

## National Parties in Crisis

The potency of the slavery controversy increased political instability, as shown in the weakening of the two major parties—the Democrats and the Whigs—and in a disastrous application of popular sovereignty in the territory of Kansas.

### The Election of 1852

Signs of trouble for the Whig party were apparent in the 1852 election for president. The Whigs nominated another military hero of the Mexican War, General Winfield Scott. Attempting to ignore the slavery issue, the Whig campaign concentrated on the party's innocuous plans for improving roads and harbors. But Scott quickly discovered that sectional issues could not be held in check. The antislavery and Southern factions of the party fell to quarreling, and the party was on the verge of splitting apart.

The Democrats nominated a safe compromise candidate, Franklin Pierce of New Hampshire. Though a Northerner, Pierce was acceptable to Southern Democrats because he supported the Fugitive Slave Law. In the electoral college vote, Pierce and the Democrats won all but four states in a sweep that suggested the days of the Whig party were numbered.

### The Kansas-Nebraska Act (1854)

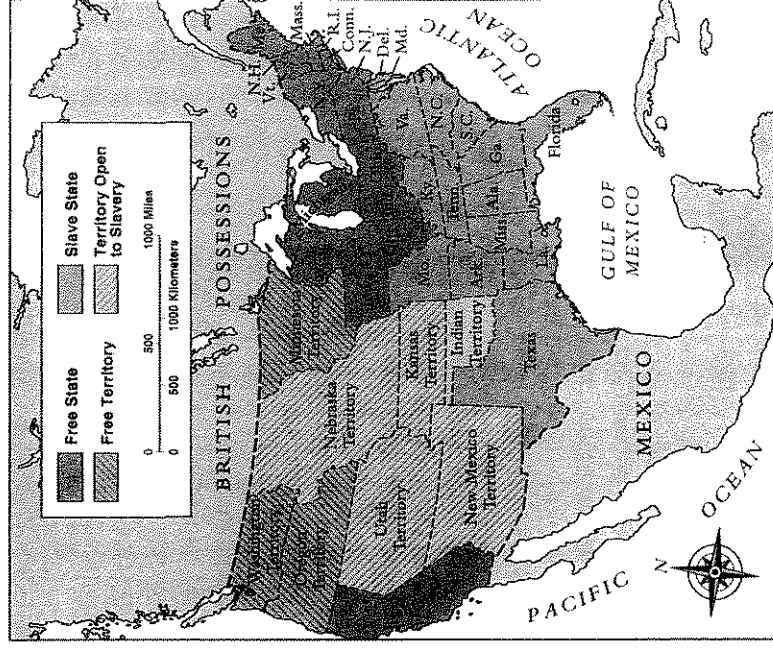
With the Democrats firmly in control of national policy both in the White House and in Congress, a new law was passed that was to have disastrous consequences. Senator Stephen A. Douglas of Illinois devised a plan for building a railroad and promoting western settlement (while at the same time increasing the value of his own real estate holdings in Chicago). Douglas needed to win Southern approval for his plan to build a transcontinental railroad through the central United States, with a major terminus in Chicago. (Southern Democrats preferred a more southerly route for the railroad.) To obtain Southern approval for his railroad route, Douglas introduced a bill to divide the Nebraska Territory into two parts, the Kansas Territory and Nebraska Territory, and allow settlers in each territory to decide whether to allow slavery or not. Since these territories were located *north* of the 36°30' line, Douglas's bill gave Southern slave owners an opportunity to expand slavery that previously had been closed to them by the Missouri Compromise of 1820. Northern Democrats condemned the bill as a surrender to the "slave power."

After three months of bitter debate, both houses of Congress passed Douglas's bill as the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, and President Pierce signed it into law.

### Extremists and Violence

The Kansas-Nebraska Act, in effect, repealed the Missouri Compromise that had kept a lid on regional tensions for more than three decades. After 1854, the conflicts between antislavery and proslavery forces exploded, both in Kansas and on the floor of the United States Senate.

