparable to Manifest Destiny, around which the splintering factions of the Democratic Party would unite.

Two sources of potential conflict loomed. First, some southerners advocated a rival route for the Pacific railroad that would start at either New Orleans or Memphis. Second, Nebraska lay within the Louisiana Purchase and north of the Missouri Compromise line of  $36^{\circ}30'$ , a region closed to slavery (see Map 14.2). Under Douglas's bill, the South would lose the Pacific rail route *and* face the possibility of more free territory in the Union. To placate southerners and win their votes, Douglas made two concessions. He stated publicly that the Nebraska bill "superseded" the Missouri Compromise and rendered it "void." Next, he agreed to a division of Nebraska into two territories: Nebraska to the west of Iowa, and Kansas to the west of Missouri. Because Missouri was a slave state, most congressmen assumed that the division aimed to secure Kansas for slavery and Nebraska for free soil.

The modifications of Douglas's original bill set off a storm of protest. Congress quickly tabled the

Pacific railroad (which, in the turn of events, would not be built until after the Civil War) and focused on the issue of slavery extension. Antislavery northerners assailed the bill as "an atrocious plot" to violate the "sacred pledge" of the Missouri Compromise and to turn Kansas into a "dreary region of despotism, inhabited by masters and slaves." Their rage electrified southerners, many of whom initially had reacted indifferently to the Nebraska bill. Some southerners had opposed an explicit repeal of the Missouri Compromise, from fear of stimulating sectional discord; others doubted that Kansas would attract many slaveholders. But the furious assault of antislavery northerners united the South behind the Kansas-Nebraska bill by turning the issue into one of sectional pride as much as slavery extension.

Despite the uproar, Douglas successfully guided the Kansas-Nebraska bill through the Senate, where it passed by a vote of 37 to 14. In the House of Representatives, where the bill passed by little more than a whisker, 113 to 100, the true dimensions of the conflict became apparent. Not a single northern Whig representative in the House voted for the bill, whereas the northern Democrats divided evenly, 44 to 44.

### The Surge of Free Soil

Amid the clamor over his bill, Douglas ruefully observed that he could now travel to Chicago by the

light of his own burning effigies. Neither a fool nor a political novice, he was the victim of a political bombshell—free soil—that exploded under his feet.

Support for free soil united northerners who agreed on little else. Some free-soilers opposed slavery on moral grounds and rejected racist legislation, but others were racists who opposed allowing any African-Americans, slave or free, into the West. An abolitionist traced the free-soil convictions of many westerners to a “perfect, if not supreme” hatred of blacks. Racist free-soilers in Iowa and Illinois secured laws prohibiting settlement by black people.

One opinion shared by free-soilers of all persuasions was that slavery impeded whites’ progress. Because a slave worked for nothing, the argument ran, no free laborer could compete with a slave. A territory might contain only a handful of slaves or none at all, but as long as Congress refused to prohibit slavery in the territories, the institution would gain a foothold and free laborers would flee. Wherever slavery appeared, a free-soiler proclaimed, “labor loses its dignity; industry sickens; education finds no schools; religion finds no churches; and the whole land of slavery is impoverished.” Free-soilers also blasted the idea that slavery had natural limits. One warned that “slavery is as certain to invade New Mexico and Utah as the sun is to rise”; others predicted that if slavery gained a toehold in Kansas, it would soon invade Minnesota.

To free-soilers, the Kansas-Nebraska Act, with its erasure of the Missouri Compromise, was the last straw, for it revealed, one wrote, “a continuous movement by slaveholders to spread slavery over the entire North.” For a Whig congressman from Massachusetts who had voted for the Compromise of 1850 and opposed abolitionists, the Kansas-Nebraska Act, “that most wanton and wicked act, so obviously designed to promote the extension of slavery,” was too much to bear. “I now advocate the freedom of Kansas under all circumstances, and the prohibition of slavery in all territories now free.”

## The Ebbing of Manifest Destiny

The uproar over the Kansas-Nebraska Act embarrassed the Pierce administration. It also doomed Manifest Destiny, the one issue that had held the Democrats together in the 1840s.

Franklin Pierce had come to office championing Manifest Destiny, but increasing sectional rivalries sidetracked his efforts. In 1853, his emissary James Gadsden negotiated the purchase from Mexico of a strip of land south of the Gila River (now southern Arizona and part of southern New Mexico), an acquisition favored by advocates of a southern railroad route to the Pacific. Fierce opposition to the

Gadsden Purchase revealed mounting free-soilers’ suspicion of expansion, and the Senate approved the treaty only after slashing nine thousand square miles from the parcel. The sectional rivalries beginning to engulf the Nebraska bill clearly threatened any proposal to gain new territory.

Cuba provided even more vivid proof of the change in public attitudes about expansion. In 1854, a former Mississippi governor, John A. Quitman, planned a filibuster (an unofficial military expedition) to seize Cuba from Spain. Eager to acquire Cuba, Pierce may have encouraged Quitman, but Pierce forced Quitman to scuttle the expedition when faced with intense opposition from antislavery northerners who saw filibusters as just another manifestation of the **Slave Power**—the conspiracy of slaveholders and their northern dupes to grab more territory for slavery.

Pierce still hoped to purchase Cuba, but events quickly slipped out of his control. In October 1854, the American ambassadors to Great Britain, France, and Spain, two of them southerners, met in Belgium and issued the unofficial Ostend Manifesto, calling on the United States to acquire Cuba by any means, including force. Beset by the storm over the Kansas-Nebraska Act and the furor over Quitman’s proposed filibuster, Pierce rejected the mandate.

Despite Pierce’s disavowal of the Ostend Manifesto, the idea of expansion into the Caribbean continued to attract southerners, including the Tennessee-born adventurer William Walker. Slightly built and so unassuming that he usually spoke with his hands in his pockets, Walker seemed an unlikely soldier of fortune. Yet between 1853 and 1860, the year a firing squad in Honduras executed him, Walker led a succession of filibustering expeditions into Central America. Taking advantage of civil chaos in Nicaragua, he made himself the chief political force there, reinstated slavery, and talked of making Nicaragua a U.S. colony.

For all the proclamations and intrigues that surrounded the movement for southern expansion, its strength and goals remained open to question. With few exceptions, the adventurers were shady characters whom southern politicians might admire but on whom they could never depend. Some southerners were against expansion, among them Louisiana sugar planters who opposed acquiring Cuba because Cuban sugar would compete with their product. But expansionists stirred enough commotion to worry antislavery northerners that

To free-soilers, the Kansas-Nebraska Act, revealed “a continuous movement by slaveholders to spread slavery over the entire North.”

the South was conspiring to establish a Caribbean slave empire. Like a card in a poker game, the threat of expansion southward was all the more menacing for not being played. As long as the debate on the extension of slavery focused on the continental United States, prospects for expansion were limited. However, adding Caribbean territory to the pot changed all calculations.

## The Whigs Disintegrate, 1854–1855

While straining Democratic unity, the Kansas-Nebraska Act wrecked the Whig party. In the law's immediate aftermath, most northern Whigs hoped to blame the Democrats for the act and to entice free-soil Democrats to their side. In the state and congressional elections of 1854, the Democrats were decisively defeated. But the Whig party failed to benefit from the backlash against the Democrats. However furious at Douglas for initiating the act, free-soil Democrats could not forget that the southern Whigs had supported Douglas. In addition, the northern Whigs themselves were deeply divided between antislavery "Conscience" Whigs, led by Senator William Seward of New York, and conservatives, led by former president Millard Fillmore. The conservatives believed that the Whig party had to adhere to the Compromise of 1850 to maintain itself as a national party.

Divisions within the Whig party repelled anti-slavery Democrats from affiliating with it and prompted many antislavery Whigs to look for an alternative party. By 1856, the new Republican Party would become the home for most of these northern refugees from the traditional parties; but in 1854 and 1855, when the Republican Party was only starting to organize, the American, or Know-Nothing, party emerged as the principal alternative.

## The Rise and Fall of the Know-Nothings, 1853–1856

One of a number of nativist societies that mushroomed in opposition to the massive immigration of the 1840s, the **Know-Nothings** originated in the secret Order of the Star-Spangled Banner. The party's popular name, Know-Nothing, derived from the standard response of its members to inquiries about its activities: "I know nothing." The Know-Nothings' core purpose was to rid the

United States of immigrant and Catholic political influence. To this end, they pressured the existing parties to nominate and appoint only native-born Protestants to office and advocated an extension of the naturalization period before immigrants could vote.

Throughout the 1840s, nativists usually voted Whig, but their allegiance to the Whigs started to buckle during Winfield Scott's campaign for the presidency in 1852. In an attempt to revitalize his party, which was badly split over slavery, Scott had courted the traditionally Democratic Catholic vote. But Scott's tactic backfired. Most Catholics voted for Franklin Pierce. Nativists, meanwhile, felt betrayed by their party, and after Scott's defeat, many gravitated toward the Know-Nothings. The Kansas-Nebraska Act cemented their allegiance to the Know-Nothings, who in the North opposed both the extension of slavery and Catholicism. An obsessive fear of conspiracies unified the Know-Nothings. They simultaneously denounced a papal conspiracy against the American republic and a Slave Power conspiracy spreading its tentacles throughout the United States. The Know-Nothings' surge was truly stunning. In 1854, they captured the governorship, all the congressional seats, and almost all the seats in the state legislature in Massachusetts.

