

Chapter Fifteen: The Impending Crisis (1848-1861)

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Chapter Fifteen: The Impending Crisis (1848-1861)

15.1 INTRODUCTION

Most Americans rejoiced in their country's victory over Mexico when the U.S. Senate approved the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848. However, the acquisition of new territory in the West raised questions about the expansion of slavery in the United States. Southerners believed the government should allow slavery in places like California and New Mexico. Northerners disagreed. Their differences had very little to do with humanitarian concerns about slavery. Rather, they centered on the economic and political implications of the so-called peculiar institution. National political leaders tried to quiet the division with the Compromise of 1850. However, sectional tensions mounted throughout the remainder of the decade. With each passing year, a new crisis drove the wedge deeper. The Fugitive Slave Act, Kansas-Nebraska Act, the *Dred Scott* decision, and other events increased sectional hostilities and left leaders with little hope for compromise. While the North and the South shared many intellectual, social, political, and economic beliefs, they seemed unable to come to an agreement about whether the nation should be slave or free. Abraham Lincoln's election as president in 1860 ultimately led to the secession of several southern states and paved the way for a civil war.

15.1.1 Learning Outcomes

After completing this chapter, you should be able to:

- Discuss the different solutions proposed to deal with the issue of slavery in the territories and the major terms of the Compromise of 1850.
- Describe the major events in the movement toward secession after the Compromise of 1850.
- Describe and analyze the major political developments of this period, especially the emergence of new political parties and the presidential contests.

15.2 THE SECTIONAL BALANCE BEGINS TO UNRAVEL

Northerners and southerners alike saw the territories in the West as a place of opportunity to improve their quality of life. People from both regions wanted to ensure social mobility, but their views of social mobility differed significantly. For northerners, it meant small, family homesteads where they could ensure self-sufficiency and participate in the market economy. For southerners, it meant the opportunity to acquire more land and more slaves on which to build their life. In the late 1840s and early 1850s, political leaders struggled to balance the interests of their constituents and maintain national unity. They managed to halt the sectional conflict with the Compromise of 1850, but their efforts provided only a temporary solution to the problem of a nation half slave and half free.

15.2.1 Slavery in the Territories

For at least some Americans, the Mexican-American War and the potential territorial expansion spelled trouble for the future of the United States. An aging John C. Calhoun opposed the war because it would bring slavery back into the national political discourse. A young Abraham Lincoln had similar misgivings. From the mid-1830s to the mid-1840s, the Democratic Party had managed to keep debates about slavery in Congress to a minimum with the gag rule. Calhoun and Lincoln realized, however, that any discussion over a treaty with Mexico or the question of slavery in newly acquired territories would raise challenging issues. Poet Ralph Waldo Emerson also recognized the potential problem, when he noted, “Mexico will poison us.” These men, of course, were correct since the sectional divide only intensified after the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo.¹



Figure 15.1 The Wilmot Proviso | In 1846, Democrat David Wilmot, a member of the U.S. House of Representatives, introduced a proviso to an appropriations bill that would have barred slavery in any territory acquired as a result of the Mexican-American War. His suggestion reintroduced the issue of slavery into national politics.

Artist: Unknown
Source: Library of Congress

The Wilmot Proviso

Before the end of the war, Democrat Representative David Wilmot of Pennsylvania brought up the question of slavery in the

territories. Wilmot proposed to ban slavery and involuntary servitude in the territory acquired from Mexico. The Wilmot Proviso passed in the House of Representatives, but not in the Senate. The measure came before Congress several times over the next few years; in every instance, northerners voted for the compromise and southerners voted against it.² Party affiliation, it seemed, mattered little when it came to the debate over slavery in the territories.

Wilmot introduced the measure because he opposed slavery and because he opposed southern control of the Democratic Party. As northerners lined up to support the measure, both reasons motivated their decision. Northern Democrats worried the question of slavery in the territories would drive antislavery voters to the Whigs; taking the lead on banning slavery in the Southwest would lessen that possibility. Meanwhile, true abolitionists found the proposal appealing. It fell short of their ultimate goal to end slavery as quickly as possible, but it allowed them to duck charges of extremism. Many northerners believed they were fulfilling the wishes of the founding fathers by fighting the extension of slavery. They maintained that the Revolutionary generation compromised on slavery in order to provide a decent interval for the institution to die out naturally. As such, supporters of the Wilmot Proviso invoked the Revolution's legacy.³

Few southerners expected slavery to take hold in most of the Mexican Cession because the climate was inhospitable to plantation slavery. However, they objected to the Wilmot Proviso because it would limit their ability to dominate national politics. While they held a majority in the Senate in 1846, they could not compete in the House. The North's population grew at a much faster rate than did the South's. If Congress legislated on the status of slavery in the territories, then it might also pass laws on the status of slavery in the states in the future. Calhoun, hoping to halt further debate on the issue, introduced a measure suggesting that the Fifth Amendment prevented Congress from excluding slavery from the territories. The Senate did not pass Calhoun's resolution because the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 and the Missouri Compromise had set a precedent for Congressional authority.⁴ After the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo went into effect, it became more important for Congress to set up territorial governments. Thus, the future of slavery in the territories became a major issue in the next presidential election.

The Election of 1848

The extension of slavery proved problematic for both the Democrats and Whigs. Both parties had always been a coalition of diverse voters, and they had won national elections by holding those voters together in support

or opposition of issues like the tariff. Slavery had always been the issue leaders wanted to avoid at all costs, but that no longer seemed possible in 1848. First, the Wilmot Proviso made the issue a matter of national public debate. Until the national government resolved the issue, it would continue to dominate politics. Second, antislavery advocates worked hard to keep the expansion of slavery on the minds of voters. Northern “Free Soilers” sought to prevent the expansion of slavery. Most Free Soilers did not worry much about the effect of slavery on the slaves. Rather, they worried about how slavery undermined the dignity of free labor. Southern proponents of slavery hardly could understand the Free Soil arguments. Slavery provided blessings to the slave and to the master, and thus should be spread to the new territories.⁵

James K. Polk opted not to run again in 1848, so potential Democratic candidates James Buchanan and Lewis Cass proposed solutions on the extension question in their attempt to win the nomination. Buchanan, Polk’s secretary of state, supported the administration’s plan to extend the Missouri Compromise line (the 36°30’ line) to the Pacific Ocean. The Senate voted to support the proposal several times before the election, but the House voted it down. Lewis Cass, a Michigan senator, proposed letting the people who actually settled in the territories decide slavery’s fate. Popular sovereignty’s most appealing feature was the ambiguity about the precise moment when settlers needed to decide slavery’s fate. The doctrine won Cass the Democratic nomination because, as long as the timing remained

vague, it gave both sides hope they could win new territories to their cause.⁶

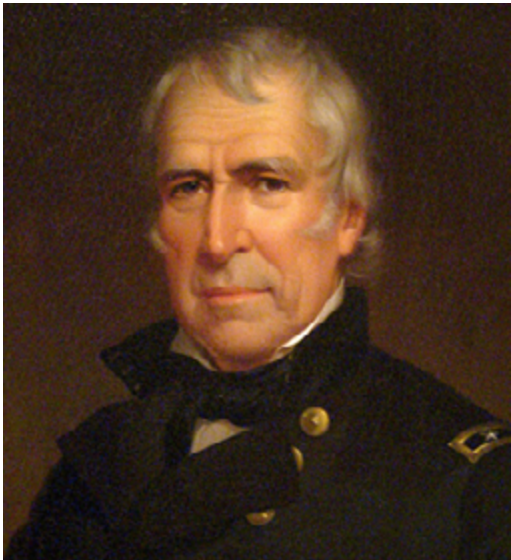


Figure 15.2 Zachary Taylor | This portrait captures Zachary Taylor, the successful presidential nominee in 1848. The Whigs chose him because he was war hero and a plantation owner.

Artist: Unknown
Source: National Archives US Presidents in the Census Records

Meanwhile, the Whigs hoped to maintain party unity by adopting no platform at all. They also decided to bypass longtime Whig leader Henry Clay because of his association with the Whig’s efforts to oppose territorial expansion during the war. The Whigs needed to accept and deal with the Mexican Cession because peace came before they nominated a candidate. So, they chose General Zachary Taylor, a Mexican-American War hero. Historian James M. McPherson suggests his nomination “illustrated...the strange bedfellow nature of American politics.” Taylor

hardly looked presidential; he often appeared in a simple uniform and a straw hat when in battle. At the same time, his image of “Old Rough and Ready” had great appeal to the average voter. Furthermore, Taylor owned plantations in Louisiana and Mississippi, ensuring that southern Whigs would not abandon the party after their northern brethren supported the Wilmot Proviso.⁷

Antislavery Whigs could not accept Taylor’s nomination. Therefore, they left the party. New Yorker William H. Seward proclaimed the time had come to create “one grand Northern party of Freedom.”⁸ They joined with the Barnburners, who were a group of Democrats opposed to Cass’s nomination, as well as members of the Liberty Party. In August, the new Free Soil Party met in Buffalo. It nominated Martin Van Buren for president and Charles Francis Adams for vice president. The Free Soil platform called for no more slave states and no more slave territories. At the same time, delegates carefully chose a former president and the son of a former president to give their ticket more appeal to voters.⁹

The presence of the Free Soil candidate in 1848 meant the Whigs and the Democrats could not ignore the issue of slavery. The Whigs promoted

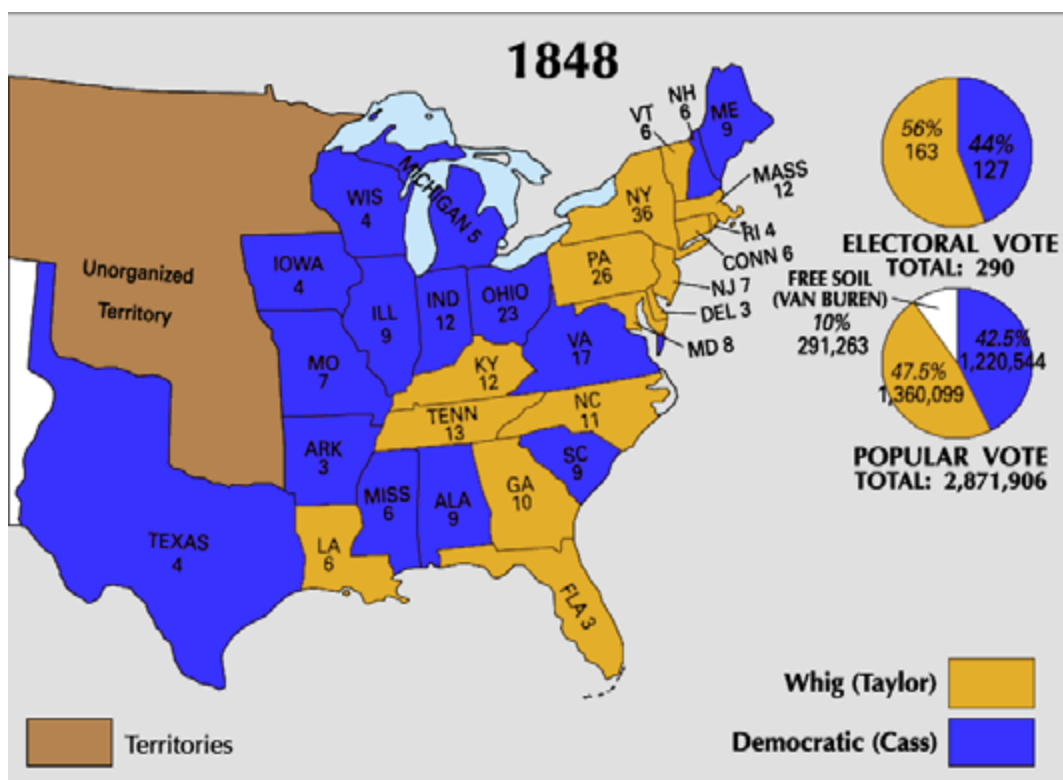


Figure 15.3 Presidential Election Map, 1848 | The central issue of the 1848 election related to the extension of slavery in the territories. Both the Democrats and the Whigs hoped to avoid the issue, but the presence of the Free Soil candidate meant the parties had to take a stand. The Democrats promoted popular sovereignty. The Whigs, meanwhile, did not unite on a single position; they ran different campaigns in the North and the South. Ultimately, the Whigs triumphed.

Author: National Atlas of the United States
Source: Wikimedia Commons

statements made by Taylor that he would not veto any decisions Congress made about slavery in the North; they also highlighted Taylor's status as a war hero and a slaveholder in the South. The Democrats, meanwhile, embraced the doctrine of popular sovereignty. Taylor won both the popular and the Electoral College votes. He was stronger in the South than in the North.¹⁰ However, Van Buren took ten percent of the popular vote, throwing many northern states into the Taylor column. As it turned out, Taylor shared the Free Soilers' ideas about preventing the extension of slavery. Moreover, the Free Soilers elected nine representatives and two senators, Salmon P. Chase (OH) and Charles Sumner (MA). Their influence far exceeded their numbers when the new Congress began to address California's application for statehood.

