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The Motives of Stephen A. Douglas in the Organization of Nebraska Territory: A Letter Dated December 17, 1853

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The scope of this paper is limited. The prime object is to make available a single letter of Stephen A. Douglas, dated December 17, 1853, dealing with his purpose and motives for the organization of the Indian country as of that date. The letter is momentous because it placed upon the record Douglas' own statement of his position after the introduction of the Dodge bill into the senate on December 14, notice having been given December 5, the very first day of the session, and during the interval when the senate committee on territories, of which Douglas was chairman, was deliberating on that bill, which, through substitution and amendment, was to become the Kansas-Nebraska Act of May 30, 1854. This, then, is the nearest contemporaneous statement by Douglas, just prior to the opening of the historic debates, relative to the organization of the Indian country, the Pacific railroad, the Indian barrier and the slavery issue.

The motives of Douglas have been the subject of dispute, and historical literature presents several major interpretations. These are reviewed here under three main heads: (1) slavery, (2) provisional government of Nebraska, (3) Pacific railroad.

The slavery interpretation includes both anti and proslavery versions. The dominant one is represented in many variant antislavery-abolition accounts, all of which, however, agreed upon hostility toward Douglas as the prime author and proponent of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, with its repeal of the Missouri Compromise of 1820 by which slavery had been excluded from the Louisiana Purchase territory north of the line of 36° 30' north latitude. Implied or ex-

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pressly, they ascribed to Douglas lack of moral principles, ambition for the Presidency, subservience to the slavocracy as a means of promoting his personal ambition and unscrupulous political methods of accomplishing his ends. This literature may be classified for convenience into three types: 1) immediate attacks upon Douglas in connection with the debates on the Kansas-Nebraska bill, and the subsequent Kansas troubles, the most dramatic single document being the “Appeal of the Independent Democrats . . .,” published January 24, 1854; 2) the formal historical works of contemporaries such as Horace Greeley (1856, 1866), Henry Wilson (1874), and John A. Logan (1886); 3) the formal work of historians of the post-Civil War generation, who were supposedly committed to the scientific method, especially Hermann Eduard von Holst (1885), and James Ford Rhodes (1892). In the name of human freedom, morality and religion, these set the pattern of one of the most flagrant instances of character assassination in history.

The vicious character of the contemporary attacks upon Douglas are best illustrated by the “Appeal of the Independent Democrats . . .,”¹ as it may be said to have set the model for so many others. The body of the “Appeal” was directed at the Douglas drafts of the Nebraska bill as they appeared January 4 and 10. Among other things Senators Chase and Sumner and associates declared that

We arraign the bill as a gross violation of a sacred pledge; as a criminal betrayal of precious rights; as part and parcel of an atrocious plot to exclude from a vast unoccupied region immigrants from the Old World, and free laborers from our own States, and convert it into a dreary region of despotism, inhabited by Masters and slaves.

They expressly related the bill to the Pacific railroad, charging that slavery along such a road would retard settlement, enhance costs of construction, endanger profits, and would render worthless there a homestead law if enacted;

We earnestly request the enlightened conductors of newspapers printed in the German and other foreign languages, to direct the attention of their readers to this important matter. .

We implore Christians and Christian ministers to interpose. Their divine religion requires them to behold in every man a brother, and to labor for the advancement and regeneration of the human race.

¹ Congressional Globe, 33 Cong., 1 Sess., January 30, 1854, pp. 281, 282. The document as printed in the Globe was given the date January 19, 1854, and contained a note at the end commenting on the new draft of the Douglas bill presented January 23, 1854, which divided the territory into Kansas and Nebraska. The New York Tribune printed the “Appeal” January 25, 1854, giving it the date January 19, without the note, and attributed it to the Ohio senators and a majority of the Ohio members of the house of representatives. The original publication was in the National Era, Washington, D. C., January 24, 1854, with the date January 22, 1854. Milton, Eve of Conflict, p. 126, note is inaccurate on the Tribune handling of the document.
Then the note, appended to the “Appeal,” written the day Douglas reported the new draft of the Kansas-Nebraska bill, January 23, 1854, closed with this sentence: “Will the people permit their dearest interests to be thus made the mere hazards of a presidential game, and destroyed by false facts and false inferences?”

Such was the state of mind among the antislavery-abolitionists that all that seemed necessary was for the recognized leaders, like Chase, and Sumner, to make an accusation, and it was accepted as true without investigation. Historians have largely been held captives by this formula of liberalism, morality and religion. Douglas replied in hardhitting speeches, especially on January 30 and on March 3, but few newspapers, North or South, certainly not the New York Tribune, reported them adequately for readers to learn the facts.

The essential portion of the Missouri Compromise read that, except for Missouri, in all of the Louisiana Purchase north of 36° 30′ north latitude, slavery “shall be and is hereby forever prohibited.” It should be noted that the word “forever” is used. When, on January 30, Douglas took Chase to task for the accusations made in the “Appeal,” Chase replied:

Sir, our offense is, that we deny the nationality of slavery. No man can show that we have ever sought to interfere with the legislation of any State of the Union upon that subject. All we have ever insisted upon is, that the Territories of this Union shall be preserved from slavery; and that where the General Government exercises jurisdiction, its legislation shall be on the side of liberty. It is because we defend these positions that the Senator from Illinois attacks us. . . .

If Chase knew what he was saying, he had himself repealed the Missouri Compromise, except during the territorial period when he insisted the policy of the General government must be slanted in favor of liberty. Douglas had stated explicitly that there was no intention of legislating slavery into or out of a territory. Only during the territorial status did Chase’s position, as stated upon cross-examination in the debate, differ from that of the Douglas bills in any of their several versions. Participation in government was open to any citizen or immigrant who had declared his intention of becoming a citizen of the United States. The Clayton amendment, proposing to disqualify declarants from political privileges, was not offered until later and should not confuse the issue. What did the antislavery-abolition group intend; what sincerity was there in their professions; what was the meaning of this “tempest-in-a-teapot” in which words had no relation to reality?

The excesses of the heat of battle are usually treated by historians with a great deal of tolerance, and that may be applicable to the controversies over the Kansas-Nebraska bill and the later Kansas troubles. But the problem does not end there. The books of Greeley, Wilson and Logan were written after the Civil War, when time and perspective should have, but did not, mellow judgments. Greeley called his two-volume book *The American Conflict: A History of the Great Rebellion* . . . (Hartford, Chicago, 1866-1867). Henry Wilson called his three-volume work *The Rise and Fall of the Slave Power in America* (Boston, 1872-1877). John A. Logan wrote of *The Great Conspiracy* (New York, 1886). But least excusable on any basis of measurement is the work of scholars of the generation later, those who had not been participants. Hermann von Holst, a German scholar, might have been expected to bring to the history of the United States an objective view of a foreigner, but in many respects, he outdid the antislavery partisans in his interpretations:

Both [Pierce and Douglas] labored for the slavocracy for the reward of the presidency and earned perhaps only the contempt of the people of the north, . . . but then the contempt visited on Douglas had its roots in hate while Pierce seemed so contemptible that to hate him was to do him too much honor.  

The case of James Ford Rhodes is quite different and more complex. He had grown up under the antislavery environment of the Western Reserve district of Ohio, but his father, Daniel P. Rhodes, had been a friend of Douglas, and there was a marriage connection linking the two families, and Douglas had named Daniel P. Rhodes as executor of his estate. Upon the death of his father, James Ford Rhodes succeeded to that post. When the two Douglas sons became of age the estate had been dissipated, and suit was brought against James Ford Rhodes. This litigation was finally compromised out of court, by Rhodes settling with the Douglas sons for the equivalent of about $30,000. There would seem to be little room for argument that by that time relations between the two families were not exactly amicable. What bearing did these family difficulties exert on Rhodes as historian? When F. H. Hodder published the facts in 1922, Albert Bushnell Hart undertook to dispute them on authority of a denial by Rhodes. Only when faced with a photostat of the original agreement of settlement, with signatures, did they decide to withdraw their charges.  

Whatever the influence of these family difficulties, Rhodes’ treatment of Douglas in his *History of the United States From the Compromise of 1850* was venomous.  

Rhodes said that of the five rivals for the Presidency in the Democratic party, as of January 1, 1854, “Douglas was the boldest of all” and “the least popular with the South.” In the nominating convention of 1852, he had received the smallest number of votes from that section, which would have 117 votes in the nominating convention of 1856: “The result of the previous convention, however, had taught Douglas that he could not be nominated without the aid of Southern votes.” On the basis of this reasoning, Rhodes attributed to Douglas the following: “Thoughts and calculations like these must have passed through Douglas’ mind . . . ,” and as chairman of the committee on territories, he could win the support of the South by organizing territories agreeable to these wishes. He attributed to Douglas a desire to emulate Clay, assuming for himself a leadership in the Democratic party similar to Clay’s leadership in the old Whig party. On this particular point, the comparison with Clay, the great compromiser, Rhodes may have guessed better than he knew, but he spoiled it by venting his personal spleen: “But Clay had profound moral convictions which, although sometimes set at naught in the heat of partisan conflict, were of powerful influence in his political career; in the view of Douglas, moral ideas had no place in politics.”

