

# The Divisive Politics of Slavery

## MAIN IDEA

The issue of slavery dominated U.S. politics in the early 1850s.

## WHY IT MATTERS NOW

U.S. society continues to be challenged by issues of fairness, equality, race, and class.

## Terms & Names

- Wilmot Proviso
- secession
- Compromise of 1850
- popular sovereignty
- Stephen A. Douglas
- Millard Fillmore

## One American's Story

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TAKING NOTES

Use the graphic organizer online to take notes on the regional differences discussed in the section.

South Carolina senator John C. Calhoun was so sick that he had missed four months of debate over whether California should enter the Union as a free state. On March 4, 1850, Calhoun, explaining that he was too ill to deliver a prepared speech, asked Senator James M. Mason of Virginia to deliver it for him.

### A PERSONAL VOICE JOHN C. CALHOUN

"I have, Senators, believed from the first that the agitation of the subject of slavery would, if not prevented by some timely and effective measure, end in disunion. . . . The agitation has been permitted to proceed . . . until it has reached a period when it can no longer be disguised or denied that the Union is in danger. You have thus had forced upon you the greatest and the gravest question that can ever come under your consideration: How can the Union be preserved?"

—quoted in *The Compromise of 1850*, edited by Edwin C. Rozwenc

Senator Calhoun called on the North to give the South "justice, simple justice." He demanded that slavery be allowed throughout the territories won in the war with Mexico. If it was not, he declared, the South would secede, or withdraw, from the Union. Once again, the issue of slavery had brought about a political crisis, deepening the gulf between the North and the South.



▲ John C. Calhoun was vice-president under John Quincy Adams and Andrew Jackson. His last words were: "The South. The poor South."

## Differences Between North and South

Senator Calhoun argued that although the North and the South had been politically equal when the Constitution was adopted, the "perfect equilibrium" between the two sections no longer existed. At any rate, the two sections certainly had developed different ways of life by the 1850s.

**INDUSTRY AND IMMIGRATION IN THE NORTH** The North industrialized rapidly as factories turned out ever-increasing amounts of products, from textiles and sewing machines to farm equipment and guns. Railroads—with more than 20,000 miles of track laid during the 1850s—carried raw materials eastward and

manufactured goods and settlers westward. Small towns like Chicago matured into cities almost overnight, due to the sheer volume of goods and people arriving by railroad. Telegraph wires strung along the railroad tracks provided a network of instant communication for the North.

Immigrants from Europe entered the industrial workplace in growing numbers. Many became voters with a strong opposition to slavery. They feared the expansion of slavery for two main reasons. First, it might bring slave labor into direct competition with free labor, or people who worked for wages. Second, it threatened to reduce the status of white workers who could not successfully compete with slaves.

**AGRICULTURE AND SLAVERY IN THE SOUTH** Unlike the North, the South remained a predominantly rural society, consisting mostly of plantations and small farms. The Southern economy relied on staple crops such as cotton. Though one-third of the nation's population lived in the South in 1850, the South produced under 10 percent of the nation's manufactured goods. At the same time that Northern railroad lines were expanding, Southerners were mostly using rivers to transport goods. In addition, few immigrants settled in the South, because African Americans, whether enslaved or free, met most of the available need for artisans, mechanics, and laborers. Those immigrants who did settle in the South, however, displayed significant opposition to slavery. For example, German-American newspapers in Texas and in Baltimore, Maryland published editorials in favor of universal voting rights and freedom for African Americans.

The conflict over slavery rattled Southern society. In three Southern states, Mississippi, Louisiana, and South Carolina, African Americans were in the majority. In Alabama and Florida, African Americans composed almost half of the population. While blacks dreamed of an end to slavery, many Southern whites feared that any restriction of slavery would lead to a social and economic revolution. Furthermore, Calhoun warned that such a revolution would condemn blacks as well as whites "to the greatest calamity, and the [South] to poverty, desolation, and wretchedness." **A**

