

## **Immediate Causes of the Civil War—1850s**

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The Mexican War of 1846-1848 initiated the more immediate background to the Civil War. As a result of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, Mexico recognized the American acquisition of Texas, and also reluctantly agreed to cede more than 500,000 square miles of territory, encompassing the present-day southwestern United States.

This acquisition reawakened the issue of the expansion of slavery in the western territories, as it was not covered under the provisions of the earlier Missouri Compromise, which had restricted slavery to a line south of 36-30 in the Louisiana Purchase lands. The issue heightened quickly with the discovery of gold in California, touching off a rush of immigrants to the region and a petition by the territory to enter the Union. The subsequent Compromise of 1850 allowed California to enter as a free state, thereby upsetting the balance between the two regions that had been maintained since the earliest days of the republic. Other provisions included ending the slave trade in Washington D.C., a new stricter fugitive slave law, and the implementation of “popular sovereignty” as a means to determine the slave or free status of the remainder of the Mexican Cession lands.

The issue of slavery’s expansion remained heated throughout the rest of the 1850s, with southerners intent on the institution expanding into new western lands, while more northerners became committed to, if not the outright abolition of slavery, then at least to its containment within its current boundaries.

In 1854, discussion over the building of a transcontinental railroad culminated in the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which created two new territories with popular sovereignty to determine their status. The fact that these lands lay in an area where slavery had previously been excluded led to a firestorm of protest in the north. Within months the more moderate Whig Party broke apart over the slavery issue, leaving the nation politically polarized. The new Republican Party was founded on its opposition to the expansion of slavery in the territories, while Democrats, though attempting to maintain a national base, became more and more dominated by southern leaders. The new nativist American, or Know-Nothing Party, tried to avoid a position on the expansion of slavery, but within a few years it collapsed in disarray.

Over the next several years the new Kansas Territory became a battleground, as both pro- and anti-slave factions strove for control. Other events, most relating directly or indirectly to the slavery question, further drove the nation apart. Southern filibusterers mounted expeditions to Cuba and Central America in an effort to obtain new slave territories, while northern abolitionists became more vocal in their denunciation of the institution. Violence erupted on the floor of the U.S. Senate, with the beating of a northern senator by a southern congressman. In 1857 the Supreme Court, with a southern Democratic majority, ruled in the Dred Scott Decision against the rights of African Americans and in favor of the rights of slaveowners to take their property throughout the Union. In 1856 the new Republican Party performed well in its first major election, though Democrat James Buchanan won the presidency. The Republicans gained strength two years later in the congressional elections, while much attention was placed on the senatorial race in Illinois. There a well-known Democratic incumbent, Stephen Douglas, withstood a challenge from former one term congressman Abraham Lincoln. Though he lost, Lincoln's performance in a series of debates with Douglas gained him much notice on the

national political scene, and led to talk of his possible candidacy for the presidency or vice-presidency in 1860. Southerners, meanwhile, worried over the rise in prominence of the “Black Republicans,” and warned that the election of a candidate from that party might lead to secession. The stage was set for a political explosion.