

Slavery or “Freedom Forever”

What's at Stake in the Kansas-Nebraska Act?

In 1854 President Franklin Pierce faced a critical choice, one that would determine the fate of his presidency and have a profound impact on the future of the United States. Should he support the Kansas-Nebraska proposal, which gave local settlers the right to determine whether or not slavery would be permitted? Should he maintain the Missouri Compromise, which banned slavery in these territories? Or, since any decision regarding slavery would have a significant impact the nation’s economic well-being, should practical considerations overrule moral rhetoric? How would you advise President Pierce?

- 1 **Approach One: Remember Our Ideals** 5
Slavery is a labor system involving the most fundamental rights of human beings. Therefore, all questions involving slavery are inherently moral questions. Maintain the Missouri Compromise restriction at all costs so as to prevent any expansion of evil and immoral slavery.
- 2 **Approach Two: Affirm Individual Choice** 8
Questions concerning slavery are political in nature. Slavery is a divisive issue and threatens to split the national political parties and even divide the nation itself. Give the local settlers the right to decide and remove the issue of slavery from the national arena.
- 3 **Approach Three: Protect Our Prosperity** 11
Decisions regarding slavery should be based on economic considerations, since they affect everyone’s access to new lands and to economic resources. We need to focus on the nation’s economic well-being and ensure the development of a strong and prosperous society.
- Issue Map** 14

College Issue Forums

Figuring out the right thing to do about can be especially challenging on college campuses. Differing perspectives, which may be related to ethnicity, gender, race, religion, sexual identity, socioeconomic class, and geographic origin, can result in disagreements about what should be done to address a common problem. This can be further complicated by competing academic orientations and goals. And a significant turn-over of residents each year creates communities that are in constant transition.

Deliberative Dialogues are public conversations designed to assist diverse communities address ethical issues. Forum participants share experiences, priorities, and values. The goal isn’t compromise or consensus, but for everyone to communicate

effectively across differences and develop common ground for acting together.

The **ground rules** for deliberation support increasing mutual understanding, rather than undermining an “opponent’s” position, defending one’s own view, or withdrawing to avoid a conflict. Participants are asked to consider the advantages and drawbacks of each as they search for common ground.

The College Issues Forums **discussion guides** have been developed in collaboration with students and faculty at Franklin Pierce. Each guide presents three approaches for addressing a particular problem. Topics range from issues especially important to college-age students to problems that affect everyone in our society.

Ground Rules

1. **This a dialogue, not a debate.**
2. **Everyone is encouraged to participate. No one person or group should dominate.**
3. **Treat all participants as equals.**
4. **Listen to each other with empathy. Disagree respectfully.**
5. **Listening is as important as speaking.**
6. **Examine your own assumptions as well as the assumptions of others.**
7. **Explore the advantages and disadvantages of each approach.**
8. **Speak from direct experience, not hearsay.**
9. **Our goal is to move toward greater mutual understanding of the issue.**
10. **Try to imagine what others who are not present might say.**

Slavery or “Freedom Forever”

What's at Stake in the Kansas-Nebraska Act?



This woodcut accompanied John Greenleaf Whittier's antislavery poem "Our Countrymen in Chains" on a broadside that was published in 1837.

*Library of Congress,
Rare Books & Special Collections*

By 1850, the total population of the United States stood at 23 million, and in the 15 states where slavery was legal, 3.2 million out of 9.6 million people (33%) were slaves.

Politics in twenty-first century America often seems dominated by contentious issues difficult to resolve to the satisfaction of all sides. Controversies over stem cell research, the 'culture wars,' or abortion make their way into the political realm, but the "art of compromise" appears ill-suited to handling conflicts involving elemental moral beliefs and ethical choices. As a result, Americans face the daunting task of resolving issues of rights and moral choices through political and legal channels, yet it is difficult to compromise bedrock beliefs and values or accept definitions of rights at variance with one's personal convictions. The battles rage on, with no end in sight.

This problem is not new, however and we can find a parallel example in mid-nineteenth century America. In 1854, the proposal to create the territories of Kansas and Nebraska (the initial step towards ultimate statehood) sparked one of the most tumultuous debates and political upheavals in American history. By leaving to settlers themselves the power to decide whether to permit or prohibit slavery, the Kansas-Nebraska proposal unleashed a panoply of difficult questions. Was slavery a moral institution? Should it be encouraged or should it be limited? Do the basic rights enunciated in the Declaration of Independence apply to all people? Is it fair to restrict the property rights of slaveowners? Ultimately, what do we envision as the future of the United States? Can the nation reconcile the right to own humans with its oft-proclaimed dedication to freedom and liberty for all? These were among the difficult questions confronting those seeking a political and legal resolution to the formation of the territories of Kansas and Nebraska.

That slavery could evoke so much heat and passion should not surprise us, for slavery was a system of labor and racial control as old as the United States itself.

Slaves appeared in Virginia as early as 1619, only a dozen years after the first permanent English settlement at Jamestown. By 1775 and the American Revolution, all thirteen colonies, from New Hampshire to Georgia, legally recognized slavery, and nearly 20% (1 out of every 5 individuals) in British North America was a slave. After the Revolution, states north of Maryland gradually abolished slavery on both moral and economic grounds, but from Maryland southward, slavery followed a different path. In particular, the profitable spread of cotton cultivation in the early 1800s breathed new life into slavery, making it a bedrock institution of Southern agriculture in the nineteenth century, and vital to the continuing operation and prosperity of the plantation system of agriculture. By 1850, the total population of the United States stood at 23 million, and in the 15 states where slavery was legal, 3.2 million out of 9.6 million people (33%) were slaves.

