D. The Debate over the Kansas-Nebraska Bill

I. Stephen Douglas's Popular-Sovereignty Plea (1854)

The Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 shattered the uneasy sectional truce. Senator Stephen Arnold Douglas of Illinois—a bouncy, stumpy real estate booster and transcontinental railroad enthusiast—undertook to organize Nebraska into a territory. Hoping to enlist Southern support, he held out the bait of making Kansas a slave state by the operation of "squatter" or "popular" sovereignty. In short, he would let the people of the territories themselves democratically decide whether they wanted slaves or no slaves. But this meant an outright repeal, by means of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, of the time-hallowed Compromise of 1820—the compromise that had banned slavery in the Louisiana Purchase territory north of 36° 30' (see earlier, p. 251). Whatever his motives, Douglas infuriated Northern abolitionists and free-soilers by driving the Kansas-Nebraska bill through the Senate with relentless energy. In this portion of his Senate speech, how does he define the merits of "popular sovereignty"?

... When the people of the North shall all be rallied under one banner, and the whole South marshaled under another banner, and each section excited to frenzy and madness by hostility to the institutions of the other, then the patriot may well tremble for the perpetuity of the Union. Withdraw the slavery question from the political arena, and remove it to the states and territories, each to decide for itself, such a catastrophe can never happen. Then you will never be able to tell, by any Senator's vote for or against any measure, from what state or section of the Union he comes.

Why, then, can we not withdraw this vexed question from politics? Why can we not adopt the [popular sovereignty] principle of this [Kansas-Nebraska] bill as a rule of action in all new territorial organizations? Why can we not deprive these agitators of their vocation, and render it impossible for Senators to come here upon bargains on the slavery question? I believe that the peace, the harmony, and perpetuity of the Union require us to go back to the doctrines of the Revolution, to the principles of the Constitution, to the principles of the Compromise of 1850, and leave the people, under the Constitution, to do as they may see proper in respect to their own internal affairs.

Mr. President, I have not brought this question forward as a Northern man or as a Southern man. I am unwilling to recognize such divisions and distinctions. I have brought it forward as an American Senator, representing a state which is true to this principle, and which has approved of my action in respect to the Nebraska bill. I have brought it forward not as an act of justice to the South more than to the North. I have presented it especially as an act of justice to the people of those territories, and of the states to be formed therefrom, now and in all time to come.

I have nothing to say about Northern rights or Southern rights. I know of no such divisions or distinctions under the Constitution. The bill does equal and exact justice to the whole Union, and every part of it; it violates the rights of no state or territory, but places each on a perfect equality, and leaves the people thereof to the free enjoyment of all their rights under the Constitution....

I say frankly that, in my opinion, this measure will be as popular at the North as at the South, when its provisions and principles shall have been fully developed and become well understood.

Thinking Questions

* Which is a better system, popular sovereignty or a dividing line like the Missouri Compromise? Why?