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# Renewing the Sectional Struggle

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1848–1854

SECESSION! PEACEABLE SECESSION!  
SIR, YOUR EYES AND MINE ARE NEVER  
DESTINED TO SEE THAT MIRACLE.

DANIEL WEBSTER,  
SEVENTH OF MARCH SPEECH, 1850

The year 1848, highlighted by a rash of revolutions in Europe, was filled with unrest in America. The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo had officially ended the war with Mexico, but it had initiated a new and perilous round of political warfare in the United States. The vanquished Mexicans had been forced to relinquish an enormous tract of real estate, including Texas, California, and all the area between. The acquisition of this huge domain raised anew the burning issue of extending slavery into the territories. Northern antislaveryites had rallied behind the Wilmot Proviso, which flatly prohibited slavery in any territory acquired in the Mexican War. Southern senators had blocked the passage of the proviso, but the issue would not die. Ominously, debate over slavery in the area of the Mexican Cession threatened to disrupt the ranks of both Whigs and Democrats and split national politics along North-South sectional lines.



## The Popular Sovereignty Panacea

Each of the two great political parties was a vital bond of national unity, for each enjoyed powerful support in both North and South. If they should be replaced by two purely sectional groupings, the Union would be in peril. To politicians, the wisest strategy seemed to be to sit on the lid of the slavery issue and ignore the boiling beneath. Even so, the cover bobbed up and down ominously in response to the agitation of zealous northern abolitionists and impassioned southern “fire-eaters.”

Anxious Democrats were forced to seek a new standard-bearer in 1848. President Polk, broken in health by overwork and chronic diarrhea, had pledged himself to a single term. The Democratic National Convention at Baltimore turned to an aging leader,

General Lewis Cass, a veteran of the War of 1812. Although a senator and diplomat of wide experience and considerable ability, he was sour-visaged and somewhat pompous. His enemies dubbed him General “Gass” and quickly noted that *Cass* rhymed with *jackass*. The Democratic platform, in line with the lid-sitting strategy, was silent on the burning issue of slavery in the territories.

But Cass himself had not been silent. His views on the extension of slavery were well known because he was the reputed father of “popular sovereignty.” This was the doctrine that stated that the sovereign people of a territory, under the general principles of the Constitution, should themselves determine the status of slavery.

Popular sovereignty had a persuasive appeal. The public liked it because it accorded with the democratic tradition of self-determination. Politicians liked it because it seemed a comfortable compromise between the free-soilers’ bid for a ban on slavery in the territories and southern demands that Congress protect slavery in the territories. Popular sovereignty tossed the slavery problem into the laps of the people in the various territories. Advocates of the principle thus hoped to dissolve the most stubborn national issue of the day into a series of local issues. Yet popular sovereignty had one fatal defect: it might serve to spread the blight of slavery.



### Political Triumphs for General Taylor

The Whigs, meeting in Philadelphia, cashed in on the “Taylor fever.” They nominated frank and honest Zachary Taylor, the “Hero of Buena Vista,” who had never held civil office or even voted for president. Henry Clay, the living embodiment of Whiggism, should logically have been nominated. But Clay had made too many speeches—and too many enemies.

As usual, the Whigs pussyfooted in their platform. Eager to win at any cost, they dodged all troublesome issues and merely extolled the homespun virtues of their candidate. The self-reliant old frontier fighter had not committed himself on the issue of slavery extension. But as a wealthy resident of Louisiana, living on a sugar plantation, he owned scores of slaves.

Ardent antislavery men in the North, distrusting both Cass and Taylor, organized the Free Soil party. Aroused by the conspiracy of silence in the Democratic and Whig platforms, the Free-Soilers made no bones about their own stand. They came out foursquare for



**General Zachary Taylor (1784–1850)**

This Democratic campaign cartoon of 1848 charges that Taylor’s reputation rested on Mexican skulls.

the Wilmot Proviso and against slavery in the territories. Going beyond other antislavery groups, they broadened their appeal by advocating federal aid for internal improvements and by urging free government homesteads for settlers.

The new party assembled a strange assortment of new fellows in the same political bed. It attracted industrialists miffed at Polk’s reduction of protective tariffs. It appealed to Democrats resentful of Polk’s settling for part of Oregon while insisting on all of Texas—a disparity that suggested a menacing southern dominance in the Democratic party. It harbored many northerners whose hatred was directed not so much at slavery as at blacks and who gagged at the prospect of sharing the newly acquired western territories with African

Americans. It also contained a large element of “conscience Whigs,” heavily influenced by the abolitionist crusade, who condemned slavery on moral grounds. The Free-Soilers trotted out wizened former president Van Buren and marched into the fray, shouting, “Free soil, free speech, free labor, and free men.” These freedoms provided the bedrock on which the Free-Soilers built their party. Free-Soilers condemned slavery not so much for enslaving blacks but for destroying the chances of free white workers to rise up from wage-earning dependence to the esteemed status of self-employment. Free-Soilers argued that only with free soil in the West could a traditional American commitment to upward mobility continue to flourish. If forced to compete with slave labor, more costly wage labor would inevitably wither away, and with it the chance for the American worker to own property. As the first widely inclusive party organized around the issue of slavery and confined to a single section, the Free Soil party foreshadowed the emergence of the Republican party six years later.

With the slavery issue officially shoved under the rug by the two major parties, the politicians on both sides opened fire on personalities. The amateurish Taylor had to be carefully watched, lest his indiscreet pen puncture the reputation won by his sword. His admirers puffed him up as a gallant knight and a Napoleon, and sloganized his remark, allegedly uttered during the Battle of Buena Vista, “General Taylor never surrenders.” Taylor’s wartime popularity pulled him through. He harvested 1,360,967 popular and 163 electoral votes, as compared with Cass’s 1,222,342 popular and 127 electoral votes. Free-Soiler Van Buren, although winning no state, polled 291,263 ballots and apparently diverted enough Democratic strength from Cass in the crucial state of New York to throw the election to Taylor.

### “Californy Gold”

Tobacco-chewing President Taylor—with his stumpy legs, rough features, heavy jaw, black hair, ruddy complexion, and squinty gray eyes—was a military square peg in a political round hole. He would have been spared much turmoil if he could have continued to sit on the slavery lid. But the discovery of gold on the American River near Sutter’s Mill, California, early in 1848, blew the cover off.

A horde of adventurers poured into the valleys of California. Singing “O Susannah!” and shouting “Gold! Gold! Gold!” they began tearing frantically at the yellow-graveled streams and hills. A fortunate few of the bearded miners “struck it rich” at the “diggings.” But the



**California Gold Rush Country** Miners from all over the world swarmed over the rivers that drained the western slope of California’s Sierra Nevada. Their nationalities and religions, their languages and their ways of life, are recorded in the colorful place names they left behind.

luckless many, who netted blisters instead of nuggets, probably would have been money well ahead if they had stayed at home unaffected by “gold fever,” which was often followed by more deadly fevers. The most reliable profits were made by those who mined the miners, notably by charging outrageous rates for laundry and other personal services. Some soiled clothing was even sent as far away as the Hawaiian Islands for washing.

