

## “The Impending Crisis” – Causes of the Civil War

### Key Terms

1. **Manifest Destiny** – Nineteenth-century belief that the United States was destined by Providence to spread democratic institutions and liberty from the Atlantic to the Pacific. The ideology of manifest destiny helped justify Polk’s expansionist program.
2. **Wilmot Proviso** – The 1846 proposal by Representative David Wilmot of Pennsylvania to ban slavery in territory acquired from the Mexican War. The proviso triggered a divisive and increasingly ominous dispute between the North and the South. It passed twice in the House but was defeated in the Senate.
3. **Slave Power** – Antebellum term referring to the disproportionate power that Northerners believed wealthy slaveholders wielded over national political decisions.
4. **Popular Sovereignty** – Principle advocated by Stephen A. Douglas that the settlers of a given territory have the sole right to decide whether slavery will be permitted there. Popular sovereignty led to a divisive debate over the expansion of slavery into the western territories. The first great test of popular sovereignty occurred in Kansas following passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which led to “bleeding Kansas” and increased sectionalism.

### Territorial Expansion, 1836-1850

#### I. **Texas** –

- a. Texas belonged first to Spain and then, after 1821, to Mexico.
  - i. The Mexican government opened Texas to settlers from the United States. The Anglo-Americans received generous land grants at low prices. In exchange they agreed to become Roman Catholics and citizens of Mexico.
  - ii. By 1830, there were about 30,000 people in Texas, 90% of whom were Anglo-Americans. However, few converted to Catholicism and many owned slaves.
- b. The rapid growth of the Anglo-American population in Texas alarmed Mexican officials. In 1830, the Mexican government announced that slaves could no longer be brought into any part of Mexico and that Americans could no longer settle in Texas.
  - i. Faced with these restrictions, the Texans rebelled and declared their independence on March 2, 1836.
  - ii. The **Texas Revolution** lasted less than two months. After suffering defeats at the Alamo and Goliad, Texan forces, led by Sam Houston, crushed the Mexican army at the Battle of San Jacinto on April 21, 1836.
- c. **The Annexation Issue** –
  - i. Most Texans wanted to join the United States. However, antislavery Whigs opposed admitting another slave state into the Union. Other opponents warned that annexing Texas would provoke a war with Mexico
  - ii. President Jackson feared that a prolonged debate over the admission of a slave state would ignite a divisive campaign issue that could cost his chosen successor Martin Van Buren the presidency. As a result, Jackson postponed **annexation** and Texas remained an independent "**Lone Star Republic**."

## II. **President Polk** and Territorial Expansion

### a. **Manifest Destiny** –

- i. During the 1820s many Americans thought the boundaries of the United States would not extend beyond the Rocky Mountains.
  1. However, the quest for land, opportunity, and adventure excited a new generation eager to explore and settle the western frontier.
    - a. By 1860, over 4 million people lived west of the Mississippi River.
- ii. John L. O'Sullivan, the editor of the *Democratic Review*, gave the nation's expansionist spirit a name when he coined the term "Manifest Destiny".
  1. O'Sullivan declared that America's right to territorial expansion lay in "our manifest destiny to occupy and possess the whole of the Continent which providence has given us."
  2. Illinois Representative John Wentworth expressed this optimistic sense of America's special destiny when he told Congress that the original States had a divinely sanctioned mission to become the "great center from which civilization, religion, and liberty should radiate and radiate until the whole continent shall bask in their blessings."

### b. Polk's platform –

- i. The issue of territorial expansion dominated the 1844 presidential election. As the campaign began, Texas still remained independent, California still belonged to Mexico, and America and Great Britain still shared the **Oregon Territory**.
- ii. The Democratic presidential nominee James K. Polk shared Andrew Jackson's belief that America was chosen by Providence to be "the guardians of freedom".
  1. Polk narrowly defeated the Whig candidate Henry Clay on a platform promising to turn the idea of Manifest Destiny into a geographical reality.

