**CLASS SET!**

Compromise of 1850

Early on the evening of January 21, 1850, Senator Henry Clay of Kentucky trudged through the Washington, D.C. snow to visit Senator Daniel Webster of Massachusetts. Clay, 73 years old, was a sick man, wracked by a severe cough. But he braved the snowstorm because he feared for the Union's future.

For an hour, Clay outlined to Webster a complex plan to save the Union. A compromise could only be effective, he stated, if it addressed all the issues dividing North and South. He originally proposed that:

* California be admitted as a free state;
* there be no restriction on slavery in New Mexico and Utah;
* Texas relinquish its claim to land in New Mexico in exchange for federal assumption of Texas's unpaid debts;
* Congress enact a stringent and enforceable fugitive slave law; and
* the slave trade--but not slavery--be abolished in the District of Columbia.

A week later, Clay presented his proposal to the Senate. The aging statesman was known as the "Great Compromiser" for his efforts on behalf of the Missouri Compromise and the Compromise Tariff of 1832 (which resolved the nullification crisis). Once again, he appealed to Northerners and Southerners to place national patriotism ahead of sectional loyalties.

Clay's proposal ignited an eight-month debate in Congress and led John C. Calhoun to threaten Southern secession.

Despite heated debate, the compromise proposals never succeeded in gathering solid congressional support. In the end, only 4 senators and 28 representatives voted for every one of the measures. Nevertheless, they all passed.

As finally approved, the Compromise:

* admitted California as a free state;
* allowed the territorial legislatures of New Mexico and Utah to settle the question of slavery in those areas;
* set up a stringent federal law for the return of runaway slaves;
* abolished the slave trade in the District of Columbia; and
* gave Texas $10 million to abandon its claims to territory in New Mexico east of the Rio Grande.

The compromise created the illusion that the territorial issue had been resolved once and for all. "There is rejoicing over the land," wrote one Northerner, "the bone of contention is removed; disunion, fanaticism, violence, insurrection are defeated." Sectional hostility had been defused; calm had returned. But, as one Southern editor correctly noted, it was "the calm of preparation, and not of peace."

Uncle Tom’s Cabin Published

[Harriet Beecher Stowe](http://www.history.com/topics/harriet-beecher-stowe)'s anti-slavery novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin,* was published in 1852. The novel sold 300,000 copies within three months and was so widely read that when President [Abraham Lincoln](http://www.history.com/topics/abraham-lincoln) met Stowe in 1862, he reportedly said, "So this is the little lady who made this big war."

While living in Cincinnati, Stowe encountered fugitive slaves and the [Underground Railroad](http://www.history.com/topics/underground-railroad). Later, she wrote *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in reaction to recently tightened fugitive slave laws. The book had a major influence on the way the American public viewed slavery. Most northerners were unaware of the harsh living conditions that slaves were placed in, especially in the “deep south”. The book went on to be one of the bestselling books of the century, only out done by the Bible. It also established Stowe's reputation as a woman of letters. She traveled to England in 1853, where she was welcomed as a literary hero. Along with Ralph Waldo Emerson, she became one of the original contributors to *The Atlantic,* which launched in November 1857. In 1863, when Lincoln announced the end of slavery, she danced in the streets. Stowe continued to write throughout her life and died in 1896.

Kansas- Nebraska Act

In 1854, a piece of legislation was introduced in Congress that shattered all illusions of sectional peace. The Kansas-Nebraska Act destroyed the Whig Party, divided the Democratic Party, and created the Republican Party. Ironically, the author of this legislation was Senator Stephen A. Douglas, who had pushed the Compromise of 1850 through Congress and who had sworn after its passage that he would never make a speech on the slavery question again.

As chairman of the Senate Committee on Territories, Douglas proposed that the area west of Iowa and Missouri--which had been set aside as a permanent Indian reservation--be opened to white settlement. Southern members of Congress demanded that Douglas add a clause specifically repealing the Missouri Compromise, which would have barred slavery from the region. Instead, the status of slavery in the region would be decided by a vote of the region's settlers. In its final form, Douglas's bill created two territories, Kansas and Nebraska, and declared that the Missouri Compromise was "inoperative and void." With solid support from Southern Whigs and Southern Democrats and the votes of half of the Northern Democratic members of Congress, the measure passed.

Why did Douglas risk reviving the slavery question? His critics charged that the Illinois Senator's chief interest was to win the Democratic presidential nomination in 1860 and secure a right of way for a transcontinental railroad that would make Chicago the country's transportation hub.

Douglas's supporters pictured him as a proponent of western development and a sincere believer in popular sovereignty as a solution to the problem of slavery in the western territories. Douglas had long insisted that the democratic solution to the slavery issue was to allow the people who actually settled a territory to decide whether slavery would be permitted or forbidden. Popular sovereignty, he believed, would allow the nation to "avoid the slavery agitation for all time to come."

