

Chapter 14

The Gathering Tempest, 1853–1860

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Chapter 14: The Gathering Tempest, 1853–1860 Chapter Introduction
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Chapter Introduction

Stump Speaking

George Caleb Bingham's 1853–1854 genre painting *Stump Speaking* captures the cultural importance of politics in American life in the pre–Civil War era. Here a diverse rural audience listens to an open-air speaker. We can see plainly dressed men and women sitting on the ground and listening intently; a bored child; and well-fed and well-dressed gentlemen seated on chairs. The standing man in the foreground, wearing hat and coat, seems about to interrupt the speaker—or perhaps is just listening especially closely. This portrait of political engagement reminds us that oratory was a central part of the practice of politics in mid-19th-century America.



Stump Speaking (oil on canvas), Bingham, George Caleb (1811-79)/Private Collection/The Bridgeman Art Library

THE WOUNDS caused by the 1850 battle over slavery in the territories had barely healed when they were reopened. This time the strife concerned the question of slavery in the Louisiana Purchase territory, an issue presumably settled 34 years earlier by the Missouri Compromise of 1820.

The Compromise of 1820 had admitted Missouri as a slave state but had banned slavery from the rest of the Purchase north of $36^{\circ}30''$. To obtain southern support for the organization of Kansas and Nebraska as territories, Senator Stephen Douglas consented to the repeal of this provision. Northern outrage at this repudiation of a “sacred contract” killed the Whig Party and gave birth to the antislavery Republican Party. In 1857, the Supreme Court added insult to injury with the [Dred Scott \(Missouri slave who sued for freedom on grounds of prolonged residence in a free state and free territory; in 1857, the Supreme Court found against his case, declaring the Missouri Compromise unconstitutional.\)](#) decision, which denied Congress the power to restrict slavery from the territories. The ominous reorientation of national politics along sectional lines was accompanied by a bloody civil war in Kansas and a raid on the federal arsenal at [Harpers Ferry \(Site of John Brown’s 1859 raid on a U.S. armory and arsenal for the manufacture and storage of military rifles.\)](#), Virginia, by [John Brown \(Prominent abolitionist who fought for the antislavery cause in Kansas \(1856\) and led a raid to seize the Harpers Ferry arsenal in 1859.\)](#) and his followers.

14-1 Kansas and the Rise of the Republican Party

By 1853, land-hungry settlers had pushed up the Missouri River to its confluence with the Kansas and Platte rivers, and entrepreneurs were talking about a railroad across the continent to San Francisco. But settlement west of Missouri and land surveys for a railroad required the organization of this region as a territory. Accordingly, in 1853 the House passed a bill creating the Nebraska Territory, embracing the area north of Indian Territory (present-day Oklahoma) up to the Canadian border. But the House bill ran into trouble in the Senate. Under the Missouri Compromise, slavery would be excluded from the new territory. Having lost California, the pro-slavery forces were determined to salvage something from Nebraska. Missourians were particularly adamant, because a free Nebraska would leave them almost surrounded on three sides by free soil.

Focus Question

Why did the Whig Party die, and why did the Republican Party emerge as the new majority party in the North?

The sponsor of the Senate bill was Stephen A. Douglas, chairman of the Senate Committee on Territories. Only 5 feet 4 inches tall, Douglas had earned the nickname Little Giant for his parliamentary skill, which he had demonstrated most dramatically in helping pass the Compromise of 1850 through Congress. In Douglas’s opinion, the application of popular sovereignty to the slavery question in New Mexico and Utah had been the centerpiece of the compromise. The initial draft of his Nebraska bill merely repeated the language used for those territories, specifying that when any portion of the Nebraska Territory came in as a state, it could do so “with or without slavery, as its constitution may provide.”

This was not good enough for southern congressmen, who insisted on an explicit repeal of the Missouri Compromise. Sighing that this would “raise a hell of a storm,” Douglas nevertheless agreed. He further agreed to divide the area in question into two territories: Kansas west of Missouri and Nebraska west of Iowa and Minnesota. To many northerners this looked suspiciously like a scheme to mark Kansas out for slavery and Nebraska for freedom.

Chronology

- | | |
|------|--|
| 1852 | Plenary Council of Catholic Church seeks tax support for parochial schools |
| 1853 | American Party (“Know-Nothings”) emerges |
| 1854 | Crimean War begins • Congress passes Kansas-Nebraska Act • Republican Party organized • Antebellum immigration reaches |

	peak
1855	Ethnic riots in several cities • “Border ruffian” legislature in Kansas legalizes slavery
1856	Civil war in Kansas • Preston Brooks canes Charles Sumner on Senate floor • Crimean War ends • Buchanan wins three-way presidential election
1857	Supreme Court issues Dred Scott decision • Lecompton constitution written in Kansas • Congress enacts lower tariff • Panic of 1857 • Helper’s <i>Impending Crisis</i> published
1858	Kansas voters reject Lecompton constitution • Lincoln-Douglas debates
1859	Congress defeats federal slave code for territories • John Brown’s raid at Harpers Ferry
1860	Shoemakers’ strike in New England • Buchanan vetoes Homestead Act

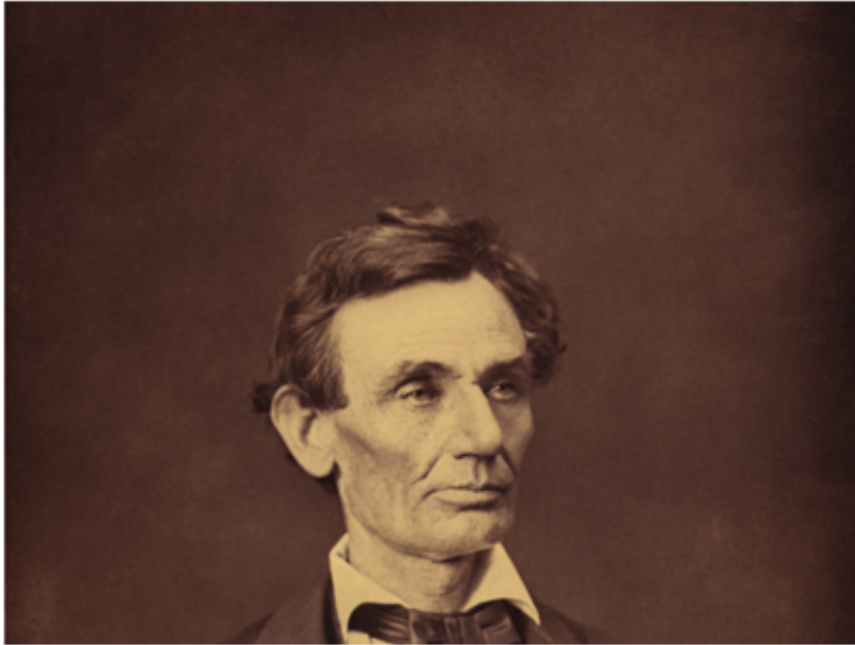
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14-1a The Kansas-Nebraska Act

The [Kansas-Nebraska Act \(Law enacted in 1854 to organize the new territories of Kansas and Nebraska that effectively repealed the provision of the 1820 Missouri Compromise by leaving the question of slavery to the territories’ settlers.\)](#) did “raise a hell of a storm.” Contemporaries and historians have speculated endlessly on Douglas’s motives. Some thought he wanted to win southern support for the presidential nomination in 1856. Perhaps, but he risked losing northern support. Others point out that Douglas’s real estate holdings in Illinois would have increased in value if a transcontinental railroad were to traverse the Nebraska Territory and that southern opposition could block this route. The most likely reason, however, was Douglas’s passionate belief in Manifest Destiny, in filling up the continent with American settlers and institutions. For this, he was willing to pay the South’s price for support of his Kansas-Nebraska bill. But he failed to recognize the depth of northern opposition to the “slave power” and to the expansion of slavery. Douglas had no firm moral convictions about slavery. He said that he cared not whether the settlers voted slavery up or down; the important thing was to give them a chance to vote.

Abraham Lincoln

Nominated to oppose Stephen A. Douglas's reelection to the Senate from Illinois in 1858, Abraham Lincoln was not yet a national figure. But his status would change dramatically with the Lincoln-Douglas debates of 1858, which focused on the issue of slavery. Lincoln's eloquence in this series of debates propelled him into national prominence.



Adoc-photos/Art Resource, NY

But many Americans did care. They regarded the expansion of slavery as a national question, and one that was too important to be left to territorial voters. One of them was an old acquaintance of Douglas, [Abraham Lincoln \(Illinois Whig who became the Republican Party's first successful presidential candidate in 1860 and who led the Union during the Civil War.\)](#). An antislavery Whig who had served four terms in the Illinois legislature and one term in Congress, Lincoln was propelled back into politics by the shock of the Kansas-Nebraska bill. He acknowledged the constitutional right to hold slave property in the states where it already existed, but he believed slavery was “an unqualified evil to the negro, the white man, and to the state.... There can be no moral right in connection with one man's making a slave of another.” Lincoln admitted he did not know how to bring this deeply

entrenched institution to an end. He understood that race prejudice was a powerful obstacle to emancipation. Still, he believed that the country must face up to the problem. It must stop any further expansion of slavery as the first step on the long road to its “ultimate extinction.”

Lincoln excoriated Douglas’s “care not” attitude toward whether slavery was voted up or down. He branded Douglas’s assertion that slavery would never be imported into Kansas because of the region’s supposedly unsuitable climate a “LULLABY argument.” The climate of eastern Kansas was similar to that of the Missouri River valley in Missouri, where slaves were busily raising hemp and tobacco. Missouri slaveholders were already poised to take their slaves into the Kansas River valley. “Climate will not ... keep slavery out of these territories,” said Lincoln. “Nothing in *nature* will.” Many of the Founding Fathers had looked forward to the day when slavery would no longer exist in republican America. Instead, the United States had become the world’s largest slaveholding society, and Douglas’s bill would permit slavery to expand even further. In a political speech at Peoria, Illinois, in October 1854, Lincoln insisted:

Stephen A. Douglas

The Little Giant began his meteoric rise to leadership of the Democratic Party with his successful effort to have the Compromise of 1850 enacted by Congress. Having forestalled sectional schism in 1850, he drove a wedge more deeply than ever between North and South with the Kansas-Nebraska bill of 1854. Six years later, Douglas became a victim of sectional schism when the Democratic Party split into northern and southern factions and thereby ruined his chance of winning the presidency.



Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division

The monstrous injustice of slavery deprives our republican example of its just influence in the world—enables the enemies of free institutions, with plausibility, to taunt us as hypocrites.... Let us re-adopt the Declaration of Independence, and with it, the practices, and policy, which harmonize with it.... If we do this, we shall not only have saved the Union; but we shall have so saved it, as to make, and to keep it, forever worthy of the saving.

With these eloquent words, Lincoln gave voice to the feelings rising up against the Kansas-Nebraska bill. Abolitionists, Free-Soilers, northern Whigs, and even many northern Democrats held impassioned meetings to form anti-Nebraska coalitions, but they could not stop passage of the bill. It cleared the Senate easily, supported by a solid South and 15 of the 20 northern Democrats. In the House, it passed by a vote of 113 to 100.

