

## The Compromise of 1850

The Compromise of 1850 acted as a band-aid over the growing wound of sectional divide.

### Overview

- The Compromise of 1850 acted as a temporary truce on the issue of slavery, primarily addressing the status of newly acquired territory after the Mexican-American War.
- The Compromise had five provisions: a stricter fugitive slave law; California's entry into the Union as a free state; a boundary drawn between New Mexico and Texas, stopping slavery in its tracks; the outlaw of the slave trade in Washington, DC.; and the implementation of popular sovereignty (allowing the states themselves to decide their policy on slavery) in the Western territories.
- The Compromise did not resolve the issue of slavery's expansion; instead, the fiery rhetoric surrounding the Compromise further polarized sectional divides between the North and the South.

### Mexican Cession begs the slavery question

At the end of the Mexican-American War, the United States gained a large piece of western land known as the **Mexican Cession**. Americans immediately wondered: Would the new states allow slavery? Anti-slavery advocates did not want to abolish slavery where it already existed; rather, they wanted to keep slavery out of the western territories for the benefit of white laborers settling in the area. Abolitionists, however, thought disallowing slavery's expansion was key to slavery eventually becoming abolished. Southern extremists, especially wealthy slaveholders, reacted with outrage at this effort to limit slavery's expansion. They vowed to leave the Union if necessary to protect their way of life and its western growth.



Map depicting the area of the Mexican Cession, including the present-day states of California, Nevada, Utah, and portions of Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado and Wyoming.

The Mexican Cession. [Map](#) courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

The issue of slavery in the Mexican Cession consumed Congress at the end of the 1840s, among other related controversial matters. Antislavery advocates wanted to end the slave trade in the District of Columbia, while proslavery advocates aimed to strengthen **fugitive slave laws**. The contested border between Texas and New Mexico and the issue of California both remained unresolved. Many emigrants flocked to California upon the discovery of gold in the late 1840s, forcing the question of its statehood and status as a slave or free state.

The presidential election of 1848 determined which of these issues would be tackled first. Southern Mexican-American war military hero Zachary Taylor was elected as president in 1848, much to the satisfaction of southern slaveholders. While Taylor himself owned more than one hundred slaves,

surprisingly he did not prioritize slavery's expansion into the Mexican Cession. Instead, he called on Congress to admit California as a free state.

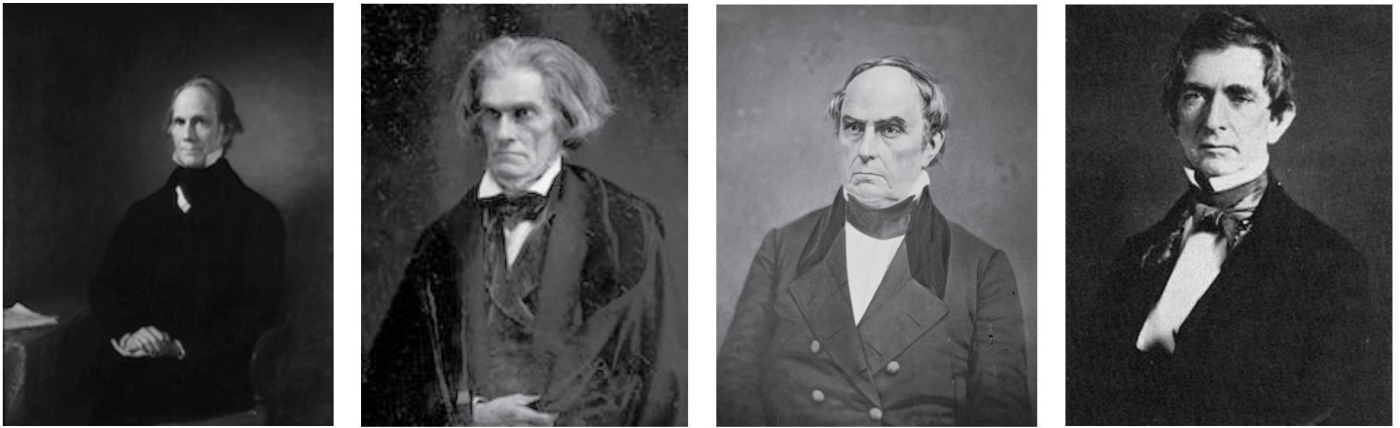
### **The Great Compromiser vs. The Great Nullifier**