On the proslavery side of this slavery interpretation of Douglas are the versions of Sen. Archibald Dixon, Rep. Philip Phillips and Sen. David R. Atchison, contemporaries; and their subsequent more formal presentations of later years. Each of these men claimed at the time to have been the prime mover or author, or both, of the repeal of the Missouri Compromise, and to have forced the hand of Douglas in this matter. Mrs. Archibald Dixon elaborated her husband’s story in a book, *The True History of the Missouri Compromise and Its Repeal* (Cincinnati, 1899). Perley Orman Ray, published an elaborately documented monograph, *The Repeal of the Missouri Compromise* (Cleveland, 1909), in which he explained the repeal as arising out of the political rivalry of Atchison and Thomas Hart Benton in Missouri, and Atchison’s forcing of Douglas’ hand. H. B. Learned, without becoming a partisan, has pre-

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5. This work was planned in several volumes, the original block covering the period 1850-1877 in seven volumes. Later, two other volumes were added. *Volume 1*, in which the enactment of the Kansas-Nebraska Act was treated, was published in 1898, copyright 1899.

sented the evidence on “The Relation of Philip Phillips to the Repeal of the Missouri Compromise. . . .” 7

The provisional government of Nebraska interpretation of the Kansas-Nebraska Act has two aspects and complications which defy neat labels. Persons in the Indian country, or near it, conceived the idea of anticipating the official organization of the country into a territory and sending a delegate to represent the so-called Nebraska territory in congress. Hadley Johnson, allied with Iowa interests, was “elected” and appeared in Washington in December, 1853, with the idea of dividing the Indian country into two territories as a means of advancing Pacific railroad interests, and he claimed that Douglas accepted his plan, which appeared in the revised bill of January 23, 1854.8

The more comprehensive claims growing out of the situation in the Indian country, were associated with the so-called provisional government of Nebraska territory, which was set up primarily by the Emigrant tribes of Indians, particularly the Wyandot tribe in 1852, with William Walker as provisional governor, and Abelard Guthrie as delegate to congress, both members of the Wyandot tribe. The protagonist of the claims of these men to having instigated the organization of Kansas and Nebraska, was William Elsey Connelley.9 He maintained that Hadley Johnson’s activities and the division of the territory blocked the recognition by the house of representatives of the provisional government.10 and that Abelard Guthrie’s activities during the winter of 1852-1853 forced the action upon congress at the next session, which did pass the Kansas-Nebraska Act.11

The Pacific railroad interpretation of the Kansas-Nebraska Act was presented to a hostile and skeptical public, after Douglas’ death, by two political friends, James Washington Sheahan (1861), and James Madison Cutts (1866). In view of the contents of the Douglas letter which serves as the occasion for this paper, a re-

8. Hadley Johnson, “How the Kansas-Nebraska Boundary Line Was Established.”
Transactions and Reports of the Nebraska State Historical Society, series 1, v. 2 (1887), pp. 80-92.
11. Ibid., pp. 304-315.
printing of both these versions seems desirable as neither is generally available for reference.12

TEXT OF THE SHEAHAN ACCOUNT

... The great act of legislation upon which his opponents have assailed him most fiercely, and which, even after death, has been quoted as "the great mistake, not to say crime" of his life, was the one in which he took the most pride, and which he felt to be the wisest and the best. It was the Nebraska Act. A defense of that act is not needed here, but as it served for years as a battery from which he was assailed, it is but proper that in a few sentences it be stated why he proposed it, why he pressed it, and why it failed.

Mr. Douglas was one of those who saw that the agitation of the slavery question in Congress could accomplish nothing, save to widen the social and political breach that has always existed between the slaveholding and non-slaveholding States. Seven years experience in Congress confirmed him in the opinion that it was necessary to remove that question from the halls of the national legislature. In 1850, the compromise bills of that year, of which he wrote every word, were passed. California had been acquired, and a road to the Pacific was indispensable. In 1854, the immense tract of territory, now known as Nebraska and Kansas, was closed, by law, to emigration and to travel. Like a huge block, it barred the natural pathway to the Pacific. The South was pressing a railroad from Memphis, and southwesterly across the continent. Mr. Douglas wanted a fair chance to have that railroad lead from the north, where it could find communication through Chicago to the Atlantic. Our railroads had already reached the Mississippi, and others were projected, extending to the Missouri. He wanted Nebraska and Kansas opened, and the country made free to the enterprise of the north. In case of a dissolution of the Union, it was essential to have the Pacific connected by some other route than one through a hostile section. That was the motive for organizing these territories—a motive having its origin in the desire to benefit the whole nation, and especially to give to the northwest a fair opportunity to compete for the commerce of the great east.

But that curse of all things, the question of African slavery, lay at the threshold. He could not open Kansas and Nebraska without waking the sleeping Demon. He therefore determined to make one grand struggle, to seize the monster, to invite both North and South to unite in chaining it; and, having it in chains, to remove it forever beyond the limits of national legislation. For that purpose he framed the Nebraska Act, by which he asked the North and the South forever to bind themselves to leave the question of the existence or non-existence of slavery to the exclusive adjudication and determination of the people of the respective territories. The bill passed, and became a law.

12. James W. Sheahan, Eulogy on Stephen A. Douglas (Chicago, 1861), reprinted, with slight omissions, as Stephen A. Douglas an Eulogy, in the Fergus Historical Series, No. 15 (Chicago, 1881), pp. 15-18 in the original printing, and pp. 204-207 in the reprint. The present author has seen only the reprint, but the late Frank Heywood Hodder collated the two printings and marked his copy of the reprint accordingly, and that copy is now in the library of the University of Kansas. This eulogy was delivered at the University of Chicago, of which Douglas was a founder, July 3, 1861.

James Madison Cutts, A Brief Treatise Upon Constitutional and Party Questions, and the History of Political Parties, as I Received It Orally From the Late Senator Stephen A. Douglas, of Illinois (New York, 1866), pp. 84-97.
Its design and intent plainly stamped upon its face, and its friends all committed to abide its results. He had accomplished all his purposes, so far as they could be done by legislation. The rest he left to time and to the intelligence of the people; and throughout the eventful years that followed he was not an indifferent but a confident spectator, waiting for results which every day seemed more inevitably certain. For two years he fought rebellion in Kansas, and to Pierce he offered just what he offered to Lincoln—his aid in suppressing rebellion, and resistance to the laws and Constitution. In 1856, the Cincinnati convention met. He was but little troubled as to who should be the nominee, but he was greatly agitated lest some portion of the South would not ratify and approve the great act of 1854. But that convention, without a dissenting voice, did ratify that act, and then from the very bottom of his heart he rejoiced. The chain which bound fanaticism forever had been riveted, and the territories were no longer to be divided by a black line, but freedom was as free to go to the lowest confines of the continent as it was to tread the ocean-washed shores of Oregon. Never, except by something approaching a miracle, would there be another slave-State formed by the free will of the people, and no State, except formed by the free will of the people, could ever be admitted without a violation of the contract. In the fullness of his joy, and in the tumult of his gratitude, he sent that dispatch which, while it withdrew his name, unfortunately made Mr. Buchanan President.

Despite the civil war and rebellion which had reigned in Kansas, the great measure worked its own way successfully toward the contemplated result; when lo, there came a blow so sudden and unexpected, that no human sagacity could have been prepared to meet it. The Lecompton fraud was taken to the executive bosom, nursed into life; a message was sent to Congress, requesting that, after the manner of royal infants in other lands, this only child of the bachelor President, should be portioned, pensioned, and provided for at the national charge. Had Mr. Buchanan been true to his trust, true to his plighted honor, and true to the solemn oath of office, the issue of disunion would have been tried on the Lecompton question, and rebellion would have been compelled to take up arms in defence of that horrid fraud—a fraud covered with blood, and reeking with the stenches of the most shocking corruptions. Had he been true, Mr. Douglas' original design and expectations would have been verified, and the ultraists of the South, and not of the North, would have heaped contumely upon the Nebraska bill and its author.

As the corner-stone of the University [of Chicago] was laid under a malediction upon the Nebraska bill and its living author, I have thought it not inappropriate, that in burying the illustrious dead beneath its monumental towers, a record of the motive should be placed where posterity may find that and the malediction together.

Mr. Douglas was an independent statesman. Looking at all questions from an immovable stand-point of principle, he could neither be coaxed nor driven into an approval of what he deemed to be wrong.

Text of the Cutts Account

At the next meeting of Congress after the election of General Pierce, Mr. Douglas as chairman of the Committee on Territories, reported the Kansas-Nebraska Bill, accompanied by a special report, in which he said, "that the object of the committee was to organize all Territories in the future upon the
principles of the compromise measures of 1850. That these measures were intended to have a much broader and more enduring effect, than to merely adjust the disputed questions growing out of the acquisition of Mexican territory, by prescribing certain great fundamental principles, which, while they adjusted the existing difficulties, would prescribe rules of action in all future time, when new Territories were to be organized or new States to be admitted into the Union.” The report then proceeded to show that the principle upon which the Territories of 1850 were organized was, that the slavery question should be banished from the halls of Congress and the political arena, and referred to the Territories and States who were immediately interested in the question, and alone responsible for its existence; and concluded, by saying “that the bill reported by the committee proposed to carry into effect these principles in the precise language of the compromise measures of 1850.”

