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Introduction

To Abraham Lincoln and many others involved in the Civil War, slavery was the one single cause of the conflict. Their interpretation assumes that the antebellum Republican party was primarily a vehicle for antislavery sentiment. This view, however, has been attacked by historians who have emphasized the importance of other issues in the formation of the Republican party. John R. Commons characterized the Republicans as primarily a homestead party, and Charles and Mary Beard later added the tariff as one of its fundamental concerns. More recently, historians have stressed aversion to the presence of blacks in the western territories as the Republicans' motive for opposing the extension of slavery. Because the Republicans disavowed the intention of attacking slavery in states where it already existed by direct federal action, their antislavery declarations have been dismissed by some historians as hypocritical. William E. Gienapp, while admitting that antislavery has a place in the formation of the early party, stresses the importance of such issues as temperance and nativism, especially at the state level. Michael F. Holt provides a variation on the antislavery theme by positing the idea that the early Republicans were bothered not so much by slavery itself as by the slave power which they viewed as forcing proslavery measures on the rest of the country.

Historians have thus varied widely in their views of the
Republican position on black slavery and how central that stand was to their appeal. Evidence exists in Republican platforms, pamphlets, speeches, and editorials to support widely varying interpretations of what the party stood for and why Northerners supported it. Some historians, for example, argue that the Republicans were abolitionists dedicated to eradicating slavery as soon as it was constitutionally feasible, while others insist that humanitarian or moral antipathy to the institution, if not outright abolitionism, was the moving force behind the party. They point out that the 1856 Republican national platform condemned slavery as a "relic of barbarism" and proclaimed that "all men are created equal and have inalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Together with other assaults on slavery's inhumanity, demands that it be extinguished, and statements proclaiming the glory of freedom and liberty, these can provide evidence that Republicans sincerely wanted to do away with slavery altogether.

Yet along with demands that slavery be ended and freedom extended went constant Republican denials that the federal government had any right to interfere with slavery within the Southern states or that Republicans had any intention of doing so. Similarly, along with enlightened talk of the equality of all men appeared blatant racism or at least strained arguments that concern for the black, free or slave, had nothing to do with the Republican party. This evidence seems to refute the assertions that moral antipathy to black slavery or humanitarianism was the basic force
behind Republicanism. William H. Seward, a prominent early Republican, acknowledged this view when he said, "The motive of those who have protested against the extension of slavery [has] always been concern for the welfare of the white man, not an unnatural sympathy with the negro."6

Historians have tried to reconcile these contradictory appeals in various ways. Some simply admit that the party was a heterogeneous coalition ranging from radicals to conservatives on the slavery issue whose rhetoric reflected the diverse views of its different elements. Others have excused the Republicans' racist remarks as an attempt to defend the party from Democratic charges that it cared more about blacks than whites. In reality, they argue, the Republicans were more favorable to black rights than Democrats, as their voting records against discriminatory laws in Northern state legislatures demonstrate. Still others have accepted the racism of some Republicans and the reluctance of the vast majority to interfere with slavery in the South by arguing that the Republicans were essentially a free-soil party, not an abolitionist or antislavery party. Opposition to slavery extension, which sprang from a number of sources, constituted the party's central thrust. Many sincerely believed that slavery had to expand to survive and that restricting it would bring about its ultimate destruction. Others wanted to protect the free labor system of the North by preserving areas for its expansion, while some wanted to keep blacks out of the territories for racist reasons. Many Republicans, finally, desired to stop the growth of
Southern political power.

Controversy over the proper place of antislavery in the Republican ideology did not, however, begin with historians. During the 1850s, considerable debate occurred within abolitionist circles as to the proper attitude they should express toward Republicanism. In part, this was simply an extension of the schism between political and non-political abolitionists, and it comes as no surprise that William Lloyd Garrison and others like him held little enthusiasm for the Republicans. Yet many abolitionists who had no objection on principle to political involvements considered the antislavery commitment of the Republican party insufficient to support. Gerrit Smith and William Goodell, two abolitionists who had been instrumental in organizing the Liberty party in New York State, in 1855 declared that they could not support a party which recognized the constitutionality of slavery anywhere in the Union. Yet it is important to remember that despite their criticisms of the Republican party, leading abolitionists maintained close personal relations with Republican leaders. The evidence strongly suggests that with the exception of Garrison and several others, most abolitionists voted with the Republican party despite their wish that the party adopt a more aggressive antislavery position. Indeed, abolitionist societies experienced financial difficulties in the late 1850s as former contributors began giving their money to the Republicans. Even Gerrit Smith, who insisted he could "never vote for any person who recognizes a law for slavery," contributed five hundred dollars to the Fremont campaign.
The fact that so many abolitionists supported the Republican party is an indication that antislavery formed no small part of the Republican ideology. Many historians have concluded, moreover that writers like Charles Beard greatly overestimated the importance of economic issues in the elections of 1856, 1858, and 1860. Eric Foner goes so far as to say "it would have been suicidal for the Republicans to have put their emphasis on economic policies, particularly the neo-Whiggism described by Beard."³

If one thing is evident after analyzing the various elements which made up the party, it is that antislavery was one of the few policies which united all Republican factions. For political reasons, if for no other, the Republicans were virtually obliged to make antislavery the main focus of their political appeal. Such questions as the tariff, nativism, and race were too divisive to be stressed, while the homestead issue could be advanced for the very reason that it was noncontroversial in the North.

What follows is a study of the emergence of three men as early leaders in the Republican party. The selection of these three, Joshua R. Giddings, Benjamin F. Wade, and Lyman Trumbull, was, of course, not arbitrary. Each is intended to represent a separate element in the early party, as each had recently abandoned a different political organization to join the Republicans. In the case of Giddings, it was the short-lived Free Soil party which was actually fused with the Republicans. Wade and Trumbull, on the other hand, chose to leave the Whigs and the Democrats, respectively, in favor of Republicanism. It is hoped that what
will emerge may provide evidence for the argument that slavery, more than any other factor, is what brought the Republican party into being. Only slavery could unite diverse elements as conservative Republicans and radicals, ex-Democrats, and former Whigs. All agreed that slavery was the major issue of the 1850s. The potency of the slavery controversy, and the way in which it subordinated or absorbed all other political questions, was noted by the anti-Lecompton Democrat from New York, Horace Clark:

It is not to be controverted that the slavery agitation is not at rest. It has absorbed and destroyed our national politics. It has overrun State politics. It has even invaded our municipalities; and now, in some form or other, everywhere controls the elections of the people. 10

And, Clark may have added, slavery had brought about a new political party, and a massive realignment of the American party system.
Notes to Introduction


6 Berwanger 39.

7 Foner 302.

8 Foner 303.

9 Foner 304.

10 U.S. Congressional Globe, 36 Cong., 1 Sess., 23.
Joshua R. Giddings

Joshua Giddings is perhaps the easiest early Republican to associate with antislavery principles. His expression of antislavery views was extensive both within the halls of the United States House of Representatives and throughout the northern states from 1838 to 1859. In the House, Giddings took every occasion to expound his philosophy about slavery. He made many tours to promote his cause and to fan the flames of antislavery agitation. He was also responsible for the portions of the first Republican party platform which contained his ideas of equal rights for all men. Giddings was, in short, a radical on the slavery question.

It is not a difficult task to find the antislavery influences which helped mold Giddings' radical stance. He made his home in the Western Reserve area of northeastern Ohio which, by 1835, had become one of the strongest areas of antislavery sentiment. Many believe that the significant turning point in Giddings' attitude toward slavery occurred when the abolitionist Theodore Weld spoke in Jefferson, Ohio in 1835. It is probably unfair to say that Giddings was converted to the doctrines of the antislavery forces, but there is little question that from that point Giddings was truly an "antislavery" personage. How much convincing was necessary on Weld's part is unknown, but Dumond reported that Weld prayed in the office of the attorney, Giddings, until the latter was convinced of the "sin of slavery."¹ Weld emphasized the idea
that slavery must be immediately abolished, not reformed or compromised. When he toured the Western Reserve he not only influenced Giddings but Benjamin F. Wade as well. Wade and Giddings were law partners for a time, but their business failed and the two men had a falling out.

Giddings was elected to the Twenty-sixth Congress in December, 1839 as a Whig. The 16th District of Ohio, which he represented, was comprised of Ashtabula, Geauga, and Trumbull counties and constituted a Whig stronghold. Most of its constituents held the same sectional convictions common to the Western Reserve, and early in his campaign Giddings saw to it that his supporters knew where he stood on the slavery question. During the canvass he replied publicly to a query from the Ashtabula County Antislavery Society, explaining his views on slavery’s political aspects: both slavery and the slave trade in Washington D.C. should be brought to an end. Congress had the moral duty and legal power to abolish these injustices, but the interstate slave trade was not subject to congressional controls. Moreover, he maintained that the Fugitive Slave Law of 1793, although unfortunate, was constitutional. On the question of the “gag rule,” which automatically excluded the petitions of antislavery Northerners from House consideration, Giddings affirmed his position that all citizens had both a “moral and legal right” to petition Congress on any subject. To prohibit this right was a gross violation of the Constitution.2

Giddings won the election. Had the antislavery forces been united into a political faction, he probably would have been one
of the first "Abolitionist Party" men elected. Except for the political label, there was not much difference between the Western Reserve Whig and the Western Reserve Abolitionist.

However, Giddings was first and foremost a Whig at the time of his entry into national politics, and for several years he was influenced by his party's leaders in Congress. Sampson declared that he "was a Whig by intelligence and temperament; accepted the Whig policy and exposition of the Constitution save on the question of slavery." He goes on to explain Giddings' antislavery stance within the Whig party.

By 1837 the Whigs of Ashtabula County were not all active antislavery men—quite possibly only a minority of them were so classified, but it is certain that most antislavery men were Whigs. Not only is a study of the personnel of the two organizations a ground for this conclusion but it is strengthened by the fact that during the late 1830s and the early 1840s Congressman Giddings was nominated by Whig conventions and his antislavery efforts in Washington were approved by antislavery meetings.

When Giddings went to Washington, William Slade of Vermont was the only other antislavery representative in Congress. John Quincy Adams of Massachusetts was a sympathetic member in the House, but he was not sent there on the basis of his antislavery sentiments as Slade and Giddings had been. These men found themselves quite dependent upon Weld's help. They asked him to come to Washington
to lobby on their behalf, which he did most effectively. He worked in Washington during two sessions of Congress and with Joshua Leavitt, encouraged this small group of antislavery Whigs to be more militant in dealing with the slave power. Leavitt had a great influence upon Giddings, advising him to attack slavery directly on the floor of Congress.

Giddings wasted little time in following Leavitt's advice. On February 13, 1839, Giddings rose to address the House for the first time. The subject under discussion was an amendment to the District of Columbia appropriations bill, which set aside $30,000 for a bridge over the east branch of the Potomac River. The issue had not the remotest connection with slavery, but Giddings seized upon it, for it would allow him to speak of the terrible activities he had seen in the District without being cut off by the "gag rule." He moved to strike out the amendment and went on to explain his reasons.

It would be wasteful, Giddings maintained, to make such an appropriation, for soon the government would be moved to a free state because of growing Northern hostility to slavery and the slave trade. His constituents viewed with "disgust and abhorrence" the spectacle of a Congress surrounded by practices usually condoned only by "barbarous and uncivilized nations." No liberty-loving Northerner would remain content to "continue the seat of government in the midst of a magnificent slave mart . . ." where high-sounding congressional debates mingled with "the voice of the auctioneer proclaiming the sale of human, intelligent beings."
Immediately following his address, an influential Whig paper in Cleveland advised Giddings' constituents to order him home at the earliest opportunity. Amid this criticism from his own party Giddings felt no less a loyal Whig, for he found it easy to reconcile his Whig and antislavery ideologies. Unrestricted sectionalism could easily disrupt the party. Giddings knew this and did not wish to destroy Whiggery. He was as eager to defeat the Democrats and enact the Whig economic program as he was to push his antislavery cause forward. The two loyalties were at least partially contradictory, but Giddings tried to reconcile them. He thought of himself as acting in the best interests of the party by becoming an effective antislavery agitator in Congress.

Though many Southern Whigs were no less devoted to the gag rule and slavery than the Democrats, Giddings maintained that the Democrats, both Northerners and Southerners, were responsible for every proslavery measure. Whigs, on the other hand, even slaveowning ones, were redeemable. On the gag rule vote, and later, when Adams tried to get a hearing for a petition asking for the recognition of Haiti, Giddings noted that nearly every Northern Democrat voted with the "Southern interest," while a far greater number of Northern Whigs took a sectional position.

Giddings jumped upon this block of Northern Whig votes and decided that agitation on his part would best serve the interests of the party. Whiggery, he believed, held the potential to become antislavery's best agency. Giddings believed that Whig congressmen could become dedicated antislavery men, for they were not bound to
Southern opinion the way Northern Democrats were. Giddings looked upon the Northern Whig votes as a potentially powerful antislavery base and he hoped to push the Whigs in this direction with his agitation in Congress. In this manner he was able to discover harmony between antislavery and Whiggery.