The overnight inpouring of tens of thousands of people into the future Golden State completely overwhelmed the one-horse government of California. A distressingly high proportion of the newcomers were lawless men, accompanied or followed by virtueless women. A contemporary song ran,

*Oh what was your name in the States?  
Was it Thompson or Johnson or Bates?*



#### Placer Miners in California

Cheap but effective, placer mining consisted of literally “washing” the gold out of surface deposits. No deep excavation was required. This crew of male and female miners in California in 1852 was using a “long tom” sluice that washed relatively large quantities of ore.

*Did you murder your wife,  
And fly for your life?  
Say, what was your name in the States?*

An outburst of crime inevitably resulted from the presence of so many miscreants and outcasts. Robbery, claim jumping, and murder were commonplace, and such violence was only partly discouraged by rough vigilante justice. In San Francisco, from 1848 to 1856, there were scores of lawless killings but only three semilegal hangings.

A majority of Californians, as decent and law-abiding citizens needing protection, grappled earnestly with the problem of erecting an adequate state government. Privately encouraged by President Taylor, they drafted a constitution in 1849 that excluded slavery and then boldly applied to Congress for admission. California would thus bypass the usual territorial stage, thwarting southern congressmen seeking to block free soil. Southern politicians, alarmed by the Californians’ “impertinent” stroke for freedom, arose in violent opposition. Would California prove to be the golden straw that broke the back of the Union?



### Sectional Balance and the Underground Railroad

The South of 1850 was relatively well-off. It then enjoyed, as it had from the beginning, more than its share of the nation’s leadership. It had seated in the White House the war hero Zachary Taylor, a Virginia-

*A married woman wrote from the California goldfields to her sister in New England in 1853,*

*“i tell you the woman are in great demand in this country no matter whether they are married or not you need not think strange if you see me coming home with some good looking man some of these times with a pocket full of rocks. . . it is all the go here for Ladys to leave there Husbands two out of three do it there is a first rate Chance for a single woman she can have her choice of thousands i wish mother was here she could marry a rich man and not have to lift her hand to do her work.”*

*The idea that many ne’er-do-wells went west is found in the Journals (January 1849) of Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882):*

*“If a man is going to California, he announces it with some hesitation; because it is a confession that he has failed at home.”*

born, slaveowning planter from Louisiana. It boasted a majority in the cabinet and on the Supreme Court. If outnumbered in the House, the South had equality in the Senate, where it could at least neutralize northern maneuvers. Its cotton fields were expanding, and cotton prices were profitably high. Few sane people, North or South, believed that slavery was seriously threatened where it already existed below the Mason-Dixon line. The fifteen slave states could easily veto any proposed constitutional amendment.

Yet the South was deeply worried, as it had been for several decades, by the ever-tipping political balance. There were then fifteen slave states and fifteen free states. The admission of California would destroy the delicate equilibrium in the Senate, perhaps forever. Potential slave territory under the American flag was running short, if it had not in fact disappeared. Agitation had already developed in the territories of New Mexico and Utah for admission as nonslave states. The fate of California might well establish a precedent for the rest of the Mexican Cession territory—an area purchased largely with southern blood.

#### Texas and the Disputed Area Before the Compromise of 1850



**A Stop on the Underground Railroad** Sliding shelves in the wall of the Reverend Alexander Dobbin's home in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, concealed a crawl space large enough to hide several escaping slaves.



Texas nursed an additional grievance of its own. It claimed a huge area east of the Rio Grande and north to the forty-second parallel, embracing in part about half the territory of present-day New Mexico. The federal government was proposing to detach this prize, while hot-blooded Texans were threatening to descend upon Santa Fe and seize what they regarded as rightfully theirs. The explosive quarrel foreshadowed shooting.

Many southerners were also angered by the nagging agitation in the North for the abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia. They looked with alarm on the prospect of a ten-mile-square oasis of free soil thrust between slaveholding Maryland and slaveholding Virginia.

Even more disagreeable to the South was the loss of runaway slaves, many of whom were assisted north by the Underground Railroad. This virtual freedom train consisted of an informal chain of “stations” (antislavery homes), through which scores of “passengers” (runaway slaves) were spirited by “conductors” (usually white and black abolitionists) from the slave states to the free-soil sanctuary of Canada.

The most amazing of these “conductors” was an illiterate runaway slave from Maryland, fearless Harriet Tubman. During nineteen forays into the South, she rescued more than three hundred slaves, including her aged parents, and deservedly earned the title “Moses.” Lively imaginations later exaggerated the reach of the Underground Railroad and its “stationmasters,” but its importance was undisputed.

By 1850 southerners were demanding a new and more stringent fugitive-slave law. The old one, passed by Congress in 1793, had proved inadequate to cope with runaways, especially since unfriendly state authorities failed to provide needed cooperation. Unlike cattle thieves, the abolitionists who ran the Underground Railroad did not gain personally from their lawlessness. But to the slaveowners, the loss was infuriating, whatever the motives. The moral judgments of the abolitionists seemed, in some ways, more galling than outright theft. They reflected not only a holier-than-thou attitude but a refusal to obey the laws solemnly passed by Congress.

Estimates indicate that the South in 1850 was losing perhaps 1,000 runaways a year out of its total of some 4 million slaves. In fact, more blacks probably gained their freedom by self-purchase or voluntary emancipation than ever escaped. But the principle weighed heavily with the slavemasters. They rested their argument on the Constitution, which protected slavery, and on the laws of Congress, which provided for slave-catching. “Although the loss of property is felt,” said a southern senator, “the loss of honor is felt still more.”



**Harriet Tubman, Premier Assistant of Runaway Slaves** John Brown called her “General Tubman” for her effective work in helping slaves escape to Canada on the Underground Railroad. During the Civil War, she served as a Union spy behind Confederate lines. Herself illiterate, she worked after the war to bring education to the freed slaves in North Carolina.



### Twilight of the Senatorial Giants

Southern fears were such that Congress was confronted with catastrophe in 1850. Free-soil California was banging on the door for admission. “Fire-eaters” in the South were voicing ominous threats of secession. In October 1849 southerners had announced their intention to convene the following year in Nashville, Tennessee, to consider withdrawing from the Union. The failure of Congress to act could easily mean the failure of the United States as a country. The crisis brought into the congressional forum the most distinguished assemblage

of statesmen since the Constitutional Convention of 1787—the Old Guard of the dying generation and the young gladiators of the new. That “immortal trio”—Clay, Calhoun, and Webster—appeared together for the last time on the public stage.

