**Compromise of 1850**

For a period of time following the 1820 Missouri Compromise, both slave and free states entered the Union peacefully. However when the Bear Flag Republic, California, requested admission to the United States as a free state in 1850, the balance of power in the Senate was once again threatened. The balance currently stood at 15 free, and 15 slave states. Many feared that if the nation could not come to a compromise on the California issue, the country would break apart. The United States again turned to Henry Clay to find a compromise. Though frail and ill, the 73 year old Clay agreed to find a way for the Northern and Southern states to agree on the California issue. After seemingly endless speeches and months of debate, a compromise was finally found by Clay and Illinois Senator Stephen Douglas. Known as the **Compromise of 1850**, it had 5 parts:

1. California would enter as a free state

2. The states of New Mexico and Utah were created and could decide by popular sovereignty if they would be

free or slave states.

3. Ended the slave trade in Washington, D.C.

4. Put into place a strict fugitive slave law

5. Settled a border dispute between Texas and Mexico



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**Fugitive Slave Law**

Until 1850, most Northerners had ignored a previous Fugitive Slave Law passed in the 1700’s. As a result, fugitive slaves often lived as free citizens in northern cities. However the **Fugitive Slave Law of 1850,** passed as part of the Compromise of 1850, was much harder to ignore. It required all citizens to help catch runaway slaves. Any person caught aiding a runaway slave by providing shelter, food or any other form of assistance was liable to six months' imprisonment and a $1,000 fine. On the other hand, officers capturing a fugitive slave were entitled to a monetary reward. This also encouraged some officers to kidnap free Negroes and sell them to slave-owners. People suspected of being a runaway slave could be arrested without warrant and turned over to a claimant on nothing more than his sworn testimony of ownership. The new law also set up specialized courts that only handled cases of runaways. Judges overseeing these trials received $10 for sending an accused runaway slave to the South. They received only $5 for setting them free. Some judges sent African Americans to South whether they were runaways or not. The Compromise of 1850 was meant to appease the North and the South, however the Fugitive Slave Law enraged many Northerners. It only served to convince more Northerners of the evils of slavery and increase feelings of

sectionalism in the nation.

**Kansas Nebraska Act**

Officially titled "An Act to Organize the Territories of Nebraska and Kansas," this act repealed the Missouri Compromise (1820), which had outlawed slavery above the 36º 30' latitude in the Louisiana territories and reopened the national struggle over slavery in the western territories. In 1854, a bill to set up a government for the Nebraska Territory was introduced in Congress. Knowing that white southerners would not want to add

another free state to the Union, it was proposed by Stephen Douglas that the Nebraska Territory be divided into two territories, **Kansas** and **Nebraska**. The settlers living in each territory would decide the issue of slavery by **popular sovereignty**, when

the people are allowed to decide whether or not slavery will be permitted in their

individual territories. This was known as the Kansas Nebraska Act.

Southern leaders especially supported the Kansas-Nebraska Act, sure that slave

owners in neighboring states would move across the border to Kansas and vote for

Kansas to become a slave state. Northerners quickly opposed the new law. They argued that the Missouri Compromise had already banned slavery in Kansas and Nebraska. Slavery could now spread to areas that had been free for more than 30 years. The Republican political party, committed to keeping slavery from spreading westward, was formed in 1854 as a result of Kansas Nebraska debates.



**Bleeding Kansas**

As a result of the controversial Kansas Nebraska Act, which opened up the territories of Kansas and Nebraska to slavery through popular sovereignty (where the people vote whether or not to allow slavery), Kansas now became a battleground over the slavery question. Instead of deciding the issue of slavery on election day, proslavery and anti-slavery forces sent settlers pouring into Kansas to physically fight for control of the

territory. Proslavery bands from Missouri known as Border Ruffians often rode across the border to battle antislavery forces in Kansas. During the local elections of 1855, hundreds of Border Ruffians crossed into Kansas and voted illegally, elected a proslavery legislature. The legislature quickly passed laws to support slavery, such

as the one which stated that speaking out against slavery was a crime punishable by two years of hard labor. Anti-slavery settlers refused to accept these laws. Two rival

governments sprang up, propelling Kansas into chaos. This chaos soon turned violent. In 1856 a band of proslavery men raided the town of Lawrence, an anti-slavery stronghold. Attackers destroyed home and Free Soil newspapers. In retaliation, abolitionists, led by **John Brown**, attacked and killed five proslavery settlers in the town of Pottawatomie Creek. These killings sparked even more violence. By the mid 1850’s,

more than 200 people had been killed over the issue of slavery in Kansas. As a result, newspapers began calling the territory **Bleeding Kansas.**



**Violence Spreads: Attack in the Senate**

As tensions rose between pro and anti slavery factions in Kansas, the debate over popular sovereignty and slavery in the western territories continued in the U.S. Senate. **Charles Sumner,** an abolitionist Senator from Massachusetts, gave a speech entitled “Crimes Against Kansas,” which blamed two Democratic senators for the violence which was spreading across the territory. Sumner saved his most personal verbal attack for Andrew Butler of South Carolina:

Has he read the history of "the State" which he represents? He cannot surely have

forgotten its shameful imbecility (great stupidity) from Slavery, confessed throughout

the Revolution, followed by its more shameful assumptions for Slavery since. He

cannot have forgotten its wretched persistence in the slave-trade as the very apple of its

eye, and the condition of its participation in the Union….

Though Butler was not in the Senate chamber the day Sumner made his explosive speech, word of Sumner’s accusations quickly spread. Several days after the

speech, as Sumner sat writing letters at his desk in the Senate chamber, South Carolina Representative Preston Brooks entered the room. Brooks, a relative of Senator

Butler, quickly enacted his revenge on Sumner. Brooks slammed his metal-topped cane onto the unsuspecting Sumner's head. Brooks struck Sumner repeatedly with

his heavy cane. Stuck under his heavy desk, Sumner endured the brutal attack for more than a minute before lurching up the aisle, where he finally collapsed, unconscious. Brooks calmly left the room without being stopped by the stunned onlookers. Both Brooks and Sumner became overnight heroes to their respective regions. It was three years before Sumner was able to resume his duties in the Senate.