Slavery in the South was both a system of labor and a system of racial control, by which African Americans could be held in a subordinate position by an apprehensive white majority. Racist attitudes and assumptions, however, were not confined to the South and were just as prevalent in

the Northern or “free” states. Across the North, African American political and legal rights were sharply circumscribed, and in a number of cases, state governments sought to ban any African Americans from moving into their state. Many in the North also profited from slavery, owning plantations and slaves in the South. More commonly, merchants and wholesalers in ports like New York profited from shipping Southern cotton to markets and selling manufactured goods to Southern planters for their consumption. Cities such as Lowell, Massachusetts became centers of textile manufacturing, employing thousands of workers to weave slave-grown cotton into cloth which was often sold back to Southerners for clothing themselves and their slaves. In fact, slaves were the economic engine of the American economy up to the 1850s, growing the cotton which was the nation’s largest export commodity and the material foundation for much of the nation’s early industrial development. The institution of slavery might have been geographically limited to fifteen states (about half the states after 1850), but the entire nation shared in the profits of slavery and there was a broad consensus, North and South, as to the racial inferiority of African Americans.

Questions concerning the growth of slavery also had a long lineage prior to 1854 and the Kansas-Nebraska controversy. Congress had passed the Northwest Ordinance in 1787 prohibiting slavery from territories north of the Ohio river and east of the Mississippi, while implicitly permitting slavery south of the Ohio river. Nearly thirty-five years later, a ferocious debate arose over admitting Missouri as a new slave state. An elderly Thomas Jefferson worried that the bitter exchanges of 1819 and 1820 were akin to “a firebell in the night,” warning of ominous future divisions. Still, a solution was devised, the so-called Missouri Compromise, whereby free Maine and slave Missouri were admitted together, and slavery was barred north of 36° 30' longitude in the rest of the Louisiana Purchase territory.

Serious political controversies again erupted in the 1840s with the annexation

of Texas as a slave state and the conquest of California and western territories via the 1848 treaty ending the war with Mexico. Amidst a rising tide of threats and recriminations, Congress finally passed a series of measures collectively labeled the Compromise of 1850. These various acts included admission of California without slavery (creating a free state majority in the Union) and organization of the territories of Utah and New Mexico, which lay outside the bounds of the Louisiana Purchase and were not subject to the 1820 Missouri Compromise. Instead, these territories were organized with no mention of slavery at all, implicitly leaving the issue to the decision of the people and ultimately, the courts. Numerous critics in the North were not satisfied, but others such as Daniel Webster of Massachusetts argued it was a moot point, since regardless of law, inhospitable climate and terrain made it virtually impossible slavery would ever flourish in either territory.

Many in the North and South were unhappy with the Compromise of 1850, but a majority of Americans breathed a sigh of relief and hoped this would be the end to further controversies over the future of slavery in the territories. Both political parties, Whigs and Democrats, pledged support for these Compromise measures in the election of 1852, thereby neutralizing it as a political

(continued)

Key Terms

- **Kansas-Nebraska Bill.** By the terms of this proposed law, two new territories would be created, with each to eventually become a state at some future point. It eventually included an explicit repeal of the Missouri Compromise. Instead, the new policy in these territories would be that of popular sovereignty, whereby local settlers in the territory would determine whether or not slavery was to be permitted.
- **Missouri Compromise.** An effort in 1820 to settle conflicts around the balance of free and slave states in the Senate from the creation of new states in the territory acquired by the Louisiana Purchase of 1803. Maine is admitted as a free state; Missouri as a slave state; and slavery is banned in the Louisiana Territory north of 36° 30'.
- **Popular sovereignty.** Allow local settlers in the territory to determine whether or not slavery is permitted.

Popular sovereignty, which left it to local settlers in the territory to determine whether or not slavery was to be permitted, struck many as a democratic and fair way to resolve a vexing problem.

issue. After Democrat Franklin Pierce won the presidency in a landslide, peace and harmony seemed assured, as Pierce strongly and publicly committed his Administration to avoiding further sectional rancor over issues involving slavery. This proved difficult to do when in January 1854, Senator Stephen Douglas, an Illinois Democrat, introduced legislation to create the territories of Kansas and Nebraska. Bowing to pressure from Southern Democrats, Douglas modified his proposal to include an explicit repeal of the Missouri Compromise, which would have barred slavery from both territories, since they lay north of the 36° 30' line. Instead of remaining free territories, the new policy would be that of popular sovereignty, whereby local settlers in the territory would determine whether or not slavery was to be permitted. Thus, territory previously set aside for future free states would now be open to slavery, but at the same time, the actual decision would be left to those living there, which struck many as a democratic and fair way to resolve a vexing problem.

The proposal by Douglas quickly ignited a firestorm of criticism, and the fate of the legislation soon rested upon whether or not fellow Democrat, President Franklin Pierce, would support or oppose the measure. In this pressure-cooker atmosphere, President Pierce now had to make a fateful decision. As a framework for discussing this issue and determining how you would advise President Pierce, this guide provides three ways of approaching slavery itself,

along with potential courses of action regarding Kansas-Nebraska and the fate of slavery in the territories.

**Approach One:
Remember Our Ideals**

Slavery is a labor system involving the most fundamental rights and freedoms of human beings. Therefore, all questions involving slavery are inherently moral questions. Decisions regarding the place of slavery in the territories are also moral decisions, and it is difficult indeed to ask people to compromise on their moral beliefs.

**Approach Two:
Affirm Individual Choice**

Questions concerning slavery are political in nature. Slavery is a divisive issue and threatens to split the national political parties into sectional units and even divide the nation itself. Decisions regarding slavery in the territories are political decisions and affect the rights of self-determination as well as the future political balance between free and slave states.