After rising spectacularly between 1853 and 1855, the star of Know-Nothingism plummeted and gradually disappeared below the horizon after 1856. The Know-Nothings proved as vulnerable as the Whigs to sectional conflicts over slavery. Although primarily a force in the North, the Know-Nothings had a southern wing, comprised mainly of former Whigs who loathed both the antislavery northerners who were abandoning the Whig party and the southern Democrats, whom they viewed as disunionist firebrands. In 1855, these southern Know-Nothings combined with northern conservatives to make acceptance of the Kansas-Nebraska Act part of the Know-Nothing platform, and thus they blurred the attraction of Know-Nothingism to those northern voters who were more antislavery than anti-Catholic.

One such Whig refugee, Illinois congressman Abraham Lincoln, asked pointedly: "How can anyone who abhors the oppression of negroes be in favor of degrading classes of white people?" "We began by declaring," Lincoln continued, "that 'all men are created equal.' We now practically read it 'all men are created equal except negroes.' When the Know-Nothings get control, it will read 'all men are created equal, except Negroes and foreigners and Catholics.'" Finally, even most Know-Nothings

"When the Know-Nothings get control, it will read 'all men are created equal, except Negroes and foreigners and Catholics.'"

eventually came to conclude that, as one observer put it, “neither the Pope nor the foreigners ever can govern the country or endanger its liberties, but the slavebreeders and slavetraders do govern it, and threaten to put an end to all government but theirs.” Consequently, the Know-Nothings proved vulnerable to the challenge posed by the emerging Republican Party, which did not officially embrace nativism and which had no southern wing to blunt its antislavery message.

## The Republican Party and the Crisis in Kansas, 1855–1856

Born in the chaotic aftermath of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, the **Republican Party** sprang up in several northern states in 1854 and 1855. With the Know-Nothings’ demise after 1856, the Republicans would become the main opposition to the Democratic Party. But few in 1855 would have predicted this. While united by opposition to the Kansas-Nebraska Act, the Republicans held various shades of opinion in uneasy balance. At one extreme were conservatives who merely wanted to restore the Missouri Compromise; at the other was a small faction of former Liberty Party abolitionists; and the middle held a sizable body of free-soilers.

Faced with these diverse constituencies, Republican leaders became political jugglers. To maintain internal harmony, the party’s leaders avoided potentially divisive national issues such as the tariff and banking. Even so, Republican leaders recognized that they and the Know-Nothings were competing for many of the same voters. Believing that addiction to alcohol and submission to the pope were forms of enslavement, these voters often were protemperance, anti-Catholic, and antislavery.

The Republicans had clearer antislavery credentials than the Know-Nothings, but this fact alone did not guarantee that voters would respond more to antislavery than to anti-Catholicism or temperance. The Republicans needed a development that would make voters worry more about the Slave Power than about rum or Catholicism. Violence in Kansas, which quickly became known as Bleeding Kansas, united the party around its free-soil center, intensified antislavery feelings, and boosted Republican fortunes.

In the wake of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, Boston-based abolitionists had organized the New England Emigrant Aid Company to send antislavery settlers into Kansas. The abolitionists’ aim was to stifle efforts to turn Kansas into a slave state.

But antislavery New Englanders arrived slowly in Kansas; the bulk of the territory’s early settlers came from Missouri or elsewhere in the Midwest. Very few of these early settlers opposed slavery on moral grounds. Some, in fact, favored slavery; others wanted to keep all blacks, whether slave or free, out of Kansas.

Despite most settlers’ racist leanings and utter hatred of abolitionists, Kansas became a battleground between proslavery and antislavery forces.

In March 1855, thousands of proslavery Missourian “border ruffians,” led by Senator David R. Atchison, crossed into Kansas to vote illegally in the first election for a territorial legislature. Drawing and cocking their revolvers, they quickly silenced any judges who questioned their right to vote in Kansas. These proslavery advocates probably would have won an honest election because they

would have been supported by the votes both of slaveholders and of nonslaveholders horrified at rumors that abolitionists planned to use Kansas as a colony for fugitive slaves. But by stealing the election, the proslavery forces committed a grave tactical blunder. A cloud of fraudulence thereafter hung over the proslavery legislature subsequently established at Lecompton, Kansas. “There is not a proslavery man of my acquaintance in Kansas,” wrote the wife of an antislavery farmer, “who does not acknowledge that the Bogus Legislature was the result of a gigantic and well planned fraud, that the elections were carried by an invading mob from Missouri.” This legislature then further darkened its image by passing a succession of outrageous laws, limiting officeholding to individuals who would swear allegiance to slavery, punishing the harboring of fugitive slaves by ten years’ imprisonment, and making the circulation of abolitionist literature a capital offense.

The territorial legislature’s actions set off a chain reaction. Free-staters, including many settlers enraged by the proceedings at Lecompton, organized a rival government at Topeka in the summer and fall of 1855. In response, the Lecompton government in May 1856 dispatched a posse to Lawrence, where free-staters, heeding the advice of antislavery minister Henry Ward Beecher that rifles would do more than Bibles to enforce morality in Kansas, had taken up arms and dubbed their guns “Beecher’s Bibles.” Bearing banners emblazoned

“There is not a proslavery man of my acquaintance in Kansas who does not acknowledge that the Bogus Legislature was the result of a gigantic and well planned fraud.”



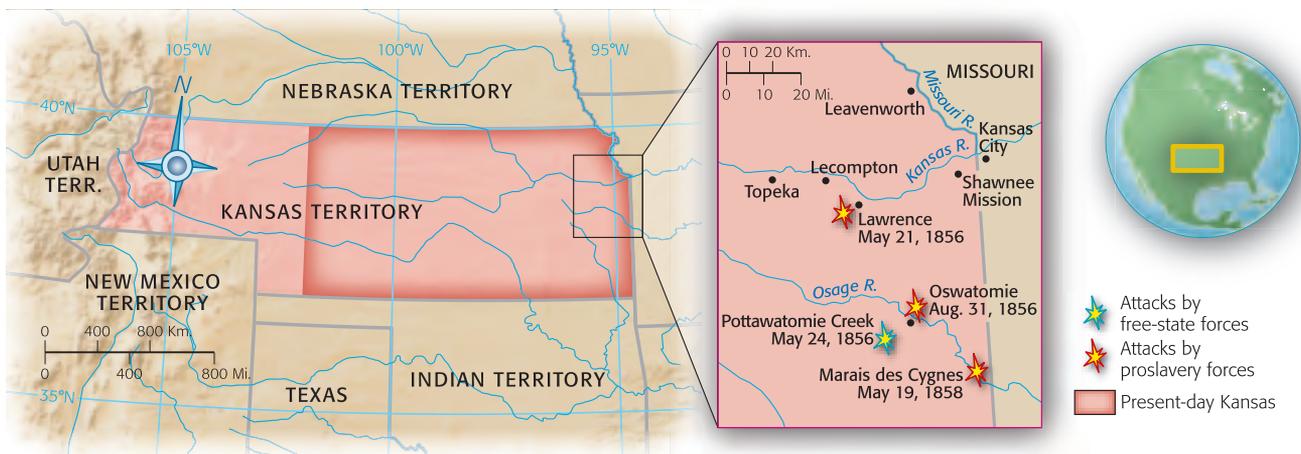
**KANSAS NEBRASKA ACT, 1856** Proslavery Missourians on their way to plunder the free-state stronghold of Lawrence in the Kansas Territory. (*Granger Collection*)

“southern rights” and “let yankees tremble and abolitionists fall,” the proslavery posse tore through Lawrence, burning several buildings and destroying two free-state presses. There were no deaths, but Republicans immediately dubbed the incident “the sack of Lawrence.”

The next move was made by John Brown. The sack of Lawrence convinced Brown that God now beckoned him “to break the jaws of the wicked.” In late May, Brown led seven men, including his four sons and his son-in-law, toward the Pottawatomie Creek near Lawrence. Setting upon five men associated with

the Lecompton government, they shot one to death and hacked the others to pieces with broadswords. Brown’s “Pottawatomie massacre” struck terror into the hearts of southerners and completed the transformation of Bleeding Kansas into a battleground between the South and the North (see Map 14.3). A month after the massacre, a South Carolinian living in Kansas wrote to his sister,

Popular sovereignty had failed in Kansas. Instead of resolving the issue of slavery extension, popular sovereignty merely institutionalized the division over slavery by creating rival governments in



**MAP 14.3 BLEEDING KANSAS** Kansas became a battleground between free-state and slave-state factions in the 1850s.



**ADMIT ME FREE FLAG** In 1856 this flag was used at a rally at Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, for Republican presidential nominee John C. Frémont. The oversized 34<sup>th</sup> star and the words “Admit Me Free” in the upper left part of the flag are in support of Kansas’s admittance as a free state. (*Kansas State Historical Society*)

Lecompton and Topeka. The Pierce administration then shot itself in the foot by denouncing the Topeka government and recognizing only its Lecompton rival. Pierce had forced northern Democrats into the awkward position of appearing to ally with the South in support of the “Bogus Legislature” at Lecompton.