THE UNITED STATES AFTER  
THE KANSAS-NEBRASKA ACT OF 1854



### "Bleeding Kansas"

Stephen Douglas, the sponsor of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, expected the slavery issue in the territory to be settled peacefully by the antislavery farmers from the Midwest who migrated to Kansas. These settlers did in fact constitute a majority of the population. But slaveholders from the neighboring state of Missouri also set up homesteads in Kansas chiefly as a means of winning control of the territory for the South. Northern abolitionists and Free-Soilers responded by organizing the New England Emigrant Aid Company (1855), which paid for the transportation of antislavery settlers to Kansas. Fighting soon broke out between the proslavery and the antislavery groups, and the territory became known as "bleeding Kansas."

Proslavery Missourians, mockingly called "border ruffians" by their enemies, crossed the border to create a proslavery legislature in Leecompton, Kansas. Antislavery settlers refused to recognize this government and created their own legislature in Topeka. In 1856, proslavery forces attacked the free-soil town of Lawrence, killing two and destroying homes and businesses. Two days later, John Brown, a stern abolitionist who was born in Connecticut and living in New York, retaliated. He and his sons attacked a proslavery farm settlement at Pottawatomie Creek, killing five settlers.

In Washington, the Pierce administration kept aloof from the turmoil in Kansas. It did nothing to keep order in the territory and failed to support honest elections there. As “bleeding Kansas” became bloodier, the Democratic party became ever more divided between its Northern and Southern factions.

**Caning of Senator Sumner** The violence in Kansas spilled over into the halls of the U.S. Congress. In 1856, Massachusetts Senator Charles Sumner verbally attacked the Democratic administration in a vitriolic speech, “The Crime Against Kansas.” His intemperate remarks included personal charges against South Carolina Senator Andrew Butler. Butler’s nephew, Congressman Preston Brooks, defended his absent uncle’s honor by walking into the Senate chamber and beating Sumner over the head with a cane. (Brooks explained that dueling was too good for Sumner, but a cane was fit for a dog.) Sumner never fully recovered from the attack.

Brooks’ action outraged the North, and the House voted to censure him. Southerners, however, applauded Brooks’ deed and sent him numerous canes to replace the one he broke beating Sumner. The Sumner-Brooks incident was another sign of growing passions on both sides.

### **New Parties**

The increasing tensions over slavery divided Northern and Southern Democrats, and it completely broke apart the Whig party. In hindsight, it is clear that the breakup of truly national political parties in the mid-1850s paralleled the breakup of the Union. The new parties came into being at this time—one temporary, the other permanent. Both played a role in bringing about the demise of a major national party, the Whigs.

**Know-Nothing Party** In addition to sectional divisions between North and South, there was also in the mid-1850s growing ethnic tension in the North between native-born Protestant Americans and immigrant Germans and Irish Catholics. Nativist hostility to these newcomers led to the formation of the American party—or the Know-Nothing party, as it was more commonly known (because party members commonly responded “I know nothing” to political questions). The Know-Nothings drew support away from the Whigs at a time when that party was reeling from its defeat in the 1852 election. Their one core issue was opposition to Catholics and immigrants who, in the 1840s and 1850s, were entering Northern cities in large numbers.

Although the Know-Nothings won a few local and state elections in the mid-1850s and helped to weaken the Whigs, they quickly lost influence, as sectional issues again became paramount.

**Birth of the Republican Party** The Republican party was founded in Wisconsin in 1854 as a direct reaction to the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act. Composed of a coalition of Free-Soilers and antislavery Whigs and Democrats, its overriding purpose was to oppose the spread of slavery in the territories—not to end slavery itself. Its first platform of 1854 called for the repeal of both the Kansas-Nebraska Act and the Fugitive Slave Law. As violence increased in Kansas, more and more people, including some abolitionists, joined the

Republican party, and it was soon the second largest party in the country. But because it remained in these years strictly a Northern or sectional party, its success alienated and threatened the South.