**Approach Three:
Protect Our Prosperity**

Decisions regarding slavery are ultimately economic decisions. They affect everyone's access to new lands and to economic resources. Decisions regarding slavery in the territories should enhance the nation's economic well-being, thereby promoting the development of a prosperous, good, and virtuous society.

**Introduction
For Further Reading**

Berlin, Ira. GENERATIONS OF CAPTIVITY: A HISTORY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN SLAVES. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003.

Etcheson, Nicole. BLEEDING KANSAS. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004.

Morrison, Michael. SLAVERY AND THE AMERICAN WEST. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997.

Moral

1

Approach One

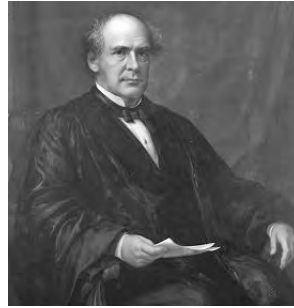
Slavery is a labor system involving the most fundamental rights and freedoms of human beings. Therefore, all questions involving slavery are inherently moral questions. Decisions regarding the place of slavery in the territories are also moral decisions, and it is difficult indeed to ask people to compromise on their moral beliefs.

In early January 1854, Senator Salmon Chase of Ohio began meeting with the small band of Congressional opponents of slavery to plot strategy against the proposed organization of Kansas and Nebraska territories. The stage was set on January 23, when Stephen Douglas introduced his revised Kansas-Nebraska bill explicitly repealing the Missouri Compromise prohibition against slavery in these territories. Immediately, newspapers across the North began publishing the “Appeal of the Independent Democrats,” signed by Chase and five other senators and representatives, including noted abolitionist Gerritt Smith.

Igniting a firestorm in the North, the “Appeal” warned that this new effort to expand the sway of slavery was an “imminent danger [that] menaces the freedom of our institutions.” The signatories attacked the Kansas-Nebraska proposal as “a gross violation of a sacred pledge” and warned “that the Union can only be maintained by the full recognition of the just claims of freedom and man.” The signers called on Christians “to behold in every man a brother,” and in a ringing conclusion, promised “We will not despair; for the cause of human freedom is the cause of God.”¹

Three weeks later, radical abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison reminded a New York City audience that “when I say that Freedom is of God, and Slavery is of the Devil, I mean just what I say.” As he had so many times before, Garrison rejected all compromise with slavery, for if it was wrong to admit a new slave state, “why is [it] not a damning sin to [even] permit a Slave State to remain in the Union?”²

Radicals like Garrison, Smith, and



Senator Salmon Chase
Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division

Chase railed against Kansas-Nebraska and slavery as issues involving fundamental moral questions. Others, however, were just as willing to defend slavery on moral grounds. Thornton Stringfellow, a Baptist minister from Virginia, was a leading proponent of slav-

ery, arguing from Biblical authority in defense of the institution. Stringfellow and many others recurred to numerous Old Testament texts as Biblical sanctions for slavery. In a later summary of his views, Stringfellow concluded that “inequality among men, is made of God to be the cohesive element which binds all together in the social body,” and that “the subordination of the inferior to the superior stands prominently to view in every thing that comes from the hand of infinite wisdom.” Stringfellow and thousands of others in both the South and North believed slavery was sanctioned by God, a moral institution providing maximal protection and care for natural racial and social inferiors.³

To a 21st century audience, any mention of morality and slavery immediately brings to mind the arguments of abolitionists, the fiercest opponents of slavery. In its most elemental form, the moral argument against slavery rested on the simple maxims embodied in the Declaration of Independence, with its unequivocal statement that “all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these, are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” Slaveowners, therefore, assumed an inequality amongst mankind and by definition, restricted the liberty and ability to pursue happiness on the

(continued)

“We will not despair; for the cause of human freedom is the cause of God.”

—Salmon Chase



“When I say that Freedom is of God, and Slavery is of the Devil, I mean just what I say.”

—William Lloyd Garrison

part of the enslaved. As for the unalienable right of life, abolitionists like Theodore Weld pointed to the Southern press itself for innumerable examples of slaves murdered, maimed or flogged by masters, of families separated by owners, and the dangers and temptations created when slaveowners possessed absolute power over their slaves. Given such horrors, abolitionists denounced the immorality and sin of slavery and demanded immediate action against slavery. One does not compromise with sin, or as Garrison himself wrote in 1831, “Tell a man whose house is on fire to give a moderate alarm; tell him to moderately rescue his wife from the hands of the ravisher; tell the mother to gradually extricate her babe from the fire into which it has fallen;—but urge me not to use moderation” in the war against slavery. To such abolitionists, no compromise could be acceptable.

Others, such as eventual senator Salmon Chase, would endorse the moral critique of slavery yet argue that political and social realities required compromise. Any steps putting slavery on the eventual road to abolition were positive steps, including capping the growth of the institution by preventing any further geographic extension of slavery into new territories such as Kansas and Nebraska. Permitting the further growth of slavery would only strengthen a system built upon violence and exploitation, in direct contradiction to the highest stated ideals of the United States.⁴

Strange as it sometimes seems to 21st century students, the moral defense of slavery probably had even more adherents in 1850s America than did abolitionism.

