

## Beyond Kansas

Stephen Douglas was in the friendly surroundings of New York City when he issued his challenge. He was staying at the St. Nicholas Hotel in the strongly Democratic and relatively pro-South metropolis following the passage of his controversial Kansas-Nebraska bill in May 1854 and probably did not yet fully grasp that his legislation made him a pariah in much of the North. After all, his boosters in the city, who threw several events in his honor, seemed untroubled by the vehement objections raised in the northern press and pulpit and on the floors of Congress against his measure. One celebration began around 11:00 p.m. on June 3, when a large gathering congregated outside his hotel, continuing after midnight as a more-than-thirty-piece brass band turned up to celebrate him. As the crowd cried, “Douglas, Douglas,” the Little Giant strode to the balcony of the hotel and, after being introduced by a local Democratic leader, defended “the great principle of popular sovereignty” enshrined in his Kansas enactment. Then Douglas threw down the gauntlet. His critics, he warned, should back off in their vituperative attacks because his “Nebraska bill” was gaining popularity as people familiarized themselves with it. In fact, Americans would want the same principles applied in the future whenever “*the question of the admission of any new State arises, whether it be Nebraska, Kansas, Oregon, Mexico, Cuba or the Sandwich Islands.*”

Douglas’s prognostication, picked up by the press, hardly mollified his detractors. The *New York Times* assumed that the very territorial growth for popular sovereignty Douglas optimistically anticipated would make the “extension of Slavery over all the territory which the United States now possess, or may hereafter acquire” into the “great aim and object of the Democratic party.” Similarly, the antislavery *Washington National*

*Era* thought Douglas's remarks confirmation that the senator and his allies intended slavery's extension into future territorial acquisitions and suggested that Douglas's omission in his list of the Dominican Republic, a former Spanish colony on Haiti's eastern boundary that took up roughly two-thirds of the island of Hispaniola both countries occupied, was probably unintended. Before long, the paper predicted, the U.S. government would be secretly prosecuting a "Slave Power" plot for Cuba.<sup>1</sup>

Douglas's remarks at the St. Nicholas and the reaction they sparked suggest that America's sectional crisis in the mid-1850s related to slavery's expansion southward as well as to the west. Most accounts of the Kansas-Nebraska Act and the struggle over slavery in the Kansas Territory in its aftermath, however, treat Douglas's legislation with little thought as to its Caribbean implications. Nor do they sufficiently address linkages between Caribbean issues and the origins of Abraham Lincoln's Republican Party. Republicans rarely regarded Kansas as a cause divorced from other geographies, and it would have been remarkable had they done so since the nation had been growing southward as well as westward since the Louisiana Purchase. Jefferson's main territorial interest in his negotiations with France had been U.S. control of New Orleans and the Mississippi River's outlet to the Gulf of Mexico rather than the absorption of western plains. The Monroe administration's purchase of Florida was southerly growth and the annexation of Texas pointed toward the Tropics as much as it did the Pacific Ocean. As the Republican Party leader William H. Seward of New York emotionally cautioned his U.S. Senate colleagues, principles of governance established in Kansas applied to "all the Territories, present and future," a question with grave stakes since the nation was already embarked "upon a career of territorial aggrandizement."<sup>2</sup> By the time the struggle for Kansas resolved itself, Lincoln was as fully attuned as Douglas and Seward to the Caribbean implications of slavery's option on the West.

It is nearly impossible to imagine Abraham Lincoln ever being president had Congress not enacted Stephen Douglas's Kansas-Nebraska

<sup>1</sup> *New York Weekly Herald*, June 10, 1854; (Montpelier) *Vermont Patriot and State Gazette*, June 9, 1854; *New-York Daily Times*, June 6, 1854; *Washington (DC) National Era*, June 15, 1854; James A. Rawley, "Stephen A. Douglas and the Kansas-Nebraska Act," John R. Wunder and Joann M. Ross, "'An Eclipse of the Sun': The Nebraska-Kansas Act in Historical Perspective," both in *The Nebraska-Kansas Act of 1854*, ed. Wunder and Ross (Lincoln, NE, 2008), 71-75, 2.