As proof of his Whig loyalties, Giddings supported Harrison for President in 1840. This was disappointing to the Abolitionists, who had nominated their own Liberty Party ticket, but Giddings concluded that the election of the Abolitionist ticket was futile. On the other hand, the Whigs had the potential of becoming a strong antislavery party. No great love, however, developed between Giddings and Harrison during Harrison's tenure in office.7

The Florida War provided Giddings with another opportunity to attack slavery. The speech delivered on February 8, 1841, specifically opposed the appropriation of money for the removal of Seminole chiefs and warriors from Florida. Giddings bemoaned the fact that northern funds had been squandered on the South for the past five years while the propriety of this massive expenditure had not been demonstrated.8 A certain $5,000 disbursement for the army's purchase of bloodhounds, he charged, was not for the purpose of tracking down Indians, as had been represented; it was rather for the purpose of capturing runaway slaves. Northern freemen were now having their pockets picked for the acquisition of bloodhounds to cooperate with the army in this disgraceful and disgusting method of waging the war.9
President Harrison had called a special session of Congress to meet in May 1841. This session reported a Whig majority, but when the caucus selected slaveholder John White of Kentucky to run for Speaker, Giddings and a number of antislavery Whigs bolted the nomination and voted for Northern Whig candidates. Despite this, Giddings was appointed chairman of the Claims Committee. This move angered many Southern Congressmen.

During this brief session, Giddings and the rest of the Whigs were preoccupied with economic legislation. The antislavery circle joined with its Whig brethren to repeal the subtreasury system, pass a bankruptcy bill, and create a third Bank of the United States. Giddings also supported a plan to readopt the "gag rule," while at the same time asking that a committee investigate it in order to "get at [the] business of the Whig economic program, for enough time had already been wasted." This tactic brought the wrath of Joshua Leavitt and other abolitionists upon Giddings. Leavitt was incensed at the antislavery Whigs for capitulating to the "gag rule," even temporarily.

Giddings was to redeem himself in the eyes of the abolitionists during the Twenty-seventh Congress, for this Congress was about to witness a climax in the struggle for free debate. Giddings was to be a central figure in that struggle.

The "gag rule" was the central focus of the conflict. This rule, product of Southern fears for slavery and Northern desires to avoid the sectional conflict, had been instituted when abolitionists began flooding Congress with antislavery materials.
The "gag" dictated that all petitions to Congress protesting any aspect of slavery be automatically tabled without being printed, discussed, or acted upon in any manner.

Giddings began meeting with John Quincy Adams, the leader in the fight against the "gag rule," to map out a plan of attack. The two men became close friends and also partners in the congressional antislavery struggle. After his first meeting with Adams, Giddings doubtless felt more certain than ever that moral duty required him to speak out against slavery.¹³

But loyal Whiggery demanded that no Northern member hold undue hatred toward slaveholders. Initially Giddings felt none, but he began to modify his opinion when the gag rule again passed in mid-December. Efforts led by Adams to defeat it were defeated with relative ease,¹⁴ and as debate wore on, Giddings began to notice vast differences in the characters of members of the north and south. Southern men displayed "self-important airs" and "overbearing manners," while representatives from the North were "diffident, taciturn, and forebearing." Giddings concluded that "southern bullies" had forced everyone else into silence, and no one was even willing to protest the slave markets which did business across the street from the House of Representatives.¹⁵

Trouble began when Giddings introduced the Creole resolutions. The Creole was an American ship engaged in the coastal slave trade. In 1841, the slaves on board mutinied, killed a seaman, and forced the captain to take the vessel to Nassau, where all except the murderer were declared free under British law. The American owners
denied British jurisdiction over their slave property and demanded that the freedmen be returned and tried as murderers.

Giddings, along with Weld, drew up resolutions that argued the municipal nature of slavery. According to the municipal theory, if slavery's laws had no effect beyond the borders of the Southern states, then once the Creole entered national waters her slaves immediately reverted to their God-given state of freedom and were right in using violence to throw off their oppressors.

After Giddings introduced these resolutions, confusion immediately prevailed. Democrats and Whigs alike were passionately aroused by this maneuver. A resolution of censure was drawn up and passed, and Giddings was effectively silenced without even being given the opportunity to defend himself. At this point, he resigned his office as a representative and left the city for his home to begin a re-election bid.

No one was more aware of the high stakes riding on the outcome of Giddings' re-election attempt than the Whigs in Washington. Efforts to exonerate Giddings on the floor of the House were defeated by Whig votes, and a move to develop party support fell through because of the unwillingness of the Ohio delegation to involve itself. The Democrats, of course, stopped at nothing in trying to smear the Whigs with abolitionism.

The Reserve voters, meanwhile, with their conservative habits, were greatly perturbed by the arbitrary curtailment of Giddings' rights as their representative. They returned him to the Capitol by a 7469 to 393 majority over his Democratic opponent. "Joshua
Giddings had become an antislavery hero.\textsuperscript{17} Giddings, armed with the support of his constituency, continued the same method which he had used before he was censured in the House. On June 3, 1842, while arguing a military bill, he brought up the \textit{Creole} case again. Through the process of his censure, re-election, and reassertion of the \textit{Creole} resolutions, Giddings had successfully defied his party and nearly all of Congress. His "reappearance meant the conspiracy against silence had been broken. Agitation could proceed apace."\textsuperscript{18}

The 1843 state and local elections proved disastrous for Ohio's Whig party, as the Democrats scored enough victories to capture both houses of the legislature as well as the governorship. The reason was that the Liberty party had drawn off many antislavery Whig voters.

Giddings, however, remained a staunch antislavery Whig, and hoped to counter this threat. His answer was a series of essays which he signed "Pacificus." They first appeared in the \textit{Western Reserve Chronicle}, a newspaper published in Cleveland. Later they appeared in pamphlet form and were copied by various papers. "Pacificus" attempted to unite the Whig economic program with antislavery doctrine by defining both as parts of larger "Northern rights" which true friends of "the cause" should support. He argued that protective tariffs, national roads, and homestead bills were as much antislavery measures as the abolition of servitude in the District of Columbia.

Giddings hoped to influence two groups with "Pacificus." The
first was made up of Whigs whose antislavery convictions needed prodding. The second was the Liberty Party men who had to be persuaded to vote for Whig candidates. Giddings believed that the objects of the two parties were very much the same and he hoped to unite them. His political logic was, of course, faulty. The more he preached to the Liberty men as a Whig the more he antagonized his own party. The longer he remained a Whig, the greater became Liberty party opposition.

The Texas annexation issue provided Giddings with another opportunity to attack slavery. On March 3, 1843, twenty members of Congress, including Giddings, united in an address to the people of the free states warning that the Southern politicians were determined to annex Texas, that their object was to extend and perpetuate slavery, that annexation would involve the country in a war with Mexico, and that a dissolution of the Union would result.¹⁹

By 1844, the Liberty Party had greatly increased its power within the Western Reserve. The Liberty men had increased their vote ten times since 1840 and had even established a newspaper in Giddings' district. In the 1844 race, Giddings was attacked as an opportunist, and the "Pacificus" arguments were rejected as anti-abolitionist nonsense.

Giddings himself, however, remained as solid a Whig as ever. No longer did he try to reason with the Liberty men. Instead he began attacking them furiously as foes of Northern rights, plotters who were contriving to place James K. Polk in the presidency and
Texas in the Union by drawing votes from the Whig candidate, Henry Clay. When the results of the October elections were announced, Giddings had defeated his Liberty and Democratic opponents by more than a two-to-one margin. His antislavery Whig appeals had done their work well.

Upon returning to Congress, Giddings turned his attention to his new Whig colleagues, urging them to look into antislavery matters. He hoped to organize an antislavery "phalanx" in the House capable of driving "slavery into the Atlantic or Gulf of Mexico."²⁰

At this point in his Congressional career, Giddings was labeled an "Abolitionist" and "Agitator" with neither the Democratic party members nor the Whig party members very happy with his position. After having served for so long as Chairman of the Committee on Claims, he now found himself relegated to the Committee on Revolutionary Pensions which had no business to consider.

Giddings, however, while radical, was not an abolitionist in the truest sense of the word. His antislavery doctrines were far too narrow to sustain any federal legislation for complete political freedom. His belief in the right of each state to regulate its own institutions led him to his program of denationalizing slavery but not abolishing it.

Giddings came to believe that the ultimate intention of the South was to spread slavery North and destroy civil liberties in the free states. In 1843, he observed to Salmon P. Chase that the
principal cause of the slow growth of antislavery politics in the North was "ignorance in regard to the encroachments of the Slave Power upon our rights." Later, he wrote to Chase, saying that he was certain "that northern liberty or southern slavery must fall."\(^{21}\)

Especially offensive to Giddings was the idea that Congress was pandering to the slave power. At the previous session of Congress, he charged, the people's representatives had spent the time and money of their constituents to assist slave mongers to speculate in human beings, thus contravening the Constitution and the rights it guaranteed. No one in the hall, he ventured, would risk his reputation by saying that congressmen had the authority to appropriate the government's funds for these "base purposes."\(^{22}\)

Meanwhile, new elements within the Whig party began acting as Giddings felt all good politicians should. In Massachusetts, a diverse group of young men, "Conscience" Whigs as they came to be called, had taken a strong sectional position by issuing a manifesto against the admission of Texas. The leaders of the "Conscience" Whigs, soon to be Giddings' closest allies, were one day to number among the North's foremost sectional figures. The group included such men as Charles Sumner, Charles Francis Adams, Henry Wilson, and John Gorham Palfrey.

United in their opposition to Texas annexation, this heterogeneous association attacked the "tools of the slave power," men like Daniel Webster, Edward Everett, Abbot Lawrence, and one whom Giddings had already come to distrust, Robert C. Winthrop.
These individuals represented the Massachusetts orthodoxy, the "Cotton" Whigs. The two factions began to compete for control of the state organization. The "Conscience" Whigs helped restore Giddings’ dedication to the party at a time when he was coming under attack by many of its members.

Tensions increased between the South and North in May 1846 with the beginning of the Mexican War. On May 12 Giddings took the opportunity to speculate on the millions to be spent on the war. These huge sums of course, would be drawn largely from the northern people, who he said, had a right to know what compensation they could expect for their sacrifices. Giddings volunteered the information: "The parasites of the Executive," the slave drivers of the South would gain dazzling fortunes."

Giddings, in opposing the Mexican War, was breaking significantly with his party. He was one of only fourteen men in the House who chose to defy the decision of the Whig caucus and vote against the war. His theme in speaking against the war was consistent and simple: "I will lend the war no aid," he announced, "no support whatever. I will not bathe my hands in the blood of the people of Mexico . . . [in order] to waste her countryside and subject her to slavery."

Although his attempts to cajole Whiggery into blocking all military appropriations were to prove fruitless, Giddings never gave up the task. The party, he feared, was heading for "inevitable ruin." He believed the only way to save the Whig party was by working for antislavery fusion.
As early as 1845 Giddings began working for fusion by coordinating his efforts in Ohio to capture the Liberty party with the movements of the "Conscience" Whigs. He had even proposed that a national convention be called without party distinction, based on a series of gatherings held in various states.

Memories of Henry Clay's defeat in 1844 made most Whigs nervous about further fragmentations over the slavery question. Giddings and several others, however, informed the Liberty party men that they would never again vote for a slaveholder, not even Clay, and would bolt to a third party if the Whigs did not nominate a Northerner for president in 1848.25

This latest episode brought Giddings to his greatest crisis yet as a Whig. Ever since 1838 he had deemed himself a loyal Whig, assuming that his sectional agitation was beneficial to the party. He could not suddenly cast aside this belief and abandon Whiggery. Such a move would have amounted to an admission of failure and thus, long after many of his associates had decided to bolt, Giddings remained determined to reform the Whig party. He still looked forward to dividing the Democrats along sectional lines and absorbing the entire North into the Whig party. He would continue to feel this way until the national convention finally nominated Zachary Taylor.

The plain fact was, however, that the Whig party had no candidate whom Giddings could accept. Every report from out of state indicated Taylor's growing popularity.

Meanwhile, the Thirtieth Congress was to be evenly divided,
and a balance of power was available to anyone prepared to seize it. The contest for Speaker of the House promised to be a close one, a fact quickly noticed by Giddings and his Massachusetts comrades. Giddings responded by trying to solidify backing for the strongly anti-war Caleb B. Smith. But soon it became obvious that Robert C. Winthrop, Giddings' least favorite "doughface," was winning the party's endorsement.

Giddings and several other "Conscience" Whigs drew up a list of demands which were presented to Winthrop in December. Among these demands was a promise from Winthrop to organize House committees to help bring an end to the war, report bills to abolish slavery in the District of Columbia, repeal the 1793 fugitive slave law, and obstruct the extension of slavery. Winthrop refused even to bargain with the bolters.

Winthrop did indeed win the Whig nomination, with Giddings and his allies dissenting. For this, he was attacked by his own party. But Giddings would not be discouraged yet. He still believed that the party could be saved by a moral crisis and he hoped to bring this about. He hurled proslavery accusations at Winthrop, forcing Northern Whiggery to take a stand on the issue.

By late January, the Whigs in Ohio and Massachusetts were dividing into two hostile camps.