Virtually all Americans believed in the natural or “essential” inferiority of African Americans, and found strong sanction for slavery in the Bible and in the observations of scientists such as Dr. Josiah Nott. Inequality was the natural state of humankind, and as James H. Hammond proclaimed in the Senate in 1858, all societies are built upon “a class to do the menial duties, to perform the drudgery of life. . . . Fortunately for the South, she found a race adapted to that purpose, . . . We use them for our purpose, and call them slaves.”⁵

Based upon a natural or Divinely-inspired racial inequality, slavery was a moral institution because it served to civilize and Christianize the slaves. Viewing their slaves as akin to children, slaveowners provided shelter, food, clothing and all the necessities of life to their slaves, asking merely for labor in return. In the words of South Carolina statesman John C. Calhoun, slavery was a “positive good,” improving Africans physically, morally and intellectually. In Calhoun’s view, few societies left so much “to the share of the laborer, and so little exacted from him, or where there is more kind attention paid to him in sickness or infirmities of age.” In essence, slavery was a familial or paternal system, wherein the naturally child-like African served and in return, received protection and care from his or her master. Therefore, expansion of slavery into Kansas and/or Nebraska meant the spread of a system serving the interests of natural inferiors (African American slaves) and their paternalistic caregivers (slaveowners). Any efforts to bar further growth of slavery questioned the very morality of the system and of slaveholders themselves, and had to be resisted.⁶

Individuals emphasizing the moral dimensions of slavery could approach the Kansas-Nebraska proposal in a number of ways. For those convinced that slavery is an absolute moral wrong, there could be no compromise. The Missouri Compromise line, preserving these territories for freedom, must be maintained. Slavery, a system built upon the deprivation of freedom, exploitation of humans, and theft of the fruits of human labor, must not be permitted to grow in any way.

Slavery was a “positive good,” improving Africans physically, morally and intellectually”

—John C. Calhoun

Choice One **For Further Reading**

Cain, William E., ed. WILLIAM LLOYD GARRISON AND THE FIGHT AGAINST SLAVERY. Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin’s Press, 1995.

Faust, Drew Gilpin, ed. THE IDEOLOGY OF SLAVERY. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981.

Finkelman, Paul, ed. DEFENDING SLAVERY: PROSLAVERY THOUGHT IN THE OLD SOUTH. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2003.

Stewart, James B. HOLY WARRIORS: THE ABOLITIONISTS AND AMERICAN SLAVERY. Revised edition. New York: Hill & Wang, 1996.

Approach Two

Questions concerning slavery are political in nature. Slavery is a divisive issue and threatens to split the national political parties into sectional units and even divide the nation itself. Decisions regarding slavery in the territories are political decisions and affect the rights of self-determination as well as the future political balance between free and slave states.

Energetic and combative, Senator Stephen A. Douglas of Illinois was no political novice in 1854, having served seven years in the Senate. A bright and appealing young leader, Douglas fought for his party's presidential nomination in 1852, only to lose to dark-horse Franklin Pierce. Nourishing his political ambitions, Douglas in 1854 was a fervent advocate of territorial expansion, an ardent nationalist, and dedicated to rapid settlement of the territories in the West. Unquestioned leader of the "Young America" faction among Democrats, Douglas never lost sight of his personal goal of winning the Presidency.

Like any leader with national ambitions, Douglas knew slavery was a dangerous issue in national politics. Although opposing slavery in principle, Douglas never displayed any strong moral antipathy to slavery. Given his knowledge and experience, however, he knew that issues involving slavery could threaten his nationalistic agenda and shatter his own political ambitions. To Douglas, slavery was above all, a political problem, an institution governed by laws and protected by the U. S. Constitution. As a friend recalled many years later, Douglas privately called slavery "a curse beyond computation," but in the end, the "integrity of this political Union" was "worth more to humanity than the whole black race." The national interests and idealistic mission of the United States took precedence, and slavery should remain a political question, dealt with via the arts of negotiation and compromise.⁷

In its final form, Douglas' Kansas-Nebraska proposal embodies this political perspective. The territories need to be organized, and to satisfy all parties, the explicit ban on slavery (the Missouri



Senator Stephen A. Douglas

Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division

Compromise) must be repealed. By doing so, a proper policy of non-discrimination will be put in place, akin to that used in organizing the territories of Utah and New Mexico in 1850. Removing the Missouri Compromise restriction would change nothing, for climate and geography made it highly unlikely slavery would flourish in Kansas or Nebraska. Furthermore, popular sovereignty would leave the issue of slavery to those most directly affected, the local inhabitants of the territories themselves. As such, it fulfilled the ideal of self-government, while relieving the Federal government of responsibility and insulating national politics from the explosive issue of slavery.

Through the Kansas-Nebraska Act and popular sovereignty, Douglas hoped to eliminate slavery as an issue in national political affairs. Other individuals, however, viewed the politics of slavery in a different light. In early discussions concerning Kansas-Nebraska, Secretary of State William Marcy advised President Franklin Pierce to avoid any repeal of the Missouri Compromise, warning it would inflame the

Northern public and be seen as an unwarranted changing of the rules of the game by opening to slavery territories long reserved as free-soil. Pierce and the Democrats had swept to an overwhelming electoral victory in 1852, and their erstwhile opponents, the Whigs, were clearly in rapid decline across the nation. Political prudence, therefore, dictated delay and avoidance of any unwarranted actions involving slavery. Why resuscitate the fortunes of the political opposition and risk the burgeoning Democratic majority?

Southern Democratic senators such as David Atchison of Missouri and Virginia's James M. Mason held another political perspective. The nation already contained a 16 to 15 majority of free states, with other territories clearly poised to add to this free-state dominance. Creating a pro-slavery territory and possible state in Kansas could sustain the sectional balance of power deemed critical to upholding the long-term interests and Constitutional protections for slavery. Repealing the Missouri Compromise prohibition would also score political points for Democrats in the South, and by forcing President Pierce to endorse the measure, demonstrate the influence of the Southern wing of the party over the Pierce

Administration. Nervous northern Democrats could be reminded of long-standing Democratic themes of Federal non-intervention and promotion of states' rights, while being placated with the tangible rewards of office and influence as members of the ruling Democratic party. Consequently, by focusing on the political dimensions of slavery, the interests of the South and the national Democratic party could best be served through support for the Kansas-Nebraska Act and repeal of the Missouri Compromise.