By reference to those sections of the Kansas-Nebraska Act which define the powers of the Territorial Legislature, it will be perceived that they are in the precise language of the acts of 1850, and confer upon the Territorial Legislature power over all rightful subjects of legislation, consistent with the Constitution, without excepting African slavery.

During the discussion of this measure it was suggested that the 8th section of the act of March 6, 1820, commonly called the Missouri Compromise, would deprive the people of the Territory, while they remained in a Territorial condition of the right to decide the slavery question, unless said 8th section should be repealed. In order to obviate this objection, and to allow the people the privilege of controlling this question, while they remained in a Territorial condition, the said restriction was declared inoperative and void, by an amendment which was incorporated into the bill, on the motion of Mr. Douglas, with these words in explanation of the object of the repeal: “it being the true intent and meaning of this act, not to legislate slavery into any Territory or State, nor to exclude it therefrom, but to leave the people thereof perfectly free to form and regulate their domestic institutions in their own way, subject only to the Constitution of the United States.” In this form, and with this intent, the Kansas-Nebraska Act became a law, by the approval of the President, on the 30th of May, 1854.

This bill and its author were principally assailed upon two points. First, that it was not necessary to renew slavery agitation, by the introduction of the measure; and secondly, that there was no necessity for the repeal of the Missouri restriction.

To the first objection it was replied, that there was a necessity for the organization of the Territory, which could no longer be denied or resisted. That Mr. Douglas, as early as the session of 1843, had introduced a bill to organize the Territory of Nebraska, for the purpose of opening the line of communication between the Mississippi Valley and our possessions on the Pacific Ocean, known as the Oregon country, and which was then under the operation of the treaty of joint occupation, or rather non-occupation, with England, and was rapidly passing into the exclusive possession of British Hudson’s Bay Fur Company, who were establishing posts at every prominent and commanding point in the country. That the Oregon Territory was, therefore practically open to English emigrants, by ships, while it was closed to all emigration from our Western States by our Indian intercourse laws, which imposed a thousand dol-
lars penalty, and six months' imprisonment, upon every American citizen who should be found within the Indian country which separated our settlements in the Mississippi or Missouri Valley from the Oregon Territory. That the desire for emigration in that direction was so great, that petitions were poured into Congress at every session for the organization of the Territory. Mr. Douglas renewed the introduction of his bill for the organization of Nebraska Territory, each session of Congress, from 1844 to 1854, a period of ten years, and while he had failed to secure the passage of the act, in consequence of the Mexican war intervening, and the slavery agitation which ensued, no one had objected to it upon the ground that there was no necessity for the organization of the Territory. During the discussions upon our Territorial questions during this period, Mr. Douglas often called attention to the fact that a line of policy had been adopted many years ago, and was being executed each year, which was entirely incompatible with the growth and development of our country. It had originated as early as the administration of Mr. Monroe, and had been continued by Mr. Adams, General Jackson, Mr. Van Buren, Harrison, and Tyler, by which treaties had been made with the Indians to the east of the Mississippi River, for their removal to the country bordering upon the States west of the Mississippi or Missouri Rivers, with guaranties that the country within which these Indians were located should never be embraced within any Territory or State or subjected to the jurisdiction of either, so long as grass should grow and water should run. These Indian settlements, thus secured by treaty, commenced upon the northern borders of Texas, or Red River, and were continued from year to year westward, until, when in 1844, Mr. Douglas introduced his first Nebraska Bill, they had reached the Nebraska or Platte River, and the Secretary of War was then engaged in the very act of removing Indians from Iowa, and settling them in the valley of the Platte River, with similar guaranties of perpetuity, by which the road to Oregon was forever to be closed. It was the avowed object of this Indian policy to form an Indian barrier on the western borders of Arkansas, Missouri, and Iowa, by Indian settlements, secured in perpetuity by a compact, that the white settlement should never extend westward of that line. This policy originated in the jealousy, on the part of the Atlantic States, of the growth and expansion of the Mississippi Valley, which threatened in a few years to become the controlling power of the nation. Even Colonel Benton, of Missouri, who always claimed to be the champion of the West, made a speech, in which he erected the god Terminus upon the summit of the Rocky Mountains, facing eastward, and with uplifted hand, saying to Civilization and Christianity, "Thus far mayst thou go, and no farther!" and General Cass, while Secretary of War, was zealous in the execution of this policy. This restrictive system received its first check in 1844, by the introduction of the Nebraska Bill, which was served on the Secretary of War, by its author, on the day of its introduction, with a notice that Congress was about to organize the Territory, and therefore he must not locate any more Indians there. In consequence of this notice, the Secretary (by courtesy) suspended his operations until Congress should have an opportunity of acting upon the bill; and inasmuch as Congress failed to act that session, Mr. Douglas renewed his bill and notice to the Secretary each year, and thus prevented action for ten years, and until he could procure action on the bill. In the mean time the passion of the Western people for emigration had become so aroused, that
they could be no longer restrained; and Colonel Benton, who was a candidate in Missouri for reelection to the Senate in 1852 and 1853, so far yielded to the popular clamor, as to advise the emigrants, who had assembled, in a force of fifteen or twenty thousand, on the western border of Missouri, carrying their tents and wagons, to invade the Territory and take possession, in defiance of the Indian intercourse laws, and of the authority of the Federal Government, which, if executed, must inevitably have precipitated an Indian war with all those tribes.

When this movement on the part of Colonel Benton became known at Washington, the President of the United States dispatched the Commissioner of Indian Affairs to the scene of excitement, with orders to the commanding officer at Fort Leavenworth to use the United States army in resisting the invasion, if he could not succeed in restraining the emigrants by persuasion and remonstrances. The Commissioner of Indian Affairs succeeded in procuring the agreement of the emigrants that they would encamp on the western borders of Missouri, until the end of the next session of Congress, in order to see if Congress would not in the meantime, by law, open the country to emigration. When Congress assembled at the session of 1853-54, in view of this state of facts, Mr. Douglas renewed his Nebraska Act, which was modified, pending discussion, by dividing into two Territories, and became the Kansas-Nebraska Act. From these facts you can draw your own conclusions, whether there was any necessity for the organization of the Territory and of Congressional action at that time.

In regard to the second objection, it is proper to remark, that if the necessity for the organization of the Territories did in fact exist, it was right that they should be organized upon sound constitutional principles; and if the compromise measures of 1850 were a safe rule of action upon that subject, as the country in the Presidential election, and both of the political parties in their national conventions in 1852 had affirmed, then it was the duty of those to whom the power had been intrusted to frame the bills in accordance with those principles. There was another reason which had its due weight in the repeal of the Missouri restriction. The jealousies of the two great sections of the Union, North and South, had been fiercely excited by the slavery agitation. The Southern States would never consent to the opening of those Territories to settlement, so long as they were excluded by act of Congress from moving there and holding their slaves; and they had the power to prevent the opening of the country forever, inasmuch as it had been forever excluded by treaties with the Indians, which would not be changed or repealed except by a two-third vote in the Senate. But the South were willing to consent to remove the Indian restrictions, provided the North would at the same time remove the Missouri restriction, and thus throw the country open to settlement on equal terms by the people of the North and South, and leave the settlers at liberty to introduce or exclude slavery as they should think proper. This was true, but this power to defeat the Kansas-Nebraska Act by refusing to make new treaties, that is, repealing the old by consent of both parties, the Indians and the United States, was overlooked by both parties, or the Kansas-Nebraska Act might have been defeated. I saw this objection, and was often on the point of letting it slip, in debate, but as often checked myself. In the meantime commissioners were sent out, pending the Nebraska Act, to make new treaties. A clause in
the act made it prospective, so as to await this result. The treaties were made and ratified by the Senate. Bell, of Tennessee, saw the objection, and alluded to it; but he did not portray or grasp it fully. I pretended not to be listening to his speech, but was terribly frightened, when, on the last night of the Kansas-Nebraska Bill he made his speech against it (having been previously pledged to vote for it), but at a time when the whole South was pledged to it, and would hardly even listen to what he was saying. In that speech, Bell, in substance, said that he did not blame the Senator from Illinois for the part he was acting on this occasion—that Senator understood what he was about. He had a grand scheme for the building up of a great Northwestern empire, which would in a few years be strong enough to govern the whole country. His scheme contemplated the extinction of the Indian title to a country large enough for ten or twelve new States, which under his guidance would soon be brought into the Union, to swell the power of his own section. “I repeat that I do not blame the Senator for the part he is acting; I only blame the South for allowing themselves to be used as his instruments, to carry out his grand scheme for his own section. It is said that the Romans were in the habit of conferring a civic crown upon every Roman consul who added a new province to the empire. If his section of the country shall prove as grateful as the Romans, he will be entitled to ten civic crowns in gratitude for his services.”

