

Expansionism and political crisis at midcentury

Throughout the 19th century, eastern settlers kept spilling over into the Mississippi valley and beyond, pushing the frontier farther westward. The Louisiana Purchase territory offered ample room to pioneers and those who came after. American wanderlust, however, was not confined to that area. Throughout the era Americans in varying numbers moved into regions south, west, and north of the Louisiana Territory. Because Mexico and Great Britain held or claimed most of these lands, dispute inevitably broke out between these governments and the United States.

Westward expansion

The growing nationalism of the American people was effectively engaged by the Democratic presidents Jackson and James K. Polk (served 1845–49) and by the expansionist Whig president John Tyler (served 1841–45) to promote their goal of enlarging the “empire for liberty.” Each of these presidents performed shrewdly. Jackson waited until his last day in office to establish formal relations with the Republic of Texas, one year after his friend Sam Houston had succeeded in dissolving the ties between Mexico and the newly independent state of Texas. On the Senate’s overwhelming repudiation of his proposed treaty of annexation, Tyler resorted to the use of a joint resolution so that each house could vote by a narrow margin for incorporation of Texas into the Union. Polk succeeded in getting the British to negotiate a treaty (1846) whereby the Oregon country south of the 49th parallel would revert to the United States. These were precisely the terms of his earlier proposal, which had been rejected by the British. Ready to resort to almost any means to secure the Mexican territories of New Mexico and upper California, Polk used a border incident as a pretext for commencing a war with Mexico. The Mexican-American War was not widely acclaimed, and many congressmen disliked it, but few dared to oppose the appropriations that financed it.

Although there is no evidence that these actions had anything like a public mandate, clearly they did not evoke widespread opposition. Nonetheless, the expansionists’ assertion that Polk’s election in 1844 could be construed as a popular clamour for the annexation of Texas was hardly a solid claim; Clay was narrowly defeated and would have won but for the defection from Whig ranks of small numbers of Liberty Party and nativist voters. The nationalistic idea, conceived in the 1840s by a Democratic editor, that it was the “manifest destiny” of the United States to expand westward to the Pacific undoubtedly prepared public opinion for the militant policies undertaken by Polk shortly thereafter. It has been said that this notion represented the mood of the American people; it is safer to say it reflected the feelings of many of the people.

The continuation of westward expansion naturally came at the further expense of the American Indians. The sociocultural environment of “young America” offered fresh rationales for the dispossession of Native Americans; the broadening of federal power provided administrative machinery to carry it out; and the booming economy spurred the demand to bring ever more “virgin land” still in Indian hands into the orbit of “civilization.” After 1815, control of Indian affairs was shifted from the State Department to the War Department (and subsequently to the Department of the Interior, created in 1849.) The Indians were no longer treated as peoples of separate nations but were considered wards of the United States, to be relocated at the convenience of the government when necessary. The acquisition of the Louisiana Territory in 1803 and Florida in 1819 removed the last possibilities of outside help for the Indians from France or Spain; moreover, they opened new areas for “resettlement” of unassimilable population elements.

The decimated and dependent Indian peoples of Michigan, Indiana, Illinois, and Wisconsin were, one after another, forced onto reservations within those states in areas that Americans of European descent did not yet see as valuable. There was almost no resistance, except for the Sauk and Fox uprising led by Black Hawk (the Black Hawk War) in 1832 and put down by local militia whose ranks included a young Abraham Lincoln. It was a slightly different story in the Southeast, where the so-called Five Civilized Tribes (the Chickasaw, Cherokee, Creek, Choctaw, and Seminole peoples) were moving toward assimilation. Many individual members of these groups had become landholders and even slave owners. The Cherokee, under the guidance of their outstanding statesman Sequoyah, had even developed a written language and were establishing U.S.-style communal institutions on lands in north Georgia ceded to them by treaty. The Treaty of New Echota was violated by squatters on Indian land, but when the Cherokees went to court—not to war—and won their case in the Supreme Court (*Worcester v. Georgia*), Pres. Andrew Jackson supported Georgia in contemptuously ignoring the decision. The national government moved on inexorably toward a policy of resettlement in the Indian Territory (later Oklahoma) beyond the Mississippi, and, after the policy's enactment into law in 1830, the Southeast Indian peoples were driven westward along the Trail of Tears. The Seminole, however, resisted and fought the seven-year-long Second Seminole War in the swamps of Florida before the inevitable surrender in 1842.