Giddings attempted to defend himself from the accusations of his detractors by writing articles in his own defense for those Whig papers that would print them. He imagined himself coordinating a struggle for control of the party, but really his
actions were more effective in solidifying the antislavery Whigs of Ohio and Massachusetts in favor of third party fusion with the Liberty party.27

Giddings hoped to unify antislavery opinion behind his own presidential favorite, Thomas Corwin, a moderate Whig senator from Ohio whose speeches against the Mexican War had impressed many antislavery men. Corwin, however, proved unreceptive. He made clear to Giddings his opposition to any effort to run him for president, saying that the Whig party would split on sectional issues if the agitation continued.

Giddings, however, made clear his intention to oppose Taylor at any cost. Before the session ended he gave one more significant speech on the Mexican War. Taking the opportunity to speak when the bill to supply deficiency of appropriations for 1847 was being discussed, he decided that a portion of the Whig party would not support Taylor.

Earlier, he spoke for an hour on the latest military appropriations bill. This speech represented a desperate effort by Giddings to salvage his party. The tactic he chose was to frighten the Whigs by forecasting massive Northern defections unless the party deserted Taylor.

Giddings predicted that the Whig future was dark indeed, unless the party ceased to vote for war funds and never again elected a Speaker who supported American aggression and the slave trades while promoting the payment of slave claims. If the party refused to enact total divorce of the federal government from
slavery and unless it denounced Taylor as "one whose hands are dripping with human gore," the Barnburners, or anti-Southern Democratic faction, antislavery Whigs, and Liberty men would be forced to band together in an independent effort. The coalition he warned with deadly accuracy, would form "the germ of a party which will at no distant day, become dominant in this nation."

Having for so long written off the antislavery Whigs as opportunists, many Liberty men simply had not believed that Giddings and the rest would bolt if Taylor got the nomination. But such Liberty leaders began changing their minds as they watched Giddings defy his party on the Speakership and battle for abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia. While Giddings' struggle with Winthrop continued to make ever more permanent divisions among the Northern Whigs, his activities were also causing an important segment of Liberty party opinion to reevaluate its position. Many third party men soon expressed a far more favorable attitude toward union with the dissident antislavery groups within the two major parties.

Giddings himself, meanwhile, remained sure that the Whigs could be kept together "only in one way; that is to get up the question of slavery in every possible shape and thereby [to] compel northern Whigs and southern Whigs to take their position."

In March, the Boston Atlas vindicated Giddings by publishing proof supporting his accusations against Winthrop. This reopened the entire controversy. The newspapers of Boston and Maine assumed their previous position, and the bitter rejoinders lasted for a
month. By this time the party had completely polarized. Whigs in the Reserve were ready, if necessary, to follow Giddings and the Massachusetts minority into a third party.

But Giddings still believed that bolting would be unnecessary. Early in the session, he met with Supreme Court Justice John McLean, an Ohioan of high stature in the Whig party, and had come away much impressed with the Justice's views on slavery. Giddings now felt certain that McLean was the most promising candidate, and that if he were nominated he could easily draw the radical Democrats and Liberty men into the Whig party.

The results of the 1848 presidential race, however, were anything but pleasing to antislavery men. The Democrats nominated Lewis Cass on a platform of "popular sovereignty." This doctrine opened to possible slavery all lands taken from Mexico by the recently ratified Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo. The Whigs served antislavery men no better. On the fourth ballot General Taylor, despite his total lack of political experience, was nominated. Henry Wilson led the antislavery Whigs out the door.

Salmon Chase issued a call for a nonpartisan state convention in Columbus, and the Barnburners put forth an announcement of a bolters' meeting in Utica. The Massachusetts "Conscience" Whigs proclaimed that a similar meeting would convene in Worcester, and Gamaliel Bailey advised all Liberty men to take part in these various deliberations. Giddings announced that no "true" Whig could support Taylor, and left to help his Massachusetts friends.

On June 28 the Worcester meeting began. Five thousand
delegates attended as Giddings, Henry Wilson, Charles Allen, and Charles Sumner sat at the speakers' table. A resolution endorsing Giddings' actions in Congress was the first agenda item, and it passed unanimously. The delegates rejected Taylor and Cass and adopted resolutions calling for a national convention to meet in Buffalo on August 9.

The full significance of Giddings' endless wars with the "Cotton" Whigs had finally been revealed. Antislavery Whigs were completely aroused, and large portions of the Liberty party were now more friendly toward fusion because Giddings gave it his approval. In the six months since he had chosen not to vote for Robert Winthrop, he had tried his best to save the Whigs from the "slave power." "But because of his activities, no man had done more, albeit unwittingly, to galvanize the third party movement than had Joshua Giddings." 30

At the Free Soil convention held in Buffalo on August 8, Martin Van Buren was nominated for president. The platform pledged "free soil" as the means for restricting slavery. This stand was too conservative for certain Liberty party leaders, including Gerrit Smith and William Goodell, who left the Buffalo convention.

But for Giddings the Free Soil party represented an advance, not a retreat. Unlike other antislavery Whigs such as Horace Greeley or Ben Wade, Giddings had finally chosen to cut all ties with his old party. The Whig party, he believed, had ceased to be representative of the people of the North and of the people who saw the evil and the wrong of slavery. Despite the somewhat
conservative nature of its proceedings, the Free Soil doctrines did far less violence to Giddings' beliefs than they did to those of the Liberty men. Furthermore, he was to defend a radical interpretation of this platform in the same manner that he had always proclaimed the Whig party to be an antislavery party.

Giddings now began an exhaustive campaign, this time as a Free Soil candidate. He campaigned on the assertion that the Whig party had abandoned its "true principles" by nominating Taylor. Orthodox constitutionalism, he claimed, now resided exclusively in the doctrines of the Free Soilers. He was of course, attacked by the Whigs endlessly. The results, however, vindicated Giddings once again. He carried every county in his district and defeated his coalition opponent by over 3,000 votes.

Giddings now pursued his antislavery goals as a Free Soil candidate. The turn of events had given him increased confidence. There was strength in numbers and even though the antislavery forces were not in the majority, the chance of success was gaining momentum. In December he introduced a bill authorizing the people of the District of Columbia to express themselves on the question of slavery. His objective was to place before the country the fact that both the Whig and Democratic parties were committed to the support of slavery and the slave trade in the District. This was accomplished.

Almost immediately Giddings learned that his view of the Free Soil party was a long way from that of most of the party members. To Chase and many others the party was simply a temporary device
for political gain. Since 1848 David Wilmot, Preston King, and others of the ex-Democratic faction had agreed with this position. Giddings' need to feel politically loyal, however, remained. Politics to him still consisted of appealing to the national conscience.

When Chase approached him with a plan to merge with the Democrats, therefore, Giddings refused to listen. He insisted that the party should act as a permanent, independent institution. Fusion, he feared, would destroy the organization's identity and rob it of its distinctive moral power. Giddings much preferred a policy of keeping the Free Soilers aloof from all Whig and Democratic squabbles.

By mid-July, however, when nominations for off-year elections were made, nearly every county in Ohio had a Free Soil platform which favored fusion with the Democrats. Even the party's name was changed, with "Free Democracy" being substituted for "Free Soil." Although he scarcely sensed it, Giddings was already being left behind by many politicians within the antislavery movement.

The 1850 elections in Ohio announced the ruin of the Free Soilers as an independent reform movement. Everywhere in the state, Free Soil men were merging into the Democratic party. Giddings alone succeeded as an independent representative.

In mid-February, Henry Clay delivered a speech against a mob of Boston abolitionists which had rescued a runaway named Shadrach from the custody of federal marshals, commissioned under the Fugitive Slave Law. Giddings, in turn, castigated Clay's bad
taste on the floor of the House. The rescuers, Giddings maintained, were defying tyranny, just as the Sons of Liberty had done at the Boston Tea Party. As incidents like the Shadrach case became increasingly frequent after 1851, Giddings continued to channel their impact into the halls of Congress. These verbal exercises were part of Giddings' effort to rebuild the Free Soil party.

The major thrust of his effort, however, was a series of conventions. At the first, Giddings brought forth a platform which pledged the party to every imaginable antislavery measure and it was adopted unanimously. The entire Compromise of 1850 was repealed in favor of complete denationalization of slavery. Any Whigs and Democrats with acceptable antislavery principles would be welcomed into the organization, but the third party itself would never bow to the older organizations. Finally, all agreed with Giddings motions to schedule a state nominating convention in Columbus for August 21 and a national convention to meet in Cleveland to prepare for the 1852 campaign.

In June the Whig and Democratic presidential conventions convinced Giddings that a third party was necessary. The Democrats drafted Franklin Pierce, whom Giddings despised, and the Whigs chose Winfield Scott. Both parties' platforms upheld the Compromise measures and promised not to renew agitation over the slavery question.

Giddings was now determined to launch the Free Soil campaign. On the floor of the House he assailed the Whigs and Democrats for
jointly supporting the Compromise, especially the Fugitive Slave Act. "The Free Soilers," he promised, "would dwell on the question of slavery until the people reacted en masse to hurl from power the men who thus condemn popular feeling."  

The National Free Soil Convention opened on August 11, 1852, in Pittsburgh. Giddings' influence was immediately apparent. Ohio's delegates carried a banner proclaiming "No Compromise with Slaveholders of Doughfaces." Giddings, as chairman of the platform committee, reported resolutions which denounced the Compromise, endorsed a complete denationalization of slavery, and called for the recognition of Haiti as the first step toward "moral intervention" in foreign affairs.

Back in Ohio, no one was betting on Giddings to succeed himself, for his district had been drastically gerrymandered. Cuyahoga, Lake, and Geauga counties, in which he had always polled majorities, had been replaced with two counties, one of which had gone consistently Democratic since the 1830s. Yet Giddings surprised many by carrying his new district.

In the national contest, however, Franklin Pierce scored an unparalleled victory. Scott controlled just forty-two electoral votes, while John P. Hale, the Free Soil candidate, pulled in about half of Van Buren's 1848 figure. Whiggery was slowly expiring, and the Free Soil party simply had not become the rallying point that Giddings had hoped for.

In December, 1853, antislavery issues, it seemed, were effectively buried, and the number of congressional agitators was
greatly diminished. Charles Durkee, Charles Allen, and George W. Julian had all failed to obtain re-election in 1852. The political atmosphere was quiet and undisturbed by sectional turbulence.

The Free Soil issue, however, was about to explode. In early January, 1854, Stephen A. Douglas announced his intention to repeal the Missouri Compromise and open Kansas and Nebraska to slavery. In theory at least, slavery would have vast new areas for expansion.

By January 22, Giddings, Charles Sumner, and Salmon Chase had finished composing an "Appeal of the Independent Democrats in Congress to the people of the United States," designed to mobilize the North against the sudden incursion of the "slave power." The "Appeal" indicted the Kansas-Nebraska Act as a "gross violation of a sacred pledge," which would convert free territory "into a dreary despotism inhabited by masters and slaves."33 The impact of the "Appeal" upon Northern attitudes was tremendous. Some have gone so far as to say that "it became the significant basis for the beginning of the Republican party."34

In the House and Senate the Whig party totally dissolved, its Northern branch uniting with the Free Soilers against the Kansas-Nebraska Act. A splinter group of Democrats, meanwhile, also chose to place sectional loyalty over party allegiance. Northern politics now began a transformation from which the Republican party was finally to emerge.

In Ohio, a complicated series of conventions which paralleled those in other states had already prepared the way for a massive
free soil fusion attempt. This attempt was begun in a very conservative manner. A state wide non-partisan meeting held in Columbus during mid-March set the tone of the movement. Participants approved resolutions condemning the Kansas-Nebraska Act and endorsed the Compromise of 1850, the Fugitive Slave Law and all, as the "final solution" to the sectional quarrels.

Many radicals were incensed by the conservative nature of the resolutions but Giddings threw himself into the spreading coalition. As he had done in the Whig and Free Soil parties, Giddings hoped to push the emerging group to a more radical stance and use it as a vehicle for antislavery agitation.

On July 13, the anti-Nebraska nominating convention assembled in Columbus. The delegates nominated a complete slate of candidates, endorsed the idea of a national convention, and again assured the public that the Compromise of 1850 offered the best solution to the slavery question. It took five ballots to secure Giddings' renomination. On the final vote he barely scraped by, 43-40, and the closeness of the contest was an indication of his tenuous place in the emerging party. The conservative faction had nearly muscled Giddings out of the party just as it was forming.

With the nomination behind him, Giddings' re-election was a certainty. By October the voters had rejected the Democrats in all Northern states except Illinois. Every district in Ohio elected a fusionist candidate for Congress and the anti-Kansas-Nebraska nominees for state offices secured 75,000 vote majorities.

The future of the fusion attempt was by no means assured,
however. The year 1855 witnessed the rise of an ominous new party, the Know-Nothings, which threatened to eclipse the anti-Kansas-Nebraska movement. The Know-Nothings touched America's deep streak of anti-immigrant and anti-Catholic bigotry and attracted many followers as it provided an outlet for intolerance while acting as a home for displaced conservative Whigs. Though the party had been completely overshadowed by the free soil upheaval in 1854, by 1855 it was starting to draw a statewide following. Giddings and many others began to fear for the future of their fragile fusion group. Some hoped for fusion with the Nativists, but Giddings advocated no cooperation save on the "principles of liberty."  

With the pivotal 1855 Ohio gubernatorial race looming, Giddings and other radicals like Chase began to insist that slavery be "the issue and the sole issue" of 1855. Salmon Chase had long been considered the most acceptable choice for governor. The Know-Nothings announced that they were planning a state nominating convention of their own only two weeks before the anti-Nebraska men were due to assemble in Columbus for the same purpose. Their intention, of course, was to coerce the fusionists by endorsing Chase first.

