Chapter 15: The Coming Crisis: The 1850s

Chapter Review

1. AMERICAN COMMUNITIES Illinois Communities Debate Slavery

During the summer and fall of 1858, Stephen Douglas and Abraham Lincoln debated the most important political issue of the day, slavery, around Illinois on seven occasions. That the Lincoln-Douglas debates focused on slavery and the future of the Union alone is an indication of how serious matters had become. Stephen Douglas was the leading Democratic contender for the 1860 presidential election. Lincoln, who had been an underdog in the 1858 Senate race, was a Whig who had become radicalized by the issue of slavery. Although Lincoln did not believe in the equality of the races, he did believe that slavery was morally wrong. Douglas won the 1858 senatorial election in Illinois but the acclaim that Lincoln gained as a result of participating in the debates helped establish the Republicans’ claim to be the only party capable of stopping the spread of slavery and made Lincoln a strong contender for the Republican nomination for the presidential race in 1860.

1. AMERICA IN 1850

Geographic expansion, population increase, economic development, and the changes wrought by the market revolution had transformed the struggling new nation. Americans had formed a strong sense of national identity economically, culturally, and politically.

a. Expansion and Growth

Through war and diplomacy, the country had grown to continental proportions and more than tripling in size. America had thirty-one states in 1850 and more than half of the population lived west of the Appalachian mountains. America was also a much richer country and considered to be a “developed” rather than a “developing” county. The success of the United States in geographic expansion and economic development undermined the role of the South in national politics.

b. Politics, Culture, and National Identity

In 1848, a series of democratic revolutions in Italy, France, Germany, Hungary, and parts of the Austrian Empire served to foster American pride. Many Americans assumed that American democracy and manifest destiny were the models for these liberal revolutions. Pride in democracy was only one unifying theme in a growing sense of national identity. In the 1850s there was a burst of creative activity termed the “American Renaissance.” During the American Renaissance, American writers like Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville pioneered new literary forms. American poets, like Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson, experimented with “off-rhyme” verse. Most of the writers of the American Renaissance were social critics. The most successful novel of the period, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe, vividly described the horrors of slavery in the literary style of domestic novels.

1. THE COMPROMISE OF 1850

1850 marked the most serious political crisis the United States had ever known. The issue of the expansion of slavery, raised by the 1846 Wilmot Proviso, could no longer be ignored.

a. Political Parties and Slavery

At a time when Americans were most united by sectional issues, politicians from all sections of the country cooperated to form political parties with national appeal. Despite these efforts, by the election of 1848 sectional divisions already ran deep. Political splits were preceded by divisions in other social institutions. For instance, disagreements about slavery had already split the country’s great religious organizations into northern and southern groups.

b. Congressional Debate

President Zachary Taylor died during the congressional debates that preceded the Compromise of 1850. Vice President Millard Fillmore assumed the presidency. John C. Calhoun wrote the southern dissent of the compromise. His argument insisted that Congress did not have a constitutional right to prohibit slavery in the territories since they were the common property of all states. This position quickly became Southern dogma: anything less than full access to the territories was unconstitutional. Southern threats to secede from the Union convinced many Northern voters that the South was a demonic monolith that threatened the national government.

c. Two Communities, Two Perspectives

It was the common belief shared by both Northerners and Southerners in the necessity of expansion that made their arguments about slavery irreconcilable. Both North and South believed in manifest destiny and both used the language of basic rights and liberties in the debate over expansion. To antislavery Northerners, the South appeared to be backward and economically behind, an area dominated by a small slave-owning aristocracy who deprived poor whites of their democratic rights and the benefits of honest work. The South saw itself as a great exporter of cotton and therefore the great engine of national economic growth from which the North, as well as the South, benefited. They saw slavery not only as a blessing to the slaves but also as the cornerstone of democracy.

d. Compromises

The Compromise of 1850 was actually five separate bills embodying three separate compromises. First, California was admitted to the Union as a free state but the status of the other former Mexican possessions would be decided by popular sovereignty when they applied for statehood. Second, Texas, a slave state, was required to cede land to New Mexico Territory, which had yet to determine its status as a slave or free territory. Finally, the slave trade, but not slavery, was ended in Washington D.C. in exchange for a stronger fugitive slave law to be enforced in all states. Although the compromise was met with excitement and relief, the sectional splits within each party that existed before the compromise remained.

e. The Fugitive Slave Act

Northern abolitionists had urged slaves to escape and had promised to assist them when they reached the North. Many northern states had passed personal liberty laws informing the federal government that they would not cooperate with the enforcement of the fugitive slave law. The Fugitive Slave Law, enacted in 1850, dramatically increased the power of slave owners to capture escaped slaves and gave slave owners the full support of the federal government in this endeavor. The new law also imposed federal penalties on citizens who protected fugitive slaves. The Fugitive Slave Law made slavery national and forced many northern communities to confront the full meaning of slavery. More and more Americans came to believe that slavery was wrong.

