

Informative essay on compromise of 1850

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By the 1850's the Constitution had become a source of sectional discord and tension due to the different interpretations taken by the North and South.

The North's interpretation was that slavery was immoral and not protected under the Constitution. The South, on the other hand, interpreted the Constitution as recognizing slavery where it existed. In addition, the acquisition of new land brought into question the expansion of slavery and the balance of power between the free states and slave states.

The interpretations that both sides vindicated were irreconcilable; slavery was a necessity to the Southern way of life, and Northerners shared different views; effective compromises could not be achieved and ultimately this led to failure of the Union that the Constitution had created. After the Missouri Compromise had established the 36. 30? line that divided the national domain between the North and South, the Compromise of 1850 threatened to break the sectional balance.

The admission of California as a free state would create an imbalance in the senate, which stood at 15 states each for the North and South. This is evident from Document A. Essentially, admitting California would grant greater political power to free states, and therefore create a conflict between the North and South. However, the admission of the Utah and New Mexico territory under the premise of popular sovereignty almost guaranteed that they would be slave states; it was mainly inhabited by Southerners and the climate was more conducive for Southern products, namely cotton.

The sectional sentiment that was aroused by the Compromise of 1850 is obviously present in Document B, a letter from an anonymous Georgian. In

his " Plain Words for the North" the Georgian emphasizes that the Constitution " recognizes slavery where it exists" and that unless this view is respected by the North, the " destruction [of the Constitution] is inevitable. " However in Document E, Garrison, an extreme abolitionist whose motto was " No Union with Slaveholders. argued that the Constitution " never intended to give any protection or countenance to the slave system".

Thus the question arises, " Does the Constitution protect slavery as an institution? " Since the framers of the Constitution did not explicitly condone or embrace slavery, the decision was left to Congress, the President, and the courts to supplement and implement any judgment concerning the issue. Although slavery was not mentioned in the Constitution, the context of it essentially supports slavery - many of the signers of the Constitution were slave owners.

However, Northerners such as Emerson, (Document D) who addressed the Fugitive Slave Law, argued that slavery was immoral and foresaw the ending of the Union. Southerners, on the other hand, saw slavery as their natural right and regarded the three-fifths clause as evidence that slaves did not hold the rights of citizenship. Southerners were aided in their argument by the Supreme Court decision Dred Scott (1857), which ruled that African Americans had no civil rights, and that the Missouri Compromise was unconstitutional.

Although the decision was made on the basis of the interpretation of the Constitution, it also reflected the susceptibility of the court to be influenced by personal views and politics - several of the justices were slave owners.

Even though the court decision settled the question of slavery expansion and strengthened the South's position, it ironically fueled the Republican movement after the defeat of the Lecompton constitution and the admittance of Kansas as a free state.

Aided by the anti-slavery sentiment in the North, which had the majority of the electoral votes, the Republican party, led by Abraham Lincoln, was able to win the Election of 1860. With virtually no support in the South and only 40 percent of the popular vote, the election of Lincoln was a terrible political defeat for the southerners; he had been elected to office on the strength of the anti-slavery ballot. This revealed the importance of the electoral vote and the inability of the Constitution to establish equitable voting methods.

After Lincoln's election in 1860, South Carolina, which saw secession as the only alternative left to protect their way of life and liberty, challenged federal authority and attempted to coerce other southern states to join them. On February 7, 1871, seven slave states declared independence, joined the Confederate States of America and elected Jefferson Davis president. In Davis' message to the Confederate Congress (Document H), he expressed his view that the Constitution set up a compact between independent states, rather than a national government made up of states.

The misconception that the Constitution set up a national government, he said, was the perception of a certain political school in the North. In contrast, Lincoln's message in Document I, questions how the Southern States (Secessionists) could withdraw from the Union without the consent of the other states. As these two documents have pointed out, the different

interpretations by which Northerners and Southerners interpreted the Constitution was one of the main sources of sectional discord and tension. Despite efforts at preserving the Union, social and economic forces were pulling the North and South apart.

Both were progressing, but divergently. Northern society was being cultured by the industrial revolution, and by educational and humanitarian movements that had little effect in the South. Southern society was dominated by agriculture, and therefore slavery was a necessary institution and way of life. Since the North and South were essentially two different societies united under one common law, it seemed inevitable that the conflict over slavery and political power would arise. It would have been impossible to accommodate the differences between the North and South under one law that applied to both.