The Question of California

While the presidential election played out, an unexpected discovery in California quickened the pace of the sectional divide. In January 1848, a worker at John Sutter's sawmill in northern California stumbled upon gold. Word spread quickly to San Francisco about the discovery. Within days, the city appeared empty as people poured into the gold fields. By the end of the year, gold fever had shifted to the East coast. The so-called "forty-niners" migrated to California to make their fortune. The population grew so quickly that military authorities called for an organized territorial government. Before Congress acted, California had enough people to consider applying for statehood. Throughout the debate on the extension of slavery, politicians assumed they would have plenty of time before any of the areas of the Mexican Cession would apply for statehood. The gold rush, of course, changed that assumption.

As California's population rose, national leaders weighed the question of whether the new state would be slave or free. Southerners saw California as the most suitable territory acquired from Mexico for cotton production. Northerners refused to accept the idea that its suitability preordained it as a slave state. Meanwhile, the residents of California grew impatient since the lame-duck Polk did little to encourage a divided Congress to appoint a territorial government before they adjourned. In fact, tensions ran so high in the Senate that late one night several rather drunk members began to exchange not only insults, but punches too. When Zachary Taylor took office, he made it clear he wanted to resolve the issue. He proposed to skip the creation of a territory and move directly to the application for statehood. So, the military authorities in California issued a call for a state constitutional convention.¹¹

The president worked under the assumption that California, as well as New Mexico, would become free states. Although he owned slaves, Taylor

supported a Free Soil solution for the Mexican Cession as the best way to preserve the Union.¹² The settlers in California also opposed slavery, which worked in Taylor's favor. In July 1849, a group of Texas slaveholders arrived in the gold fields. After staking out their claim, they set their slaves panning for gold. White miners did not like the idea of competing with slave labor. Hence, they held a meeting to discuss slavery in the gold fields. The miners resolved that "no slave or Negro should own claims or even work in the mines." Not long after forcing the Texans out, a delegate to the state constitutional convention from the mining region proposed a ban on slavery and involuntary servitude in California. The other delegates supported the measure unanimously and began to draft a constitution that barred slavery.¹³ Although California's application for statehood seemed the perfect the opportunity to test the real meaning of popular sovereignty, it instead provoked a crisis in Congress.

15.2.2 The Compromise of 1850

Tensions between northern and southern leaders were quite high when the new Congress convened in December 1849. The House could not even decide on a new speaker, much less on the more substantial questions about slavery once Zachary Taylor proposed to admit California to the Union. The president, wanting to play on the members' devotion to the Union, asked them not to discuss the "exciting topics of a section character" that "provided the painful apprehensions in the public mind." According to historian Michael A. Morrison, Taylor hoped non-action in Washington would allow people in the West to take the initiative with respect to becoming a free or a slave state. However, few members of Congress—Whig or Democrat—wanted a quick solution.¹⁴

Northern Whigs saw the president's move as rejecting his support for the Wilmot Proviso. Southern Whigs saw the president as a traitor to the slaveholding class. Southern Democrats maintained the president wanted to harm the South on purpose. Southerners, regardless of party affiliation, believed they would, perhaps permanently, lose control of the Senate with California's admission as a free state. Taylor's request did little to quell the debate. According to one northerner, it seemed that slavery affected every public policy issue in 1850. Henry Clay once again decided to step in to promote a compromise. Denied the Whig nomination in 1848, Clay wanted to seize the initiative from the president and preserve national unity as he had done with the Missouri Compromise. Daniel Webster and Stephen A. Douglas aided him in working out the details and finally getting Congressional approval. At the same time, John C. Calhoun and William H. Seward led the opposition to any compromise.¹⁵

The Road to the Compromise

On January 29, 1850, Henry Clay rose before the Senate to introduce a series of measures to relieve the sectional tension. Throughout much of his career, the Kentucky senator had promoted economic growth and national unity at the expense of slavery, even though he owned slaves. He proposed measures that required both sides to give a little in the increasingly tense debate. First, California would enter the Union as a free state; the rest of the Mexican Cession would organize without restriction on slavery, or along the lines popular sovereignty. Second,



Figure 15.4 Henry Clay Promotes Compromise | Questions surrounding the extension of slavery in Mexican Cession, especially California, created a major rift between the North and South. Longtime unionist, Henry Clay, promoted a series of measures in 1850 designed to resolve the differences of opinion.

Artist: Engraving by Robert Whitechurch of painting by Peter Rothermel
Source: Library of Congress

Texas would abandon its claim to territory in New Mexico; in return, the federal government would cover debts incurred by Texas when it was an independent republic. Third, Congress would abolish the slave trade but not slavery in the District of Columbia. Finally, Congress would adopt a stronger fugitive slave law, but it would not regulate the interstate slave trade.¹⁶ Clay's proposals touched off an eight-month debate in Congress. Southern and northern radicals opposed the measures for a variety of reasons.

John C. Calhoun spoke ardently for the southern position. Calhoun, who was too ill to deliver his own speech, blamed the North for the crisis. He implied only the North could save the Union “by conceding to the South an equal right in the acquired territory, and to do her duty by causing the stipulations relative to fugitive slaves to be faithfully fulfilled.” Moreover, the North needed to “provide for the insertion of a provision in the Constitution...which will restore to the South in substance the power she possessed of protecting herself, before the equilibrium between the sections was destroyed by the action of this Government.” If the North failed to respond to the South's concerns, Calhoun indicated the South could not stay in the Union.¹⁷

In his first speech before the Senate, William H. Seward explained the northern opposition to compromise. Seward denied the Constitution protected the right to own human property and, even if it did, slavery was “repugnant to the law of nature and of nations.” While the Constitution did recognize slavery, he implied the institution was incompatible with the nation's founding principles. “Freedom is...in harmony with the Constitution of the United States...You may separate slavery from South Carolina, and

the state will still remain; but if you subvert freedom there, the state will cease to exist.” Finally, he suggested Americans, though subject to the Constitution, were subject to a higher law as well. Clay, Taylor, and others lambasted the radical and inflammatory nature of Seward’s comments, but to some extent, he represented the feelings of much of the upper North.¹⁸

While the radicals set the tone of public debate, moderates from the lower North and upper South worked toward a compromise. In a speech supporting the compromise, Daniel Webster said, “I speak to-day for the preservation of the Union...I speak to-day out of a solicitous and anxious heart for the restoration to the country of that quiet and harmonious harmony which make the blessings of this Union so rich, and so dear to us all.”¹⁹ Many moderates shared his opinion and hoped to gain support for Clay’s scheme. A special Congressional committee combined the proposals into the one measure. The supporters of compromise hoped the desire to preserve the Union would outweigh sectional interests so they could pass the “Omnibus Bill.” Unfortunately, they hoped in vain.

Radicals, who composed nearly two-thirds of Congress, did not intend to accept the compromise. Neither, for that matter, did Zachary Taylor. He wanted to see California, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah, and Minnesota admitted to statehood before the question of slavery was addressed, a proposal that would have given the North a ten-vote majority in the Senate.²⁰ A sudden turn of events changed the debate over the compromise. Zachary Taylor



Figure 15.5 Millard Fillmore | This photograph captures Millard Fillmore who ascended to the presidency after Zachary Taylor unexpectedly died.

Author: Unknown
Source: National Archives US Presidents in the Census Records

died unexpectedly on July 9, 1850. Millard Fillmore, a New Yorker who ardently supported a compromise, succeeded him. Even with Fillmore’s support, the Omnibus Bill failed to win a majority in either chamber.

While Clay gave up on the compromise, other members of Congress decided to try a different tactic. Led by Illinois Senator Stephen Douglas, supporters of compromise worked to salvage the situation. Douglas broke Clay’s proposal into separate parts. By introducing the measures one at a time, he managed to gather support from varying coalitions of Whigs and Democrats and Northerners and Southerners on each issue. In

September, Fillmore signed each bill—collectively known as the Compromise of 1850—into law. California entered the Union as a free state. New Mexico and Utah territories were organized, but Congress deferred the question of slavery until their admission as states. Texas gave up a portion of its western boundary to New Mexico in return for \$10 million. Congress abolished the slave trade in the District of Columbia. Finally, Congress passed a more stringent fugitive slave law.²¹

The Impact of the Compromise

People around the country rejoiced at how the compromise saved the Union; the president even called it “a final settlement” of sectional differences. However, radicals on both sides maintained the battle would continue, especially when the Fugitive Slave Law went into effect. Few members of Congress had paid much attention to the provisions of the measure designed to assist slaveholders capture runaway slaves. The nation’s first fugitive slave law came in 1793 because Article IV of the Constitution said “No person held to service or labor in one state, under the laws thereof, escaping into another, shall, in consequence of any law or regulation therein, be discharged from such service or labor, but shall be delivered up on claim of the party to whom such service or labor may be due.” However, the 1850 version made the law much harsher than it had been in the past.²²

The Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 required all citizens to help in the capture of fugitive slaves. U.S. Marshalls had the ability to deputize citizens to aid in seizing runaways. Those who refused to help or interfered in the effort to capture slaves faced stiff fines and jail time. Furthermore, those accused of being runaways had no right to a jury trial and no right to testify in their own defense. Federal commissions could send blacks, runaway or free, back to slavery solely on the sworn statement of individuals claiming to be their owners. The law also said the government would pay commissioners a \$10 fee if they found in favor of the claimant, but a \$5 fee if they found in favor of the accused. Frustrated about the preference the law gave to southern slaveholders, northerners began to obstruct its implementation. While the law did not turn all northerners into antislavery advocates, many believed that accepting it would undermine their states’ freedom of choice.²³

In northern communities, blacks and whites banded together to protect runaways. They passed “personal liberty laws” denying federal officials the use of state facilities. They formed vigilance committees to warn blacks when slave catchers arrived in town and to obstruct their efforts in capturing runaways. In Boston, abolitionists helped fugitives William and Ellen Craft of Georgia escape capture by harassing the slave catchers in the streets. They also freed Shadrach, who fled his master in Virginia, from a federal courtroom. Abolitionists saved some runaways with such daring stunts, but

they could not save them all. In the 1850s, commissioners returned over three hundred blacks to the South and set only eleven free. Most fugitives opted to head to Canada rather than wait to see whether a slave catcher would come after them.²⁴

In Christiana, a small Quaker community near Gettysburg, a slaveholder died in an attempt to capture his runaways. Millard Fillmore, under pressure from southerners to enforce the law, sent the marines to find the runaways and those responsible for the slaveholder's death. The federal government tried the resisters for treason, but the case fell apart. Local juries would simply not convict those accused of violating the law. Southerners expressed horror at the open defiance of the law, even though most northerners complied with it. Historian William W. Freehling remarks that white southerners happily relied on the use of federal power "whenever necessary to sustain the Peculiar Institution," even as they promoted states' rights. Historian Vernon Burton indicated southerners expected the federal government to protect their right to property even when it came at the expense of northerners' right to free speech.²⁵

With tensions already on the rise, the antislavery movement stepped up their efforts to persuade the northern population (and if possible some southerners) about the evils of slavery. They relied heavily on slave narratives and novels designed to highlight the worst aspects of slavery. *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, written by Harriet Beecher Stowe, became the most widely known of these efforts. The book, published in 1852, caused a sensation in the North. In the first year alone, it sold 300,000 copies. Most people were moved by the pain and suffering of the book's main characters, Uncle Tom and Eliza. More than ever before, they began to think about the moral implications of slavery because Stowe successfully managed to link the antislavery cause with the



Figure 15.6 Uncle Tom's Cabin | Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel featuring the horrors of slavery incensed both northerners and southerners. People in the North reacted to the abuse slaves faced, while people in the South claimed the book contained many falsehoods about slavery.

Author: Unknown

Source: *Pictures and Stories from Uncle Tom's Cabin*

preservation of the family. Stowe clearly criticized the southern way of life. However, in making the villain, Simon Legree, a northern transplant, she also blamed northerners for their complicity in perpetuating slavery.²⁶

While it would be hard to quantify the impact of Stowe's book, James McPherson maintains that few contemporaries "doubted its power." Influential political leaders both at home and abroad read *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Moreover, the "vehemence of the southern denunciations" of the book served as "best gauge of how close they hit home." Most southerners considered Stowe's book slanderous. The *Southern Literary Messenger* thought the South had every right to criticize the book because it contained so many false accusations. Pro-slavery authors responded with dozens of books designed to counter the images presented in the antislavery literature. Most of their efforts suggested that slaves lived far better lives than workers in the North did; they focused on the goodness and gentility of life on the plantation. They suggested that slavery's shortcomings came not from deficiencies in the institution, but from an unequal union.²⁷

As national elections approached in 1852, much like in 1848, Whigs and the Democrats sought to close the sectional rifts that had opened within their parties. Both parties chose moderates who had not inflamed voters' passions on the question of slavery. The Whigs needed to find a candidate other than Millard Fillmore, because antislavery Whigs would not vote for him after he ardently upheld The Fugitive Slave Law. Southern Whigs refused to support William H. Seward because of the "Higher Law" speech. To maintain party unity, they selected Winfield Scott, a Mexican War hero and non-slaveholding Virginian. The Democrats also bypassed their better-known members, including James Buchanan, Lewis Cass, and Stephen Douglas. They settled on Franklin Pierce, a former New Hampshire senator.²⁸

The Democrats and the Whigs wanted to avoid the issue of slavery but had no other issues on which to campaign. A healthy economy meant no one cared much about the tariff, a national bank, or internal improvements. Therefore, the campaign descended into a series of vicious personal attacks. The Whigs implied Pierce had no talent for governing; moreover, he was a cowardly drunk. In return, the Democrats, painted Scott as a nativist, which prevented him from picking up votes among immigrants. Pierce triumphed in both the popular and the Electoral College votes. Free Soil candidate Nathan P. Hale siphoned off some of Scott's popular votes, but most Democrats returned to the party fold, thus giving Pierce the edge. Moreover, most southern Whigs could not accept Scott as a candidate because he seemed less than devoted to the Compromise of 1850. The sectional divide for the Whigs did not bode well for the party's future. The Democrats, at least temporarily, papered over their divisions. After the election, many people believed the tensions had finally subsided.²⁹

15.2.3 Before You Move On...

Key Concepts

When Ralph Waldo Emerson proclaimed, “Mexico will poison us,” he quite accurately captured the effect territorial acquisition from the Mexican-American War had on the United States. New territories raised new questions about the extension of slavery that political leaders could not easily answer in the late 1840s and early 1850s. The Wilmot Proviso, proposing to bar slavery in territories acquired from the war, touched off debate in Congress that took over four years to resolve. The gold rush forced a quick decision on the slave issue because California petitioned for statehood in 1849. Californians desired to enter the Union as a free state, and many southerners stood aghast at the real possibility of the Senate tilting in favor of the free states. Southerners threatened secession. In response, Senator Henry Clay proposed a series of measures, collectively known as the Compromise of 1850, to preserve the Union. After months of debate, Congress passed the compromise. Slavery, however, was not a matter that would disappear. Concerns about the response of those opposed to slavery to the Fugitive Slave Law and the publication of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* to promote the end of slavery kept North and South divided into 1852 when Democrat Franklin Pierce triumphed over Whig Winfield Scott in the presidential election.