Nor did popular sovereignty keep the slavery issue out of national politics. On the day before the sack of Lawrence, Republican senator **Charles Sumner** of Massachusetts delivered a bombastic and wrathful speech, “The Crime Against Kansas,” in which he verbally whipped most of the U.S. Senate for complicity in slavery. Sumner singled out Senator Andrew Butler of South Carolina for making “the harlot, slavery” his mistress and for the “loose exhortation” of his speech (a nasty reference to the aging Butler’s tendency to drool). Two days later, a relative of Butler, Democratic representative Preston Brooks of South Carolina, strode into the Senate chamber, found Sumner at his desk, and struck him repeatedly with a cane. The hollow cane broke after five or six blows, but Sumner required stitches, experienced shock, and did not return to the Senate for three years. Brooks became an instant hero in the South, and the fragments of his weapon were “begged as sacred relics.” A new cane, presented to Brooks by the city of Charleston, bore the inscription “Hit him again.”

Now Bleeding Kansas and Bleeding Sumner united the North. The sack of Lawrence, Pierce’s recognition of the proslavery Lecompton government, and Brooks’s actions seemed to clinch the Republican argument that an aggressive “slaveocracy” held white northerners in contempt. Abolitionists remained unpopular in northern opinion, but southerners were becoming even less popular. Northern migrants to Kansas coined a name reflecting their feelings about southerners: “the pukes.” By denouncing the Slave Power more than slavery itself, Republican propagandists sidestepped the issue of slavery’s morality, which divided their followers, and focused on portraying southern planters as arrogant aristocrats and the natural enemies of the laboring people of the North.

## The Election of 1856

The election of 1856 revealed the scope of the political realignments of the preceding few years. In this, its first presidential contest, the Republican Party nominated John C. Frémont, the famed “pathfinder” who had played a key role in the conquest of California during the Mexican War. The Republicans then maneuvered the northern Know-Nothings into endorsing Frémont. The southern Know-Nothings picked the last Whig president, Millard Fillmore, as their candidate, and the Democrats dumped the battered Pierce for

James Buchanan of Pennsylvania. A four-term congressman and long an aspirant to the presidency, Buchanan finally secured his party's nomination because he had the good luck to be out of the country (as minister to Great Britain) during the furor over the Kansas-Nebraska Act. As a signer of the Ostend Manifesto, he was popular in the South: virtually all of his close friends in Washington were southerners.

The campaign quickly turned into two separate races—Frémont versus Buchanan in the free states and Fillmore versus Buchanan in the slave states. In the North, the candidates divided clearly over slavery extension; Frémont's platform called for congressional prohibition of slavery in the territories, whereas Buchanan pledged congressional "noninterference." In the South, Fillmore appealed to traditionally Whig voters and called for moderation in the face of secessionist threats. But by nominating a well-known moderate in Buchanan, the Democrats undercut some of Fillmore's appeal. Although Fillmore garnered more than 40 percent of the popular vote in ten of the slave states, he carried only Maryland. In the North, Frémont outpolled Buchanan in the popular vote and won eleven of the sixteen free states; if Frémont had carried Pennsylvania and either Illinois, Indiana, or New Jersey, he would have won the election. As it turned out, Buchanan, the only truly national candidate in the race, secured the presidency.

The election yielded three clear conclusions. First, the American party was finished as a major national force. Having worked for the Republican Frémont, most northern Know-Nothings now joined that party, and southern Know-Nothings gave up on their party and sought new political affiliations. Second, although in existence scarcely more than a year, lacking any base in the South, and running a political novice, the Republican Party did very well. A purely sectional party had come within reach of capturing the presidency. Finally, as long as the Democrats could unite behind a single national candidate, they would be hard to defeat. To achieve such unity, however, the Democrats would have to find more James Buchanans—"doughface" moderates who would be acceptable to southerners and who would not drive even more northerners into Republican arms.

## The Crisis of the Union, 1857–1860

No one ever accused James Buchanan of impulsiveness or fanaticism. Although a moderate eager to avoid controversy, he presided over one of the most

controversy-ridden administrations in American history. Trouble arose first over the famed *Dred Scott* decision of the Supreme Court, then over the proslavery Lecompton constitution in Kansas, next following the raid by John Brown on Harpers Ferry, and finally concerning secession itself.

The forces driving the nation apart were already spinning out of control by 1856. By the time of Buchanan's inauguration, southerners who looked north saw creeping abolitionism in the guise of free soil, whereas northerners who looked south saw an insatiable Slave Power. Once these images had taken hold in the minds of the American people, politicians like James Buchanan had little room to maneuver.

### The Dred Scott Case, 1857

Pledged to congressional "non-interference" with slavery in the territories, Buchanan had long looked to the courts for a nonpartisan resolution of the vexing issue of slavery extension. A case that appeared to promise such a solution had been wending its way through the courts for years; and on March 6, 1857, two days after Buchanan's inauguration, the Supreme Court handed down its decision in *Dred Scott v. Sandford*.

During the 1830s, Dred Scott, a slave, had been taken by his master from the slave state of Missouri into Illinois and the Wisconsin Territory, areas respectively closed to slavery by the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 and the Missouri Compromise. After his master's death, Scott sued for his freedom on the grounds of his residence in free territory. In 1856, the case finally reached the Supreme Court.

The Court faced two key questions. Did Scott's residence in free territory during the 1830s make him free? Regardless of the answer to this question, did Scott, again enslaved in Missouri, have a right to sue in the federal courts? The Court could have resolved the case on narrow grounds by answering the second question in the negative, but Buchanan wanted a far-reaching decision that would deal with the broad issue of slavery in the territories.

In the end, Buchanan got the broad ruling that he sought, but one so controversial that it settled little. In the most important of six separate majority opinions, Chief Justice Roger B. Taney, a seventy-nine-year-old Marylander whom Andrew Jackson had appointed to succeed John Marshall in 1835, began with the narrow conclusion that Scott, a slave, could not sue for his freedom. Then the thunder started. No black, whether a slave or a free person descended from a slave, could become a citizen of the United States, Taney continued. Next Taney whipped the

thunderheads into a tornado. Even if Scott had been a legal plaintiff, Taney ruled, his residence in free territory years earlier did not make him free, because the Missouri Compromise, whose provisions prohibited slavery in the Wisconsin Territory, was itself unconstitutional. The compromise, declared Taney, violated the Fifth Amendment's protection of property (including slaves).

Contrary to Buchanan's hopes, the decision touched off a new blast of controversy over slavery in the territories. The antislavery press flayed it as a "willful perversion" filled with "gross historical falsehoods." Taney's ruling gave Republicans more evidence that a fiendish Slave Power conspiracy gripped the nation. Although the Kansas-Nebraska Act had effectively repealed the Missouri Compromise, the Court's majority now rejected even the principle behind the compromise, the idea that Congress could prohibit slavery in the territories. Five of the six justices who rejected this principle were from slave states. The Slave Power, a northern paper bellowed, "has marched over and annihilated the boundaries of the states. We are now one great homogenous slaveholding community."

Like Stephen Douglas after the Kansas-Nebraska Act, President Buchanan now appeared to be a northern dupe of the "slaveocracy." Republicans restrained themselves from open defiance of the decision only by insisting that it did not bind the nation; Taney's comments on the constitutionality of the Missouri Compromise, they contended, amounted merely to *obiter dicta*, opinions superfluous to settling the case.

Reactions to the decision underscored the fact that by 1857 no "judicious" or nonpartisan solution to slavery extension was possible. Anyone who still doubted this needed only to read the fast-breaking news from Kansas.

## The Lecompton Constitution, 1857

In Kansas, the free-state government at Topeka and the officially recognized proslavery government at Lecompton viewed each other with profound distrust. Buchanan's plan for Kansas looked simple: an elected territorial convention would draw up a constitution that would either permit or prohibit slavery; Buchanan would submit the constitution to Congress; Congress would then admit Kansas as a state.

Unfortunately, the plan exploded in Buchanan's face. Popular sovereignty, the essence of Buchanan's plan, demanded fair play, a scarce commodity in Kansas. The territory's history of fraudulent elections left both sides reluctant to commit their fortunes to the polls. An election for a constitutional convention took place in June 1857, but free-staters, by now a

majority in Kansas, boycotted the election on the grounds that the proslavery side would rig it. Dominated by proslavery delegates, a constitutional convention then met and drew up a frame of government, the **Lecompton constitution**, that protected the rights of those slaveholders already living in Kansas to their slave property and provided for a referendum in which voters could decide whether to allow in more slaves.