### c. **Texas and Oregon Annexations** –

- i. Shortly after Polk's election, Congress approved a resolution annexing Texas as the nation's 28th state. President Tyler signed the resolution on March 1, 1845, three days before Polk took office.
- ii. Acquiring Oregon proved to be more difficult than annexing Texas. Both the United States and Great Britain claimed the territory. The Democratic campaign slogan "**Fifty-four forty or fight**" meant that the United States would go to war with Britain in order to obtain the entire Oregon territory.
  1. Despite his belligerent campaign slogan, Polk avoided a conflict by accepting a proposal dividing Oregon at the 49<sup>th</sup> parallel.

## III. **The Mexican War** –

### a. The Outbreak of War –

- i. The annexation of Texas outraged Mexico. Polk exacerbated tensions by supporting Texas's claim to the Rio Grande River as its southwestern boundary. The Mexican government denied this claim, insisting that the Texas territory extended no further south than the Nueces River.
- ii. On April 25, 1846, Mexican cavalry ambushed a U.S. unit in the disputed region between the Rio Grande and the Nueces River, killing 11 soldiers.

1. Polk promptly demanded that Congress declare war on Mexico, stating that Mexico had "invaded our territory and shed American blood on American soil." Congress agreed and approved a declaration of war on May 13, 1846.
- b. **Opposition to the War** –
- i. The Mexican War provoked opposition from a small but highly visible group of influential critics. Whigs such as John Quincy Adams and New England abolitionists such as William Lloyd Garrison both denounced the war as an act of aggression designed to help the South expand slavery into new territories.
  - ii. In Congress an obscure Illinois representative named **Abraham Lincoln** challenged Polk to identify the exact spot on American soil where American blood had been shed. Like other Whigs, Lincoln believed that the skirmish was a pretext for a war to claim new lands.
  - iii. **Civil disobedience** –
    1. **Henry David Thoreau** staged the best-known act of protest against the Mexican War. As a gesture of opposition, the Transcendentalist essayist spent a night in jail for refusing to pay a state poll tax.
      - a. Thoreau later wrote the classic essay "Civil Disobedience" urging passive resistance to laws that required a citizen "to be an agent of injustice".
      - b. Thoreau's essay became a source of inspiration for Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s philosophy of nonviolent protest.
- c. **Conquest of Mexico** –
- i. American forces led by Generals Zachary Taylor and Winfield Scott successfully conquered Mexico. Taylor became a national hero when he defeated a much larger Mexican army at the Battle of Buena Vista. Scott won public acclaim when his forces captured Mexico City.
  - ii. While American forces invaded Mexico, Colonel Stephen W. Kearny captured Santa Fe, New Mexico, and then helped secure California.
- d. **Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo** –
- i. Mexico ceded New Mexico and California to the United States while also accepting the Rio Grande as the Texas border. New Mexico included what is now Arizona, Nevada, Utah, and parts of Colorado and Wyoming.
  - ii. The United States acquired more than 500,000 square miles of new territory while Mexico lost about one-third of its territory.
  - iii. The later Gadsden Purchase was not part of the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo. The purchase included land in the southern portion of the New Mexico Territory intended to facilitate the construction of a transcontinental railroad from Houston, Texas, to Los Angeles, California.
- e. **Sectionalism** –
- i. The Mexican War sparked a brief moment of triumph. The war fulfilled the goal of Manifest Destiny by transforming America into a transcontinental republic. Instead of giving rise to a new era of harmony, however, the postwar spirit of nationalism quickly faded.
  - ii. The Mexican War marked a turning point in American history because it ignited an increasingly bitter dispute over the extension of slavery into the new western territories. Sectionalism soon threatened to disrupt the fragile balance of power between the North

and the South.