f. The Election of 1852

The weakening of the national political parties was evident during the presidential election of 1852, when both parties had difficulty nominating candidates for the election. After fifty-two ballots the Republicans nominated General Winfield Scott as the party’s candidate rather than the current president, Willard Fillmore. The Democrats, after several tied votes, nominated Franklin Pierce of New Hampshire and united under a platform calling for enforcement of all parts of the Compromise of 1850.

g. “Young America”: The Politics of Expansion

The “Young America” movement began as a group of writers and politicians in the New York Democratic Party who believed in the democratic and nationalistic promise of manifest destiny. By the 1850s their goals had shrunk to a desire to conquer Central America and Cuba. During the Pierce administration, several attempts were made to invade Caribbean and Central American countries, usually with the declared intention of extending slavery. In 1854, Pierce authorized his minister to Spain, Pierre Soule, to try to force the unwilling Spanish to sell Cuba to the United States for $130 million. Pierce also dispatched Commodore Matthew Perry across the Pacific to Japan, a nation previously inaccessible to American trade. The mission resulted in a treaty in 1845 that opened Japan to American trade.

1. THE CRISIS OF THE NATIONAL PARTY SYSTEM

In 1854, Stephen Douglas introduced the Kansas-Nebraska Act, proposing to open those lands that had previously been the northern part of Indian Territory to American settlers under the principal of popular sovereignty. This effectively reopened the question of slavery in the territories.

a. The Kansas-Nebraska Act

Douglass introduced the Kansas-Nebraska act in order to further the construction of the transcontinental railroad to California. Douglas wanted the rail line to terminate in Chicago, but for that to happen, the land west of Iowa and Missouri had to be organized into territories. Douglas thought that by allowing popular sovereignty in the new territories he was solving the slavery question, but in reality his bill repealed the Missouri Compromise of 1820, which barred slavery north of 36°30’. The Kansas-Nebraska bill passed, but not without greatly straining the major political parties. The passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act convinced many northern Whigs that compromise with the South was impossible.

b. “Bleeding Kansas”

The first to claim land in Kansas were residents of Missouri, which was already a slave state. Proslavery strongholds such as Leavenworth, Kickapoo, and Atchison quickly developed. In 1855, the second of several fraudulent elections regarding the territory’s slave status, more ballots were cast than there were residents of the territory. Northerners quickly responded and the first party of New Englanders arrived in the summer of 1854. They established the free-soil town of Lawrence. Kansas soon became a bloody battleground as the two factions struggled to secure the mandate of popular sovereignty. In the summer of 1856, these disagreements exploded into open warfare. Proslavery forces burned and looted Lawrence, and in retaliation, John Brown led his sons in a raid on the proslavery settlers as Pottawatomie Creek, killing five unarmed people. A wave of violence ensued. The rest of the nation watched in horror as the residents of Kansas murdered one another in the pursuit of sectional goals.

c. The Politics of Nativism

The violence in Kansas was mirrored by increasing violence in the nation’s cities. This urban violence was caused by the breakdown of the two party system. The breakup of the Whig party left a political vacuum that was filled by one of the strongest bursts of anti-immigrant feeling in American history. A new party, the American Party, grew rapidly in the 1850s. Nativists held immigration to be solely responsible for the increase in crime and the rising cost of relief for the poor that accompanied the rapid urban growth of the 1830s and 1840s. The popular name for the American Party was the “Know Nothings.” The proposed a twenty-one year residency requirement before foreigners could vote and a head tax meant to prevent poorer immigrants from arriving in America.

d. The Republican Party and the Election of 1856

The immediate question facing the nation in 1856 was which new party, the Know-Nothings or the Republicans, would emerge as the stronger party. A more important question was whether or not the Democratic Party could hold together. The two strongest contenders for the Democratic nomination for president were President Pierce and Stephen A. Douglas. Because both men had the support of the southern wing of the party but not the northern wing, the Democrats settled on a compromise candidate, James Buchanan. The election of 1856 was a three-way contest between Buchanan, John C. Fremont of the Republican Party, and former president Millard Fillmore as the Know-Nothing Party candidate. Buchanan won the election because he was the only national candidate. This victory indicated that the Republican Party had beat the Know-Nothing Party in the battle to become a major national party. However, the Republican Party remained a sectional, rather than national, party.