The debate in Congress was heating up quickly. Kentucky senator Henry Clay, also known as the "**Great Compromiser**," offered a series of resolutions, most of which aimed to limit slavery's expansion. Clay answered Taylor's request, calling for California to enter the Union as a free state. Yet he coupled this antislavery provision with a more robust federal fugitive slave law in hopes of sectional compromise.

Clay's resolution for California's entry into the union as a free state angered the deathly ill John C. Calhoun, also known as the "**Great Nullifier**." Calhoun, too sick to speak, had his friend deliver a speech condemning Clay's proposal as endangering Southern rights and prosperity. Calhoun reinforced the need for a stronger fugitive slave law, and also proposed a constitutional amendment specifying a dual presidency—one office that would represent the South and another for the North—a suggestion that hinted at the possibility of disunion.

Soon thereafter, Massachusetts senator Daniel Webster countered Calhoun in his famous "**Seventh of March**" speech. Webster called for national unity, famously declaring that he spoke "not as a Massachusetts man, not as a Northern man, but as an American." While Webster denounced slavery, he regarded disunion as much worse.

Then, Whig senator William H. Seward declared that slavery was incompatible with the assertion in the Declaration of Independence that "all men are created equal," and proclaimed that slavery would be extinguished in the country. Seward's speech, in which he invoked the idea of a "higher moral law" than the Constitution and displayed contradictions within the Constitutional text itself—a promising tactic of many abolitionists of the time.



From left to right: Henry [Clay](#), John [Calhoun](#), Daniel [Webster](#), and William [Seward](#). Photos courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

The speeches made in Congress were published in the nation's newspapers, and the American public followed with great interest, anxious to learn how the issues of the day, especially the potential advance of slavery, would be resolved. However, President Taylor and Henry Clay's inability to cooperate stalled the government's resolutions on slavery. Taylor then became suddenly ill, reportedly after eating an excessive amount of fruit washed down with milk, and died within five days. Vice President Millard Fillmore took office and worked with Congress to flesh out the "final" terms of the compromise.

## **The Compromise of 1850**

Illinois Senator Stephen Douglas spearheaded the Compromise of 1850 through Congress. Five separate bills collectively composed the Compromise:

**First**, as advocated by the South, Congress passed the **Fugitive Slave Act**, a law that provided federal money—or “bounties”—to slave-catchers.

**Second**, to balance this concession to the South, Congress admitted California as a free state.

**Third**, Congress settled the contested boundary between New Mexico and Texas by favoring New Mexico and not allowing for an enlarged Texas, another outcome pleasing to the North.

**Fourth**, antislavery advocates welcomed Congress’s ban on the slave trade in Washington, DC, although slavery itself continued in the capital.

**Fifth**, Congress avoided a direct decision on the question of slavery in the western territories, employing the principle of popular sovereignty. This granted residents of the territories to decide for themselves whether to allow slavery. Popular sovereignty conveniently followed the logic of American democracy; majorities in each territory would decide the territory’s laws. The compromise, however, further fractured the country as votes on the bills divided along strict sectional lines.

Most Americans breathed a sigh of relief over the deal brokered in 1850, choosing to believe it had saved the Union. However, the compromise stood as a truce in an otherwise white-hot sectional conflict. Popular sovereignty paved the way for unprecedented violence in the West over the question of slavery.

### **What do you think?**

Who do you think got the better deal in the Compromise of 1850, the North or the South? Why? How did the Compromise of 1850 amplify the threat of disunion?