The Lecompton constitution created a dilemma for Buchanan. A supporter of popular sovereignty, he had gone on record in favor of letting the voters in Kansas decide the slavery issue. Now he was confronted by a constitution drawn up by a convention that had been elected by less than 10 percent of the eligible voters, by plans for a referendum that would not allow voters to remove slaves already in Kansas, and by the prospect that the proslavery side would conduct the referendum no more honestly than it had other ballots. Yet Buchanan had compelling reasons to accept the Lecompton constitution as the basis for the admission of Kansas as a state. The South, which had provided him with 112 of his 174 electoral votes in 1856, supported the constitution. Buchanan knew, moreover, that only about two hundred slaves resided in Kansas, and he believed that the prospects for slavery in the remaining territories were slight. The contention over slavery in Kansas struck him as another example of how extremists could turn minor issues into major ones. To accept the constitution and speed the admission of Kansas as either a free state or a slave state seemed the best way to pull the rug from beneath the extremists and quiet the ruckus in Kansas. Accordingly, in December 1857, Buchanan endorsed the Lecompton constitution.

Stephen A. Douglas and other northern Democrats broke with Buchanan. To them, the Lecompton constitution, in allowing voters to decide only whether more slaves could enter Kansas, violated the spirit of popular sovereignty. "I care not whether [slavery] is voted down or voted up," Douglas declared. But to refuse to allow a vote on the constitution itself, with its protection of existing slave property, smacked of a "system of trickery and jugglery to defeat the fair expression of the will of the people."

Even as Douglas broke with Buchanan, events in Kansas took a new turn. A few months after electing delegates to the convention that drew up the Lecompton constitution, Kansans had gone to the polls to elect a territorial legislature. So flagrant was the fraud in this election—one village with thirty

The Slave Power, a northern paper bellowed, "has marched over and annihilated the boundaries of the states. We are now one great homogenous slaveholding community."

Of Abraham Lincoln, Douglas said, “He is the strong man of his party—full of wit, facts, dates—and the best stump speaker with his droll ways and dry jokes, in the West.”

eligible voters returned more than sixteen hundred proslavery votes—that the governor disallowed enough proslavery returns to give free-staters a majority in the legislature. This territorial legislature then called for a referendum on the Lecompton constitution and thus slavery itself. Whereas the Kansas constitutional convention had restricted the choice of voters to the narrow issue of the future introduction of slaves,

the territorial legislature sought a referendum that would allow Kansans to vote against the protection of existing slave property as well.

In December 1857, the referendum called earlier by the constitutional convention was held. Boycotted by free-staters, the constitution with slavery passed overwhelmingly. Two weeks later, in the election called by the territorial legislature, the proslavery side abstained, and the constitution went down to crushing defeat. Buchanan tried to ignore this second election, but when he attempted to bring Kansas into the Union under the Lecompton constitution, Congress blocked him and forced yet another referendum. This time, Kansans were given the choice between accepting or rejecting the entire constitution, with the proviso that rejection would delay statehood. Despite the proviso, Kansans overwhelmingly voted down the constitution.

Buchanan simultaneously had failed to tranquilize Kansas and alienated northerners in his own party. His support for the Lecompton constitution confirmed the suspicion of northern Democrats that the southern Slave Power pulled all the important strings in their party. Douglas became the hero of the hour for northern Democrats. “The bone and sinew of the Northern Democracy are with you,” a *New Yorker* wrote to Douglas. Yet Douglas himself could take little comfort from the Lecompton fiasco, as his cherished formula of popular sovereignty increasingly looked like a prescription for civil strife rather than harmony.

## The Lincoln-Douglas Debates, 1858

Despite the acclaim he gained in the North for his stand against the Lecompton constitution, Douglas faced a stiff challenge in Illinois for reelection to the United States Senate. Of his Republican opponent, Abraham Lincoln, Douglas said: “I shall have my hands full. He is the strong man of his party—full of wit, facts, dates—and the best stump speaker with his droll ways and dry jokes, in the West.”

Physically as well as ideologically, the two men formed a striking contrast. Tall (6’4”) and gangling, **Abraham Lincoln** once described himself as “a piece of floating driftwood.” Energy, ambition, and a passion for self-education had carried him from the Kentucky log cabin in which he was born in 1809 through a youth filled with various occupations (farm laborer, surveyor, rail-splitter, flatboatman, and storekeeper) into law and politics in his adopted Illinois. There he had capitalized on westerners’ support for internal improvements to gain election to Congress in 1846 as a Whig. Having opposed the Mexican-American War and the Kansas-Nebraska Act, he joined the Republican Party in 1856.

Douglas was fully a foot shorter than the towering Lincoln. But his compact frame contained astonishing energy. Born in New England, Douglas appealed primarily to the small farmers of southern origin who populated the Illinois flatlands. To these and others, he was the “little giant,” the personification of the Democratic Party in the West. The campaign quickly became more than just another Senate race, for it pitted the Republican Party’s rising star against the Senate’s leading Democrat and, thanks to the railroad and the telegraph, received unprecedented national attention.

Although some Republicans extolled Douglas’s stand against the Lecompton constitution, to Lincoln nothing had changed. Douglas was still Douglas, the author of the infamous Kansas-Nebraska Act and a man who cared not whether slavery was voted up or down as long as the vote was honest. Opening his campaign with the “House Divided” speech (“this nation cannot exist permanently half slave and half free”), Lincoln reminded his Republican followers of the gulf that still separated his doctrine of free soil from Douglas’s popular sovereignty. Douglas dismissed the house-divided doctrine as an invitation to secession. What mattered to him was not slavery, which he viewed as merely an extreme way to subordinate a supposedly inferior race, but the continued expansion of white settlement. Like Lincoln, he wanted to keep slavery out of the path of white settlement. But unlike his rival, Douglas believed popular sovereignty was the surest way to attain this goal without disrupting the Union.

The high point of the campaign came in a series of seven debates held from August to October 1858. The Lincoln-Douglas debates mixed political drama with the atmosphere of a festival. At the debate in Galesburg, for example, dozens of horse-drawn floats descended on the town from nearby farming communities. One bore thirty-two girls dressed in white, one for each state, and a thirty-third who dressed in black with the label “Kansas” and carried a banner proclaiming “they won’t let me in.”

Douglas used the debates to portray Lincoln as a virtual abolitionist and advocate of racial equality.



**STEPHEN A. DOUGLAS** Douglas's politics were founded on his unflinching conviction that most Americans favored national expansion and would support popular sovereignty as the fastest and least controversial way to achieve it. Douglas's self-assurance blinded him to rising northern sentiment for free soil. (*National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C./Art Resource, NY*)

Both charges were calculated to doom Lincoln in the eyes of the intensely racist Illinois voters. In response, Lincoln affirmed that Congress had no constitutional authority to abolish slavery in the South, and in one debate he asserted bluntly that "I am not, nor ever have been in favor of bringing about the social and political equality of the white, and black man." However, fending off charges of extremism was getting Lincoln nowhere; so in order to seize the initiative, he tried to maneuver Douglas into a corner.

In view of the *Dred Scott* decision, Lincoln asked in the debate at Freeport, could the people of a territory lawfully exclude slavery? In essence, Lincoln was asking Douglas to reconcile popular sovereignty with the *Dred Scott* decision. Lincoln had long contended that the Court's decision rendered popular sovereignty as thin as soup boiled from the shadow of a pigeon that had starved to death. If, as the



**ABRAHAM LINCOLN** Clean-shaven at the time of his famous debates with Douglas, Lincoln would soon grow a beard to give himself a more distinguished appearance. (*Library of Congress*)

Supreme Court's ruling affirmed, Congress had no authority to exclude slavery from a territory, then it seemingly followed that a territorial legislature created by Congress also lacked power to do so. To no one's surprise, Douglas replied that notwithstanding the *Dred Scott* decision, the voters of a territory could effectively exclude slavery simply by refusing to enact laws that gave legal protection to slave property.

Douglas's "Freeport doctrine" salvaged popular sovereignty but did nothing for his reputation among southerners, who preferred the guarantees of the *Dred Scott* ruling to the uncertainties of popular sovereignty. Whereas Douglas's stand against the Lecompton constitution had already tattered his reputation in the South ("he is already dead there," Lincoln affirmed), his Freeport doctrine stiffened southern opposition to his presidential ambitions.

Lincoln faced the problem throughout the debates that free soil and popular sovereignty, although distinguishable in theory, had much the same practical effect. Neither Lincoln nor Douglas doubted that popular sovereignty, if fairly applied, would keep slavery out of the territories. In the closing debates, to keep the initiative and sharpen their differences, Lincoln shifted toward attacks on slavery as "a moral, social, and political evil." He argued that Douglas's view of slavery as merely an eccentric and unsavory southern custom would dull the nation's conscience and facilitate the legalization of slavery everywhere. But Lincoln compromised his own position by rejecting both abolition and equality for blacks.

