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TOPIC CENTER: PRELUDE TO THE CIVIL WAR, 1840–1861



In the period before the Civil War, commonly known as the antebellum era, the United States experienced a crisis of sectionalism. That is, the North and South, increasingly defined by different economic, political, and social agendas, became steadfast in their allegiance to their region's own interests. In particular, the question of whether slavery should be extended to new western territories was a key source of conflict. Despite varying efforts at compromise, these sectional tensions continued to divide the nation and helped contribute to the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861.

Origins of the Conflict

The roots of sectionalism go as far back as the colonial era, when the northern and southern regions of the United States developed contrasting economic structures largely due to geographical differences. With a terrain and climate unsuitable for farming, northern states built an economy that relied mostly on manufacturing, trade, and a competitive labor market. Meanwhile, the fertile soil and relative warmth of the south made agriculture, driven by slave labor, a profitable venture.

As a result of the distinct economies and cultures that came to define the North and South, each region developed starkly different political interests. In the North, many people opposed the spread of slavery to protect their own job interests, while others abhorred it for moral reasons. In the South, people were determined to protect slavery, an institution that was an ingrained part of their economy and way of life.

The Need for Compromise

The issue of slavery became an intense political battleground with the rapid territorial expansion that occurred during the antebellum period. If new territories became slave states, then the South would have more representation in Congress than the North, making it easier for the South to accomplish its goal of maintaining slavery.

In 1818, tensions flared when Missouri applied to join the Union as a slave state, which threatened to upset the even balance of power between free states and slave states. To diffuse the conflict, Congress passed the Missouri Compromise, which granted Missouri's request but admitted Maine as a free state. It also drew an imaginary line across the Louisiana territory that established where slavery would be permitted.

The addition of land acquired from Mexico in 1848 required yet another legislative negotiation. In the Compromise of 1850, California was admitted as a free state, while the question of slavery in the Utah and New Mexico territories would be determined by popular sovereignty—that is, the decision of local settlers. In addition, the compromise ended the slave trade in Washington, D.C., and made it easier for Southerners to recapture escaped slaves.

The Divide Deepens

The Missouri Compromise and the Compromise of 1850 helped settle the issue of slavery in the western territories, but only temporarily. The Kansas-Nebraska Act (1854), which established popular sovereignty regarding slavery in those territories, effectively repealed the ban on slavery north of the line established by the Missouri Compromise. This led to violent conflict between antislavery and proslavery groups in Kansas, as well as the rise of the Republican Party, which supported Northern interests against slavery.

Sectional conflict was further escalated by the Supreme Court's 1857 *Dred Scott* decision, which determined that Congress could not prohibit slavery in any territory. Consequently, more Northerners threw their support behind the staunchly antislavery Free-Soil Republicans, which deepened Southerners' resolve to defend slavery.

Also contributing to the animosity between North and South were the ideas advocated by the abolitionist movement, which made the issue of slavery hard to ignore. Abolitionists sought freedom for all slaves and called for the end of racial discrimination and segregation. To that end, they formed antislavery societies, held abolition meetings, sent petitions to Congress, and flooded the North with literature and speeches supporting their cause.

A Nation in Crisis

Some abolitionists promoted violent methods to end slavery. This included John Brown, a controversial figure who led a raid of a federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry in hopes of starting an armed slave revolt. The attack stoked fears in the South of slave insurrections, and Brown's subsequent trial and hanging elevated him to martyrdom in the eyes of many Northerners. As a result, the episode provoked more sectional tension and left the North and South further unable to accommodate each other.

By the time of the presidential election of 1860, it was clear that deep divisions existed between North and South over the future course of the Union. The raid on Harpers Ferry, in particular, enabled Southerners to link the Republican Party to abolitionism and the overthrow of slavery. Thus, the election of Illinois Republican Abraham Lincoln set the stage for Southern rebellion. With the secession of South Carolina shortly following Lincoln's victory, Brown's final words, that slavery would "never be purged away, but with blood," would be prophetic as the nation marched closer to civil war.

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