

CHAPTER FIFTEEN: THE COMING CRISIS, THE 1850s

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CONCLUSION

KEY TOPICS

- *The failure of efforts by the Whigs and the Democrats to find a lasting political compromise on the issue of slavery
- *The end of the Second American Party System and the rise of the Republican Party
- *The secession of the southern states following the Republican Party victory in the election of 1860

AMERICAN COMMUNITIES: ILLINOIS COMMUNITIES DEBATE SLAVERY Illinois voters gathered in 1858 to hear Stephen A. Douglas and Abraham Lincoln debate slavery and the future of the Union. Douglas accused Lincoln of favoring social equality of whites and blacks. Lincoln denied this and accused Douglas of supporting policies that would spread slavery everywhere. The debates attracted tremendous interest. Although Douglas won the election, the debates established both Lincoln and the Republican Party as contenders for national power. The

vignette demonstrates that the slavery question had divided American communities, but that Americans strongly valued their democratic institutions.

AMERICA IN 1850 America had grown rapidly in the first half of the nineteenth century. It was much larger in terms of area, population, and number of states. The nation had experienced great growth of wealth, industry, and urbanization. Equally important, southern economic influence was waning. An American Renaissance produced a wide range of writers who were focusing on social criticism. Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson experimented with poetic form. Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville wrote in allegorical form about the darker side of human nature. Frederick Douglass's autobiography and Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* condemned slavery in no uncertain terms. Slavery had divided Americans before, but prior to the 1840s Americans had compromised on the issue. The national party system had forced both Whigs and Democrats to forge inter-sectional coalitions. By 1848 sectional interests were eroding these coalitions. Sectional divisions in religious and other organizations had already begun to divide the country.

John C. Calhoun had laid out the states' rights defense by claiming that the territories were the common property of each of the states and Congress could not discriminate against slaveowners. Northerners grew increasingly concerned over what they saw as a Southern conspiracy to control the government: the "slave power." Both sides were committed to expansion, but each viewed manifest destiny in its own terms. Both sides also shared a commitment to basic rights and liberties but saw the other as infringing on them. Two communities with two perspectives had emerged. Northerners viewed their region as a dynamic society that offered opportunity to the common man, in contrast to the stagnant slaveowning aristocracy of the South. Southerners viewed their section as promoting equality for whites by keeping blacks in a perpetual state of bondage. The chances for national reconciliation were slim.

THE COMPROMISE OF 1850 The California gold rush forced the issue of the status of slavery in the new territories. Other conflicts had been developing as well. Henry Clay offered a compromise package. The death of President Taylor brought to power Millard Fillmore who was more amenable to compromise. Illinois Senator Stephen Douglas engineered the final compromise, which balanced sectional interests. California came in as a free state but other southwest territories were to be settled by popular sovereignty. A stronger fugitive slave law was enacted while the slave trade was outlawed in Washington, D.C. Lastly, the Texas-New Mexico border dispute was settled. No side was happy with the outcome, but it averted a crisis, for the time being.

The issue of runaway slaves further divided the nation. The Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 put the full force of the federal government behind slave catchers. States had previously passed acts against aiding slave catchers. Mobs of northerners tried to prevent the law from being carried out, but were rarely successful. Black fugitives described their experiences as slaves, helping to raise Northerners' consciousness. The growing polarization of opinion strained the party system. The Democrats won in the election of 1852 by avoiding sectional issues. The new President Franklin Pierce supported independent efforts to seize territory by "filibusters" like William Walker and endorsed efforts to buy Cuba.

THE CRISIS OF THE NATIONAL PARTY SYSTEM To further his presidential ambitions and locate the proposed transcontinental railroad in the North, in 1854 Stephen Douglas pushed through a bill to open Kansas territory. To win southern support, Douglas's bill declared that the territory would be organized on the principle of popular sovereignty, even though slavery in that territory had been banned under the Missouri Compromise. The Kansas-Nebraska Act passed Congress, but destroyed the Whig Party and nearly destroyed the northern wing of the Democratic Party. It also negated treaties with Indians removed to Kansas in the 1830s. The territory became a battleground of sectional politics. On election day, pro-slavery Missourians crossed over the border and took control of the territorial legislature. Northerners quickly responded by founding free-soil communities. By the summer of 1856 open warfare erupted.

Concurrent with sectional pressures, came an outburst of anti-immigrant feeling. Reformers were appalled by the influx of Irish into American cities. Former Whigs formed the "Know Nothing" Party to try to prevent what they saw as a takeover by the immigrants. But the Know-Nothings succumbed to sectional divisions. The Republican Party was founded, linking northern who linked nativists and former Whigs. In 1856, Democrats nominated James Buchanan as a compromise candidate. Southern Know-Nothings ran Millard Fillmore; Northern Republicans ran John C. Fremont who decisively defeated Buchanan in the North. Buchanan carried nearly the entire South and won. The election signaled the rise of the Republican Party and showed northerners were more concerned about slavery than immigration.

THE DIFFERENCES DEEPEN Conflict over Kansas exploded in Congress when Rep. Preston Brooks of South Carolina caned Senator Charles Sumner over his remarks on the Kansas situation. The Dred Scott decision worsened sectional divisions. The Supreme Court ruled that Congress could not ban slavery in the territories and that Dred Scott's long-term residence in free territory did not make him free. While southerners applauded the decision, northerners denounced it.