Giddings began taking steps to prevent any such coercion. First, he announced his support for Chase, then he planned a simple, effective strategy. He knew that the Know-Nothings had begun to split on sectional lines over the Kansas-Nebraska question, and he was certain that the best policy was to emphasize this split. Fusionists, he decided, must stand firm upon their
doctrines, refusing to compromise upon the slavery question. Giddings also told Chase that he planned to bolt the Columbus convention if even the slightest bargain was made with the nativists. "He made clear that there was already too little humanitarianism in the anti-Kansas-Nebraska organization and that he did not intend to let it be diluted further with bigoted "Know-Nothingism."36

Soon, radical and moderate anti-Kansas-Nebraska presses all over the state began to echo Giddings' theme. At the nativist convention on June 20, the Know-Nothings, intimidated and unsure of themselves, vetoed independent nominations, adopted a strong anti-Kansas-Nebraska platform, and made clear their desire to work closely with the Columbus meeting. So far, Giddings' tactics had worked quite well.

His predictions, however, were only partly accurate, for the Columbus convention was certainly not all he had hoped for, even though concessions to the nativists were held to a minimum. Chase received a unanimous nomination for governor, and the rest of the slate was filled with conservative fusionists acceptable to the Know-Nothings. Most of the nativists were now completely fused with the Free Soil political machine, and all factions within the anti-Nebraska fold were partly mollified. Ohio's Republican party had finally come into being.

Giddings was, perhaps, the least satisfied delegate at the convention. The resolutions merely condemned the Kansas-Nebraska Act, insisted on free soil, and endorsed the idea of a Republican
presidential convention to meet the following year. It was the most restricted antislavery program yet put forward in Ohio. Giddings seized the floor and announced that, although he would not object to the resolutions, they certainly did not go far enough. In the platform committee meeting he had pressed for a statement asserting the duty of the federal government to protect man's God-given right to human freedom. The others had overruled him, but he still wished to make his position clear. In the moment of decision, Giddings failed to make good his threat of bolting. Instead he acquiesced to the will of the delegates, overlooked the resolutions, and assumed that he could best improve Republicanism by remaining associated with it. This choice was in keeping with the precedents he had set for himself as a member of the Whig and Free Soil parties. Giddings next offered a resolution calling on all members of the convention to vow perpetual allegiance to Republican creeds and never to return to their old parties. He was voted down. While Giddings had worked hard to keep the Republicans from falling prey to nativism, his services were far less recognized by his colleagues than his antislavery radicalism, which was placing him beyond the pale of party regulars.37

This was to be a characteristic of Giddings' sojourn in the Republican party. By 1858, he was rebuked and failed to be renominated. He was, in all likelihood, too radical for his new party. His nervous Republican colleagues tried their best to keep him quiet. They feared, with good reason, that he was not the proper man to argue the moderate nature of the party. In the
Thirty-fourth Congress, Ohio Republican John Sherman tried to rebut the Southern charges of abolitionism. He did so by making a detailed analysis of the antislavery movement. There were two types of antislavery men with whom the Republicans had nothing to do, Sherman explained, Garrisonian abolitionists and slightly less "ultra" men like Joshua Giddings. Giddings' opinions, said Sherman reassuringly, were "no more engrafted upon the Republican platform than the recent doctrines of Governor Adams of South Carolina in reopening the slave trade." To be sure, Republicans regarded the venerable agitator with "great respect" but hardly considered him a legitimate member of the party.38

To some antislavery partisans like William Lloyd Garrison all attempts to reform the political system from within amounted to morally debilitating compromises, only forestalling the day of emancipation. Joshua Giddings, however, had spent his years in Congress trying to achieve what Garrison deemed impossible, a fusion of morality and conventional politics in order to reform society. Giddings was convinced that by moral agitation he could persuade his fellow representatives to act, and he refused to be deterred by the compromising actions of his associates.

Despite all the pragmatism of his position, Giddings had spoken out courageously in the House of Representatives from 1838 to 1858, in an effort to mobilize American politics against the Southern labor system. By assuming the role of Congress' moral catalyst, Joshua Giddings enjoyed a successful career as a practitioner of radical politics, transmitting the moral
perceptions of revolutionaries like Garrison to the institutionalized politicians of ante-bellum America. He provided a vital link between traditional representative government and the moral activist.

This link, however, was one the early Republican party wished to avoid. The party was, after all, struggling to gain respect in its early days and the last thing it needed was to be associated with radical abolitionist thought. The Republicans were a diverse assortment of individuals representing a range of thought, even on the slavery question. It took the Kansas-Nebraska Act, and its implications of slavery and "slave power" extension to bring the various elements together. On the issue of slavery extension and Kansas-Nebraska the Republicans were united. On other issues such as the Fugitive Slave Law and black rights, they were much less cohesive. Talk such as that bantered about by Giddings during his tenure in the House was bound to step on toes and disturb many party members.

Based upon this evidence, one would certainly not be incorrect in asserting that Giddings was not representative of the "typical" early Republican. It is important to remember though, that the early party was an odd collection of many different factions. Trying to pinpoint the "typical" 1855 Republican would be a little like trying to locate the "typical" American from any period. The fact is that Joshua Giddings is an important representative of one of the factions, albeit a very radical one, which was fused into the Republican party. His own case gives one no reason to doubt
his own belief that "there is but one real issue between the Republican party and those factions that stand opposed to it. That is the question of slavery."
Notes to Chapter 1


2Stewart, James Brewer, Joshua Giddings and the Tactics of Radical Politics (Cleveland: The Press of the Case Western Reserve University, 1970) 32-33.


5Stewart 43.


7Buell, Walter, Joshua Giddings, A Sketch (Cleveland: W.W. Williams, 1882) 110-111.


11U.S. Congressional Globe, 27 Cong., 1 Sess., 55-56

12Stewart 68.

13Stewart 40.


15Stewart 40.


"U.S. Congressional Globe, 28 Cong., 1 Sess., 653-54.

"U.S. Congressional Globe, 29 Cong., 1 Sess., 643.

"U.S. Congressional Globe, 29 Cong., 1 Sess., 641-45.

Stewart 126.

Stewart 142-43.

Stewart 145.

"U.S. Congressional Globe, 30 Cong., 1 Sess., 380-83.

Stewart 142.

Stewart 145.

Julian 238.

"U.S. Congressional Globe, 32 Cong., 1 Sess., 738-42.

Stewart 225.


Crandall 36.

Foner 244.

Stewart 232.

"U.S. Congressional Globe, 34 Cong., 3 Sess., 53-56.
39roner 304.
At first glance, the careers of Benjamin Wade and Joshua Giddings seem almost identical. They were both, after all, Ohio radicals who became famous fighting slavery. There are, however, important differences which justify their inclusion in this study. Perhaps most interesting is the fact that Wade and Giddings, especially later in their careers, really did not get along in spite of the fact that they seemed to be working toward the same goals.

The name of Benjamin Wade is linked inextricably with radicalism. No matter what the consequences, Wade could be relied upon to support radical causes, and when he championed them, he did so with such vigor and bluntness that he became known as "Bluff" Benjamin Wade.

The principal reform in which Wade became interested concerned the Negro--first emancipation from slavery, then elevation to full citizenship. Along with Giddings, Wade was one of the few men to speak out in favor of black suffrage. If the Republican voters wanted strong talk from their representatives, Wade did his best to satisfy them. He was the master of what one reporter called "scorching sarcasms." When it seemed that the Senate was more interested in discussing the acquisition of Cuba than the homestead bill, Wade told the southerners, "The question will be, shall we give niggers to the niggerless, or land to the landless?" And
after a slaveholding Senator described with tenderness his relationship with an old house servant, Wade retorted, "nobody wished to forbid his taking his old mammy with him—we only sought to forbid his selling her after he got there." Wade was, indeed, biting and vehement when it came to slavery questions.

Wade grew up in the Western Reserve in poverty with little formal education. Once he became old enough he studied law under Elisha Whittlesey, as had Giddings. By 1831, the law firm of Wade and Giddings had been formed.

During the first few years of their association the two men found each other congenial. They were generally in agreement about politics and law and tended to complement each other as partners. As an accomplished speaker, Giddings would appear in court and do the pleading. As an excellent researcher, Wade would stay in the office and do the background work. As time went on the firm prospered. Success helped Wade overcome his early timiditv and eventually he was able to make forceful appearances in court. Within a few years, both Giddings and Wade had made such names for themselves that the firm became known as one of the most important on the Reserve, with business extending all over Ashtabula, Trumbull, and Geauga counties.

When the panic of 1837 broke however, the firm of Giddings and Wade was faced with financial disaster and the old partnership was dissolved. Giddings ran for Congress while Wade ran for the state senate and formed a new partnership with Rufus P. Ranney. Both Giddings and Wade eventually succeeded in extricating themselves
from heavy indebtedness, but the former partners gradually drifted apart and finally became bitter enemies.

It was almost inevitable that Wade should have been attracted to politics and to the Whig party. Joshua Giddings had long been active in the anti-Jacksonian party in Ohio, and Elisha Whittlesey, the mentor of both Giddings and Wade, represented anti-Jacksonian sentiment in the lower house of Congress. The overwhelming majority of the professional men on the Reserve were opposed to the Jackson administration. Just as their forebears in New England had been Federalist, just as they themselves had supported John Quincy Adams and Henry Clay as National Republicans, so they now joined the new Whig party, winning virtually every election in the area until 1846.1 Wade remained a staunch Whig until the demise of the party in 1854.

As a Whig, Wade was strongly opposed to what was described as "executive usurpation," standing instead for a weak Presidency. When it came to the various economic tendencies of Whiggery, however, he was not always a strict party man. To be sure, he believed in a protective tariff and internal improvements at federal expense, but in the matter of subsidies to industry and government solicitude for corporations, he found himself more often than not in company with the hated Democrats. Moreover, he couldn't forget the underprivileged and if his own party opposed such beneficial measures as the abolition of imprisonment for debt, he had no problems with joining the opposition.

One of his main reasons for remaining within the party was
practicality. Third party movements seemed harmful to him, and so he shied away from the various antislavery parties, Liberty or Free Soil, which were becoming popular on the Western Reserve. For him, his own major party was the proper vehicle for political action. Nevertheless, he never understood that working within a party meant blind fidelity to the party line. When his party's policies suited him, he supported them. When they did not, he never had any compunctions about asserting his independence.

In the fall of 1837 he was elected to the Ohio senate by the Whigs. He was then 37 years old. The state was at the time largely Democratic. Though one of the youngest members, he was at once placed on the judiciary committee, then the most important committee of the senate.

Many believe that Wade, like Giddings, became profoundly interested in the antislavery movement because of the speeches of Theodore Weld, the great abolitionist orator, who spoke on the Reserve in 1837.² There is probably, however, no reason to doubt that Wade never had any use for an institution so much at variance with everything he was used to. Weld may have strengthened some convictions which Wade already held, but he scarcely could have done more. Wade most likely came by his antislavery sentiments naturally.

Whatever the source of his antislavery feelings, there could be no doubt about their intensity. Within two short years of his appearance in the state senate he had succeeded in becoming known as one of his region's most outspoken champions of the rights of
blacks. He had hardly taken his seat in Columbus when the question of repealing the state's Black Codes was raised. As the law then stood, blacks could neither vote nor attend the public schools in Ohio. They were excluded from all juries and their testimony was not acceptable in cases involving whites. Opponents of the Codes, though still in a small minority, were not idle. Almost from the day on which Wade first entered the senate, antislavery senators presented petitions for their repeal. Wade, who was strongly in favor the cause of equal rights for blacks, soon presented petitions for repeal himself. Although he could not induce the legislature to take action in 1838, he was beginning to make his mark as an advocate of black equality.

Even while the petitions concerning the Black Codes were being presented, the slavery issue itself came up in the legislature. The question of the propriety of the annexation of Texas was beginning to divide the nation. Wade was put on a committee to consider the subject. On January 11, 1838, he rendered his report, saying that the proposed annexation was neither expedient nor constitutional. Since its object was to spread slavery, he denounced it as utterly opposed to the principles of the Declaration of Independence. "It is madness to tempt destruction by extending this rotten and wicked system over what are now unpeopled solitudes," he wrote, asserting that to take foreign territories for such purposes would brand the United States as hypocritical in the eyes of the world.³

For many of the lawmakers, Whig and Democratic alike, the
report was much too outspoken. Wade soon realized that the senate would adopt anti-Texas resolutions only if they were watered down. In his usual practical manner, he withdrew his report and submitted new resolutions, more acceptable to the majority because they referred only indirectly to slavery. These passed with only one dissenting vote. And although his original report was not accepted by the legislature, it was reprinted in pamphlet form, so that the whole state could familiarize itself with the senator's antislavery views.4

The Texas committee was only the first select committee upon which Wade served in the antislavery cause. In January, 1838, he presented petitions from his constituents protesting against the "gag rule" adopted by the national House of Representatives. Wade believed that the rule requiring all antislavery petitions to be tabled without discussion was an outrage, and he protested strongly against efforts to sidetrack his petitions.