Immediately after the Nebraska Bill was introduced, and before the clause was inserted in the bill repealing the Missouri Compromise, an appeal to the people was prepared and published by Messrs. Chase of Ohio, Sumner of Massachusetts, Seward of New York, Wade, Giddings, and other leading Freesoilers, in which they denounced the measure as an attempt to open the whole Northern country to slavery, and, in fact, to introduce slavery into a country large enough for fourteen States by act of Congress, and denouncing the author of it as a traitor to the cause of freedom, to the North, and to the whole country; and appealing to the friends of freedom, and to all who were opposed to the extension of slavery, to forget all former party distinctions, hold public meetings, denounce the measure and its author, send up petitions and remonstrances from every town and hamlet in the country, urge the Legislature to send up instructions, and requesting the preachers of the gospel to denounce it in their pulpits, and all religious men to assemble in prayer-meetings and invoke the interposition of divine vengeance against those who should consummate such a damnable crime. This appeal to the passions of the people was prepared by its authors secretly, and after being agreed to in caucus on the Sabbath day, as appears from its date, was printed and sent to every portion of the country the day before the bill was to be taken up for discussion in the Senate.

On the next morning, a few minutes before Mr. Douglas was to make his opening speech in favor of the bill, Mr. Chase and Mr. Sumner came to his desk and appealed to his courtesy to postpone the discussion for one week, and assigned as a reason that they had not had time to read the bill and understand its provisions, acknowledging that it was their own fault and neglect that they had not done so, and therefore that they had no other claim to ask the postponement than the courtesy of the author of the measure. Mr. Douglas yielded to their appeal, and granted the postponement. Three or four days afterwards, he received by mail from Ohio a printed copy of this appeal, signed by Chase and Sumner, and bearing date several days before he had granted the postponement, which conduct he immediately denounced in open Senate.
They had thus lived—had got first before the country, seeking thus by fraud to forestall public opinion. Mr. Douglas' friends had reproved him for granting the postponement. He replied to them that it was a fair measure, and that he intended to act fairly and honestly, and to let friends and opponents all equally have an opportunity to use their abilities, for and against the measure, understandingly.

In response to this appeal the wildest passions were aroused. Meetings were held, violent resolutions of denunciation were passed, sermons preached, violence urged to any extent necessary to defeat the measure. As a specimen of the tone of the anti-Nebraska press, the New York 'Tribune' threatened, and justified the execution of the threat, that if the measure could not be defeated in any other mode, the capital should have been burned over the heads of the members, or blown up with powder. Mr. Douglas was burned and hung in effigy in every portion of the free States, sometimes in a hundred different places in the same night, and nearly every pulpit of the Protestant churches poured forth its denunciations and imprecations upon every man who should vote for the measure. A memorial was presented in the Senate, among others of the same character, containing the signatures of three thousand and fifty clergymen protesting against the measure in the name of Almighty God, and imploring His vengeance upon the author.

The twentieth century vindication of Stephen A. Douglas must be credited primarily to two men; Allan Johnson, whose biography was published in 1908, and Frank Heywood Hodder, in a series of papers, 1912-1925, but to the latter must be credited the most fundamental research in establishing the factual basis for a comprehensive reinterpretation of this "Middle Period" of American history.13

The interest of Douglas in a Pacific railroad by a northcentral route, preferably from Chicago, and the organization of the Indian country spanned nearly a decade, 1845-1853, prior to the fateful congressional session of 1853-1854. He successfully countered efforts to make commitments for rival routes for railroads north or south of the Chicago-South Pass route, or for canal routes at some point across the Isthmus.14 The Indian country was divided into two territories, Nebraska and Kansas, to facilitate railroad plans, either through Kansas or through Nebraska. Douglas hoped to avoid any reopening of the slavery agitation.


The most comprehensive biography of Douglas that has come out of this reinterpretation is that of George Fort Milton, The Eve of Conflict: Stephen A. Douglas and a Neillless War (Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1934). The Milton book has many good points, but the fact remains that a satisfactory biography of Douglas is still to be written.

14. Robert R. Russel, Improvement of Communication With the Pacific Coast as an Issue in American Politics, 1783-1864 (Cedar Rapids, Iowa, 1949). This study of the whole range of railroad and canal rivalries was begun under Hodder's direction at the University of Kansas. It is the pioneer monograph and is unique in the field.
To this summary of the revision of the historical view of Douglas, an additional point should be added. Douglas and the West have been emphasized, but that is inaccurate to the extent that it used the word West with two meanings; west meaning everything to the Pacific ocean, and west meaning the Mississippi Valley with emphasis upon the western portion of it. The area in which Douglas was engrossed primarily was the Mississippi Valley; certainly not in a third use of the term west as employed by the followers of Frederick Jackson Turner and the frontier hypothesis, nor in a fourth sense suggested by the phrase: “Westward the course of Empire takes its way,” which applied to the idea of the circumnavigation of the globe by European culture. Douglas was thinking about the continent of North America as a land mass, the interior of which was made accessible by steam on waterways and especially on railroads. The Great Lakes and the Mississippi Valley were the geographical pivot of its history. This is in the tradition of Halford J. Mackinder’s thinking about land power as superior to sea power under certain conditions, especially under the influence of mechanically-powered land communications.15 Under such a regime, interior sites became more important than coastal sites, the continent pivoting upon the area where the Mississippi Valley and the Great Lakes meet. To be sure, Douglas had not given these ideas a formal theoretical statement, or constructed from them a system of thought, or embodied them in a comprehensively documented philosophy of history, but his ideas were in accord with a substantial body of opinion trending in that direction. Mackinder did not give this land-mass theory its classical statement until 1904, elaborated in 1919, just as Alfred T. Mahan had not stated his sea-power theory of history until 1890 in his book, The Influence of Sea-Power in History. The best statement of Douglas on the subject was extempore, March 18, 1850, but it was so clearly done as to suggest that the ideas were not new to him. He was taking Webster to task for saying that the Northern Democracy had supported the annexation of Texas, the Mexican War, and the annexation of the Southwest “under pledges to the slave interest.” Webster interposed to differentiate the Northwest, and it was then that Douglas launched his eulogy:

I am gratified to find that there are those who appreciate the important truth, that there is a power in this nation greater than either the North or the

South—a growing, increasing, swelling power, that will be able to speak the law to this nation, and to execute the law as spoken. That power is the country known as the great West—the Valley of the Mississippi, one and indivisible from the Gulf to the Great Lakes, and stretching, on the one side and the other, to the extreme sources of the Ohio and Missouri—from the Alleghanies to the Rocky Mountains. There, Sir, is the hope of this nation—the resting place of the power that is not only to control, but to save, the Union. We furnish the water that makes the Mississippi, and we intend to follow, navigate, and use it until it loses itself in the briny Ocean. So with the St. Lawrence. We intend to keep open and enjoy both of these great outlets to the ocean, and all between them we intend to take under our especial protection, and keep and preserve as one free, happy, and united people. This is the mission of the great Mississippi Valley, the heart and soul of the nation and the continent. We know the responsibilities that devolve upon us, and our people will show themselves equal to them. We indulge in no ultraisms—no sectional strife—no crusades against the North or the South. Our aim will be to do justice to all, to all men, to every section. We are prepared to fulfill all our obligations under the Constitution as it is, and determined to maintain and preserve it inviolate in its letter and spirit. Such is the position, the destiny, and the purpose of the great Northwest.\(^{16}\)

Douglas had written confidentially to Charles H. Lanphier, November 11, 1853, that three issues would challenge the Pierce administration: public finance which meant adjustment of the tariff to eliminate the surplus before a panic occurred; a rivers and harbors policy toward which he proposed improvements financed by local tonnage dues, and the Pacific railroad, which he would aid with land grants.\(^{17}\) This letter is the nearest in time to the St. Joseph convention letter which reflects the views of Douglas on what he thought would be the leading issues of the coming session of Congress. Historians and biographers of Douglas have either omitted all reference to the rivers and harbors program of Douglas or have barely mentioned it, only to miss its significance.

At an earlier time, Douglas had discussed the matter in Congress, but on January 2, 1854, he addressed a letter to Gov. Joel A. Mattock, of Illinois, in exposition of the plan for state action.\(^{18}\) As the constitution provided that states might levy tonnage dues in harbors with the consent of congress, Douglas advocated a federal act to that effect, providing a uniform rule and authorizing state compacts among states bordering particular rivers, the administration

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Among the contemporary publications, the full text of the Douglas letter to Mattock was printed in the *National Intelligencer*, January 26, 1854, along with a commentary upon it by Archibald Williams. The *National Intelligencer* gave much more space to the rivers and harbors issue during January, 1854, than to the Nebraska question.
of each river being placed in the hands of a board of commissioners named by the compact states. Thus the Delaware river would be governed by a three-state compact and a three-man board; the Ohio river by a six-state compact, and the Mississippi river by a nine-state compact. These regional state compacts and boards were Douglas’ alternative to federal involvement, to which, as a States’ rights man, he was opposed. The New York Tribune took him seriously enough to publish, January 30, 1854, an editorial diatribe on his Matteson letter of nearly two columns on the crucial day of his opening of the debate on the redrafted Kansas-Nebraska bill and of his first opportunity to reply to the “Appeal of the Independent Democrats.”

The conclusion to be formulated here for the first time is that the focus of Douglas’ interest was the continental interior of North America, and his program of 1853-1854 comprehended both water and land communications combined with a view to the development of the pivot area where the Great Lakes and the Mississippi river meet, “the heart and soul of the nation and the continent.”