Henry Clay, now seventy-three years of age, played a crucial role. The “Great Compromiser” had come to the Senate from Kentucky to reprise the role he had played twice before, in the Missouri and nullification crises. The once-glamorous statesman—though disillusioned, enfeebled, and racked by a cruel cough—was still eloquent, conciliatory, and captivating. He proposed and skillfully defended a series of compromises. He was ably seconded by thirty-seven-year-old Senator Stephen A. Douglas of Illinois, the “Little Giant” (five feet four inches), whose role was less spectacular but even more important. Clay urged with all his persuasiveness that the North and South both make concessions and that the North partially yield by enacting a more feasible fugitive-slave law.

Senator John C. Calhoun, the “Great Nullifier,” then sixty-eight and dying of tuberculosis, championed the South in his last formal speech. Too weak to deliver it himself, he sat bundled up in the Senate chamber, his eyes glowing within a stern face, while a younger colleague read his fateful words. “I have, Senators, believed from the first that the agitation on the subject of slavery would, if not prevented by some timely and effective measure, end in disunion.” Although approving the purpose of Clay’s proposed concessions, Calhoun rejected

them as not providing adequate safeguards for southern rights. His impassioned plea was to leave slavery alone, return runaway slaves, give the South its rights as a minority, and restore the political balance. He had in view, as was later revealed, an utterly unworkable scheme of electing two presidents, one from the North and one from the South, each wielding a veto.

Calhoun died in 1850, before the debate was over, murmuring the sad words, “The South! The South! God knows what will become of her!” Appreciative fellow citizens in Charleston erected to his memory an imposing monument, which bore the inscription “Truth, Justice, and the Constitution.” Calhoun had labored to preserve the Union and had taken his stand on the Constitution, but his proposals in their behalf almost undid both.

Daniel Webster next took the Senate spotlight to uphold Clay’s compromise measures in his last great speech, a three-hour effort. Now sixty-eight years old and suffering from a liver complaint aggravated by high living, he had lost some of the fire in his magnificent voice. Speaking deliberately and before overflowing galleries, he urged all reasonable concessions to the South, including a new fugitive-slave law with teeth.

As for slavery in the territories, asked Webster, why legislate on the subject? To do so was an act of sacrilege, for Almighty God had already passed the Wilmot Proviso. The good Lord had decreed—through climate, topography, and geography—that a plantation economy, and hence a slave economy, could not profitably exist in the Mexican Cession territory.\* Webster sanely concluded that compromise, concession, and sweet reasonableness would provide the only solutions. “Let us not be pygmies,” he pleaded, “in a case that calls for men.”

If measured by its immediate effects, Webster’s famed Seventh of March speech, 1850, was his finest. It helped turn the tide in the North toward compromise. The clamor for printed copies became so great that Webster mailed out more than 100,000, remarking that 200,000 would not satisfy the demand. His tremendous effort visibly strengthened Union sentiment. It was especially pleasing to the banking and commercial centers of the North, which stood to lose millions of dollars by secession. One prominent Washington banker canceled two notes of Webster’s, totaling \$5,000, and sent him a personal check for \$1,000 and a message of congratulations.

*Ralph Waldo Emerson, the philosopher and moderate abolitionist, was outraged by Webster’s support of concessions to the South in the Fugitive Slave Act. In February 1851 he wrote in his Journal,*

“I opened a paper to-day in which he [Webster] pounds on the old strings [of liberty] in a letter to the Washington Birthday feasters at New York. ‘Liberty! liberty!’ Pho! Let Mr. Webster, for decency’s sake, shut his lips once and forever on this word. The word *liberty* in the mouth of Mr. Webster sounds like the word *love* in the mouth of a courtesan.”

\*Webster was wrong here; within one hundred years, California had become one of the great cotton-producing states of the Union.

## Compromise of 1850

### Concessions to the North

California admitted as a free state

Territory disputed by Texas and New Mexico to be surrendered to New Mexico

Abolition of the slave trade (but not slavery) in the District of Columbia

### Concessions to the South

The remainder of the Mexican Cession area to be formed into the territories of New Mexico and Utah, without restriction on slavery, hence open to popular sovereignty

Texas to receive \$10 million from the federal government as compensation

A more stringent fugitive-slave law, going beyond that of 1793

But the Free-Soilers and abolitionists, who had assumed Webster was one of them, upbraided him as a traitor, worthy of bracketing with Benedict Arnold. The poet Whittier lamented,

*So fallen! so lost! the light withdrawn  
Which once he wore!  
The glory from his gray hairs gone  
For evermore!*

These reproaches were most unfair. Webster had long regarded slavery as evil but disunion as worse.



### Deadlock and Danger on Capitol Hill

The stormy congressional debate of 1850 was not finished, for the Young Guard from the North were yet to have their say. This was the group of newer leaders who, unlike the aging Old Guard, had not grown up with the Union. They were more interested in purging and purifying it than in patching and preserving it.

William H. Seward, the wiry and husky-throated freshman senator from New York, was the able spokesman for many of the younger northern radicals. A strong antislaveryite, he came out unequivocally against concession. He seemed not to realize that compromise had brought the Union together and that when the sections could no longer compromise, they would have to part company.

Seward argued earnestly that Christian legislators must obey God's moral law as well as man's mundane law. He therefore appealed, with reference to excluding slavery in the territories, to an even "higher law" than the Constitution. This alarming phrase, wrenched from

its context, may have cost him the presidential nomination and the presidency in 1860.

As the great debate in Congress ran its heated course, deadlock seemed certain. Blunt old President Taylor, who had allegedly fallen under the influence of men like "Higher Law" Seward, seemed bent on vetoing any compromise passed by Congress. His military ire was aroused by the threats of Texas to seize Santa Fe. He appeared to be doggedly determined to "Jacksonize" the dissenters, if need be, by leading an army against the Texans in person and hanging all "damned traitors." If troops had begun to march, the South probably would have rallied to the defense of Texas, and the Civil War might have erupted in 1850.

