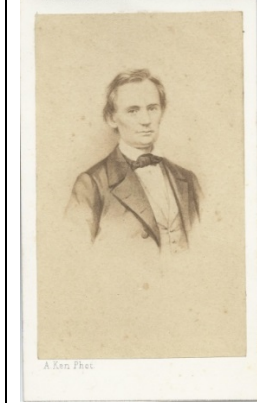


Chapter 158 – The Political Battle Over The War And The Peace In Mexico Intensifies



Dates:
Winter 1847 to
Winter 1848

- Sections:**
- Polk Is Frustrated By Internal Conflicts Over Negotiating A Treaty With Mexico
 - The Whig, Abraham Lincoln, Calls The War A “Sheer Deception”
 - The Democrats Search For A “Solution” To The Wilmot Proviso
 - Democratic Senator Stephen Douglas Promotes “Popular Sovereignty”

Date: Winter-Spring 1847

Polk Is Frustrated By Internal Conflicts Over Negotiating A Treaty With Mexico

The Mexican War is effectively over on September 16, 1847, when Scott secures the capital city.

Still President Polk properly senses by December 1847 that he is losing control in Congress over the final outcomes of the war.

Even within his own Democratic Party, divisions run deep about what to do with Mexico and its territory.

Polk’s Treasury Secretary, Robert Walker, wants to annex the entire country.

James Buchanan, who publicly opposed any land acquisition when the war began, now turns acquisitive, to boost his odds for the presidential nomination. Once again Polk is enraged by his erratic Secretary of State.

Senator John C. Calhoun, whose hawkishness over Texas provoked the war, expresses horror at this thought – which would blemish America’s racial purity.

We have never dreamt of incorporating into our Union any but the Caucasian race – the free white race. To incorporate Mexico, would be the very first instance of (including) an Indian race. Ours, sir, is the government of the white man...To erect these Mexicans into a territorial government and place them on an equality with the people of the United States is (something) I protest.

Then there is the especially galling NY wing of the party, now being called the “Wilmot Proviso Democrats,” who continue to insist that slavery be prohibited on any new land acquired from Mexico.

Polk himself opposes a wholesale annexation, but argues that America must be “indemnified” (i.e. compensated) for the costs of a war Mexico started by “their invading U.S. soil” along the Rio Grande on April 25, 1846. He decides to “wait out” the Mexicans, hoping they will offer up attractive peace terms.

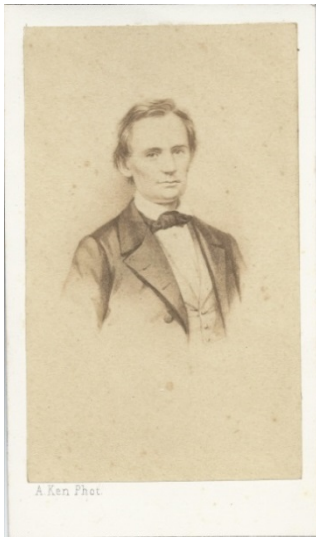
He has sent his version of the territorial boundaries he favors to Nicholas Trist of the State Department, to advance talks toward a treaty.

But gradually he learns that Trist is negotiating on his own terms, with potential concessions in Texas and Alta (upper) California that Polk opposes. He also hears that Scott has court marshaled his confidante, Pillow, and joined Trist in working out a treaty, including a possible \$1 million bribe to Santa Anna.

At this point, Polk concludes that the time has come to sack both Trist and Scott -- but he is emotionally so averse to personal confrontations that both men stay on by default.

Date: Feb 12, 1848

The Whig, Abraham Lincoln, Calls The War A “Sheer Deception”



Abraham Lincoln (1809-1865)

Polk’s troubles from his Democrats are now matched by an increasingly vocal Whig opposition, with its 116-112 majority in the House.

On November 13, 1847, Henry Clay lays out the Whig position in a speech in Lexington, Kentucky. The war was one of “aggression,” not defense, initiated by Polk’s false claim that Mexico invaded U.S. land. The end must not lie in annexing all of Mexico or in any extension of slavery into new land. Hearing these words, Polk’s supporters label Clay a convert to the abolitionist movement.

As the second session of the 30th Congress convenes, Clay’s arguments are amplified in two addresses by the 38 year old freshman representative from Illinois, Abraham Lincoln.