In view of the existing status of the Douglas problem, the anti-slavery interpretation would seem to have been completely discredited. The proslavery interpretations and the provisional government interpretations must be recognized as contributing, but not as controlling, factors. The preponderance of evidence has long since been all but conclusive that Douglas’ ruling passion was the development of what was generally referred to as the west, more accurately, the Mississippi Valley, as the dominant issue of national politics in the mid-nineteenth century. He sincerely believed that the slavery question was subordinate, and that its agitation could only be a menace to the Union. He hoped that any revival of it after the Compromise of 1850 could be avoided.

The revision of the Douglas rôle in history has not been accepted altogether, and in some quarters there has been a tendency to challenge its adequacy. Allan Nevins, The Ordeal of the Union (1947), took the ground that the Western interpretation of Douglas’ career had not been proven. To some extent the reinterpretation of Douglas has been caught in the cross currents of another disagreement, the whole issue of the American Civil War, its causes, whether war was necessary, and its consequences. The so-called revisionist school had been interpreting it as a needless war that might have been avoided. Milton’s biography partook of both re-

vision movements.20 Still more recently, a new current of interpretation of the American Civil War is in the making, arising out of the mid-twentieth century preoccupation with racism. These revisionists propose to revise the revisionists, and insist that the major cause of the Civil War was the moral issue of slavery, that slavery could be eradicated only by the shedding of blood, and that it was a veritable “irrepressible conflict,” a moral crusade. They are making of it a virtual “holy war,” and inevitably hark back to a revival of the old antislavery-abolitionism views of the Civil War generation, with only some twentieth century refinements of argument. 21

During the summer of 1853, issues in the West were moving rapidly to a climax. The Atchison-Benton feud was intensifying with the approaching election of a legislature which would select the next senator. Natural recrimination was the order of the day between them on the subjects of the organization of the Indian country and the Pacific railroad. Benton and friends sponsored the Edward F. Beale expedition, as a rival to the government surveys, to survey the gaps in the Colorado mountains for a railroad and Benton spoke at the City of Kansas on the occasion of Beale’s departure. Also, Benton announced that unassigned lands in the Indian country were already open to immediate white settlement and had a map printed and circulated showing these lands. The map was captioned “Official,” but the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, George W. Manypenny, repudiated the claim. The provisional government of Nebraska held elections, from which three candidates claimed the seat of delegate to congress: Abelard Guthrie, Thomas Johnson and Hadley Johnson. Benton was supposedly identified with the provisional government movement, but it had gotten out of hand. Atchison took ground opposite to Benton on white settlement in Indian country, and demanded the repeal of the Missouri Compromise as a condition of organization of the territory of Nebraska.

In response to this excitement centering on the Indian country,

20. Avery Craven, The Repressive Conflict, 1830-1861 (Baton Rouge, 1939); The Coming of the Civil War (New York, 1942); James G. Randall, Lincoln, the President, 2 volumes (New York, 1945); Lincoln and the South (Baton Rouge, 1946); Lincoln, the Liberal Statesman (New York, 1947); George Port Milton, The Eve of Conflict: Stephen A. Douglas and a Needless War (New York, 1934).

a mass meeting was held at St. Joseph, August 27, 1853. At this meeting resolutions were adopted endorsing the immediate organization and settlement of Nebraska, the congressional action to follow the lines of the Willard P. Hall bill of the preceding session, which had been passed by the house of representatives by an overwhelming vote and was defeated in the senate by six votes. Hall addressed the meeting. On November 9, 1853, the St. Joseph Gazette proposed a delegate convention, which was called to meet January 8, 1854. On December 3, 1853, a mass meeting was held in Buchanan county to choose delegates and pass resolutions. Other counties in northwestern Missouri and western Iowa did likewise during December, even “Nebraska Territory” sent delegates. The Buchanan county mass meeting appointed a committee of correspondents to invite notable men to attend and others to address the convention. Responses came in the form of letters from two senators, Douglas of Illinois, and Augustus C. Dodge of Iowa, Missouri Congressmen Mordecai Oliver and John G. Miller, Ex-Representative Willard P. Hall, and four Missourians in state politics.

The letter of Sen. Stephen A. Douglas is the major concern of this article; the subject of the Nebraska convention at St. Joseph, together with the other documents, being reserved for a separate paper. Douglas had been invited to address the convention, but, of course, declined on account of his duties in the senate at Washington. As suggested by the invitation, however, he expressed his views to the convention. His remarks were organized under four heads: 1) the history of Douglas’ interest in the organization of the Indian country 1844 to 1853; 2) prevention of the completion of the Indian barrier, linked with the organization bills; 3) the Pacific railroad paralleling in time the first two questions; 4) and finally the slavery issue. Douglas showed how he had advocated continuously the three policies hand in hand over a decade.

Douglas related how the Indian policy had been shaping in the direction of a permanent Indian barrier from the Red river northward, emigrant Indian tribes from the east being settled there in perpetuity, and with the pledge that they would “never be incorporated within the limits of territory or state of the Union.” Upon introducing his first Nebraska bill, in 1844, he had notified the Secretary of War to suspend the settling of Indians there during the

22. The files of the St. Joseph Gazette, incomplete, are held by the St. Joseph Public Library, where they were consulted originally by the present author. More recently, they were microfilmed by the Missouri State Historical Society and a copy of that film has greatly facilitated the work on this study which includes another paper on the Nebraska convention at St. Joseph.
time the bill was pending. Afterwards, Douglas continued the tactics and claimed to have succeeded in preventing the completion of the relocation policy. In order to settle the 1,500 miles of Indian country intervening between the Missouri-Iowa boundary and the Pacific coast, the Indians must be removed: "Continuous lines of settlement, with civil, political and religious institutions all under the protection of law, are imperiously demanded by the highest national considerations."

Besides organization and settlements, there must be telegraph and railroads, "not one railroad only, but many lines, for the valley of the Mississippi will require as many Rail Roads to the Pacific coast as to the Atlantic and [I] will not venture to limit the number." He then reviewed his pamphlet of December, 1845, in which he had discussed these issues at length. That was prior to the acquisition of California, but he had expressed a preference for the railroad to reach San Francisco rather than Oregon, "in event California should be annexed in time." The Mexican War and the slavery agitation operated adversely upon these projects, and in the last congress, 1852-1853, the organization bill was defeated, but he was confident that it would pass at this session: "It is to be hoped that the necessity and importance of the measure are manifest to the whole country, and that so far as the slavery question is concerned, all will be willing to sanction and affirm the principle established by the Compromise Measures of 1850."

With the gist of the Douglas letter before the reader and the full text available at the end of this article, the time has come for some evaluations. The first item is to invite comparison of the Cutts version printed earlier in this article with the Douglas letter. Cutts professed to have received the information for his book orally from Douglas. That may have been true, but the exact quotations incorporated at various points is proof that Cutts has consulted the documents rather carefully. Did Cutts have before him a copy of this Douglas letter or some similar statement of the facts about the organization of the Indian country and the Indian barrier? The point Cutts did omit was the development of the theme of the Pacific railroad, although he did refer to the original Douglas Nebraska bill as introduced for "the purpose of opening a line of communications between the Mississippi Valley and our possessions on the Pacific Ocean. . . ." The legislative history of the Kansas-Nebraska bill was general knowledge available from the Congressional Globe, for the most part, but possibly punctuated by personal comments
from Douglas; certainly the Chase "appeal" episode is in that category.

Historians have been disposed to ignore the Cutts book. Ray pronounced it "of almost no value." In preparing a monograph, published in 1921, on *Indian Policy and Westward Expansion, 1830-1854*, the present author became convinced of the substantial reliability of the Cutts account of the relationship of the Douglas organization bills and the Indian barrier question. It did fit the major facts. The Douglas letter of December 17, 1853, seems to vindicate that judgment. Possibly the Cutts book as a whole is entitled to a revaluation, because the bitter and vindictive antislavery-abolition prejudice against Douglas extended to all who defended him.

Similarly, the Sheahan *Eulogy* invites comparison with the Douglas letter of December 17, 1853. Sheahan's major contention that the Pacific railroad was the motive behind the Kansas-Nebraska Act is confirmed explicitly by Douglas. His statement of the slavery question was correct so far as it went. Sheahan made one error, when he admitted that the Kansas-Nebraska Act failed on account of the action of Buchanan. What is meant by failure? It did not fail, because the question of freedom in Kansas was settled regardless of the action of Buchanan. The Free-State party held control of both legislatures, territorial and Lecompton state, so that in event of either admission or rejection under the Lecompton constitution, Kansas was free.24 The Lecompton controversy was again "a tempest in a teapot" which had no practical bearing on the fate of Kansas, and served only the purposes of those intent upon inflaming the sectional conflict on a national scale. But, on the main issue, Sheahan was sound, and the Douglas letter vindicates the *Eulogy*.

