

Excerpt from *Two Roads to Sumter* **By William and Bruce Catton**

...The man primarily responsible for what may have been the most fateful single piece of legislation in all American history was Senator Douglas of Illinois. When Douglas reported the Kansas-Nebraska Bill from the Senate Committee on Territories in January, 1854, he was setting in motion a chain of events that led unswervingly into civil conflict. The new measure repealed the old Missouri Compromise, destroyed the three-year truce that had followed the Compromise of 1850, reawakened and instilled new vigor into the controversy over slavery in the territories, summoned Abraham Lincoln from retirement, created a new political party and split an old one down the middle, induced fraud and bloodletting on the remote Kansas prairies, touched off some sort of process in the disordered mind of a tall, bearded mystic named John Brown, and added immeasurably to the mutual fear and distrust that were making a cold war out of the North-South relationship. Before Kansas-Nebraska the country's chances of avoiding a civil war were problematical, but fair; after Kansas-Nebraska they were virtually nonexistent.

That Stephen Douglas should be the man to release the brake and start the country down the last long slope was ironic, to say the least. A patriot and believer in national unity, he made disunion infinitely harder to avoid; a loyal party man, he invoked the controversy that was almost bound to split his party in two. Few men were more indifferent to the moral and emotional aspects of the quarrel over slavery, yet few men did as much, in a single legislative enactment, to insure that the moral and emotional features would dominate every remaining phase of the controversy. He is an arresting figure, this Stephen A. Douglas. His country will always find him easy to misjudge but impossible to ignore, and it must end however reluctantly by pronouncing him a great man. They called him the Little Giant, and it fitted superbly; a short man with broad shoulders and massive brow and commanding presence, highly able, harshly eloquent; a battler who fought with the same courage and tenacity for the loftiest and shoddiest of causes; an ambitious politician of coarse habit and unscrupulous tactic who ultimately learned to wear the mantle of statesmanship without stumbling; a materialist who took his final stand on the ground of high principle.

In framing the Kansas-Nebraska bill Douglas undoubtedly had the best of intentions, although his logic was hampered by one enormous blind spot. The measure called for the creation of two new territories out of the vast, unorganized region that stretched from the western boundaries of Missouri and Iowa to the Rocky Mountain divide and from the Canadian border to 36°30', the prairie version of the Mason and Dixon line. This much was routine; what gave the Douglas bill its toxic quality was the clause that specifically repealed the Missouri Compromise of 1820 and permitted slave owners, with their chattels, to settle at will in the region north of 36°30', which the law of 1820 had pronounced "forever free." Douglas had originally planned to sidestep this explosive issue—even he recognized that it would "raise a hell of a storm" in the North—until a few Southern senators warned him that the South would oppose the measure if it did not unequivocally reopen the Kansas-Nebraska region to slavery. The bill was so amended, and Congress had to decide whether it wanted to legislate the Missouri Compromise out of existence.

There seemed no need to reopen the slavery question. The country was highly prosperous, still enjoying the relative political calm ushered in by the Compromise of 1850. The status of slavery had been settled by legislative enactment in every square inch of the national domain. Abolitionists and Southern fire-eaters continued to exchange denunciations with undiminished virulence, but extremism was clearly in the minority, still smarting from the triumph of moderate sentiment in 1850-1851.

There were trouble spots, of course. The South made new enemies each time a runaway, real or alleged was brought before the harsh terms of the Fugitive Slave Law in some northern city. In 1852 young Harriet Beecher Stowe began to sear the Yankee conscience with the hot, effective lash of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*—a vivid, highly imaginative, best-selling, and altogether damning indictment of slavery that roused a counter indignation among Southerners both because they thought Mrs. Stowe's portrait untrue and because the North was so willing to believe it. (In men's minds, reality was giving way to images, and the images were irredeemably hostile: from now on the Southern stereotype in Northern eyes was something akin to Simon Legree, even as the South would shortly come to identify the typical Yankee with John Brown.) But in 1854, with the thorny question of territorial slavery out of national politics, there was yet reason to hope that the barometer of ill feeling would not drop to the danger point.

It began to drop, steadily, from the moment the terms of the Kansas-Nebraska Bill leaked out to the Northern press. Though he had foreseen this—with pathetic dimness, as it turned out—Douglas felt that the benefits of his measure would far outweigh its drawbacks. Several considerations were prompting him. He was an Illinois Democrat, a self-appointed and highly popular spokesman for the land-hungry, expansion-minded Northwest, and a staunch advocate of material progress. Organization of the Kansas-Nebraska region, he knew, would appeal strongly to the Western homesteader and could not be long delayed in any case, since the advance guard of settlement was already spilling across the Missouri at Independence and Council Bluffs. His bill would also further the cause of a Pacific railroad, a project dear to Douglas's heart, by permitting exact location of the route and making land grants available.

In reopening the new territories to slavery, Douglas thought he had found a formula at once democratic and practical. He would apply the principle of popular sovereignty: open Kansas-Nebraska to all, keep Congressional hands off, and allow the settlers themselves—the sovereign people—to decide whether they would erect free states or slave states. Long a champion of the popular sovereignty idea, Douglas had been instrumental in applying it to the Utah and New Mexico territories under the Compromise of 1850. He could thus point to precedent, and he could argue, with some logic, that letting the people decide was the very essence of democracy and the American way. The principle, once accepted, would permanently remove the troublesome slave-territory issue from the arena of Congressional debate.