**MAIN IDEA**

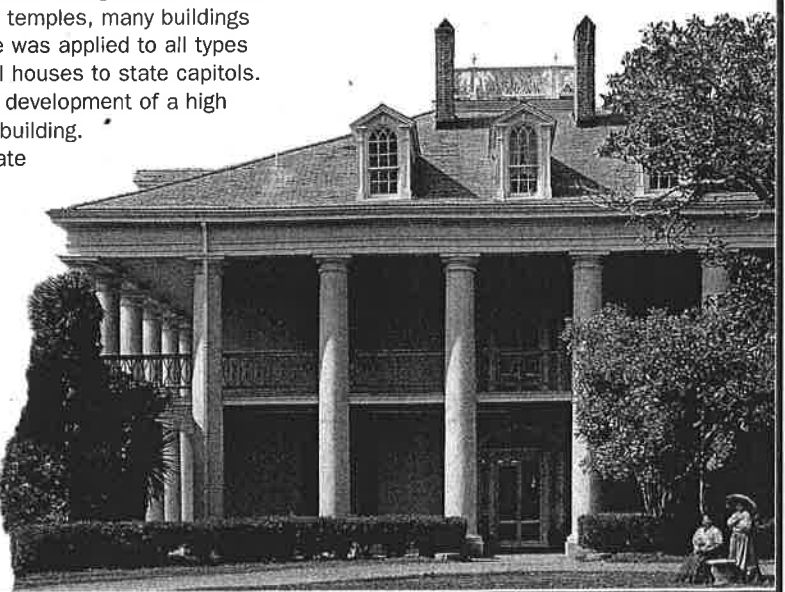
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**History Through Architecture**

**GREEK REVIVAL ARCHITECTURE**

The Greek Revival was an architectural style that spread throughout the United States between 1825 and 1860. Like ancient Greek temples, many buildings in this style had columns on all four sides. This style was applied to all types of buildings in Greek Revival architecture, from small houses to state capitols. The hot, humid climate of the South encouraged the development of a high porch and with columns rising to the full height of a building. These wide porches were unusual in the cooler climate of Europe but well-suited to tropical regions. In the hands of Greek Revival architects in the South, the porches became grand living spaces where families could find shelter from the summer heat.

Oak Alley Plantation, Louisiana ▼



**SKILLBUILDER Interpreting Visual Sources**

How would you be able to tell that this home is an example of the Greek Revival style?  
How did the architecture help cool the house?

SEE SKILLBUILDER HANDBOOK, PAGE R23.

## Slavery in the Territories

On August 8, 1846, Pennsylvania Democrat David Wilmot heightened tensions between North and South by introducing an amendment to a military appropriations bill proposing that “neither slavery nor involuntary servitude shall ever exist” in any territory the United States might acquire as a result of the war with Mexico. In strictly practical terms, the **Wilmot Proviso** meant that California, as well as the territories of Utah and New Mexico, would be closed to slavery forever.

**THE WILMOT PROVISIO** The Wilmot Proviso divided Congress along regional lines. Northerners, angry over the refusal of Southern congressmen to vote for

internal improvements, such as the building of canals and roads, supported the proviso. They also feared that adding slave territory would give slave states more members in Congress and deny economic opportunity to free workers.

Southerners, as expected, opposed the proviso, which, some argued, raised complex constitutional issues. Slaves were property, Southerners claimed, and property was protected by the Constitution. Laws like the Wilmot Proviso would undermine such constitutional protections.

Many Southerners feared that if the Wilmot Proviso became law, the inevitable addition of new free states to the Union would shift the balance of power permanently to the North. The House of Representatives approved the proviso, but the Senate rejected it. Congressman Alexander H. Stephens of Georgia issued a dire prediction. ❶

Membership in House of Representatives		
Year	Members from Free States	Members from Slave States
1800	77	65
1810	105	81
1820	123	90
1830	142	100
1840	141	91
1850	144	90

Source: Historical Statistics of the United States

**SKILLBUILDER Interpreting Charts**  
About what percentage of House members represented free states in 1850?

### A PERSONAL VOICE ALEXANDER H. STEPHENS

“The North is going to stick the Wilmot amendment to every appropriation and then all the South will vote against any measure thus clogged. Finally a tremendous struggle will take place and perhaps [President] Polk in starting one war may find half a dozen on his hands. I tell you the prospect ahead is dark, cloudy, thick and gloomy.”

—quoted in *The Coming of the Civil War*

**STATEHOOD FOR CALIFORNIA** As a result of the gold rush, California had grown in population so quickly that it skipped the territorial phase of becoming a state. In late 1849, California held a constitutional convention, adopted a state constitution, elected a governor and a legislature, and applied to join the Union.

California’s new constitution forbade slavery, a fact that alarmed many Southerners. They had assumed that because most of California lay south of the Missouri Compromise line of 36°30’, the state would be open to slavery. They had hoped that the compromise, struck in 1820, would apply to new territories, including California, which would have become a slave state.