Test Yourself

1. The Wilmot Proviso

- was unconstitutional.
- would prohibit slavery in lands acquired from Mexico.
- passed both houses of Congress.
- would extend the Missouri Compromise line to the Pacific.

2. The Compromise of 1850

- postponed California statehood.
- gave Texas more territory.
- ended slavery in Washington, D.C.
- strengthened the fugitive slave laws.

3. Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*
 - a. was perhaps the most effective piece of antislavery propaganda.
 - b. was perhaps the most effective piece of proslavery propaganda.
 - c. ended section hostilities after its publication in 1852.
 - d. presented a picture of happy, well-treated slaves and benevolent masters.

[Click here to see answers](#)

15.3 THE COLLAPSE OF THE SECOND PARTY SYSTEM

Many Americans believed Franklin Pierce's election in 1852 would end the sectional problems that emerged after the Mexican-American War. Southerners expected the new president to uphold the Fugitive Slave Law and protect slavery; for the most part, Pierce lived up to their expectations. Democrats also looked for ways to maintain the sectional balance and promote economic development that would benefit all Americans. However, the resulting efforts to annex Cuba and spread slavery to Kansas raised concerns about the future direction of the nation, especially among those opposed to slavery. As North and South once again pulled apart, the Whigs entered a period of decline. After the election of 1852, they ceased to exist as a national party. Several new parties emerged to take their place—most notably the Know-Nothing Party, or the American Party, and the Republican Party. Events in 1856 ultimately paved the way for the Republicans to supersede the Whigs as the second largest party in the nation. Showing the clear divide of the nation, all of the Republicans' support came from the North.

15.3.1 The Possible Expansion of Slavery

Southerners, when surveying the national landscape in 1852 and 1853, continued to worry about their weakening power in the Union. Utah and New Mexico allowed slavery, but low levels of slaveholding did little to strengthen the southern hold on the national government. Moreover, although slavery remained profitable because of a cotton boom in the 1850s, the prices of slaves rose steadily since the ban on the international slave trade went into effect in 1807. Slaveholders, especially in the lower South, had bristled for years about the laws restricting the international slave trade. Some suggested states adopt laws allowing landowners to acquire "apprentices" from Africa. Others simply broke the law. Late in the decade, Charles Lamar sent the *Wanderer* to Africa. Federal authorities stopped the

importation of these slaves, but southern juries acquitted Lamar and his cohorts of all charges, an acquittal which resembled the actions of northern juries in dealing with fugitive slave cases.³⁰ The slaveholder's desire for more territory, particularly in Latin America and later in Kansas, proved far more significant than their defiance of the ban on the international slave trade.

Young America and Cuba

Acquiring new slave territory in the 1850s fit well with a nationalistic movement in the Democratic Party known as Young America. For several years, some slaveholders had looked to Cuba. James Polk offered to purchase the territory, but the Spanish refused. When that effort failed, many expansionists were more than willing to go to war to win the island. Narciso Lopez, a Cuban exile, encouraged these efforts by recruiting pirates to attack Cuba. His expeditions failed, but the desire to obtain Cuba did not abate. During 1852, the Young Americans made acquiring Cuba from Spain part of the Democratic Platform. Pierce's victory increased the possibility of territorial expansion, especially after he appointed numerous southern expansionists to his administration.³¹

Although Pierce sent Pierre Soulé, a devoted expansionist, to Spain as minister, he seemed less than confident the Spanish would sell. So, the president encouraged John Quitman to plan a piracy expedition. Pierce hoped the effort would spark an uprising against Spanish rule in Cuba. The revolution would lead to an independent republic, which, like Texas, would apply to enter the Union. Since slavery was legal in Spanish Cuba, it would remain so after annexation. By 1854, Quitman recruited enough volunteers for an invasion. Louisiana Senator John Slidell then introduced a measure to suspend the neutrality law so Americans could sell weapons to Cubans. At that point, the Pierce administration began to have second thoughts about supporting Quitman because of developments in Kansas and Nebraska.³²

Since the president still wanted Cuba, he instructed Soulé to offer the Spanish \$130 million for the territory. Failing that, Soulé should "detach the island from the Spanish dominion." Soulé encouraged James Buchanan, the minister to Great Britain, and John Mason, the minister to France, to join him in issuing the Ostend Manifesto. Their memorandum stated, "We firmly believe...the vital interests of Spain are as seriously involved in the sale, as those of the United States in the purchase, of the island and that the transaction will prove equally honorable to both nations." They further declared that Spanish control of the island harmed the United States. If Spain would not sell, then the United States would "be justified in wresting it from Spain." The European and American press savaged the Ostend Manifesto. By the end of the year, the administration gave up any hope of acquiring Cuba, though they later flirted with acquiring Nicaragua through similar

means.³³ Although the Pierce administration ultimately failed to acquire Cuba, it did complete the continental expansion of the United States. In 1853, the president appointed James Gadsden as the minister to Mexico. When he arrived in Mexico City, Gadsden had one goal—to negotiate the purchase of land in northern Mexico so the United States could complete a rail line from New Orleans to southern California. Gadsden offered Santa Anna \$50 million for 250,000 square miles. Even though the Mexican leader needed the money, he would not part with one-third of his territory. Instead, he negotiated the sale of 55,000 square miles for \$15 million. The Senate approved the Gadsden Purchase only after northern members cut the acquisition to 46,000 square miles.³⁴ While many southerners did not give up their desire to acquire more slave territory, after 1854 they turned their attention to Kansas.

The Kansas-Nebraska Act

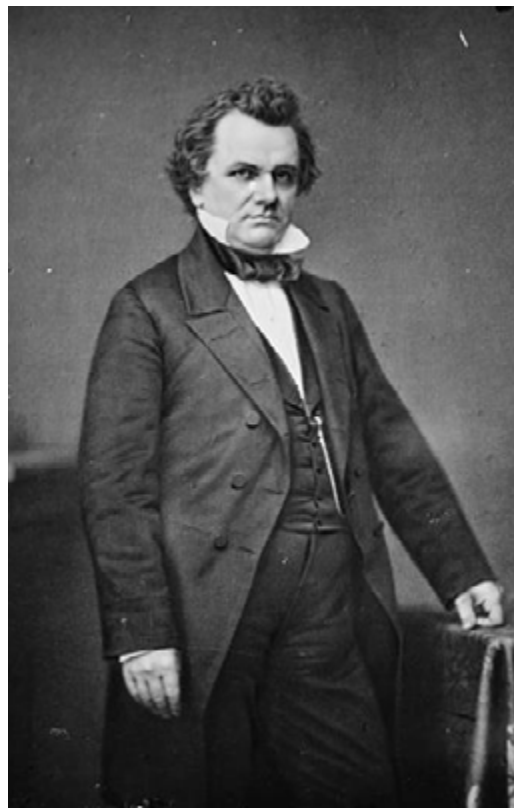


Figure 15.7 Stephen A. Douglas | This photograph of Douglas (the “Little Giant”) was taken sometime after the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act. The Illinois Democrat hoped to promote economic growth when he introduced the measure to organize two new western territories. However, the bill only reignited sectional tensions.

Author: Unknown
Source: Library of Congress

As southern politicians supported expansionist ventures, northern politicians looked for ways to promote national unity. Stephen Douglas, the “Little Giant” who successfully shepherded the Compromise of 1850 through Congress, saw economic expansion as the best means to bridge the gap between the sections. To facilitate that growth, Douglas looked to Congress to grant land concessions to the Illinois Central Railroad in order to complete a transcontinental railroad from Chicago to San Francisco. Since the route would go through the central part of the country, Congress also needed to organize new territories out of the Louisiana Purchase. As an investor in the railroad, Douglas stood to gain financially upon the line’s completion. But more than personal gain motivated the senator. Douglas believed, according to Vernon Burton, his plan “offered something for everyone” and the spirit of manifest destiny would prevail. Unfortunately, the plan had the opposite effect.³⁵

As the chair of the Senate committee on territories, Douglas introduced a bill in 1853 to organize the Nebraska territory based on the terms of the Missouri Compromise. His counterpart in the House did likewise. While the House passed the measure, opposition from southern senators derailed it. Leading southern senators made it clear that, if Douglas wanted their support, he would have to allow slavery in the territory. He, of course, knew opening the territory to slavery would undermine northern support. When Douglas proposed a revised bill in 1854, he used the same phrase Congress used with respect to New Mexico and Utah. The southerners, however, indicated he had not gone far enough to meet their needs. They insisted on a stated repeal of the Missouri Compromise. By 1854, southerners grew frustrated with northern defiance of the Fugitive Slave Law. The case of Anthony Burns in Boston, where leading abolitionists supported his failed rescue attempt from the federal courthouse, made southerners want stronger federal protection for slavery. Douglas acquiesced to their demands when he introduced the Kansas-Nebraska bill. The measure proposed to create two territories instead of one; it also supported the use of popular sovereignty in both territories.³⁶

The Kansas-Nebraska bill ended the sectional peace. When the Pierce administration tried to propose a bill that would not repeal the Missouri Compromise, southern senators literally stormed the White House in protest. The president backed down because they told him he would lose southern support if he did not support the measure as proposed. The administration then put pressure on northern Democrats to vote for the measure. However, regardless of their party, many northerners could not accept the bill. The Free Soilers' frequent warnings of a slave power conspiracy no longer seemed so farfetched. State legislatures across the North passed resolutions opposing the Kansas-Nebraska bill. In response, Douglas claimed that the Compromise of 1850 had already repealed the Missouri Compromise. But most northerners found the argument disingenuous since the 1850 measures only applied to the Mexican Cession, not the Louisiana Purchase.³⁷

Congress narrowly approved the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854 after Douglas found enough northerners to support the bill. At the same time, southerners prevented the simultaneous passage of a homestead act to provide settlers with 160 acres of free land in the newly-organized territories. James McPherson maintains the Kansas-Nebraska Act "may have been the most important single event pushing the nation toward civil war." It undermined the Whigs as a national party and cut the strength of Democrats in the North.³⁸ After the measure passed, most people assumed Nebraska would be a free territory because its climate was not suitable for plantation slavery. Kansas, on the other hand, would be up for grabs. Whichever side controlled the process of writing the state constitution would make the decision. In the coming years, the confrontation in Kansas turned violent.

15.3.2 The Emergence of New Parties

After the election of 1852, Whigs across the country thought that they could mount a comeback if they exploited the Democrats' mistakes, a recovery that would come so long as the Whigs did not draw attention to themselves. Historian Michael Holt, however, maintained their strategy had serious flaws. By 1853, the Whigs had broken into five factions, ranging from those who wanted to create a new antislavery party to those who wanted to create a new union party. Try as they might, the Whigs could not find an issue in 1853 to unite their national party.³⁹

Although the Kansas-Nebraska debate weakened the Democrats, it did not benefit the Whigs. The rising concern about immigrants and about slavery hurt them. The Whigs' wait-and-see strategy backfired because time was not on their side, as they believed. Moreover, they failed to consider other parties might gain more from voter backlash against the Democrats.⁴⁰ While dozens of new political organizations vied for voters' attention, two emerged as true contenders. One focused on concerns about immigration; the other focused on concerns about slavery. The party realignment that occurred in the 1850s did not rest solely on the issue of slavery; nativism played a significant role as well.