Birth of the Republican Party

The Kansas-Nebraska Act galvanized antislavery northerners of all parties into new anti-Nebraska organizations opposed to the repeal of the Missouri Compromise's ban on slavery in Louisiana Purchase territories north of **36°30"**. Appealing to the "spirit of '76," these organizations coalesced into the Republican Party, which held its first convention at Pittsburgh on Washington's birthday in 1856 to organize a national party in preparation for the presidential nominating convention later that year.



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14-1b Death of the Whig Party

These proceedings completed the destruction of the Whigs as a national party. Southern Whigs had been disappearing ever since Zachary Taylor had “betrayed” them on the issue of a free California. After the presidential election of 1852, few Whigs remained in the cotton South. In that year, the Whig Party nominated General Winfield Scott for president. Although he was a Virginian, Scott, like Taylor, took a national rather than a southern view. He was the candidate of the northern Whigs in the national convention, which nominated him on the 53rd ballot after a bitter contest between the northern and southern wings of the party. A mass exodus of southern Whigs into the Democratic Party enabled Franklin Pierce to carry all but two slave states in the election. The unanimous vote of northern Whigs in Congress against the Kansas-Nebraska bill was the final straw. The Whig Party never recovered its influence in the South.

Whig strength seemed to be on its last legs in the North as well. Antislavery Whig leaders, such as William H. Seward and Lincoln, hoped to channel the flood of anti-Nebraska sentiment through the Whig Party, an effort akin to containing Niagara Falls. Free-Soilers and antislavery Democrats spurned the Whig label. Political coalitions arose spontaneously in the North under various names: anti-Nebraska, Fusion, People’s, Independent. The name that caught on evoked memories of America’s first fight for freedom in 1776: Republican. The first use of this name seems to have occurred at an anti-Nebraska rally in a Congregational church at Ripon, Wisconsin, in May 1854. Soon, most of the congressional candidates fielded by anti-Nebraska coalitions ran their campaigns under the Republican banner.

The 1854 elections were disastrous for northern Democrats. One-fourth of Democratic voters deserted the party. The Democrats lost control of the House of Representatives when 66 of 91 incumbent free-state Democratic congressmen went down to defeat. Combined with the increase in the number of Democratic congressmen from the South, where the party had picked up the pieces of the shattered Whig organization, this rout brought the party under southern domination more than ever.

But who would pick up the pieces of old parties in the North? The new Republican Party hoped to do so, but it suffered a shock in urban areas of the Northeast. Hostility toward immigrants created a tidal wave of [nativism \(Hostility of native-born Americans toward immigrants.\)](#) that threatened to swamp the anti-Nebraska movement. “Nearly everybody appears to have gone deranged on Nativism,” reported a Pennsylvania Democrat, while a Whig in upstate New York warned that his district was “very badly infected with Know-nothingism.” Described as a “tornado,” a “hurricane,” a “freak of political insanity,” the [Know-Nothings \(Adherents of nativist organizations and of the American party who wanted to restrict the political rights of immigrants.\)](#) won landslide victories in Massachusetts and Delaware, polled an estimated 40 percent of the vote in Pennsylvania, and did well elsewhere in the Northeast and border states. Who were these mysterious Know-Nothings? What did they stand for?

14-2 Immigration and Nativism

During the early 19th century, immigration was less pronounced than in most other periods of U.S. history.

The volume of immigration (the number of new immigrants in proportion to the whole population) was little more than 1 percent in the 1820s, increasing to 4 percent in the 1830s. Three-quarters of the newcomers were Protestants, mainly from Britain. Most of them were skilled workers, farmers, or members of white-collar occupations.

Focus Question

What were the origins of nativism? How did this movement relate to the slavery issue?

Immigration to the United States

Revolution in Germany and potato famine in Ireland were significant factors behind the dramatic rise in immigration to the United States between 1845 and 1850.

Another surge in immigration occurred after the Civil War ended in 1865.



Source: Data from *Historical Statistics of the United States, Millennial Online Addition*, "U.S. Immigrants and Emigrants: 1820–1998" [Table Ad1-2].

In the 1840s, a combination of factors abruptly quadrupled the volume of immigration and changed its ethnic and occupational makeup. The pressure of expanding population on limited land in Germany and successive failures of the potato crop in Ireland impelled millions of German and Irish peasants to emigrate. A majority came to the United States, where recovery from the depression of the early 1840s brought an economic boom and an insatiable demand for labor. During the decade after 1845, 3 million immigrants entered the United States—15 percent of the total American population in 1845, the highest proportional volume of immigration in American history. Many of them, especially the Irish, joined the unskilled and semiskilled labor force in the rapidly growing eastern cities.

Most of the new arrivals were Roman Catholics. Anti-Catholicism had centuries-deep roots in Anglo-American Protestantism. Fear of the pope and of the Roman Church as autocratic and antirepublican was never far below the surface of American political culture, and scurrilous anti-Catholic literature circulated during the 1830s. Several ethnic riots between Protestant and Catholic workers over the years culminated in pitched battles and numerous deaths in Philadelphia in 1844. In several eastern cities nativist political parties sprang up in the early 1840s with the intent of curbing the political rights of immigrants.

Nativism appeared to subside with the revival of prosperity after 1844, but the decline was temporary. Established Americans perceived more recent arrivals as responsible for an increase of crime and poverty in the cities. They also viewed immigrant customs with suspicion. The social and political life of both the Irish and the Germans revolved around taverns and beer parlors at a time when the temperance crusade had sharply curtailed drinking among native-born Protestants (see [Chapter 12](#)).

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14-2a Immigrants in Politics

The growing political power of immigrants became a bone of contention. Most of the immigrants became Democrats, because that party welcomed or at least tolerated them and many Whigs did not. Foreign-born voters leaned toward the pro-slavery wing of the Democratic Party, even though seven-eighths of them settled in free states. Mostly working-class and poor, they rubbed shoulders against the small northern black population; Irish American mobs sometimes attacked black neighborhoods and rioted against black workers. They supported the Democratic Party as the best means of keeping blacks in slavery and out of the North. These attitudes sparked hostility toward immigrants among many antislavery people.

Attitudes toward immigrants had political repercussions. Two of the hottest issues in state and local politics during the early 1850s were temperance and schools. The temperance crusaders had grown confident and aggressive enough to go into politics. The drunkenness and rowdiness they associated with Irish immigrants became one of their particular targets. Beginning with Maine in 1851, 12 states had enacted prohibition laws by 1855. Although several of the laws were soon weakened by the courts or repealed by legislatures, they exacerbated ethnic tensions.

So too did battles over public schools versus parochial schools. Catholics resented the Protestant domination of public education and the reading of the King James Bible in schools. The Catholic Church began to build parochial schools for the faithful, and in 1852, the first Plenary Council of American bishops decided to seek tax support for these schools or tax relief for Catholic parents who sent their children to them. This effort set off heated election contests in numerous northern cities and states. Anti-Catholic “free school” tickets won most of these elections on a platform of defending public schools against the “bold effort” of this “despotic faith” to “uproot the tree of Liberty.”

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14-2b The Rise of the Know-Nothings

It was in this context that the Know-Nothings (their formal name was the American Party) burst onto the political scene. This party was the result of the merger in 1852 of two secret fraternal societies that limited their membership to native-born Protestants: the Order of the Star-Spangled Banner and the Order of United Americans. Recruiting mainly young men in skilled blue-collar and lower white-collar occupations, the merged order had a membership of 1 million or more by 1854. The order supported temperance and opposed tax support for parochial schools. Members wanted public office restricted to native-born men and sought to lengthen the naturalization period before immigrants could become citizens. Members were also pledged to secrecy; if asked about the order, they were to reply, “I know nothing.”

This was the tornado that swept through the Northeast in the 1854 elections. Although the American Party drew voters from both major parties, it cut more heavily into the Whig constituency. Northern Whigs who had not already gone over to the Republicans flocked to the Know-Nothings.

Know-Nothing Sheet Music

Composers of popular music produced songs for political parties and movements of every stripe, and the Know-Nothing movement was no exception. Note the symbolism of the eagle and the flags for this anti-immigrant party. The pumpkins, chicken, and corn seem to symbolize rural America, threatened by cities with a growing foreign-born population.



Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division[LC-USZ62-19431]

When the dust of the 1854 elections settled, it was clear that those who opposed the Democrats would control the next House of Representatives. But who would control the opposition—antislavery Republicans or nativist Americans?

Some northern voters adhered to both political faiths. But many Republicans warned against flirting with religious bigotry. In a letter to a friend, Abraham Lincoln asked:

How can any one who abhors the oppression of negroes, be in favor of degrading classes of white people? ... As a nation, we began by declaring that "all men are created equal." We now practically read it "all men are created equal, except

negroes.” When the Know Nothings get control, it will read “all men are created equal, except negroes, and foreigners, and catholics.” When it comes to this I should prefer emigrating to some country where they make no pretense of loving liberty—to Russia, for instance, where despotism can be taken pure, and without the base alloy of hypocrisy.

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14-2c The Decline of Nativism

In 1855, Republican leaders maneuvered skillfully to divert the energies of northern Know-Nothings from their crusade against the pope to a crusade against the slave power. Two developments helped them. The first was turmoil in Kansas, which convinced many northerners that the slave power was a greater threat than the pope. The second was an increase of nativist sentiment in the South. The American Party won elections in Maryland, Kentucky, and Tennessee and polled at least 45 percent of the votes in five other southern states. Violence in several southern cities with large immigrant populations revealed a significant streak of nativism in the South.

These developments had important implications at the national level. Southern Know-Nothings were pro-slavery, whereas many of their Yankee counterparts were antislavery. Just as the national Whig Party had floundered on the slavery issue, so did the American Party during 1855 and 1856. At the party’s first national council in June 1855, most of the northern delegates walked out when southerners and northern conservatives joined forces to pass a resolution endorsing the Kansas-Nebraska Act. A similar scene occurred at an American Party convention in 1856. By that time, most northern members of the party had, in effect, become Republicans.

Nativism faded. The volume of immigration suddenly dropped by more than half in 1855 and stayed low for the next several years. Ethnic tensions eased, and cultural issues such as temperance and schools receded. But there was no easing of the conflict between North and South over the extension of slavery. That conflict led to civil war—and the war seemed already to have begun in the territory of Kansas.

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14-3 Bleeding Kansas

When it became clear that southerners had enough votes to pass the Kansas-Nebraska Act, the stage was set for

Focus Question

conflict. At first, Missouri settlers in Kansas posted the stronger numbers. As the year 1854 progressed, however, settlers from the North came pouring in. Alarmed by this influx, bands of

Missourians, labeled **“border ruffians”** (Term used to describe proslavery Missourians who streamed into Kansas in 1854, determined to vote as many times as necessary to install a proslavery government there.) by the Republican press, rode into Kansas prepared to vote as many times as necessary to install a pro-slavery government. In fall 1854, they cast at least 1,700 illegal ballots and sent a pro-slavery territorial delegate to Congress.