Since speaking out after the 1837 murder of the abolitionist Elijah Lovejoy, Lincoln has devoted his energy to building a law practice in Springfield, courting and marrying Mary Todd in 1842, buying a home, and raising his first two sons, Robert and Willie. He has also dabbled in local politics, serving four terms in the Illinois House. In 1846, he is elected to the US House as the only Whig in a delegation dominated by Douglas and his Democrats.

Lincoln’s reputation is that of a “free soil man,” opposing those who would seek to extend it geographically, while not calling for abolishing it entirely. As such he will vote five times in favor of Wilmot’s proviso during his term in office.

His first address to the House, on December 22, 1847, is very brief, but pointed. It becomes known as the “spot speech” for its “respectful request” of the President to inform the members...

1st. Whether the spot on which the blood of our citizens was shed, as his messages declared, was or was not within the territory of Spain, at least after the treaty of 1819, until the Mexican revolution.

2d. Whether that spot is or is not within the territory which was wrested from Spain by the revolutionary Government of Mexico.

3d. Whether that spot is or is not within a settlement of people, which has existed ever since long before the Texas revolution, and until its inhabitants fled before the approach of the United States army.

After eight such constructions, Lincoln has made the case that American was intruding on Mexican land, and not vice versa, when the fighting began.

Lincoln’s second speech comes nine days after the House has passed a resolution by a vote of 85-81 saying that the war was “unnecessarily and unconstitutionally begun by the President of the United States.” It paints a picture of a President who deceived the nation into starting a war to grab land belonging to Mexico, and is now “bewildered” about how to force the Mexicans into a treaty that makes it all look legal.

Mr. Chairman: Some if not all the gentlemen on the other side of the House... have spoken complainingly ...of the vote given a week or ten days ago declaring that the war with Mexico was unnecessarily and unconstitutionally commenced by the President...I am one of those who joined in that vote; and I did so under my best impression of the truth of the case

The President, in his first war message of May, 1846, declares that the soil was ours on which hostilities were commenced by Mexico... Now, I propose to try to show that the whole of this issue and evidence is from beginning to end the sheerest deception.

All of this is but naked claim; and what I have already said about claims is strictly applicable to this. If I should claim your land by word of mouth, that certainly would not make it mine.

I am now through the whole of the President's evidence... (and) I more than suspect already that he is deeply conscious of being in the wrong.

My way of living leads me to be about the courts of justice; and there I have sometimes seen a good lawyer, struggling for his client's neck in a desperate case, employing every artifice to work round, befog, and cover up with many words some point arising in the case which he dared not admit and yet could not deny and from just such necessity, is the President's struggle in this case.

He insists that the separate national existence of Mexico shall be maintained; but he does not tell us how this can be done, after we shall have taken all her territory...As to the mode of terminating the war and securing peace, the President is equally wandering and indefinite.

As I have before said, he knows not where he is. He is a bewildered, confounded, and miserably perplexed man. God grant he may be able to show there is not something about his conscience more painful than his mental perplexity.

A decade later, Stephen Douglas will cite these speeches as evidence of Lincoln's "lack of patriotism" when the two pair off in a race for a senate seat.

Date: Winter 1847-48

The Democrats Search For A "Solution" To The Wilmot Proviso



Daniel Dickinson (1800-1866)

While the Whigs continue to hammer away at Polk over his motives for the war, the Democrats are desperately searching for a path to securing peace within their own party.

To do so, they must arrive at an option to Wilmot's total ban on the expansion of slavery into the west, which is anathema to their entire Southern wing.

Their first choice – declaring that the 34'30" Missouri Compromise line be the boundary for Slave vs. Free State designation in all newly acquired land – has been rejected repeatedly in the House.

As a fallback, they turn to a new option, one will become known as "popular sovereignty."

On the surface the idea is simple and altogether consistent with the original spirit of personal liberty in America – namely, that the people themselves should determine the rules by which they will be governed.

John Calhoun's February 15, 1847 address in opposition to the Wilmot Proviso cites this theme in his "fourth resolve:"

Resolved, That it is a fundamental principle in our political creed, that a people, in forming a constitution, have the unconditional right to form and adopt the government which they may think best calculated to secure their liberty, prosperity, and happiness; and that, in conformity thereto, no other condition is imposed by the Federal Constitution on a State, in order to be admitted into this Union, except that its constitution shall be republican; and that the imposition of any other by Congress would not only be in violation of the constitution, but in direct conflict with the principle on which our political system rests."

