

The compromise of 1850

[History](#)



At the close of the Mexican War, in 1848, the United States owned a lot of territory without local government (all the land now included in New Mexico, Arizona, and California was then unsettled). Then in 1848 gold was found in California. Thousands of people joined the gold rush and in a few months about 80,000 of them had settled in California to hunt for gold.

To keep control of these settlements, a government was needed, so California asked to be admitted to the Union as a free state, but the South would not allow this, the North was also not going to allow California into the Union as a slave state, so Senator Henry Clay decided that he would make a compromise both sides could live with, he said each side should give in to something the other side wanted. Eventually after Clay's Omnibus Bill failed to pass, five separate acts were passed. These acts would become known as the Compromise of 1850.

Basically, the North should allow New Mexico and Utah to organize as territories with popular sovereignty and give the South a stronger fugitive slave law. The South should accept California as a free state and allow the end of slave trade in Washington DC. For most of 1850, Congress debated. Clay had the support of the North, including Stephen Douglas and Daniel Webster. In Webster's famous Seventh of March speech, he declared that slave labor could never be profitable in New Mexico and that the North would lose nothing by granting this concession.

He felt that it was not necessary to bar slavery by law of Congress; it was already excluded by "the law of nature." The North was opposed by the Southern states, led by John C. Calhoun, who at the time was dying and was

so sick that his speeches had to be read by someone else. The Compromise of 1850. There were five parts to the Compromise of 1850. The first was the Texas-New Mexico Act. It was the most important of the five. It made New Mexico a territory, gave some of Texas (the Santa Fe region) to New Mexico, and allowed for popular sovereignty there.

This bill was passed on September 9, 1850. The second part allowed California into the Union as a free state. This bill was also passed on September 9, 1850. The third part was the Utah Act, which was also passed on September 9, 1850. It made Utah a territory and allowed popular sovereignty to decide the slavery issue. On September 18, the New Fugitive Slave Act was passed, forcing all law enforcement officers in the North and South, to help return fugitive slaves. There were penalties for helping fugitive slaves. The last act passed on September 20, abolishes slave trade in Washington DC.

Clay had intended to give each act separately to Congress and had only made the Omnibus Bill (combining all of the acts into one bill) because he wanted to make sure there would be no veto by President Taylor. The Omnibus Bill could not make it passed Congress because the Northerners wouldn't accept the Fugitive Slave Act, or allow for popular sovereignty, and the Southerners wouldn't allow California in as a free state or allow the size of Texas to be reduced. After the Omnibus Bill failed, Clay went on vacation in Newport, Rhode Island and Stephen Douglas took over control of the compromise.

When Douglas broke up Clay's plan into five separate bills, all of them passed. Although Clay originally wrote the acts, it was really Douglas, not Clay, who made the laws acceptable to both sides. The different parts needed different areas of the United States to give in. Northerners from both parties, and Whigs from border states approved the admission of California, the abolition of the slave trade in Washington, and the adjustment of the Texas border. Southerners and Northern Democrats passed the Fugitive Slave Law and organized Utah and New Mexico without restrictions on slavery (Brown, 192-193).

Neither side really gave in, but people hoped it would end the dispute on slavery. Northern Reactions. The North had not paid much attention to the Fugitive Slave Act when it was being put through Congress. Their main concern had been the admission of California, popular sovereignty, and the Texas border. But when the Northerners heard about the new things they would have to do to prevent runaway slaves from escaping, they were very angry. It created resistance and as a result Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote Uncle Tom's Cabin.

When Fillmore became president the government began to put down local resistance to the Fugitive Slave Law. Controversy also declined because the number of African Americans returned to the South fell by two-thirds in the second year under the law, in part because so many blacks had resettled in Canada. The Free Soil Party, which had received about 10 percent of the vote in the presidential election of 1848, received only about half as much in 1852 (Brown, 193). Southern Reactions. The Southern reaction was not as well known, but it was more dangerous to the Union.

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The radicals in the south held the Nashville Convention in June of 1850 decided to meet after the compromise to discuss policy, but in November of 1850 when they met the second time, only a few people attended. Unionists still had a lot of control in the South. The governors in Georgia and Mississippi were Unionists, and fourteen of the nineteen congressmen from Georgia, Mississippi, and Alabama were Unionists. Even in South Carolina (the state that had the strongest disunionist population) the voters voted to stay in the union by a large amount.

Some states accepted the Georgia Platform of 1850, saying that they would give resistance and secede if Congress made more Antislavery Acts. The compromise also left political parties fighting one another. The Southern Whigs were separated from the rest of the Whigs because the Northern Whigs led the fight against slavery in the Mexican cession and controlled Whig president Zachary Taylor. Repairing the intersectional bonds of party politics would be crucial to cementing loyalty to the Union (Brown, 193).