How was violence in Kansas related to the issue of slavery?

Free-State Men Ready to Defend Lawrence, Kansas, in 1856

After pro-slavery forces sacked the free-state capital of Lawrence in 1856, northern settlers decided they needed more firepower to defend themselves. Somehow they got hold of a six-pound howitzer. This cannon did not fire a shot in anger during the Kansas troubles, but its existence may have deterred the “border ruffians.”



Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka, Kansas

When the time came for the election of a territorial legislature the following spring, David Rice Atchison led a contingent of border ruffians to Kansas for the election. “There are eleven hundred coming over from Platte County to vote,” he told his followers, “and if that ain’t enough, we can send five thousand—enough to kill every God-damned abolitionist in the Territory.”

His count was accurate. Nearly 5,000 came and voted illegally to elect a pro-slavery

territorial legislature. The territorial governor pleaded with President Pierce to nullify the election, but Pierce listened to Atchison and removed the governor. Meanwhile, the new territorial legislature legalized slavery and adopted a slave code that even authorized the death penalty for helping a slave to escape.

Members of the so-called Free State Party, outraged by these proceedings, had no intention of obeying laws enacted by this “bogus legislature.” By fall 1855, they constituted a majority of bona fide settlers in Kansas. They called a convention, adopted a free-state constitution, and elected their own legislature and governor. By January 1856, two territorial governments in Kansas stood with their hands at each other’s throats.

Kansas now became the leading issue in national politics. The Democratic Senate and President Pierce recognized the pro-slavery legislature meeting in the town of Lecompton, while the Republican House of Representatives recognized the antislavery legislature in the town of Lawrence. Southerners saw the struggle as crucial to their future. “The admission of Kansas into the Union as a slave state is now a point of honor,” wrote Congressman Preston Brooks of South Carolina. “The fate of the South is to be decided with the Kansas issue.” On the other side, Charles Sumner of Massachusetts gave a well-publicized speech in the Senate on May 19 and 20 entitled “The Crime against Kansas.” “Murderous robbers from Missouri,” charged Sumner, “from the drunken spew and vomit of an uneasy civilization” had committed the “rape of a virgin territory, compelling it to the hateful embrace of slavery.” Among the southern senators Sumner singled out for special condemnation and ridicule was a cousin of Congressman Brooks, Andrew Butler of South Carolina. Butler was a “Don Quixote,” said Sumner, “who had chosen a mistress to whom he has made his vows ... the harlot, Slavery.”

Map 14.1

Kansas-Nebraska and the Slavery Issue

On the main map, note how much territory was opened to slavery on the principle of popular sovereignty by the Compromise of 1850 and the Kansas-Nebraska Act. The enlarged inset map shows how close together were the centers of Free Soil and pro-slavery forces in Lawrence and Lecompton, respectively.

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14-3a The Caning of Sumner

Sumner's speech incensed southerners, none more than Preston Brooks, who decided to avenge his cousin. Two days after the speech, Brooks walked into the Senate chamber and began beating Sumner with a heavy cane. His legs trapped beneath the desk that was bolted to the floor, Sumner wrenched the desk loose as he stood up to try to defend himself, whereupon Brooks clubbed him so ferociously that Sumner slumped forward, bloody and unconscious.

News of the incident sent a thrill of pride through the South and a rush of rage through the North. Charleston newspapers praised Brooks for "standing forth so nobly in defense of... the honor of South Carolinians." Brooks resigned from Congress after censure by the House and was unanimously reelected. From all over the South came gifts of new canes, some inscribed with such mottoes as "Hit Him Again" and "Use Knock-Down Arguments." But in the North, the Republicans gained thousands of voters as a result of the affair. It seemed to prove their contentions about "the barbarism of slavery." "Has it come to this," asked the poet William Cullen Bryant, editor of the *New York Evening Post*, "that we must speak with bated breath in the presence of our Southern masters? ... Are we to be chastised as they chastise their slaves?" A veteran New York politician reported that he had "never before

seen anything at all like the present state of deep, determined, & desperate feelings of hatred, & hostility to the further extension of slavery, & its political power.”

Interpreting the Visual Past

The Caning of Sumner

On May 22, 1856, pro-slavery congressman Preston Brooks of South Carolina beat Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts with a heavy cane on the floor of the Senate. Brooks injured Sumner so severely that he was not able to return to the Senate for over three years. The caning of Sumner was the worst of several instances of North-South violence or threatened violence on the floor of Congress in the 1850s, presaging the violence on the battlefields of the 1860s.

This political cartoon depicts that notorious violence, making its pro-northern sympathies graphically clear both in its caption and its visualization of the attack on Sumner. At a Sumner rally in New York shortly after the caning, Henry Ward Beecher had asserted that “the symbol of the North is the pen; the symbol of the South is the bludgeon.” The caption picks up on that theme, offering ironic commentary on a thuggish “Southern chivalry” wielding “clubs” rather than argument in the Senate. But as with any political cartoon, its full impact depends not just on words but also on a powerful image.

The New York Public Library/Art Resource, NY

Q

How does the artist visually emphasize his pro-northern position? What choices has he made in positioning the bodies of the two men here? How does he visually emphasize the viciousness of the attack? Why does the fallen Sumner hold a quill in one hand and a scroll with the word “Kansas” on it in the other?

Q

The artist has hidden the face of Brooks. Is this an effective artistic choice? Why or why not?

Q

Why does the artist show cartoon figures in the background smiling at the violence? What message does he convey?

Republicans were soon able to add “Bleeding Kansas” to “Bleeding Sumner” in their repertoire of winning issues. Even as Sumner was delivering his speech in Washington, an “army” of pro-slavery Missourians, complete with artillery, marched on the free-state capital of Lawrence, Kansas. On May 21, they shelled and sacked the town, burning several buildings. A rival force of free-state men arrived too late to intercept them. One of the free-state “captains” was John Brown, an abolitionist zealot who considered himself anointed by the Lord to avenge the sins of slaveholders. When he learned of the murder of several free-state settlers and the sack of Lawrence, he “went crazy—crazy,” according to one of his followers. We must “fight fire with fire,” Brown declared. “Something must be done to show these barbarians that we, too, have rights.” Leading four of his sons and three other men to a pro-slavery settlement at Pottawatomie Creek on the night of May 24–25, 1856, Brown dragged five men from their cabins and split open their heads with broadswords.

Brown’s murderous act set off a veritable civil war in Kansas. One of Brown’s sons was among the estimated 200 men killed in bushwhacker raids. Not until President Pierce sent a tough new territorial governor and 1,300 federal troops to Kansas in September 1856 did the violence subside—just in time to save the Democrats from possible defeat in the presidential election.

Chapter 14: The Gathering Tempest, 1853–1860: 14-4 The Election of 1856

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14-4 The Election of 1856

By 1856, the Republicans had become the largest party in the North. They were also the first truly sectional party in American history, for they had little prospect of carrying a single county in the slave states. At their first national convention, the Republicans wrote a platform that focused mainly on that

“relic of barbarism,” slavery. The platform also incorporated the old Whig program of federal aid to internal improvements, including a railroad to California. For its presidential

Focus Question

What role did the issue of slavery play in the election of 1856?

nominee, the party steered away from its most prominent leaders, who were identified with the old parties, and turned instead to John C. Frémont. This “Pathfinder of the West” had a dashing image as an explorer and for his role in the acquisition of California. With little political experience, he had few political enemies, and his antislavery credentials were satisfactory.

The Democrats chose as their candidate James Buchanan, a veteran of 30 years in various public offices. The Democratic platform endorsed popular sovereignty and condemned the Republicans as a “sectional party” that incited “treason and armed resistance in the Territories.”

This would be a three-party election because the American Party was still in the field. Having become mainly a way station for former southern Whigs, the party nominated ex-Whig Millard Fillmore. The three-party campaign sifted out into a pair of two-party contests: Democrats versus Americans in the South and Democrats versus Republicans in the North. Fillmore, despite a good showing of 44 percent of the popular vote in the South, carried only Maryland. Considering Buchanan colorless but safe, the rest of the South gave him three-fourths of the electoral votes he needed for victory.

Popular and Electoral Votes in the 1856 Presidential Election

Candidate	Free States		Slave States		Total	
	Popular	Electoral	Popular	Electoral	Popular	Electoral
Buchanan (Democrat)	1,227,000	62	607,000	112	1,833,000	174
Frémont (Republican)	1,338,000	114	0	0	1,338,000	114
Fillmore (American)	396,000	0	476,000	8	872,000	8

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The real excitement in this election showed itself in the North. For many Republicans, the campaign was a moral cause, an evangelical crusade against the sin of slavery. Republican “Wide Awake” clubs marched in torchlight parades chanting “Free Soil, Free Speech, Free Men, Frémont!” A veteran politician in Indiana marveled: “Men, Women & Children all seemed to be out, with a kind of fervor I have never witnessed before in six Pres. Elections in which I have taken an active part.” The turnout of eligible voters in the North was a remarkable 83 percent. One awestruck journalist, anticipating a Republican victory, wrote that “the process now going on in the United States is a *Revolution*.”

Not quite. Although the Republicans swept New England and the upper parts of New York

State and the Old Northwest—both settled by New Englanders, where evangelical and antislavery reform movements had taken hold—the contest in the lower North was close. Buchanan needed only to carry Pennsylvania and either Indiana or Illinois to win the presidency, and the campaign focused on those states. The immigrant and working-class voters of the eastern cities and the rural voters of the lower Midwest, descendants of upland southerners who had settled there, were antiblack and anti-abolitionist in sentiment. They were ripe for Democratic propaganda that accused Republicans of favoring racial equality. “[Black Republicans \(Label coined by the Democratic Party to attack the Republican Party as believers in racial equality. The Democrats used this fear to convince many whites to remain loyal to them.\)](#),” declared an Ohio Democratic newspaper, intended to “turn loose ... millions of negroes, to elbow you in the workshops, and compete with you in fields of honest labor.” A Democrat in Pennsylvania told voters that “the one aim” of the Republicans was “to elevate the African race in this country to complete equality of political and economic condition with the white man.” Indiana Democrats organized parades with young girls in white dresses carrying banners inscribed: “Fathers, save us from nigger husbands.”

The Republicans in these areas denied that they favored racial equality. They insisted that the main reason for keeping slavery out of the territories was to enable white farmers and workers to make a living there without competition from black labor. But their denials were in vain. Support for the Republican Party by prominent black leaders, including Frederick Douglass, convinced hundreds of thousands of voters that the Black Republicans were racial egalitarians. For the next two decades, that sentiment would be one of the most potent weapons in the Democratic arsenal.

The charge that a Republican victory would destroy the Union was even more effective. Buchanan set the tone in his instructions to Democratic Party leaders: “The Black Republicans must be ... boldly assailed as disunionists, and the charge must be re-iterated again and again.” It was. And southerners helped the cause by threatening to secede if Frémont won. Fears of disruption caused many conservative ex-Whigs in the North to support Buchanan, who carried Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Indiana, Illinois, and California and won the presidency.