This is the classical argument of the States' Rights Democrats going all the way back to Jefferson, and forever disputed by the Federalist conviction that local "sovereignty" is trumped by the majority will of the nation as a whole. Sixty years after the 1787 "constitutional contract" this fundamental dispute still

simmers – and, as always, within the context of Southern demands related to slavery and its economic imperatives.

The notion of a “popular sovereignty” solution is floated out on the floor of the Senate on December 22, 1847, by Senator Daniel Dickinson of New York. He is a member of the “Hunker” faction in the state, men who seek to smooth tensions with the South, and who oppose the “Barnburner” wing’s attempt to stop the spread of slavery.

The Enduring Rift Within The New York Democrats

Factions	Key Members
“Barnburners” (Pro-Wilmot)	Martin Van Buren, John Van Buren, Preston King, Silas Wright, John Dix
“Hunkers” (Anti-Wilmot)	Daniel Dickinson, William Marcy, Horatio Seymour, Edwin Crosswell, Samuel Beardsley

Healing the division in New York is critical to the Democrat’s chances in the 1848 political race, since the Empire state remains the top prize in the Electoral College with 36 votes. It is also considered “in play” in 1848 – with the Whig Harrison having carried it in 1840 and Polk in 1844.

Top Ten Electoral Vote States In 1848

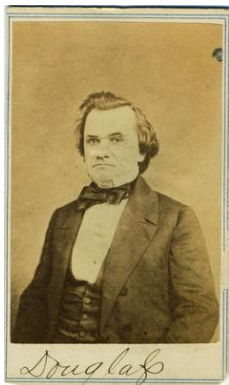
N.Y.	Pa	Ohio	Va	Tenn	Mass	Ky	Ind	NC	Ga	All-Other	Total US
36	26	23	17	13	12	12	12	11	10	172	290

It will now be up to two powerful Western Democrats – Lewis Cass of Michigan and Stephen Douglas of Illinois – to make the case for “popular sovereignty” as the road to alignment and victory in 1848.

With Polk holding true to his promise of one term in office, both men also have their eyes on the nomination.

Date: Winter 1847-48

Democratic Senator Stephen Douglas Promotes “Popular Sovereignty



It is the 35 year old Douglas who becomes the most visible spokesperson for “pop sov” from the beginning.

Two raw ambitions drive “the Little Giant” from early on: power and wealth.

Power has come to him through a meteoric political career, organizing the Democratic Party machine in Illinois, then heading to the U.S. House in 1843 and the Senate in 1847.

Stephen A. Douglas 1813-1861

His idol all along has been Andrew Jackson, and like the ex-President, he is an outright racist, as his harsh rhetoric demonstrates. In March 1847, he also becomes a slave-owner through his marriage to Martha Martin, who inherits a large cotton plantation in Mississippi.

This property will provide Douglas with wealth and spare capital, which he uses throughout his career to buy up land around Chicago, always with an eye to windfall profits if he can someday route a trans-continental railroad through the city.

To protect his political image in the North, Douglas manages his Mississippi plantation surreptitiously,.

Both his views on blacks and his personal stake in the future of cotton and slaves make him an ideal ally for his Southern colleagues in the capital. In fact, while in DC, he shares his living quarters with four leading Southerners, and their slave servants, in what becomes known as the “F-Street mess.” Three of his housemates chair important Senate Committees -- Finance (Robert TM Hunter of Virginia), Foreign Affairs (James Mason of Virginia), and Judiciary (Andrew Butler of South Carolina). The fourth is the outspoken pro-slavery Missouri Senator, David Atchison.

Douglas himself is Chairman of the Committee on Territories, a perfect position from which to both shape and promote “popular sovereignty” in the new western lands. He describes the process to statehood as follows:

- Once a sizable number settle in a new Territory, they will hold a State convention.
- At this convention, they will write and debate a State Constitution.
- Included in this document will be a “free state” or “slave state” declaration.
- The Constitution will then be voted on – yes or no – by all citizens of the State.
- Once a Constitution has passed, the Territory will apply to Washington for recognition.

In other words, popular sovereignty becomes...

Simply let the people decide!

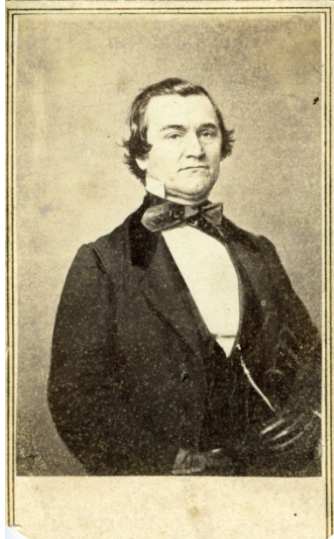
Once formulated, Douglas and Lewis Cass attempt to rally the party and the public to their solution.