When the legislature assembled again in December, 1838, the Whig majority had vanished. The Democrats outnumbered their opponents by a narrow margin, and since they were more friendly to slavery than the Whigs, Wade could expect little sympathy for his antislavery notions. Wade blamed the Whigs' defeat on abolitionists who had bolted the party. "No doubt the Whigs lost the State this year through the influence of the Abolitionists," he wrote. "I hope they will learn before it is too late that they have lent themselves to a party who are devoted soul and body to Southern dictation."5 He had no use for third party organizations,
but this did not mean that he had changed his mind on slavery. On
the contrary, "his stand must have satisfied all but the most
extreme among the foes of human bondage."6

Wade's attacks on the "peculiar institution" made him famous,
and before long he was singled out by people all over the state to
present antislavery and anti-Black Code petitions to the Senate.
Not only abolitionists, but also blacks became aware of the
outspoken senator. Though they were disenfranchised and
persecuted, they had hopes of bettering their lot. Since they were
excluded from the common schools, they sought a charter to
incorporate a school of their own. To present a petition for this
purpose, they selected Wade. The Democratic majority was furious.

The controversy that really stamped Wade as an outstanding
antislavery legislator in Ohio was the struggle over the Ohio
Fugitive Slave Law. The proposed law provided for the return of
fugitives upon simple application to an Ohio judge or mayor by the
alleged owner. Wade and three fellow Whigs attacked it
persistently. Despite this, the bill passed.

On issues other than slavery, especially his interest in the
poor, Wade also showed his independence. Strongly in favor of
abolition of imprisonment for debt, a reform generally opposed by
Whigs, he must have known that any outspoken opposition to the
party on this issue would make him unpopular with the businessmen
at home, who might displace him in the fall of 1839. To keep quiet
would have been easy, but it was not his way of doing things.
Whether because of his innate belief in progress or of his humble
origins, he was determined to support a bill to abolish the degrading practice, and to the horror of his associates, he carried out his purpose. When a Democratic bill for abolition of imprisonment for debt was enacted into law against the wishes of the majority of Whigs in 1838, it was firmly supported by Wade.

For a man who believed as strongly in the rights of the individual as Wade, his party's support of corporations was equally disturbing. His belief in the equality of man went hand in hand with a distrust of corporations, although a good Whig was expected to stand by these institutions against attacks from the opposition. Orthodox party members were appalled when, early in 1838, the senator introduced an anti-corporation measure. He was unable to have the bill adopted, but, when he returned to Columbus in December, he tried again. The Whigs remained unconvinced. Yet it was a popular measure, and within two years a similar bill would be passed with only six representatives opposing it in the House. While Wade's stand hadn't made him popular with his party, "it had proved his foresight and independence."7

Wade's distrust of corporations was not confined merely to advocacy of a greater separation between government and business. It extended much further, to the amazement of his Whig colleagues, to the concept of limited liability itself. His old-fashioned view made him wary of incorporated businesses, and when the Democrats proposed to make individual stockholders responsible for the debts of corporations, he not only voted with them, but on several occasions himself offered restrictive amendments to bills
chartering corporations. His interest in popular rights did not permit him to support a cause which he believed to be dangerous, and if his party associates didn't agree with him, he saw no reason why he shouldn't assert his independence.

Wade's interest in popular rights also caused him to work for the extension of free education for all. Ohio had had a public school system since 1821, but the principle of free public education hadn't been generally accepted. The legislature, in February, 1838, passed a school bill which furthered the cause of free education for all citizens by appropriating a common school fund of $200,000 financed by a tax on the counties. Governor Vance, a Whig, endorsed the reform, and Wade, this time in harmony with his party, not only supported the measure, but defended it vehemently in the following years against attempts to repeal it.

As the school question showed, Wade's independence and devotion to radical causes didn't mean that he didn't consider himself a good Whig. Never one to desert a party because of differences of opinion, he was thrilled by the victory of Ohio's anti-Jacksonian party in 1837 and he supported most of their measures when he first arrived in Columbus. The Democrats seemed to him an unprincipled group of politicians who pandered to slaveholders, and he expected to accomplish great things with a Whig majority in the legislature.

The Whigs' national problems interested him also. He begged his old mentor Elisha Whittlesey not to resign his seat in the House; he supported a resolution condemning President Martin Van
Buren's proposed independent treasury system, and he voted to castigate John C. Calhoun's distribution scheme. In spite of his radicalism, Wade felt at home in the Whig party, but to orthodox party members his deviations from party discipline were cause for concern.

Conservative Whigs on the Reserve disliked Wade's strong independence. They were afraid of abolitionism. They strongly believed in government subsidies to corporations, and they considered the concept of limited liability essential for a sound business structure. As a result, many came out against Wade in 1839, and on election day they rejected him by 72 votes.

Wade now began a very temporary retirement from political activity. In the first year after his defeat, he didn't run for office. But the issues at stake were too stirring for Wade to sit by quietly. The Whigs had nominated William Henry Harrison for president, and the campaign fascinated Wade. Identifying the Whig cause with his own, he threw himself into the campaign with full force. His service to the party was rewarded with a renomination for the state senate the next year. Again he delivered speeches all over the district, and when the returns were in, he had a majority of more than 1000 votes over his Democratic opponents. Two months later, he again set out for Columbus.

Wade's second term in the legislature in many ways paralleled the first. Again he proved his independence by taking a strong stand against slavery and for the abolition of imprisonment for debt. When other issues were at stake, however, he was a loyal
Whig who supported the party through thick and thin.

Opposition to slavery remained first and foremost among his radical ideas. If his outspoken attacks on human bondage had made him unpopular with some of his constituents, his determined stand had also made him famous. Fully aware of the fact that his antislavery attitude had contributed to his defeat in 1839 and that conservative Whigs were blaming the party's defeat on abolitionists, he began exactly where he had left off two years earlier. On December 23, 1842, he presented his first petition of the session, and for weeks he kept up the agitation against the "peculiar institution." The abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia, repeal of the state's fugitive slave law, nullification of the Black Codes, the establishment of schools for black children-- these were the subjects which he consistently kept before the legislators by presenting petitions from abolitionists in his district.

There were still other ways in which Wade proved his unrelenting commitment to the antislavery cause. In January, 1842, the Ohio legislature was considering a motion to censure John Quincy Adams for his introduction in the national House of Representatives, of a petition to dissolve the Union. Wade vigorously supported moves for an indefinite postponement of the motion of censure while heatedly answering his Democratic opponents. ¹¹

Just as Wade refused to heed the consequences of his antislavery position, so he refused to worry about the fact that
his attitude on economic problems had contributed to his defeat in 1839. Since he was a strong believer in the abolition of imprisonment for debt, in spite of his party's opposition to reform, he couldn't sit by idly when efforts were being made to modify it. He therefore joined with just eight other senators and defied his party by voting in favor of a bill to do away with imprisonment for debt.

But all these instances of radicalism didn't make him any less a Whig. During his second term, as during the first, he considered the Whig party the only acceptable political organization, and no temporary differences of opinion with party leaders could change his fundamental loyalties.

When the banking institutions were involved, Wade was in full accord with his party. Considering Jacksonian suspicions of a money power merely a sham, he believed that the Democrats were really interested in an unusual financial system to enable unscrupulous manipulators to enrich themselves at the expense of the public. And what he thought to be true of Ohio, he believed to be true of the entire country. When President Tyler succeeded Harrison and began vetoing his party's financial measures, Wade was utterly disgusted.12

Wade worked hard to foil his Democratic opponents at every turn. Voting against a resolution to return to ex-President Jackson a $1,000 fine which the General had been forced to pay in New Orleans for contempt of court, Wade also opposed a Democratic measure to repeal the charters of offending corporations, sponsored
a successful measure to regulate the rates of interest at a maximum of seven percent, and engaged in research on a measure to reform the county jails. In spite of his radical convictions, he proved to be as good a Whig as all the rest.

From 1843-1847, Wade held no public office. It was during this retirement from active political life that his devotion to his party would be most severely tested. Abolitionists in Ohio had organized the Liberty party, and during the coming years, advocates of independent antislavery parties increased in importance. Since most of their support came from former Whigs, and since abolitionism was especially strong on the Western Reserve, ever mounting pressure was brought to bear on antislavery Whigs to join the new organization. Wade's brother Ned joined the Liberty party, and Joshua Giddings, after resisting the appeal of the splinter group for several years, became a Free Soiler in 1848. Wade remained true to his Whig faith. This decision, more than anything else, was to cause a complete estrangement between Wade and his former law partner.

That Wade remained within the fold of the Whig party as long as there was any hope for its continued existence should come as little surprise. The points of agreement were numerous. He believed in a protective tariff, so did the Whigs; he believed in a limited executive, so did the Whigs; he believed that slavery shouldn't be spread by the federal government, so did the Whigs, or so it seemed. "Independent enough to disregard party discipline when it appeared necessary, he nevertheless loathed impractical
schemers who had a tendency to contribute to the success of the common enemy." By 1847, his loyalty was rewarded when he was elected by party leaders to the presiding judgeship of the third Ohio judicial circuit.

Eighteen-forty-eight however, marked the beginning of the end of the Whig party in Ohio. Antislavery Whigs had never approved of the war with Mexico, now they demanded passage of the Wilmot Proviso to keep slavery out of the territories. At the very least, they wanted a presidential candidate opposed to human bondage. State leaders of the party, who had generally favored either ex-Governor Thomas Corwin or Justice John McLean for the nomination, found it almost impossible to keep their organization together when General Zachary Taylor, the owner of one-hundred slaves, was nominated instead. Thousands deserted the party.

On the Western Reserve, the nomination of a man believed to be friendly toward slavery caused tremendous excitement. Giddings walked out of the party to support Martin Van Buren, whom the Free Soilers nominated. Many prominent Whigs followed suit. They simply refused to vote for a slaveholder.

Almost alone among influential Whigs upon the Reserve, Wade not only refused to bolt, but campaigned actively for Taylor. His decision was not an easy one. Old friends turned away from him, the local press derided him, and his motives were constantly questioned. But he never wavered. Wade continued "to adhere persistently, obstinately to the Whig party, to the grief of many admiring friends."
Wade's dislike for third party movements was not the only reason for his position. Under no circumstances was he willing to support Van Buren, for he believed that the ex-President had been much too friendly to slaveholders in the past. A vote for Van Buren, he reasoned, would be a vote for Lewis Cass and the Democrats, and Cass was sympathetic to the South. Taylor, on the other hand, with his strong Unionism, seemed uncommitted. Therefore, Wade decided to stand by his party.

Wade's efforts on behalf of Taylor seemed to be in vain, however. Not only did he lose Ohio, but Van Buren and his Free Soilers carried most of the Reserve counties. Moreover, Giddings was sent triumphantly back to Congress. For the time being, it seemed as if Wade had made a major mistake. His own prospects in Ashtabula appeared dim.

But Wade did not despair. The victorious Taylor remembered Wade's loyalty and, to the disgust of Giddings, made Wade the arbiter of federal patronage on the Reserve.

With Taylor in office, Wade seemed vindicated, for no antislavery Whig had reason for complaint. In 1850, Henry Clay's compromise measures were introduced in Congress. Because they provided for popular sovereignty in Utah and New Mexico, continued to sanction slaveholding in the District of Columbia, and above all proposed the passage of a new fugitive slave law, the radicals detested them. But so did the President. Determined that New Mexico should be admitted without passing through a territorial stage, he fought the Compromise. Taylor was, indeed, living up to
Wade’s expectations.

In July, 1850, however, the situation changed. Taylor died and Millard Fillmore assumed the presidency. Fillmore had originally been placed on the Whig ticket to pacify the northern wing of the party. Now he came out in favor of the Compromise measures and he exerted all his efforts in their favor. Within two months of his accession the Compromise of 1850 had been enacted.

For radical Northern Whigs these developments were very disturbing. They were being asked to support a Chief Executive who had signed the Fugitive Slave Law. For Wade, these events meant an end to compromise. No matter how loyal he had been to the Whig party he couldn't support so hated a measure as the Fugitive Slave Law. He now embarked on a speaking tour in and around Ohio, denouncing the law.

In 1850-51, a U.S. senator was to be chosen in Ohio. Because the Free Soilers held the balance of power in the state legislature, it was obvious that only a strong antislavery leader could be elected, one acceptable to both the third party and to one of the old parties. Since Wade was one of the few antislavery Whigs on the Western Reserve who had not bolted in 1848, he became available as a compromise candidate. On March 15, 1851, on the twenty-eighth ballot, he was elected.

Wade had remained true to his convictions all along. That he disapproved of third party movements he had shown beyond all doubt in 1848, and all Free Soilers who voted for him knew it. But that he hated slavery, they also knew. It was precisely because of this
that they voted for him. For three more years he was to stand loyally by his party, always in the hope that the antislavery cause might best be served by Whig victories. When his conviction was finally proven wrong in 1854, he was among the first to switch to the new Republican administration.

The pattern of Wade's behavior was fixed from the very beginning of his first term in the Senate. He was first and foremost an opponent of slavery, and he expressed antislavery opinions regardless of popular opinion. Consequently, he never failed to give his vote to any project designed to curb the expansion of slavery, no matter how unpopular.