Finally, political opponents of the Pierce Administration, including Whigs and a small band of Free Soilers such as Pierce's New Hampshire neighbor John P. Hale, saw Kansas-Nebraska as a golden opportunity to revive their political fortunes. By deploying both a moral appeal and the economic/ideological arguments in favor of free labor, they sought to defeat the Kansas-Nebraska Act and recoup their sagging political fortunes in the North. For them, the political dimension required focusing upon the sectional balance of power and accusing Pierce and the Democrats of being "doughfaces," pliant Northern tools of an aggressive "Slave Power." In this view, the political **(continued)**

Why resuscitate the fortunes of the political opposition and risk the burgeoning Democratic majority?



As "Mother" Columbia spansks Northern Democrat Stephen A. Douglas, she admonishes him with the words, "You have been a bad boy, Steve, ever since you had anything to do with that Nebraska Bill and have made a great deal of trouble in the family and now I'll pay you for it." Uncle Sam encourages her to "give him the Stripes until he sees Stars." Douglas was widely criticized during his 1860 presidential campaign because of his past support of legislation friendly to Southern interests. Source: HarpWeek, LLC.

Union, an engraving by Henry S. Sadd, celebrates the Compromise of 1850. Daniel Webster and John C. Calhoun are surrounded by patriotic symbols including a bust of Washington and the U.S. Constitution. Liberty, hovering above, blesses the proceedings. The optimism depicted in this image was short lived.

self-interest of the North lay in preventing repeal of the Missouri Compromise and halting implementation of popular sovereignty. Since the Constitution endowed Congress with power to “make all needful rules and regulations respecting the territory or other property belonging to the United States,” (Article 4, Section 3), prohibitions against slavery were legitimate. Over the long term, any weakening of slavery as a political force served Northern interests, for it was often Southern votes that blocked protective tariffs, homestead legislation, and aid for internal improvement projects. In this view, the divisive political effects of slavery would be positive, weakening the national Democratic party and perhaps strengthening the sectional unity of the nation’s Northern majority.

Those focusing on the political dimensions of slavery could therefore approach the Kansas-Nebraska proposal in a number of ways. Some northern Whigs and Free Soilers quickly saw Kansas-Nebraska as a means of assailing the Pierce Administration and eroding the political power of the Democratic party. Others in the South saw advocacy of the Kansas-Nebraska proposal as the key to political success in their region, providing them the chance to stand

forth as defenders of slavery and Southern interests. By making support for Kansas-Nebraska and repeal of the Missouri Compromise a test of party loyalty, they could also increase their power and influence within the Pierce Administration and over the national Democratic party, which had just won a smashing electoral victory in November 1852. Lastly, Stephen Douglas also saw political opportunity in Kansas-Nebraska, for by banishing the issue of slavery to distant territories via popular sovereignty, he could work to unite the Democratic party behind his own favored issues of nationalism and an aggressive foreign policy and promote his personal political ambitions.

The dangers or trade-offs inherent to a political focus upon slavery are quite clear. Most important, by forcing Congressional action on slavery and repealing the Missouri Compromise, proponents of the Kansas-Nebraska bill ran the risk of igniting Northern anger and splitting national political parties into competing sectional blocs. Given their minority status in the Union, this could prove detrimental to Southerners and Southern interests. Heightened sectionalism could also prove costly to political leaders like Stephen Douglas, making it difficult for them to construct the national coalition essential to electoral success. However, if the Northern public could be shown that climate and geography would bar slavery from these new territories regardless, then the political risks could be greatly reduced. Moreover, while they might not like slavery, Northern society was extremely racist, and the abolitionists’ moral critique against slavery had made little headway over the past twenty-five years. So long as Northern self-interest did not seem affected, Kansas-Nebraska and popular sovereignty might help fuse a Northern political base with Southern support garnered through repeal of the Missouri Compromise prohibition. The result would be a powerful national coalition, a political party capable of governing the nation and preserving the Union.

Choice Two For Further Reading

Giennapp, William E. THE ORIGINS OF THE REPUBLICAN PARTY. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987.

Nichols, Roy H. FRANKLIN PIERCE. Reprint edition. Newtown, CT: American Political Biography Press, 1998.

Potter, David M. THE IMPENDING CRISIS, 1848-1861. New York: Harper & Row, 1976.

Endnotes

¹ Robert W. Johannsen, STEPHEN A. DOUGLAS (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1973), 419.

Economic

3

Approach Three

Decisions regarding slavery are ultimately economic decisions. They affect everyone's access to new lands and to economic resources. Decisions regarding slavery in the territories should enhance the nation's economic well-being, and thereby promote the good and virtuous society.

Standing before the Senate on March 4, 1858, James Hammond of South Carolina boldly proclaimed "Cotton is king," and "No power on earth dares to make war upon it." By Hammond's calculations, full two-thirds of American exports were products grown and produced in the South, particularly cotton. Official statistics confirmed Hammond's claims. In

1858, cotton alone composed 49% of total US exports, up from 39% in 1854, the year of Kansas-Nebraska. If one added in the value of cotton shipped to Northern textile mills and the tobacco and other agricultural products exported out of the South, clearly the American economy rested heavily upon the South. Cotton might be king, but ultimately slavery powered the Southern and by extension, the nation's economy.¹

In an 1855 essay, David Christy concluded "that nearly all the cotton consumed in the Christian world is the product of the slave labor of the United States, . . . and, while this monopoly is retained, the institution will continue to extend itself wherever it can find room to spread."² Commentators noted that Kansas might not be especially suited to cotton cultivation, but crops such as tobacco and hemp were already profitable in neighboring Missouri and might be extended into Kansas along with slavery. More broadly, slavery provided the Southern states with a



high standard of living, and the economic benefits extended well beyond strictly monetary calculations. It was always in the interest of the slaveowner to take good care of his/her slaves, for slaves were both labor and property. In the free states, the separation of labor and property led to exploitation, as the capitalist sought to extract maximal value from labor for

the lowest possible cost or wage. As a result, the free worker would be dogged throughout life by insecurity, poverty, and fears of what might befall him or his family in case of illness or old age. In contrast, the slave never had cause to worry about shelter, food, clothing, or care in times of illness and old age.

