



Representatives were always more directly susceptible to public pressure than senators, who were chosen by state legislatures for six-year terms. Since January, a storm of protest had erupted across the North against the repeal of the Missouri Compromise line. All of the reasons that had prompted northern support for the Wilmot Proviso powered this anger, but two additional factors increased it. While Northerners had little interest in distant places like Utah and New Mexico, many of them hoped to move to the areas contiguous to Missouri and Iowa and feared they would be prevented from doing so if slaveholders also went there. But even for Northerners with no wanderlust, the repeal of a thirty-four-year-old pledge against slavery extension into that area was intolerable. Many northern Democrats wavered before this popular wrath. When the Nebraska bill passed the House on May 22 by a vote of 113 to 100, northern Democrats split precisely in half—forty-four in favor and forty-four against. Southern Whigs, in contrast, divided thirteen in favor, seven against, and four not voting. Had those southern Whigs united in opposition, as their northern colleagues im-

plored them to do, the bill would have failed in the House. Instead, Pierce signed the Kansas-Nebraska Act into law on May 30, 1854.

Because of its results, the Kansas-Nebraska Act is arguably the most consequential piece of legislation ever passed by the U.S. Congress. Those results relating to slavery's possible extension into Kansas (no one expected slaveholders to move to Nebraska) took a while to develop, but the political fallout was instantaneous and proved enduring. For one thing, northern outrage scotched Pierce's ambitious plans for territorial expansion. The treaty with Mexico acquiring the Gadsden Purchase south of the Gila River almost lost in the Senate in the spring of 1854 because Northerners feared additional slavery expansion into it. It finally succeeded only after senators significantly reduced the size of the acquisition James Gadsden had negotiated. The larger lesson was clear: any prospect that Congress would now allow annexation of slaveholding Cuba was doomed.

So was the northern wing of the Democratic Party. As some perceptive northern Democrats instantly feared, their party suffered a terrific backlash from furious northern voters determined to punish it for sponsoring the Kansas-Nebraska Act. This realignment of the North's electorate against Democrats lasted until the congressional elections of 1874 and even longer in presidential contests. The dimensions of this anti-Democratic landslide can be measured in several ways. In the Congress that passed the Kansas-Nebraska Act, northern Democrats held ninety-one seats in the House; in the North's congressional elections of 1854 and 1855, they lost sixty-six of those seats. Of the forty-four northern Democrats who voted for the Kansas-Nebraska Act, only seven won reelection. Viewed somewhat differently, in the three-way presidential contest of 1852, Franklin Pierce won almost 50 percent of the North's popular vote;

in 1856, in another three-man race, Democratic candidate James Buchanan garnered a little more than 41 percent of the region's vote. That was a huge swing; indeed, one of the main reasons that the Republican Abraham Lincoln won the presidency in 1860 is that by 1856 Democrats had already been reduced to a minority of the northern electorate.

If the backlash against the Kansas-Nebraska Act devastated Democrats politically, however, it, in combination with other crucial factors, also contributed to the final destruction of the Whig Party. Southern Whig support for Douglas's measure in Congress disrupted the party along sectional lines. Unlike the previous sectional divisions over the Wilmot Proviso and the Compromise of 1850, this breach proved irreparable. From January 1854 on, northern Whigs both inside and outside Congress, antislavery Sewardites and conservative pro-compromise Whigs alike, warned that southern Whig support for a measure that opened up the West to slavery extension would "be a finishing blow to the Whig party" since northern Whigs could and would never cooperate with southern Whigs again. "No man has struggled as I have to preserve it as a national party," accurately protested Connecticut's Whig Senator Truman Smith, who since 1842 had served as the de facto national chairman of the party. But "I shall have nothing to do with any Southern Whig who joins Stephen A. Douglas in introducing into Congress & into the country another controversy on the subject of slavery."