#### IV. **The Wilmot Proviso** –

- a. Since the passage of the Missouri Compromise of 1820, both the Whigs and the Democrats attempted to suppress divisive questions about the status of slavery in the western territories.
- b. On August 8, 1846, David Wilmot, a freshman Democrat from Pennsylvania, attached an amendment, or proviso, to a military appropriations bill. In language deliberately borrowed from the Northwest Ordinance, the proviso stated "neither slavery nor involuntary servitude shall ever exist" in any territory gained from Mexico.
  - i. Wilmot defended his proviso as a necessary means of insuring the "rights of white freemen" to live and work in the new territories without facing the unfair burden of competing with slave labor. He argued that slavery degraded free labor. Wilmot and his supporters believed that "**free soil**" would guarantee liberty, free competition, social mobility and thus a worker's "right to rise."
  - ii. Supported in the North and opposed in the South, the Wilmot Proviso passed the House twice, but was defeated in the Senate.
- c. **Consequences** –
  - i. The votes on the Wilmot Proviso did not divide along party lines between Whigs and Democrats. Instead, they occurred between representatives from the North and the South. This rift exposed an ominous development that would soon destroy the Second Party System.
  - ii. Apprehensive Southern leaders warned that the Wilmot Proviso marked the beginning of a long-postponed attack on slavery. Determined to defend their "peculiar institution," they suppressed dissent in the South and denounced all attempts to resist the expansion of slavery.
  - iii. The South's response to the Wilmot Proviso deepened Northern fears of the so-called **Slave Power**. Abolitionists had long warned that a slaveholding oligarchy intended to dominate the federal government. The defeat of the Wilmot Proviso gave these warnings greater credibility.
  - iv. The debate over the Wilmot Proviso raised issues about slavery, free labor, political power, and the nature of the Constitution that could not be evaded. Despite attempts to resolve them, these issues widened and eventually eroded the bonds holding the Union together.

#### The Road to Disunion, 1850-1860

##### I. **Compromise of 1850** –

- a. **Context – California Gold Rush**
  - i. By the end of 1849, over 80,000 prospectors swarmed into California. The new Californians promptly drew up a constitution asking Congress to admit them into the Union as a free state.
- b. **Renewed Debates over Slavery** –
  - i. California's petition for statehood renewed the still unresolved debate over the spread of slavery into the territories won in the Mexican War.

- ii. Southern leaders feared the North's growing political dominance. Augmented by a surging tide of immigrants from Ireland and Germany, Northern states held a commanding majority in the House of Representatives. However, the equal division of 15 slave states and 15 free states enabled the South to maintain a veto power in the Senate.
- iii. Reaching an agreement with the South proved to be difficult. Southern senators repeatedly warned that any law threatening slavery would lead to secession.
  - 1. Sensing that "our country is in danger", Henry Clay lived up to his reputation as the "Great Compromiser" by proposing a series of measures that passed the Senate after months of intense bargaining.
- c. Clay's Compromise Proposals –
  - i. Clay grouped six proposals into three pairs. Each pair offered one concession to the North and one to the South.
  - ii. The first pair admitted California as a free state while also calling for the establishment of territorial governments in the rest of the Mexican Cession "without the adoption of any restriction or condition on the subject of slavery."
    - 1. This statement conciliated the South by reaffirming the permanence of slavery and rejecting the validity of the Wilmot Proviso.
  - iii. The second pair settled a heated boundary dispute between Texas and New Mexico. Congress assigned the disputed territory to New Mexico but compensated Texas by paying off a \$10 million debt it had incurred while an independent republic.
  - iv. The third pair abolished the slave trade but not slavery in the District of Columbia. At the same time, Congress recognized Southern complaints by enacting a strict new **Fugitive Slave Law**.
- d. Settlement of the Compromise of 1850
  - i. In a message to Congress in December 1850, President Fillmore described the Compromise of 1850 as "a final settlement." Most Americans agreed, believing the compromise would restore sectional harmony.
  - ii. With the benefit of hindsight, we know that sectional forces would soon gather strength and ultimately lead to disunion. But the Compromise of 1850 should not be dismissed as unimportant.
    - 1. It bought a decade of delay that enabled the North to gain the industrial strength, population growth, and the leadership it would need to successfully face the challenge of secession.

## II. **Fugitive Slave Act** –

- a. The Compromise of 1850 initially produced unexpected benefits for the South. Although California entered the Union as a free state, it selected conservative Senators who voted with the South on most issues. Meanwhile, the territorial legislatures in Utah and New Mexico legalized slavery.
- b. About 1,000 slaves escaped to freedom each year. Southern leaders viewed enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Act as a litmus test of the North's good faith in enforcing the Compromise of 1850.
- c. Public opposition –
  - i. The Fugitive Slave Act intensified antislavery sentiment because it required Northerners to enforce slavery. In Boston, thousands of outraged abolitionists vainly attempted to prevent federal marshals from returning a fugitive slave to his master in Virginia.