That a policy of “population transfer” foreshadowing some of the later totalitarian infamies of the 20th century should be so readily embraced in democratic 19th-century America is comprehensible in the light of cultural forces. The revival-inspired missionary movement, while Native American-friendly in theory, assumed that the cultural integrity of Indian land would and should disappear when the Indians were “brought to Christ.” A romantic sentimentalization of the “noble red man,” evidenced in the literary works of James Fenimore Cooper and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, called attention to positive aspects of Indian life but saw Native Americans as essentially a vanishing breed. Far more common in American thought was the concept of the “treacherous redskin,” which lifted Jackson and William Henry Harrison to the presidency in 1828 and 1840, respectively, partly on the strength of their military victories over Indians. Popular celebration of allegedly Anglo-Saxon characteristics of energy and independence helped to brand other “races”—Indians as well as Africans, Asians, and Hispanics—as inferiors who would have to yield to progress. In all, the historical moment was unkind to the Indians, as some of the values that in fact did sustain the growth and prosperity of the United States were the same ones that worked against any live-and-let-live arrangement between the original Americans and the newcomers.

Attitudes toward expansionism

Public attitudes toward expansion into Mexican territories were very much affected by the issue of slavery. Those opposed to the spread of slavery or simply not in favour of the institution joined abolitionists in discerning a proslavery policy in the Mexican-American War. The great political issue of the postwar years concerned slavery in the territories. Calhoun and spokesmen for the slave-owning South argued that slavery could not be constitutionally prohibited in the Mexican cession. “Free Soilers” supported the Wilmot Proviso idea—that slavery should not be permitted in the new territory. Others supported the proposal that popular sovereignty (called “squatter sovereignty” by its detractors) should prevail—that is, that settlers in the territories should decide the issue. Still others called for the

extension westward of the 36°30' line of demarcation for slavery that had resolved the Missouri controversy in 1820. Now, 30 years later, Clay again pressed a compromise on the country, supported dramatically by the aging Daniel Webster and by moderates in and out of the Congress. As the events in the California gold fields showed (beginning in 1849), many people had things other than political principles on their minds. The Compromise of 1850, as the separate resolutions resolving the controversy came to be known, infuriated those of high principle on both sides of the issue—Southerners resented that the compromise admitted California as a free state, abolished the slave trade in the District of Columbia, and gave territories the theoretical right to deny existence to their “peculiar institution,” while antislavery men deplored the same theoretical right of territories to permit the institution and abhorred the new, more-stringent federal fugitive-slave law. That Southern political leaders ceased talking secession shortly after the enactment of the compromise indicates who truly won the political skirmish. The people probably approved the settlement—but as subsequent events were to show, the issues had not been met but had been only deferred.

The Civil War Prelude to war, 1850–60

Before the Civil War the United States experienced a whole generation of nearly unremitting political crisis. Underlying the problem was the fact that America in the early 19th century had been a country, not a nation. The major functions of government—those relating to education, transportation, health, and public order—were performed on the state or local level, and little more than a loose allegiance to the government in Washington, D.C., a few national institutions such as churches and political parties, and a shared memory of the Founding Fathers of the republic tied the country together. Within this loosely structured society every section, every state, every locality, every group could pretty much go its own way.

Gradually, however, changes in technology and in the economy were bringing all the elements of the country into steady and close contact. Improvements in transportation—first canals, then toll roads, and especially railroads—broke down isolation and encouraged the boy from the country to wander to the city, the farmer from New Hampshire to migrate to Iowa. Improvements in the printing press, which permitted the publication of penny newspapers, and the development of the telegraph system broke through the barriers of intellectual provincialism and made everybody almost instantaneously aware of what was going on throughout the country. As the railroad network proliferated, it had to have central direction and control; and national railroad corporations—the first true “big businesses” in the United States—emerged to provide order and stability.

