CHAPTER 18

Renewing the Sectional Struggle, 1848–1854

# Focus Questions

. How did the California gold rush result in inflaming strong sectional disputes?

. Who supported and who opposed the Compromise of 1850, what were its main provisions, and how did it pass?

. What section benefited the most from the Compromise of 1850? Why?

. What foreign policy agreements were made with regard to Latin America and Asia?

. What were the explicit provisions and implicit understandings of the Kansas-Nebraska Act and what were some of the consequences of its passage?

# Chapter Themes

**Theme:** The sectional conflict over the expansion of slavery that erupted after the Mexican War was temporarily quieted by the Compromise of 1850, but Douglas’s Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 exploded it again.

**Theme:** In the 1850s, American expansionism in the West and the Caribbean was extremely controversial because it was tied to the slavery question.

**Theme:** Commercial interests guided American foreign policy in Asia and contributed to sectional tension within the United States, as regions tried to secure the terminus to a transcontinental railroad.

chapter summary

The acquisition of territory from Mexico created acute new dilemmas concerning the expansion of slavery, especially for the two major political parties, which had long tried to avoid the issue. The antislavery Free Soil party pushed the issue into the election of 1848. The application of gold-rich California for admission to the Union forced the controversy into the Senate, which engaged in stormy debates over slavery and the Union.

After the timely death of President Taylor, who had blocked a settlement, Congress resolved the crisis by passing the delicate Compromise of 1850. The compromise eased sectional tension for the moment, although the Fugitive Slave Law aroused opposition in the North.

As the Whig Party died, the Democratic Pierce administration became the tool of proslavery expansionists. Controversies over Nicaragua, Cuba, and the Gadsden Purchase showed that expansionism was closely linked to the slavery issue.

The desire for a northern railroad route led Stephen Douglas to ram the Kansas-Nebraska Act through Congress in 1854. By repealing the Missouri Compromise and making new territory subject to popular sovereignty on slavery, this act aroused the fury of the North, sparked the rise of the Republican Party, and set the stage for the Civil War.

# developing the chapter: suggested lecture or discussion topics

* Discuss the conflicts created by the Mexican War acquisitions and explain how the Compromise of 1850 tried to resolve them. The focus might be on the extreme delicacy of the sectional adjustment.

REFERENCE: David Potter, *The Impending Crisis, 1848–1861* (1976).

* Assess the breakup of the second two-party system in relation to the slavery controversy. Show how the Whig demise and Democratic divisions paved the way for the Republicans.

REFERENCE: Bruce Levine, *Half Slave and Half Free: The Roots of the Civil War* (1992).

* Show the connection between the proslavery expansionist schemes, particularly the Cuban affair and the Gadsden Purchase and the growing sectional controversy. Emphasize southern hopes and northern fears of potential slavery expansion to the Caribbean or Central America.

REFERENCE: Robert May, *The Southern Dream of a Caribbean Empire* (1973).

* Examine the Kansas-Nebraska Act and explain why it aroused such wrath in the North. Particular attention might be paid to the railroad-promoting Douglas, with his theory of popular sovereignty and to the rise of the free soil ideology in the North.

REFERENCE: Richard Sewell, *A House Divided* (1988).

# for further interest: additional class topics

* Consider the characters and drama of the Senate debates over the Compromise of 1850, especially the roles of Webster, Clay, Seward, and Douglas.
* Discuss the Fugitive Slave Law and the Underground Railroad as running sores in the sectional conflict. The life of Harriet Tubman might provide a focus.
* Examine the various filibustering efforts in connection with the issues of Cuba and Central America, and relate them to the southern dream of expanding slavery by acquiring new territory to the South.
* Focus on Douglas as a typical northern Democrat—one who did not really like slavery but thought it a secondary issue that should not disrupt such important matters as railroads.

# character sketches

## Zachary Taylor (1784–1850)

Taylor was the military hero of the Mexican War and the Whig president whose political ineptitude nearly blocked the Compromise of 1850.

He came from a slaveholding Kentucky family and fought in the War of 1812, the Black Hawk War, and the Seminole wars before his performance in the Mexican War made him a national hero.

Using daring and risky troop movements, Taylor defeated Santa Anna’s much larger army at Buena Vista. Polk was jealous of Taylor’s appeal but failed to stop the public and journalistic celebration of “Old Rough and Ready.”

While Taylor had long supported the Whigs, he was so politically ignorant that he nearly ruined his 1848 candidacy by writing blunt letters. At the time of his death, Whig politicians were despairing of Taylor’s incompetence and trying to persuade prominent figures to enter the cabinet and keep him under control.

**Quote:** “I am a Whig, but not an ultra Whig. If elected I would not be the mere President of a party. I would endeavor to act independent of party domination. I should feel bound to administer the government untrammeled by party schemes.” (1848)

REFERENCE: K. Jack Bauer, *Zachary Taylor: Soldier, Planter, Statesman of the Old Southwest* (1985).