In matters other than the slavery struggle, Wade also established a firm pattern of behavior during his first year in Congress. He remained loyal to Whig party measures such as protection for industry, government aid to projects of internal improvement, and a homestead bill. But as he had shown in Columbus, he was by no means blind to the faults of his own party. He would remain an independent antislavery Whig as long as there was a Whig party.

When it came time to nominate a Whig for president in 1852, Wade made it clear that he still considered the Whigs to be the party of freedom. When Winfield Scott received the nomination, Wade stumped the state of Ohio, everywhere portraying Scott as a radical antislavery candidate. Such talk alienated and angered many Southern Whigs. As the returns came in, it became evident that Wade's efforts had been wasted. The Democrats swept Ohio and
the rest of the country.

Wade's hands had always been tied as long as he remained a Whig. He was a man with radical ideas confined in an essentially conservative organization. Wade seems never to have fully understood that the Whig party had generally drawn its strength from men of property in the South as well as the North. He was able to defy his party at times, even take radical positions in the antislavery struggle, but he was always limited. "The coarse, plainspoken Wade was far too . . . radical on the slavery question to wield influence over a conglomerate party."16

The new Republican party was much more congenial to Wade. Not as impractical as its Free Soil and Liberty predecessors, it was nevertheless an organization which was able to attract all forces opposed to slavery. Wade became one of its most enthusiastic supporters from the first.

When Congress reassembled in December, 1853, Wade most likely had no thought of abandoning a party to which he had belonged for so long. But within a few weeks, the introduction of the Kansas-Nebraska Act was to throw the entire political system into disarray.

As soon as it became apparent that the Kansas-Nebraska bill would be coupled with the repeal of the Missouri Compromise, Ohio antislavery men went into action, as Chase and Giddings authored their "Appeal of the Independent Democrats." The manifesto had originally been entitled "To the People of Ohio," and Wade had actually signed and endorsed it. But the authors were not
satisfied. Determined to gain as much publicity for their Independent Democratic party as possible, they decided to rename the work. The final draft was never submitted to Wade, who had no use for the Democrats, independent or otherwise.

The absence of Wade's signature from the Appeal did not mean that he did not agree with it as he was careful to point out in the Senate. When Senator Stephen A. Douglas attacked Chase and the other signers for publishing the document, Chase explained that Wade had also approved it. Wade now took advantage of this opportunity. Addressing the Senate, he avowed that he now endorsed "every word" of the Appeal, and joined ranks with other antislavery senators to fight against the Kansas-Nebraska Act. To give his blessings to a document like the Appeal was a daring step for Wade, for he was still a Whig.

The manifesto created an immediate sensation. Huge rallies against the Kansas-Nebraska bill were held in community after community. In Ohio, several papers printed the Appeal in its original form, with Wade's as well as Chase's and Giddings' name on it.

Wade had his say about the Kansas-Nebraska bill on February 6, when he rose in the Senate to deliver a long speech against it. Still appealing to the patriotism of Whigs throughout the country, he called upon his Southern colleagues to stand by the solemn compact made at the time of the admission of Missouri. The fathers, he affirmed, had believed that the territories "should be fenced up from the intrusion of this accursed scourge of mankind,
human slavery," but the bill violated this principle. He once again proclaimed his utter distaste for the institution and his conviction that the federal government should have nothing to do with it.

Am I obliged, as a member of the Government of the United States, to acknowledge your title to a slave? No sir, never. Before I would do it, I would expatriate myself; for I am a believer in the Declaration of Independence. I believe that it was a declaration of Almighty God, that all men are created free and equal, and have the same inherent rights. ... You may call me an Abolitionist if you will. I care but little for that; for if an undying hatred for slavery and oppression constitutes an Abolitionist, I am that Abolitionist.¹⁹

This speech really marked Wade's entrance as an antislavery agitator in Congress. Before, he rarely spoke, offering instead silent support of measures of which he approved. As one of the chief opponents of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, however, he had become one of the slaveholders' most outspoken antagonists.

Wade denounced the "slave power," but his greatest contempt was reserved for Northern allies of slaveholders. Douglas he especially despised. Again and again he clashed with the Little Giant, and on one occasion, after Chase had replied to a Douglas speech, Wade said: "But sir, I need not refer further to the speech of the Senator from Illinois. My colleague so entirely
pulverized that speech that there is not enough left upon which a man can hang an idea."²⁰

Senator Norris of New Hampshire was another Northern Democrat whose efforts on behalf of slaveholders irked Wade. When Norris asked Chase whether he would ever live up to his constitutional obligations and aid in the return of a fugitive slave, Wade answered that he never did nor ever would assist in executing that law.²¹

The debates in Congress, the failure of the Whigs to sustain their Northern colleagues, and the general bitterness brought on by the repeal of the Missouri Compromise gradually led Wade, along with many others, to search for new political alignments. Up to that time, he had still considered himself a Whig, but now he was prepared to disavow completely the organization.

His break with the Whig party was no sudden, impulsive move. In Ohio, as in other states, a fusion movement was beginning to take shape. Former Whigs, some Democrats, Free Soilers, and Independent Democrats, as well as Know Nothings, were coming together in common resentment against Stephen A. Douglas' scheme. Wade joined this movement and urged all those who opposed the extension of slavery to do the same.

It was on May 25 that Wade announced his final break with the Whig organization. The passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act in the House of Representatives three days earlier was the last straw. If the lower House, where the North was better represented than in the upper, was unable to sustain the Missouri Compromise, then the
Senate, "this rotten borough department of the Government where the voice of the people is scarcely heard at all," certainly could not do anything. He had been a Whig all his life, had supported Whig presidential candidates for the South, and relied upon Southern honor for the safety of Northern rights. He would do so no more. Southern Whigs had betrayed him by joining with the enemy behind his back, and until the injustice brought on by the Kansas-Nebraska Act was undone, all possibility of compromise was gone. As for his future political alignment, he minced no words. "I am an Abolitionist at heart while in the slave cursed atmosphere of this capital," he concluded, "whatever I may be at home. But here pride and self-respect compel a man either to be a dough-face, flunky, or an abolitionist, and I choose the latter. I glory in the name." From that time on, Wade exerted all his influence to further the new party, as yet nameless, but soon to be called Republican.

Like Giddings, Wade was alarmed by the early nativist influence in the party. Had he been merely a self-serving politician, he could have benefited from the new movement. As a native-born descendant of America's earliest Protestant settlers, he would have been welcomed with open arms by the new organization. Instead, he not only refused to negotiate with the Know Nothings, but he also went out of his way to provoke them. In the spring of 1854, when nativism was at its peak, Wade spoke out for the immigrants, saying,
These poor men do not deserve the harsh epithets which have been indiscriminately applied to foreigners. . . . we are all either immigrants or the descendants of immigrants, and it cannot certainly be of much importance at what particular period the emigration took place?²³

Benjamin F. Wade, then, while a radical for certain, also provides a contrast to Joshua Giddings. If Giddings was a staunch Whig, Wade was even more so, for he refused to abandon the party almost until its last gasping breath. The main difference between the two men was really one of methods. While both were skeptical of third party organizations, Giddings jumped to the Free Soilers, while Wade continued to pursue antislavery goals through the Whig organization.

Some have tried to portray Wade as being less radical than Giddings but this would be difficult to prove. While it is true that Wade was able to remain in the Republican party long after Giddings and his radical convictions had been muscled out, at no point did Wade betray his antislavery convictions. He was many years ahead of his time with statements such as, "I hold to the old Whig doctrine. . . . that ALL are equal . . . without regard to color." Giddings could scarcely have uttered anything more radical. Beyond this, however, it also reflects Wade's belief that the Whig party was based on the principles of equality. This belief helps explain Wade's obstinate loyalty to the Whig party even when Giddings was jumping to the Free Soilers.
Slavery and, beyond that, equality were truly moral issues for Wade. As he put it,

I know it is said that the African is an inferior race, incapable of defending his own rights. My ethics teach me. . . . [that] they are still human; they are animated by the same hopes, they are afflicted with the same sorrows; they are actuated by the same motives that we are.24

These principles were to remain the platform of the Republican party.

As has been shown, Wade was a self-proclaimed abolitionist. In this sense, he was much like Giddings in that it was his hope to achieve abolitionist goals through the existing party system. He believed that the Whig party was based upon the principles of liberty. As such, it provided the perfect means for fighting slavery. Third party organizations, like the Free Soilers, served only to draw away Whig votes and aid the Democrats. While this was a conviction held by Giddings as well, Wade continued to believe it almost until the Whig party was no more.

At any rate, the two men together provide evidence for the diversity, not only of the early Republicans, but of the radical faction within the Republican party. Giddings and Wade, both radicals, nevertheless, despised each other. The only thing that brought them together under the Republican tent was a firm commitment to antislavery principles. Giddings had been a Whig and a Free Soiler because he believed these organizations to be the
best vehicles for antislavery sentiment. Wade had remained a Whig for the same reason. Both men, alike in many ways but different as well, now joined the Republican ranks because they recognized it as an opportunity to unite all antislavery factions, radical as well as not, under one party label.
Notes to Chapter 2


3 Trefousse 31.

4 Riddle, Albert Gallatin, The Life of Benjamin F. Wade (Cleveland: W.W. Williams, 1886) 83.

5 Buell, Walter, Joshua R. Giddings, A Sketch (Cleveland: W.W. Williams, 1882) 33.

6 Trefousse 33.

7 Trefousse 39.

8 Trefousse 41.

9 Riddle 144.

10 Trefousse 44-45.

11 Trefousse 46.

12 Trefousse 48.

13 Trefousse 54.

14 Riddle 166.

15 Trefousse 82.


17 U.S. Congressional Globe, 33 Cong., 1 Sess., 280.

18 Trefousse 86.

19 U.S. Congressional Globe, 33 Cong., 1 Sess., 337-40.
20 U.S. Congressional Globe, 33 Cong., 1 Sess., 309.
21 U.S. Congressional Globe, 33 Cong., 1 Sess., 309.
22 U.S. Congressional Globe, 33 Cong., 1 Sess., 763-65.
23 U.S. Congressional Globe, 33 Cong., 1 Sess., 944.
24 U.S. Congressional Globe, 36 Cong., 1 Sess., 150.
Benjamin Wade and Joshua Giddings can easily be classified as radicals. Lyman Trumbull is not so easily categorized. While he did work closely with the radicals, at the same time he exhibited conservative tendencies. Historians have traditionally shied away from writing about Trumbull because they have encountered difficulty in putting him into a specific category. Writers often refer to Trumbull as a radical and sometimes as a conservative, often with little justification for either term.

Lyman Trumbull was, throughout his long political career, a "conservative radical." This term is very ambiguous and seemingly paradoxical, but it does describe Trumbull's peculiar ability to be basically a conservative who at times advocated radical political and economic ideas and measures. The Chicago Tribune editorialized in 1872 that "no American statesman has ever stood so nearly midway between the violence of fanaticism on both sides."1

Whereas Wade and Giddings had come to the Republican party from radical ranks, Trumbull was a Democrat. Furthermore, he came from a political tradition of opposition to Negro rights. He was numbered among those early Republicans who made little distinction between free Negroes and slaves, and felt that association with any black degraded the white race. "I want nothing to do, either with the free negro or the slave negro . . .," he once said. "We wish
Trumbull was born in Colchester, Connecticut in 1813, and this was where he spent his boyhood. Of his formal education, little is known. Although his father and grandfather were Yale graduates, financial difficulties prevented him from having similar advantages of education.

Trumbull began his adult life as a teacher. From 1833-36, he filled a position as principal of Greenville Academy in Georgia. While in Greenville, he employed his leisure hours reading law in the office of the judge of the superior court of Georgia. There is no record of his impressions of slavery during this sojourn in the South, "but it is easy to surmise that the Connecticut Yankee didn't like it and that he was eager to return to the North." In 1837 he was admitted to practice by the Georgia courts and in the fall of that year he journeyed to Illinois.

After settling in Belleville, Trumbull apparently lost no time in becoming involved in public affairs for on November 23, 1840, he entered the Illinois House of Representatives. He was elected as a Democrat and soon became one of the state's most important Democratic leaders.

Three months after Trumbull took his seat in the Illinois legislature, Stephen A. Douglas resigned the office of secretary of state of Illinois to take a seat on the state supreme court, and Trumbull was appointed to fill the vacancy. He held the position until March, 1843, when he resigned because of a political feud with Governor Ford. In February, 1846, his name was presented to
the Democratic State Convention for the office of governor of the state. He was, however, defeated. In that same year he was nominated for Congress by the Democrats of the First District but was also defeated in that race. After his defeat he returned to his Belleville law practice.

True to his New England heritage, Trumbull detested slavery, for it outraged his moral sensibilities. At the same time, he was opposed to abolitionism and to interference with slavery in the slave states. Trumbull took an active part in antislavery agitation when in late 1837 he traveled in southern Illinois lecturing against slavery. He also gathered signatures on a petition that would prohibit the slave trade between the states and abolish slavery in the District of Columbia. In doing so, Trumbull was putting himself in danger of being associated with abolitionist principles, for the mid-1830s witnessed the rise of abolitionist petition drives.