For many Americans the wrench from a largely rural, slow-moving, fragmented society in the early 1800s to a bustling, integrated, national social order in the mid-century was an abrupt and painful one, and they often resisted it. Sometimes resentment against change manifested itself in harsh attacks upon those who appeared to be the agents of change—especially immigrants, who seemed to personify the forces that were altering the older America. Vigorous nativist movements appeared in most cities during the 1840s; but not until the 1850s, when the huge numbers of Irish and German immigrants of the previous decade became eligible to vote, did the antforeign fever reach its peak. Directed both against immigrants and against the Roman Catholic church, to which so many of them belonged, the so-called Know-Nothings emerged as a powerful political force in 1854 and increased the resistance to change.

Sectionalism and slavery

A more enduring manifestation of hostility toward the nationalizing tendencies in American life was the reassertion of strong feelings of sectional loyalty. New Englanders felt threatened by the West, which drained off the ablest and most vigorous members of the labour force and also, once the railroad network was complete, produced wool and grain that undersold the products of the poor New England hill country. The West, too, developed a strong sectional feeling, blending its sense of its uniqueness, its feeling of being looked down upon as raw and uncultured, and its awareness that it was being exploited by the businessmen of the East.

The most conspicuous and distinctive section, however, was the South—an area set apart by climate, by a plantation system designed for the production of such staple crops as cotton, tobacco, and sugar, and, especially, by the persistence of slavery, which had been abolished or prohibited in all other parts of the United States. It should not be thought that all or even most white Southerners were directly involved in the section's "peculiar institution." Indeed, in 1850 there were only 347,525 slaveholders in a total white population of about 6,000,000 in the slave states. Half of these owned four slaves or fewer and could not be considered planters. In the entire South there were fewer than 1,800 persons who owned more than 100 slaves.