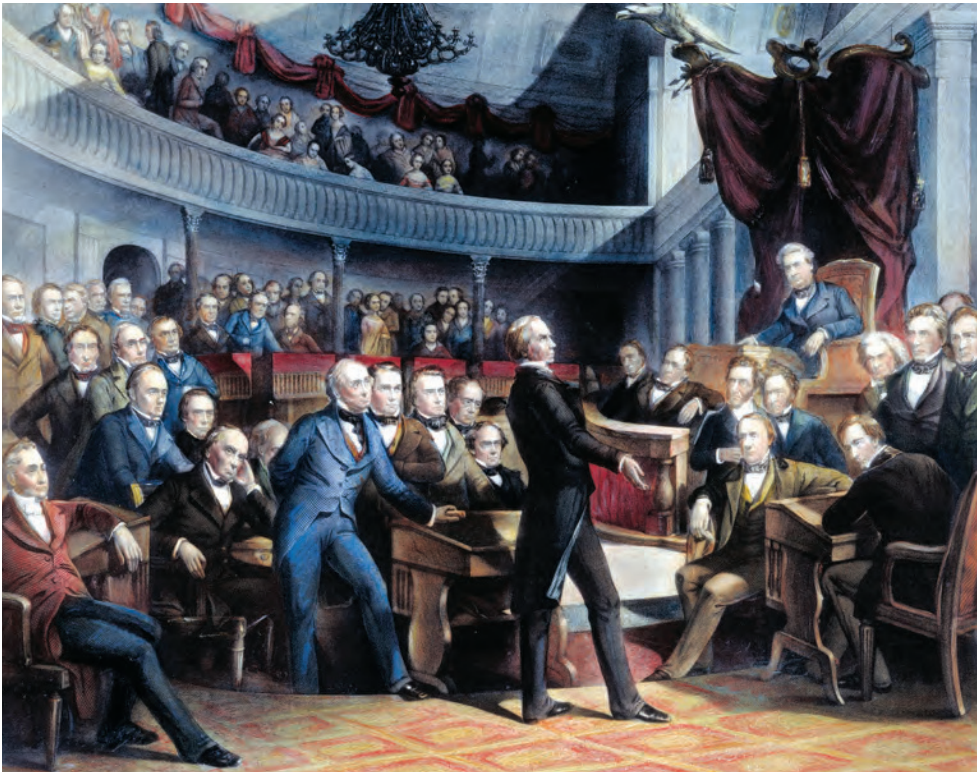


### Breaking the Congressional Logjam

At the height of the controversy in 1850, President Taylor unknowingly helped the cause of concession by dying suddenly, probably of an acute intestinal disorder. Portly, round-faced Vice President Millard Fillmore, a colorless and conciliatory New York lawyer-politician, took over the reins. As presiding officer of the Senate, he had been impressed with the arguments for conciliation, and he gladly signed the series of compromise measures that passed Congress after seven long months of stormy debate. The balancing of interests in the Compromise of 1850 was delicate in the extreme.

The struggle to get these measures accepted by the country was hardly less heated than in Congress. In the northern states, "Union savers" like Senators Clay, Webster, and Douglas orated on behalf of the compromise. The ailing Clay himself delivered more than seventy speeches, as a powerful sentiment for acceptance





### Henry Clay Proposing the Compromise of 1850

This engraving captures one of the most dramatic moments in the history of the United States Senate. Vice President Millard Fillmore presides, while on the floor sit several of the “Senatorial Giants” of the era, including Daniel Webster, Stephen A. Douglas, and John C. Calhoun.

gradually crystallized in the North. It was strengthened by a growing spirit of goodwill, which sprang partly from a feeling of relief and partly from an upsurge of prosperity enriched by California gold.

But the “fire-eaters” of the South were still violently opposed to concessions. One extreme South Carolina newspaper avowed that it loathed the Union and hated the North as much as it did Hell itself. A movement in the South to boycott northern goods gained some headway, but in the end the southern Unionists, assisted by the warm glow of prosperity, prevailed.

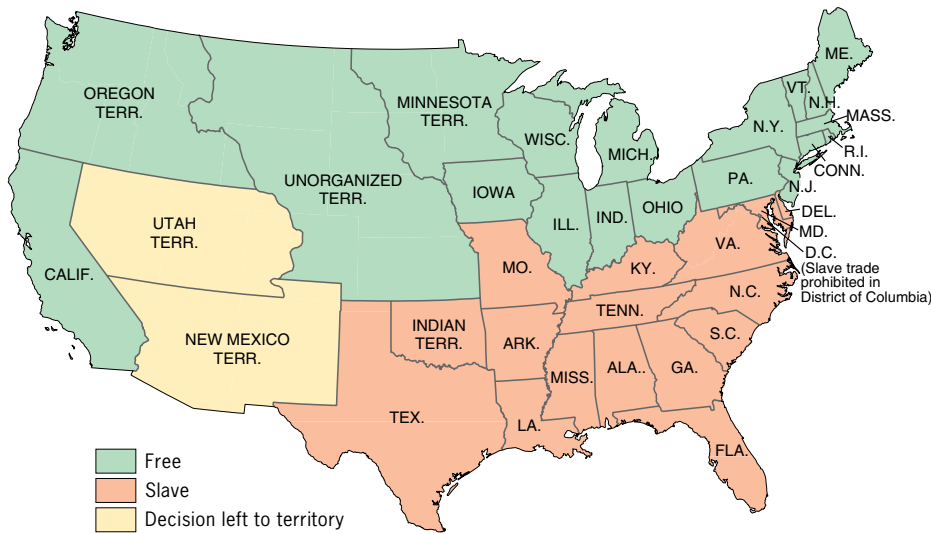
In June 1850 the assemblage of southern extremists met in Nashville, ironically near the burial place of Andrew Jackson. The delegates not only took a strong position in favor of slavery but condemned the compromise measures then being hammered out in Congress. Meeting again in November after the bills had passed, the convention proved to be a dud. By that time southern opinion had reluctantly accepted the verdict of Congress.

Like the calm after a storm, a second Era of Good Feelings dawned. Disquieting talk of secession subsided. Peace-loving people, both North and South, were determined that the compromises should be a “finality” and that the explosive issue of slavery should be buried. But this placid period proved all too brief.

### Balancing the Compromise Scales

Who got the better deal in the Compromise of 1850? The answer is clearly the North. California, as a free state, tipped the Senate balance permanently against the South. The territories of New Mexico and Utah were open to slavery on the basis of popular sovereignty. But the iron law of nature—the “highest law” of all—had loaded the dice in favor of free soil. Southerners urgently needed more slave territory to restore the “sacred balance.” If they could not carve new states out of the recent conquests from Mexico, where else might they get them? The Caribbean was one answer.

Even the apparent gains of the South rang hollow. Disgruntled Texas was to be paid \$10 million toward discharging its indebtedness, but in the long run this was a modest sum. The immense area in dispute had been torn from the side of slaveholding Texas and was almost certain to be free. The South had halted the drive toward abolition in the District of Columbia, at least temporarily, by permitting the outlawing of the slave *trade* in the federal district. But even this move was an entering wedge toward complete emancipation in the nation’s capital.



**Slavery After the Compromise of 1850** Regarding the Fugitive Slave Act provisions of the Compromise of 1850, Ralph Waldo Emerson declared (May 1851) at Concord, Massachusetts, "The act of Congress . . . is a law which every one of you will break on the earliest occasion—a law which no man can obey, or abet the obeying, without loss of self-respect and forfeiture of the name of gentleman." Privately he wrote in his *Journal*, "This filthy enactment was made in the nineteenth century, by people who could read and write. I will not obey it, by God."