Neither man scored a clear victory in argument, and the senatorial election itself settled no major issues. Douglas's supporters captured a majority of the seats in the state legislature, which at the time was responsible for electing U.S. senators. But despite the racist leanings of most Illinois voters, Republican candidates for the state legislature won a slightly larger share of the popular vote than did their Democratic rivals. Moreover, in its larger significance, the contest solidified the sectional split in the national Democratic Party and made Lincoln famous in the North and infamous in the South.

## The Legacy of Harpers Ferry

Although Lincoln rejected abolitionism, he called free soil a step toward the "ultimate extinction" of slavery. Similarly, New York Republican senator William H. Seward spoke of an "irrepressible conflict" between slavery and freedom. Predictably, many white southerners ignored the distinction between free soil and abolition, and concluded that

Republicans and abolitionists were joined in an unholy alliance against slavery. To many in the South, the North seemed to be controlled by demented leaders bent on civil war. One southern defender of slavery equated the doctrines of the abolitionists with those of "Socialists, of Free Love and Free Lands, Free Churches, Free Women and Free

Negroes-of No-Marriage, No-Religion, No-Private Property, No-Law and No-Government."

Nothing did more to freeze this southern image of the North than the evidence of northern complicity in John Brown's raid on the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia, on October 16, 1859. Brown and his followers were quickly overpowered; Brown himself was tried, convicted, and hanged. Lincoln and Seward condemned the raid. But some northerners turned Brown into a martyr; Ralph Waldo Emerson exulted that Brown's execution would "make the gallows as glorious as the cross." Further, captured correspondence disclosed that Brown had received financial support from northern abolitionists. His objective, to inspire an armed slave insurrection, rekindled the deepest fears of white southerners.

In the wake of Brown's raid, rumors flew around the South, and vigilantes turned out to battle conspiracies that existed only in their minds. Volunteers, for example, mobilized to defend northeastern Texas against thousands of abolitionists supposedly on their way to pillage Dallas and its environs. In other incidents, vigilantes rounded up thousands of slaves, tortured some into confessing to nonexistent plots, and then lynched them. The hysteria fed by such rumors played into the hands of the extremists known as fire-eaters, who encouraged the witch hunt by spreading tales of slave conspiracies in the press so that southern voters would turn to them as alone able to "stem the current of Abolition."

More and more southerners concluded that the Republican Party itself directed abolitionism and deserved blame for Brown's raid. After all, had not influential Republicans spoken of an "irrepressible conflict" between slavery and freedom? The Tennessee legislature reflected southern views when it passed resolutions declaring that the Harpers Ferry raid was "the natural fruit of this treasonable 'irrepressible conflict' doctrine put forth by the great head of the Black Republican party and echoed by his subordinates."

## The South Contemplates Secession

A pamphlet published in 1860 embodied in its title the growing conviction of southerners that *The South Alone Should Govern the South*. Southerners reached this conclusion gradually and often reluctantly. In 1850, few southerners could have conceived of transferring their allegiance from the United States to some new nation. Relatively insulated from the main tide of immigration, southerners thought of themselves as the most American of Americans. But the events of the 1850s persuaded many southerners that the North had deserted the true principles of the Union.

Ralph Waldo Emerson exulted that Brown's execution would "make the gallows as glorious as the cross."

*Illustrations of the American Anti-Slavery Almanac for 1840.*



*'The Southern Domestic Pastimes'*



*Northern Hospitality—New-York and north law. [The slave owner of the above scene, and his chosen girl, I find that, with neither above, could study the careless law.]*



*Beating of Mr. Bird at St. Louis, on April, 1838*



*Showing her abuse against the condition of her funds*



*The Slave from New-York—'My-Tail and north law. [The slave owner of the above scene, and his chosen girl, I find that, with neither above, could study the careless law.]*



*Severity of the Fugitive Slave in crossing and returning*



*Beating a Mother from her Child*



*Showing slaves with their feet and hands*



*'The King's' they can't take care of themselves*



*Whipping and going*



*A Woman whipped in a field, and a Man to whip all over the field*



*Beating slaves*



*Cutting up a Slave in Kentucky*



*Paid*

**ILLUSTRATIONS FROM THE AMERICAN ANTI-SLAVERY ALMANAC** Northern antislavery propagandists indicted the southern way of life, not just slavery. These illustrations depict the South as a region of lynchings, duels, cockfights, and everyday brawls. Even northerners who opposed the abolition of slavery resolved to keep slaveholders out of the western territories. (*Library of Congress*)

Southerners interpreted northern resistance to the Fugitive Slave Act and to slavery in Kansas as either illegal or unconstitutional, and they viewed headline-grabbing phrases such as “irrepressible conflict” and “a higher law” as virtual declarations

of war on the South. To southerners, it was the North, not the South, that had grown peculiar (see *Beyond America*).

Viewed as a practical tactic to secure concrete goals, secession did not make a great deal of sense.



## Beyond America

# GLOBAL INTERACTIONS

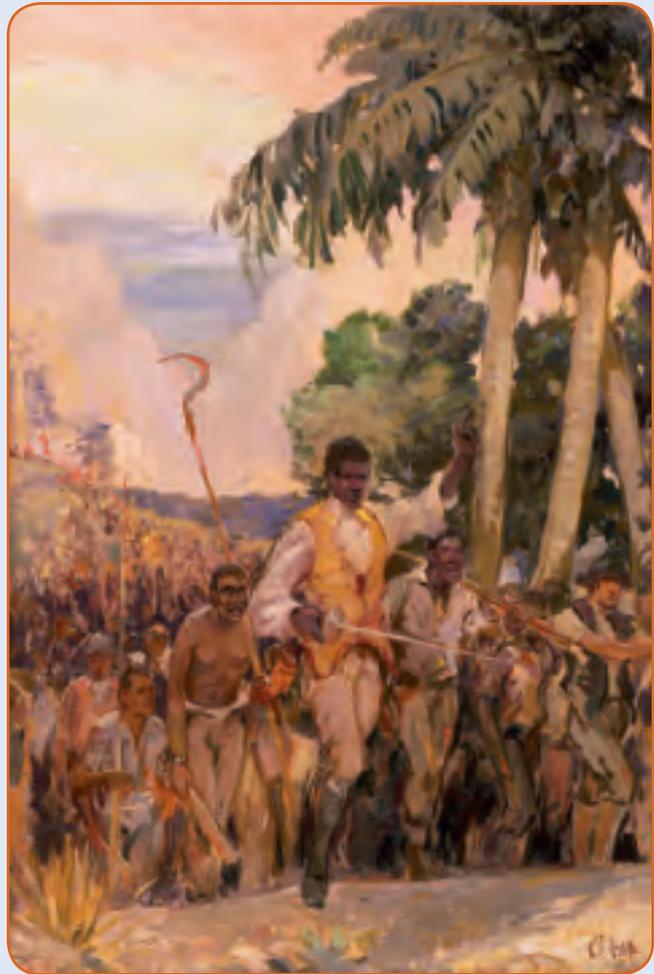
## Slave Emancipation in the Atlantic World

Southern defenders of slavery often portrayed northern abolitionists as frenzied extremists who were out of step with the practice of many nations where slavery was still legal. They had a point. In 1860, slavery was lawful in much of Asia and Africa and in nearly all Islamic nations. In forging this argument, however, southerners missed the point: slavery in the Americas had been under siege for nearly a century.

After 1760, slavery had come under increasing attack from whites in the United States and Britain. Quakers believed that the “inner light” elevated conscience over tradition, and they provided most of the early recruits for antislavery societies in America and Britain. The principle of natural rights proclaimed by the American revolutionaries of the 1770s also boosted the cause of abolition. All the northern states put slavery on the road to extinction between 1777 and 1804; Congress banned the external slave trade in 1808. American independence also stimulated the antislavery movement in Britain. As long as Britain possessed its American colonies, its government had been reluctant to agitate the slavery issue for fear of arousing the hostility of the southern colonies in America. With American independence, however, antislavery Englishmen like the evangelical Protestants William Wilberforce and Granville Sharp found new listeners in high places in Britain.

The issue in Britain was not slaves on British soil—slaves in Britain had been effectively freed by a judicial decision in 1772—but the international slave trade. Because slave mortality was high in Britain’s malaria-ridden sugar colonies like Barbados and Jamaica, the perpetuation of slavery there depended on fresh imports of slaves from Africa. West Indian planters, who formed an influential block in Parliament, staunchly resisted any tampering with the slave trade. But a series of events between 1791 and 1807 undermined their position.