The Know-Nothing Party

During the 1830s, anti-immigrant sentiments in the United States began to rise. Protestant Americans viewed Catholic immigrants as ignorant and superstitious and so perceived their growing number as harmful to the nation's republican form of government. At first, nativist tendencies influenced the workplace more than political debates. Employment advertisements often featured the phrase, "No Irish Need Apply." When the potato famine sent thousands of Irish people to American shores, nativist organizations rose in both popularity and political power. In the 1840s, the Order of United Americans and the Order of the Star Spangled Banner, two secret organizations, formed in an effort to preserve native-born political power. They merged in 1852 to form the Know-Nothing Party, sometimes known as the American Party. Their name derived from member's standard response to questions about the party: "I know nothing." With over one million members, the group became an important political force in the North.⁴¹

Men who gravitated toward Know-Nothingism tended to be in their twenties and to work in lower white-collar or skilled blue-collar positions. More than anything else, in light of the Market Revolution, they wanted to preserve their place in American society. Their political positions stemmed from their hostility to foreigners. They linked the poverty and ignorance of

the Irish in Ireland and the United States to drink and to Catholic education. Therefore, the party supported the temperance movement and opposed tax support for parochial schools in order to assimilate the Irish into American culture. However, more than anything else, Know-Nothings wanted to undermine the political power of naturalized citizens. They proposed to lengthen the naturalization period from five to twenty-one years. They also called for public office to be restricted to the native born.⁴²

In 1854, the Know-Nothings did well in local and state elections. They controlled state governments in California, Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and New York. By 1855, the party spread southward, as they made significant inroads in Maryland, Kentucky, and Tennessee. These victories stemmed less from nativist sentiment and more from the desire of southern Whigs to find a new home before the next presidential election. As the strength of the party shifted, slavery became a divisive issue. Northern Know-Nothings tended to oppose the spread of slavery. They thought slavery, like Catholicism, stemmed from ignorance and tyranny. They did well in the 1854 and 1855 elections in some states because they banded with Free Soil candidates. Southern Know-Nothings, however, could not accept a party that denounced the expansion of slavery into the territories. Northern delegates walked out of their 1855 national convention after southern delegates asked the party to endorse the Kansas-Nebraska Act. Antislavery advocates looked for other options; thus, the American Party grew stronger in the South and weaker in the North.⁴³

The Republican Party

After Stephen Douglas introduced the Kansas-Nebraska bill, some northerners thought they needed to create a new political coalition to stop the spread of slavery. As the nation approached the midterm elections in 1854, people opposed to the extension of slavery aligned in hopes of undermining the Democrats' control of the national government. In time, disgruntled Democrats, disillusioned Free Soilers, distraught Whigs, and discouraged Know-Nothings united in what supporters eventually called the Republican Party, though until 1856 it had several different names. The results of the 1854 elections showed a great deal of resentment toward the Democrats among northern voters, but it did not guarantee a party hostile to slavery could be successful. Party organizers therefore looked for a way to unite their rather heterogeneous group of voters.⁴⁴

Efforts to build the Republican Party into a cohesive group began in earnest after the 1854 elections. Leaders sought to outline a political philosophy or ideology that could speak to former Democrats and former Whigs as well as appeal to nativists and immigrants. They needed to find a way to package their antislavery views to as many northerners as possible, since they did

not expect to draw much support from southerners. Historian Eric Foner maintains “the concept of ‘free labor’ lay at the heart” of Republican ideology. It provided a “coherent social outlook” that allowed the party to suggest why slavery harmed American society. Republicans believed, as William Seward indicated, slavery was “morally unjust, politically unwise, and socially destructive” because it undermined a person’s ability to achieve economic independence and social mobility. Free labor allowed Republicans to focus on the effects of slavery on non-slaveholders as opposed to the slaves; thus, they could better blunt criticism that they favored racial equality.⁴⁵

Republicans expanded on their platform of free labor by promoting “free soil” and “free men.” Free soil referred to the old Free Soil Party that hoped to stop the spread of slavery in the territories and to the crisis in Kansas following the Kansas-Nebraska Act. Republicans wanted to spread free labor to the West. For that to happen, those territories needed to be free of both slaves and free blacks. Free men referred to a belief that all men, black or white, deserved the right to their own labor. Few Republicans supported equality between the races, but they believed in basic human rights for all. The number of Republicans who supported the American Colonization Society’s efforts to encourage migration of former slaves to Africa suggested widespread racism in the party. At the same time, most Republicans fought efforts to make the legal and social position of blacks worse than it was in the 1850s.⁴⁶

Free labor ideology helped to bridge the gap between the radical, conservative, and moderate wings of the party. Regional variations in the North helped shape Republican policy and programs as well as determined which part leaders chose to focus on. When dealing with radical members, leaders addressed the need to end slavery. When dealing with conservative members, leaders focused on the need to preserve the Union. As the party grew in strength, moderates held the party together and tried to find a way to meet both of their goals.⁴⁷ Although the Kansas-Nebraska Act helped form the party, it would be events in 1856 that helped the Republicans become the dominant alternative to the Democrats by the end of the decade.

15.3.3 The Tremors of 1856

Throughout 1854 and 1855, it seemed unclear whether the Know-Nothings or the Republicans would successfully manage to succeed the Whigs in the traditional two-party system. However, two events paved the way for the Republicans to rise in strength. After the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, both sides vowed to triumph in Kansas. New Englanders sent money and weapons to the antislavery settlers; meanwhile, Missouri slaveholders pledged to burn the abolitionists out of Kansas. In 1856, the conflict between

proslavery and antislavery elements turned violent, leading to a civil war in Kansas and an attack on Charles Sumner in Washington. Combined, the two events made the threat of slavery seem far more serious than the threat of immigrants.⁴⁸

Bleeding Kansas

At first, antislavery and proslavery advocates in Kansas hoped to use the ballot box to swing the territory to slave or free. Initially, slaveholders outnumbered Free Soilers. Nevertheless, proslavery leaders wanted to ensure victory in elections for a representative to Congress and for the territorial legislature. Led by David Atchison, who was a Missouri senator, proslavery forces from Missouri cast ballots in the Kansas elections. On May 30, 1855, the slaveholders secured a majority in the territorial legislature, though almost 5,000 illegal ballots were cast. Andrew Reeder, the territorial governor, ordered new elections in many districts, which the Free Soilers won. However, when the legislature met in July, it refused to seat those elected in the second election. Then it passed a series of laws to undermine the influence of the Free Soilers, including one that made it a crime to express antislavery statements. When Missourians cast ballots in Kansas, according to William Freehling, they created a new issue there. It became less about legalizing slavery and more about “whether Kansas could abide antirepublican repression of whites.”⁴⁹

When Reeder traveled to Washington to meet with the president about the fraud, Franklin Pierce backed the proslavery forces in Kansas. He replaced Reeder with William Shannon, whom he instructed to uphold the laws passed by the proslavery legislature. At the same time, Free Soilers made it clear they had no intention of living under the laws of a legislature they considered fraudulent. They continued to move into Kansas to press their cause and soon outnumbered the slaveholders. Free Soilers held a convention in Topeka, where they adopted a constitution that barred slaves and free blacks from Kansas. Moreover, they proposed to select a new state legislature and a new governor. As 1856 began, Kansas had two constitutions and two legislatures: one representing proslavery forces in Lecompton, and one representing antislavery forces in Topeka.⁵⁰

Kansas descended into violence in 1856. Hoping to encourage Free Soilers to leave the territory, hundreds of proslavery forces, mostly from Missouri, marched into Lawrence on May 21, 1856. Their purpose was to arrest the leaders of the antislavery government for treason. Although the leaders did not resist arrest, the posse burned the local hotel, looted a number of houses, destroyed two antislavery printing presses, and killed one man. Less than a week later, the antislavery forces responded in kind. John Brown, who believed he had a personal duty to overthrow slavery, became quite agitated

when he heard about what happened in Lawrence. He vowed to “fight fire with fire” and to “strike terror in the hearts” of the proslavery forces. Along with four of his sons and three other supporters, Brown headed to a neighborhood near Pottawatomie Creek on May 24, 1856. They killed five proslavery men and proceeded to cut off their heads and hands during the course of the night. The “Pottawatomie Massacre” coupled with the “Sack of Lawrence” led to a guerilla war that lasted for much of the rest of the decade.⁵¹

Bleeding Sumner

Given the situation in Kansas, Congress opened debates on its statehood in a heated atmosphere. However, both sides knew neither a proslavery nor an antislavery constitution would win approval because the Republicans controlled the House and the Democrats controlled the Senate. Thus, both sides saw the debates as an opportunity to attack the opposition before the next presidential election. David Atchison had previously indicated if the South won Kansas, slavery would spread successfully to the Pacific. However, if the South failed, it would lose Missouri, Arkansas, and Texas. In other words, the South was playing “for mighty stakes.” South Carolina Representative Preston Brooks tied the fate of the South to the Kansas issue, noting it was a “point of honor.”⁵²

At the same time, Republicans highlighted the infringement of the rights of the Free Soil settlers. On May 19, 1856, Massachusetts Senator Charles Sumner began his “Crime against Kansas Speech.” Sumner hoped to inflame passions about the situation in Kansas when he stated, “It is the rape of a virgin Territory, compelling it to the hateful embrace of slavery; and it may be clearly traced to a depraved longing for a new slave State, the hideous offspring of such a crime, in the hope of adding to the power of slavery in the national government.” Democrats heavily criticized the speech, while Republicans remained muted in their praise because Sumner’s remarks showed so much hostility to the South. However, no one quite expected that one man’s response to the speech would revive political abolition.⁵³

During the speech, Charles Sumner made a passing reference to Andrew Butler, his aging colleague from South Carolina. Sumner accused Butler of not only defending but also lusting after the “harlot, Slavery” for most of his public life. Southerners were furious about this personal attack on one of their elder statesmen, none more so than Butler’s cousin, Preston Brooks. The young representative felt compelled to defend the honor of both his cousin and the South. Under normal circumstances, Brooks would have challenged Sumner to a duel. However, he did not consider Sumner worthy of a duel, nor did he think Sumner would accept. On May 22, 1856, Brooks did what he considered the next best thing. After the Senate adjourned, he

approached Sumner who was working at his desk. Brooks declared Sumner had libeled his state and his relative, and he planned to punish him for it. As the senator looked up from his desk, Brooks began to assault him with his cane and did not stop until Sumner lay bleeding and unconscious on the floor.⁵⁴

In the wake of the caning, southerners labeled Brooks a hero. A Charleston newspaper praised him for “standing forth so nobly in defense of...the honor of South Carolinians.” Northerners in the House hoped to expel him, but southern support blocked the attempt. Brooks then resigned his seat; he returned home only to have the people of South Carolina reelect him unanimously. Fellow southerners also sent him gifts of new canes with inscriptions like “Hit Him Again” and “Use Knock Down Arguments.” Simultaneously, northerners turned Sumner into a martyr for the antislavery cause. Brooks’s assault symbolized the barbarity of the slave system. Moreover, it showed southerners would not tolerate free speech anywhere, even in the halls of Congress, when it criticized their beloved institution of slavery. Southern praise for Brooks proved even more damaging than the attack itself. Northern conservatives began to concede that southern society might be as bad as the radicals had suggested. The combined effects of “Bleeding Kansas” and “Bleeding Sumner” convinced many northerners of the necessity of curbing slave power.⁵⁵

The Election of 1856

As the election of 1856 approached, once again the future of slavery and the future of freedom dominated public discourse. “Bleeding Kansas” and “Bleeding Sumner” set the stage for the election as the Know-Nothings, the Republicans, and the Democrats looked to find candidates who could hold their fragmented coalitions together. In the end, the ongoing sectional tensions shaped the outcome. The election also paved the way for the continuation of those divisions as the Republican Party grew stronger in the North.

In 1856, Know-Nothing leaders hoped to bridge the gap between the two regions that had grown in the wake of their split over slavery the previous year. Once again, southerners called for support of slavery, and many northerners refused. The southern delegates nominated former president Millard Fillmore, who had cast his lot with the Know-Nothings when the Whigs fell apart in New York. Fillmore ran on a platform that did not specifically endorse slavery; rather, it endorsed popular sovereignty and respect for existing laws. The northerners who left the convention chose to support Speaker of the House Nathaniel Banks; however, Banks intended to pull out of the race so that antislavery Know-Nothings would have to support the Republican nominee.⁵⁶

Republican leaders chose not to use the name Republican when they called their convention. Instead, they held an antislavery convention in Philadelphia open to all those opposed to the Kansas-Nebraska Act and the Pierce administration. Party leaders looked to draft a platform and select a candidate that would help broaden their constituency in the North. The platform opposed the expansion of slavery. Republicans also supported Whig ideas about internal improvements and left their

commitment to nativism ambiguous. The party selected John C. Frémont as their presidential nominee. His reputation as a notable explorer, known as the “Pathfinder,” served to enhance his political standing. His marriage to Missouri politician Thomas Hart Benton’s daughter helped him appeal to antislavery Democrats. Finally, his support for a free California and a free Kansas demonstrated his antislavery credentials. Throughout the campaign, the Republicans used the slogan “Free Soil, Free Speech, Free Men, Frémont!”⁵⁷

Democratic leaders shied away from incumbent Franklin Pierce and from Stephen Douglas because in the public’s mind both bore a great deal of responsibility for reigniting sectional hostilities. So, they turned to James Buchanan, then serving as the minister to Great Britain, because he seemed like a safe choice. Buchanan, who hailed from Pennsylvania, had made few political enemies in a long career of public service. The best thing Buchanan had going for him in securing the nomination and campaigning for president was he had been out of the country while it divided over Kansas. Southern delegates preferred Douglas, but they conceded to Buchanan’s selection. The party platform also helped mollify their concerns about choosing a northerner. The Democrats pledged to uphold popular sovereignty and states’ rights.⁵⁸

Since Frémont did not appear on the ballot in most southern states, two races occurred in 1856. Buchanan and Fillmore contested for votes in the South, while Buchanan and Frémont contested for votes in the North. Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Indiana, and Illinois were the battleground states. The Democrats, especially in these key states, focused on the sectional nature of the Republican Party. Given the fact that many southerners threatened secession if Frémont won, Democrats could claim a vote for Buchanan was a vote for the Union. Moreover, the Democrats suggested the Republicans



Figure 15.8 Republican Political Cartoon, 1856 | The Republican Party ran its first presidential candidate, John C. Frémont in 1856. This political cartoon supporting his candidacy pokes fun at James Buchanan’s support for popular sovereignty.