### **The Election of 1856**

The Republicans’ first test of strength came in the presidential election of 1856. Their nominee for president was a senator from California, the young explorer and “Pathfinder,” John C. Frémont. The Republican platform called for no expansion of slavery, free homesteads, and a probusiness protective tariff. The Know-Nothings also competed strongly in this election, with their candidate, former President Millard Fillmore, winning 20 percent of the popular vote.

As the one major national party, the Democrats expected to win. They nominated James Buchanan of Pennsylvania, rejecting both President Pierce and Stephen Douglas because they were too closely identified with the controversial Kansas-Nebraska Act. As expected, the Democratic ticket won a majority of both the popular and electoral vote. But the Republicans made a remarkably strong showing for a sectional party. In the electoral college, Frémont carried 11 of the 16 free states. People could predict that the antislavery Republicans might soon win the White House without a single vote from the South.

The election of 1856 foreshadowed the emergence of a powerful political party that would win all but four presidential elections between 1860 and 1932.

### **Constitutional Issues**

Both the Democrats’ position of popular sovereignty and the Republicans’ stand against the expansion of slavery received serious blows during the Buchanan administration (1857–1861). Republicans attacked Buchanan as a weak president.

### **Lecompton Constitution**

One of Buchanan’s first challenges as president in 1857 was to decide whether to accept or reject a proslavery state constitution for Kansas submitted by the Southern legislature at Lecompton. Buchanan knew that the Lecompton constitution, as it was called, did not have the support of the majority of settlers. Even so, he asked Congress to accept the document and admit Kansas as a slave state. Congress did not do so, because many Democrats, including Stephen Douglas, joined with the Republicans in rejecting the Lecompton constitution. The next year, 1858, the proslavery document was overwhelmingly rejected by Kansas settlers, most of whom were antislavery Republicans.

### **Dred Scott v. Sandford (1857)**

Congressional folly and presidential ineptitude contributed to the sectional crisis of the 1850s. Then the Supreme Court worsened the crisis when it infuriated many Northerners with a controversial proslavery decision in the case of a slave named Dred Scott. Scott had been held in slavery in Missouri and then taken to the free territory of Wisconsin where he lived for two years before

returning to Missouri. Arguing that his residence on free soil made him a free citizen, Scott sued for his freedom in Missouri in 1846. The case worked its way through the court system. It finally reached the Supreme Court, which rendered its decision in March 1857, only two days after Buchanan was sworn in as president.

Presiding over the Court was Chief Justice Roger Taney, a Southern Democrat. A majority of the Court decided against Scott and gave these reasons:

- Dred Scott had no right to sue in a federal court because the Framers of the Constitution did not intend African Americans to be U.S. citizens.
- Congress did not have the power to deprive any person of property without due process of law; if slaves were a form of property, then Congress could not exclude slavery from any federal territory.
- The Missouri Compromise was unconstitutional because it excluded slavery from Wisconsin and other Northern territories.

The Court's ruling delighted Southern Democrats and infuriated Northern Republicans. In effect, the Supreme Court declared that all parts of the western territories were open to slavery. Republicans denounced the Dred Scott decision as "the greatest crime in the annals of the republic." Because of the timing of the decision, right after Buchanan's inauguration, many Northerners suspected that the Democratic president and the Democratic majority on the Supreme Court, including Taney, had secretly planned the Dred Scott decision, hoping that it would settle the slavery question once and for all. The decision increased Northerners' suspicions of a slave power conspiracy and induced thousands of former Democrats to vote Republican.

Northern Democrats such as Senator Douglas were left with the almost impossible task of supporting popular sovereignty without repudiating the Dred Scott decision. Douglas's hopes for a sectional compromise and his ambitions for the presidency were both in jeopardy.

### QUESTIONS

1. Explain why Senator Stephen Douglas sought passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854. What did the law do?
2. Explain THREE important results of the Kansas-Nebraska Act. What impact did the law have on political parties?
3. Explain the Supreme Court's decision in the Dred Scott v. Sandford case. How did the decision impact the status of slavery in the western territories?