This Douglas letter of December 17, 1853, has nothing on the matter of the Presidency, either directly or indirectly. It would seem to fit into the framework of his confidential letter to Charles H. Lanphier, editor of the *Illinois State Register*, Springfield, November 11, 1853, when he commented that "I think such a state of things will exist that I shall not desire the nomination. . . . Let us leave the Presidency out of view for at least two years."25 The item that he did have in view for the coming session was the Pacific railroad which he predicted would be "a disturbing element." He did not mention the organization of Nebraska in that letter, but too

much should not be made of that, because the December letter was most explicit in making the organization of Nebraska and a continuous line of settlements the necessary antecedents of the Pacific railroad. There is nothing contradictory between the two letters, and certainly there is nothing in the December letter that could possibly be interpreted as a changed intention to bid for the Presidency.

In St. Joseph, Mo., Lucien J. Eastin, editor of the *Gazette* of that place, responded enthusiastically, December 14, 1853, to the news of the Dodge Nebraska bill and railroad bill. The headline ran:

BILL TO ORGANIZE NEBRASKA  
Introduced First Moment of the  
Session, by Dodge of Iowa.  
NEBRASKA AHEAD OF ALL.  
GO IT FOR NEBRASKA.

and the text elaborated:

The very moment a quorum was announced to be present in the Senate, Mr. Dodge of Iowa, introduced a bill to organize Nebraska Territory; also a bill granting lands to Iowa for Rail Road purposes.

The resolutions adopted at the St. Joseph delegate convention of January 9, 10, 1854, representing northwestern Missouri and western Iowa, spoke of the organization and settlement of Nebraska as “adding many new stars to our political constellation, and we are therefore in favor of such legislation as will cover the whole extent of that wilderness with a people and a free government.”

26 It was fortunate for Douglas and the success of his bill that these resolutions did not enjoy publicity in Washington. Dodge and Douglas, and for that matter all who advocated the organization of Nebraska, were careful not to refer to it in terms of more than one potential state. The division into two territories by the rewritten bill of January 23, 1854, was carefully explained in terms of facilitating railroads. There is no documentation for the antislavery-abolition charge that it was done to give Kansas to the South as a slave state in compensation for Nebraska as a Free State. All the evidence is on the other side. There was a rather general consensus in the South that Kansas was not adapted to the slave system. In Missouri,

26. St. Joseph Gazette, January 18, 1854. The use of the word free in conjunction with government in this sentence did not refer to slavery, but to free white democracy.

The Nebraska bill, as reported by Douglas, January 4, 1854, contained in section 1, a definition of the boundary which differed from the later version of January 23. To clarify geography, these should be compared with the final limits as enacted May 30. But, provisos attached to the boundary section require more attention than has been given them. One proviso authorized the division of the territory, or the admission of one or more states carved from it, no limit being set to the number. The same proviso had been in the Hall bill of December 14, 1853, but occasioned no comment. Therefore, the division of the Indian country into two territories, Nebraska and Kansas, on January 23, should have occasioned no particular surprise, or recriminations.
where slavery had been established from the beginning, it was on
the defensive and was declining independently of any influence of
antislavery-abolition agitation. The logic of these facts has not
been applied to the situation, even by those defending Douglas.
Cutts mentioned Douglas' consternation at Bell's reference to
Douglas' Northwestern empire, which, with the ten or twelve states
that would be added from Nebraska, could govern the Union. Every
subdivision of the Indian country, under whatever name, meant
that many more Free States, and a strengthening of the non-slavery
North. The division of the Indian country into two territories,
Nebraska and Kansas, was clearly to the advantage of the North.
There was no real danger of Kansas ever becoming a slave state,
and the whole Kansas crusade of antislavery-abolitionism was a
trumped-up affair in which the country was victimized by propa-
ganda, and history has been dominated ever since by that falsehood.
The North should have welcomed two territories as a victory. Why
didn't they insist on three or five? Naturally, the South was not en-
thusiastic about the Kansas-Nebraska Act and its popular sov-
ereignty, and many denounced it from the beginning. In any case,
the moderate elements in the South accepted it only as an unwel-
come compromise, and some attempted to make the best of it for
their section.

The argument has been made by the defenders of Douglas, that
the organization of the Indian country was essential to prevent the
South from getting the Pacific railroad. It is long since time that
this assumption was re-examined. The Douglas letter of December
17, 1853, was explicit in specifying that there would be many lines;
as many west as east of the Mississippi river. The element of ri-
vality was in getting the advantage that might accrue from the first
railroad. But there is another aspect of the problem that needs
clarification. Should the South have secured the first railroad, with
the Indian barrier legally intact against the middle and northern
routes, illegal settlement, Indian troubles, and organization could
have been made formidable handicaps that might have delayed in-
definitely the second road by middle routes. Cutts' reference to
Douglas' fears had substance, that the South could embarrass him
by merely refusing to permit the extinguishment of Indian titles in
the Indian country. Organization of the Indian country prior to a
southern railroad authorization was essential to that time only to

27. E. L. Craik, "Southern Interest in Territorial Kansas," Kansas Historical Collec-
tions, v. 15 (1919-1922), pp. 334-450; G. F. Milton, The Eve of Conflict, p. 149, as-
ssembled evidence that the South recognized that Kansas was not suited to slavery.
the extent of equalization of opportunity in the rivalry among the sections to be first to settle and to build railroads westward that would reach the coast.

So far as the private speculation of Douglas was concerned, he had placed most of his investments in the Chicago vicinity. But he had invested also in the Superior City enterprise on Lake Superior, with a view to making it the terminus of a Pacific railroad by the northern route.28 He had hedged also against the southern route, by joining with southern interests in railroad bills that would, if successful, connect across Arkansas to Cairo and the Illinois Central with a Pacific railroad by any southern route.29 There is one unanswered question that is entered into the record for the sake of completing the picture: Had Douglas hedged also against the victory of St. Louis and Benton’s central route?

The aspect of the Douglas letter that is most in need of clarification is that relating to the slavery issue. The sentence on that theme from the Douglas letter bears repeating as the text for the discussion which follows: “It is to be hoped that the necessity and importance of the measure are manifest to the whole country, and that so far as the slavery question is concerned, all will be willing to sanction and affirm the principle established by the Compromise measures of 1850.” Of course, in this sentence and in the bill which he reported January 4, 1854, Douglas was proposing to repeal the Missouri Compromise of 1820. Why deny it, or quibble about it? More accurately, he was recognizing an accomplished fact, that, in effect, the Missouri Compromise had been repealed already by the course of events. His proviso was only a straightforward recognition of reality; a technicality of removing the obsolete material from the statute books.

The successive changes of form, in other words the changes in wording, January 10, and 23, February 6, and 7, 1854, were changes in form only. Nothing of substance was either added to or subtracted from the original report of January 4, 1854, or the sentence quoted above from the letter of December 17, 1853. He yielded nothing of substance in those amendments to David R. Atchison, to Philip Phillips, or to Archibald Dixon. His subsequent assertion that he consulted no one, but wrote the bill himself seems more clearly substantiated than formerly, if it needed any further corroboration.

The “Appeal of the Independent Democrats,” which was men-

tioned by Cutts, was published January 24, 1854, by Sen. Salmon P. Chase of Ohio, Sen. Charles Sumner of Massachusetts, and others, and was undoubtedly a major invention in propaganda technique and strategy. It was as outstandingly successful as it was contemptible. In spite of the fact that the episode has been recounted innumerable times there is no satisfactory version extant; and Milton, in his biography of Douglas, missed his opportunity by writing a distorted pro-Douglas narrative. This article is not the place to retell the story, but this much may be said. Neither party to the Kansas-Nebraska debates in congress, during that session, can stand successfully the test of candid examination, and the idealist must wish that popular government in action might have risen to the challenge of the heroic possibilities of the occasion and might have presented to the world a high level of performance in keeping with the gravity of the crisis. In retrospect, the historian can see so many ways in which Douglas could have made a more statesmanlike defense and one more worthy of the principle for which he stood. The point must not be missed, that Douglas was standing for an important principle.

Douglas did not raise the slavery issue in the Nebraska organization question in congress or outside. That had been done already in the country, and by others. Avoidance of it in congress would have been nothing less than miraculous. The only elements of uncertainty in the matter that can be considered are when, how, and by whom—a mere technicality, but of tremendous strategic advantage in controversy where it is important to place the opponent on the defensive for conducting propaganda on an emotional level. The choice before Douglas was not between right and wrong, a clear cut moral issue, but a choice from among courses, none of which was ideal.

To attempt to ignore the Nebraska question would only have been to precipitate it in another and possibly more dangerous form. Even assuming that the issue was not forced by someone else in that session of congress, following Benton’s advice, his deceptive map and false interpretations of law, the population would have moved into the Indian country in force during the summer of 1854, and with unpredictable consequences, possibly civil war on the border. Atchison and Benton were men of more than local influence and they were determined to destroy each other. Both appear equally unscrupulous and both were guilty. Regardless of law, slavery would have been carried into the unorganized Indian country. In fact, slavery had been practiced there for some time at the
Methodist mission to the Shawnees, as well as by Indians themselves, all without the issue of legality under the Missouri Compromise having been raised. Contrary to the accusations of Chase and associates in the “Appeal,” Douglas was not introducing slavery into the Indian country by any version of his bills.