Most alarming of all, the drastic new Fugitive Slave Law of 1850—"the Bloodhound Bill"—stirred up a storm of opposition in the North. The fleeing slaves could not testify in their own behalf, and they were denied a jury trial. These harsh practices, some citizens feared, threatened to create dangerous precedents for white Americans. The federal commissioner who handled the case of a fugitive would receive five dollars if the run-

away were freed and ten dollars if not—an arrangement that strongly resembled a bribe. Freedom-loving northerners who aided the slave to escape were liable to heavy fines and jail sentences. They might even be ordered to join the slave-catchers, and this possibility rubbed salt into old sores.

So abhorrent was this "Man-Stealing Law" that it touched off an explosive chain reaction in the North.



**A Ride for Liberty, by Eastman Johnson** In this famous painting, Johnson, a New England artist, brilliantly evokes the anxiety of fleeing slaves.



**The Legal Status of Slavery, from the Revolution to the Civil War**

Many shocked moderates, hitherto passive, were driven into the swelling ranks of the antislaveryites. When a runaway slave from Virginia was captured in Boston in 1854, he had to be removed from the city under heavy federal guard through streets lined with sullen Yankees and shadowed by black-draped buildings festooned with flags flying upside down. One prominent Bostonian who witnessed this grim spectacle wrote that “we went to bed one night old-fashioned, conservative, Compromise Union Whigs and waked up stark mad Abolitionists.”

The Underground Railroad stepped up its timetable, and infuriated northern mobs rescued slaves from their pursuers. Massachusetts, in a move toward nullification suggestive of South Carolina in 1832, made it a penal offense for any state official to enforce the new federal statute. Other states passed “personal liberty laws,” which denied local jails to federal officials and otherwise hampered enforcement. The abolitionists rent the heavens with their protests against the man-stealing statute. A meeting presided over by William Lloyd Garrison in

1851 declared, “We execrate it, we spit upon it, we trample it under our feet.”

Beyond question, the Fugitive Slave Law was an appalling blunder on the part of the South. No single irritant of the 1850s was more persistently galling to both sides, and none did more to awaken in the North a spirit of antagonism against the South. The southerners in turn were embittered because the northerners would not in good faith execute the law—the one real and immediate southern “gain” from the Great Compromise. Slavecatchers, with some success, redoubled their efforts.

Should the shooting showdown have come in 1850? From the standpoint of the secessionists, yes; from the standpoint of the Unionists, no. Time was fighting for the North. With every passing decade, this huge section was forging further ahead in population and wealth—in crops, factories, foundries, ships, and railroads.

Delay also added immensely to the moral strength of the North—to its will to fight for the Union. In 1850 countless thousands of northern moderates were

unwilling to pin the South to the rest of the nation with bayonets. But the inflammatory events of the 1850s did much to bolster the Yankee will to resist secession, whatever the cost. This one feverish decade gave the North time to accumulate the material and moral strength that provided the margin of victory. Thus the Compromise of 1850, from one point of view, won the Civil War for the Union.



### Defeat and Doom for the Whigs

Meeting in Baltimore, the Democratic nominating convention of 1852 startled the nation. Hopelessly deadlocked, it finally stampeded to the second “dark-horse” candidate in American history, an unrenowned lawyer-politician, Franklin Pierce, from the hills of New Hampshire. The Whigs tried to jeer him back into obscurity with the cry, “Who is Frank Pierce?” Democrats replied, “The Young Hickory of the Granite Hills.”

Pierce was a weak and indecisive figure. Youngish, handsome, militarily erect, smiling, and convivial, he had served without real distinction in the Mexican War. As a result of a painful groin injury that caused him to fall off a horse, he was known as the “Fainting General,” though scandalmongers pointed to a fondness for alcohol. But he was enemyless because he had been inconspicuous, and as a prosouthern northerner, he was acceptable to the slavery wing of the Democratic party. His platform revived the Democrats’ commitment to territorial expansion as pursued by President Polk and emphatically endorsed the Compromise of 1850, Fugitive Slave Law and all.

The Whigs, also convening in Baltimore, missed a splendid opportunity to capitalize on their record in statecraft. Able to boast of a praiseworthy achievement in the Compromise of 1850, they might logically have nominated President Fillmore or Senator Webster, both of whom were associated with it. But having won in the past only with military heroes, they turned to another, “Old Fuss and Feathers” Winfield Scott, perhaps the ablest American general of his generation. Although he was a huge and impressive figure, his manner bordered on haughtiness. His personality not only repelled the masses but eclipsed his genuinely statesmanlike achievements. The Whig platform praised the Compromise of 1850 as a lasting arrangement, though less enthusiastically than the Democrats.

With slavery and sectionalism to some extent soft-pedaled, the campaign again degenerated into a dull and childish attack on personalities. Democrats ridiculed Scott’s pomposity; Whigs charged that Pierce was the hero of “many a well-fought *bottle*.” Democrats cried exultantly, “We Polked ’em in ’44; we’ll Pierce ’em in ’52.”

Luckily for the Democrats, the Whig party was hopelessly split. Antislavery Whigs of the North swallowed Scott as their nominee but deplored his platform, which endorsed the hated Fugitive Slave Law. The current phrase ran, “We accept the candidate but spit on the platform.” Southern Whigs, who doubted Scott’s loyalty to the Compromise of 1850 and especially the Fugitive Slave Law, accepted the platform but spat on the candidate. More than five thousand Georgia Whigs—“finality men”—voted in vain for Webster, although he had died nearly two weeks before the election.

General Scott, victorious on the battlefield, met defeat at the ballot box. His friends remarked whimsically that he was not used to “running.” Actually, he was stabbed in the back by his fellow Whigs, notably in the South. In addition, Free Soil party candidate John P. Hale, senator from New Hampshire, siphoned off northern Whig votes that might have gone to Scott. Hale walked away with a respectable 5 percent of the popular vote. The pliant Pierce won in a landslide, 254 electoral votes to 42, although the popular count was closer, 1,601,117 to 1,385,453.

The election of 1852 was fraught with frightening significance, though it may have seemed tame at the time. It marked the effective end of the disorganized Whig party and, within a few years, its complete death. The Whigs’ demise augured the eclipse of *national* parties and the worrisome rise of purely *sectional* political alignments. The Whigs were governed at times by the crassest opportunism, and they won only two presidential elections (1840, 1848) in their colorful career, both with war heroes. They finally choked to death trying to swallow the distasteful Fugitive Slave Law. But their great contribution—and a noteworthy one indeed—was to help uphold the ideal of the Union through their electoral strength in the South and through the eloquence of leaders like Henry Clay and Daniel Webster. Both of these statesmen, by unhappy coincidence, died during the 1852 campaign. But the good they had done lived after them and contributed powerfully to the eventual preservation of a *united* United States.