- ii. Demonstrations like the one in Boston dramatized public resistance to enforcing the Fugitive Slave Act.
- iii. At the same time, a clandestine network of conductors and safe houses known as the **Underground Railroad** helped escaped slaves flee to the North.
  - 1. Renowned as "The Moses of Her People," **Harriet Tubman** led more than 300 enslaved people to freedom.
- d. ***Uncle Tom's Cabin*** –
  - i. The Fugitive Slave Act appalled Harriet Beecher Stowe. A dedicated abolitionist, Stowe wrote *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to help her readers understand the morally intolerable impact of slavery upon family life.
  - ii. First published in book form in March 1852, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* sold 300,000 copies within a year. It soon became an international sensation translated into 20 languages while selling 2.5 million copies worldwide.
  - iii. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* intensified antislavery sentiment in the North, and by contrast, aroused deep resentment in the South.

### III. **The Kansas-Nebraska Act**

- a. Context –
  - i. As 1854 began most Americans believed that the **Missouri Compromise** line provided a permanent agreement for separating free and slave territory in the Louisiana Purchase.
    - 1. At that time, the Republican Party did not exist and Democrats sympathetic to the South controlled the White House and Congress. But all this was about to dramatically and irrevocably change.
  - ii. As the slavery issue receded, political leaders and the public focused on the need for a **transcontinental railroad** to facilitate the movement of people and goods across the nation.
    - 1. While everyone agreed on the need for a transcontinental railroad, cities such as New Orleans, St. Louis, and Chicago vigorously competed for the lucrative position of becoming the eastern terminus for the project.
      - a. As the senator from Illinois, **Stephen A. Douglas** wanted Chicago to achieve his objective, Douglas had to first persuade Congress to organize the **Nebraska Territory** and then persuade Southern senators to support giving this prize to a Northern city.
- b. Kansas-Nebraska Act –
  - i. On January 23, 1854, Douglas introduced a bill that would organize two territories, Kansas and Nebraska. Both territories were north of the line banning slavery. In order to win Southern support, Douglas added an enticing amendment repealing the Missouri Compromise.
  - ii. Douglas's bill included a proposal calling for **popular sovereignty** granting the people of Kansas and Nebraska the sole right to allow or forbid slavery.
  - iii. Douglas predicted that his bill would "raise a hell of a storm." However, he believed that passions would subside when the public recognized that climate and soil conditions in the Great Plains would serve as permanent barriers to the expansion of plantation crops and slavery into Kansas and Nebraska.
    - 1. Given these geographic conditions, settlers would inevitably use popular sovereignty to remain free.

- c. Consequences –
  - i. The Kansas-Nebraska Act broke the uneasy truce between the North and the South. Indignant Northern Democrats denounced the act as a violation of the Missouri Compromise's "sacred pledge" to ban slavery north of the 36°30' line.
  - ii. Kansas marked the first important test of popular sovereignty. Within a short time, "**Bleeding Kansas**" became a battleground between rival proslavery and antislavery settlers.
  - iii. The Democrats and Whigs had formed a **Second Party System** that dominated American politics from the 1830s to the early 1850s.
    - 1. The furor over the Kansas-Nebraska Act and the violence in Kansas led to the demise of the Whig Party.
  - iv. The Kansas-Nebraska Act galvanized a spontaneous outpouring of popular opposition in the North that led to the formation of the **Republican Party** in 1854.
    - 1. Within a short time, Whigs, antislavery Democrats, Free Soilers, and former Know-Nothings joined the rapidly growing Republican coalition.
    - 2. The rise of the Republican Party began a new **Third Party System** that dominated American politics until the 1896 presidential election.
  - v. The Kansas-Nebraska Act dealt a severe blow to Douglas's presidential aspirations.
    - 1. At the same time, it revitalized **Abraham Lincoln's** political career. Realizing that his opposition to the Kansas-Nebraska Act had gone beyond the confines of Whig policy, Lincoln declared himself a Republican.