Hall’s bill had contained a proviso: “That nothing shall be construed to impair the rights of person or property now pertaining to the Indians in said Territory. . . .” This caused no comment. Douglas had used it in his Utah bill of 1850, and inserted it in his Nebraska bill, as reported January, 1854. In this context, it caused an explosion. The New York Tribune, January 10, 1854, stated that the Indians who held slaves were protected, and on January 19, applied the proviso generally. The National Era, Washington (weekly ed.), January 19, 1854, insisted that the reason for this proviso was the fact that slavery already existed in Nebraska territory.

To attempt to organize Nebraska territory under Dodge’s bill, as he prepared it (the Hall bill of the preceding session), without change in the Missouri Compromise status, would have precipitated the slavery controversy on the floor of Congress in a manner similar to what did happen, only the three senate sponsors of repeal, Phillips, Atchison and Dixon, would have been engaged in making amendments that really meant change of substance. The situation faced in the winter of 1853-1854 was different from that of the winter of 1852-1853. The slavery agitation had reached such a point of emotional tension and semantic confusion that no statement whatsoever on that subject could be framed that would mean the same thing to those concerned. Two of the several resolutions of the St. Joseph convention on Nebraska illustrate the point:

7. Resolved, That, we are utterly opposed to any reagitation of that vexed question, now happily at rest—and we will resist all attempts at renewing in Congress, or out of it, the agitation of the slavery question, under whatsoever shape or color the attempts may be made.

9. Resolved, That in organizing Nebraska Territory, all who are now or who may hereafter settle there should be protected in all their rights, leaving questions of local policy to be settled by the citizens of the Territory, when they form a State Government.

These two resolutions were quoted without comment, by the National Intelligencer, Washington, D. C., February 2, 1854, apparently as completely without consciousness as the convention that adopted them, of the absolute paradox they contained. The New York Tribune, January 30, 1854, reprinted from the pro-Benton St. Louis Democrat an editorial which contained two of the resolutions from the same convention; on immediate organization of Nebraska,
and on opposition to reagitation of "that vexed question," but passed over the one demanding the protection of the settlers in all their rights, which meant that the slave property of any settler was to be legalized in Nebraska contrary to the Missouri Compromise. Was that superseding or repealing the Missouri Compromise; or was it organizing the territory without repealing the Missouri Compromise or reagitating "that vexed question?" The reader should be reminded that one of the five points in the Compromise of 1850 had been the prohibition of the slave trade in the District of Columbia, an area under federal jurisdiction, but not the abolition of slavery there. The view was that certain attributes of the institution were separable. In other words, specified attributes could be practiced, without making a commitment for or against the institution as a whole. That is substantially what the St. Joseph convention was asking for Nebraska territory, the application of the Compromise of 1850. That is exactly what Douglas proposed to do—if the English language can be claimed to serve the function of communication. The charge was made repeatedly that the proposal to organize without repeal was intended to defeat organization; also that the proposal to organize only with repeal had the same purpose. In other words, total frustration threatened regardless of what course was followed. To fail to organize Nebraska at that session would have left all parties to the controversy disgruntled and inflamed.

To organize Nebraska as Douglas proposed to do was only to recognize the fact that the slavery issue had been raised already, and to attempt the disposal of it again by the same formula he had used with apparent success in the Compromise of 1850. Possibly therein lies the major weakness of the Douglas position—captive of his own success in 1850, he thought that the same formula could be employed in a different situation. His hand was not forced to repeal the Missouri Compromise unless one argues mere technicalities to the point of complete semantic frustration. The argument may be made that there was no great crisis to compromise as in 1820-1821, 1833 and 1850, and superficially that may appear to be true, but misses the point. The pro-Benton St. Louis *Democrat* had made the charge against Cass and Douglas:

The glory gained by serving the Union by the Compromise of 1850, has begun to tarnish, and they want another opportunity of displaying their talents in that line, and therefore as nobody else will agitate Slavery and thus endanger the Union, Cass and Douglas have determined to bring about a crisis themselves and thus give themselves an opportunity of displaying their patriotism.
It was in this connection that the *Democrat* had quoted two selected resolutions from the St. Joseph convention group, omitting the one relative to protection of property in Nebraska, and denounced agitation of the slavery question as a means of defeating organization of Nebraska. Reprinted in the New York *Tribune*, January 30, 1854, this editorial was given a wide audience.

As intended, this St. Louis *Democrat* editorial diverted attention from the real issue. A potential crisis was brewing, even more portentous than that of 1850, and an explosion was imminent. Douglas’ experiences in the crisis were fresh in his mind, and they were to be recalled to him in part by Senator Smith, on February 10, 1854. 30 In the session of congress, 1850-1851, a resolution had been presented declaring the Compromise measures of 1850 to be a definitive settlement of all the questions growing out of the subject of domestic slavery. Douglas opposed the resolution in a speech, December 23, 1851:

At the close of the long session which adopted those measures, I resolved never to make another speech upon the slavery question in the halls of Congress. I regard all discussion of that question here as unwise, mischievous, and out of place. 31

Later in the same speech he repeated:

I wish to state that I have determined never to make another speech upon the slavery question; and I may now add the hope that the necessity for it will never exist. I am heartily tired of the controversy and I know the country is disgusted with it.

The resolution before the senate, therefore, he thought inexpedient, because the country generally acquiesced in the settlement, and the opponents were silent. To pass the resolution would add nothing to the law, and the opponents would charge that the agitation still continued; “Are not the friends of the compromise becoming the agitators?” Furthermore, he added:

If the compromise is to be made the test of faith, the two parties will, of course, be composed of friends and opponents of that measure in battle array against each other, and the slavery question must of necessity continue the sole topic of discussion and controversy. That is the very thing which we wish to avoid, and which it was the object of the compromise to prevent... drop the subject.

In 1852, both political parties had adopted finality planks, but as Douglas had pointed out, the repetition of finality pledges was itself continuance of agitation: A controversial situation is not resolved until the participants have stopped talking about it. There

is no legitimate purpose to be served in the mid-twentieth century for historians to pretend either, that Douglas raised the issue, or that the issue was not already before the session of congress which opened in December, 1853. His compromise proviso, or formula, was to quench the new fire before it spread. Douglas was a practical man with more courage and integrity than his opponents to face the facts and to try to find an effective adjustment in conformity with reality. His opponents of the opposite extremes, inspired by doctrinaire approaches were determined to impose their abstractions, without respect to facts, upon all who disagreed, and to penalize by destruction all who refused to comply. Douglas was not a hypocrite in the same sense as his opponents. He found himself in the rôle of a neutral between the aggressive slavocracy and an equally aggressive antislavery-abolitionism. His appeal was to the nonfanatical, to the practical middle-ground majority. In securing the enactment of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, Douglas did succeed in his compromise of 1854.

But that conclusion will be challenged by all traditionalists, and raises the question as to what is meant by success in compromise. The success of the great compromises of 1820-1821, 1833 and 1850 was tested by the measuring stick of whether they prevented or postponed the crisis from leading into dissolution of the Union, or resort to force to prevent it. The Douglas compromise of 1854 met that test. To blame Douglas with conspiring against freedom was like blaming fire fighters for starting the fire, because they built a backfire or demolished buildings in the path of the flames as a means of stopping them.

Having won the compromise, did Douglas' followers betray him and themselves? The answer must be a qualified yes. In the long run they did, possibly because they did not possess a sufficiently positive consciousness of and convictions about the principles underlying their true interests. Time and all of the facts were on their side, if only they were not stampeded into destruction, and persisted in the faith to see the thing through. So far as the extension of slavery into the territories was concerned, railroads and the right of occupation, legalized by territorial organization, would settle the issue of freedom in both the territories and the new states irrespective of the legal status of slavery. Willard P. Hall's letter to the St. Joseph convention on Nebraska had made that point,32 but he received no hearing nationally. Douglas' Freeport doctrine

of 1858 was correct also. Of course a compromise does not settle anything, but when successful, it does buy Time during which reality may work itself out, released from the tensions of the emotional crisis. That had been true of each of the three preceding great compromises, but the fact should be faced candidly, that with the intensification of the slavery controversy, each compromise bought less and less time.

The “Appeal of the Independent Democrats” was successful in creating a false issue, and by repetition it was fixed in the public mind. Douglas was made to appear a villain of the piece instead of the Great Compromiser in the tradition of Henry Clay. Not only did the appeal and the subsequent course of antislavery-abolition propaganda create a false issue and confuse contemporaries, these factors have kept historians confused to the present day. In the South, as the pot boiled, a corresponding fanatical scum rose to the top, so that by 1860 the Democratic party was split at least four ways.

One thing that emerges clearly from a study of the 1850’s is the power of fanatical propaganda—mending repetition of unscrupulous falsehoods—syllogizing in semantic confusion—intolerance masked under moral and religious symbolism—all leading the public to frustration and defeatism, which at long last found escape from stalemate in Civil War.

The United States has been conspicuously addicted to the delusion that the passing of a law, based upon some doctrinaire principle, can work miracles; as though a mere statute could solve anything. Such procedure must fail outright, either through nullification of such legislation by general disregard of it, or through resort to force. To be effective, law must follow public opinion, and register popular will. The first alternative contains the seeds of the police state. The latter is the foundation for responsible popular government. The rôle of Douglas in 1854 was to carry through a compromise in keeping with the course of events and the convictions of the effective majority. Kansas was in no danger of being lost to slavery. That bogey was all a trumped-up issue of extremists. The compromise of 1854 postponed again the final appeal to disunion, or to arms, until facts had more nearly overtaken the ideal.