General Zachary Taylor, who succeeded Polk as president in 1849, supported California’s admission as a free state. Moreover, he felt that the South could counter abolitionism most effectively by leaving the slavery issue up to individual territories rather than to Congress. Southerners, however, saw this as a move to block slavery in the territories and as an attack on the Southern way of life—and began to question whether the South should remain in the Union. ❷

California’s admission to the Union in 1850 increased tensions between North and South. ▼



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## The Senate Debates

The 31st Congress opened in December 1849 in an atmosphere of distrust and bitterness. The question of California statehood topped the agenda. Of equal concern was the border dispute in which the slave state of Texas claimed the eastern half of New Mexico Territory, where the issue of slavery had not yet been settled. In the meantime, Northerners demanded the abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia, while Southerners accused the North of failing to enforce the Fugitive Slave Act of 1793. As passions rose, some Southerners threatened **secession**, the formal withdrawal of a state from the Union. Could anything be done to prevent the United States from becoming two nations?

**CLAY'S COMPROMISE** Henry Clay worked night and day to shape a compromise that both the North and the South could accept. Though ill, he visited his old rival Daniel Webster on January 21, 1850, and obtained Webster's support. Eight days later, Clay presented to the Senate a series of resolutions later called the **Compromise of 1850**, which he hoped would settle "all questions in controversy between the free and slave states, growing out of the subject of Slavery."

**TERMS OF THE COMPROMISE** Clay's compromise (summarized on the chart shown on page 308) contained provisions to appease Northerners as well as Southerners. To satisfy the North, the compromise provided that California be admitted to the Union as a free state. To satisfy the South, the compromise proposed a new and more effective fugitive slave law.

Other provisions of the compromise had elements that appealed to both regions. For example, a provision that allowed residents of the territories of New Mexico and Utah **popular sovereignty**—the right of residents of a territory to vote for or against slavery—appealed to both North and South. As part of the compromise, the federal government would pay Texas \$10 million to surrender its claim to New Mexico. Northerners were pleased because, in effect, it limited slavery in Texas to within its current borders. Southerners were pleased because the money would help defray Texas's expenses and debts from the war with Mexico. 

### IDEA

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**1** Daniel Webster strongly supported Clay's compromise. He left the Senate before Stephen Douglas could engineer passage of all the provisions of the compromise.

**2** Henry Clay offered his compromise to the Senate in January 1850. In his efforts to save the Union, Clay earned the name "the Great Compromiser."

**3** John C. Calhoun opposed the compromise. He died two months after Clay proposed it.

On February 5, Clay defended his resolutions and begged both the North and the South to consider them thoughtfully. The alternative was disunion—and, in Clay's opinion, quite possibly war.

**A PERSONAL VOICE** HENRY CLAY

“And such a war as it would be, following the dissolution of the Union! Sir, we may search the pages of history, and none so ferocious, so bloody, so implacable, so exterminating . . . would rage with such violence. . . . I implore gentlemen, I adjure them, whether from the South or the North . . . to pause at the edge of the precipice, before the fearful and dangerous leap be taken into the yawning abyss below.”

—quoted in *Voices from the Civil War*

**CALHOUN AND WEBSTER RESPOND** Clay's speech marked the start of one of the greatest political debates in United States history. Within a month, Calhoun had presented the Southern case for slavery in the territories. He was followed three days later by Daniel Webster, who began his eloquent appeal for national unity by saying, “I wish to speak today, not as a Massachusetts man, nor as a Northern man, but as an American. . . . ‘Hear me for my cause.’” He urged Northerners to try to compromise with the South by passing a stricter fugitive slave law, and he warned Southern firebrands to think more cautiously about the danger of secession.

**A PERSONAL VOICE** DANIEL WEBSTER

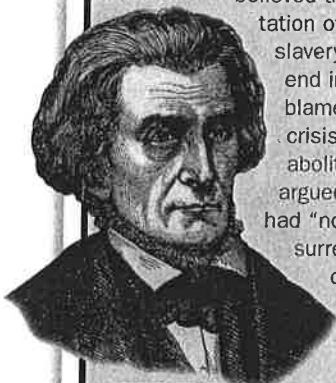
“I hear with pain, and anguish, and distress, the word *secession*, especially when it falls from the lips of those who are eminently patriotic. . . . Secession! Peaceable secession! . . . There can be no such thing as a peaceable secession. . . . Is the great Constitution under which we live . . . to be thawed and melted away by secession. . . . No, sir! I will not state what might produce the disruption of the states; . . . [What] that disruption must produce . . . [would be] such a war as I will not describe.”

—“Seventh of March” speech, quoted in *The American Spirit*

**The Compromise of 1850**

**Calhoun's Goals**

Calhoun believed strongly in states' rights over federal power and held the interests of the slaveholding South as his highest priority. He had long believed that “the agitation of the subject of slavery would . . . end in disunion.” He blamed the sectional crisis on Northern abolitionists and argued that the South had “no concession or surrender to make” on the issue of slavery.