Artist: John L. Magee
Source: Library of Congress

wanted to end white supremacy and enact racial equality. The Republican Party found it very difficult to counter the charges, even though they were not true.⁵⁹

James Buchanan defeated John C. Frémont and Millard Fillmore by winning both the popular and Electoral College votes. He took the entire South, plus the battleground states. Southerners vowed to use their support of Buchanan to exact future concessions on the question of slavery. Astute politicians across the country, however, realized the potential for an entirely sectional candidate to triumph in 1860. If the Republicans could hold the North as well as take Pennsylvania and Illinois, then they could win the election without a single Electoral College vote from the South. The results cemented the strength of the Republican Party, but they spelled trouble for union in the future.⁶⁰

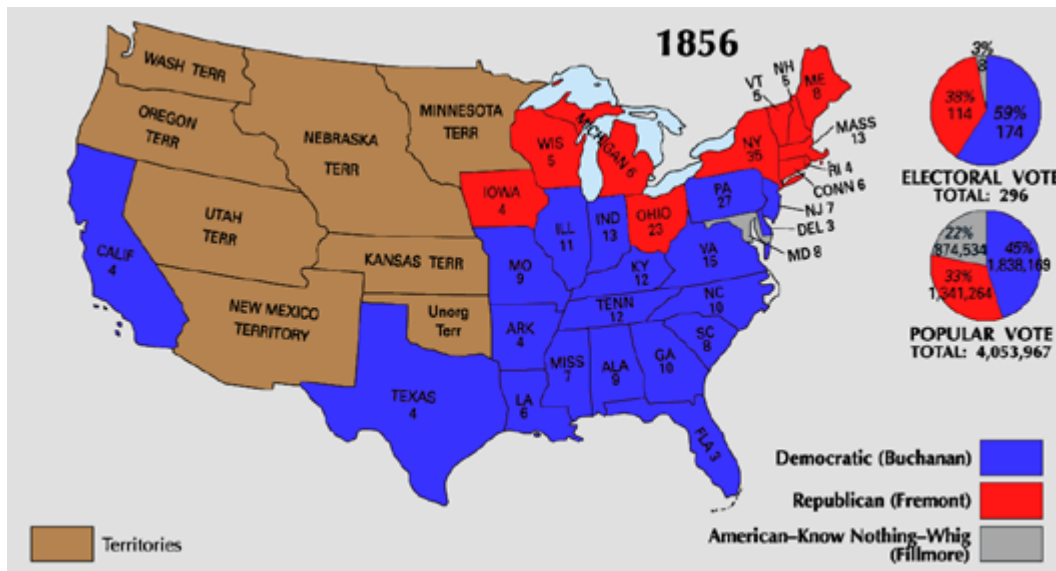


Figure 15.9 Presidential Election Map, 1856 | Democrat James Buchanan defeated Republican John C. Frémont and Know-Nothing Millard Fillmore because southerners threatened secession if Frémont won. However, Frémont’s victories in the North showed the strength of the Republican Party.

Author: National Atlas of the United States
Source: Wikimedia Commons

15.3.4 Before You Move On...

Key Concepts

Many Americans believed Franklin Pierce’s presidency would help lessen the sectional divide, but the opposite happened. From 1853 to 1856, a series of events stemming from the southern desire to expand slavery and the northern desire to curb slavery made the resentment worse. Southerners, with the backing of the Young America movement, promoted the expansion to the South—looking to Cuba and Mexico. Their attempts raised concerns in the North, concerns which Stephen

Douglas further exacerbated when he proposed to organize the Nebraska territory. The resulting Kansas-Nebraska Act, repealing the Missouri Compromise line, pleased southerners who wanted federal protection for slavery and angered northerners who opposed its extension into new territories.

The measure contributed to the end of the second party system. The Whigs could no longer find common ground and disintegrated into several factions. The Know-Nothings rose to prominence by opposing the influence of immigrants on the country in light of the fact that the rate of immigration rose in the late 1840s and early 1850s, whereas the Republicans began to gather support by expressing concern about the expansion of slavery especially in terms of how it affected non-slaveholding whites. As the two parties vied for support, the outbreak of violence in Kansas over the implementation of popular sovereignty, as well as Preston Brooks's attack on Charles Sumner, set the stage for the presidential contest in 1856. Democrat James Buchanan defeated Republican John C. Frémont and Know-Nothing Millard Fillmore because the Democratic Party successfully managed to portray him as the only viable option to disunion and to racial equality. However, most people also realized his election would not bring sectional harmony.

Test Yourself

1. The Ostend Manifesto was
 - a. an agreement by the United States, Britain, and France to free oppressed Cubans.
 - b. a diplomatic dispatch suggesting that Cuba be taken from Spain to protect American interests.
 - c. an attempt to gain Cuba as a colony for freed American slaves.
 - d. a plot by slaveholders to gain more slave territory.

2. Stephen Douglas's proposed Kansas-Nebraska Act
 - a. strengthened his presidential prospects.
 - b. showed his enthusiastic support of slavery.
 - c. strengthened the Missouri Compromise.
 - d. might allow slavery in Kansas and Nebraska.

3. During the presidential campaign of 1860, the Republican Party
 - a. nominated William H. Seward for president.
 - b. opposed the further spread of slavery.
 - c. supported states' rights.
 - d. condemned nativism.

15.4 THE SECTIONAL BALANCE COMES UNDONE

The last few years of the 1850s paved the way for the sectional breakdown that resulted in a civil war. Following the Mexican-American War, disunion seemed like an unlikely prospect even though North and South disagreed on the future of slavery. In the past, national leaders had managed to compromise on divisive issues like the tariff and the bank; most people expected them to do so when it came to slavery. Unfortunately, by the time James Buchanan took office in 1857, few people wanted to compromise. The new president also seemed unwilling or incapable of bringing the North and the South together. Southerners, who worried about Buchanan's northern sympathies, found him disposed to accept their demands for federal support of the extension of slavery. Then a financial panic, the *Dred Scott* decision, and John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry made tensions between proslavery and antislavery advocates worse. Finally, Abraham Lincoln emerged as a forceful speaker for the Republican Party as Buchanan tilted the Democratic Party further to the South.

15.4.1 Northern and Southern Perspectives

Northerners and southerners in the 1850s increasingly felt the need to defend their position on slavery, whether they opposed it or they favored it. Slavery drove the two sides apart, but not because either side had many moral concerns about the peculiar institution. Both sides saw their freedom at stake, namely, their freedom to the political and economic liberties they believed the Constitution guaranteed. Both sides saw themselves as fighting for liberty and for what they perceived to be the legacy of the American Revolution. They simply had very different viewpoints about what the Revolution had meant.

Northerners believed a vast slave power conspiracy dominated national politics. Meanwhile, southerners saw an influential abolitionist element trying to eliminate slavery all over the country. Few people on either side fell into these extremist categories. But, northern and southern spokesmen felt compelled to criticize the other side and defend their position. As tensions mounted toward the end of the decade, people began to wonder if they could ever mend their differences. In 1858, William H. Seward outlined the notion of irrepressible conflict, in which the nation would have to choose to be all slave or all free. Northerners and southerners nonetheless did not necessarily think their differences would lead to a war.

The Northern Perspective

Northerners increasingly turned to ideas about free labor to explain the benefits of their society. A free labor system in which employers

paid workers wages led to economic growth. New Yorker William Evarts suggested that labor was “the source of all our wealth, of all our progress, of all our dignity and value.” The system also provided opportunity for social mobility. The goal for most northerners was not great wealth, but economic independence. If they worked hard enough, they could improve their lives and enter the ranks of the middle class. Pennsylvanian Thaddeus Stevens recorded how “the middling classes who own the soil, and work it with their hands are the main support of every free government.”⁶¹ In the nineteenth century, most northerners also believed progress came from developing the economy, increasing social mobility, and spreading democratic institutions.

To the proponents of free labor, slavery robbed labor, both slave and free, of its dignity. Slavery denied workers social mobility. Since workers had no incentive, they became less productive. Economically speaking, they believed slavery led to mass poverty. However, northerners worried more about the effect a slave-based economy had on non-slaveholders than on slaves. They frequently commented on the lack of opportunity for poor whites to improve their social and economic standing. From the northern perspective, people born poor in the South remained poor. Northerners believed all the best qualities about a free labor society, such as hard work, frugality, and a spirit of industry, were lacking in the South. Many northerners, especially the Republicans, sought to create a free labor system in the South. They looked for government action to promote free labor; however, southern dominance of national political institutions, referred to sometimes as slave power, prevented that option.⁶²

The Southern Perspective

Southerners found the criticism of their lifestyle unwarranted. They believed courtesy, hospitality, and chivalry were the hallmarks of their way of life. When antislavery advocates became more vocal in the 1830s, southerners began to highlight the positive nature of slavery. Thomas R. Dew, a professor at William and Mary, relied on biblical and historical evidence to suggest how slavery benefited the master and the slave. To justify why only blacks became slaves in the South, Dew suggested the institution helped Africans become more civilized. Moreover, enslaving blacks brought greater liberty and equality to whites. By the 1850s, southern theorists like George Fitzhugh focused even more on racial inferiority to justify slavery. Fitzhugh argued in favor of the paternalistic nature of slavery, noting that “He the Negro is but a grown up child, and must be governed as a child, not as a lunatic or criminal. The master occupies toward him the place of parent or guardian.”⁶³

To the proponents of slavery, free labor did not benefit anyone. Alluding to the paternalistic nature of slavery, Virginian Edmond Ruffin suggested

northern employers held their workers “under a much more stringent and cruel bondage, and in conditions of far greater...suffering than our negro slaves.” Slaves, moreover, did not have to worry about securing food, clothing, or shelter, since their masters provided those commodities. James Henry Hammond, basing his justification for slavery on the so-called mudsill theory, further suggested the benefits of slavery for southern whites. All societies had, he noted, a “mudsill class” or working class. In the South, slaves performed the menial and thankless tasks, leaving whites to pursue the fruits of civilization. In the North, the wage labor system meant whites performed the tasks of slaves and therefore had no real opportunity for advancement.⁶⁴

The Panic of 1857

The debate between the North and the South intensified after a financial panic hit the nation in 1857. American exports of grain increased between 1854 and 1856 because of the Crimean War in Europe. When the war ended, the market slumped. The war also pushed investors in Europe to sell off their American stocks and bonds. Both developments hurt the American economy. For much of the decade, economic growth caused a rise in western land prices, the overextension of the railroads, and risky loans by banks. When grain exports declined and European investment stopped, American banks began to fail. By the end of the year, hundreds of thousands of northern workers lost their jobs. Relief efforts helped the jobless to survive the winter and prevent a much-feared class war. By spring, the economy was on its way to recovery.⁶⁵

Southerners for the most part escaped the economic downturn. So, they boasted about the superiority of the plantation economy. Many even suggested cotton saved the North from financial ruin. Frustrated northerners blamed the South, with its constant demand for low tariffs, for the crisis. After the panic, a coalition of northern Republicans and Democrats pushed for an increase in the tariff, as well as land grant measures for farmers, the railroads, and colleges, to help prevent future economic problems. Southern obstruction of these efforts only made the sectional tensions worse.⁶⁶ Southerners saw the measures as a way to promote a federally-backed antislavery agenda; northerners, on the other hand, saw the slave power conspiracy at work.

15.4.2 The Crisis Continues

As northerners and southerners staked their claim to the Revolution’s legacy, the dispute about the future of slavery in the United States continued. The Supreme Court, under the leadership of Roger B. Taney, decided to step

into the debate on the rights of slaves and slaveholders. Moreover, questions about Kansas's proposed statehood continued to affect territorial authorities and national leaders. The sectional tensions also provided politicians with new challenges and opportunities, as evidenced by Abraham Lincoln's reentry into politics as a Republican after the Kansas-Nebraska Act. In 1858, Lincoln challenged Stephen Douglas to a series of debates before the fall elections. He hoped to win a Republican majority in the state legislature in order to secure a position in the U.S. Senate.