The motivation for this speaking tour most likely had to do with the killing of Rev. Elijah P. Lovejoy. Lovejoy, though an abolitionist, was not of the Garrisonian fire-and-brimstone school. It was his plan to publish a newspaper in Alton, Illinois which would discuss the slavery issue. A mob learned of his plan and murdered Lovejoy. Trumbull gives some of his first opinions on the slavery controversy in a letter to his father dated November 12, 1837. He says, "As much as I am opposed to the immediate emancipation of the slaves and to the doctrine of Abolitionism, yet I am more opposed to mob violence and outrage, and had I been in
Alton, I would have cheerfully marched to the rescue of Mr. Lovejoy and his property."

While his attempts to win an elective office were unsuccessful, Trumbull's law practice prospered. He was rapidly gaining a reputation as a learned and effective trial lawyer. He devoted himself, however, to cases which brought him no money and whose political benefit was doubtful. These cases involved Negroes who were held in virtual slavery by a system of indenture. Trumbull considered the system, which stemmed from the complicated legal history of slavery in Illinois, to be immoral and illegal. His reputation as an antislavery lawyer grew.

Considering the proslavery sentiments of the great majority of the inhabitants of Belleville and the county where Trumbull practiced law, his fight for the abolition of the remnants of slavery and the indenture system was an act of great personal and political courage. Even during his political association with John Reynolds, his patron and mentor and leader of the proslavery forces in Illinois, Trumbull did not compromise his opposition to slavery. After paying tribute to several Illinois lawyers who fought against slavery, Dwight Harris, the author of the only comprehensive history of slavery in Illinois, stated, "Chief among them [the antislavery lawyers] was Trumbull, whose name should be written large in antislavery annals. . . . In politics he was an old-time Democrat with no leanings toward abolitionism, but possessing an honest desire to see justice done to the Negro in Illinois."7

In 1847, a new constitution was adopted by the state of
Illinois which reduced the number of judges on the supreme court from nine to three. The state was divided into three districts, each to select one member of the court. Trumbull was elected judge for the southern district in 1848. He accepted a reelection as judge in 1852 but resigned a year and a half later because the salary was insufficient to support his family. After this he retired from politics.

The introduction by Stephen A. Douglas of the Kansas-Nebraska bill on January 4, 1854, brought Trumbull as it did Abraham Lincoln, out of political retirement. Political indignation in Illinois ran high. Abolitionist agitation, which was subdued for a long time, was revived. Both the Whig and the Democratic papers in Illinois devoted little space to the slavery question in the years 1851-53. The Compromise of 1850 was generally considered an adequate settlement. Illinois was content to accept the fact that both the Whigs and the Democrats in their national conventions in 1852 officially affirmed that they would "adhere to a faithful execution of the acts known as the compromise measure settled by the last Congress." 9

The reaction in Illinois to the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act was swift and bitter. The Missouri Compromise had in Illinois an added sanctity because the bill incorporating the compromise measure had been introduced in the Senate by Senator Jesse B. Thomas of Illinois. Thus it was particularly important to the people of Illinois who took natural pride in a measure which was generally credited with saving and preserving the internal peace
Trumbull was now forty-one. He joined Gustave Koerner and other Democrats in organizing the Eighth Congressional District in opposition to Douglas and his Kansas-Nebraska bill. The Eighth Congressional District was the strongest Democratic district in the state, but the political parties had been thrown into such disorder by the Kansas-Nebraska bill that no regular nominations were made by either the Whigs or the Democrats. Trumbull announced himself as an anti-Nebraska Democratic candidate and was elected over Philip B. Fouke, who ran independently as a Douglas Democrat.

In spite of the growing swell of public protest, Douglas was successful in having the Illinois legislature pass a resolution endorsing the Kansas-Nebraska bill. But this victory was a hollow one, for it revealed within the Democratic party the emergence of a strong anti-Nebraska faction that adamantly rejected Douglas' leadership on the Kansas issue, and that didn't hesitate to vote with the Whigs.

Among the Democrats who voted in the state senate against Douglas' policies were John Palmer, Norman B. Judd, and Burton C. Cook. All three of these men later became Trumbull's close political associates in the anti-Nebraska movement. Gradually, the bitterness of Douglas and his supporters made the position of the anti-Nebraskaites within the Democratic party untenable. Meetings of anti-Nebraska Democrats were held in many parts of the state. A meeting at Freeport adopted a resolution to organize a new political party.9
Douglas' opponents, anti-Nebraska Democrats and Whigs alike, had concentrated their entire campaign on the repeal of the Missouri Compromise almost to the total exclusion of other issues. The Chicago Tribune wrote that the

Nebraska bill opens a great highway for the onward march of slavery. If we must choose, we choose where humanity stands upright and free. We will give no quarter to traitors, but follow to his political grave every man who betrays freedom.10

Many antislavery men in Illinois believed the Nebraska bill was the result of the appeasement policies pursued in dealing with an aggressive and arrogant South. In reading the verbatim reports of the speeches made by the anti-Nebraska leaders at countless protest meetings held throughout the state, one constantly comes across the slogan "Slavery is Sectional, Liberty is National."

Eventually the great wave of protest which swept the country after the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska bill resulted in a mass movement, which, after two years, culminated in the organization of the Republican party. But until the summer of 1856, the future of the anti-Nebraska movement was by no means assured. In Illinois there was no central organization whatever in 1854. The men who opposed Douglas were Whigs, anti-Nebraska Democrats, Free Soilers, and Know Nothings who had united temporarily in order to attain a common goal—namely, the voicing of their opposition to the Kansas-Nebraska bill. So it was that Democrats like Palmer,
Koerner, and Trumbull broke away from the Douglas Democrats.

Opposition to the Kansas-Nebraska Act proved to be a powerful force for unity. Antislavery men, including free soilers, abolitionists, antislavery Whigs, and antislavery Democrats met at several conventions throughout the state in the summer of 1854. At the Ottawa meeting the name "Republican" was suggested for the new antislavery party. The last regional convention was held on August 30 at Rockford. It represented eight counties of northern Illinois and was called to "prevent the still further extension of slavery, and to protect the interests of free labor and free men." The Rockford convention adopted a set of strong antislavery resolutions including a demand for a free Kansas, for Congressional legislation prohibiting slavery in the territories, for the abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia, and for repeal of the Fugitive Slave Law.

On September 7, 1854, a group of antislavery men issued, in Springfield, a call for a "mass convention" to be held at the State Capitol on October 5, the second day of the Illinois State Agricultural Fair. the call declared that the convention was called "for the organization of a party which shall put the government upon a Republican tack and to secure to non-slaveholders throughout the Union their just and constitutional weight in the councils of the nation." The call did not spell out any abolitionist objectives; on the contrary it was a rather moderate appeal to antislavery men to meet and fight for a common cause.

The resolutions adopted by this convention were moderate if
The platform condemned the Kansas-Nebraska Act and the repeal of the Missouri Compromise. It expressed opposition to the extension of slavery, but it did not demand repeal of the Fugitive Slave Law, and it did not propose interference with slavery in the states where it already existed.\(^{13}\)

Trumbull delivered a speech at the fair in answer to Douglas. In it, he attacked the Nebraska Act and decried the repeal of the Missouri Compromise. He ridiculed Douglas' theory of popular sovereignty and charged that it was designed to make Kansas a slave state.\(^{14}\)

By the time the fair was held, Trumbull had already decided to become a candidate for the House from the Eighth District. At this point he had been out of politics since 1846. During most of 1853 and 1854 he was dangerously ill and his doctors were unable to diagnose his illness. His family feared that he would not recover, yet he did and his recovery seemed to coincide with the passage of Douglas' act. Trumbull now believed that his recovery was an act of God to allow him to lead the battle against the spread of slavery.\(^{15}\)

Upon his return to Belleville, Trumbull turned his attention to the forthcoming Congressional elections. The anti-Nebraska Democrats, with Trumbull leading the way, served notice that they would not support any pro-Nebraska nominee, and when the Democratic Convention of the Eighth Congressional District met on September 5, 1854, at Carlyle, it split so deeply on the issue that it adjourned without naming a candidate. It was obvious that the old
party lines were becoming blurred and that there would be two candidates in the election, a Douglas Nebraskaitte and an anti-Nebraskaitte supported by many Democrats and Whigs. The Whig leaders in the district, realizing that they had no chance to elect their own man, announced that they would support an anti-Nebraska Democrat and urged Trumbull to run.

Philip B. Fouke, a Belleville lawyer and former Prosecuting Attorney of St. Clair County, announced his candidacy and stated his support for the Kansas-Nebraska Act and the repeal of the Missouri Compromise. Fouke was a formidable candidate. Only by uniting behind an equally strong candidate could the antislavery movement hope to win.

On October 10, a month after Fouke was in the field, Trumbull announced his candidacy and was immediately endorsed by both Democratic and Whig newspapers. Trumbull conducted an aggressive campaign. He often addressed several meetings in single day and proved himself effective on the stump. Still, it was only "by the greatest efforts" of Trumbull's Democratic and Whig supporters that he won the election.16

The election and the bitterness engendered between Trumbull and his followers and the Nebraska pro-Douglas men, forced Trumbull to give serious consideration to his position in the Democratic party. The hard-fought campaign in the Eighth Congressional District underscored the split in the Democratic party. Trumbull himself was repeatedly attacked as a renegade and a traitor.17

There is little reason to believe that the contemplated break
with the Democratic party was particularly painful to Trumbull. He was not what one would call a party man. Many years later he said, "I never was a party man to the extent of being willing to serve the party against my country." And, Clarence Darrow said of him that he "has been too consistent to bind himself irretrievably to any party." Dedicated as he was to the fight against Douglas' policies, he was ready to incur the wrath of some of his Illinois friends by making a bid for election to the United States Senate.

When the legislature met in Springfield, the situation was uncertain and confused. It required fifty-one votes to elect a senator, and the forty-six anti-Nebraska Whigs were a unit for Abraham Lincoln, the Whig candidate. Lincoln, therefore, resigned his seat in the legislature and became a candidate. However, the few Abolitionists distrusted him, and the five anti-Nebraska Democrats held the balance of power. When balloting began, Lincoln took the lead on the first ballot. For some time balloting proceeded with little change, but on the sixth poll Lincoln began to lose strength and, by the ninth, it appeared as if Governor Matteson, a Douglas Democrat, would capture the seat. When Lincoln saw his chances growing dim, he swung his votes over to the anti-Nebraska Democratic candidate, Trumbull. On the tenth ballot Trumbull was elected.

Trumbull was not a Republican when he was elected to the Senate in 1855. Neither were such other men as Henry Wilson, William H. Seward, and John P. Hale, all of whom were elected to the Senate in 1855. Especially in Illinois, where one would have
expected Lincoln's gesture in backing Trumbull and his gracious acceptance of defeat to have promoted unity among anti-Nebraska men, suspicions between Whigs and anti-Nebraska Democrats remained strong. In the long run, however, these senatorial elections would be very important to the Republican movement, as would be clear in the 1856 congressional session when Hale, Seward, Wilson, and Trumbull would assume the leadership of the new party.

It was as yet an open question whether a fusion of such diverse elements could ever be affected, and it was precisely because the five anti-Nebraska Democrats were determined to maintain their party identity that Trumbull captured a seat in the Senate. He did this when the five men refused to vote for anyone else.

Trumbull's election was significant for a number of reasons. First, it was an anti-Nebraska victory and a humiliating defeat for the Democratic party. It was obviously a bitter pill for Douglas to have an anti-Nebraska Democrat as a colleague in the Senate. Second, as a U.S. Senator, Trumbull occupied a strategic position for organizing opposition to Douglas within his own party. Moreover, his election paved the way for fusion of the anti-Nebraska Democrats with most of the Whigs because his election by their combined votes brought the two groups closer together. Eventually, the two groups would become important parts of the new Republican party. The election of Trumbull was not only an important step in the evolution of the anti-Nebraska Democrats from rebels within their own party to membership in a new party, but it
also made possible their ascendancy in that party in 1856.

Trumbull's election astounded the Democrats. They were more disappointed by it than they would have been by the election of Lincoln. They regarded Trumbull as an arch-traitor. When he began opening fire on the Nebraska bill as soon as he took his seat in the Senate he confirmed their hostility.

Jolted by Trumbull's election, the Douglas Democrats began a move to prevent him from taking his seat on the ground that the Illinois Constitution made judges of the State Supreme Court ineligible for any state or federal position during the term of office for which they had been elected and for one year thereafter. Since Trumbull was re-elected in June, 1852, for a nine year term, it was contended that the law applied to him. Trumbull, upon learning of the plot contacted Abraham Lincoln, and the two began their close coordination toward the slow, cautious formation of a Republican party in Illinois.

Trumbull believed that caution was necessary because he did not think that the anti-Nebraska Democrats of the state were, as yet, ready to join a new party, and there was little sentiment for a fusion with the Whigs. The only issue which might possibly unite the diverse elements was opposition to the extension of slavery.19

First, however, he had to get the Senate to confirm his election. The consideration of his eligibility was long and protracted. During the several months of the controversy, Trumbull did all he could to make a good impression on the Senate. In his few speeches, delivered between December, 1855, and March, 1856,
Trumbull was careful to stress that he considered himself to be a good Democrat, that he was not an abolitionist, that he advocated the enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law, and that he was opposed to any interference with slavery in the states where it existed. He did tell the Senate that he opposed the extension of slavery and believed in the right of Congress to prohibit slavery in the territories. On the whole, then, his was a thoroughly moderate and respectable position. Trumbull obviously was determined not to antagonize the Southerners, whose votes he needed for the confirmation of his seating. Answering those who spoke out against him, Trumbull said that he believed the clause in the Illinois Constitution to be inoperative because he had resigned from the Illinois Supreme Court more than a year and a half ago. He added that "the spirit of the Constitution of the State of Illinois does not apply to my case, though it is possible that its letter may." In the final vote Trumbull's right to sit was confirmed by a count of 35 to 8.