1. THE DIFFERENCES DEEPEN

James Buchanan believed that he could hold the nation together. However, he was so indebted to the southern wing of the Democratic Party for his election that he could not take the impartial actions needed to heal “Bleeding Kansas.”

a. The Dred Scott Decision

*Dred Scott v. Sandford* was decided on March 6, 1857, two days after James Buchanan was sworn in. The southern-dominated Supreme Court attempted—and failed—to solve the political controversy over slavery. In 1846, Dred Scott, a slave, sued for his freedom and the freedom of his wife and daughter based on the fact that they had lived in the free territory of Wisconsin with Scott’s master and were therefore free. Chief Justice Roger B. Taney in his decision, declared the Missouri Compromise unconstitutional, and dismissed the Dred Scott case on the grounds that only citizens could bring suits before federal courts and black people were not citizens. The five southern members of the Supreme Court agreed with Taney’s decision. Southerners agreed with the decision while Northerners did not. For the Republican Party, the Dred Scott decision represented a formidable challenge. By invalidating the Missouri Compromise, the decision nullified the free-soil foundation of the party.

b. The Lecompton Constitution

In Kansas, the doctrine of popular sovereignty led to continuing internal strife and two governments for the territory. The first election of officers in 1855 produced a proslavery outcome that was obviously the result of illegal voting by Missouri border ruffians. Free-Soilers protested by forming their own government. Kansas then had a proslavery territorial legislature in Lecompton and a free-soil government in Topeka. Free-soil voters boycotted a June 1857 election of representatives to a convention to write the territory’s constitution. As a result, the convention had a proslavery majority and they wrote a proslavery constitution. The convention then applied to Congress for admission under the Lecompton constitution, as it was known. The majority of Congress voted in April 1858 to refuse Kansas admission to the Union under the Lecompton constitution. In a new referendum, the people of Kansas also overwhelmingly voted to reject the Lecompton constitution. Kansas was finally admitted as a free state in January 1861.

c. The Panic of 1857

In August 1857, the failure of an Ohio investment house ignited a wave of panicked selling and led to business failures and slowdowns that put thousands out of work. The major cause of the panic was a sharp, but temporary, downturn in agricultural exports to Britain. The Panic of 1857 was less harmful to the South than it was to the North. Southerners took this as proof of the superiority of their economic system.

d. John Brown’s Raid

In 1859, John Brown proposed a scheme to raid the South and start a general slave uprising. Free African Americans, including Fredrick Douglass, did not support Brown, thinking his plan to raid the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia, was doomed to failure. On October 16, 1859, Brown led a group of twenty-two white and African American men against the arsenal. In less than a day the raid was over. Eight of Brown’s men, including two of his sons, were dead and no slaves had joined the fight. John Brown was captured, tried and hanged on December 2, 1859. His raid shocked the South and aroused their greatest fear, that of slave rebellion. Even more frightening to southerners was the discovery of documents captured at Harpers Ferry indicating that Brown had the financial support of a half dozen wealthy northern elites.

1. THE SOUTH SECEDES

By 1860, sectional differences had caused the collapse of the national Whig Party and the second national party, the Democrats, were on the brink of dissolution. Ordinary people in both the North and the South were coming to believe that there was no way to avoid open conflict.

a. The Election of 1860

The split of the Democratic Party into northern and southern wings that occurred during President Buchanan’s tenure became official at the Democratic nominating conventions in 1860. After ten days, fifty-nine ballots, and two southern walkouts, the convention ended where it had begun: deadlocked. Southern Democrats nominated John C. Breckinridge of Kentucky while northern Democrats nominated Stephen A. Douglas. The two leading Republican candidates were Senator William H. Seward of New York and Abraham Lincoln of Illinois. The election of 1860 presented voters with one of the clearest choices in American history. Breckinridge supported the extension of slavery, Lincoln firmly opposed it, and Douglas attempted to hold the middle ground with the concept of popular sovereignty. The Republicans did not campaign in the South and Breckinridge did not campaign in the North. The election of 1860 produced the second highest voter turnout in U.S. history. Lincoln won the election and 54 percent of the vote in the northern states although his name did not even appear on the ballot in ten southern states.

b. The South Leaves the Union

The governors of South Carolina, Alabama, and Mississippi, each of whom had committed his state to secession if Lincoln were elected, immediately issued calls for special state conventions. On December 20, 1860, a state convention in South Carolina voted unanimously to secede from the Union. In the weeks that followed, conventions in Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, and Texas followed suit. Many Southerners believed that Northerners threatened their way of life and they seceded because they no longer believed they had a choice.

c. The North’s Political Options

As a lame duck president, Buchanan decided to take no action regarding the Southern states secession. Abraham Lincoln, as president-elect, made it clear that he would not compromise on the extension of slavery, which was the South’s main demand. There were three political options that the new administration could pursue with the South. They could compromise, let the South go in peace, or they could use force to reunite the Union.