Map 14.2

Counties Carried by Candidates in the 1856 Presidential Election

This map illustrates the sharp geographical division of the vote in 1856. The pattern of Republican counties coincided almost exactly with New England and the portions of other states settled by New England migrants during the two preceding generations.

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But southerners did not intend to let Buchanan forget that he owed his election mainly to the South. “Mr. Buchanan and the Northern Democracy are dependent on the South,” wrote a Virginian after the election. “If we can succeed in Kansas ... and add a little more slave territory, we may yet live free men under the Stars and Stripes.”

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14-4a The Dred Scott Case

The South took the offensive at the outset of the Buchanan administration. Its instrument was the Supreme Court, which had a majority of five justices from slave states, led by Chief Justice Roger B. Taney of Maryland. Those justices saw the Dred Scott case as an opportunity to settle once and for all the question of slavery in the territories.

Dred Scott was a slave whose owner, an army surgeon, had kept him at military posts in Illinois and in Wisconsin Territory for several years before taking him back to Missouri.

After the owner's death, Scott sued for his freedom on the grounds of his prolonged stay in the Wisconsin Territory, where slavery had been outlawed by the Missouri Compromise. The case worked its way up from Missouri courts through a federal circuit court to the U.S. Supreme Court. There it attracted attention as a test case of Congress's power to prohibit slavery in the territories.

The southern Supreme Court justices decided to declare that the Missouri Compromise ban on slavery in the territories was unconstitutional. To avoid the appearance of a purely sectional decision, they sought the concurrence of a northern Democratic justice, Robert Grier of Pennsylvania. President-elect Buchanan played an improper role by pressing his fellow Pennsylvanian to go along with the southern majority. Having obtained Justice Grier's concurrence, Chief Justice Taney issued the Court's ruling stating that Congress lacked the power to keep slavery out of a territory, because slaves were property and the Constitution protects the right of property. For good measure, Taney also wrote that the circuit court should not have accepted the Scott case in the first place because black men were not citizens of the United States and therefore had no standing in its courts. The two non-Democratic northern justices dissented vigorously. They stated that blacks were legal citizens in several northern states and were therefore citizens of the United States. To buttress their opinion that Congress could prohibit slavery in the territories, they cited Congress's constitutional power to make "all needful rules and regulations" for the territories. Modern scholars agree with the dissenters. In 1857, however, Taney had a majority, and his ruling became law.

Republicans denounced Taney's decision as a "gross perversion" of the Constitution. Several Republican state legislatures resolved that the ruling was "not binding in law and conscience." They looked forward to the election of a Republican president who could "reconstitute" the Court and secure a reversal of the decision. "The remedy," said the *Chicago Tribune*, "is the ballot box.... Let the next President be Republican, and 1860 will mark an era kindred with that of 1776."

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14-4b The Lecompton Constitution

Instead of settling the slavery controversy, the Dred Scott decision intensified it. Meanwhile, pro-slavery advocates, having won legalization of slavery in the territories, moved to ensure that it would remain legal when Kansas became a state. That required deft maneuvering, because legitimate antislavery settlers outnumbered pro-slavery settlers by more than two to one. In 1857, the pro-slavery legislature (elected by the fraudulent votes of border ruffians two years earlier) called for a constitutional convention at Lecompton to prepare Kansas for statehood. Because the election for delegates was rigged, Free Soil voters refused to participate. One-fifth of the registered voters thereupon elected convention delegates, who met at Lecompton and wrote a state constitution that made slavery legal.

Then a nagging problem arose. Buchanan had promised that the Lecompton constitution

would be presented to voters in a fair referendum. The problem was how to pass the pro-slavery constitution, given the antislavery majority of voters. The convention came up with an ingenious solution. Instead of a referendum on the whole constitution, it would allow the voters to choose between a constitution “with slavery” and one “with no slavery.” The catch was that the constitution “with no slavery” guaranteed slave owners’ “inviolable” right of property in the 200 slaves already in Kansas and their progeny. It also did nothing to prevent future smuggling of slaves across the 200-mile border with Missouri. Once in Kansas, they, too, would become “inviolable” property.

Free-state voters branded the referendum a farce and boycotted it. One-quarter of the eligible voters went to the polls in December 1857 and approved the constitution “with slavery.” Meanwhile, in a fair election policed by federal troops, the antislavery party won control of the new territorial legislature and promptly submitted both constitutions to a referendum that was boycotted by pro-slavery voters. This time, 70 percent of the eligible voters went to the polls and overwhelmingly rejected both constitutions.

Which referendum would the federal government recognize? That question proved even more divisive than the Kansas-Nebraska debate four years earlier. President Buchanan faced a dilemma. He had promised a fair referendum. But southerners, who dominated both the Democratic Party and the administration, threatened secession if Kansas was not admitted to statehood under the Lecompton constitution “with slavery.” “If Kansas is *driven out of the Union for being a Slave State*,” thundered Senator James Hammond of South Carolina, “can any Slave State remain in it with honor?” Buchanan caved in. He explained to a shocked northern Democrat that if he did not accept the Lecompton constitution, southern states would “secede from the Union or take up arms against us.” Buchanan sent the Lecompton constitution to Congress with a message recommending statehood. Kansas, said the president, “is at this moment as much a slave state as Georgia or South Carolina.”

What would Stephen Douglas do? If he endorsed the Lecompton constitution, he would undoubtedly be defeated in his bid for reelection to the Senate in 1858. And he regarded the Lecompton constitution as a travesty of popular sovereignty. He broke with the administration on the issue. He could not vote to “force this constitution down the throats of the people of Kansas,” he told the Senate, “in opposition to their wishes and in violation of our pledges.”

The fight in Congress was long and bitter. The South and the administration had the votes they needed in the Senate and won handily there, but the Democratic majority in the House was so small that the defection of even a few northern Democrats would defeat the Lecompton constitution. The House debate at one point got out of hand, and a wild fistfight erupted between Republicans and southern Democrats. “There were some fifty middle-aged and elderly gentlemen pitching into each other,” wrote a bemused reporter, “most of them incapable, from want of wind and muscle, from doing each other any serious harm.”

When the vote was finally taken, two dozen northern Democrats defected, providing enough votes to defeat Lecompton. Both sides then accepted a compromise proposal to resubmit the constitution to Kansas voters, who decisively rejected it. This meant that while Kansas would not come in as a slave state, neither would it come in as a free state for some time yet. Nevertheless, the Lecompton debate had split the Democratic Party, leaving a legacy of undying enmity between southerners and Douglas. The election of a Republican

president in 1860 was now all but assured.

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14-5 The Economy in the 1850s

Beginning in the mid-1840s, the American economy enjoyed a dozen years of unprecedented growth and prosperity, particularly for the railroads. The number of miles in operation quintupled. Railroad construction provided employment for many immigrants and spurred growth in industries that produced rails, rolling

stock, and other railroad equipment. Most railroad construction took place in the Old Northwest, linking the region more closely to the Northeast and continuing the reorientation of transportation networks from a north-south river pattern to an east-west canal and rail pattern. By the mid-1850s, the east-west rail and water routes carried more than twice as much freight tonnage as the north-south river routes. This closer binding of the western and eastern states reinforced the effect of slavery in creating a self-conscious “North” and “South.”

Focus Question

How did economic developments in the 1840s and 1850s widen the breach between North and South?

Bridge of the Milwaukee and Chicago Railroad at Racine, Wisconsin

By the 1850s, Chicago had become the hub for a dozen or more railroads that tied the fast-growing Midwest to the older South and East. This illustration shows the railroad bridge over the Root River between Chicago and Milwaukee.

©CORBIS

Although the Old Northwest remained predominantly agricultural, rapid expansion of railroads there laid the basis for its industrialization. During the 1850s, industrial output in the free states west of Pennsylvania grew at twice the rate of Northeast industrial output and three times the rate in the South. The Northwest urban growth rate tripled that of the Northeast and quadrupled that of the South. Chicago became the terminus for 15 rail lines in the 1850s, during which its population grew by 375 percent. In 1847, two companies that contributed to the rapid growth of agriculture during this era built their plants in Illinois: the McCormick reaper works at Chicago and the John Deere steel-plow works at Moline.

Economic expansion considerably outstripped even the prodigious pace of population increase. While the number of Americans grew by 44 percent during these 12 years (1844–1856), the value of both exports and imports increased by 200 percent; mined coal tonnage by 270 percent; banking capital, industrial capital, and industrial output by approximately 100 percent; farmland value by 100 percent; and cotton, wheat, and corn harvests by about 70 percent. These advances meant a significant increase of per capita production and income, although the distance between rich and poor was widening—a phenomenon that has characterized all capitalist economies during stages of rapid industrial growth.

By the later 1850s, the United States had forged ahead of most other countries to become the second-biggest industrial producer in the world, behind only Britain. But the country was still in the early stages of industrial development. Agricultural product processing and raw materials still played the dominant role. By 1860, the four leading industries, measured by value added in manufacturing, were cotton textiles, lumber products, boots and shoes, and flour milling. Iron and machinery, industries typical of a more mature manufacturing economy, ranked sixth and seventh.

Map 14.3

Main Transportation Routes in the 1850s

These maps illustrate how the transportation networks by natural waterways (rivers and the Atlantic coastal waters) oriented commerce north and south while the canals and railroads linked east and west. By 1860, railroads tied the midwestern states economically to the Northeast.

14-5a “The American System of Manufactures”

The United States had pioneered in one crucial feature of modern industry: the mass production of **interchangeable parts** (Industrial technique using machine tools to cut and shape a large number of similar parts that can be fitted together with other parts to make an entire item such as a gun.). This revolutionary concept had begun with the manufacture of firearms earlier in the 19th century and had spread to many products by the 1850s. High wages and a shortage of the skilled craftsmen who had traditionally fashioned guns, furniture, locks, watches, and other products had compelled American entrepreneurs to seek alternative methods. “Yankee ingenuity,” already world-famous, came up with an answer: special-purpose machine tools that would cut and shape an endless number of parts that could be fitted together to make whole guns, locks, clocks, and sewing machines in mass quantities. These products were less elegant and less durable than products made by skilled craftsmen, but they were also less expensive and thus more widely available to the “middling classes.”

Such American-made products were the hit of the first World’s Fair, the Crystal Palace Exhibition at London in 1851. British manufacturers were so impressed by Yankee techniques, which they dubbed “the American system of manufactures,” that they sent two commissions to the United States to study them. The British also invited Samuel Colt of Connecticut, inventor of the famous six-shooting revolver, to set up a factory in England stocked with machinery from Connecticut. In testimony before a parliamentary committee in 1854, Colt summed up the American system of manufactures in a single sentence: “There is nothing that cannot be produced by machinery.” Although the British had a half-century head start over Americans in the Industrial Revolution, Colt’s testimony expressed a philosophy that would enable the United States to surpass Britain as the leading industrial nation by 1880.