With this formulation, they are convinced that “popular sovereignty” will thread the political needle between Northerners, uncertain about extending slavery into the west, and Southerners, demanding it. His next step is to try it out among his Southern colleagues.

Date: February 14-15, 1848

The Southern “Fire-Eaters” Respond With The 1848 “Alabama Platform”

What Douglas and Cass find when they go to “sell popular sovereignty” is a growing band of Southern Democrats who will become known as the “Fire-eaters” – whose zeal around expanding slavery is every bit as intense as the Northern “Barnburners” wish to contain it.



William L. Yancey (1814-1863)

The Fire-Eaters understand that the entire economic future of the South rests on raising cotton and selling slaves west of the Mississippi, from Texas to California – and they want “guarantees” of this outcome from Washington.

“Popular sovereignty” boosts their odds of success above Wilmot’s flat-out ban; but it falls well short of the “certainties” they point to in the U.S. Constitution and even the 1820 Missouri Compromise. Simply put, the risks of a pop-sov vote going against them are too high to bear.

One “Fire-Eater” who now joins Calhoun in attempting to unite the South behind a better option is Senator William L. Yancey of Alabama.

Yancey is born in Georgia and educated at Williams College in Massachusetts. His step-father is a New School Presbyterian minister who supports abolition, and other family members are strongly pro-Union.

After college he moves to South Carolina, edits a local newspaper, and speaks out against the 1832 “Nullification Bill” proposed by John Calhoun. In 1834 he passes the bar and begins to practice law.

At this point he looks like anything but a future pro-slavery secessionist.

His views shift, however, in 1835 when he marries the daughter of a wealthy Alabama planter and receives, as a dowry, extensive cotton land and 35 slaves of his own, near the town of Cahaba. Yancey takes up residence there and quickly blends in to the lifestyle of the southern aristocrat. To give voice to his now outspoken support of slavery, he becomes editor of *The Cahaba Southern Democrat*, and enters politics, first in the state legislature, then, in 1844, as a member of the Alabama delegation to the U.S. House.

In his personal life, Yancey embraces the “code duello,” which defines “honorable behavior” for men of the South. Included here are a series of “how-to’s” – how to manage a plantation, treat women and slaves, interact in society, serve one’s country, uphold traditions. Also, how to avenge insults or sleights, something Yancey does on two noteworthy occasions: first, when he kills a doctor who offends him, in a brawl, which leads to a jail term; and second, in 1846, when he fights a harmless duel with Thomas Clingman, a Whig congressman, who criticizes his speech on the Texas Annexation.

In 1848 Yancey focuses his ire on the continuing push in Congress to approve the Wilmot Proviso.

Like Calhoun, he believes the time has come for the South to take a united stand against all threats to abolish or limit the expansion of slavery. To create this united front, he orchestrates the development of five principles related to the Mexican Cession lands that become known as the “Alabama Platform:”

1. Mexico's 1821 law abolishing slavery must be revoked for the new US territories.
2. Settlers must be able to bring slaves into any territory once it is opened up.
3. The federal government must protect the rights of slave-holders in the territory.
4. Slavery will be legal until and unless a formal state Convention votes to prohibit it.
5. Alabama delegates will oppose all presidential candidates supporting either Wilmot or a "pop sov" version that prohibits bringing slaves into any new territories.

Yancey's demands are all aimed at "rigging" any popular voting in favor of slavery by making it a fait d'accompli in a new territory well in advance of any state constitution or election.

This will be accomplished, Yancey believes, by rushing slaves onto farms and plantations in new territories as quickly as possible and then delaying any popular vote until the institution is well established. On the premise that removing slavery once it has taken root will be more difficult than banning it from the start.

Yancey admits that his "fait d'accompli strategy" is not the ironclad guarantee the South would ideally seek, but it does build off the Democrat's "popular sovereignty" platform, while tipping the scales of any live vote in favor of slavery.

The 5-point "Alabama Platform" is approved by his home state legislature on February 14-15, 1848, and Yancey then tries to "sell it" across the South. He succeeds in three other states – Virginia, Georgia and Florida – and will take his case to the May 22 Democratic National Convention in Baltimore.