## Harriet Tubman (1821–1913)

Tubman was a fugitive slave and black abolitionist who led many slaves out of the South.

She was born a slave in Maryland and, as a child, suffered a severe head injury that affected her throughout her life. She worked as a field hand, displaying tremendous physical stamina.

In 1844, her master forced her to marry another slave against her wishes. Five years later, she escaped across the Pennsylvania border, traveling only by night.

She began making raids back into the South and eventually led out an estimated three hundred slaves, including her elderly parents. Between trips, she worked as a cook and used much of her income to help the fugitives get a start or move to Canada.

Tubman was illiterate but learned to speak before abolitionist groups. During the Civil War, she went south with the Union army and worked as a cook, laundress, nurse, and spy.

**Quote:** “Jes’ so long as he [God] wanted to use me, he would take keer of me, an’ when he didn’t want me no longer, I was ready to go. I always tole him, I’m gwine to hole stiddy on you, an’ you’ve got to see me trou’.” (Comment, 1868)

REFERENCE: Sarah Bradford, *Harriet Tubman: The Moses of Her People* (1974).

## Stephen A. Douglas (1813–1861)

Douglas was the Democratic senator whose Kansas-Nebraska Act helped bring on the Civil War that ruined his party and dashed his once-high presidential hopes.

Born in Vermont, he made his way to frontier Illinois, where he taught school and learned law. Although only briefly a judge on the state supreme court, he was always called “Judge Douglas.” Douglas was first elected to the Illinois legislature in 1836, along with young Abraham Lincoln.

Douglas’s first wife inherited a southern plantation with many slaves, and this became a political liability for Douglas. His second wife was related to Dolley Madison and was well connected in Washington high society, where the Douglases were very prominent in the late 1850s.

Once Douglas realized he had no hope of winning the 1860 election, he concentrated on rallying Democratic support for the Union and against secession. Although he and Lincoln had been longtime political rivals, he held Lincoln’s hat at his inaugural and publicly defended him in the secession crisis. Douglas died of typhoid fever in 1861.

**Quote:** “I hold that under the Constitution of the United States each state of this Union has a right to do as it pleases on the subject of slavery. In Illinois we have exercised that right by abolishing slavery.… It is none of our business whether slavery exists in Missouri. Hence I do not choose to occupy the time allotted to me in discussing a question that we have no right to act upon.” (Lincoln-Douglas debates, 1858)

REFERENCE: Robert W. Johannsen, *Stephen A. Douglas* (1973).

## William Walker (1824–1860)

Walker was the American filibusterer and adventurer who attempted to add a Central American slave empire to the American commonwealth before the Civil War.

A graduate of the University of Nashville, Walker earned a medical degree, practiced law, and edited a New Orleans newspaper, but his boredom with ordinary pursuits constantly drove him into exotic and dangerous schemes. He first attempted to set up a republic with himself as president in Lower California (part of Mexico) in 1853, but he was arrested and acquitted of violating neutrality laws.

His briefly successful dictatorship in Nicaragua in 1855 began to collapse when he attempted to seize control of overland transit in the country from Cornelius Vanderbilt’s company. An angry Vanderbilt helped turn other Central American countries and U.S. authorities against Walker, and his southern friends in the American navy proved unable to save him from capture and execution.

**Quote:** “That which you ignorantly call ‘filibustering’ is not the offspring of hasty passion or ill-regulated desire. It is the fruit of the supreme instincts that act in accord with fixed laws as old as creation.” (Autobiography, 1860)

REFERENCE: Laurence Greene, *The Filibuster: The Career of William Walker* (1937).

# questions for class discussion

. Was the Compromise of 1850 a wise effort to balance sectional differences or a futile attempt to push the slavery issue out of sight? Could a better compromise have been met if California had not skipped the regular territorial phase?

. Why did the North so strongly resent the Fugitive Slave Law and why did the South resent northern resistance to enforcing it? (See boxed quote on page 387.)

. Is there a significant difference in the leadership of Old Guard senators such as Clay, Webster, and Calhoun when compared with the Young Guard of Douglas and Seward?

. Did the North, South, or West benefit most from the Compromise of 1850? Why?

. Why was the issue of acquiring Cuba so controversial in the 1850s? Could some of the Caribbean islands or parts of Central America have become incorporated as slave states with the United States? How would American designs for expansion into the Caribbean and Central America affect U.S. relations with Latin America? Did European turmoil in the late 1840s and early 1850s encourage American expansionist dreams? (See boxed quote on page 393.)

. Would the sectional conflict have been reheated had Douglas not pushed through the Kansas-Nebraska Act? Why or why not? (See boxed quote on page 397.)

**CONTENDING VOICES: JOHN C. CALHOUN VS. DANIEL WEBSTER**

**Questions for Class Discussion**

1. What did Senator Calhoun propose to resolve the growing sectional tension?

2. What did Senator Webster think would be the response to Calhoun’s proposal?