By the time Trumbull was ready to leave Illinois for Washington in late November, 1855, he was still a Democrat and Lincoln was still a Whig, but both men were united in their determination to stop the extension of slavery. They were ready, sometime soon, to organize a new fusion party on a platform of restoration of Kansas, and opposition to the further extension of slavery. It was a moderate platform, not because Trumbull and Lincoln opposed the abrogation of the Fugitive Slave Law and the abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia. Rather, the
platform was moderate because Trumbull and Lincoln were shrewd politicians and 1856 was a Presidential election year. They knew that only on such a limited platform could they hope to elect a Republican governor, get a majority in the legislature, and carry the state for a Republican nominee.

The antislavery people of Illinois and Trumbull himself, felt that his primary objective in the Senate was to give battle to Douglas and prevent Kansas from becoming a slave state. Trumbull soon realized that this was a formidable task. Congress was in the midst of a tense struggle over Kansas, and the coalition of Southerners and Nebraska Democrats was riding roughshod over the minority of antislavery Whigs and free soilers. On a later occasion Trumbull described the Senate as it convened at the first session of the thirty-fourth Congress on December 3, 1855:

At that time it [the Senate] consisted of sixty-two members, of whom fifteen were Republicans. It was a time of high party excitement. The majority were domineering and offensive to members of the minority. They controlled the business of the Senate and could take their own time to assail the minority Senators. . . . It was not uncommon for the members of the dominant party to go out of their way to seek controversies with and assail certain Senators in the minority . . . 22

Trumbull truly had his work cut out for him.

Trumbull did little to disappoint his supporters in Illinois, however. Just as the supporters of Douglas had feared, as a U.S.
Senator Trumbull was outspoken against the policy and doctrines of the Democratic party with which he was still identified. On all slavery questions, he acted in direct opposition to his colleague, Stephen A. Douglas, and fought bitterly the popular sovereignty plan of settling the slavery question in the territories and future states.

The fight for a free Kansas, which brought to the fore once again the aggressive spirit of the slave states, and the intransigence of Southern leaders in Congress, hardened the opposition of many Illinoisans. Trumbull received daily scores of letters from cities, towns, and villages of Illinois, urging him to stand firm and fight for a free Kansas.

Trumbull responded with a three hour speech on the floor of Congress. He began with a review of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, dwelling first upon the failure of the measure to fix any time when the people of a territory should exercise the right of deciding whether they should have slavery or not. He illustrated his point by citing some resolutions adopted by a handful of squatters in Kansas as early as September, 1854, many months before any legislature had been organized or elected, in which it was declared that the squatters "would exercise the right of expelling from the territory, or otherwise punishing any individual, or individuals, who may . . . entice away our slaves . . . ." These resolutions, Trumbull said, gave proof that the Missourians were giving notice beforehand that violence would be used upon any intending settlers who might be opposed to the introduction of slavery.
He went on to assert that the developments in Kansas had proven the sham of Douglas' theory of popular sovereignty. Launching into a personal attack on his colleague, he told the Senate that Douglas had to be held responsible for the acts of violence and fraud perpetrated by the proslavery elements in Kansas. Trumbull rejected Douglas' contention that the free soil settlers were being sent into Kansas to "abolitionize" the territory. "What! Abolitionize Kansas!" he said. "It was said on all sides of the Senate Chamber, that it was never meant to have slavery go into Kansas. What is meant, then, by abolitionizing Kansas?" Finally, he called upon Congress to rescind the Kansas-Nebraska Act and to restore the Missouri Compromise.23

Meanwhile, anti-Nebraska Democrats were every day being pushed out of the party as President Pierce's administration attempted to make support of the measure a party requirement. Some, perhaps even Trumbull, continued to hope that a middle ground could be found between supporting repeal of the Missouri Compromise and leaving the party. Nevertheless, Trumbull gave his support to a fusion convention held in Bloomington which reaffirmed the right of Congress to outlaw slavery in the territories and urged a free Kansas under a restored Missouri Compromise.

The lingering doubts of men like Trumbull were largely removed by the actions of the state Democratic convention. With the Douglasites in control, the convention enthusiastically endorsed the Nebraska Act and nominated William A. Richardson, the House floor manager of the Nebraska bill, to head the state ticket.
Another resolution, adopted by acclamation, censured Trumbull and repudiated his claim to being a Democrat. By these actions, the regular party organization forced out the anti-Nebraska Democrats. In the aftermath of the Democratic convention, most anti-Douglas Democrats endorsed the Bloomington convention.

In June, 1856, at Abraham Lincoln's urging, Trumbull made the decision final by attending the Republican National Convention in Philadelphia. At the convention, Trumbull exerted all his conservative influences in an attempt to secure the nomination of a moderate for president.

Lyman Trumbull then, represents a far more conservative element in the early Republican party. It would be extremely difficult to identify him as an abolitionist. He even spoke out in favor of the Fugitive Slave Law, and this was a sore point with the radicals. Trumbull also had no use for black rights, and much of his hesitancy in joining the Republican party had to do with his fear that it was in danger of being controlled by radical abolitionists.

For Trumbull, more so than for Wade or Giddings, the real impetus for his switch in party allegiance was the Kansas-Nebraska Act and, even more narrowly, the act's repeal of the Missouri Compromise. He said in Congress, "If the policy [the Missouri Compromise] . . . had been adhered to there would have been no difficulty; we should have had no slavery agitation . . . ."24 His views were far too conservative to permit interference with the institution where it already existed. In this sense, he was much
like Abraham Lincoln. He was, however, strongly opposed to the extension of slavery, and he harbored a deep resentment for the "Slave Power," which he believed had been appeased too often in the past. In these senses, he was closer to a radical position.

Trumbull was a "conservative radical," and his movement into the Republican ranks cannot be understood without admission of an antislavery influence. In Trumbull's view, the party was made up of many diverse elements held together by one common thread. He said, "When I speak of the Republicans I . . . mean all those who on the slavery question singly make this issue, opposition to its spread into free territory."25
Notes to Chapter 3

1 Chicago Tribune, April 26, 1872.


3 Krug, Mark, Lyman Trumbull, conservative radical (New York: A.S. Barnes, 1965) 84.


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8 Nevins, Allan, A House Dividing, Vol. II of The Ordeal of the Union (New York: Chas Scribner's Sons, 1947) 49.

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17 Krug 94.
18 Krug 96.
19 Krug 109-110.
20 U.S. Congressional Globe, 34 Cong., 1 Sess., 466.
21 U.S. Congressional Globe, 34 Cong., 1 Sess., 467.
23 U.S. Congressional Globe, 34 Cong., 1 Sess., 653.
24 U.S. Congressional Globe, 34 Cong., 1 Sess., 653.
Conclusion

Clearly, the origins of our present day Republican party cannot be understood without emphasizing the importance of antislavery sentiment. The revisionist historians, in their efforts to downplay the slavery issue, have missed the mark. Some, such as Michael Holt and his "slave power" hypothesis have come closer than others, but for the most part, the true principles behind early Republicanism have been deemphasized in favor of nativism, temperance, and the tariff.

This lack of agreement, even if disturbing, is not unusual. All history, after all, is colored by the era in which it is interpreted. Perhaps the best example of this is a slightly later period in Republican party history, Radical Reconstruction. For many years, the Republicans of this era were portrayed as vindictive villains ignoring constitutional law and presidential vetoes in sole pursuit of vengeance on a helpless South. Later, when civil rights and equality became important catch phrases again, these same historical figures were seen as heroes whose only objective was the extension of equal rights to all, regardless of color.

The attempts to deemphasize slavery's role in the formation of the early Republican party are understandable as well because it is difficult for anyone to understand the all-pervasiveness of the slavery issue during this period. No issue before or since has so absorbed and subordinated all other concerns. There is
certainly nothing comparable to it today, when single issue politics tend to be looked down upon. Perhaps this is because the Civil War taught Americans the value of avoiding such practices.

Political thought from this ante-bellum period is also difficult to understand because this was, after all, the "golden age" of politics, when the affairs of government were the primary concern of society at large. This was a time when political parties radiated the energies of an entire society. The apparatus of party government was more than a device for recording popular will. Under such circumstances, politics became the concern of virtually everyone in the society and involved them in the affairs of government and in the election of officials to serve them. Given this fact, and taking into account the extreme pervasiveness of the slavery issue, one can understand how the Republican party could have risen to prominence on the wings of antislavery sentiment.

For a party that was destined to control the Presidency during sixty of its first hundred years, the birth of the Republican party was, in many ways, unimpressive. Although numerous party members later claimed credit for launching or naming the party, nobody of any consequence took any interest in it in 1854. The first Republican president, Abraham Lincoln, protested against attempts to use his name in connection with initial attempts to organize the party in Illinois. Thereafter, the party attracted recruits more rapidly, but only by partially concealing its name and original character. The national committee omitted the word "Republican"
from its call for nominating conventions in both 1856 and 1860, while one of the leading candidates for the Presidency at the latter convention referred to it as "The National Union Convention."¹

There is no single explanation to the paradox that more people approved of the Republican party than were willing to join it. Some hesitated because of the recent lack of success in third party movements. Many, however, were frightened away by the political antecedents of the first Republicans, most of whom boasted long records as militant foes of slavery.

The stigma attached to the antislavery cause in an era notorious for its sympathy with reform movements was due to none other than the Abolitionists who conducted a long crusade for freedom with little public support. It was not so much what the Abolitionists proposed as the provocative tone of their arguments that offended people. Garrison for one loved to talk wildly about the rights of Negroes "to cut the throats of their masters."² Such talk was understandably offensive to many, and their behavior increased the danger that anyone who criticized the abuses of the slave system would be branded an Abolitionist.

By 1840 the futility of the Abolitionist crusade had convinced many antislavery men that abuses could be remedied only through political action on a step-by-step basis. These more cautious reformers were the men who ultimately organized the Republican party. Many of them were as critical of Southern institutions as the Abolitionists were, and secretly wished for the same objective.
Yet they avoided all connection with the Abolitionists and concentrated their initial efforts on legislation to block the admission of more slave states. Many of these advocates of political action contested the elections of 1840 and 1844 as members of the Liberty party. The public response to this organization was discouraging so that by 1848 another group, the Free Soilers, made its attempt at third party success. This effort, as we have seen, was short-lived as well.

The principal handicap of both third parties was that they could not sell the moral arguments for the containment of slavery. Some creative antislavery men had tried to connect their program with sectional economic issues, but this formula made no headway until the breakdown of the Compromise of 1850. Both the Democrats and Whigs thought they had solved the problem of slavery in the territories recently taken from Mexico without any statement about the status of slaves. Their optimism was founded on the belief that no new territories would be organized in the near future. Since neither the territories created in the aftermath of the Mexican War nor the remaining Louisiana Purchase territory seemed capable of supporting agriculture, the Compromise advocates imagined that the agitation over the expansion of slavery would subside.3

In 1854, however, Stephen A. Douglas and the Democrats reopened the territorial quarrel and gave the soon to be Republican party a rallying point which the Liberty men and Free Soilers had lacked. Nobody considered the Great Plains suitable for the
cultivation of cotton, but the fact that the Douglas bill divided the region into two territories, Kansas and Nebraska, suggested a deal to give the South control of Kansas. Many Northerners indifferent to the plight of the black race thought the South was trying to swindle them out of territory reserved for the free farmer. They denounced the proposed amendment repealing the Missouri Compromise as a cynical breach of the thirty-year-old contract between the sections. Northern congressmen who could not be reached by antislavery arguments found themselves cooperating with Free Soilers in the fight against the Kansas-Nebraska bill.4

The sudden change in the political climate encouraged Free Soilers everywhere to call anti-Nebraska meetings. Although few people recognized it at the time, this initial round of protest meetings was the beginning of the Republican party. With this information in hand, one can possibly strike a compromise with the revisionist historians, for the Republican party can be viewed, at least in part, as having succeeded by making the slavery issue more palatable to northern voters. The Free Soilers had taken a step in this direction by narrowing the Liberty party's focus down to the slavery extension question. The Republican party took the next logical step and narrowed the issue down to a firm stand against the Kansas-Nebraska Act. Such a platform brought together the many diverse elements of antislavery antagonism, for all despised the Kansas-Nebraska bill.

There is, however, an additional danger in adopting the revisionist position. Abraham Lincoln said, "Without the
institution of slavery, and the colored race as a basis, the war could not have an existence." When the revisionist historians minimized the slavery question, they naturally had no choice but to see the Civil War as a needless conflict, brought about by a blundering generation. By refusing to consider the all-importance of slavery as a moral issue, they denied themselves the ability to understand the emotions, north and south, which forced the Union to its moment of truth. By thus draining the moral content out of history, they reduced the Civil War to an entirely base and wanton affair. This interpretation of the Union's greatest internal crisis would be a mistake, and an unfortunate one at that.
Notes to Conclusion


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4 Mayer 26.

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