The first of these events occurred in Saint Domingue (now Haiti) in the French West Indies. At the signal of beating drums at 10 P.M. on August 22, 1791, slaves rose against their white masters, burning plantations, killing whites in their beds, and raping their wives on top of their husbands’ corpses. The carnage sent shock waves throughout the Atlantic world. Saint



**TOUSSAINT L'OUVERTURE** After leading the successful slave insurrection against the French in Saint Domingue in 1791, Toussaint allied in 1794 with the revolutionary French republic, which officially declared an end to slavery. During the next four years, his ragged black army prevailed over British and Spanish invaders. When Napoleon Bonaparte tried to re-impose slavery in 1802, Toussaint again turned against the French. At first, his army suffered reverses. Captured and deported to France, Toussaint died in a medieval fortress in April 1803. Within a few months, however, the war in Saint Domingue shifted against the French; victorious blacks established Haiti as an independent nation in 1804. (*The Amistad Research Center at Tulane University, New Orleans*)

Domingue was a very profitable colony. More than twice the size of Jamaica, it produced 30 percent of the world's sugar and more than half of its coffee. With 500,000 black slaves working under oppressive conditions, and forty thousand whites, it was chronically vulnerable to eruption. Further, the insurrection occurred at a time when France itself was in the midst of revolution.

The British government already feared that the ideals of the French Revolution, which had started in 1789, would undermine their monarchy, and they quickly recognized that slaves carried to Jamaica by fleeing French planters were infecting Jamaican slaves with ideas of freedom. When Britain and France went to war in 1793, Britain dispatched an army, larger than any it had sent to crush the American rebellion two decades earlier, to seize Saint Domingue from France and “to prevent a Circulation in the British Colonies of the wild and pernicious Doctrines and Liberty and Equality.” But British intervention backfired. Toussaint L'Ouverture, a free black who first joined and then led Saint Domingue's ex-slaves, used guerrilla tactics to inflict heavy casualties on the British army, which had already been decimated by malaria, and in 1798 British troops were forced to evacuate.

Britain's disastrous intervention to preserve West Indian slavery had the unintended effect of enlivening the antislavery movement in Britain. More than half of the nearly 89,000 British troops sent to the West Indies between 1791 and 1801 died of disease or wounds. Even Britons who had no moral objection to slavery found themselves asking whether maintaining colonies based on slave labor was worth the cost.

This practical consideration was soon bolstered by a political argument against slavery. In 1794, the new French Republic had abolished slavery in all French colonies. But in 1802, Napoleon Bonaparte sent an army to crush the rebels in Saint Domingue. Despite savage tactics—one rebel leader's epaulets were nailed to his shoulders before his wife and children, who were then drowned before his eyes—the French army was destroyed by disease and by former slaves desperate to remain free. When the war between France and Britain resumed in 1803, Britain took the moral high ground against Napoleon, the enslaver, by making hostility to slavery a patriotic duty.

In 1807, Parliament banned Britons from engaging in the slave trade. By then, British public opinion had turned against

slavery. Because only a small fraction of Britons could vote, West Indian planters continued to have enough influence in Parliament to block the emancipation of slaves. But word of antislavery agitation in Britain reached slaves in Jamaica. In 1831, Christmas fell on a Sunday, and when slaves learned they would not get an extra day's holiday, they erupted in the largest slave uprising in the history of the British Caribbean. White planters roughed up Protestant missionaries, whom they blamed for seeding the rebellion. Returning to Britain, the missionaries led a renewed onslaught on slavery. In 1833, Parliament decreed the abolition of slavery in all British dependencies. This act, which freed 700,000 slaves in the West Indies and another sixty thousand in South Africa, became fully effective on August 1, 1838. Before the Civil War, free American blacks in the North celebrated August 1, not July 4, as their national holiday.

British emancipation breathed new life into the antislavery movement in the United States. John Quincy Adams compared it to an earthquake, and William Lloyd Garrison journeyed to London to study the tactics of British abolitionists. Elsewhere, rebellions against Spanish rule led to laws abolishing slavery in Venezuela (1821), Chile (1823), and Mexico (1829). Although many of these laws had limited effect, once Britain had abolished slavery it had an incentive to undermine slavery everywhere to deny its rivals a competitive economic advantage. The argument advanced by southerners in the 1840s that the United States had to annex Texas to prevent Britain from emancipating slaves there was not entirely fanciful. True, Britain was in no position to abolish slavery in Texas, to which it had no claim. But Britain, once the world's leading slave-trading nation and a country with which the United States had already fought two wars, had become the world's leading antislavery nation.

In 1860, slavery survived in the Western Hemisphere only in the American South, Cuba, Puerto Rico, and Brazil. Southerners who had long invoked the universality of slavery as a reason to continue it were now whistling in the dark.

## QUESTIONS FOR ANALYSIS

- What factors explain Britain's shift toward antislavery?
- How did this shift affect defenders and opponents of slavery in the United States?

Some southerners contended that secession would make it easier for the South to acquire more territory for slavery in the Caribbean; yet the South was scarcely united in desiring additional slave territory in Mexico, Cuba, or Central America. States like Alabama, Mississippi, and Texas contained vast tracts of unsettled land that could be converted to cotton cultivation far more easily than the Caribbean. Other southerners continued to complain that the North blocked the access of slaveholders to territories in the continental United States. But if the South were to secede, the remaining continental territories would belong exclusively to the North, which could then legislate for them as it chose. Nor would secession stop future John Browns from infiltrating the South to provoke slave insurrections.

Yet to dwell on the impracticality of secession as a choice for the South is to miss the point. Talk of secession was less a tactic with clear goals than an expression of the South's outrage at what southerners viewed as the irresponsible and unconstitutional course that the Republicans were taking in the North. It was not merely that Republican attacks on slavery sowed the seeds of slave uprisings. More fundamentally, southerners believed that the North was treating the South as its inferior, as no more than a slave. "Talk of Negro slavery," exclaimed southern proslavery philosopher George Fitzhugh, "is not half so humiliating and disgraceful as the slavery of the South to the North."

"Talk of Negro slavery is not half so humiliating and disgraceful as the slavery of the South to the North."

Having persuaded themselves that slavery made it possible for them to enjoy unprecedented freedom and equality, white southerners took great pride in their homeland. They bitterly dismissed Republican portrayals of the South as a

region of arrogant planters and degraded white common folk. Submission to the Republicans, declared Democratic senator Jefferson Davis of Mississippi, "would be intolerable to a proud people."

## The Collapse of the Union, 1860–1861

As long as the pliant James Buchanan occupied the White House, southerners did no more than talk about secession. Once aware that Buchanan had declined to seek reelection, however, they approached the election of 1860 with anxiety. Although not all voters realized it, when they cast their ballots in 1860 they were deciding not just the outcome of an election but the fate of the Union. Lincoln's election initiated the process by which the southern states abandoned

the United States for a new nation, the Confederate States of America. Initially, the Confederacy consisted only of states in the Lower South. As the Upper South hesitated to embrace secession, moderates searched frantically for a compromise that would save the Union. But they searched in vain. The time for compromise had passed.

### The Election of 1860

As a single-issue, free-soil party, the Republicans had done well in the election of 1856. To win in 1860, however, they would have to broaden their appeal in the North, particularly in states like Pennsylvania and Illinois, which they had lost in 1856. To do so, Republican leaders had concluded, they needed to forge an economic program to complement their advocacy of free soil.

A severe economic slump following the so-called Panic of 1857 furnished the Republicans with a fitting opening. The depression shattered more than a decade of American prosperity and thrust economic concerns to the fore. In response, in the late 1850s the Republicans developed an economic program based on support for a protective tariff (popular in Pennsylvania) and on two issues favored in the Midwest, federal aid for internal improvements and the granting to settlers of free 160-acre homesteads out of publicly owned land. By proposing to make these homesteads available to immigrants who were not yet citizens, the Republicans went far in shedding the nativist image that lingered from their early association with the Know-Nothings. Carl Schurz, an 1848 German political refugee who had campaigned for Lincoln against Douglas in 1858, now labored mightily to bring his antislavery countrymen over to the Republican Party.

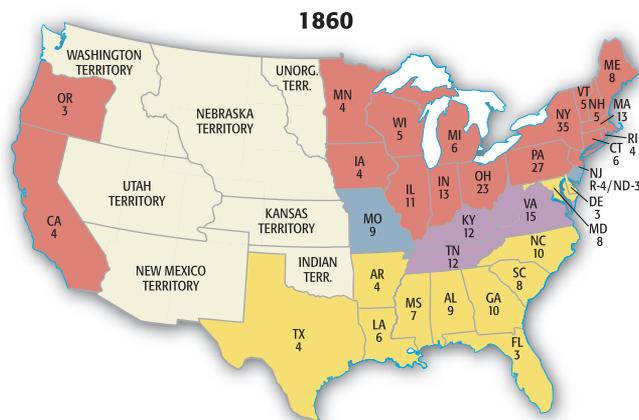
The Republicans' desire to broaden their appeal also influenced their choice of a candidate. At their convention in Chicago, they nominated Abraham Lincoln over the early front-runner, William H. Seward of New York. Although better known than Lincoln, Seward failed to convince his party that he could carry the key states of Pennsylvania, Illinois, Indiana, and New Jersey. Lincoln held the advantage not only of hailing from Illinois but also of projecting a more moderate image than Seward on the slavery issue. Seward's penchant for controversial phrases like "irrepressible conflict" and "higher law" had given him a radical image. Lincoln, in contrast, had repeatedly affirmed that Congress had no constitutional right to interfere with slavery in the South and had explicitly rejected the "higher law" doctrine. The Republicans now needed only to widen their northern appeal.