<sup>2</sup> CG, 34 Cong., 1 Sess., Appendix, 1089-1114.

Act of 1854, one of the most divisive pieces of legislation in the nation's history. Douglas's measure, signed into law by President Franklin Pierce on May 30, was highly controversial because in creating the new territories of Kansas and Nebraska it repealed the Missouri Compromise of 1820, which had prohibited slavery in all future territories carved out of the Louisiana Purchase above the parallel of 36°30'. Since Kansas and Nebraska lay above that line, they should have become territories without slavery. But Douglas's measure substituted popular sovereignty for the 1820 ban, allowing the two territories' settlers to decide whether to allow human bondage. To Douglas, chair of the Senate's Committee on Territories, the measure sensibly renewed principles of local democratic rule already applied by Congress in the Utah and New Mexico popular sovereignty language of the Compromise of 1850. Countless northerners, though, considered Douglas's decision a sellout to the Slave Power, the arbitrary overturning of a sectional contract that had preserved the Union for decades, and worried that slavery might thrive in Kansas, given its location directly west of the slave state of Missouri (Nebraska, lying directly west of the free state of Illinois, seemed less endangered). One critic questioned whether Douglas had been self-interested in pushing his legislation, given his Mississippi slaveholdings, where whippings took a daily toll on "woman's shrinking flesh." Now he could dispose of slaves at a premium to southerners bound for Kansas who needed laborers there (Figure 3.1).<sup>3</sup>

Douglas intended his measure to facilitate the construction of a northern transcontinental railroad originating possibly in Chicago to the Pacific Ocean, since western lands could not be surveyed prior to territorial organization. He integrated the Missouri Compromise repeal into his bill not to spread slavery, but because southerners in Congress informed him that territorial organization would fail without it. Convincing himself that the climate of Nebraska and Kansas was inhospitable anyway to slavery, Douglas apparently expected that free-soil would win out in any sectional competition. But he had trouble convincing northern public opinion, even in his own party. When the House of Representatives recorded its narrowly positive tally for the Kansas legislation on May 22 (113–100), as many free-state Democrats voted for rejection as passage (they split 44–44). Most northern Democrats who voted positively

<sup>3</sup> *Detroit Democrat* quoted in *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Jan. 27, 1854; "A Southron" in the *St. Louis Intelligencer*, quoted in *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Sept. 29, 1854.



angered their constituents. In the fall 1854 election, all but seven of the forty-four lost their congressional seats.<sup>4</sup>

Yet it would not be the Democrats' Whig rivals who would capitalize on the legislation's unpopularity even though northern Whigs lambasted it in Congress, in the press, and at public meetings. Every northern Whig representative who voted on the Kansas-Nebraska bill rejected it. In taking this stand, however, northern Whigs unsurprisingly alienated countless proslavery southern Whigs, seriously crippling their party. Although the Whig Party arguably might have disintegrated without Douglas's law since it had been on the decline for some time, the Kansas-Nebraska Act hastened the process. Gradually, two new political organizations supplanted the Whigs. The first was the transsectional, anti-Roman Catholic and antiimmigrant Know Nothing Party (more formally the American Party); the second, the stridently free-soil and almost exclusively northern Republican Party. Within a few years, in the North, the Republicans squeezed out the Know Nothings, who had no more success at uniting their party's northern and southern wings on territorial policy than had the Whigs. Meanwhile in the South, most Know Nothings made their way into the Democracy, though some joined anti-Democratic organizations loosely called the "Opposition." Here and there the Whig Party survived at the local level, but the Whigs never nominated a presidential candidate again.<sup>5</sup>

Few northern Whigs taking umbrage at Douglas's work reacted more angrily than Abraham Lincoln, who harnessed the measure, in the words of one historian, as his personal "vehicle to ride" back into national politics. Beginning with his remarks at a Whig meeting in Winchester, Illinois, in late August 1854, Lincoln gave a succession of speeches in northern and central Illinois towns and cities, calling for the election to Congress