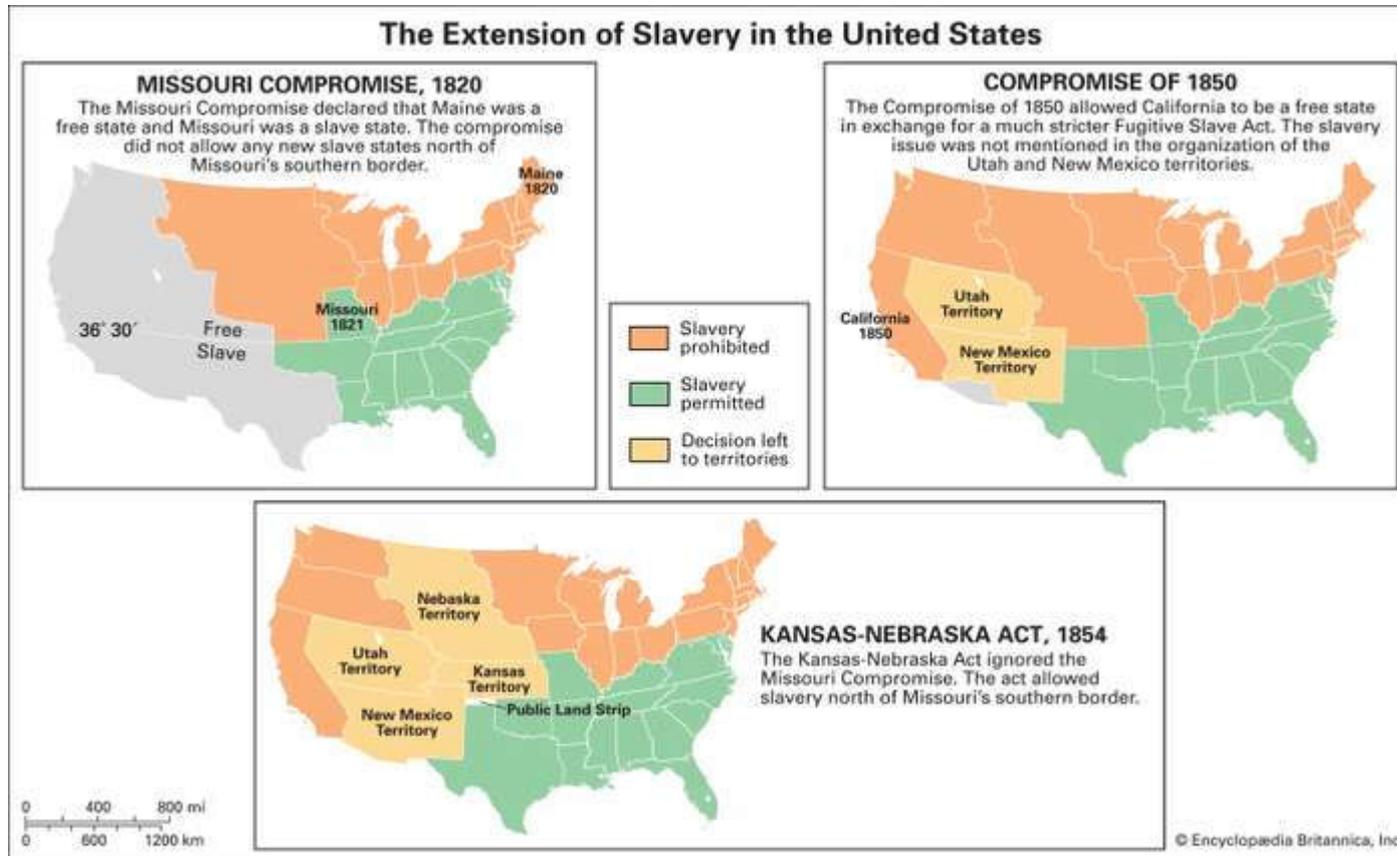
Nevertheless, slavery did give a distinctive tone to the whole pattern of Southern life. If the large planters were few, they were also wealthy, prestigious, and powerful; often they were the political as well as the economic leaders of their section; and their values pervaded every stratum of Southern society. Far from opposing slavery, small farmers thought only of the possibility that they too might, with hard work and good fortune, some day join the ranks of the planter class—to which they were closely connected by ties of blood, marriage, and friendship. Behind this virtually unanimous support of slavery lay the universal belief—shared by many whites in the North and West as well—that blacks were an innately inferior people who had risen only to a state of barbarism in their native Africa and who could live in a civilized society only if disciplined through slavery. Though by 1860 there were in fact about 250,000 free blacks in the South, most Southern whites resolutely refused to believe that the slaves, if freed, could ever coexist peacefully with their former masters. With shuddering horror, they pointed to an insurrection of blacks that had occurred in Santo Domingo, to a brief slave rebellion led by the African American Gabriel in Virginia in 1800, to a plot of Charleston, South Carolina, blacks headed by Denmark Vesey in 1822, and, especially, to a bloody and determined Virginia insurrection led by Nat Turner in 1831 as evidence that African Americans had to be kept under iron control. Facing increasing opposition to slavery outside their section, Southerners developed an elaborate proslavery argument, defending the institution on biblical, economic, and sociological grounds.

A decade of political crises

In the early years of the republic, sectional differences had existed, but it had been possible to reconcile or ignore them because distances were great, communication was difficult, and the powerless national government had almost nothing to do. The revolution in transportation and communication, however, eliminated much of the isolation, and the victory of the United States in its brief war with Mexico left the national government with problems that required action.

Popular sovereignty

The Compromise of 1850 was an uneasy patchwork of concessions to all sides that began to fall apart as soon as it was enacted. In the long run the principle of popular sovereignty proved to be most unsatisfactory of all, making each territory a battleground where the supporters of the South contended with the defenders of the North and West.



