

10-1 The Compromise of 1850

The Missouri Compromise permitted Missouri to become a slave state, maintained political balance by admitting Maine as a free state, and banned slavery north of the 36°30' line of latitude in the old Louisiana Territory.

SOURCE: Congressional Globe, 31st. Congress, 1st. Sess., 1850, Appendix pp. 115-16, 452 -55

Clay Proposes Compromise (January 29, 1850)

It is desirable for the peace and harmony of the Union that all existing controversies between the states, arising out of the institution of slavery, be settled amicably upon a fair, equitable, and just basis. Therefore,

Resolved, That California ought to be admitted as a state without Congress placing any restriction on the exclusion or introduction of slavery within the boundaries of that state.

Resolved, That since slavery does not exist by law, and is not likely to be introduced into any of the territory acquired by the United States from the Republic of Mexico, Congress ought not to provide by law either for its introduction into or exclusion from any part of that territory. Appropriate territorial governments ought to be established by Congress in all of the territory, outside the boundaries of the proposed State of California, without the adoption of any restriction or condition on slavery.

Resolved, That it is unwise to abolish slavery in the District of Columbia, while slavery continues to exist in Maryland, without the consent of that State, without the consent of the people of the District, and without just payment to the owners of the slaves within the District.

But resolved, That it is wise to prohibit within the District the slave trade of the slaves brought in from states or places outside the District. They should not be sold within the District nor sent to markets outside the District of Columbia.

Resolved, That a more effective law ought to be made, according to the requirement of the Constitution, for the return of slaves who may have escaped into any state or territory in the Union.

Resolved, That Congress has no power to promote or obstruct the slave trade between slave-holding states, but whether slaves may be admitted or excluded from a state to which they are brought depends entirely on that state's particular laws.

Calhoun Replies (March 4, 1850)

A single section, governed by the will of a numerical majority, now controls the government and its entire powers. The North has absolute control over the government. It is clear, therefore, that on all questions between it and the South, where there are different interests, the interests of the South will be sacrificed to the North, no matter how oppressive the effects may be. The South possesses no political means by which it can resist.

Northern hostility towards the social organization of the South lay dormant a long time. The first organized movement against it began in 1835. Then, for the first time, antislavery societies were organized, presses established, lecturers sent forth to excite the people of the North, and incendiary publications were scattered over the whole South, through the mail. The South was thoroughly aroused. Meetings were held everywhere, and resolutions adopted, calling upon the North to arrest the threatened evil. But petitions poured into Congress from the North, calling upon it to abolish slavery in the District of Columbia, and to prohibit what they called the internal slave trade between the states, announcing at the same time that their ultimate object was to abolish slavery, not only in the District, but in the states and throughout the Union. With the increase of their influence, the abolitionists extended the sphere of their action. In a short time, they had sufficient influence to get the legislatures of most of the northern states to pass acts which in effect repealed the provision of the Constitution that provides for the return of fugitive slaves. This was followed by petitions and resolutions of legislatures of the northern states meetings, to exclude the southern states from all territories acquired or to be acquired, and to prevent the admission of any state into the Union which, by its constitution, does not prohibit slavery.

How can the Union be saved? There is but one way by which it can with any certainty; and that is, by a full and final settlement, on the principle of justice, of all the questions at issue between the two sections. The South asks for justice, simple justice, and less she ought not to take. She has no compromise to offer but the Constitution, and no concession or surrender to make. She has already surrendered so much that she has little left to surrender. Such a settlement would go to the root of the evil, and remove all cause of discontent, by satisfying the South, that she could remain honorably and safely in the Union. Nothing else can, with any certainty, finally and forever settle the question at issue, and agitation, and save the Union.

But can this be done? Yes, easily; not by the weaker party, for it can of itself do nothing—not even protect itself—but by the stronger. The North has only to do justice by conceding to the South an equal right in the acquired territory to do her duty by causing the constitutional provisions related to fugitive slaves to be faithfully fulfilled, to cease the agitation of the slave question, and to provide for an amendment to the Constitution. Such an amendment should restore to the South the power she possessed to protect herself, before the balance between the section was destroyed by this government.

But will the North agree to do this? It is for her to answer this question. But, I will say, she cannot refuse, if she has half the love of the Union which she professes to have, or without justly exposing herself to the charge that her love of power is far greater than her love of the Union. At all events, the responsibility of saving the Union rests on the North, and not the South.

Questions:

1. What is Clay's basis for compromise?
2. What would the extremists of the North and South tend to think of this compromise?
3. What is Calhoun's main objection to the compromise?