Slavery not only powered the nation's economy, but it also provided the South with a system avoiding the typical strife between capital and labor. With slaves assigned the menial tasks suited to their ability, Southern whites were free to cultivate the higher arts and engage in political pursuits. The result was a cultured and sophisticated civilization. The very racial basis of slavery even fostered the white equality valued by all Americans. Northern class antagonisms did not exist in the South according to author H. Manly, as "Colour alone is here the badge of distinction, the true mark of aristocracy, and all who are white are equal in

(continued)

(Left) John Bull, worships "King Cotton," apparently unaware of—or oblivious to—the slave on the ground underneath his boots. Note the last line of the verse below the illustration: "And deaf be his ear to the live chattel's groan." Characteristically portrayed as a stout man in a top hat, John Bull is a well-intentioned and conservative yeoman who serves as a personification of Britain. (The United States equivalent would be Uncle Sam.)

Source: New York Historical Society.

In 1858, cotton alone composed 49% of total US exports.

spite of variety of occupation.” In similar fashion, Arthur Simkins pointed to the independence of both the humble farmer and the wealthy planter, for “Each man is master within his own domain and has no rival there.” Only the South featured this broad-based equality and autonomy so vital to preservation of a virtuous society and a republican government capable of protecting and respecting the rights of responsible members of a harmonious community.³

Not all observers of mid-nineteenth century America reached these sorts of conclusions regarding slavery and its importance to the nation’s economy and well-being. By 1854, slavery was in decline around the world, with only Brazil and the Spanish colonies of Cuba & Puerto Rico joining the United States as major slave-based economies. In the United States, numerous political figures had long touted the superiority of free labor over slave labor, and in 1848 and 1852 the Free Soil party competed for the presidency on precisely such a platform. In both years, the party stood committed to “free soil, free speech, free labor, and free men,” and demanded prohibition of slavery from the remaining territories of the United States. Territories were to be preserved for the use of free and superior white labor, providing welcome access to new lands for a burgeoning free population in the North and the waves of immigrants arriving each year at the nation’s ports.

Representative David Wilmot of Pennsylvania was blunt and forceful in 1847 when he stated “Where the negro slave labors, the free white man cannot labor by his side without sharing in his degradation and disgrace.” To Wilmot and many others, slavery and free labor could not coexist profitably in any specific locale. Slavery drove down the wages of free laborers, and in a racist American society, few whites felt ennobled working at jobs also done by enslaved African Americans. Editorializing in the *Brooklyn Eagle* in 1847, Walt Whitman warned against bringing “the dignity of labor down to the level of slavery,” a “level of what is

little above brutishness—sunk to be like owned goods, and driven cattle!” Ten years later, Hinton R. Helper chided the South for its economic backwardness and its widespread and “galling poverty and ignorance,” laying the blame upon the institution of slavery. In the eyes of Helper and many others, slavery bred a self-perpetuating aristocracy while undermining any real equality of opportunity or freedom among the white population. The paucity of commerce and manufacturing in the South was due to the blighting effects of slavery and left the region economically underdeveloped and dependent on the North. Instead of a society featuring a rough democratic equality, Helper charged that a slaveholding aristocracy controlled the South. This aristocracy used the rhetoric of white racial equality, “a cunningly devised mockery of freedom,” to cloak the broad and persistent economic inequities burdening so many in the South.⁴

To many critics of slavery, the obviously superior motivational power of free labor, whereby the laborer reaped the rewards of initiative and perseverance, was the bedrock of a virtuous society. A diverse and larger Northern economy, as well as superior schools and colleges, churches, and

Choice Three For Further Reading

Foner, Eric. *FREE SOIL, FREE LABOR, FREE MEN*. Revised edition. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995.

Genovese, Eugene. *THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF SLAVERY*. New York: Vintage Books, 1965.

North, Douglass C. *THE ECONOMIC GROWTH OF THE UNITED STATES, 1790-1860*. New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1966.

emigrants. Once allow slavery in Kansas or elsewhere, and free labor would be blighted. Moreover, political supporters of economic legislation such as tariffs or Federal aid to internal improvement projects such as railroads knew that Southern representatives frequently blocked such initiatives. Therefore, future hopes of developing a vibrant and modern national economy rested upon expansion of the realm of free labor and restriction or even prohibition against any further extension of the area of slavery.

The economic approach to slavery clearly encroached upon both moral and political dimensions, so much so that the 19th century term “political economy” seems appropriate. Individuals emphasizing this dimension would also approach the Kansas-Nebraska proposal in a variety of ways. Advocates of the free labor ideology would castigate slavery as a pre-modern institution, unsuited to the burgeoning industrial economy of the 1850s. Where slavery thrived, free labor suffered, due to low wages and unfair competition. Slaves lacked purchasing power, so their contribution to real economic growth was inherently limited. A free labor system was the key to a virtuous and prosperous society, and since free labor could not coexist with slavery, Kansas and Nebraska should be kept free of the taint of slavery.