Colt Arms Plant in Hartford, Connecticut

Samuel Colt’s factory for manufacturing firearms was a showpiece for the American system of manufactures in the 1850s. All of the processes for production of the famous Colt revolver were housed under one roof, with power-driven machinery cutting the metal and shaping the interchangeable parts. Hand filing was necessary, however, for a perfect fit of the parts, because the tolerances of machine tools were not yet as finely calibrated as they later became.

Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division[LC-USZ62-19431]

The British industrial commissions cited the American educational system as an important reason for the country's technological proficiency. "Educated up to a far higher standard than those of a much superior grade in the Old World," reported the 1854 commission, "every [American] workman seems to be continually devising some new thing to assist him in his work, and there is a strong desire ... to be 'posted up' in every new improvement." By contrast, the British workman, trained by long apprenticeship "in the trade," rather than in school, lacked "the ductility of mind and the readiness of apprehension for a new thing" and was therefore "unwilling to change the methods he has been used to."

Whether this British commission was right in its belief that American schooling encouraged the "adaptative versatility" of Yankee workers, it was certainly true that public education and literacy were more widespread in the United States than in Europe. Almost 95 percent of adults in the free states were literate in 1860, compared with 65 percent in England and 55 percent in France. The standardization and expansion of public school systems that had begun earlier in New England had spread to the mid-Atlantic states and into the Old Northwest by the 1850s. Nearly all children received a few years of schooling, and most completed at least six or seven years.

The Country School

This famous painting by Winslow Homer portrays the typical one-room rural schoolhouse in which millions of American children learned the "three R's" (reading, 'riting, and 'rithmetic) in the 19th century. By the 1850s, teaching elementary school was a profession increasingly dominated by women, an important change from earlier generations.

© Francis G. Mayer/Corbis

This improvement in education coincided with the feminization of the teaching profession, which opened up new career opportunities for young women. By the 1850s, nearly three-quarters of the public school teachers in New England were women (who worked for lower salaries than male teachers), a trend that was spreading to the mid-Atlantic states and the Old Northwest as well.

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14-5b The Southern Economy

In the South, 80 percent of the free population and only 10 percent of the slaves were literate. This was one of several differences between North and South that antislavery people pointed to as evidence of the backward, repressive, and pernicious nature of a slave society.

Still, the South shared in the economy's rapid growth following recovery from the depression of 1837–1843. Cotton prices and production both doubled between 1845 and 1855. Similar increases in price and output emerged in tobacco and sugar. The price of slaves also doubled during this decade. Southern crops provided three-fifths of all U.S. exports, with cotton alone supplying more than half.

But a growing number of southerners deplored the fact that the **colonial economy** (Economy based on the export of agricultural products and the import of manufactured goods; sometimes used to describe the dependence of the South on the North.) of the South was so dependent on the export of agricultural products and the import of manufactured goods. Northern or British firms owned the ships that carried southern cotton; Yankees or

Englishmen provided most of the financial and commercial services. In the years of rising sectional tensions around 1850, many southerners began calling for economic independence from the North. How could they obtain their rights, they asked, if they were “financially more enslaved than our negroes?” Yankees “abuse and denounce slavery and slaveholders,” declared a southern newspaper in 1851, yet “we purchase all our luxuries and necessities from the North.... Our slaves are clothed with Northern manufactured goods and work with Northern hoes, ploughs, and other implements.... The slaveholder dresses in Northern goods...and on Northern-made paper, with a Northern pen, with Northern ink, he resolves and re-resolves in regard to his rights.”

Southerners must “throw off this humiliating dependence,” declared James D. B. De Bow, the young champion of economic diversification in the South. In 1846, De Bow had founded in New Orleans a periodical eventually known as *De Bow’s Review*. Proclaiming on its cover that “Commerce is King,” the *Review* set out to make this slogan a southern reality. De Bow took the lead in organizing annual commercial conventions that met in various southern cities during the 1850s. In its early years, this movement encouraged southerners to invest in shipping lines, railroads, textile mills (“bring the spindles to the cotton”), and other enterprises. “Give us factories, machine shops, work shops,” declared southern proponents of King Commerce, “and we shall be able ere long to assert our rights.”

Economic diversification in the South did make headway during the 1850s. The slave states quadrupled their railroad mileage, increased the amount of capital invested in manufacturing by 77 percent, and boosted their output of cotton textiles by 44 percent. But northern industry was growing even faster. In 1860, the North had five times more industrial output per capita than the South, and it had three times the railroad capital and mileage per capita and per thousand square miles. Southerners had a larger percentage of their capital invested in land and slaves in 1860 than they had had 10 years earlier. Some 80 percent of the South’s labor force worked in agriculture—the same as 60 years earlier. By contrast, while farming remained, at 40 percent, the largest single occupation in the North, the northern economy developed a strong manufacturing and commercial sector whose combined labor force almost equaled that of agriculture by 1860.

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14-5c The Sovereignty of King Cotton

A good many southerners preferred to keep it that way. “That the North does our trading and manufacturing mostly is true,” wrote an Alabama planter in 1858. “We are willing that they should. Ours is an agricultural people, and God grant that we may continue so. It is the freest, happiest, most independent, and with us, the most powerful condition on earth.” In the later 1850s, the drive for economic diversification in the South lost steam. King Cotton reasserted its primacy over King Commerce as cotton output *and* prices continued to rise, suffusing the South in a glow of prosperity. “Our Cotton is the most wonderful talisman on earth,” declared a planter. “By its power we are transmuting whatever we choose into whatever we want.” In a speech that became famous, James Hammond of South Carolina told his fellow senators in 1858 that “the slaveholding South is now the controlling power of

the world.... No power on earth dares to make war on cotton. Cotton is king.”

Even the commercial conventions in the South seem to have embraced this gospel. By the later 1850s, one of the main goals of these conventions was to reopen the African slave trade, prohibited by law since 1808. The conventions also lobbied for the annexation of Cuba, which would bring a productive agricultural economy and 400,000 more slaves into the United States.

Nowhere in the South, said defenders of slavery, did one see such “scenes of beggary, squalid poverty, and wretchedness” as one could find in any northern city. Slaves, they insisted, enjoyed a higher standard of living than white “wage slaves” in northern factories. Slaves never suffered from unemployment or wage cuts, they received free medical care, and they were taken care of in old age.

This argument reached its fullest development in the writings of George Fitzhugh, a Virginia farmer-lawyer whose newspaper articles were gathered into two books published in 1854 and 1857, *Sociology for the South* and *Cannibals All*. Free-labor capitalism, said Fitzhugh, was a competition in which the strong exploited and starved the weak. Slavery, by contrast, was a paternal institution that guaranteed protection of the workers. “Capital exercises a more perfect compulsion over free laborers than human masters over slaves,” wrote Fitzhugh, “for free laborers must at all times work or starve, and slaves are supported whether they work or not.... What a glorious thing is slavery, when want, misfortune, old age, debility, and sickness overtake [the slave].”

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14-5d Labor Conditions in the North

How true was this portrait of poverty and starvation among northern workers? Some northern labor leaders did complain that the “slavery” of the wage system gave “bosses” control over the hours, conditions, and compensation of labor. But there is no evidence that a northern workingman ever offered to change places with a southern slave. Average per capita income was about 40 percent higher in the North than in the South. Although that average masked large disparities between rich and poor—even between the middle class and the poor—those disparities were no greater, and probably smaller, in the North than in the South.

Southern Portraits of Slavery and Free Labor

Romanticized images of happy, well-fed slaves enjoying their work picking cotton were common in pro-slavery literature. Such images were often contrasted with the supposed harshness of life in northern tenement districts, as in this illustration of a communal pump that has run dry on a hot summer day in an immigrant neighborhood on New York’s Lower East Side.

Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division © The Granger Collection, New York

To be sure, substantial numbers of recent immigrants, day laborers, and young single women in large northern cities lived on the edge of poverty—or slipped over the edge. Many women seamstresses, shoe binders, milliners, and the like, who worked 60 or 70 hours per week in the outwork system, earned less than a living wage. Some of them resorted to prostitution in order to survive. The widespread adoption of the newly invented sewing machine in the 1850s did nothing to make life easier for seamstresses; it only lowered their per-unit piecework wages and forced them to turn out more shirts and trousers than before. Many urban working-class families could not survive on the wages of an unskilled or semiskilled man. Women had to take in laundry, boarders, or outwork, and

one or more children also had to work. Much employment was seasonal or intermittent, leaving workers without wages for long periods, especially during the winter. The poverty, overcrowding, and disease in the tenement districts of a few large cities—especially New York City—seemed to lend substance to pro-slavery claims that slaves were better off.

Map 14.4

Slavery and Staple Crops in the South, 1860

Note the close correlation between the concentration of the slave population and the leading cash crops of the South. Nothing better illustrates the economic importance of slavery.

But they were not—even apart from the psychological contrast between being free and being a slave. New York City's poverty, although highly concentrated and visible, was exceptional. In the North, only one-fourth of the people lived in cities or towns of more than 2,500 people. Wages and opportunities for workers were greater in the North than anywhere else in the world, including the South. That was why 4 million immigrants came to the United States from 1845 to 1860 and why seven-eighths of them settled in free states. It was also why twice as many white residents of slave states migrated to free states than

vice versa.

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14-5e The Panic of 1857

In fall 1857, the relative prosperity of the North was interrupted by a financial panic that caused a short-lived but intense depression. When the Crimean War in Europe (1854–1856) cut off Russian grain from the European market, U.S. exports had mushroomed to meet the deficiency. After the Crimean War ended, U.S. grain exports slumped. The sharp rise in interest rates in Britain and France, caused by the war, spread to U.S. financial markets in 1857 and dried up sources of credit. Meanwhile, the economic boom of the preceding years had caused the American economy to overheat: Land prices had soared, railroads had built beyond the capacity of earnings to service their debts, and banks had made too many risky loans.

This speculative house of cards came crashing down in September 1857. The failure of one banking house sent a wave of panic through the financial community. Banks suspended specie payments, businesses failed, railroads went bankrupt, construction halted, and factories shut down. Hundreds of thousands of workers were laid off, and others went on part-time schedules or took wage cuts, just as the cold winter months were arriving. The specter of class conflict similar to the European revolutions of 1848 haunted the public. Unemployed workers in several northern cities marched in parades carrying banners demanding work or bread. A mob broke into the shops of flour merchants in New York City. On November 10, a crowd gathered on Wall Street and threatened to break into the U.S. customs house and sub-treasury vaults, where \$20 million was stored. Soldiers and marines had to be called out to disperse the mob.

The Panic on Wall Street

This cartoon satirizes the consternation among New York investors and financiers when banks and businesses crashed in autumn 1857. Notice the smirk on the faces of two men in the foreground, who undoubtedly stood to benefit from foreclosures on defaulted property. The panic was no laughing matter, though, because it led to a short but sharp recession in 1857 and 1858.

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But the country got through the winter with little violence. No one was killed in the demonstrations—in contrast to the dozens who had been killed in ethnic riots a few years earlier and the hundreds killed in the guerrilla war in Kansas. Class conflict turned out to be the least threatening of the various discords that endangered society in the 1850s. Charity and public works helped tide the poor over the winter, and the panic inspired a vigorous religious revival. Spontaneous prayer meetings arose in many northern cities, bringing together bankers and seamstresses, brokers and street sweepers. They asked God's forgiveness for the greed and materialism that, in a self-flagellating mood, they believed had caused the panic.