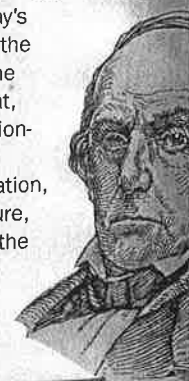


**Terms of the Compromise**

- California admitted as a free state
- Utah and New Mexico territories decide about slavery
- Texas-New Mexico boundary dispute resolved; Texas paid \$10 million by federal government.
- The sale of slaves banned in the District of Columbia. But slavery itself may continue there.
- Fugitive Slave Act required people in the free states to help capture and return escaped slaves.

**Webster's Goals**

Webster had argued with Northern Whigs that slavery should not be extended into the territories. Upon hearing Calhoun's threat of secession, he took to the Senate floor and endorsed Clay's compromise “for the preservation of the Union. . . . a great, popular, constitutional government, guarded by legislation, by law, by judicature, and defended by the whole affections of the people.”



**SKILLBUILDER Interpreting Charts**

1. How did Calhoun and Webster disagree over states' rights? 2. How did the compromise try to satisfy both sides?

Webster's speech became one of the most famous in the history of the Senate. Spectators packed the Senate chamber for the event.

**THE COMPROMISE IS ADOPTED** The Senate rejected the proposed compromise in July. Discouraged, Clay left Washington. **Stephen A. Douglas** of Illinois picked up the pro-compromise reins.

To avoid another defeat, Douglas developed a shrewd plan. He unbundled the package of resolutions and reintroduced them one at a time, hoping to obtain a majority vote for each measure individually. Thus, any individual congressman could vote for the provisions that he liked and vote against, or abstain from voting on, those that he disliked. It appeared as though Douglas had found the key to passing the entire compromise.

The unexpected death of President Taylor on July 9 aided Douglas's efforts. Taylor's successor, **Millard Fillmore**, made it clear that he supported the compromise. In the meantime, the South was ready to negotiate. Calhoun's death had removed one obstacle to compromise. Southern leaders came out in favor of Clay's individual proposals as being the best the South could secure without radical action. After eight months of effort, the Compromise of 1850 was voted into law. **E**

President Fillmore embraced the compromise as the "final settlement" of the question of slavery and sectional differences. For the moment, the crisis over slavery in the territories had passed. However, the relief was short-lived. Even as crowds in Washington celebrated the passage of the compromise, the next crisis loomed ominously on the horizon—enforcement of the new fugitive slave law.

## KEY PLAYER



**STEPHEN A. DOUGLAS**  
1813–1861

Stephen A. Douglas's political cleverness, oratorical skill, and personal drive earned him the nickname the Little Giant—a reference to the fact that he stood only 5'4" tall.

Using his political skill, Douglas engineered the passage of the Compromise of 1850 when all of the efforts of senatorial warriors, such as Clay, had failed. Douglas later became the well-known opponent of Abraham Lincoln in both a senatorial and a presidential election.

Douglas had been a judge, and then served two terms in the House of Representatives before he was elected to the Senate. However, he never achieved his ultimate political goal: the presidency.

### MAIN IDEA

#### Analyzing Events

What was the effect of Douglas's handling of the resolutions?

## SECTION 1

### ASSESSMENT

**TERMS & NAMES** For each term or name, write a sentence explaining its significance.

- Wilmot Proviso
- Compromise of 1850
- Stephen A. Douglas
- secession
- popular sovereignty
- Millard Fillmore

### MAIN IDEA

#### TAKING NOTES

Create a chart similar to this one. Complete it by indicating each region's position on an issue or trend covered in this section.

Issue or Trend	North	South
1.		
2.		
3.		
4.		
5.		

How was each region affected by the issue or trend?

### CRITICAL THINKING

#### 3. HYPOTHESIZING

Do you think there are any points at which a different action or leader might have resolved the conflict between the North and the South? Support your opinion with references from this section. **Think About:**

- issues raised by the Wilmot Proviso, California statehood, and the Compromise of 1850
- constitutional issues raised by Southerners

#### 4. ANALYZING PRIMARY SOURCES

When California applied for statehood in 1850, Mississippi senator Jefferson Davis warned, "For the first time, we are about permanently to destroy the balance of power between the sections." Why might Davis have felt this way?

#### 5. EVALUATING

Do you think the North or the South won more significant concessions in the Compromise of 1850? Explain your answer.