

Chapter 180 - A Nascent “Republic Party” Is Formed To Oppose The Kansas-Nebraska Act

Time: Summer 1854

Various Anti-Democrat Factions See A Potential Winning Political Strategy

Ever since the 1852 death of Henry Clay and the decisive loss by Winfield Scott in the presidential election, despairing Whig politicians have been searching for a strategy to defeat the Democrats.

The obvious North-South cracks among the Democrats looks like an opening, but the question becomes how best to exploit them? For some the answer lies in trying to invent a new party capable of bringing together a diverse range of Northerners who oppose the further expansion of slavery in America.

Included here might be the “Wilmot Proviso” men, the “Free Soilers,” the radical Abolitionists, those angered by local bounty hunters searching for run-aways, others who feel disdainful toward the southern culture or tired of its disproportionate control in Washington.

The 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act may provide the necessary opening.

Public antipathy toward the bill is immediate and strong across both the North and the West. First because it reneges on the 1820 Missouri Compromise and re-opens the threat of *nationalizing* slavery. Second because, like the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act, it appears to be another capitulation by the Democrats to bullying demands made by the southern planter elites.

The initial political response lies in the formation of various coalitions which march behind the banner of repealing the 1854 bill.

One such coalition simply calls itself the “Opposition Party” and consists of two Whig factions. One are the anti-slavery men, ranging from moderates like Henry Seward and Edward Bates, to outright abolitionists such as Charles Sumner, Salmon Chase and Cassius Clay. The other are the Whig Unionists who fear that potential in the Kansas Territory will end in civil war. Included in this latter group are both northerners (Edward Everett, Robert Winthrop) and some southerners, notably John J. Crittenden (Kentucky), John Bell (Tennessee), and William Graham (North Carolina).

The other coalition, known as the “Anti-Nebraska Party,” will include Northern Democrats who favored the Wilmot Proviso banning the expansion of slavery and bolted to the Free Soil Party in 1848 to back Van Buren over Cass. Among this group are formidable politicians such as Gideon Welles of Connecticut and Hannibal Hamlin of Maine.

The normally astute Stephen Douglas is both surprised and alarmed by these negative reactions.

In his mind, the notion of applying the principle of popular sovereignty, rather than a fixed line, in Kansas, seems like a small concession to the South in exchange for opening the Territory and supporting his route for the transcontinental railroad through Chicago.

By the summer of 1854, however, the true cost of the bargain begins to dawn on him, and on Franklin Pierce.

For Douglas, the bill will be the end of his presidential aspiration; for Pierce, it is the realization of his greatest fear, a possible North-South schism within his own party.

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Opponents Of The “Slave Power” Organize The Republican Party

Another group opposing the spread of slavery is more grass roots in character and calls itself the Republican Party.

The first officially recorded gathering here takes place in Ripon, Wisconsin, on March 30, 1854, with some 30 locals in attendance at what becomes known as The Little White Schoolhouse. The meeting is called by a lawyer, one Alvan Bovay, recently arrived in Ripon from New York City. According to tradition, the men “walked in as Whigs and Free-Soilers and left as Republicans.”

Other independent meetings follow, one in Bangor, Maine, then in Friendship, New York, and Washington, DC.

A more sizable and organized convention follows, this time in Jackson, Michigan from July 6-13, 1854.

The prime mover here is Charles V. DeLand, editor of Jackson’s *American Citizen* paper, who invites all who oppose the “slave power” to attend:

In view, therefore, of the recent action of Congress upon this subject (the violation of the Missouri Compromise) and the evident designs of the slave power to attempt still further aggressions upon freedom, we invite our fellow citizens without reference to former political associations, who think that the time has arrived for a union at the North to protect liberty from being overthrown and downtrodden, to assemble in mass convention on Thursday, the 6th day of July, next, at 1 o'clock p.m. at Jackson, there to take such measures as shall be thought best to concentrate the popular sentiment of this state against the encroachment of slave power.

When some 3,000 people show up, the convention is forced outside to a 40-acre grove, where the proceedings are completed “under the oaks.” The primary task lies in hammering out a tentative platform. Ten of the thirteen planks signal opposition to “the Slave Power’s still further

aggressions upon freedom.” While not embracing abolition, the delegates are unequivocal in condemning slavery on moral grounds.

We believe that slavery is a violation of the rights of man – as a man – we vow at whatever expense...to oppose...by all means...all attempts, direct and indirect, to extend slavery in the country...or to allow new slave states into the union.

Ironically this position mirrors that taken by Thomas Jefferson in his original draft of the Land Ordinance of 1784.

After the year 1800 there shall be neither slavery nor involuntary servitude in any (future state).

Claims to giving the new party its name are widespread. Most trace the idea back to Thomas Jefferson’s Democratic-Republican Party which dominated the political scene during his time. But the acknowledged popularizer of the “Republican Party” moniker is Horace Greeley, editor of the *New York Tribune*, and soon to be a prominent member of the movement on the national stage.

New energy is pumped into the movement some three months after the Jackson convention adjourns. Its source is a retired Whig from Illinois named Abraham Lincoln who returns to politics to protest the Kansas-Nebraska Bill.