The Dred Scott Decision

In 1846, Dred Scott sued for his freedom after his master Dr. John Emerson died. White friends encouraged Scott to file the suit because his master had taken him to live for a significant period in the free state of Illinois and the free territory of Wisconsin in the 1830s before returning to Missouri. Scott, his wife Harriet, and their daughter claimed residing in free territory made them free. Scott initially won freedom for his family in the Missouri courts. But on appeal, the Missouri Supreme Court reversed the decision. The court had previously awarded slaves their freedom in similar cases. Scott's lawyers therefore took his suit to the federal courts. In 1854, the Missouri district court agreed to hear the case and subsequently upheld

the decision to return the family to slavery.⁶⁷



Figure 15.10 Dred Scott | In 1858, the Supreme Court issued a decision in the *Dred Scott v. Sandford* case. Scott claimed his residence in a free territory made him free. The court declared blacks could not be citizens of the United States, residence in a free territory did not make a slave free, and Congress had no authority to bar slavery in the territories

Artist: Unknown
Source: Library of Congress

The U.S. Supreme Court agreed to hear the case in 1856. Chief Justice Roger B. Taney hoped their decision in the case would be the final word on the constitutionality of the institution of slavery. The justices decided to delay their ruling until after the presidential election. According to James McPherson, the Court had three questions to answer in their decision. One, did Scott have the right to sue in federal court; in other words, was he a U.S. citizen? Two, did residence in a free territory for almost four years make him free? Three, did Congress have the authority to bar slavery in any territory; in other words, was the Missouri Compromise constitutional? Before James

Buchanan's inauguration, a majority of the Court seemed inclined to rule that Missouri law determined Scott's status as a slave and to say nothing more.⁶⁸

However, Roger B. Taney encouraged his fellow southerners to issue a decision in order to put the matter of slavery in the territories to rest. Taney, a native of Maryland, had long wanted to write this decision; he had waited for years for the right opportunity to protect the southern way of life. The chief justice also knew the southern majority on the Court would need one northerner to go along as well. So, one of the southern justices asked the president-elect to put pressure on one of the northern justices. Whatever Buchanan felt about the impropriety of such a move, he shared with Taney a desire to settle the issue. He knew how poisonous the debate about slavery could be to his administration. Buchanan, in his inaugural address, suggested that the issue of the extension of slavery belonged with the Supreme Court, not Congress.⁶⁹

Two days after the inauguration, the Court issued its ruling in *Dred Scott v. Sandford*. Speaking for the majority, Taney declared Scott had no standing to sue in federal court because blacks could not be citizens of the United States. Technically, the decision should have ended there since, as once he declared Scott a non-citizen, nothing else mattered. However, Taney decided to address the remaining issues before the court in order to settle portions of the ongoing slavery debate. The chief justice said that residence in free territory did not make a slave free once he or she returned to slave territory. He further indicated that the Constitution upheld slavery because it protected private property and slaves were a form of property. Finally, he said Congress had no authority to bar slavery in the territories, making the Missouri Compromise unconstitutional.⁷⁰

According to Vernon Burton, "The *Dred Scott* ruling was pure joy for southerners." Not only did the decision grant them protection for their human property, but also it confirmed their right to take slaves anywhere in the country. In other words, slavery was a national institution; the distinction between slave and free states no longer existed. After the decision, northerners could only destroy slavery through a constitutional amendment, and no southerner expected that to happen.⁷¹ The South also delighted in the idea that the decision would crush the hated Republican Party. Republicans, however, refused to accept Taney's decision.

Republican papers lambasted the ruling. The *Cleveland Leader* called it "villainously false," and the *New York Tribune* said it had "as much moral weight...the majority of those congregated in any Washington bar-room." Moreover, Republicans argued the decision was not binding because it addressed matters not before the court, a practice known as *obiter dictum*.

Northern legislatures with Republican majorities responded by passing laws reaffirming the citizenship of their black residents. The decision additionally gave many northern Democrats pause. It occurred to them that Taney also undermined popular sovereignty because the chief justice indicated voters could not exclude slavery from a territory. The decision hurt the Democrats more than the Republicans, especially in light of what happened in Kansas.⁷²

Whatever Roger B. Taney hoped to accomplish with his ruling, he certainly did not remove the question of slavery from politics. The decision in *Dred Scott v. Sandford* only made the sectional divide greater. From the northern perspective, everything they feared about southern slave power seemed to be coming true. From the southern perspective, the decision secured them from the onslaught of northern abolitionists and preserved the institution of slavery.

Kansas Again...

Before the presidential election of 1856, Franklin Pierce sent John W. Geary to Kansas as the new governor, since Wilson Shannon proved unable to end the conflict. Geary managed to quell the violence before the election, but the peace did not last. Looking at the election returns of 1856, southerners believed they needed more slave territory in order to prevent a Republican victory in 1860. They set their sights on Kansas, where the proslavery legislature still controlled the territory, even though the Free Soilers had a commanding majority in population. To maintain the peace, Geary asked the proslavery legislature to revise the antislavery acts. In response, the legislature made plans to revise the state constitution but indicated they would not seek a statewide referendum on the changes. Geary, shocked by their audacity, resigned his position.⁷³

After the *Dred Scott* decision, James Buchanan persuaded Mississippian Robert J. Walker to become governor of Kansas. The president asked him to oversee an orderly drafting of a constitution, which the people had an opportunity to vote on. Surprisingly, Walker had no real desire to see Kansas become a slave state. He encouraged the slaveholders to submit the Lecompton Constitution to the people for a vote, but they refused and sent the constitution to Congress, along with their petition for statehood. Walker then journeyed to Washington to consult with Buchanan and explain the situation, especially since the president told him to secure a referendum. Buchanan, facing pressure from his proslavery advisers, refused to accept that the majority of people in Kansas wanted to become a free state. Instead of rejecting the Lecompton Constitution, Buchanan asked Congress to admit Kansas as a slave state based on the provisions of the *Dred Scott* decision. At the time, the president firmly believed opposing the South would lead to secession.⁷⁴

Southerners who wanted a victory in Kansas believed they could win approval of the Lecompton Constitution, since the Democrats controlled Congress and they controlled the Democratic Party. At the same time, enough recognized the risk of their plan and encouraged the Kansas legislature to put the constitution to vote. What seemed like a major concession proved nothing more than a face-saving device. Voters could choose from a constitution with slavery or a constitution with no slavery that protected slave property in Kansas forever. Free Soil residents called it the “great swindle,” and criticism of the South’s malfeasance mounted in the North. Walker resigned when he realized that Buchanan no longer supported a fair referendum in Kansas.⁷⁵

Many northern Democrats opposed admitting Kansas as a slave state because it was not what the people wanted. Stephen Douglas met with Buchanan in December and pled with him not to support the Lecompton Constitution; otherwise, he would have to oppose the president in Congress. Buchanan apparently told Douglas to “remember that no Democrat ever yet differed from an administration of his own choice without being crushed.” In spite of the threat, Douglas knew he had to stand up to Buchanan over Kansas. If he did not, his future political career would be quite short since he staked his political reputation on the validity of popular sovereignty. Douglas worked with Republicans to defeat the Lecompton Constitution. Then the Kansans held two separate elections; one where only the proslavery forces voted, and one where only the antislavery forces voted. These elections made it apparent that the Free Soilers held a two-to-one majority and northerners could not accept Kansas as a slave state. In the wake of the vote, Kansas once again descended into violence.⁷⁶

The Lincoln-Douglas Debates

Into the 1850s, Illinois was one of the most southern-like northern states because so many southerners migrated there early in the century. Southern folkways pervaded the lower part of the state. Moreover, it had been a stronghold for the Democratic Party. Most residents, especially in the more rural regions of the state, loathed the idea of an active government. From the 1830s to the 1850s, the Democrats usually held a majority in the state legislature, and the state consistently voted Democrat for president.⁷⁷ However, the debates on slavery by the mid-decade allowed the newly-formed Republican Party to gain some ground among Illinois voters. In 1858, the Republicans very much wanted to secure a seat in the U.S. Senate. If they could win a majority in the state legislature, then they could replace Stephen Douglas with someone opposed to slavery. Abraham Lincoln hoped the Republicans would choose him. Douglas, of course, looked for ways to prevent that outcome.

Kentucky-born Abraham Lincoln moved to Indiana as a boy and to central Illinois as a young man. Lincoln decided not to become a farmer like his father. He wanted to find work more in tune with the modern capitalist world, so he worked as a storekeeper, surveyor, and lawyer. By the 1840s, Lincoln was prosperous and respectable. Given his views about the market economy, Lincoln found his political beliefs more in line with the Whigs than the Democrats. Eric Foner asserts that Lincoln “saw government as an active force in promoting opportunity and advancement.” Although the Democrats dominated Illinois, Lincoln served four terms in the state legislature and one term in the U.S. House of Representatives. In the early 1850s, he returned to his law practice. However, the Kansas-Nebraska Act reinvigorated his desire to run for office.⁷⁸

With the Whigs in decline, Lincoln eventually found a home in the Republican Party. In a series of speeches in late 1854, Lincoln called slavery a “monstrous injustice” and suggested that slavery undermined “the very fundamental principles of civil liberty.” While he admonished slavery, Lincoln was no abolitionist. Like many Republicans, he had moderate racial views. He opposed human bondage, but he also opposed political or social equality for blacks. To Lincoln, slavery threatened the human ability to succeed; it robbed individuals of the freedom to better their condition. Thus, like other Republicans, he believed in free labor principles. His public pronouncements against slavery helped him win a seat in the state legislature in 1854. However, he resigned that seat so he could seek election to the U.S. Senate. The state legislature did not award Lincoln the position. His failure pushed him more toward the Republican Party as he cast his eye on Stephen Douglas’s seat in 1858.⁷⁹

As Douglas looked toward the elections in Illinois in 1858, he knew that, in order to retain his spot in the Senate, he needed to stand up to the president’s policy on the Lecompton Constitution. He purposely broke with Buchanan and precipitated a sectional divide in the Democratic Party because he needed to come across as anti-southern to Illinois voters. He also tried to reach out to Republican voters, but he failed to win the Republicans over. Rather, when party leaders met in June, they criticized popular sovereignty and *Dred Scott*. Moreover, they publicly supported Lincoln for the U.S. Senate seat, which parties did not normally do until after the state elections. In support of his campaign, Lincoln noted, “A house divided against itself cannot stand...this government cannot endure, permanently, half slave and half free. I do not expect the Union to be dissolved...but I do expect it will cease to be divided.” In other words, Lincoln asked the voters of Illinois to decide whether to support freedom or to support slavery.⁸⁰

Lincoln also challenged Douglas to a series of debates so he could expose the failings of his opponent’s position on slavery. Douglas agreed to seven

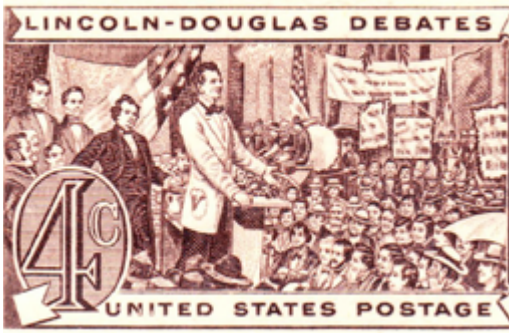


Figure 15.11 The Lincoln-Douglas Debates (1858) | In preparation for state elections in Illinois, Republican Abraham Lincoln challenged Democrat Stephen Douglas to a series of debates, so he could expose the failings of his opponent's positions. Douglas agreed to seven meetings so he could do the same to Lincoln. Lincoln became a nationally-known Republican figure even though he did not win a seat in the U.S. Senate.

Author: U.S. Government, Post Office Department
Source: Wikimedia Commons

Democratic Party. However, both James McPherson and Eric Foner point out that Douglas's position on the Lecompton Constitution already caused a rift.⁸¹

Meanwhile, Douglas exploited the race issue by labeling Lincoln a “Black Republican” and by telling voters about how free blacks such as Frederick Douglass were campaigning on his behalf. He further argued it was a “monstrous heresy” to suggest the Founding Fathers intended to make blacks citizens with equal rights. Finally, only those who believed in black equality would vote for Lincoln. Countering the race issue became of major importance for Lincoln. In the fourth debate he said, “I will say then that I am not...in favor of bringing about in anyway the social and political equality of the white and black races...I am as much as any other man in favor of having the superior position assigned to the white race.” At the same time, he continued to argue against the dehumanization of blacks.⁸²

Douglas managed to retain his seat in the Senate. However, Republicans did quite well in the elections. Had the state apportionment actually reflected the growth of the northern districts, Lincoln might have won. Nevertheless, Douglas reinforced his position as the leader of the northern Democrats. Still, Lincoln gained a great deal from the 1858 campaign. The debates highlighted the differences between Democrats and Republicans in the North. They also catapulted Lincoln into the national spotlight. Finally, they showed that Lincoln was more than up to the challenge of taking on Douglas in the presidential election of 1860.⁸³

meetings so he could do likewise. Lincoln focused his attention on how, during his career, Douglas had undermined the intentions of the Founding Fathers by supporting an extension of slavery into the territories. He forced Douglas to reconcile popular sovereignty with *Dred Scott*. In the Freeport Doctrine, named for the town where the second debate occurred, Douglas suggested residents of a territory could bar slavery by enacting “local police regulations,” a position he had made public several times before. Contemporaries argued the Freeport Doctrine helped drive a wedge in the

15.4.3 The Road to Secession

By 1859, James Buchanan knew the issue of slavery had ruined his administration. Although he had hoped a Supreme Court ruling could quiet concerns about slavery, the *Dred Scott* decision poisoned the political atmosphere and ensured the next presidential election would focus on the future of slavery. The Lincoln-Douglas debates deepened the national division over slavery. But nothing proved more inflammatory than John Brown's attempt to foment a widespread southern slave rebellion with his attack on Harper's Ferry. As the election of 1860 approached, the Democratic Party stood as one of the few remaining national institutions. It too proved unable to maintain unity in the face of the slavery debate as it split into three factions. This division presented an opportunity for the Republican Party to win the presidency, which they did with the nomination of Lincoln. The election of a purely sectional party prompted South Carolina and six other states from the Lower South to secede from the Union.