<sup>4</sup> David Potter, *The Impending Crisis, 1848-1861*, ed. and completed by Don E. Fehrenbacher (New York, 1976), 145-62, 165-67, 169-72, 175; Michael A. Morrison, *Slavery and the American West: The Eclipse of Manifest Destiny and the Coming of the Civil War* (Chapel Hill, 1997), 142-47, 154; Robert W. Johannsen, *Stephen A. Douglas* (1973; rpt., Urbana, 1997), 390-418; Nicole Etcheson, *Bleeding Kansas: Contested Liberty in the Civil War Era* (Lawrence, 2004), 11-15.

<sup>5</sup> Morrison, *Slavery and the American West*, 126, 131, 138-39, 152, 154; Michael F. Holt, *The Political Crisis of the 1850s* (New York, 1978), 101-38; Tyler Anbinder, *Nativism & Slavery: The Northern Know Nothings and the Politics of the 1850s* (New York, 1992); William E. Gienapp, *The Origins of the Republican Party, 1852-1856* (New York, 1987), 16-67; Steven E. Maizlish, "The Meaning of Nativism and the Crisis of the Union: The Know-Nothing Movement in the Antebellum North," in *Essays on American Antebellum Politics, 1840-1860*, ed. Stephen E. Maizlish (College Station, 1982), 166-98.

of men who would have the Kansas measure repealed and the Missouri line restored. With his political ambitions rekindled by Douglas's measure, Lincoln also attempted an aggressive but ultimately unsuccessful letter-writing campaign during the fall and winter hoping to round up sufficient support so the Illinois legislature would choose him as the state's next U.S. senator. Though he tried to remain a Whig as long as possible, Lincoln ultimately joined the migration to Republican ranks and in May 1856 played a prominent role at the state Republican convention in Bloomington. Later that year, he also campaigned for the famous western explorer and former U.S. senator from California, John C. Frémont, the Republicans' first presidential candidate.<sup>6</sup>

Lincoln's initial attacks on the Kansas-Nebraska Act were western-centered, yet he also seems to have been concerned about slavery's course southward. In the Senate, Douglas had charged northern congressional free-soilers with hypocrisy for professing devotion to the Missouri Compromise, since at the end of the Mexican War they had unanimously opposed proposals to extend the 36°30' line farther westward to lands that Mexico ceded. Lincoln rejoined that just because he and similarly inclined Whigs wanted to keep the 1820 sectional bargain for the land (including Kansas and Nebraska) encompassed by the Louisiana Purchase to the east, they were not compelled for consistency's sake to apply the Missouri line "to any future territory acquired by the United States." At Springfield on October 4, Lincoln clarified his argument by analogy: "If a man comes to me . . . and advises me to build an addition to my house and I decline to do so, shall that man burn my house down, and say I have decided against any house at all, because I am unwilling to spread it out and extend it?" Twelve days later, at Peoria, Lincoln not only denounced Douglas's law for permitting slavery into Kansas and Nebraska but also for foreshadowing the principle that it could "spread to every other part of the wide world, where men can be found inclined to take it." As if he feared his audience might miss his point, Lincoln repeated that "the authors of Nebraska" intended their "principle" for "future use"

<sup>6</sup> Gienapp, *Origins of the Republican Party*, 122–23, 286–95; George B. Forgie, *Patricide in the House Divided: A Psychological Interpretation of Lincoln and His Age* (New York, 1979), 251; AL to Thomas J. Henderson, Nov. 27, 1854, AL to Elihu N. Powell, Nov. 27, 1854, AL to Hugh Lemaster, Nov. 29, 1854, AL to Joseph Gillespie, Dec. 1, 1854, AL to Elihu B. Washburne, Dec. 19, 1854, Jan. 6, Feb. 9, 1855, AL to Ichabod Coddington, Nov. 27, 1854 (copy), CWAL, 2: 288–306; David Herbert Donald, *Lincoln* (1995; rpt., New York, 1995), 178–85, 187–94; Richard J. Carwardine, *Lincoln: Profiles in Power* (London, 2003), 59.