Conflict continued in Kansas as free-soilers organized their own territorial government and boycotted the proslavery government's elections for a constitutional convention. The proslavery "Lecompton constitution" was submitted to Congress. Stephen Douglas fought against it, alienating his southern supporters. Kansans rejected the constitution and finally came into the Union as a free state. The defeat of Lecompton came as Congress continued to divide along sectional lines. Adding to the conflict was a financial panic and sharp depression in 1857-58. Sectional tensions intensified when John Brown led an unsuccessful effort to instigate a slave revolt. Brown was hanged but Southern opinion was shocked by Northerners' attempts to make Brown a martyr and Northern support for slave revolts.

THE SOUTH SECEDES In the election of 1860, four candidates ran for president. The Democrats split over a proposed slave code for the territories. Stephen Douglas won the nomination but Southerners nominated John C. Breckinridge. Southern and border state Whigs created the Constitutional Union Party and nominated John Bell. Republicans nominated Abraham Lincoln, a moderate. Breckinridge and Lincoln represented the extreme positions on slavery in the territories. Breckinridge favored the institution and Lincoln opposed it. Douglas and Bell tried to find a middle ground. Douglas favored popular sovereignty, while Bell tried to

avoid the issue. Lincoln won the election with 38 percent of the vote by virtually sweeping the North.

Southerners responded by initiating secession movements. South Carolina was first, but the rest of the Deep South soon passed secession ordinances. The Upper South remained in the Union, however. Various Northerners tried to find some compromise that would satisfy all sides. None could be found. Some Northerners were willing to allow the South to go in peace, but Lincoln believed that the idea of free government would be threatened if the South were permitted to leave. In the meantime Southerners established the Confederate States of America and chose Jefferson Davis, a moderate, as its president. Davis tried to portray secession as a legal, peaceful step. Lincoln saw things differently, and resolved to keep the nation together.

CONCLUSION Though experiencing substantial growth and development, the United States in the 1850s was divided by slavery. National unity declined as sectionalism grew.

Lecture Suggestions

1. Focus on the theme of how the party system unraveled as a result of sectional pressures. Make the connection with Chapter Ten to show how the party system had been created in the 1820s and 1830s in part to contain sectional conflict. As the party system fell apart new sectional parties emerged whose very existence threatened the long-term future of the Union. The party system presupposed that politicians would divide along a Democratic-Whig axis. Look at events like the Kansas-Nebraska Act which show how politics was increasingly dividing along a North-South axis.
2. Examine the way that public opinion became polarized. Make the connection with the material on American writers with the discussion of Transcendentalism in Chapters Ten and Twelve. Show how propagandists of both sides painted increasingly dismal pictures of the other side. Show how events such as Bleeding Kansas served to push public opinion in to increasingly harsh positions.
3. Make the point that by the end of 1856 the Democratic Party was the only national institution with any significant following in both sections. The churches had divided along North/South lines. The reform societies, literary magazines, etc. had done the same. The Whig Party was dead and a purely sectional Republican Party had taken its place. Only the Democrats were left. Then show how events following the election split the Democratic Party. Specifically, point to the battle over the Lecompton constitution and the Dred Scott decision. The election of 1860 ratified the political reality of a national split.

Discussion Questions

1. What was wrong with the Compromise of 1850? Why didn't it keep the two sides cooperating?

2. Why was the Kansas-Nebraska Act so devastating to the party system? Why couldn't party leaders find a way of coming up with a long-term compromise?
3. Why was the Dred Scott decision seen as such an outrage by Northerners? What did they find most objectionable?
4. Why were the Lincoln-Douglas debates so important as a way of gauging Northern opinion?
5. What was the impact of John Brown's raid? Is it possible that in the long run he helped make the freedom of slaves a reality by helping to start the Civil War?
6. Why did Lincoln win the election of 1860?

Out of Class Activity

The election of 1860 is unusual in that it had four candidates. Students could be assigned to each candidate and they could report to the class what each candidate advocated. A mock debate might be held to further illuminate the positions. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.'s *History of American Presidential Elections, 1789-1968* (Chelsea House, 1971) has the relevant material.

If You're Going to Read One Book on the Subject

David Potter's *The Impending Crisis* (Harper, 1976) is my bible on the 1850s. It is packed with tremendous insight and commentary. A shorter treatment is Bruce Levine's *Half Slave and Half Free* (Hill and Wang, 1992).

Audio Visual Aids

"Roots of Resistance—A Story of the Underground Railroad" From PBS "The American Experience" series. Recounts the story of black Americans' secret railroad to freedom through narratives of escaped slaves. (Color, 60 minutes, 1989)

"The Great Debate: Lincoln Versus Douglas" Recreates the 1858 debates. (Color, 30 minutes, 1965)

"The Civil War" (1st Segment) Not too many history buffs missed Ken Burns's brilliant multi-part history of the Civil War era. The first episode covers the 1850s. Uses still photos, narration, and dramatic readings of contemporary documents. (Mainly B&W, 60 minutes, 1991)