John Brown's Raid on Harper's Ferry

In the years following his attack on proslavery forces at Pottawatomie Creek, John Brown's devotion to the antislavery cause grew. While traveling around the North to raise funds for the Free Soil effort in Kansas, Brown developed a scheme to launch a guerilla attack against slavery. With a small band of men, both black and white, he planned to attack the federal arsenal at Harper's Ferry, Virginia, where the Potomac and the Shenandoah Rivers meet. With the arsenal secure, Brown's forces would move southward to incite slaves to rebel against their masters with the weapons from the arsenal. In 1858, he approached several abolitionists for financial support for the raid. The "Secret Six" agreed to help him purchase weapons.⁸⁴

Meanwhile, Brown looked for recruits, especially free blacks, to join his mission. In August, he approached Frederick Douglass about participating in the raid. Douglass, like many other black abolitionists, had concluded that slaves would only truly be free if they fought for their own emancipation. Brown reportedly told Douglass, "When I strike, the bees will begin to swarm, and I shall need you to help hive them." Whatever Douglass thought about the use of violence, he said no because the plan seemed suicidal. Although many of his recruits never showed up, Brown decided to proceed anyway. He had twenty-two men: five blacks and seventeen whites, including three of his sons; with these men, he would launch his war against slavery.⁸⁵

On October 16, 1859, Brown and his raiders crossed from Maryland into Virginia. They quickly captured the arsenal. However, then things began to fall apart. Brown sent several men into the countryside to inform the slaves the time for a rebellion had come and to kidnap some prominent

whites. The expected slave uprising never occurred. Local slaves might have wanted to rebel against their masters, but they would have been suspicious of any stranger supporting an insurrection. For all they knew, their owners could have been testing their loyalty. Moreover, word spread quickly to the white community of the impending attack. Local militia units converged on Harper's Ferry; several raiders and locals died in the exchange of fire. On October 18, 1859, the U.S. marines, under the command of Colonel Robert E. Lee and Lieutenant J.E.B. Stuart, arrived on the scene. They stormed the firehouse where Brown and his troops retreated during the confrontation with the locals. The marines killed two of the raiders and captured the rest, including Brown.⁸⁶

While Brown accomplished nothing he set out to do, his attack inflamed passions in both the South and the North. Southerners called for Brown's blood. Even though the attack happened on federal property, he stood trial for treason, murder, and incitement of a slave insurrection before the end of the month in Virginia. The judge sentenced him to death after the jury returned a guilty verdict. Brown was executed in early December. Southerners also wanted an investigation into the rumors that prominent northerners funded the raid. They saw the attack as a clear sign of the lengths abolitionists would go to undermine the southern way of life. For some time after the incident, anyone in the South who did not support the maintenance of slavery faced a real risk of coming to a violent end. Southerners did take comfort in several things after the raid. One, no slave flocked to Brown's cause. Two, slaveholders and non-slaveholders united to fight off the invaders. Three, the federal government defended slavery.⁸⁷

The majority of northerners criticized John Brown's raid, but his composure during his trial and when facing execution transformed public opinion. Brown, according to James McPherson, "understood his martyr role and cultivated it." He refused to plead insanity and suggested he would forfeit his life to help end slavery. On the day of his execution, church bells tolled and guns fired salutes in his honor. Preachers gave eulogies emphasizing his martyrdom. People did not condone his tactics. Rather, they agreed the time had come to do more about southern power, as opposed to doing something about slavery.⁸⁸

Democrats in the North condemned the incident in order to rebuild their ties with the South and to undermine support for the Republicans. They realized the distinction between thought and action did not impress most southerners; Stephen Douglas and others implied that Brown's actions stemmed directly from Republican ideology. In response, leading Republicans, including William H. Seward and Abraham Lincoln, condemned Brown's actions. Lincoln suggested that "John Brown was

no Republican.” Without a doubt, Harper’s Ferry furthered the hostility between the North and the South. It also set the stage for the presidential election.⁸⁹

The Election of 1860

In April 1860, the Democratic Party met in Charleston, South Carolina, home of the “fire-eaters,” or those who claimed they would die defending slavery. John Brown’s raid had convinced many southerners the time had come to draw a line in the burgeoning conflict; they no longer saw northern Democrats as their ally. In fact, a few southern delegates hoped for a Republican victory because then southerners would have to choose submission or secession. Meanwhile, northern delegates felt constantly under attack as proslavery speakers extolled the virtue of slavery throughout the city.⁹⁰ Given these feelings, the gathering began with an auspicious start.

Before choosing a candidate, party members had to agree on a party platform. Speaking for many southerners, Alabama’s William L. Yancey presented a proslavery platform to the convention delegates. It called for the nomination of a proslavery candidate. Furthermore, it demanded the adoption of a congressional slave code to protect slaveholders’ constitutional right to take their property to the territories. Speaking for many northerners, Stephen Douglas introduced an alternative platform. His platform supported the principle of popular sovereignty as well as respect for the *Dred Scott* decision. The platform committee leaned toward a proslavery platform; however, the delegates still had to vote. When Yancey linked the platform to the defense of southern honor, many delegates heartily cheered his assertion. Douglas’s supporters refused to yield.⁹¹

In the end, the party delegates adopted the northern platform. Northerners outnumbered southerners in the polling because the party based state delegations on population. At that point, many of the southerners walked out of the convention. The meeting adjourned because there were not enough members present to nominate a presidential candidate. Two months later, northern Democrats met in Baltimore, Maryland; southern Democrats met in Richmond, Virginia. The two groups conferred with each other but were unable to resolve their differences. The northern Democrats nominated Stephen Douglas. The southern Democrats nominated Kentucky’s John C. Breckenridge, who was the vice president at the time. A third group of Democrats, along with some former Whigs, formed the Constitutional Union Party in an attempt to throw the election to the House of Representatives. They nominated Tennessee’s John Bell.⁹²

The split in the Democratic Party presented an excellent opportunity for the Republican Party to secure victory. They met in Chicago, Illinois.

To win, however, the party needed to build on their showing in 1856. Somewhat expecting to lose California, Oregon, and possibly New Jersey, they directed the most attention to Pennsylvania, Illinois, and Indiana. Therefore, party leaders worked to develop a platform that dealt with more than just slavery. They also set out to choose a nominee who could reach the widest range of northern voters. Few Republicans expected to have any presence in the South. With respect to the platform, the party retained their stance against the expansion of slavery but condemned John Brown's raid. They also promoted free homesteads in the West, a protective tariff, and a transcontinental railroad. Moreover, they supported immigrant political rights in order to ward off any lingering concerns about their ties to the nativist movement.⁹³

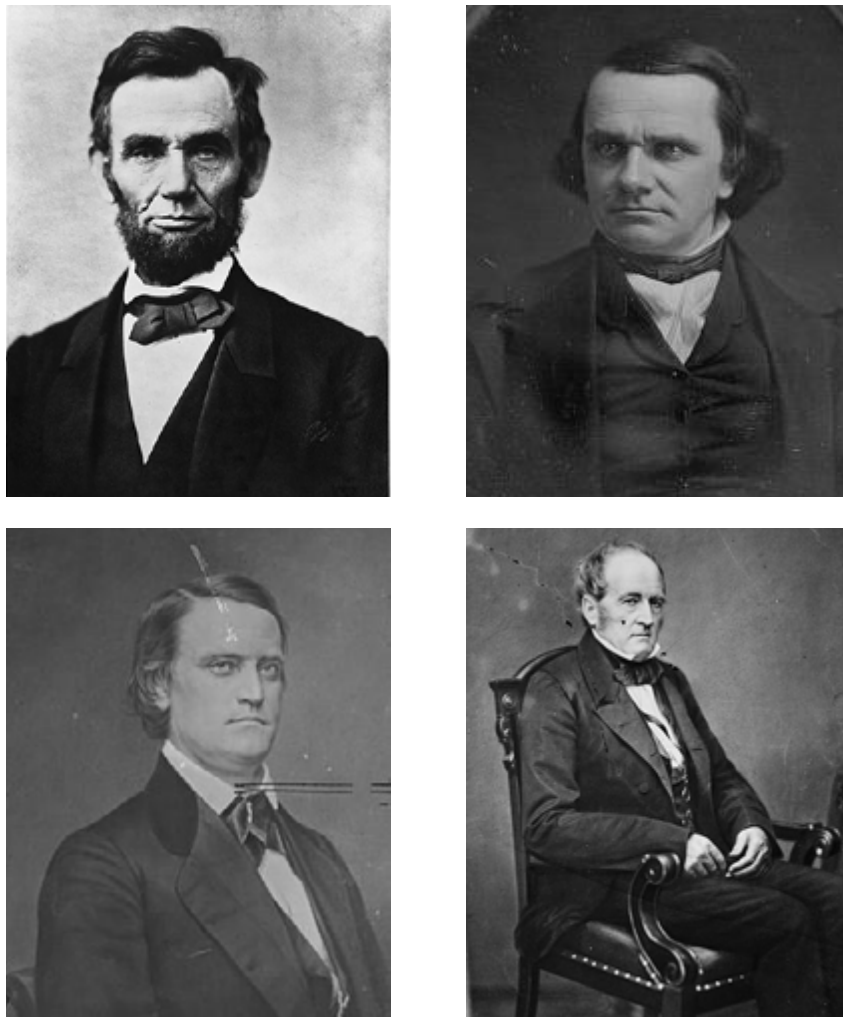


Figure 15.12 Two Races in 1860 | Given the division over slavery, the presidential election disintegrated into two separate contests: Abraham Lincoln (top left) versus Stephen Douglas (top right) in the North and John Breckenridge (bottom left) versus John Bell (bottom right) in the South.

Authors: Alexander Gardner (Lincoln), Mathew Brady (Douglas, Bell, & Breckenridge)
Source: Library of Congress

Most delegates knew the selection of a candidate was more important than the platform. The Republicans had a tough choice to make because they needed to find someone who could appeal to conservative and radical voters. Leading contenders for the nomination included Illinois's Abraham Lincoln, Missouri's Edward Bates, New York's William H. Seward, Ohio's Salmon P. Chase, and Pennsylvania's Simon Cameron. Seward appeared strong going into voting. Nevertheless, some leaders hoped to nominate a candidate who could help the party in its weaker states. They knew the Republicans would carry New York regardless of whether the party nominated the state's favorite son. Moreover, many voters linked Seward with the radical abolitionist sentiments because of his "Higher Law" speech. On the third ballot, Lincoln defeated Seward. Three things worked in Lincoln's favor: party members saw him as a moderate, his humble origins gave him a good political personality, and he came from the crucial state of Illinois.⁹⁴

The election disintegrated into two separate contests: Lincoln versus Douglas in the North and Breckinridge versus Bell in the South. Lincoln focused all of his efforts on the North; he did not even appear on the ballot in most southern states. Breckinridge, likewise, focused all of his attention on the South. Bell attempted to reach out to other unionists. Douglas broke with tradition and campaigned on his own behalf. He traveled all over the eastern part of the country before the election. In speech after speech, Douglas claimed only he could prevent disunion. Douglas's effort, however, could not overcome the split in the Democratic Party, which guaranteed

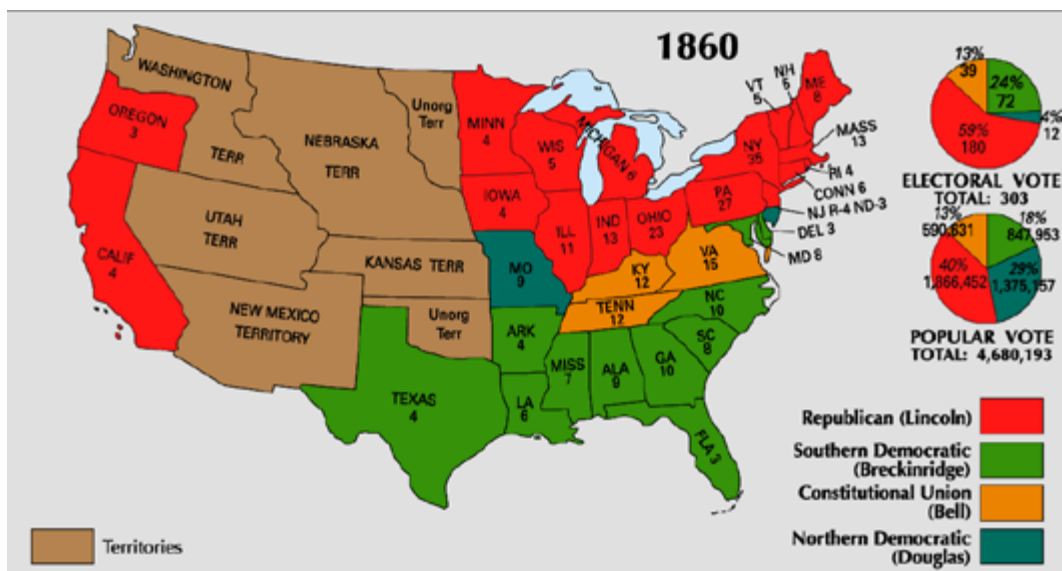


Figure 15.13 Presidential Election Map, 1860 | Since the Democrats split, Abraham Lincoln, the Republican candidate, won the presidential election of 1860 with just under 40 percent of the popular vote. However, he took a majority of the Electoral College votes.