Popular sovereignty was supposed to perform one other important service. A loyal Democrat with his eye on the White House, Douglas was acutely distressed at the squabbling, drifting, divided condition to which a year of Franklin Pierce had reduced the Democratic Party. Douglas actually seems to have felt—a practical politician whose instinct in this case was guiding him approximately 180 degrees off course—that Kansas-Nebraska and popular sovereignty would provide the great winning issue around which (and behind whose author) his faction-ridden party could unite. Popular sovereignty

would appeal to the strong democratic sentiment in the Northwest and in the country generally, while the opportunity to take slavery into an area formerly closed to it would appeal to the South.

He saw no cause for Northern antislavery opinion to get excited. Senator Douglas was a practical man, and he had figured it out this way: Kansas and Nebraska were geographically unsuited to slavery, which was a specialized labor system able to thrive only in subtropical regions. Material considerations always determined the issue. "Whenever a territory has a climate, soil and productions making it the interest of the inhabitants to encourage slave property," Douglas said, "they will pass a slave code and give it encouragement. Whenever the climate, soil and productions preclude the possibility of slavery being profitable, they will not permit it. You come right back to the principle of dollars and cents." It followed, then, that the legal right to take the slaves to Kansas was form without substance. Nature had already decreed that the new territories would be free soil, and the Missouri Compromise ban on slavery above 36°30' had never been necessary. Removing this ban would calm Southern feelings without the danger of adding a single square mile of territory to slavery's domain.

Armed with this brand of logic, backed by an administration that readily accepted his measure and did not hesitate to enforce party discipline upon recalcitrant Democrats, the Little Giant tugged and clawed and barked his controversial bill through both Houses of Congress. It took nearly four months of stormy debate and intricate political maneuver, but in the end neither the bitter opposition of a large Congressional minority nor the roar of protest from every Northern state was able to forestall the combined skill and pressure tactics of Senator Douglas and the Democratic machine.

The victory was dearly bought. Although Southern Democrats were nearly a unit in their support of the bill, the opposing free-soil block in either House was joined by Northern Whigs and border state moderates and, more ominously, by nearly half of the Northern Democrats, all of whom were torn between party loyalty and the angry protests from their home districts. When Southern enthusiasts celebrated the passage of Kansas-Nebraska by firing cannon in the small hours of a Washington morning, Senator Chase of Ohio paused on the Capitol steps to answer the reverberations with a prophetic charge, thoroughly in character: "They celebrate a present victory, but the echoes they awake shall never rest until slavery itself shall die."

Senator Douglas was a practical man, but he was now addressing himself to an issue which the country had long since lost its ability to consider in practical terms. Slavery had far outgrown the American genius for pragmatic solution, and it is not enough to blame this on a handful of demagogues and extremists, whose reckless, willful appeals to blind emotionalism (so the argument goes) were alone responsible for the failure of a realistic approach. At best this was a half truth, certainly less than half an answer. The demagogues and extremists were an effect, not a cause; the reality of slavery went well beyond geography and climate and dollars and cents, Stephen A. Douglas to the contrary notwithstanding.

His one mistake, of course, was a fatal underestimate of Northern feeling on the subject. Abolitionism was little more than a fringe of this feeling. Most Northern citizens were quite willing to leave slavery alone in the states where it already existed, but they were strongly opposed to letting it expand. Douglas's practical geographic arguments about the inability of slave labor to thrive on the Kansas prairies were beside the point.

For over thirty years the Missouri Compromise had been part of the law of the land, and throughout the free states the ban on slavery north of 36°30' was regarded as a time-honored principle at once sacred and inviolable, a permanent bulwark against the encroachments of an institution that could not be tolerated unless it stayed put. Although with some exceptions the Northern homesteaders were both anti-abolitionist and anti-Negro—here they stood arm-in-arm with Senator Douglas—their version of the good society was based on free soil and free labor. In practical terms they were convinced that sharing Kansas with slave owners would rob free labor of both its dignity and its profit, and in principle they believed that slavery extension was morally wrong.

Acute myopia, amounting almost to blindness, clouded Senator Douglas's vision at precisely this point. Himself hugely indifferent to the moral aspects of slavery, he never understood the dimension that this side of the question could assume in the minds of others. He knew, of course, that his Kansas-Nebraska bill would evoke the customary shrieks from abolitionist quarters, but he believed that after a momentary shock the great majority of Northerners would see the truth in his geographic argument and respond happily to the democratic appeal of popular sovereignty. The "hell of a storm" would soon blow itself out, and a vigorous, reunited Democracy would elect its vigorous young leader to the White House in 1856.

Few political calculations have been wider of the mark. News of the Kansas-Nebraska bill was greeted with mounting cries of protest from Maine to Minnesota, and the sustained response of newspaper editors, ministers, state legislatures, and indignant mass meetings soon dispelled any notions of a brief or moderate storm. Reaction to Kansas-Nebraska was lethal and cyclonic, a wind that would blow with undiminished force until it disrupted both the party and the country that Stephen Douglas aspired to lead. And from the distant prairies of his own state of Illinois, not long after Congress began debating the Kansas-Nebraska measure in the early months of 1854, rose the voice that would point out to him, repeatedly and with unmistakable clarity, just how grievously he had erred...