in “the planting of slavery wherever in the wide world, local and unorganized opposition can not prevent it.” To Lincoln, such a construction would make slavery last forever, and he warned that the Declaration of Independence itself was now jeopardized; instead of liberty, slavery would become “the chief jewel of the nation – the very figure-head of the ship of State.” Already, he reported, “the liberal party throughout the world” worried that slavery was “undermining” republican institutions in “the noblest political system the world ever saw.”<sup>7</sup>

Though Lincoln did not specify where U.S. slavery might head under Douglas’s script, he surely envisioned the Gulf-Caribbean, given Douglas’s public identity as apostle for Manifest Destiny and the annexation of Cuba. Plenty of other politicians of all persuasions measured the Kansas legislation by its Caribbean implications. A former Whig congressman from Virginia, John Minor Botts, for instance, accurately predicted that repealing the Missouri Compromise would ultimately do more to cripple the South’s pursuit of empire in the Tropics than to abet it, because it would harden northern resistance to the acquisition of Mexico and Cuba as slave states. More typically, commentators predicted that passage of the Kansas legislation would foster slave expansion southward. A Washington correspondent for a Philadelphia paper, taking note of political turmoil occurring in Spain, interpreted Douglas’s bill as a trap to upstage Pierce for the 1856 Democratic presidential nomination, observing that “the South” was “bent upon acquiring all the territory it can in that direction.” Similarly, the Democratic *Washington Union* suggested the bill applied “to all future acquisition” and would draw Cuba into the Union for slavery. A Democratic meeting called at Aurora, Illinois, to endorse the Kansas-Nebraska Act, resolved that the Democratic Party should now champion popular sovereignty “in any future legislation upon territories now or hereafter to be acquired.”<sup>8</sup>

Antislavery northerners, in fact, began bracing themselves for Caribbean slavery projects originating in Douglas’s measure. An Ohio Presbyterian minister sermonized about his concern about whether, if the “insatiable” and ruthless “slave power” could impose “this great fraud upon freedom,” anything could stop it “from demanding Cuba

<sup>7</sup> CG, 33 Cong., 1 Sess., 277; CWAL, 2: 226–27, 229, 230–33, 234–40, 240–84, 285.

<sup>8</sup> John Minor Botts to the *National Intelligencer*, Washington (DC) *Daily National Intelligencer*, Feb. 16, 1854; Washington correspondent’s report, Jan. 26, 1854, in *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Jan. 28, 1854; *Washington Union*, quoted in *New York Tribune* and republished in (Dedham, MA) *Norfolk Democrat*, May 26, 1854; Aurora resolutions of October 5, 1854, quoted in *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Jan. 29, 1855.

or Hayti, or the Sandwich Islands?" The *Chicago Tribune* wondered whether now "Slavery" imagined it could "push Uncle Sam into quarrels with his neighbors to acquire territory and slave states out of it." Abolitionist minister Theodore Parker argued privately that the time had arrived to "defeat our great enemy" in its planned grab of Cuba and its intentions to legalize the African slave trade, a program antislavery types frequently lumped together with slavery's Caribbean projects. An upset Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts predicted in turn to Parker that the South would strike for Cuba, Mexico, and Haiti. Black abolitionist William Wells Brown expected "our Southern masters" to follow up their triumph in Kansas and Nebraska by taking Cuba but told a Boston audience he hoped they could be staved off in Haiti. The *National Era* warned northern congressmen that if Douglas got away with repealing the Missouri Compromise, southern ambitions would "be satisfied with nothing short of the seizure of Cuba" and "the absorption of all portions of Mexico fit for slave tillage."<sup>9</sup>