The depression was short-lived. By early 1858, banks had resumed specie payments; the stock market rebounded in the spring; factories reopened; railroad construction resumed; and by spring 1859, recovery was complete. The modest labor union activities of the 1850s revived after the depression, as workers in some industries went on strike to bring wages back to pre-panic levels. In February 1860, the shoemakers of Lynn, Massachusetts, began the largest strike in U.S. history up to that time, eventually involving 20,000 workers in the New England shoe industry. Despite the organization of several national unions of skilled workers during the 1850s, however, less than 1 percent of the labor force was unionized in 1860.

14-5f Sectionalism and the Panic

The Panic of 1857 intensified sectional animosities. The South largely escaped the depression. Its export-driven economy seemed insulated from domestic downturns. After a brief dip, cotton and tobacco prices returned to high levels and production continued to increase: The cotton crop set new records in 1858 and 1859. Southern boasts about the superiority of the region's economic and labor systems took on added bravado. "Who can doubt, that has looked at recent events, that cotton is supreme?" asked Senator James Hammond in March 1858. "When thousands of the strongest commercial houses in the world were coming down," he told Yankees, "what brought you up? ... We have poured in upon you one million six hundred thousand bales of cotton.... We have sold it for \$65,000,000, and saved you."

Northerners were not grateful. In fact, many blamed southern congressmen for blocking measures, especially higher tariffs, that would have eased the effects of the depression and helped not only manufacturers but also unemployed workers. In each session of Congress from 1858 through 1860, a combination of southerners and about half of the northern Democrats blocked Republican efforts to raise tariffs. In the words of one bitter Pennsylvania Republican, this was proof that Congress remained "shamelessly prostituted, in a base subserviency to the Slave Power."

Three other measures acquired additional significance after the Panic of 1857. Republicans supported each of them as a means to promote economic health and to aid farmers and workers, but southerners perceived all of them as aimed at helping *northern* farmers and workers and used their power to defeat them. One was a homestead act to grant 160 acres of public land to each farmer who settled and worked the land. Believing that this bill "would prove a most efficient ally for Abolition by encouraging and stimulating the settlement of free farms with Yankees," southern senators defeated it after the House had passed it in 1859. The following year both houses passed the Homestead Act, but Buchanan vetoed it and southern senators blocked an effort to pass it over his veto. A similar fate befell bills for land grants to a transcontinental railroad and for building agricultural and mechanical colleges to educate farmers and workers. In the Old Northwest, where these measures were popular, Republican prospects for 1860 were enhanced by southern and Democratic opposition to them.

Chapter 14: The Gathering Tempest, 1853–1860: 14-5g The Free-Labor Ideology
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14-5g The Free-Labor Ideology

By the later 1850s, the Republican antislavery argument had become a finely honed philosophy that historians have labeled a **free-labor ideology** (Belief that all work in a free society is honorable and that manual labor is degraded when it is equated with slavery or bondage.) . It held that all work in a free society was honorable, but that slavery degraded the calling of manual labor by equating it with bondage. Slaves worked inefficiently, by compulsion; free men were stimulated to work hard and efficiently by the desire to get ahead. Social mobility was central to the free-labor ideology. Free workers who practiced

the virtues of industry, thrift, self-discipline, and sobriety could move up the ladder of success. “I am not ashamed to confess,” Abraham Lincoln told a working-class audience in 1860, “that twenty-five years ago I was a hired laborer, mauling rails, at work on a flat-boat—just what might happen to any poor man’s son!” But in the free states, said Lincoln, a man knows that “he can better his condition.... The free labor system opens the way for all—gives hope to all, and energy, and progress, and improvement of condition to all.”

Lincoln drew a rosy picture of northern reality, for large numbers of workers in the North had little hope of advancing beyond the status of wage laborer. Still, he expressed a belief that was widely shared in the antebellum North. “There is not a working boy of average ability in the New England states, at least,” observed a visiting British industrialist in 1854, “who has not an idea of some mechanical invention or improvement in manufactures, by which, in good time, he hopes to better his condition, or rise to fortune and social distinction.” Americans could point to numerous examples of men who had achieved dramatic upward mobility. Belief in this “American dream” was most strongly held by Protestant farmers, skilled workers, and white-collar workers who had some real hope of getting ahead. These men tended to support the Republican Party and its goal of excluding slavery from the territories.

For slavery was the antithesis of upward mobility. Bondsmen were “fatally fixed in that condition for life,” as Lincoln noted. Slaves could not hope to move up the ladder of success, nor could free men who lived in a society where they had to compete with slave labor. “Slavery withers and blights all it touches,” declared an Iowa Republican. “It is a curse upon the poor, free, laboring white men.” In the United States, social mobility often depended on geographic mobility. The main reason so many families moved into new territories was to make a new start, to get ahead. But, declared a Republican editor, if slavery goes into the territories, “the free labor of all the states will not. If the free labor of the states goes there, the slave labor of the southern states will not, and in a few years the country will teem with an active and energetic population.”

Southerners contended that free labor was prone to unrest and strikes. Of course it was, said Lincoln in a speech to a New England audience during the shoemakers’ strike of 1860. “I am glad to see that a system prevails in New England under which laborers *can* strike when they want to (*Cheers*).... I like the system which lets a man quit when he wants to, and wish it might prevail everywhere (*Tremendous applause*).” Strikes were one of the ways in which free workers could try to improve their prospects. “I want every man,” said Lincoln, “to have the chance—and I believe a black man is entitled to it—in which he can better his condition.” That was why Republicans were determined to contain the expansion of slavery, because if the South got its way in the territories, “free labor that can strike will give way to slave labor that cannot!”

14-5h The Impending Crisis

From the South came a maverick voice that echoed the Republicans. Hinton Rowan Helper

considered himself a spokesman for the nonslaveholding whites of the South. Living in upcountry North Carolina, a region of small farms and few slaves, he had brooded for years over slavery's retarding influence on southern development. In 1857, he poured out his bitterness in a book entitled *The Impending Crisis of the South*. Using selective statistics from the 1850 census, he pictured a South mired in economic backwardness, widespread illiteracy, poverty for the masses, and great wealth for the elite. He contrasted this dismal situation with the bustling, prosperous northern economy and its near-universal literacy, neat farms, and progressive institutions. What caused this startling contrast? "Slavery lies at the root of all the shame, poverty, ignorance, tyranny, and imbecility of the South," he wrote. Slavery monopolized the best land, degraded all labor to the level of bond labor, denied schools to the poor, and impoverished all but "the lords of the lash [who] are not only absolute masters of the blacks [but] of all nonslaveholding whites, whose freedom is merely nominal, and whose unparalleled illiteracy and degradation is purposely and fiendishly perpetrated." The remedy? Nonslaveholding whites must organize and use their votes to overthrow "this entire system of oligarchical despotism."

No southern publisher dared touch this book. Helper lugged his bulky manuscript to New York City, where a printer brought it out in summer 1857. *The Impending Crisis* was virtually banned in the South, and few southern whites read it, but it made a huge impact in the North. Republicans welcomed it as confirmation of all they had been saying about the evils of slavery and the virtues of free labor. The Republican Party subsidized an abridged edition and distributed thousands of copies as campaign documents. During the late 1850s, a war of books (Helper's *Impending Crisis* versus Fitzhugh's *Cannibals All*) exacerbated sectional tensions. Fitzhugh's book circulated freely in the North, whereas the sale or possession of Helper's book was a criminal offense in many parts of the South. Northern spokesmen did not hesitate to point out the moral: A free society could tolerate free speech and a free press, but a slave society could not.

A Southern Yeoman Farmer's Home

This modest log cabin on the edge of a small clearing, with the farmer's wife drawing water from a well in the foreground, was typical of nonslaveholders' farms in the backcountry of the South. Often stigmatized as poor whites, many of these families were in fact comfortable by the standards of the day. They did not feel the sense of oppression by the planter class that Hinton Rowan Helper believed they should feel.

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14-5i Southern Nonslaveholders

How accurate was Helper's portrayal of southern poor whites degraded by slavery and ready to revolt against it? The touchy response of many southern leaders suggested that the planters felt uneasy about that question. After all, slaveholding families constituted less than one-third of the white population in slave states, and the proportion was declining as the price of slaves continued to rise. Open hostility to the planters' domination of society and politics was evident in the mountainous and upcountry regions of the South. These would become areas of Unionist sentiment during the Civil War and of Republican strength after it.

But Helper surely exaggerated the disaffection of most nonslaveholders in the South. Three bonds held them to the system: kinship, economic interest, and race. In the Piedmont and the low-country regions of the South, nearly half of the whites lived in slaveholding

families. Many of the rest were cousins or nephews or in-laws of slaveholders in the South's extensive and tightly knit kinship network. Moreover, many young, ambitious nonslaveholders hoped to buy slaves eventually. Some of them *rented* slaves. And because slaves could be made to do the menial, unskilled labor in the South—the “mudsill” tasks, in Senator Hammond’s language—white workers monopolized the more skilled, higher-paying jobs.

Even if they did not own slaves, white people owned the most important asset of all—white skin. White supremacy was an article of faith in the South (and in most of the North, for that matter). Race was a more important social distinction than class. Southern law, politics, and social ideology were based on the concept of domination by the “master race” of whites. Subordination was the Negro’s fate, and slavery was the best means of subordination. Emancipation would loose a flood of free blacks on society and would undermine the foundations of white supremacy. Thus many of the poor whites in the South and immigrant workers or poorer farmers in the North supported slavery.

Racist themes permeated pro-slavery rhetoric. “With us,” said John C. Calhoun in 1848, “the two great divisions of society are not the rich and the poor, but white and black; and all the former, the poor as well as the rich, belong to the upper class, and are respected and treated as equals.” True freedom, as Americans understood it, required equality of rights and status (although not of wealth or income). Slavery ensured such freedom for all whites by putting a floor under them, a mudsill of black slaves that kept whites from falling into the mud of inequality. “Break down slavery,” said a Virginia congressman, “and you would with the same blow destroy the great Democratic principle of equality among men.”

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14-6 The Lincoln-Douglas Debates

Abraham Lincoln believed the opposite. For him, slavery and freedom were incompatible; the one must die that the other might live. This became the central theme of a memorable series of debates between Lincoln and Douglas in 1858, which came to be known as the **Lincoln-Douglas debates** (Series of [seven debates between Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas in their contest for election to the U.S. Senate in 1858.](#)) and turned out to be a dress rehearsal for the presidential election of 1860.

Focus Question

What were the major issues of the Lincoln-Douglas debates?

