

## The Snowball of War

Hindsight is always said to be twenty-twenty, but the phrase is not so easily applied to the American Civil War. Many historians argue when the point of no return was reached to prevent the bloody conflict, with many placing the exact points as early as the signing of the constitution to as late as the election of 1860. The point that this paper will argue is that the turning point happened rather early in the history of the country, when it became economically viable for the growth of slavery as an institution rather than the slow dismantle which in turn enforced social divides between the north and south. The three points being argued is the initial act that would prohibit the importation of slaves, then how the act eventually led to the Missouri Compromise, then culminating in the Kansas-Nebraska Act. These three events were chosen due to being where the “snowball” of an inevitable war started rolling and would grow in size and speed until it was unavoidable.

Slavery had played an important role in the economy of the southern colonies turned states in most of the time it was inhabited by Europeans, but there was a common idea that it would be eventually phased out for other means of economic prosperity. The Jefferson administration would pass legislation in 1807 that would prohibit the importation of new slaves in hopes that it would lead to a brighter future, yet the outcome would be dangerous for the nation. The lack of competition of any new slaves from the Caribbean and Africa, the other important locations of the transatlantic slave trade, leads to the currently enslaved in the South to become a source of wealth rather than just labor.

A system began to develop where the “core” of the south, specifically South Carolina and Virginia, would sell their slaves to states and territories in the west that would pay a high price

for the labor. This system would also influence the culture of the region, where slaves became more objects rather than individuals and brought a great amount of wealth to the upper classes of the South due to the emerging plantation economy and growth of cotton as a cash crop, replacing the prior tobacco as the cash crop of choice of the American South. Plantations were already a common sight on the coastal states, but they were fewer in number and typically grew tobacco, indigo, or rice depending on the soil and climate. These changes lead to the growth of the cotton plantations as an institution away from the coasts. The birth of a domestic slave market would drive political forces on a state level to strengthen the institution and lead to southern politicians to push for the spread of the practice to new markets across recently acquired territory in the Midwest of the continent through Congress. At this point of history, the snowball has begun to gain significant size and momentum and the consequent decisions will only serve to make it more difficult to course correct to avoid the bloody war.

The second major turning point towards the war would be the passage of the Missouri Compromise in 1820. The Missouri Compromise allowed Missouri to become a new slave state and Maine a new Free State as long as slavery is not allowed North of the 36° 30' parallel in any new territories or states. The issue is where the argument of whether the Federal government has a right to restrict slavery or whether it has a duty to limit its scope began to become a major talking point of American politics.

The compromise appeared to calm regional tensions at the time, but hindsight would show that it was only a temporary solution for a long term problem. At this point in time, people primarily identified as being from their state rather than region, but the compromise added a

geographical boundary between the Free states in the north and the slave society in the south.

The legislation allowed for the spread of slavery as an institution geographically further west, but argued that it kept a balance between the Free states and slave states at a federal level in Congress. The balance of slave states and Free states in the Senate would not extend the same feelings into the Supreme Court.

The existence of a slave state further North than there had been before would bring about political quandaries in the future, specifically the Dredd Scott Case. Although it was quite later, the impact of the Supreme Court ruling would not have been as dire if it did not break the Missouri Compromises aspect restricting slavery above the 36° 30' parallel. The main takeaway of the case that appears the most horrifying today may be the lack of citizenship denied to anyone of African descent, which still outraged Abolitionists during the era. The case affected the common Northerner by making it seem like the slave holding South was expanding their influence beyond their geographical borders and that free men would have to compete with slaves for labor and work in the new Western and Northern territories. The snowball of an inevitable war has at this point most likely have been unable to stop, the federal government has become set on making decisions that fracture, rather than unite, the nation through the Missouri Compromise and the subsequent Dredd Scott case serving to lead to the political divides having a geographical barrier.

By 1854, regional differences have become self-identifying features of the cultures of a Free North and a Slave South. The Antebellum South has spread as far West as Texas and the Free North as started to become unified on an idea of abolition in the form of Free-Soilers afraid that if Slave labor can expand further west and grow as an institution, then Free, White farmers

would be unable to compete with Slavers economically and be unable to own enough land to support their families or grow economically. The idea that abolitionists in the North were numerous and wanted to overthrow Southern society became a common opinion that Southerners would hold against Northerners and the Northerners believed that the South was abusing Federal politics to spread Slavery further north and saw the growth of slaveholder rights, such as the fugitive slave act, as evidence of the growth of the institution.

The straw that was laid on an already broken camel's back would be the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854. The snowball has grown to gargantuan size and the population of the time look up to see an avalanche. The original purpose of the act was to allow the growth of a national railroad that would have unified the coasts, but it divided the North and the South. The act allowed the territories to decide whether to be a free or a slave state based on popular sovereignty, but saw a massive influx of Northerners and Southerners move to the area in an attempt to sway the vote in their favor. The assembly of radically opposed men inevitably led to violence, almost a proto-Civil War in the future Kansas. Rather than battles between organized militias, it was often raids and massacres between the two sides. Even though Bloody Kansas may not have been what caused the inevitable Civil War, its importance lies with the fact that the people of the time began to realize that a national armed conflict would happen sooner rather than later. The Federal government at this point was in complete damage control and saw the birth of a new Republican party based off the political beliefs of the prior Free-Soilers.

The growth of the Republican Party was perceived as a threat to the South and when a Republican president was elected, the South believed it to be a sufficient Casus Belli. The development of the railroad for economic reasons also served to build regional differences due to

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the more modernized North becoming more connected with itself rather than the more rural South. An example of the development of a Northern Identity can be seen in the state of Illinois, where prior to the 1850s people would identify as being from their state or county, but after the 1850s they began to identify as Northerners rather than people from Illinois.

The final conclusion is that the path to avoid the Civil War lied in decisions almost 80 years before the conflict broke out. The decision to not phase out Slavery completely would prove to cost hundreds of thousands of American lives when the fight between a Free North and a Slave South would turn violent.