Southern Whig votes for the bill were thus proclaimed to be "the ultimate disruption and *denationalization* of the Whig party." The "break" with southern Whigs was "final," Truman Smith vowed in late May. "I hope to hear no more of national parties," snarled Ohio's Whig Ben Wade. "Never was a greater mistake made than in passing the Nebraska bill," moaned the disconso-

late conservative Winthrop in June 1854. He saw "nothing ahead but discord & devilry."

Northern Whigs' fury at what they regarded as southern Whigs' betrayal instantly caused Free-Soilers to implore them to leave the Whig Party and join them in a broad new northern antislavery party built around opposition to the Kansas-Nebraska Act and slavery extension. A May editorial in Free-Soilers' leading newspaper called upon the people of the North "to disregard obsolete issues, old prejudices, mere party names, and rally as one man for the re-establishment of liberty and the overthrow of the Slave Power." In 1854 this appeal met with limited success. In four midwestern states where the Whig Party had already been weakened by significant voter losses since 1850—Ohio, Indiana, Michigan, and Wisconsin—broad anti-Nebraska or "People's" coalitions consisting of indignant Whigs, Democrats, and Free-Soilers quickly emerged after the act's passage in May to challenge its offending Democratic authors. In Michigan and Wisconsin, those coalitions labeled themselves the Republican Party as early as the summer of 1854. The creation of the Republican Party, in short, directly resulted from the Kansas-Nebraska Act.

The initial state platform of Michigan's Republicans well encapsulated the purpose and thrust of the new organization. After denouncing the institution of slavery as "a relic of barbarism," calling for renewed defiance of the Fugitive Slave Act, and insisting that Congress prohibit slavery extension to check the "unequal representation" of the South in Washington, it declared that the purpose of the Kansas-Nebraska Act was to "give the Slave States such a decided and practical preponderance in all measures of government as shall reduce the North . . . to the mere province of a few slaveholding oligarchs of the South—to a condition too shameful to be contemplated." Thus the plat-

form ringingly concluded: "That in view of the necessity of battling for the first principles of republican government, and against the schemes of aristocracy the most revolting and oppressive with which the earth was ever cursed, or man debased, we will co-operate and be known as Republicans until the contest be terminated."

Over time this Republican call for Northerners to unite in a defensive sectional phalanx against Slave Power aggressions would gain much greater salience among Northerners, but in 1854 most northern Whigs outside the four states already mentioned wanted no part of a new party or a coalition with Free-Soilers. The reason was clear. Every northern Whig in the House and Senate had voted against the Kansas-Nebraska Act, and many northern Whigs and Democrats expected Whigs to sweep the North's congressional elections and indeed the presidential election of 1856 by running against it. The party had ruptured along sectional lines, but as one Pennsylvania Whig wrote in May 1854, "The Whig party of the North is, this day, stronger than at any former period." New York's Seward was especially adamant in spurning Free-Soilers' advances and insisting that the northern Whig Party was the only antislavery party Northerners needed. So, too, was Illinois's Abraham Lincoln, a devoted Whig since the party's formation in 1834 who, while running as a Whig for the state legislature in 1854, explicitly rejected appeals from Free-Soilers to join a new Republican Party.

Lincoln did not demand the immediate abolition of slavery, but his anger at the prospect of slavery extension opened by the Kansas-Nebraska Act abruptly ended his self-imposed retirement from active political participation. Convinced that slavery was a "monstrous injustice" and intolerably immoral, Lincoln also believed that the nation's Founders had never expected it to survive as long as it had. He saw its possible future extension as

wantonly prolonging a violation of the heroic Founders' intentions to create a republic devoted to liberty. In a memorable speech at Peoria, Illinois, on October 16, 1854, he made clear that his concern was the *extension* of slavery, not its *existence* in southern slave states. But the constitutionality of slavery in those states furnished no excuse for its extension into free territory in violation of the Founders' expectations. Douglas's callous overthrow of the Missouri Compromise threatened the very preservation and perpetuation of "the blessings of our glorious Union" that its passage in 1820 had secured.