The Democrats, still claiming to be a national party, had to bridge their own sectional differences. The *Dred Scott* decision and the conflict over the Lecompton constitution had weakened the northern Democrats and strengthened southern Democrats. While Douglas still desperately defended popular sovereignty, southern Democrats stretched *Dred Scott* to conclude that Congress now had to protect slavery in the territories.

The Democrats' internal turmoil boiled over at their Charleston convention in 1860. Failing to force acceptance of a platform guaranteeing federal protection of slavery in the territories, the delegates from the Lower South stalked out. The convention adjourned to Baltimore, where a new fight broke out over the question of seating hastily elected pro-Douglas slates of delegates from the Lower South states that had seceded from the Charleston convention. The decision to seat these pro-Douglas slates led to a walkout by delegates from Virginia and other states in the Upper South. The remaining delegates nominated Douglas; the seceders marched off to another hall in Baltimore and nominated Buchanan's vice president, John C. Breckinridge of Kentucky, on a platform calling for the congressional protection of slavery in the territories. Unable to rally behind a single nominee, the divided Democrats thus ran two candidates, Douglas and Breckinridge. The disruption of the Democratic Party was now complete.

The South still contained an appreciable number of moderates, often former Whigs who had joined with the Know-Nothings behind Fillmore in 1856. In 1860, these moderates, aided by former northern Whigs who opposed both Lincoln and Douglas, forged the new Constitutional Union Party and nominated John Bell, a Tennessee slaveholder who had opposed both the Kansas-Nebraska Act and the Lecompton constitution. Calling for the preservation of the Union, the new party took no stand on the divisive issue of slavery extension.

With four candidates in the field, voters faced a relatively clear choice. Lincoln conceded that the South had a constitutional right to preserve slavery but demanded that Congress prohibit its extension. At the other extreme, Breckinridge insisted that Congress had to protect slavery in any territory that contained slaves. This left the middle ground to Bell and Douglas, the latter still committed to popular sovereignty but in search of a verbal formula that might reconcile it with the *Dred Scott* decision. Lincoln won a clear majority of the electoral vote, 180 to 123 for his three opponents combined. Although Lincoln gained only 39 percent of the popular vote, his popular votes were concentrated in the North, the majority section, and were sufficient to carry



Candidate (Party)	Electoral Vote	Popular Vote
Lincoln (Republican)	180 59.4%	1,865,593 39.8%
Douglas (Northern Democrat)	12 3.9%	1,382,713 29.5%
Breckinridge (Southern Democrat)	72 23.8%	848,356 18.1%
Bell (Constitutional Union)	39 12.9%	592,906 12.6%
Territories, no returns		

**MAP 14.4 THE ELECTION OF 1860** Having given the nation four of its first five presidents, the South confronted permanent minority status after the election of 1860. Despite receiving no votes in the South, Lincoln won the electoral vote easily. Even had the Democrats united behind a single candidate, Lincoln would have won the election.

every free state. Douglas ran a respectable second to Lincoln in the popular vote but a dismal last in the electoral vote. As the only candidate to campaign in both sections, Douglas suffered from the scattered nature of his votes and carried only Missouri. Bell won Virginia, Kentucky, and Tennessee, and Breckinridge captured Maryland and the Lower South (see Map 14.4).

## The Movement for Secession

Lincoln's election struck most of the white South as a calculated northern insult. The North, a South Carolina planter told a visitor from England, "has got so far toward being abolitionized as to elect a man avowedly hostile to our institutions."

Few southerners believed Lincoln would fulfill his promise to protect slavery in the South, and most feared he would act as a mere front man for more John Browns. "Now that the black radical Republicans have the power I suppose they will Brown

"Now that the black radical Republicans have the power I suppose they will Brown us all."

## Lincoln at Cooper Union

Abraham Lincoln's Cooper Union speech, delivered in New York City on February 27, 1860, elevated him into the national spotlight. On the basis of his own extensive research, he established that in later votes in Congress, a clear majority of the thirty-nine signers of the Constitution demonstrated their

view that the federal government had the power to restrict slavery in the territories. So much for the South's insistence that it was the true heir to the Founding generation. Lincoln then continued as follows.

Will they [southerners] be satisfied if the Territories be unconditionally surrendered to them? We know they will not. In all their present complaints against us, the Territories are scarcely mentioned. Invasions and insurrections are the rage now [a reference to John Brown's raid]. Will it satisfy them if in the future we have nothing to do with invasions and insurrections? We know it will not. We so know because we know we never had anything to do with invasions and insurrections; and yet this total abstaining does not exempt us from the charge and the denunciation.

The question recurs, what will satisfy them? Simply this: we must not only let them alone, but we must somehow convince them that we do let them alone. This, we know by experience, is no easy task. We have been trying to convince them from the very beginning of our organization [the Republican party], but with no success. In all our platforms and speeches we have constantly protested our purpose to let them alone; but this has had no tendency to convince them. . . .

These natural, and apparently adequate means all failing, what will convince them? This, and this only: cease to call

slavery *wrong* and join them in calling it *right*. And this must be done thoroughly—done in *acts* as well as *words*. Silence will not be tolerated. . . . We must arrest and return their fugitive slaves with greedy pleasure. We must pull down our free state constitutions. The whole atmosphere must be disinfected of all taint of opposition to slavery, before they will cease to believe that all their troubles proceed from us.

I am quite aware they do not state their case in precisely this way. Most of them would probably say to us, "Let us alone, do nothing to us, and say what you please about slavery." But we do let them alone—have never disturbed them—so that, after all, it is what we say, which dissatisfies them. They will continue to accuse us of doing, until we cease saying. . . . Holding, as they do, that slavery is morally right, and socially elevating, they cannot cease to demand a full national recognition of it, as a legal right, and a social blessing.

**Source:** *Appears in LINCOLN AT COOPER UNION: The Speech that Made Abraham Lincoln President by Harold Holzer (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004).*

### QUESTIONS

1. Lincoln's mainly Republican audience included some prominent Democrats. What image of the Republican party was he trying to counter?
2. Was Lincoln trying to conciliate the South, or unify the North? Explain your answer.



Go to the website at [www.cengage.com/history/boyerenduring7e](http://www.cengage.com/history/boyerenduring7e) for additional primary sources on this period.

us all,” a South Carolinian lamented (see Going to the Source). An uneducated Mississippian residing in Illinois expressed his reaction to the election more bluntly:

*It seems the north wants the south to raise cotton and sugar rice tobacco for the northern states, also to pay taxes and fight her battles and get territory for the purpose of the north to send her greasy Dutch and free niggers into the territory to get rid of them. At any rate that was what elected old Abe President. Some professed conservative Republicans Think and say that Lincoln will be conservative also but sir my opinion is that Lincoln will deceive them. [He] will undoubtedly please the abolitionists for at his election they nearly all went into fits with Joy.*

Some southerners had threatened secession at the prospect of Lincoln’s election. Now the moment of decision had arrived. On December 20, 1860, a South Carolina convention voted unanimously for secession; in short order Alabama, Mississippi, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, and Texas followed. On February 4, delegates from these seven states met in Montgomery, Alabama, and established the **Confederate States of America**.

Despite the abruptness of southern withdrawal from the Union, the movement for secession was laced with uncertainty. Many southerners had resisted calls for immediate secession. Even after Lincoln’s election, fire-eating secessionists had met fierce opposition in the Lower South from so-called cooperationists, who called upon the South to act in unison or not at all. Many cooperationists had hoped to delay secession to wring concessions from the North that might remove the need for secession. Jefferson Davis, inaugurated in February 1861 as president of the Confederacy, was a reluctant secessionist who remained in the United States Senate two weeks after his own state of Mississippi had seceded. Even zealous advocates of secession had a hard time reconciling themselves to secession and believing that they were no longer citizens of the United States. “How do you feel now, dear Mother,” a Georgian wrote, “that we are in a foreign land?”

At first, the Upper South states of Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Arkansas flatly rejected secession (see Map 14.5). In contrast to the Lower South, which had a guaranteed export market for its cotton, the Upper South depended heavily on economic ties to the North that would be severed by secession. Furthermore, with proportionately far fewer slaves than the Lower South, the states of the Upper South doubted the loyalty of their sizable nonslaveholding populations to the idea of secession. Virginia, for example, had

every reason to question the allegiance to secession of its nonslaveholding western counties, which would soon break away to form Unionist West Virginia. Few in the Upper South could forget the raw nerve touched by the publication in 1857 of Hinton R. Helper’s *The Impending Crisis of the South*. A nonslaveholding North Carolinian, Helper had described slavery as a curse upon poor white southerners and thereby questioned one of the most sacred southern doctrines, the idea that slavery rendered all whites equal. If secession were to spark a war between the states, moreover, the Upper South appeared to be the likeliest battleground. Whatever the exact weight assignable to each of these factors, one point is clear: the secession movement that South Carolina so boldly started in December 1860 seemed to be falling apart by March 1861.