The major “if” question of the Middle Period of American history is whether still another postponement in 1860-1861 might possibly have eliminated the institution of slavery and set the stage for a
satisfactory solution of the race question without resort to force—
Civil War and the breakdown of popular government. There
should be no mistake about this last point. It is speculation, not
history, but by stating the matter in this form, possibly the reader
may be aided in liberating himself from captivity to the legend
about Douglas, the villain of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, and in re-
orienting himself to the idea of Douglas, the successful compro-
miser of the crisis of 1854.

In conclusion then, this Douglas letter to the St. Joseph conven-
tion committee does not provide an answer to all the questions
pending about Douglas. Some questions are answered conclu-
sively, but the letter may be said to raise more new questions than
it settles. The historian can have no legitimate objection on that
score, however, because new facts and points of view give zest and
vitality to the study of history. When there are no unsettled ques-
tions to answer, then indeed, not only history, but all historians
will be dead.

Stephen A. Douglas: Text of a letter to the St. Joseph Convention
of January 9, 1854, Dated, Washington, De-
-ember 17, 1853, and Published in the St.
Joseph Gazette, March 15, 1854.

Your letter of the 15 inst, inviting me, on behalf of the citizens of Buchanan
County, friendly to the immediate organization and settlement of the Terri-
tory of Nebraska, to address a Convention favorable to that important object
on the 9th of January, next, is this moment received.

Believing that I will be able to promote the objects of the Convention more
efficiently by remaining at my post and, as chairman of the Territorial com-
mittee, reporting and pushing forward, the Bill for the organization of Ne-
braska, I will avail myself of the alternative presented in your kind letter of
invitation, and furnish a brief “statement of my views, to be laid before the
convention.”

It is unnecessary for me to inform you, who have so long, and so anxiously
watched the slow development and progress of this important measure, that
I am, and have been, at all times since I had the honor to hold a seat in either
House of Congress, the warm and zealous advocate of the immediate organi-
zation and settlement of that Territory. Ten years ago, during the first session
I was a member of the House of Representatives, I wrote and introduced a
bill for the establishment of the Territory of Nebraska, which so far as I am
advised was the first proposition ever made in either House of Congress to
create a territory on the West bank of the Missouri river. That bill gave a
beautiful and euphonious name to a great river and the country drained by it,
by reversing the aboriginal word “Nebraska” and substituting it for the modern
and insignificant word Platte by which the river and adjacent country were at
that time generally known. From that day I have never ceased my efforts on any occasion, when there was the least hope of success, for the organization of the Territory, and have scarcely allowed a Congress to pass without bringing forward the Bill in one House or the other. Indeed I am not aware that prior to the last Congress, any other member of the Senate ever felt interest enough in it to bring forward a Bill, or even to speak in its favor when introduced by myself.

I am induced to call your attention to these facts in consequence of having been furnished with a copy of a newspaper published in your State, in which I am charged with hostility to the measure. My reasons for originating the measure, and bringing it forward during my first session in Congress, and renewed it so often since even when the indications of support furnished very light hopes of success, may be briefly stated. It seemed to have been the settled policy of the government for many years, to collect the various Indian tribes in the different States and organized Territories, and to plant them permanently on the western borders of Arkansas, Missouri and Iowa under treaties guaranteeing to them perpetual occupancy, with an express condition that they should never be incorporated within the limits of territory or state of the Union. This policy evidently contemplated the creation of a perpetual and savage barrier to the further progress of emigration, settlement and civilization in that direction. Texas not having been annexed, and being, at that time a foreign country, this barbarian wall against the extension of our institutions, and the admission of new states, could not start from the Gulf of Mexico, and consequently the work was commenced at Red river, and carried northward with the obvious purpose of continuing it to the British Possessions. It had already penetrated into the Nebraska country, and the war department in pursuit of what was then considered a settled policy, was making its arrangements to locate immediately several other Indian Tribes on the Western borders of Missouri and Iowa with similar guarantees of perpetuity. It was obvious to the plainest understanding that if this policy should be carried out and the treaty stipulations observed in good faith it was worse than folly to wrangle with Great Britain about our right to the whole or any part of Oregon—much less to cherish the vain hope of ever making this an Ocean-bound Republic. This Indian Barrier was to have been a colossal monument to the God terminus saying to christianity, civilization and Democracy “thus far mayest thou go, and no farther.” It was under these circumstances, and with a direct view of arresting the further progress of this savage barrier to the extension of our institutions, and to authorize and encourage a continuous line of settlements to the Pacific Ocean, that I introduced the first Bill to create the Territory of Nebraska at the session of 1853-4 [1843-4?]. The mere introduction of the Bill with a request of the Secretary of War to suspend further steps for the location of Indians within the limits of the proposed Territory until Congress should act upon the measure had the desired effect, so far as to prevent the

33. There were obvious typographical errors in the printing of this Douglas letter. The opening sentence gives the wrong date for the letter of invitation. It could not have been December 15, answered December 17. The other letters of invitation apparently have the date December 3, which was the date of the mass meeting authorizing the invitations. Other corrections of wrong dates are indicated in brackets in the body of the letter. The sentence about the origin of the name Nebraska is somewhat confused. The authorities on Nebraska nomenclature assign the origin to an Otoe word meaning “broad water. The reverse of Nebraska is Aksarben, a word for which the present author has not found any authority. Looking at it from another angle, maybe Douglas’ original letter meant to say “reviving” instead of “reversing” and it was misread by the St. Joe printer.
permanent location of any more Indians on the frontier during the pendency of the Bill before Congress, and from that day to this I have taken care always to have a Bill pending when Indians were about to be located in that quarter. Thus the policy of a perpetual Indian barrier has been suspended, if not entirely abandoned, for the last ten years, and since the acquisition of California, and the establishment of Territorial governments for Oregon and Washington the idea of arresting our progress in that direction, has become so ludicrous that we are amazed, that wise and patriotic statesmen ever cherished the thought.

But, while the mischief has been prevented by prescribing limits to the onward march of an unwise policy, yet there are great national interests involved in the question which demand prompt patience, and affirmative action. To the States of Missouri and Iowa, the organization of the Territory of Nebraska is an important and desirable local measure; to the interests of the Republic it is a national necessity. How are we to develop, cherish and protect our immense interests and possessions on the Pacific, with a vast wilderness fifteen hundred miles in breadth, filled with hostile savages, and cutting off all direct communication. The Indian barrier must be removed. The tide of emigration and civilization must be permitted to roll onward until it rushes through the passes of the mountains, and spreads over the plains, and mingles with the waters of the Pacific. Continuous lines of settlements with civil, political and religious institutions all under the protection of law, are imperiously demanded by the highest national considerations. These are essential, but they are not sufficient. No man can keep up with the spirit of this age who travels on anything slower than the locomotive, and fails to receive intelligence by lightning [telegraph]. We must therefore have Rail Roads and Telegraphs from the Atlantic to the Pacific, through our own territory. Not one line only, but many lines, for the valley of the Mississippi will require as many Rail Roads to the Pacific as to the Atlantic, and will not venture to limit the number. The removal of the Indian barrier and the extension of the laws of the United States in the form of Territorial governments are the first steps toward the accomplishment of each and all of those objects. When I proposed ten years ago to organize the territory of Nebraska, I did not intend to stop at that point. I proposed immediately to establish a line of military posts to protect the settler and the emigrant and to provide for the construction of bridges and making roads by granting a portion of the public lands for that purpose. In 1854 [1845], I published a pamphlet in which I proposed, so soon as the territory should be established to make out the line of a rail road to the mouth of the Columbia River, “or to the Bay of San Francisco in the event California should be annexed in time,” and then to have the public lands, on each side of the line surveyed into quarter sections, and to set apart the alternate tracts to the actual settler. The object of all these measures was to form a line of continuous settlements from the Mississippi to the Pacific, with a view of securing and enlarging our interests on that coast. The Mexican war operated adversely to the success of these measures, all the revenues in the Treasury were needed for military operations and there was an unwillingness to make any liberal and extensive disposition of the public domain, while we were making loans predicated, in part, upon that fund. The slavery agitation which followed the acquisition of California and New Mexico, also had an injurious effect by diverting public attention from the importance of our old territory and concentrating
the hopes and anxieties of all upon our new possessions. Last session the Bill passed the House of Representatives, but was lost in the Senate for want of time, it being a short session. I have a firm confidence that none of these causes can defeat the organization of the Territory this session. It is to be hoped that the necessity and importance of the measure are manifest to the whole country, and that so far as the slavery question is concerned, all will be willing to sanction and affirm the principle established by the Compromise measures of 1850.

You will do me the favor, Gentlemen to communicate this hasty sketch of my views to the convention, and assure the Delegates of my zealous efforts, and hearty cooperation in the great work which brings them together.

I have the honor to be, with respect your obedient servant.

Stephen A. Douglas.

[Men to whom directed]
Messrs. J. H. Crane,
D. M. Johnson,
L. J. Eastin;
Committee, St. Joseph, Mo.