

# Compromise of 1850

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The Compromise of 1850 was a series of acts passed in 1850, by which the United States Congress hoped to settle the strife between the opponents of slavery in the North and slave owners in the South. There is much speculation about how our country would be without this Compromise. The Compromise is a major stepping stone in United States history because of its many forces and provisions. California's admission to the Union would tip the balance in favor of free states—sixteen free states to fifteen slave states.

A balance had been achieved with the Missouri Compromise of 1820, which tried to settle the growing slavery issue at that time by admitting Missouri as a slave state and Maine as a free state. The proposed admission of California in 1850 was further complicated by unresolved slavery questions in the vast southwestern territory that had been ceded to the United States after the war with Mexico ended in 1848 with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. As he had done with the Missouri Compromise thirty years earlier, U.

S. Senator Henry Clay of Kentucky attempted to find a solution in 1850. This time the stakes were higher—the real possibility that the Union would break apart. Now seventy-one years old and in illhealth, Clay gave his last great speech to the Senate on February 5-6, 1850, outlining the many features of the compromise, which once again tried to give satisfaction to both sides, and staking his reputation upon its passage. It was Senator Stephen Douglas of Illinois, though, who successfully crafted the measures.

The Compromise of 1850 called for the admission of California as a free state as well as the organization of the ceded southwestern land into the territories of New Mexico and Utah, without mention of slavery. It stated

that, when the territories became states, voting citizens living in those territories could then decide on their slavery status, a solution known as popular sovereignty. The compromise also settled the boundary dispute between Texas and New Mexico and called for prohibition of slavery in the District of Columbia.

But by far the most contentious part of the Compromise of 1850 was the Fugitive Slave Act. It was the second of such acts, the first having been passed in 1793. Southern states demanded it largely in response to the growing number of fugitive slaves who were escaping to freedom in the North or into Canada. The act not only called for the return of runaway slaves, as the previous law had done, but prohibited the fugitives a trial by jury or even to testify in their own behalf.

In addition, marshals in the North who did not enforce the law were given heavy penalties, as were those who helped slaves to escape. The act was so severe and the outrage against it in the North so intense that it led to heavy abuses and therefore defeated its own purpose. Some Northern states passed personal liberty laws to defy the Fugitive Slave Act. The number of escapees increased, as did the number of abolitionists who took up the cause against slavery.

Putting the law into effect only led to more animosity between North and South, and when South Carolina justified its secession from the Union in December 1860, it listed the personal liberty laws as one of its grievances. The Fugitive Slave Act was not repealed until June 28, 1864, well into the Civil War. The Compromise of 1850 accomplished what it set out to do -- it kept

the nation united -- but the solution was only temporary. Over the following decade the country's citizens became further divided over the issue of slavery. The rift would continue to grow until the nation itself divided.