In fact, by 1854 the political and economic pressure to organize Kansas and Nebraska had become overwhelming. Midwestern farmers agitated for new land. A southern transcontinental rail route had been completed through the Gadsden Purchase in December 1853, and promoters of a northern railroad route for a viewed territorial organization as essential. Missouri slaveholders, already bordered on two sides by free states, believed that slavery in their state was doomed if they were surrounded by a free territory.

Republican Party Formed

In Ripon, [Wisconsin](http://www.history.com/topics/wisconsin), former members of the Whig Party meet to establish a new party to oppose the spread of slavery into the western territories. The Whig Party, which was formed in 1834 to oppose the "tyranny" of President [Andrew Jackson](http://www.history.com/topics/andrew-jackson), had shown itself incapable of coping with the national crisis over slavery.

With the successful introduction of the [Kansas](http://www.history.com/topics/kansas)-[Nebraska](http://www.history.com/topics/nebraska) Bill of 1854, an act that dissolved the terms of the [Missouri Compromise](http://www.history.com/topics/missouri-compromise) and allowed slave or free status to be decided in the territories by popular sovereignty [vote], the Whigs disintegrated.

By February 1854, anti-slavery Whigs had begun meeting in the upper midwestern states to discuss the formation of a new party. One such meeting, in Wisconsin on March 20, 1854, is generally remembered as the founding meeting of the Republican Party. Their platform included anti-slavery views and a need for strong federal government. Issues that southern states strongly disagreed with and caused them to become even more suspicious of government activity.

The Republicans rapidly gained supporters in the North, and in 1856 their first presidential candidate, John C. Fremont, won 11 of the 16 Northern states. By 1860 it truly became a conflict, when the majority of the Southern slave states were publicly threatening [secession](http://www.history.com/topics/secession) if the Republicans won the presidency.

Dred Scott Decision

On March 6, 1857, in a small room in the Capitol basement, the Supreme Court ruled that Congress had no power to prohibit slavery in the territories.

In 1846, a Missouri slave, Dred Scott, sued for his freedom. Scott argued that while he had been the slave of an army surgeon, he had lived for four years in Illinois, a free state, and Wisconsin, a free territory, and that his residence on free soil had erased his slave status. In 1850 a Missouri court gave Scott his freedom, but two years later, the Missouri Supreme Court reversed this decision and returned Scott to slavery. Scott then appealed to the federal courts.

For five years, the case proceeded through the federal courts. For more than a year, the Court withheld its decision. Many thought that the Court delayed its ruling to ensure a Democratic victory in the 1856 elections. Then, in March 1857, Chief Justice Roger B. Taney announced the Court's decision. By a 7-2 margin, the Court ruled that Dred Scott had no right to sue in federal court, that the Missouri Compromise was unconstitutional, and that Congress had no right to exclude slavery from the territories.

All nine justices rendered separate opinions, but Chief Justice Taney delivered the opinion that expressed the position of the Court's majority. His opinion represented a judicial defense of the most extreme proslavery position.

The chief justice made two sweeping rulings. The first was that Dred Scott had no right to sue in federal court because neither slaves nor free blacks were citizens of the United States. At the time the Constitution was adopted, the chief justice wrote, blacks had been "regarded as beings of an inferior order" with "no rights which the white man was bound to respect."

Second, Taney declared that Congress had no right to exclude slavery from the federal territories since any law excluding slavery property from the territories was a violation of the Fifth Amendment prohibition against the seizure of property without due process of law. For the first time since Marbury v. Madison in 1803, the Court declared an act of Congress unconstitutional.

In a single decision, the Court sought to resolve all the major constitutional questions raised by slavery. It declared that the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights were not intended to apply to black Americans. It stated that the Republican Party platform--barring slavery from the western territories--was unconstitutional. And it ruled that Stephen Douglas's doctrine of "popular sovereignty"--which stated that territorial governments had the power to prohibit slavery--was also unconstitutional.

John Brown’s Raid

On August 19, 1859, John Brown, the Kansas abolitionist, and Frederick Douglass, the celebrated black abolitionist and former slave, met in an abandoned stone quarry near Chambersburg, Pennsylvania. For three days, the two men discussed whether violence could be legitimately used to free the nation's slaves.

Up until the Kansas-Nebraska Act, abolitionists were averse to the use of violence. Opponents of slavery hoped to use moral suasion and other peaceful means to eliminate slavery. But by the mid-1850s, the abolitionists' aversion to violence had begun to fade. On the night of October 16, 1859, violence came, and John Brown was its instrument.

As early as 1857, John Brown had begun to raise money and recruit men for an invasion of the South. Brown told his backers that only through insurrection could this "slave-cursed Republic be restored to the principles of the Declaration of Independence."

Brown's plan was to capture the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia (now West Virginia), and arm slaves from the surrounding countryside. His long-range goal was to drive southward into Tennessee and Alabama, raiding federal arsenals and inciting slave insurrections. Failing that, he hoped to ignite a sectional crisis that would destroy slavery.

