

The 1850s ... Part 2  
by Bob Bird

The 1850s proved the harbinger for the bloody War Between the States, 1861-65. The issues that led up to it are still an item for roaring debate today. Let us talk about the violence that flared up before the war began.

The Kansas frontier was Ground Zero in the North-South slavery rivalry. Sen. Stephen A. Douglas opened a Pandora's Box in 1854 with the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which opened territory that had previously been closed to slavery. Douglas needed an issue to persuade southerners to support him in a bid for the presidency in 1856. He had played a vital role in forging the Compromise of 1850 with the issue of *popular sovereignty*, which permitted the new territories in the desert southwest to decide the issue of permitting slavery ... for themselves.

This would be a departure from the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 and the Missouri Compromise of 1821, where Congress decided the issue of slavery in the territories --- which of course were the nursery of future states. In 1850, *popular sovereignty* defused an almost certain break-up of the union. But his presidential ambitions, his desire for Chicago as the terminus of a transcontinental railroad, and his inability to see that what worked in 1850 could not work in 1854, opened the door to frontier warfare.

It instantly made Douglas detested throughout the north. Traveling back to Illinois, he stated that he could read a newspaper at each station along the route, from the light of being burned in effigy by protesting mobs.

Pro-slavery Missourians poured across the border to illegally vote in Kansas elections to gain control of municipal and territorial governments. To prevent this, abolitionist vigilantes poured weapons and "immigrants" from other states into the conflict. Raids, bush-whackings and outright battles commenced. The violent highlights involved the burning of Lawrence, Kansas and the destruction of abolitionist newspaper presses by proslavery forces, pitched battles such as at Osawatamie Creek, and the cold-blooded murder of five proslavery farmers by abolitionist madman John Brown.

Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts was a man ahead of his time, denouncing the violence in Kansas and slavery in moral and Biblical tones. Unlike the Free Soilers, who detested slavery on the grounds of land use policies and racial considerations, Sumner was a no-holds-bar self-righteous abolitionist crusader.

After delivering an incredibly provocative and insulting speech that could very well have led to his reprimand, censure, or expulsion from the Senate, the northern abolitionist press heaped praise on him for his lofty rhetoric and statesmanlike stature. In reality, the speech was an embarrassment that still reveals his childish sentiments even today.

It was one thing to insult an absent and elderly fellow member of the Senate, Andrew Butler of South Carolina, who had defended slavery as an institution. But Butler suffered from a speech impediment due to a stroke, which Sumner called "his loose expectoration of speech". He also used thinly disguised sexual references to Butler's defense of slavery.

But far worse, Sumner extolled the virtues of Kansas as a future free state, and insulted the state of South Carolina by declaring that in its entire history it had contributed nothing to the corpus of human progress. It led Stephen Douglas to say, "That damn fool is going to get himself killed by some other damn fool."

And sure enough, Sumner was beaten senseless with a walking stick by Congressman Preston Brooks of South Carolina, a relative of Butler, while seated at his desk in the Senate

chamber. Brooks was immediately expelled, but now the southern press heaped praise upon him with the same madness that the anti-slavery papers had been extolling upon Sumner. Brooks was also gifted with hundreds of new walking sticks from his many sympathetic admirers.

Today, we see where the hypocrisy of free speech and free expression is a privilege presumed by the Left to belong only to themselves ... their riots go unpunished in the streets; their bullying of conservatives keeps police in their patrol cars. We see and hear their artwork calling for violence, speeches that make it appear as if they have a lock on what American history and freedom mean.

The post-election violence we see today on the streets, much of it backed by the money of shadowy billionaires, the polarizing rhetoric of politicians, the refusal of riot police to defend conservative protestors, the quashing of free speech, the calls for nullification and secession now emanating from the Left ... all this reminds many observers of the toxic atmosphere of the 1850s.

But libertarians and constitutionalists should *not* be afraid of nullification and secession. Both actions provide a remedy that can *avoid* violence, not cause it. It is a remedy that was missed in the 1860s because of the tyranny of first Andrew Jackson in 1832, and later Abraham Lincoln in 1861.

Nullification and secession were demonstrated in the Virginia and Kentucky Resolutions, the Spirit of 1798 and Jefferson and Madison themselves, in resistance to the Alien and Sedition Acts. This was federal legislation that halted free speech and press in order to protect Federalist Party interests in New England and their poster boy, President John Adams.

Turning the tables in 1800 with an election that repudiated the Federalist Party, Jefferson did not use the Sedition Act in his own interests, which he could easily have done. Instead, he openly welcomed secession in his first inaugural for any disgruntled states, by which he meant New England, discontented as they were with their electoral loss and diminishing influence; and nullification continued to be manifested during Jefferson's 1808 embargo, this time quite justifiably by the very New England states who had denounced Jefferson and Madison ten years earlier!

And again, nullification and secession were offered during the War of 1812 and the Hartford Convention in New England; with the sparring between Jackson and Calhoun over tariffs and the *South Carolina Exposition and Protest* in 1832; and during the Crisis of 1850 following the Mexican War.

War, slavery, tariffs, trade ... all threatened to break up the union prior to 1861. And many northern abolitionists were in sympathy of secession in the 1850s, wanting to remove themselves from a nation that protected slavery.

The fact that the union did not dissolve earlier because of Congressional compromise created the false tradition and misunderstanding that the union was indivisible.

We will analyze in Part 3 what had been, before 911, the most famous terrorist event in American history, one whose implications are still with us today: the abolitionist raid on the federal arsenal at Harper's Ferry, Virginia, in 1859.