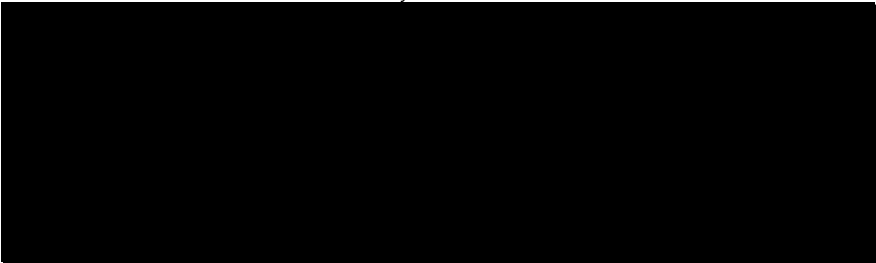


Thus Douglas decided to fill that void and save the Democratic Party from disintegration by reinstating conflict with Whigs over a program for western development. His program was three-pronged: construction of a transcontinental railroad with federal land grants; a homestead law giving away free land in the West to attract settlers; and formal territorial organization of the area west of Iowa and Missouri, on which the other parts of his plan depended. On January 4, 1854, Douglas reported out from his committee a bill organizing the Nebraska Territory. This bill, he wrote an Illinois ally, "will form the test of Parties, & the only alternative is either to stand with the Democracy or to rally under [the Whig William H.] Seward." The good of the Democratic Party, not of the nation, was Douglas's top priority. As a Louisville, Kentucky, newspaper editor later assessed Douglas's reasons for introducing the bill, "The politician constructed a new arena for party gladiators at the expense of the repose and temper of the nation."

To pass this party-salvaging bill, as Atchison had made clear, Douglas needed the support of southern Democrats, who would no longer tolerate retention of the Missouri Compromise's declaration that slavery must be "forever prohibited" from Nebraska. Douglas fully understood that outright repeal of that prohibition would infuriate Northerners, who by 1854 had come to consider it sacred. Thus he sought to make an end run around it, in part because he sincerely believed that slavery would never be extended to the new territory. His January 4 bill

copied language directly from the Utah and New Mexico measures of 1850, stating that "when admitted as a State or States, the said Territory, or any portion of the same, shall be received into the Union with or without slavery, as their constitutions may prescribe at the time of their admission." It further declared that territorial legislatures would have authority over all rightful subjects of legislation, presumably including slavery. Douglas accompanied this bill with a committee report that specifically recommended *against* either "affirming or repealing the 8th section of the Missouri act," that is, the Missouri Compromise line.

Northern Whigs in the Senate like Seward immediately wrote friends that Douglas had gone as far toward repeal of the ban on slavery extension as he dared. Southern Democrats did not see it that way. In their reading of Douglas's bill, the Missouri Compromise line would still prohibit slaveholders from entering the new territory until it was ready to apply for statehood. If so, slavery extension was impossible since Northerners would write antislavery state constitutions. They immediately told Douglas his bill did not suffice. On January 10, Douglas reported a twenty-first section of the bill that had allegedly been omitted from the first version by clerical error. This section specified that "all questions pertaining to slavery in the Territories, and in the new states to be formed therefrom are to be left to the people residing therein, through their appropriate representatives." Here was the classic northern Democratic definition of popular sovereignty: elected territorial legislatures should make the decision on slavery extension.



The pressure to organize the area west of Missouri and Iowa did not go away, however, and, it must be emphasized, that pressure did *not* come from land-hungry southern slaveholders or even southern politicians hoping to create a new slave state. Instead, it arose from two northern sources. One was farmers seeking cheaper land than they could find in rapidly populated midwestern states. Those farmers could not gain legal title to any land in the Louisiana Territory until Congress formally organized territorial governments. Only then could the federal government survey the land and put it up for sale at government land offices. Since the acquisition of Oregon and California, moreover, numerous proposals had sprouted up to build one or more railroads from the East to the Pacific coast. What route or routes such railroads might take generated considerable dispute, but everyone realized that so ambitious a project required federal subsidies in the form of land grants that railroads could sell to raise construction funds. Any route from the Midwest across the Louisiana Territory, however, required the government to survey land into sections that could be granted to railroads. Proponents of a transcontinental railroad thus joined the cry for formally organizing the area west of Missouri and Iowa. Neither land-hungry farmers nor railroad promoters had any desire to change the 1820 prohibition of slavery extension. They simply wanted territories organized.

In December 1853, at the start of the Thirty-third Congress,

with its huge Democratic majorities in both houses, Iowa Democrat Augustus Dodge introduced a bill into the Senate organizing the area west of Missouri and Iowa into the Nebraska Territory. Senators then sent the bill to the Senate Committee on Territories, chaired by Stephen A. Douglas, who had managed passage of the compromise bills through the Senate in 1850.

Douglas had sought formal organization of this area since he first arrived in Congress in 1844. An ardent nationalist, he hoped to build up the West's population so it could act as a balance wheel between the North and the South. Douglas also desired construction of a transcontinental railroad, especially if its eastern terminus were in Chicago or Superior City, Wisconsin, where he had extensive landholdings whose value stood to increase handsomely if the Pacific railroad originated in either city. Douglas astutely recognized the obstacles. He had written friends as early as November 1852 that no territory could ever be organized unless Congress somehow bypassed the prohibition of slavery extension; southern Democrats in the Senate simply would not allow it. Throughout 1853 both northern and southern Democratic newspapers called for organizing the area on the popular sovereignty basis of the Compromise of 1850, and when Congress opened in December 1853, Douglas privately promised an Illinois lieutenant that he would write a Nebraska bill which did precisely that. As it soon became clear, his rationale for doing so, a flagrantly dishonest rationale indeed, was that Congress in 1850 had meant the popular sovereignty provisions of the compromise to apply to all federal territories and not simply to Utah and New Mexico.

By the end of 1853 a number of other Democrats had reached a similar conclusion, if for reasons different from Douglas's. The framing of what became the Kansas-Nebraska Act of

1854 in fact repeated and adumbrated all of the fateful connections between politicians and slavery extension that had appeared since the emergence of the Texas annexation question in 1843. Politicians made decisions from short-term calculations of partisan, factional, or personal advantage rather than from any long-term concern for the health, indeed, the very preservation, of the Union. Unlike earlier instances in the 1840s, grassroots popular pressure at the end of 1853 existed to formally organize territorial governments in the remainder of the Louisiana Territory. But, once again, politicians, not the public at large, made the fateful decisions regarding slavery's expansion into those territories—decisions that this time ultimately propelled the nation into civil war.