United States: areas affected by Missouri Compromise, Compromise of 1850, and Kansas-Nebraska Act Compromises over extension of slavery into the U.S. territories. *Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.*

The seriousness of those conflicts became clear in 1854, when Stephen A. Douglas introduced his Kansas bill in Congress, establishing a territorial government for the vast region that lay between the Missouri River and the Rocky Mountains. In the Senate the bill was amended to create not one but two territories—Kansas and Nebraska—from the part of the Louisiana Purchase from which the Missouri Compromise of 1820 had forever excluded slavery. Douglas, who was unconcerned over the moral issue of slavery and desirous of getting on with the settling of the West and the construction of a transcontinental railroad, knew that the Southern senators would block the organization of Kansas as a free territory.

Recognizing that the North and West had outstripped their section in population and hence in the House of Representatives, Southerners clung desperately to an equality of votes in the Senate and were not disposed to welcome any new free territories, which would inevitably become additional free states (as California had done through the Compromise of 1850). Accordingly, Douglas thought that the doctrine of popular sovereignty, which had been applied to the territories gained from Mexico, would avoid a political contest over the Kansas territory: it would permit Southern slaveholders to move into the area, but, since the region was unsuited for plantation slavery, it would inevitably result in the formation of additional free states. His bill therefore allowed the inhabitants of the territory self-government in all

matters of domestic importance, including the slavery issue. This provision in effect allowed the territorial legislatures to mandate slavery in their areas and was directly contrary to the Missouri Compromise. With the backing of Pres. Franklin Pierce (served 1853–57), Douglas bullied, wheedled, and bluffed congressmen into passing his bill.

Polarization over slavery

Northern sensibilities were outraged. Although disliking slavery, Northerners had made few efforts to change the South's "peculiar institution" so long as the republic was loosely articulated. (Indeed, when William Lloyd Garrison began his *Liberator* in 1831, urging the immediate and unconditional emancipation of all slaves, he had only a tiny following; and a few years later he had actually been mobbed in Boston.) But with the sections, perforce, being drawn closely together, Northerners could no longer profess indifference to the South and its institutions. Sectional differences, centring on the issue of slavery, began to appear in every American institution. During the 1840s the major national religious denominations, such as the Methodists and the Presbyterians, split over the slavery question. The Whig Party, which had once allied the conservative businessmen of the North and West with the planters of the South, divided and virtually disappeared after the election of 1852. When Douglas's bill opened up to slavery Kansas and Nebraska—land that had long been reserved for the westward expansion of the free states—Northerners began to organize into an antislavery political party, called in some states the Anti-Nebraska Democratic Party, in others the People's Party, but in most places, the Republican Party.

Events of 1855 and 1856 further exacerbated relations between the sections and strengthened this new party. Kansas, once organized by Congress, became the field of battle between the free and the slave states in a contest in which concern over slavery was mixed with land speculation and office seeking. A virtual civil war broke out, with rival free- and slave-state legislatures both claiming legitimacy (*see also* Bleeding Kansas). Disputes between individual settlers sometimes erupted into violence. A proslavery mob sacked the town of Lawrence, an antislavery stronghold, on May 21, 1856. On May 24–25 John Brown, a free-state partisan, led a small party in a raid upon some proslavery settlers on Pottawatomie Creek, murdered five men in cold blood, and left their gashed and mutilated bodies as a warning to the slaveholders. Not even the U.S. Capitol was safe from the violence. On May 22 Preston S. Brooks, a South Carolina congressman, brutally attacked Sen. Charles Sumner of Massachusetts at his desk in the Senate chamber because he had presumably insulted the Carolinian's "honour" in a speech he had given in support of Kansas abolitionists. The 1856 presidential election made it clear that voting was becoming polarized along sectional lines. Though James Buchanan, the Democratic nominee, was elected, John C. Frémont, the Republican candidate, received a majority of the votes in the free states.