d. Establishment of the Confederacy

In February, delegates from the seven seceding states met in Montgomery, Alabama, and created the Confederate States of America. They wrote a constitution that was identical to the Constitution of the United States except that it strongly supported states’ rights and it made the abolition of slavery practically impossible. The convention chose Jefferson Davis of Mississippi as president and Alexander Stephens of Georgia as vice president of the new nation. Both men were known as moderates and this choice was deliberate. The strategy of the new Confederate state was to argue that secession was a normal, responsible, and expectable course of action, and nothing for the North to get upset about.

e. Lincoln’s Inauguration

While Lincoln refused to issue public statements about the crisis before his inaugural, Americans wanted leadership and action. Lincoln continued, however, to offer nonbelligerent firmness and moderation.

***Answer the following questions from Out of Many chapter 15:***

1. **Expansion and Growth:** What were the statistics of expansion and growth? What two regions became more interdependent? How was the South affected?

2. **Political Parties and Slavery:** What splits had occurred over slavery in the political parties? How did the national party system erode into a sectional one? What did the 1848 election illustrate about sectional interests? What social splits predated the political ones?

3. **Congressional Debate:** What was the philosophical basis of states’ rights as expressed by John C. Calhoun? How did he extend this argument to slavery in the territories? What was the connection Calhoun made between political and personal equality?

4. **Debate and Compromise:** What senior and junior leaders debated and arranged the Compromise of 1850? What happened to President Taylor and how did this complicate the debate? What were the three major compromises in the Compromise of 1850? Why was Utah’s request for statehood rejected? What position were the political parties in? How did the country respond?

5. **The Fugitive Slave Act:** What was the essence of the act and why did it cause more trouble instead of less as expected by the compromisers? What was the overall effect of the Fugitive Slave Act?

6. **The Election of 1852:** Who were the candidates and what were their programs? What was the outcome of the election? How good was voter turnout?

7. **“Young America”:** The Politics of expansion: How did the Pierce administration begin and how was this changed by the “Young America” movement? What connection was there between Pierce and this group? How did this threaten the Compromise of 1850?

8. **The Kansas-Nebraska Act:** Why did Douglas propose the Kansas-Nebraska bill? What was the essence of the bill and the price Douglas had to pay to get it passed? What effect did passage of the bill have on political parties and on the country? What effect did it have on the Indians?

9. **“Bleeding Kansas”:** What was “Bleeding Kansas”? What series of events led to Kansas bloodshed?

10. **The Organization of the Republican Party and the Election of 1856:** What qualities united the Republican Party? What constituencies found room in the party? What was the meaning of “freedom, temperance, and Protestantism against slavery, rum, and Romanism?” What effect did sectionalism and the Kansas-Nebraska Act have on the choice of candidates? Why was the election actually two separate contests and what candidates ran in them? What were the results of the election and why did the Republicans claim “victorious defeat”?

11. **The Dred Scott Decision:** What was the decision of the Supreme Court as articulated by Chief Justice Roger B. Taney? Why was it a sectional decision? Why was Buchanan unable to take action that was viewed as impartial in Kansas? Why did he support the Dred Scott decision? How did the public, North and South, and the political parties respond? What was Buchanan’s role in the decision?

12. **The Lecompton Constitution:** What was the Lecompton Constitution and how did it lead to civil strife and two opposing territorial governments? Why did Buchanan endorse the document and Douglas oppose it? How was Kansas finally admitted? What types of violence and conflict came with Lecompton’s defeat?

13. **John Brown’s Raid:** What was the intention of John Brown’s raid of the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry? What were the results, immediate and long range, of the raid? How did most people respond, North and South?

14. **The Election of 1860:** What happened to the Democratic Party in the convention process? Who did they nominate? What was the Republican strategy and who did they nominate? What clear choice did voters have? What was the turnout in the election and what areas did Lincoln carry? Who was the true winner?

15. **The South Leaves the Union:** What action did the South take? Why did they not believe Lincoln’s moderation? What states seceded from the Union? What was the vote in the various secession conventions? What did both Republicans and secessionists miscalculate?

16. **The North’s Political Options:** What was the northern response framed by Lincoln? What did he hope would happen? What was Horace Greeley’s suggestion and why was that not a likely option? What was the third possibility and where was that issue likely to come up?

17. **Establishment of the Confederacy:** How did the Confederate States compare with the U.S. in organization? What dilemma did it pose? Who were Jefferson Davis and Alexander H. Stephens and why were they chosen as president and vice-president? What was the essence of Davis’s inaugural address?

18. **Lincoln’s Inauguration:** What was the message of Lincoln’s inaugural address?