#### IV. The Dred Scott Decision

- a. The Case –
  - i. **Dred Scott** was a slave who belonged to John Emerson, an army surgeon assigned to a post in Missouri. When the Army transferred Emerson from the slave state of Missouri to the free state of Illinois, he took Scott with him. The pair then moved to the Wisconsin Territory, an area where the Missouri Compromise expressly forbade slavery.
  - ii. When Emerson died, Scott returned to Missouri where he was placed under the authority of his former master's wife. Helped by abolitionists, Scott sued for his freedom. He contended that living in a free state and a free territory made him a free man.
- b. The Decision –
  - i. Led by Chief Justice **Roger B. Taney**, the Supreme Court ruled that neither slaves nor free blacks were citizens in the political community created by the Constitution. Taney declared that slaves were "chattel property ... so far inferior that they have no rights which the white man is bound to respect."
  - ii. The Court ruled that as a constitutionally protected form of property, slaves could be taken into any state or territory.
    - 1. The decision therefore declared the Missouri Compromise to be unconstitutional.
    - 2. This marked the first time the Supreme Court struck down an act of Congress since the *Marbury v. Madison* decision in 1803.
- c. Consequences –
  - i. The *Dred Scott* decision invalidated the Missouri Compromise. It also cast doubt on the validity of popular sovereignty.
  - ii. The decision worsened sectional tensions.

1. It strengthened the Southern view that the Constitution safeguarded slavery.
  2. It strengthened the Northern view that a relentless Slave Power intended to impose slavery upon the entire nation.
- iii. The decision invalidated the Republican Party's platform pledge opposing the extension of slavery into the territories.
1. Although this initially appeared to be a serious setback, Republicans redoubled their efforts to win the presidency. They promised that a victory would enable them to change the composition of the Southern-dominated Supreme Court and reverse the *Dred Scott* decision.

## V. "The Union in Peril"

### a. **John Brown's Raid on Harper's Ferry, 1859**

- i. **John Brown's** doomed raid on Harper's Ferry set off a wave of fear throughout the slaveholding South.
  1. As rumors of slave insurrections swept across the region, frightened Southerners suppressed all criticism of slavery.
  2. Southern "**fire eaters**" incorrectly linked John Brown to the now-hated Republican Party.
- ii. Although his raid was a military failure, John Brown's capture, trial, and execution mesmerized the nation.
  1. His death aroused great sympathy in the North where he became an antislavery martyr celebrated in the song "John Brown's Body."
  2. Perplexed and angered Southerners accused the North of lionizing a fiend who intended to instigate a bloody slave rebellion.

### b. **The Election of 1860** –

- i. Unable to bridge the division over slavery, the Democratic Party split into factions.
  1. Northern Democrats nominated Stephen A. Douglas on a platform promising congressional noninterference with slavery.
  2. Deep South Democrats nominated John C. Breckinridge on a platform calling for a national slave code that would protect slavery in the territories.
- ii. Republicans sensed that they had an excellent opportunity to defeat the divided Democrats.
  1. The **Lincoln-Douglas debates** transformed Abraham Lincoln into a nationally known figure. The party nominated Lincoln.
- iii. The Republican platform stated that slavery would continue to be protected in the states where it already existed. However, the Republican Party firmly opposed the expansion of slavery into the western territories.
- iv. Lincoln won the election by carrying all 18 free states. He did not win a single state in the South.

### c. **The Crittenden Compromise**

- i. Lincoln's election prompted South Carolina and six other Deep South states to secede from the Union.

- ii. In a final desperate effort to save the Union, Senator John Crittenden of Kentucky proposed a binding constitutional amendment to extend the Missouri Compromise line to the West coast.
- iii. Lincoln rejected the Crittenden Compromise because it violated the Republican Party's steadfast position against the further extension of slavery into the Western territories.
  - 1. The nation thus continued on an inexorable path to disunion and a bloody Civil War.