The debates were arranged after Lincoln was nominated to oppose Douglas’s reelection to the Senate. State legislatures elected U.S. senators at that time, so the campaign was technically for election by the Illinois legislature. The real issue, however, was the senatorship, and Douglas’s prominence gave the contest national significance. Lincoln

launched his bid with one of his most notable speeches. “A house divided against itself cannot stand,” he said. “I believe this government cannot endure, permanently half slave and half free.... It will become all one thing, or all the other.” Under the Dred Scott decision, which Douglas had endorsed, slavery was legal in all of the territories. And what, asked Lincoln, would prevent the Supreme Court, using the same reasoning that had led it to interpret the Constitution as protecting property in slaves, from legalizing slavery in free states? (A case based on this question was then before the New York courts.) The advocates of slavery, charged Lincoln, were trying to “push it forward, till it shall become lawful in all the States.” But Republicans intended to keep slavery out of the territories, thus stopping its growth and placing it “where the public mind shall rest in the belief that it is in the course of ultimate extinction.”

The Lincoln-Douglas Debates

The Lincoln-Douglas contest for the Senate in 1858 produced the most famous—and fateful—political debates in American history. At stake was nothing less than the future of the nation. Thousands of people crowded into seven towns to listen to these three-hour debates that took place outdoors from August to October in weather ranging from stifling heat to cold rain.

Old Paper Studios/Alamy

The seven open-air debates between Douglas and Lincoln focused almost entirely on the issue of slavery. Douglas asked: Why could the country not continue to exist half slave and half free as it had for 70 years? Lincoln's talk about the "ultimate extinction" of slavery would provoke the South to secession. Douglas professed himself no friend of slavery, but if people in the southern states or in the territories wanted it, they had the right to have it. Douglas did not want black people—either slave or free—in Illinois. Lincoln's policy would not only free the slaves but would also grant them equality. "Are you in favor of conferring upon the negro the rights and privileges of citizenship?" Douglas called out to supporters in the crowd. "No, no!" they shouted back. He continued:

Do you desire to strike out of our State Constitution that clause which keeps slaves and free negroes out of the State ... in order that when Missouri abolishes slavery she can send one hundred thousand emancipated slaves into Illinois, to become citizens and voters on an equality with yourselves? ("Never," "no."). ... If you desire to allow them to come into the State and settle with the white man, if you desire them to vote

... then support Mr. Lincoln and the Black Republican party, who are in favor of the citizenship of the negro. ("Never, never.")

Douglas's demagoguery put Lincoln on the defensive. He responded with cautious denials that he favored "social and political equality" of the races. The "ultimate extinction" of slavery might take a century. It would require the voluntary cooperation of the South and would perhaps be contingent on the emigration of some freed slaves from the country. But come what may, freedom must prevail. Americans must reaffirm the principles of the Founding Fathers. In Lincoln's words, a black person was

entitled to all the natural rights enumerated in the Declaration of Independence, the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. (Loud cheers.) I hold that he is as much entitled to these as the white man. I agree with Judge Douglas he is not my equal in many respects.... But in the right to eat the bread, without leave of anybody else, which his own hand earns, he is my equal and the equal of Judge Douglas, and the equal of every living man. (Great applause.)

Lincoln deplored Douglas's "care not" attitude about whether slavery was voted up or down. He "looks to no end of the institution of slavery," said Lincoln. By endorsing the Dred Scott decision, Lincoln claimed, Douglas looks to its "perpetuity and nationalization." Douglas was thus "eradicating the light of reason and liberty in this American people." That was the real issue in the election, insisted Lincoln:

That is the issue that will continue in this country when these poor tongues of Judge Douglas and myself shall be silent. It is the eternal struggle between these two principles—right and wrong—throughout the world.... The one is the common right of humanity and the other the divine right of kings.... No matter in what shape it comes, whether from a king who seeks to bestride the people of his own nation and live by the fruit of their labor, or from one race of men as an apology for enslaving another race, it is the same tyrannical principle.

14-6a The Freeport Doctrine

The popular vote for Republican and Democratic state legislators in Illinois was virtually even in 1858, but because apportionment favored the Democrats, they won a majority of seats and reelected Douglas. But Lincoln was the ultimate victor, for his performance in the debates lifted him from political obscurity, while Douglas further alienated southern Democrats. In the Freeport debate, Lincoln had asked Douglas how he reconciled his

support for the Dred Scott decision with his policy of popular sovereignty, which supposedly gave residents of a territory the power to vote slavery down. Douglas replied that even though the Court had legalized slavery in the territories, the enforcement of that right would depend on the people who lived there. This was a popular answer in the North, but it gave added impetus to southern demands for congressional passage of a federal slave code in territories such as Kansas, where the Free-Soil majority had by 1859 made slavery virtually null. In the next two sessions of Congress after the 1858 elections, southern Democrats, led by [Jefferson Davis \(Mississippi planter and prominent leader of the Southern Democrats in the 1850s, who later served as president of the Confederacy.\)](#), tried to pass a federal slave code for all territories. Douglas and northern Democrats joined with Republicans to defeat it. Consequently, southern hostility toward Douglas mounted as the presidential election of 1860 approached.

History Through Film

Abe Lincoln In Illinois (1940)

Directed by John Cromwell.

Starring Raymond Massey (Abraham Lincoln), Gene Lockhard (Stephen Douglas), Ruth Gordon (Mary Todd Lincoln).

Raymond Massey's portrayal of Abraham Lincoln in Robert Sherwood's Broadway play, which opened in 1938 and was made into a movie in 1940, launched this Canadian-born actor as the image and voice of Lincoln on stage, screen, and radio for a generation. More people saw or heard Massey as Lincoln than ever saw or heard the real Lincoln. Perhaps that was appropriate because Sherwood's Lincoln spoke more to the generation of the Second World War than to the generation of the Civil War.

In one of the film's most dramatic scenes of the Lincoln-Douglas debates, Massey/Lincoln delivers a speech against slavery that applied equally to fascist totalitarianism and defended democracy in language resonant with the four freedoms that the Allies fought for in the Second World War. In an interview, Massey said, "If you substitute the word *dictatorship* for the word *slavery* throughout Sherwood's script, it becomes electric for our time." In the final scene, as Lincoln departs from Springfield to take up the burdens of the presidency, Massey's Lincoln sees beyond the challenge of disunion to the challenge to democracy in a world at war.

Sherwood skillfully wove together Lincoln's words with his own script to portray Lincoln's growth from the gawky youth of 1831 to the champion of freedom and democracy in 1861. Sherwood took many liberties, but what scriptwriter does not? He combined bits and pieces of several Lincoln speeches into one; he invented incidents and wrenched chronology in some of the 12 scenes from these 30 years of Lincoln's life.

Perhaps the film's sharpest departure from reality is the tension it depicts between "politics," which is bad, and "democracy," which is good. Sherwood's Lincoln

doesn't want to play the dirty game of politics; early in the film, the homespun youth declares: "I don't want to be no politician." It is Mary Todd Lincoln who is ambitious for her husband and pushes a reluctant Abraham toward his destiny. The real Lincoln loved the game of politics and played it masterfully. He was also as ambitious in his own right as Mary was for him; Lincoln's law partner William Herndon said that Abraham's ambition was "a little engine that knew no rest." Sherwood's Lincoln who transcends politics to become a great statesman could not have existed without the real Lincoln, the ambitious politician.

Raymond Massey as the 23-year-old Abraham Lincoln just elected captain of a New Salem militia company in the Black Hawk War of 1832.

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14-6b John Brown at Harpers Ferry

Southern tempers were already frayed at the start of the 1859–1860 session of Congress because of what had happened at [Harpers Ferry \(Site of John Brown's 1859 raid on a U.S.](#)

armory and arsenal for the manufacture and storage of military rifles.) , Virginia, in the previous October. After his exploits in Kansas, John Brown had disappeared from public view. But he had not been idle. Like the Old Testament warriors he admired, Brown intended to carry his war against slavery into Babylon—the South. His favorite New Testament passage was Hebrews 9:22: “Without shedding of blood there is no remission of sin.” Brown worked up a plan to capture the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry, arm slaves with the muskets he seized there, and move southward along the Appalachian Mountains, attracting more slaves to his army along the way until the “whole accursed system of bondage” collapsed.

Brown recruited 5 black men and 17 whites, including three of his sons, for this reckless scheme. He also had the secret support of a half-dozen Massachusetts and New York abolitionists, who had helped him to raise funds. On the night of October 16, 1859, Brown led his men across the Potomac River and occupied the sleeping town of Harpers Ferry without resistance. Few slaves flocked to his banner, but the next day, state militia units poured into town and drove Brown’s band into the fire-engine house. At dawn on October 18, a company of U.S. Marines commanded by Colonel Robert E. Lee and Lieutenant J. E. B. Stuart stormed the engine house and captured the surviving members of Brown’s party. Four townsmen, one marine, and ten of Brown’s men (including two of his sons) were killed; not a single slave was liberated.

John Brown’s raid lasted 36 hours, but its repercussions resounded for years. Brown and six of his followers were promptly tried by the state of Virginia, convicted, and hanged. This scarcely ended matters. The raid sent a wave of revulsion and alarm through the South. Although no slaves had risen in revolt, it revived fears of slave insurrection that were never far beneath the surface of southern consciousness. Exaggerated reports of Brown’s network of abolitionist supporters confirmed southern suspicions that a widespread northern conspiracy was afoot, determined to destroy their society. Although Republican leaders denied any connection with Brown and disavowed his actions, few southerners believed them. Had not Lincoln talked of the extinction of slavery? And had not William H. Seward, who was expected to be the next Republican presidential nominee, given a campaign speech in 1858 in which he predicted an irrepressible conflict between the free and slave societies?

The Last Moments of John Brown

This famous 1882–1884 painting of John Brown by Thomas Hovenden reminds us that the memory of Brown’s 1859 attack on Harpers Ferry resonated deeply in American culture. Here, a sentimental portrait of Brown portrays him about to kiss a baby, while the soldiers who will escort him to his death are positioned as an honor guard. Depicting Brown as a gentle hero and martyr to the cause of antislavery, this genre painting avoids grappling with the ferocity and violence of Brown’s actions, whether in Kansas or at Harpers Ferry.

Image copyright © The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Image source: Art Resource, NY

Many northerners, impressed by Brown's dignified bearing and eloquence during his trial, considered him a martyr to freedom. In his final statement to the court, Brown said:

I see a book kissed, which I suppose to be the Bible, which teaches me that all things whatsoever I would that men should do to me, I should do even so to them. It teaches me, further, to remember them that are in bonds as bound with them. I endeavored to act up to that instruction.... Now, if it is deemed necessary that I should forfeit my life for the furtherance of the ends of justice, and mingle my blood further with the blood of my children and with the blood of millions in this slave country whose rights are disregarded by wicked, cruel, and unjust enactments, I say, let it be done.

On the day of Brown's execution, bells tolled in hundreds of northern towns, guns fired salutes, and ministers preached sermons of commemoration. "The death of no man in America has ever produced so profound a sensation," commented one northerner. Ralph Waldo Emerson declared that Brown had made "the gallows as glorious as the cross."

What They Said

Reactions to John Brown

The October 1859 attack on Harpers Ferry by John Brown electrified the nation and hardened sectional loyalties. These two newspaper editorials reveal the deep differences in northern and southern interpretations of Brown.