Those who saw slavery in a positive economic light emphasized the importance of Southern cotton and agricultural production to the entire US national economy. The paternalistic racial slavery of the South was superior to the harsh wage slavery of the North, so expansion of slavery into Kansas and Nebraska would prove beneficial to the nation’s economy. As the soils on Southern farms and plantations lost fertility over time, access to new and fresh lands would prove essential, meaning slavery should be permitted or even encouraged to expand outwards. Finally, racial slavery guaranteed white social and political equality, the basis of a virtuous society of independent freeholders.

What both of the above groups shared was a faith in the economic value of developing western territories such as Kansas and Nebraska. In turn, another approach might simply emphasize that point, regarding the

presence or absence of slavery as ultimately irrelevant. What mattered was exploitation of available resources and whether carried out by slaves or by free labor was ultimately irrelevant. Let local preference (via popular sovereignty) be the determining force, and invariably, the most profitable and prosperous option would be chosen.

An emphasis upon the economic dimensions of slavery could also lead to grave difficulties. Slavery’s defenders and critics alike idealized their preferred labor system, ignoring glaring examples of exploitation of either slaves or free workers. Both positions were therefore susceptible to charges of hypocrisy and self-interest. More basically, questions involving slavery raised issues involving individual rights as well as race, rendering it very difficult to make decisions based on strict economic grounds. Political decision-making involves and affects people, and few Americans wished to be viewed solely in terms of their economic value. If human worth were defined in such a crude and narrow fashion, then what would be left of ‘virtue,’ and what value would remain to self-governance, beyond simple calculations of dollars and cents?

Endnotes

- 1 APPENDIX TO THE CONGRESSIONAL GLOBE, 35th Congress, 1st Session, 70.
- 2 David Christy, “Cotton is King,” in Mason I. Lowance, Jr., ed., *A HOUSE DIVIDED: THE ANTEBELLUM SLAVERY DEBATES IN AMERICA, 1776-1865* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 145.
- 3 H. Manly, “The South Vindicated from the Treason and Fanaticism of the Northern Abolitionists,” in David E. Shi and Holly A. Mayer, eds., *FOR THE RECORD: A DOCUMENTARY HISTORY OF AMERICA*, vol. 1, (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1999), 532; Lacy Ford, “Labor and Ideology in the South Carolina Up-Country: The Transition to Free-Labor Agriculture,” in Walter J. Fraser, Jr. & Winfred B. Moore, Jr., eds., *THE SOUTHERN ENIGMA: ESSAYS ON RACE, CLASS, AND FOLK CULTURE* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1983), 27.
- 4 David Wilmot, “I Plead the Cause of White Freemen,” in William E. Gienapp, ed., *THE CIVIL WAR AND RECONSTRUCTION: A DOCUMENTARY COLLECTION* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2001), 28; Walt Whitman, “American Workingmen, Versus Slavery,” in Lowance, Jr., ed., 199; Hinton R. Helper, “The Impending Crisis of the South,” in Stanley I. Kutler, ed., *DICTIONARY OF AMERICAN HISTORY*, vol. 9, (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 2003), 282-283.

Issue Map

1 **Approach One** **Remember Our Ideals**

Slavery is a labor system involving the most fundamental rights of human beings. Therefore, all questions involving slavery are inherently moral questions. Maintain the Missouri Compromise restriction at all costs so as to prevent any expansion of evil and immoral slavery.

Supporters Believe

- Slavery is an absolute moral evil, an exploitive system resting upon denial of all basic human rights and claims of equality.

Actions

- Maintain the Missouri Compromise restriction at all costs, so as to prevent any expansion of evil and immoral slavery.
- Increase efforts to educate all citizens about the evils of slavery so that everyone can make the right ethical decision. We cannot continue as a Union when, as a nation, we are so deeply divided about fundamental questions regarding human rights.

Opponents Say

- Slavery is moral and a “positive good,” paternalistic in form, justified by Christian teachings, and uplifting to the slaves themselves.
- Repeal the Missouri Compromise as an unwise restriction upon a moral system of labor and positively promote the expansion of slavery through direct Federal action.
- Institute popular sovereignty, leaving it to the local populace to choose between two equally moral and legitimate systems of labor (slavery or free labor).

Tradeoffs

The primary tradeoff involved in adopting the moral approach is the tendency towards an absolutist position—anything less, and one’s moral stature is called into question. Some might argue that it is time the nation take a firm moral position on slavery, but the tradeoff is the risk of severe sectional conflict and perhaps, civil war.

2 **Approach Two** **Affirm Individual Choice**

Questions concerning slavery are political in nature. Slavery is a divisive issue and threatens to split the national political parties and even divide the nation itself. Give the local settlers the right to decide and remove the issue of slavery from the national arena.

Supporters Believe

- The future prospects and interests of the United States are far greater than any concerns regarding slavery, and should be kept paramount in the minds of all Americans. Slavery must never be permitted to endanger the Union.
- Slavery is vital to the self-interests of the South, via Constitutional protections and its impact upon representation at the Federal level.

Actions

- Implement the policy of popular sovereignty in Kansas and Nebraska, removing the issue of slavery from the national arena and leaving it to the local populace to decide (self-determination).
- Demand that the Pierce Administration support Kansas-Nebraska (including repeal of the Missouri Compromise) and make it a litmus test of Democratic loyalty to the well-being of all United States citizens in both North and South.

Opponents Say

- Slavery is the basis of the “Slave Power,” a conspiracy in control of the Democratic party and working to serve Southern interests.
- Attack Kansas-Nebraska as a means of reinvigorating the kind of political debate that is essential for a healthy democracy.