Author: National Atlas of the United States
Source: Wikimedia Commons

a Republican victory. Lincoln took all the free states except New Jersey, which he split with Douglas. Lincoln won just under 40 percent, which was only a plurality of the popular vote; combined, the opposition nevertheless could not stop him from winning the Electoral College.⁹⁵

The Secession Crisis

Before the 1860 election, southern leaders proclaimed disunion would follow if Lincoln won. William Yancey even toured the North in October. At his speaking engagements, he described how an end to slavery would destroy the southern way of life, even if the Republicans did not intend to abolish slavery where it already existed. Kentucky's John J. Crittenden, a longtime unionist, echoed this sentiment. He noted many southerners concluded they had no choice but to secede if the Republicans triumphed. Many northerners, who had heard the threats before, discounted the possibility. Heeding them in the past only made the South more demanding. Buchanan won in 1856 because northern Democrats feared secession; his presidency led to the *Dred Scott* decision and the Lecompton Constitution. Some Republicans asked Lincoln to issue a statement to calm southern fears, but he chose not to. He reasoned little he might say would placate them.⁹⁶

South Carolina voted to secede from the Union in December. For years, secessionists in the state had waited for the right moment to leave the Union. Lincoln's victory allowed the separatists to triumph at the state's secession convention. Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, and Texas soon followed suit. In each of these states, the debate over secession hinged on when and how, as opposed to whether they should. The southerners who left the Union believed they had the legal right to do so. Secessionists, as Jefferson Davis put it, sought to defend the liberty their fathers and grandfathers fought for during the Revolution. They championed the idea of states' rights, noting the federal government should never infringe on their right to own property or to take that property anywhere in the country. To encourage non-slaveholders to support secession, they also used the ideas of white supremacy. Slavery made all whites, even poor whites, superior to blacks.⁹⁷

In February 1861, the seven seceded states met in Montgomery, Alabama to form the Confederate States of America. Four additional southern states, Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Arkansas, gave a warning to the federal government that if the government used force against the seceded states, then they too would leave the Union. Meanwhile, James Buchanan denied the southern states had the right to secede. He noted that "the Union shall be perpetual" and further suggested that preservation of the alliance trumped states' rights. Nevertheless, he declared that the federal government had no authority to coerce a sovereign state. The president

apparently hoped to encourage the two sides to compromise before he left office, since most northerners remained unsure as to the appropriate response to the southerners' move.⁹⁸

Before Lincoln's inauguration, various individuals and groups worked on some form of compromise to end the crisis. Senator John J. Crittenden led one of the most important efforts. His plan called for a constitutional amendment, which would recognize slavery as existing in all territories south of the Missouri Compromise line, the 36°30' line. The amendment would also guarantee that the federal government would not attempt to tamper with the institution of slavery in the future. However, the compromise required the support of the president-elect. Lincoln refused to support the plan because it contradicted one of the main principles of the Republican Party, which was to stop the further spread of slavery into the territories. The Crittenden Compromise went nowhere, nor did any of the other proposals to avoid disunion. Every suggestion required the North, or the Republicans, to make all the concessions. In early 1861, the Republicans would not submit.⁹⁹ Thus, the nation waited for Lincoln's inauguration on March 4, 1861 to see whether secession would lead to war.

15.4.4 Before You Move On...

Key Concepts

After James Buchanan took office, the United States continued down the road to disunion. While the country dealt with a financial crisis and the ongoing question of Kansas, the Supreme Court weighed in on the matter of slavery in the *Dred Scott v. Sandford* (1857) decision. Much to the delight of southerners, the Court asserted the right of slave owners to transport their slaves anywhere within the territories, whether that territory was free or permitted slavery. Likewise, the decision created a storm of protest in the northern states. The famous debates between Republican Abraham Lincoln and Democrat Stephen Douglas in 1858 as they vied for a position in the U.S. Senate deepened the national division over slavery. John Brown and his cohorts riveted national attention upon Harper's Ferry with their failed attempt to foment a widespread southern slave rebellion in 1859.

As the critical presidential election of 1860 approached, the Democratic Party stood as one of the few remaining national institutions. It too proved unable to maintain unity in the face of the slavery debate as it split into three factions after its convention in Charleston, South Carolina. This three-way division among Stephen Douglas, John Breckinridge, and John Bell presented the Republican Party an opportunity to win the presidency, which they did with the nomination

of Abraham Lincoln. After Lincoln's election, South Carolina, followed by six other southern states, seceded from the Union. In February 1861, these states met in Montgomery, Alabama, and formed the Confederate States of America, setting the stage for a civil war.

Test Yourself

1. In the *Dred Scott v. Sandford* decision, the Supreme Court
 - a. ruled that slaves who were taken to free states were free.
 - b. ruled that slaves who escaped must be returned to their owners.
 - c. stated that blacks did not have federal citizenship and could not bring suit in federal courts.
 - d. declared the Missouri Compromise constitutional.

2. In the Kansas territory, the proposed Lecompton Constitution showed the dominance of the Free Soilers.
 - a. True
 - b. False

3. What significant event occurred at the 1860 Democratic Convention in Charleston?
 - a. Southern delegates walked out.
 - b. Northern delegates walked out.
 - c. Delegates nominated Abraham Lincoln for the presidency.
 - d. Delegates nominated Jefferson Davis for the presidency.

[Click here to see answers](#)

15.5 Conclusion

By 1850, Americans recognized the divisions that questions about slavery in the territories had caused, but few expected those divisions would lead to a crisis of union by 1860. However, that was precisely what happened. Throughout the 1850s, sectional tensions mounted. Increasingly, northerners and southerners concluded they had little in common. Northerners saw the extension of slavery into the territories as a threat to their way of life based on the principles of free labor. Southerners, however, thought they needed to expand slavery to preserve their way of life built on the institution of slavery. When California applied to the Union as a free state, both sides felt compelled to press their interests at the national level. The Compromise of 1850 resolved the question of California's status, though it hardly lessened the tensions.

Questions about slavery in Kansas only reinvigorated the debate. After 1854, southerners sought federal protection of slavery. The *Dred Scott* decision seemingly gave them that protection. As northerners embraced the antislavery positions of the new Republican Party, they refused to accept the legitimacy of the Supreme Court's ruling. John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry in 1859 convinced southerners that northerners would go to any lengths to abolish slavery. Therefore, Abraham Lincoln's victory in the presidential election of 1860 prompted the secession of the lower South and the creation of the Confederate States of America.

15.6 CRITICAL THINKING EXERCISES

- Historian James McPherson maintains the Kansas-Nebraska Act “may have been the most important single event pushing the nation toward civil war.” Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Why?
- Ever since the Civil War, historians have debated the causes of the conflict. Slavery clearly seems to have played a role in the coming of the war; however, other factors also contributed to the tensions. How much of a role did economic differences between the two regions play in the conflict? What influence did religion, culture, and ethnicity have?
- Historians have also debated whether the Civil War was avoidable or not. At what point (if any) did civil war become inevitable? In other words, did the nation need the war to determine whether it would be slave or free? What might it have taken to avoid the Civil War?

15.7 KEY TERMS

- Bleeding Kansas
- Bleeding Sumner
- John Bell
- John Breckinridge
- John Brown
- James Buchanan
- John C. Calhoun
- Lewis Cass
- Democratic Convention(s) of 1860
- Henry Clay
- Compromise of 1850
- Crittenden Compromise
- Jefferson Davis
- *Dred Scott v. Sandford*
- Stephen A. Douglas
- Millard Fillmore
- “fire eaters”
- Free Soil Party
- John C. Fremont
- Fugitive Slave Act of 1850
- Gadsden Purchase
- Harper’s Ferry
- Kansas-Nebraska Act
- Know-Nothing Party (American Party)
- Lecompton Constitution
- Abraham Lincoln
- Ostend Manifesto
- Panic of 1857
- Franklin Pierce
- Popular sovereignty
- Republican Party
- Republican Convention of 1860
- Winfield Scott
- Harriet Beecher Stowe
- Zachary Taylor
- Daniel Webster
- Wilmot Proviso

15.8 CHRONOLOGY

The following chronology is a list of important dates and events associated with this chapter.

Date	Event
1846	David Wilmot attempted to ban slavery in territory acquired from Mexico in the Wilmot Proviso
1848	Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo ended the Mexican-American War; Whig Zachary Taylor elected president
1849	California applied for admission to the Union as a free state
1850	Henry Clay introduced the Compromise of 1850 to resolve questions about slavery in the Mexican Cession; Zachary Taylor died and Millard Fillmore succeeded him as president; Compromise of 1850 approved by Congress
1851	Fugitive Slave Act (part of the Compromise of 1850) heightened concern about slavery in the North
1852	<i>Uncle Tom's Cabin</i> heightened concern about abolition in the South; Democrat Franklin Pierce elected president
1853	Pierre Soulé, James Buchanan, and John Mason issued the Ostend Manifesto suggesting the United States planned to acquire Cuba by force if necessary; James Gadsden negotiated the purchase of additional land from Mexico in the Gadsden Purchase
1854	Stephen A. Douglas introduced a bill to organize the Kansas and Nebraska territories, which opened the territories to slavery contrary to the Missouri Compromise; Congress approved the Kansas-Nebraska Act; Second party system collapsed as the Know-Nothings and the Republicans formed to replace the Whigs
1856	Antislavery and proslavery advocates fought to win Kansas in the Sack of Lawrence and the Pottawatomie Massacre (Bleeding Kansas); Preston Brooks caned Charles Sumner in the Senate chamber (Bleeding Sumner); Democrat James Buchanan elected president
1857	Supreme Court issued its decision in the Dred Scott v. Sandford, which stated blacks could not be citizens of the United States; North suffered the effects of the Panic of 1857; Kansas applied for statehood as a slave state with the Lecompton Constitution prompting a split in the Democratic Party

Date	Event
1858	Lincoln-Douglas debates highlighted the problem of slavery and paved the way for the next presidential election
1859	John Brown launched an attack on the federal arsenal at Harper's Ferry, Virginia
1860	Democratic Party nominated two candidates for president, Stephen A. Douglas and John C. Breckenridge; Constitutional Union Party nominated John Bell for president; Republican Party nominated Abraham Lincoln for president; Abraham Lincoln elected president; South Carolina seceded from the Union
1861	Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, and Texas seceded from the Union; Southern states formed the Confederate States of America; Crittenden Compromise proposed in an effort to prevent further disunion

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ANSWER KEY FOR CHAPTER FIFTEEN: THE IMPENDING CRISIS (1848-1861)

Check your answers to the questions in the Before You Move On Sections for this chapter. You can click on the questions to take you back to the chapter section.

Correct answers are **BOLDED**

Section 15.2.3 - p659

1. The Wilmot Proviso
 - a. was unconstitutional.
 - B. WOULD PROHIBIT SLAVERY IN LANDS ACQUIRED FROM MEXICO.**
 - c. passed both houses of Congress.
 - d. would extend the Missouri Compromise line to the Pacific.
2. The Compromise of 1850
 - a. postponed California statehood.
 - b. gave Texas more territory.
 - c. ended slavery in Washington, D.C.
 - D. STRENGTHENED THE FUGITIVE SLAVE LAWS.**
3. Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel Uncle Tom's Cabin
 - A. WAS PERHAPS THE MOST EFFECTIVE PIECE OF ANTISLAVERY PROPAGANDA.**
 - b. was perhaps the most effective piece of proslavery propaganda.
 - c. ended section hostilities after its publication in 1852.
 - d. presented a picture of happy, well-treated slaves and benevolent masters.

Section 15.3.4 - p672

1. The Ostend Manifesto was
 - a. an agreement by the United States, Britain, and France to free oppressed Cubans.
 - B. A DIPLOMATIC DISPATCH SUGGESTING THAT CUBA BE TAKEN FROM SPAIN TO PROTECT AMERICAN INTERESTS.**
 - c. an attempt to gain Cuba as a colony for freed American slaves.
 - d. a plot by slaveholders to gain more slave territory.
2. Stephen Douglas's proposed Kansas-Nebraska Act
 - a. strengthened his presidential prospects.
 - b. showed his enthusiastic support of slavery.
 - c. strengthened the Missouri Compromise.
 - D. MIGHT ALLOW SLAVERY IN KANSAS AND NEBRASKA.**
3. During the presidential campaign of 1865, the Republican Party
 - a. nominated William H. Seward for president.
 - B. OPPOSED THE FURTHER SPREAD OF SLAVERY.**
 - c. supported states' rights.
 - d. condemned nativism.

Section 15.4.4 - p689

1. In the Dred Scott v. Sandford decision, the Supreme Court
 - a. ruled that slaves who were taken to free states were free.
 - b. ruled that slaves who escaped must be returned to their owners.
 - C. STATED THAT BLACKS DID NOT HAVE FEDERAL CITIZENSHIP AND COULD NOT BRING SUIT IN FEDERAL COURTS.**
 - d. declared the Missouri Compromise constitutional.

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2. In the Kansas territory, the proposed Lecompton Constitution showed the dominance of the Free Soilers.
 - a. True
 - B. FALSE**

3. What significant event occurred at the 1860 Democratic Convention in Charleston?
 - A. SOUTHERN DELEGATES WALKED OUT.**
 - b. Northern delegates walked out.
 - c. Delegates nominated Abraham Lincoln for the presidency.
 - d. Delegates nominated Jefferson Davis for the presidency.