Wilmington, North Carolina, *Daily Herald*, December 5, 1859

It is useless to disguise the fact, that the entire North and Northwest are hopelessly abolitionized. We want no better evidence than that presented to us by their course in this Harper's affair. With the exception of a few papers... that have had the manliness to denounce the act as it deserved, the great majority have either sympathized with the offenders, or maintained an ominous silence.

Let us look calmly at the case: A sovereign State, in the peaceful employment of the rights guaranteed by the Constitution, has been invaded by an armed force, not foreign mercenaries, but citizens of the same Confederacy, and her people shot down in the public highways. The question is a natural one—Why is this thing done? Why is murder and rapine committed?—And who are the perpetrators? The answer is found in the fact that the State whose territory has thus been invaded, is a Southern State in which the institution of slavery exists according to the law and the gospel; and the actors in the terrible drama were but carrying out the precepts and teachings of our *Northern brethren*. The “irrepressible conflict” between the North and the South then, has already commenced; to this complexion it must come at last. It is useless to talk of the conservatism of the North. Where has there been any evidence of it? Meetings upon meetings have been held for the purpose of expressing sympathy for murderers and traitors; but none, no, not one solitary expression of horror, or disapprobation even, for the crime committed, have we yet seen from any State North of Mason & Dixon's line.

Horace Greeley, *New-York Tribune*, December 3, 1859

We are not those who say, “if slavery is wrong, then John Brown was wholly right.” There are fit and unfit modes of combating a great evil; we think Brown at Harper's Ferry pursued the latter.... And, while we heartily wish every slave in the world would run away from his master tomorrow and never be retaken, we should not feel justified in entering a slave state to incite them to do so, even if we were sure to succeed in the enterprise. Of course, we regard Brown's raid as utterly mistaken and, in its direct consequences, pernicious.

But his are the errors of a fanatic, not the crimes of a felon. It were absurd to apply to him opprobrious epithets or wholesale denunciations. The essence of crime is the pursuit of selfish gratification in disregard of others' good; and that is the precise opposite of Old Brown's impulse and deed. He periled and sacrificed not merely his own life—that were, perhaps, a moderate stake—but the lives of his beloved sons, the earthly happiness of his family and theirs, to benefit a despised and downtrodden race—to deliver from bitter bondage and degradation those whom he had never seen.

Unwise, the world will pronounce him. Reckless of artificial yet palpable

obligations he certainly was, but his very errors were heroic—the faults of a brave, impulsive, truthful nature, impatient of wrong, and only too conscious that “resistance to tyrants is obedience to God.” Let whoever would first cast a stone ask himself whether his own noblest act was equal in grandeur and nobility to that for which John Brown pays the penalty of death on the gallows.

Q

The Wilmington, North Carolina, editorial writer accuses the entire North of being “abolitionized.” Is this a fair accusation? Why or why not?

Q

Would southerners have been reassured by Greeley’s assertion that Brown’s raid was “utterly mistaken”? Why or why not? What does Greeley argue in the rest of his editorial?

Sources: (top) From an editorial in the newspaper: Wilmington, North Carolina, Daily Herald, December 5, 1859. (bottom) From an editorial by Horace Greeley in the newspaper New-York Tribune, December 3, 1859.

This outpouring of northern sympathy for Brown shocked and enraged southerners and weakened the already frayed threads of the Union. “The Harper’s Ferry invasion has advanced the cause of disunion more than any event that has happened since the formation of the government,” observed a Richmond, Virginia, newspaper. “I have always been a fervid Union man,” wrote a North Carolinian, but “the endorsement of the Harper’s Ferry outrage ... has shaken my fidelity.... I am willing to take the chances of every possible evil that may arise from disunion, sooner than submit any longer to Northern insolence.”

Something approaching a reign of terror now gripped the South. Every Yankee seemed to be another John Brown; every slave who acted suspiciously seemed to be an insurrectionist. Hundreds of northerners were run out of the South in 1860, some wearing a coat of tar and feathers. Several “incendiaries,” both white and black, were lynched. “Defend yourselves!” Senator Robert Toombs cried out to the southern people. “The enemy is at your door ... meet him at the doorsill, and drive him from the temple of liberty, or pull down its pillars and involve him in a common ruin.”

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14-7 Conclusion

Few decades in American history witnessed a greater disjunction between economic well-

being and political upheaval than the 1850s. Despite the recession following the Panic of 1857, the total output of the American economy grew by 62 percent during the decade. Railroad mileage more than tripled, value added by manufacturing nearly doubled, and gross farm product grew by 40 percent. Americans were more prosperous than ever before.

Yet a profound malaise gripped the country. Riots between immigrants and nativists in the mid-1850s left more than 50 people dead. Fighting in Kansas between pro-slavery and antislavery forces killed at least 200. Fistfights broke out on the floor of Congress. A South Carolina congressman bludgeoned a Massachusetts senator to unconsciousness with a heavy cane. Representatives and senators came to congressional sessions armed with weapons as well as with violent words.

The nation proved capable of absorbing the large influx of immigrants despite the tensions and turmoil of the mid-1850s. It might also have been able to absorb the huge territorial expansion of the late 1840s had not the slavery issue been reopened in an earlier territorial acquisition, the Louisiana Purchase, by the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854. This legislation, followed by the Dred Scott decision in 1857, seemed to authorize the unlimited expansion of slavery. Within two years of its founding in 1854, however, the Republican Party emerged as the largest party in the North on a platform of preventing all future expansion of slavery. By 1860, the United States had reached a fateful crossroads. As Lincoln had said, it could not endure permanently half-slave and half-free. The presidential election of 1860 would decide which road America would take into the future.

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14-8 Chapter Review

14-8a Review

1. Why did the Whig Party die, and why did the Republican Party emerge as the new majority party in the North?
2. What were the origins of nativism? How did this movement relate to the slavery issue?
3. How was violence in Kansas related to the issue of slavery?
4. What role did the issue of slavery play in the election of 1856?
5. How did economic developments in the 1840s and 1850s widen the breach between North and South?

6. What were the major issues of the Lincoln-Douglas debates?

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Chapter Review

14-8b Critical Thinking

1. Why did the northern and southern economic systems develop in such different directions? Why did the effort by some southerners to escape from their “colonial” economic relationship fail?
2. One of the main points of contention in the Lincoln-Douglas debates was the question whether the country could continue to endure half-slave and half-free. Why did Lincoln challenge Douglas’s position that because the nation had so endured for 70 years, there was no reason why it could not continue to do so?

Chapter 14: The Gathering Tempest, 1853–1860: 14-8c Identifications
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Chapter Review

14-8c Identifications

Review your understanding of the following key terms, people, and events for this chapter.

- **Dred Scott** (Missouri slave who sued for freedom on grounds of prolonged residence in a free state and free territory; in 1857, the Supreme Court found against his case, declaring the Missouri Compromise unconstitutional.)
- **Harpers Ferry** (Site of John Brown’s 1859 raid on a U.S. armory and arsenal for the manufacture and storage of military rifles.)
- **John Brown** (Prominent abolitionist who fought for the antislavery cause in Kansas (1856) and led a raid to seize the Harpers Ferry arsenal in 1859.)

- **Kansas-Nebraska Act** (Law enacted in 1854 to organize the new territories of Kansas and Nebraska that effectively repealed the provision of the 1820 Missouri Compromise by leaving the question of slavery to the territories' settlers.)
- **Abraham Lincoln** (Illinois Whig who became the Republican Party's first successful presidential candidate in 1860 and who led the Union during the Civil War.)
- **nativism** (Hostility of native-born Americans toward immigrants.)
- **Know-Nothings** (Adherents of nativist organizations and of the American party who wanted to restrict the political rights of immigrants.)
- **"border ruffians"** (Term used to describe proslavery Missourians who streamed into Kansas in 1854, determined to vote as many times as necessary to install a proslavery government there.)
- **Black Republicans** (Label coined by the Democratic Party to attack the Republican Party as believers in racial equality. The Democrats used this fear to convince many whites to remain loyal to them.)
- **interchangeable parts** (Industrial technique using machine tools to cut and shape a large number of similar parts that can be fitted together with other parts to make an entire item such as a gun.)
- **colonial economy** (Economy based on the export of agricultural products and the import of manufactured goods; sometimes used to describe the dependence of the South on the North.)
- **free-labor ideology** (Belief that all work in a free society is honorable and that manual labor is degraded when it is equated with slavery or bondage.)
- **Lincoln-Douglas debates** (Series of seven debates between Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas in their contest for election to the U.S. Senate in 1858.)
- **Jefferson Davis** (Mississippi planter and prominent leader of the Southern Democrats in the 1850s, who later served as president of the Confederacy.)

Chapter 14: The Gathering Tempest, 1853–1860: 14-8d Suggested Readings

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Chapter Review

14-8d Suggested Readings

For an overview of the 1850s, see **James M. McPherson**, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (1988). The Kansas-Nebraska Act and its political consequences are treated in

Gerald W. Wolff, *The Kansas-Nebraska Bill: Party, Section, and the Coming of the Civil War* (1977). The conflict in Kansas is treated in **Nicole Etcheson, *Bleeding Kansas: Contested Liberty in the Civil War Era*** (2004). For the crosscutting issue of nativism and the Know-Nothings, see **William E. Gienapp, *The Origins of the Republican Party, 1852–1856*** (1987), and **Tyler Anbinder, *Nativism and Politics: The Know Nothing Party in the Northern United States*** (1992). Two excellent studies of the role of Abraham Lincoln in the rise of the Republican Party are **Don E. Fehrenbacher, *Prelude to Greatness: Lincoln in the 1850s*** (1962), and **Kenneth Winkle, *The Young Eagle: The Rise of Abraham Lincoln*** (2003). The southern response to the growth of antislavery political sentiment in the North is the theme of **William J. Cooper, Jr., *The South and the Politics of Slavery 1828–1856*** (1978).

The year 1857 witnessed a convergence of many crucial events; for a stimulating book that pulls together the threads of that year of crisis, see **Kenneth M. Stampp, *America in 1857: A Nation on the Brink*** (1990). For economic developments during the era, an older classic is still the best introduction: **George Rogers Taylor, *The Transportation Revolution, 1815–1860*** (1951). An important dimension of the southern economy is elucidated in **Fred Bateman and Thomas Weiss, *A Deplorable Scarcity: The Failure of Industrialization in the Slave Economy*** (1981). The political impact of the Panic of 1857 is the subject of **James L. Huston, *The Panic of 1857 and the Coming of the Civil War*** (1987). Still the best study of the Republican free-labor ideology is **Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party before the Civil War*** (2nd ed., 1995). For southern yeoman farmers, a good study is **Stephanie McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations, and the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country*** (1995). The best single study of the Dred Scott case is **Don E. Fehrenbacher, *The Dred Scott Case: Its Significance in American Law and Politics*** (1978), which was published in an abridged version with the title ***Slavery, Law, and Politics: The Dred Scott Case in Historical Perspective*** (1981). A thought-provoking biography of John Brown is **David S. Reynolds, *John Brown: Abolitionist*** (2005).