Tradeoffs

The biggest tradeoff is that of heightened sectional anger due to Kansas-Nebraska, which could destroy the national political parties and replace them with hostile, sectional blocs. If left to local decision (popular sovereignty), those motivated by moral considerations will never be satisfied, and as new territories are organized, the issue must be fought over again and again.

3

Approach Three Protect Our Prosperity

Decisions regarding slavery should be based on economic considerations, since they affect everyone's access to new lands and to economic resources. We need to focus on the nation's economic well-being and ensure the development of a strong and prosperous society.

Supporters Believe

- Slavery powers the American economy. Therefore it should be permitted or even encouraged to expand.
- Slavery and free labor are both based upon inequality and exploitation, two faces of the same basic assumptions undergirding all social structures.

Actions

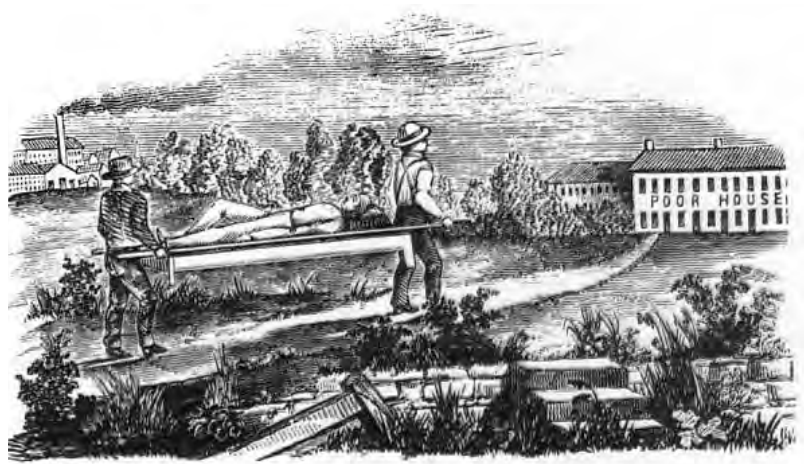
- To maintain its profitability, slavery requires access to new lands such as Kansas, and should be permitted to expand into the region.
- The nation needs to develop its territories and resources, including building a trans-continental railroad. Pass Kansas-Nebraska with popular sovereignty, since regardless of the fate of slavery, the territories will be developed and the nation will benefit.

Opponents Say

- Slavery is in global decline, at odds with the modern, capitalistic world based on free labor and individual initiative.
- Free labor cannot coexist with slavery, which reduces wages and promotes aristocracy and inequality.
- If slavery is allowed in Kansas and Nebraska, free labor will not emigrate there, refusing to compete with African American slaves. The territories will be blighted by slavery, and free labor will be denied fair economic opportunities. Therefore, ban slavery by maintaining the Missouri Compromise.

Tradeoffs

Defenders and critics of slavery are both open to charges of hypocrisy. By stressing economic considerations, they may fail to sway the American public. Given the slippery nature of statistics, economic indicators are easily manipulated. Moreover, is it possible to ignore the heavy ideological and racial burdens entwined with any discussions of the merits of slavery and free labor? Can moral imperatives be so lightly shunted aside?



ATTENTION PAID A POOR SICK WHITE MAN.



ATTENTION PAID A POOR SICK NEGRO.

These two proslavery woodcuts were published in the book, *In Defense of Slavery* by Josiah Priest (1788-1851). The two prints contrast the circumstances faced by a sick white laborer, who is being carried off to the poor house, with the attention slaveowners devote to a "poor sick negro." Source: Rare Book & Manuscript Department, Boston Public Library.

Deliberative Dialogue

Engaged Communities/Engaged Learning

The New England Center for Civic Life's College Issues Forums are based on practices developed by the National Issues Forums Institutes over the past 25 years. Deliberative dialogues are structured conversations that encourage participants to speak not only as individuals or groups with competing interests, but as members of a community with shared concerns. The goal is to work through conflicting choices together in an effort to reach some common understandings and actions. Participants are encouraged to talk not only in terms of expert analysis, but also from the perspective of their values, priorities, and personal experiences. Often some new insight for addressing a problem gets created during the deliberations.

The discussion guides have been created through an issue framing process. In issue framing, people who are affected by the problem define it in their *own* terms and develop approaches for addressing it. Each approach represents the values and priorities of a different group. Through reviewing the advantages and drawbacks of each approach participants develop a greater understanding of each others' viewpoints and begin to develop common ground. Common ground is that place where individuals see how their goals are shareable, their values overlap, and their interests intersect.

Engaging in deliberation encourages students to become active producers of knowledge because they are put into situations that ask them to think critically, listen attentively, work collaboratively, value diversity, and publicly voice their ideas. Because explicit links are made between personal experiences and broader social issues, many begin to see the connections between their own lives and public life. Awakening commitment, cultivating knowledge, and developing skills are essential if students are to look beyond their immediate self interest and become citizens and leaders of vital and productive communities.

Credits

Author: Dr. Douglas A. Ley, Associate Professor of History and Chair of the Humanities Division, Franklin Pierce College

Series Editor: Joni Doherty, Director, New England Center for Civic Life; Senior Lecturer, American Studies, Franklin Pierce College

Designer: Eva Ruutopõld, StudioBluu, Hancock, NH

Cover Artist: Patrick Welby, Peterborough, NH

© 2006 The New England Center for Civic Life and Dr. Douglas Ley

This project has been made possible by the support of Franklin Pierce College and grants from The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the Institute of Museum and Library Sciences, and The New Hampshire Higher Education Assistance Foundation. Any views, findings, conclusions or recommendations expressed in this publication do not necessarily represent those of the funders.

For more information about College Issues Forums or to place an order for a discussion guide, please contact the New England Center for Civic Life at 603-899-1150 or necccl@fpc.edu.