### Expansionist Stirrings South of the Border

The intoxicating victory in the Mexican War, coupled with the discovery of gold in California just nine days before the war's end, reinvigorated the spirit of Manifest Destiny. The rush to the Sierra Nevada goldfields aroused particular concerns about the fate of Central America. Since the days of Balboa, this narrow neck of land had stimulated dreams of a continuous Atlantic-to-Pacific transportation route that would effectively sever the two American continents. Whoever controlled that route would hold imperial sway over all maritime nations, especially the United States.

Increasing British encroachment into the area—including the British seizure of the port of San Juan (renamed Greytown) on Nicaragua's "Mosquito Coast"—drove the governments of both the United States and New Granada (later Colombia) to conclude an important treaty in 1848. It guaranteed the American right of transit across the isthmus in return for Washington's pledge to maintain the "perfect neutrality" of the route so that the "free transit of traffic might not be interrupted." The agreement later provided a fig leaf of legal cover for Theodore Roosevelt's assertion of American control of the Panama Canal Zone in 1903. It also led to the construction of the first "transcontinental" railroad. Completed in 1855 at a cost of thousands of lives lost to

pestilence and accident, it ran forty-eight miles from coast to coast through the green hell of the Panamanian jungle. A full-blown confrontation with Britain was avoided by the Clayton-Bulwer Treaty in 1850, which stipulated that neither America nor Britain would fortify or seek exclusive control over any future isthmian waterway (later rescinded by the Hay-Pauncefote Treaty of 1901; see p. 648).

Southern "slavocrats" cast especially covetous eyes southward in the 1850s. They lusted for new slave territory after the Compromise of 1850 seemingly closed most of the Mexican Cession to the "peculiar institution." In 1856 a Texan proposed a toast that was drunk with gusto: "To the Southern republic bounded on the north by the Mason and Dixon line and on the South by the Isthmus of Tehuantepec [southern Mexico], including Cuba and all other lands on our Southern shore." Nicaragua beckoned beguilingly. A brazen American adventurer, William Walker, tried repeatedly to grab control of this Central American country. (He had earlier tried and failed to seize Baja California from Mexico and turn it into a slave state.) Backed by an armed force recruited largely in the South, he installed himself as president in July 1856 and promptly legalized slavery. One southern newspaper proclaimed to the planter aristocracy that Walker—the "gray-eyed man of destiny"—"now offers Nicaragua to you and your slaves, at a time when you have not a friend on the face of the earth." But a coalition of Central American nations formed an alliance to overthrow him. President Pierce withdrew



**Central America, c. 1850, Showing British Possessions and Proposed Canal Routes** Until President Theodore Roosevelt swung into action with his big stick in 1903, a Nicaraguan canal, closer to the United States, was generally judged more desirable than a canal across Panama.

diplomatic recognition, and the gray-eyed man's destiny was to crumple before a Honduran firing squad in 1860.

Sugar-rich Cuba, lying just off the nation's southern doorstep, was also an enticing prospect for annexation. This remnant of Spain's once-mighty New World empire already held a large population of enslaved blacks, and it might be carved into several states, restoring the political balance in the Senate. President Polk had considered offering Spain \$100 million for Cuba, but the proud Spaniards replied that they would sooner see the island sunk into the sea than in the hands of the hated Yankees.

Rebuffed as buyers, some southern adventurers now undertook to shake the tree of Manifest Destiny. During 1850–1851 two “filibustering” expeditions (from the Spanish *filibustero*, meaning “freebooter” or “pirate”), each numbering several hundred armed men, descended upon Cuba. Both feeble efforts were repelled, and the last one ended in tragedy when the leader and fifty followers—some of them from the “best families” of the South—were summarily shot or strangled. So outraged were the southerners that an angry mob sacked Spain's consulate in New Orleans.

Spanish officials in Cuba rashly forced a showdown in 1854, when they seized an American steamer, *Black Warrior*, on a technicality. Now was the time for President Pierce, dominated as he was by the South, to provoke a war with Spain and seize Cuba. The major powers of Europe—England, France, and Russia—were about to become bogged down in the Crimean War and hence were unable to aid Spain.

An incredible cloak-and-dagger episode followed. The secretary of state instructed the American ministers in Spain, England, and France to prepare confidential recommendations for the acquisition of Cuba. Meeting initially at Ostend, Belgium, the three envoys drew up a top-secret dispatch, soon known as the Ostend Manifesto. This startling document urged that the administration offer \$120 million for Cuba. If Spain refused, and if its continued ownership endangered American interests, the United States would “be justified in wresting” the island from the Spanish.

The secret Ostend Manifesto quickly leaked out. Northern free-soilers, already angered by the Fugitive Slave Law and other gains for slavery, rose up in wrath against the “manifesto of brigands.” The shackled black hands of Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom, whose plight had already stung the conscience of the North, now held the South back. The red-faced Pierce administration hurriedly dropped its reckless schemes for Cuba. The slavery issue thus checked territorial expansion in the 1850s.

*The first platform of the newly born (antislavery) Republican party in 1856 lashed out at the Ostend Manifesto, with its transparent suggestion that Cuba be seized. The plank read,*

*“Resolved, That the highwayman's plea, that ‘might makes right,’ embodied in the Ostend Circular, was in every respect unworthy of American diplomacy, and would bring shame and dishonor upon any Government or people that gave it their sanction.”*



### The Allure of Asia

The acquisition of California and Oregon had made the United States a Pacific power—or would-be power. How could Americans now tap more deeply the supposedly rich markets of Asia? Rivalry with the British lion once again played a role. Britain had recently humbled China in the Opium War, fought to secure the right of British traders to peddle opium in the Celestial Kingdom. At the war's conclusion in 1842, Britain gained free access to five so-called treaty ports, as well as outright control of the island of Hong Kong (where it remained for another century and a half). Prodded by Boston merchants fearful of seeing Britain horn in on their lucrative trade with China, President Tyler thereupon dispatched Caleb Cushing, a dashing Massachusetts lawyer-scholar, to secure comparable concessions for the United States. Cushing's four warships arrived at Macao, in southern China, in early 1844, bearing gifts that included a weathervane and a pair of six-shooters.