The following year the Supreme Court of the United States tried to solve the sectional conflicts that had baffled both the Congress and the president. Hearing the case of Dred Scott, a Missouri slave who claimed freedom on the ground that his master had taken him to live in free territory, the majority of the court, headed by Chief Justice Roger B. Taney, found that African Americans were not citizens of the United States and that Scott hence had no right to bring suit before the court. Taney also concluded that the U.S. laws prohibiting slavery in the territory were unconstitutional. Two Northern antislavery judges on the court bitterly attacked Taney's logic and his conclusions. Acclaimed in the South, the Dred Scott decision was condemned and repudiated throughout the North.

By this point many Americans, North and South, had come to the conclusion that slavery and freedom could not much longer coexist in the United States. For Southerners the answer was withdrawal from a Union that no longer protected their rights and interests; they had talked of it as early as the Nashville Convention of 1850, when the compromise measures were under consideration, and now more and more Southerners favoured secession. For Northerners the remedy was to change the social institutions of the South; few advocated immediate or complete emancipation of the slaves, but many felt that the South's "peculiar institution" must be contained. In 1858 William H. Seward, the leading Republican of New York, spoke of an "irrepressible conflict" between freedom and slavery; and in Illinois a rising Republican politician, Abraham Lincoln, who unsuccessfully contested Douglas for a seat in the Senate, announced that "this government cannot endure, permanently half *slave* and half *free*."

That it was not possible to end the agitation over slavery became further apparent in 1859 when on the night of October 16, John Brown, who had escaped punishment for the Pottawatomie massacre, staged a raid on Harpers Ferry, Virginia (now in West Virginia), designed to free the slaves and, apparently, to help them begin a guerrilla war against the Southern whites. Even though Brown was promptly captured and Virginia slaves gave no heed to his appeals, Southerners feared that this was the beginning of organized Northern efforts to undermine their social system. The fact that Brown was a fanatic and an inept strategist whose actions were considered questionable even by abolitionists did not lessen Northern admiration for him.

The presidential election of 1860 occurred, therefore, in an atmosphere of great tension. Southerners, determined that their rights should be guaranteed by law, insisted upon a Democratic candidate willing to protect slavery in the territories; and they rejected Stephen A. Douglas, whose popular-sovereignty doctrine left the question in doubt, in favour of John C. Breckinridge. Douglas, backed by most of the Northern and border-state Democrats, ran on a separate Democratic ticket. Elderly conservatives, who deplored all agitation of the sectional questions but advanced no solutions, offered John Bell as candidate of the Constitutional Union Party. Republicans, confident of success, passed over the claims of Seward, who had accumulated too many liabilities in his long public career, and nominated Lincoln instead. Voting in the subsequent election was along markedly sectional patterns, with Republican strength confined almost completely to the North and West. Though Lincoln received only a plurality of the popular vote, he was an easy winner in the electoral college.

Secession and the politics of the Civil War, 1860–65

The coming of the war

In the South, Lincoln's election was taken as the signal for secession, and on December 20 South Carolina became the first state to withdraw from the Union. Promptly the other states of the lower South followed. Feeble efforts on the part of Buchanan's administration to check secession failed, and one by one most of the federal forts in the Southern states were taken over by secessionists. Meanwhile, strenuous efforts in Washington to work out another compromise failed. (The most promising plan was John J. Crittenden's proposal to extend the Missouri Compromise line, dividing free from slave states, to the Pacific.)

Neither extreme Southerners, now intent upon secession, nor Republicans, intent upon reaping the rewards of their hard-won election victory, were really interested in compromise. On February 4, 1861—a month before Lincoln could be inaugurated in Washington—six Southern states (South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Florida, Mississippi, Louisiana) sent representatives to Montgomery, Alabama, to set up a new independent government. Delegates

from Texas soon joined them. With Jefferson Davis of Mississippi at its head, the Confederate States of America came into being, set up its own bureaus and offices, issued its own money, raised its own taxes, and flew its own flag. Not until May 1861, after hostilities had broken out and Virginia had seceded, did the new government transfer its capital to Richmond.