## The Search for Compromise

The lack of southern unity confirmed the view of most Republicans that the secessionists were more bluster than substance. Seward described secession as the work of “a relatively few hotheads,” and Lincoln believed that the loyal majority of southerners would soon wrest control from the fire-eating minority.

This perception stiffened Republican resolve to resist compromise. Moderate John J. Crittenden of Kentucky proposed compensation for owners of runaway slaves, repeal of northern personal-liberty laws, a constitutional amendment to prohibit the federal government from interfering with slavery in the southern states, and another amendment to restore the Missouri Compromise line for the remaining territories and protect slavery below it. But in the face of steadfast Republican opposition, the Crittenden plan collapsed.

Lincoln’s faith in a “loyal majority” of southerners exaggerated both their numbers and their devotion to the Union. Many southern opponents of the fire-eating secessionists were sitting on the fence and hoping for major concessions from the North; their allegiance to the Union thus was conditional. Lincoln can be faulted for misreading southern opinion, but even if his assessment had been accurate, it is unlikely that he would have accepted the Crittenden plan. The sticking point was the proposed extension of the Missouri Compromise line. To Republicans this was a surrender, not a compromise,

“How do you feel now, dear Mother,” a Georgian wrote, “that we are in a foreign land?”



**MAP 14.5 SECESSION** Four key states—Virginia, Arkansas, Tennessee, and North Carolina—did not secede until after the fall of Fort Sumter. The border slave states of Maryland, Delaware, Kentucky, and Missouri stayed in the Union.

because it hinged on the abandonment of free soil, the founding principle of their party. In addition, Lincoln well knew that some southerners still talked of seizing more territory for slavery in the Caribbean. In proposing to extend the 36°30' line, the Crittenden plan specifically referred to territories “hereafter acquired.” Lincoln feared it would be only a matter of time “till we shall have to take Cuba as a condition upon which they [the seceding states] will stay in the Union.”

Beyond these considerations, the precipitous secession of the Lower South changed the question that Lincoln faced. The issue was no longer slavery extension but secession. The Lower South had left the Union in the face of losing a fair election. For Lincoln to have caved in to such pressure would have violated majority rule, the principle upon which the nation, not just his party, had been founded.

## The Coming of War

By the time Lincoln took office in March 1861, little more than a spark was needed to ignite a war.

William Seward, whom Lincoln had appointed secretary of state, now became obsessed with the idea of conciliating the Lower South in order to hold the Upper South in the Union. In addition to advising the evacuation of federal forces from Fort Sumter, Seward proposed a scheme to reunify the nation by provoking a war with France and Spain. But Lincoln brushed aside Seward’s advice. Instead, the president informed the governor of South Carolina of his intention to supply Fort Sumter with much-needed provisions, but not with men and ammunition. To gain the dubious military advantage of attacking Fort Sumter before the arrival of relief ships, Confederate batteries began to bombard the fort shortly before dawn on April 12. The next day, the fort’s garrison surrendered.

Lincoln’s appeal for seventy-five thousand volunteers from the loyal states to suppress the rebellion pushed citizens of the Upper South off the fence upon which they had perched for three months. “I am a Union man,” one southerner wrote, “but when they [the Lincoln administration] send men south it will change my notions. I can do nothing against my own people.” In quick succession,

Virginia, North Carolina, Arkansas, and Tennessee leagued with the Confederacy. After acknowledging that “I am one of those dull creatures that cannot see the good of secession,” Robert E. Lee resigned from the army rather than lead federal troops against his native Virginia.

The North, too, was ready for a fight, less to abolish slavery than to punish secession. Worn out from his efforts to find a peaceable solution to the issue of slavery extension, and with only a

short time to live, Stephen Douglas assaulted “the new system of resistance by the sword and bayonet to the results of the ballot-box” and affirmed: “I deprecate war, but if it must come I am with my country, under all circumstances, and in every contingency.”

Stephen Douglas affirmed: “I deprecate war, but if it must come I am with my country, under all circumstances, and in every contingency.”

## CHRONOLOGY

## 1850–1861

<b>1848</b>	Zachary Taylor elected president.	<b>1856</b>	“The sack of Lawrence.” John Brown’s Pottawatomie massacre. James Buchanan elected president.
<b>1849</b>	California seeks admission to the Union as a free state.	<b>1857</b>	<i>Dred Scott</i> decision. President Buchanan endorses the Lecompton constitution in Kansas. Panic of 1857.
<b>1850</b>	Nashville convention assembles to discuss the South’s grievances. Compromise of 1850.	<b>1858</b>	Congress refuses to admit Kansas to the Union under the Lecompton constitution. Lincoln-Douglas debates.
<b>1852</b>	Harriet Beecher Stowe, <i>Uncle Tom’s Cabin</i> . Franklin Pierce elected president.	<b>1859</b>	John Brown’s raid on Harpers Ferry.
<b>1853</b>	Gadsden Purchase.	<b>1860</b>	Abraham Lincoln elected president. South Carolina secedes from the Union.
<b>1854</b>	Ostend Manifesto. Kansas-Nebraska Act. William Walker leads filibustering expedition into Nicaragua.	<b>1861</b>	The remaining Lower South states secede. Confederate States of America established. Crittenden compromise plan collapses. Lincoln takes office. Firing on Fort Sumter; Civil War begins. Upper South secedes.
<b>1854–1855</b>	Know-Nothing and Republican parties emerge.		
<b>1855</b>	Proslavery forces steal the election for a territorial legislature in Kansas. Proslavery Kansans establish a government in Lecompton. Free-soil government established in Topeka, Kansas.		

## CONCLUSION

The expectation of most American political leaders that the Compromise of 1850 would finally resolve the vexing issue of slavery extension had a surface plausibility. In neither 1850 nor 1860 did the great majority of Americans favor the abolition of slavery in the southern states. Rather, they divided over slavery in the territories, an issue seemingly settled by the Compromise. Stephen A. Douglas, its leading architect and a man who assumed he always had his finger on the popular pulse, was sure that slavery had reached its natural limits, that popular sovereignty would keep it out of the territories, and that the furor over slavery extension would die down.

Douglas believed that only a few hotheads had kept the slavery extension issue alive. He was wrong. The differences between northerners and southerners over slavery extension were grounded on different understandings of liberty, which to northerners meant their freedom to pursue self-interest without competition from slaves, and to southerners their freedom to dispose of their legally acquired property, slaves, as they chose. The Compromise, which had barely scraped through Congress, soon unraveled. Enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Act brought to the surface widespread northern resentment of slaveholders, people who seemingly lived off the work of others, and a determination to exclude the possibility of slavery in the territories. Southern support for Douglas's Kansas-Nebraska bill, with its repeal of the Missouri Compromise and its apparent invitation to southerners to bring slaves into Kansas, persuaded many northerners that the South harbored the design of extending slavery. For their

part, southerners, already angered by northern defiance of the Fugitive Slave Act, interpreted northern outrage against Douglas's bill as further evidence of the North's disrespect for the rule of law.

By the mid-1850s, the sectional division was spinning out of the control of politicians. Deep divisions between the Whigs' free-soil northern wing and their proslavery southern wing led to the party's collapse in the wake of the Kansas-Nebraska Act. Divisions between northern and southern Democrats would be papered over as long as the Democratic Party could unite behind Douglas's formula of popular sovereignty. But popular sovereignty failed its test in Kansas. The outbreak of civil strife in Kansas pushed former northern Whigs and many northern Democrats toward the new, purely sectional, Republicans, a party whose very existence southerners interpreted as a mark of northern contempt for them.

The South was not yet ready for secession. Before it took that drastic step, it had to convince itself that the North's real design was not merely to restrict the extension of slavery but to destroy slavery and, with it, the South itself. Northern hostility to the *Dred Scott* decision and sympathy for John Brown struck southerners as proof of just such an intent.

As an expression of principled outrage, secession capped a decade in which each side had clothed itself in principles that were deeply embedded in the nation's political heritage. Both sides subscribed to the rule of law, which each accused the other of deserting. In the end, war broke out between siblings who, although they claimed the same heritage and inheritance, had become virtual strangers to each other.

## KEY TERMS

Fort Sumter (p. 397)

John Brown (p. 398)

free soil (p. 398)

popular sovereignty (p. 398)

“higher law” (p. 399)

Stephen A. Douglas (p. 399)

Compromise of 1850 (p. 400)

Fugitive Slave Act (p. 401)

personal-liberty laws (p. 401)

*Uncle Tom's Cabin* (p. 401)

Franklin Pierce (p. 402)

Kansas-Nebraska Act (p. 403)

Slave Power (p. 405)

Know-Nothings (p. 406)

Republican Party (p. 407)

Charles Sumner (p. 409)

*Dred Scott v. Sandford* (p. 410)

Lecompton constitution (p. 411)

Abraham Lincoln (p. 412)

Confederate States  
of America (p. 421)

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