Impressed by Cushing's charm and largesse—and also eager for a counterweight to the meddlesome British—silk-gowned Chinese diplomats signed the Treaty of Wanghia, the first formal diplomatic agreement between the United States and China, on July 3, 1844. Cushing was interested in commerce, not colonies, and he secured some vital rights and privileges from the Chinese. “Most favored nation” status afforded the United States any and all trading terms accorded to other powers. “Extraterritoriality” provided for trying Americans accused of crimes in China before American officials, not in Chinese courts. (Cushing was prompted

to seek this particular immunity by the memory of a seaman on a U.S. vessel who was strangled to death by Chinese authorities for what was apparently the accidental drowning of a Chinese woman.) American trade with China flourished thanks to Cushing's treaty, though it never reached the proportions his backers had dreamed of. More immediately important was the opportunity it opened for American missionaries, thousands of whom soon flooded prayerfully through the treaty ports to convert the "heathen Chinese." Fatefully, America had now aligned itself with the Western powers that chronically menaced China's cultural integrity. All of them would one day reap a bitter harvest of resentment.

Success in China soon inspired a still more consequential mission to pry open the bamboo gates of Japan. After some disagreeable experiences with the European world, Japan, at about the same time Jamestown was settled, withdrew into an almost airtight cocoon of isolationism and remained there for more than two centuries. The long-ruling warrior dynasty known as the Tokugawa Shogunate was so protective of Japan's insularity that it prohibited shipwrecked foreign sailors from leaving and refused to readmit Japanese sailors who had been washed up on foreign shores. Meanwhile, industrial and democratic revolutions were convulsing the Western world, while Japan remained placidly secluded. By 1853 Japan was ready to emerge from its self-imposed quarantine.

In 1852 President Millard Fillmore dispatched to Japan a fleet of warships commanded by Commodore Matthew C. Perry. The brother of the hero of the Battle of Lake Erie in 1813, Perry had prepared diligently for his mission, voraciously reading about Japan, querying whalers about Pacific Ocean currents, and collecting specimens of American technology with which to impress the Japanese. His four awesome, smoke-belching "black ships" steamed into Edo (later Tokyo) Bay on July 8, 1853, inciting near-panic among the shocked Japanese. After tense negotiations, during which Perry threatened to blast his way ashore if necessary, Perry stepped onto the beach, preceded by two conspicuously tall African American flag bearers. From elaborately carved gold-trimmed boxes, Perry produced silk-bound letters requesting free trade and friendly relations. He handed them to the wary Japanese delegation and then tactfully withdrew, promising to return the following year to receive the Japanese reply.

True to his word, Perry returned in February 1854 with an even larger force of seven men-of-war. Once again he combined bluster and grace, plying the Japa-



**Commodore Perry and Flag Bearer, by an Anonymous Japanese Artist, c. 1853 (detail)** Painted at the time of the opening of Japan, this scene shows Perry and his steward from the point of view of a Japanese artist.

nese with gifts, including a miniature steam locomotive and 350 feet of track. With this display of pomp and bravado, he persuaded the Japanese to sign the landmark Treaty of Kanagawa on March 31, 1854. It provided for proper treatment of shipwrecked sailors, American coaling rights in Japan, and the establishment of consular relations. Perry had inserted only a commercial toe in the door, but he had cracked Japan's two-century shell of isolation wide open. Within little more than a decade, the "Meiji Restoration" would end the era of the Shogunate and propel the Land of the Rising Sun headlong into the modern world—and an eventual epochal military clash with the United States.



### **Pacific Railroad Promoters and the Gadsden Purchase**

Acute transportation problems were another legacy of the Mexican War. The newly acquired prizes of Califor-

nia and Oregon might just as well have been islands some eight thousand miles west of the nation's capital. The sea routes to and from the Isthmus of Panama, to say nothing of those around South America, were too long. Covered-wagon travel past bleaching animal bones was possible, but slow and dangerous. A popular song recalled,

*They swam the wide rivers and crossed the  
tall peaks,  
And camped on the prairie for weeks upon  
weeks.  
Starvation and cholera and hard work and  
slaughter,  
They reached California spite of hell and high  
water.*

Feasible land transportation was imperative—or the newly won possessions on the Pacific Coast might break away. Camels were even proposed as the answer. Several score of these temperamental beasts—“ships of the desert”—were imported from the Near East, but mule-driving Americans did not adjust to them. A transcontinental railroad was clearly the only real solution to the problem.

Railroad promoters, both North and South, had projected many drawing-board routes to the Pacific Coast. But the estimated cost in all cases was so great that for many years there could obviously be only one line. Should its terminus be in the North or in the South? The favored section would reap rich rewards in wealth, population, and influence. The South, losing the economic race with the North, was eager to extend a railroad through adjacent southwestern territory all the way to California.

Another chunk of Mexico now seemed desirable, because the campaigns of the recent war had shown that the best railway route ran slightly south of the Mexican border. Secretary of War Jefferson Davis, a Mississippian, arranged to have James Gadsden, a prominent South Carolina railroad man, appointed minister to Mexico. Finding Santa Anna in power for the sixth and last time, and as usual in need of money, Gadsden made gratifying headway. He negotiated a treaty in 1853, which ceded to the United States the Gadsden Purchase area for \$10 million. The transaction aroused much criticism among northerners, who objected to paying a huge sum for a cactus-strewn desert nearly the size of Gadsden's South Carolina. Undeterred, the Senate approved the pact, in the process shortsightedly eliminating a window on the Sea of Cortez.

No doubt the Gadsden Purchase enabled the South to claim the coveted railroad with even greater insistence. A southern track would be easier to build because the mountains were less high and because the route, unlike the proposed northern lines, would not pass through unorganized territory. Texas was already a state at this point, and New Mexico (with the Gadsden Purchase added) was a formally organized territory, with federal troops available to provide protection against marauding tribes of Indians. Any northern or central railroad line would have to be thrust through the unorganized territory of Nebraska, where the buffalo and Indians roamed.

Northern railroad boosters quickly replied that if organized territory were the test, then Nebraska should be organized. Such a move was not premature, because thousands of land-hungry pioneers were already poised



The Gadsden Purchase, 1853



on the Nebraska border. But all schemes proposed in Congress for organizing the territory were greeted with apathy or hostility by many southerners. Why should the South help create new free-soil states and thus cut its own throat by facilitating a northern railroad?



### Douglas's Kansas-Nebraska Scheme

At this point in 1854, Senator Stephen A. Douglas of Illinois delivered a counterstroke to offset the Gadsden thrust for southern expansion westward. A squat, bull-necked, and heavy-chested figure, the “Little Giant” radiated the energy and breezy optimism of the self-made man. An ardent booster for the West, he longed to break the North-South deadlock over westward expansion and stretch a line of settlements across the continent. He had also invested heavily in Chicago real estate and in railway stock and was eager to have the Windy City become the eastern terminus of the proposed Pacific railroad. He would thus endear himself to the voters of Illinois, benefit his section, and enrich his own purse.