On June 20, free-soil northern congressmen convened a bipartisan gathering in Washington chaired by Whig U.S. senator Solomon Foot of Vermont, which unanimously adopted an address to the American people warning about the Kansas law's implications for territory "which hereafter may be acquired." Painting an alarming picture, the document anticipated that President Pierce would seek Cuba and half a dozen Mexican states for slavery, even if such programs meant war with Spain, England, and France. Further, the slave states and their lackey president wanted the Dominican Republic and Haiti for "the dominion of slavery." Once those objectives were secured, the congressmen predicted, the government would seek a Brazilian alliance giving U.S. slavery entrée into the Amazon River valley. Foot carried the message home when Congress adjourned. Addressing a Whig and free-soil gathering in Montpelier, Foot claimed that Pierce's "pliant administration" and associated northern "dough-faces" were bent on handing the South two slave states in Cuba, worth four senators and twelve representatives in Congress, plus

<sup>9</sup> Rev. J. B. Bittering, *A Plea for Humanity. A Sermon Preached in the Euclid Street Presbyterian Church, Cleveland, Ohio* (Cleveland, 1854), 22; *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Feb. 10, 1854; *Washington (DC) National Era*, Feb. 9, 1854; Theodore Parker to Charles Francis Adams, May 19, 1854, Adams Family Papers, Reel 542, Massachusetts Historical Society; Charles Sumner to Theodore Parker, June 7, 1854, in *Life and Correspondence of Theodore Parker*, ed. John Weiss, 2 vols. (New York, 1864), 2: 140; (Boston) *Liberator*, Oct. 20, 1854; *Wooster (OH) Republican*, Sept. 7, 1854; Gienapp, *Origins of the Republican Party*, 76.



Mexico, Central America, and the Dominican Republic. The senator's concern about the latter was shared by the *New York Evening Post*, which speculated that the United States would extract land grants from the Dominican Republic for buttressing up its weak government; in a country thinly inhabited by an "enervated and inferior race," a mere one hundred to two hundred Americans could seize control, give slavery constitutional protection, and "open a new slave market" prior to the logical step of complete annexation. Likewise, the *National Era* convinced itself that Douglas intended to give "slavery an opportunity of insinuating itself" in the Dominican Republic, until it enfolded "the whole island in its crushing coils."<sup>10</sup>

Later in the year, Lincoln heard from an Illinois politico appalled by the Caribbean implications of Douglas's law. A self-identified "Anti-Nebraska" Illinois state legislator inclined to favor Lincoln's candidacy for a U.S. Senate seat told him the time had arrived to settle "forever whether slavery shall be restricted to its present limits, or whether by the annexation of Cuba, by appropriating our own territory once consecrated to freedom, & by the conquest of Mexico or other territory extend the terra of slavery indefinitely." The slave states, he argued, had to be forestalled in their quest for political dominance in Washington.<sup>11</sup>

Given what was actually happening at the time, antislavery jeremiads of a Kansas-Caribbean nexus amounted to more than fear-mongering. In October 1853, a scrawny Tennessee-born adventurer named William Walker led a band of filibusters, many of them gold rush dropouts, from California to Mexican Baja California and stayed for months before being chased out by Mexican irregulars. During his occupation, Walker declared the founding of an independent Republic of Lower California with him as president. In May 1854, around the time Walker retreated to U.S. territory, Douglas moved in the Senate that the Committee on Foreign Relations investigate the "expediency" of official U.S. recognition of the Dominican Republic. In June, the Pierce administration instructed a commissioner sent there to seek a lease on part of one of the country's bays for an American naval coaling station. More significantly, that same spring the Pierce administration acquired a new slice of Mexico.

<sup>10</sup> Report from Washington, DC, June 21, 1854, in *New-York Daily Times*, June 22, 1854; *St. Albans (VT) Messenger*, Nov. 11, 1854; *New York Evening Post*, May 24, 1854; *Washington (DC) National Era*, June 1, 1854.

<sup>11</sup> Augustus Adams to AL, Dec. 17, 1854, AL Papers, Series 1, LC.