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Revival of the Slavery Issue **Digital History ID 318**

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Annotation:

In 1854, Congress passed legislation that reordered the political landscape. The Kansas-Nebraska Act revived the issue of slavery's expansion, divided the Democratic party, destroyed the Whig party, and created the Republican party. Ironically, the author of this legislation was Senator Stephen A. Douglas, the man who had pushed the Compromise of 1850 through Congress and sworn that he would never make another speech on the slavery question.

Douglas proposed that the area west of Iowa and Missouri, which had been set aside as a permanent Indian reservation, be opened to white settlement and to the eventual construction of a transcontinental railroad based in Chicago. Douglas had sought this objective since 1844, but Southern Congressmen had objected because this territory was located in the northern half of the Louisiana Purchase, where the Missouri Compromise prohibited slavery. In order to forestall southern opposition, Douglas's bill ignored the Missouri Compromise and provided that the slavery issue be resolved by "popular sovereignty." When the territory was admitted to statehood, it could enter the Union "with or without slavery" as its "constitution may prescribe."

Southern senators insisted that Douglas add a clause specifically repealing the Missouri Compromise. Douglas relented. In its final form, his bill created two territories, Kansas and Nebraska, and declared the Missouri Compromise "inoperative and void." With solid support from southern Whigs and Democrats and the votes of half of the northern Democrats, the measure passed.

In this letter, Gerrit Smith mistakenly concludes that the Whigs will benefit from the act. In fact, its passage radically realigned party support. In both the North and the South, conservative Whigs joined the Democrats, while Whigs and Democrats with free soil sentiments repudiated their elected representatives. The chief beneficiary of these defections was a new political organization, the Republican party.

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What a godsend to the Whigs was the Nebraska bill! All of them in the free States arrayed themselves against it. This was, it is true, a cheap way of making themselves abolitionists. But, that it made them really such was what they insisted on, in the ears of the credulous and silly abolitionists. I am sorry that I have to call them credulous and silly. But, alas, too many have proved themselves to be such. The Whigs now claimed with more plausibility and effect than ever, that no other antislavery organization than the Whig party is necessary; and that this party is clearly entitled to the votes of all who sympathize with the slave.... But in that mass there is a very radical little handful, who are slow to believe in the abolition character of Whig party, even after all, that the Nebraska occasion has done to improve such character. They are slow to attribute a genuine abolition to the party, that insulted and vilified them, because they would not vote for the slaveholder, Henry Clay; to the party, that elected the slaveholder, General Taylor; to the party, whose Millard Fillmore signed the diabolical fugitive slave bill....

I would say, in this connexion, that I think no better of the Democrats than I do of the Whigs. The Democrats are undisguised open, servants of the slave-power: and, hence, I need say nothing to guard abolitionists against seductive and misleading influences, in that quarter....

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