A veritable “steam engine in breeches,” Douglas threw himself behind a legislative scheme that would enlist the support of a reluctant South. The proposed Territory of Nebraska would be sliced into two territories, Kansas and Nebraska. Their status regarding slavery would be settled by popular sovereignty—a democratic concept to which Douglas and his western constituents were deeply attached. Kansas, which lay due west of slaveholding Missouri, would presumably choose to become a slave state. But Nebraska, lying west of free-soil Iowa, would presumably become a free state.

Douglas's Kansas-Nebraska scheme flatly contradicted the Missouri Compromise of 1820, which had forbidden slavery in the proposed Nebraska Territory north of the sacred 36° 30' line. The only way to open the region to popular sovereignty was to repeal the ancient compact outright. This bold step Douglas was now prepared to take, even at the risk of shattering the uneasy truce patched together by the Compromise of 1850.

Many southerners, who had not conceived of Kansas as slave soil, rose to the bait. Here was a chance to gain one more slave state. The pliable President Pierce, under the thumb of southern advisers, threw his full weight behind the Kansas-Nebraska Bill.

But the Missouri Compromise, then thirty-four years old, could not be brushed aside lightly. Whatever Congress passes it can repeal, but by this time the North had come to regard the sectional pact as almost as



**Douglas Hatches a Slavery Problem** Note the already hatched Missouri Compromise, Squatter Sovereignty, and Filibuster (in Cuba), and the about-to-hatch Free Kansas and Dred Scott decision. So bitter was the outcry against Douglas at the time of the Kansas-Nebraska controversy that he claimed with exaggeration that he could have traveled from Boston to Chicago at night by the light from his burning effigies.

sacred as the Constitution itself. Free-soil members of Congress struck back with a vengeance. They met their match in the violently gesticulating Douglas, who was the ablest rough-and-tumble debater of his generation. Employing twisted logic and oratorical fireworks, he rammed the bill through Congress, with strong support from many southerners. So heated were political passions that bloodshed was barely averted. Some members carried a concealed revolver or a Bowie knife—or both.

Douglas's motives in prodding anew the snarling dog of slavery have long puzzled historians. His personal interests have already been mentioned. In addition, his foes accused him of angling for the presidency in 1856. Yet his admirers have argued plausibly in his defense that if he had not championed the ill-omened bill, someone else would have.

The truth seems to be that Douglas acted somewhat impulsively and recklessly. His heart did not bleed over the issue of slavery, and he declared repeatedly that he did not care whether it was voted up or down in the

*Massachusetts senator Charles Sumner (1811–1874) described the Kansas-Nebraska Bill as “at once the worst and the best Bill on which Congress ever acted.” It was the worst because it represented a victory for the slave power in the short run. But it was the best, he said prophetically, because it*

*“annuls all past compromises with slavery, and makes all future compromises impossible. Thus it puts freedom and slavery face to face, and bids them grapple. Who can doubt the result?”*

territories. What he failed to perceive was that hundreds of thousands of his fellow citizens in the North *did* feel deeply on this moral issue. They regarded the repeal of the Missouri Compromise as an intolerable breach of faith, and they would henceforth resist to the last trench all future southern demands for slave territory. As Abraham Lincoln said, the North wanted to give to pioneers in the West “a clean bed, with no snakes in it.”

Genuine leaders, like skillful chess players, must foresee the possible effects of their moves. Douglas

predicted a “hell of a storm,” but he grossly underestimated its proportions. His critics in the North, branding him a “Judas” and a “traitor,” greeted his name with frenzied boos, hisses, and “three groans for Doug.” But he still enjoyed a high degree of popularity among his following in the Democratic party, especially in Illinois, a stronghold of popular sovereignty.



### Congress Legislates a Civil War

The Kansas-Nebraska Act—a curtain-raiser to a terrible drama—was one of the most momentous measures ever to pass Congress. By one way of reckoning, it greased the slippery slope to Civil War.

Antislavery northerners were angered by what they condemned as an act of bad faith by the “Nebrascals” and their “Nebrascality.” All future compromise with the South would be immeasurably more difficult, and without compromise there was bound to be conflict.

Henceforth the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850, previously enforced in the North only halfheartedly, was a dead letter. The Kansas-Nebraska Act wrecked two compromises: that of 1820, which it repealed specifically, and that of 1850, which northern opinion repealed indirectly. Emerson wrote, “The Fugitive [Slave] Law did much to unglue the eyes of men, and now the Nebraska



#### Kansas and Nebraska, 1854

The future Union Pacific Railroad (completed in 1869) is shown. Note the Missouri Compromise line of 36° 30' (1820).

Bill leaves us staring.” Northern abolitionists and southern “fire-eaters” alike saw less and less they could live with. The growing legion of antislaveryites gained numerous recruits, who resented the grasping move by the “slavocracy” for Kansas. The southerners, in turn, became inflamed when the free-soilers tried to control Kansas, contrary to the presumed “deal.”

The proud Democrats—a party now over half a century old—were shattered by the Kansas-Nebraska Act. They did elect a president in 1856, but he was the last one they were to boost into the White House for twenty-eight long years.

Undoubtedly the most durable offspring of the Kansas-Nebraska blunder was the new Republican party. It sprang up spontaneously in the Middle West, notably in Wisconsin and Michigan, as a mighty moral protest against the gains of slavery. Gathering together dissatisfied elements, it soon included disgruntled

Whigs (among them Abraham Lincoln), Democrats, Free-Soilers, Know-Nothings, and other foes of the Kansas-Nebraska Act. The hodgepodge party spread eastward with the swiftness of a prairie fire and with the zeal of a religious crusade. Unheard-of and unheralded at the beginning of 1854, when the nativist Know-Nothings instead seemed to be the rising party of the North, it elected a Republican Speaker of the House of Representatives within two years. Never really a third-party movement, its wide wingspan gave it flight overnight as the second major political party—and a purely sectional one at that.

At long last the dreaded sectional rift had appeared. The new Republican party would not be allowed south of the Mason-Dixon line. Countless southerners subscribed wholeheartedly to the sentiment that it was “a nigger stealing, stinking, putrid, abolition party.” The Union was in dire peril.

## Chronology

**1844** Caleb Cushing signs Treaty of Wanghia with China

**1848** Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo ends Mexican War  
Taylor defeats Cass and Van Buren for presidency

**1849** California gold rush

**1850** Fillmore assumes presidency after Taylor’s death  
Compromise of 1850, including Fugitive Slave Law  
Clayton-Bulwer Treaty with Britain

**1852** Pierce defeats Scott for presidency

**1853** Gadsden Purchase from Mexico

**1854** Commodore Perry opens Japan  
Ostend Manifesto proposes seizure of Cuba  
Kansas-Nebraska Act  
Republican party organized

**1856** William Walker becomes president of Nicaragua and legalizes slavery