

The Struggle for the Union

Henry Clay - the Great Compromiser

The Compromise
of 1850 to the Civil War

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L4826DVD

Teachers Guide

Program Overview

The Compromise of 1850 to the Civil War

Discussion Topics/Questions

1. What triggered the need for compromise in 1850?

The Mexican War concluded in 1848 with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. Under that treaty, vast new lands were made part of the United States. They included all or parts of the present States of California, Nevada, Utah, Colorado, New Mexico and Arizona. Texas, then a republic, sought admission to the Union. A large amount of the new territories – and Texas – were south of the 36°30' parallel of the Missouri Compromise, making it territory available for the expansion of slavery. With the discovery of gold in California in 1849, large numbers of settlers moved there. California sought admission to the Union, but it was divided by the Missouri Compromise line. Should California be admitted as a slave or free State? Then, there was a drive to abolish slavery in the District of Columbia and to abolish the interstate slave trade. Southern States threatened secession if either of those two proposals succeeded.

2. What compromise measures did Henry Clay propose?

Clay proposed to admit California as a free State and annex Texas as a slave State. He further proposed that the new territories brought into the Union after the war with Mexico be organized in a manner that left it up to the people of those territories to determine for themselves whether their territory would be slave or free.

In addition, Clay proposed to abolish slavery in the District of Columbia only so long as it had the consent of the people living there and in neighboring Maryland. He proposed to abolish the slave trade in the District of Columbia and to enact a more effective fugitive slave law. Finally, he proposed that Congress would acknowledge that it had no power to interfere with the interstate slave trade.

3. Besides Henry Clay, what other senators played key roles in the Compromises of 1820 and 1833, and what roles did they play with respect to the Compromise of 1850?

Daniel Webster of Massachusetts and John C. Calhoun of South Carolina – along with Henry Clay – were known as the “Great Triumvirate.” Webster broke with his own anti-slavery constituency in Massachusetts to advocate for Clay’s compromise on March 7, 1850. Webster was fearful the slave States would secede from the Union and there would be civil war if Clay’s compromise failed. Calhoun, after stating that he believed disunion “was all that was left” for the slave-owning States, died before the compromise was agreed upon.

4. What United States senator saved Clay’s compromise?

Stephen A. Douglas of Illinois came to the rescue after Clay’s “omnibus” bill was rejected. Clay left for his home in Kentucky, and Douglas proceeded to introduce and secure the passage of separate bills that included all of Clay’s proposals in August and September 1850.

5. What events, after the Compromise of 1850, helped Plunge the Nation into civil war?

The Kansas-Nebraska Act, organizing the territories of Kansas and Nebraska based upon “popular sovereignty” with respect to slavery; the Supreme Court’s decision in *Dred Scott v. Sanford* in 1857, holding the Missouri Compromise line unconstitutional; John Brown’s raid at Harpers Ferry in October 1859, where-by Brown sought to seize weapons from the U.S. Arsenal there in order to arm slaves who he would free in Virginia and lead in an insurrection; the election of Abraham Lincoln as President of the United States in 1860 and the secession of eleven slave States from the Union in 1860 and 1861.

6. Where did the first hostile act of the Civil War occur?

The first hostile act occurred in Charleston Harbor, South Carolina. There, on April 12, 1861, guns of the States that had seceded from the Union opened fire on Fort Sumter that was then being held by U.S. troops. On April 13 the U.S. troops in Fort Sumter surrendered.