At 8 o'clock Sunday evening, October 16, John Brown led a raiding party of approximately 21 men toward Harpers Ferry, where they captured the lone night watchman and cut the town's telegraph lines. Encountering no resistance, Brown's raiders seized the federal arsenal, an armory, and a rifle works along with several million dollars worth of arms and munitions. Brown then sent out several detachments to round up hostages and liberate slaves.

But Brown's play soon went awry. During the night, a church bell began to toll, warning neighboring farmers and militiamen from the surrounding countryside that a slave insurrection was under way. Local townspeople arose from their beds and gathered in the streets, armed with axes, knives, and squirrel rifles. Within hours, militia companies from villages within a 30-mile radius of Harpers Ferry cut off Brown's escape routes and trapped Brown's men in the armory.

Twice, Brown sent men carrying flags of truce to negotiate. On both occasions, drunken mobs, yelling "Kill them, Kill them," gunned the men down.

John Brown's assault against slavery lasted less than two days. Early Tuesday morning, October 18, U.S. Marines, commanded by Colonel Robert E. Lee and Lieutenant J.E.B. Stuart, arrived in Harpers Ferry. Brown and his men took refuge in a fire engine house and battered holes through the building's brick wall to shoot through.

Later that morning, Colonel Lee's marines stormed the engine house and rammed down its doors. Brown and his men continued firing until the leader of the storming party cornered Brown and knocked him unconscious with a sword. Five of Brown's party escaped, ten were killed, and seven, including Brown himself, were taken prisoner.

A week later, John Brown was put on trial in a Virginia court, even though his attack had occurred on federal property. During the six-day proceedings, Brown refused to plead insanity as a defense. He was found guilty of treason, conspiracy, and murder, and was sentenced to die on the gallows.

After Harpers Ferry, Southerners increasingly believed that secession and creation of a slaveholding confederacy were now the South's only options. A Virginia newspaper noted that there were "thousands of men in our midst who, a month ago, scoffed at the idea of dissolution of the Union as a madman's dream, but who now hold the opinion that its days are numbered."

Election of 1860

In April 1860, the Democratic Party assembled in Charleston, South Carolina to select a presidential nominee. Southern delegates insisted that the party endorse a federal code to guarantee the rights of slaveholders in the territories. When the convention rejected the proposal, delegates from the deep South walked out. The remaining delegates reassembled six weeks later in Baltimore and selected Stephen Douglas as their candidate. Southern Democrats proceeded to choose John C. Breckinridge as their presidential nominee.

In May, the Constitutional Union Party, which consisted of conservative former Whigs, Know Nothings, and pro-Union Democrats nominated John Bell of Tennessee for President. This short-lived party denounced sectionalism and tried to rally support around a platform that supported the Constitution and the Union. Meanwhile, the Republican Party nominated Abraham Lincoln on the third ballot.

The 1860 election revealed how divided the country had become. There were actually two separate sectional campaigns: one in the North, pitting Lincoln against Douglas, and one in the South between Breckinridge and Bell. Only Stephen Douglas mounted a truly national campaign. The Republicans did not campaign in the South and Lincoln's name did not appear on the ballot in 10 states.

In the final balloting, Lincoln won only 39.9 percent of the popular vote, but received 180 Electoral College votes, 57 more than the combined total of his opponents.

Secession 1861

In just three weeks, between January 9, 1861 and February 1, six states of the Deep South joined South Carolina in leaving the Union: Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas. Unlike South Carolina, where secessionist sentiment was almost universal, there was significant opposition in the other states. Although an average of 80 percent of the delegates at secession conventions favored immediate secession, the elections at which these delegates were chosen were very close, particularly in Georgia, Alabama, and Louisiana. To be sure, many voters who opposed immediate secession were not unconditional Unionists. But the resistance to immediate secession did suggest that some kind of compromise was still possible.

In the Upper South, opposition to secession was even greater. In Virginia, on February 4, opponents of immediate secession received twice as many votes as proponents, while Tennessee voters rejected a call for a secession convention.

On February 1, a secession convention in Texas voted to leave the Union. Three weeks later, a popular vote ratified the decision by a three-to-one margin. Texas Governor Sam Houston (1793-1863), who owned a dozen slaves, repudiated secession and refused to take an oath of allegiance to the Confederacy. As a result, he was forced from office. Houston predicted: "Our people are going to war to perpetuate slavery, and the first gun fired in the war will be the [death] knell of slavery."

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**Events Leading to the Civil War**

Directions: As you read about the eight major conflicts that lead to the US Civil War, take notes on the chart below to answer the guiding questions.

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Name of the Event** | **Who was involved?** | **When and Where?** | **What happened?** | **What is the conflict?** |
| The Compromise of 1850 |  |  |  |  |
| Uncle Tom’s Cabin Published |  |  |  |  |
| Kansas-Nebraska Act |  |  |  |  |
| Republican Party is Formed |  |  |  |  |
| **Name of the Event** | **Who was involved?** | **When and Where?** | **What happened?** | **What is the conflict?** |
| Dred Scott Decision |  |  |  |  |
| Raid on Harper’s Ferry |  |  |  |  |
| Election of 1860 |  |  |  |  |
| Secession |  |  |  |  |