"The Bitterest of All Evils": Bondage, Bleeding Kansas, and the Battle for America's Heartland, 1854-1861

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"The face of this country [Kansas] is beautiful beyond all comparison. The prairies… stretching away miles… seem never lonely or wearisome, being gently undulating… and at the ascent of each new roll of land, the traveler finds himself in the midst of new loveliness."[1] In 1856, Sara Robinson, a prolific writer, Kansas frontierswoman, and outspoken abolitionist, painted an idyllic, picturesque image of the American West, one characterized by vast plains and fertile farmland. This depiction, however, was contrasted by the simultaneous eruption of local violence and turmoil that caused the beautifully verdant prairies of America's Heartland to run red with the blood, blood that would put the national creed of liberty and justice for all to the ultimate test.

For nineteenth-century Americans, the West represented more than just land; it represented promise, opportunity, and above all freedom. But as more and more settlers flooded into the lands west of the Missouri River, the question of exactly who would be able to seize upon this prosperity quickly came to the forefront of the nation's consciousness. The abolitionist movement was gaining significant momentum during this time, though to many white Americans true freedom was still steeped in the denial of those same privileges for enslaved black people. Starting in the mid-1850s, the American West became a proving ground that eventually culminated in a full-scale fight for the very soul of the nation. Indeed, the violence experienced in the Heartland, contemporarily and historically known as "Bleeding Kansas," struck an arrhythmic blow against this new but vital organ of the Union. This volatility set the stage for the first shots to be fired between pro- and antislavery forces, triggering something of a cardiac arrest for the country as it soon plummeted into four long years of bloody civil war. For as much as the West represented the future of the nation, the fighting at Bleeding Kansas centered that future around an essential question: would it, *could it*, endure half slave and half free?

Historians have long argued that the first shots of the Civil War were not fired in April of 1861 by secessionists at Fort Sumter, South Carolina, but rather by John Brown and his ragtag group of zealous abolitionists at Harpers Ferry, Virginia, in October of 1859. Moreover, some scholars extend the true ignition of the war back even further to argue that the violence at Bleeding Kansas, starting in 1856, serves as an even more accurate starting point to the conflict. When framed through the fundamental issue of slavery, Bleeding Kansas effectively lit the fuse that eventually and inevitably exploded into the Civil War. But more than simply serving as the launching pad that saw the moral and political debate surrounding slavery escalate into physical conflict, Bleeding Kansas represented the degradation of compromise that had guided Washington's geographically and politically motivated policymaking since the nation's inception. This incendiary episode in the Heartland opened the floodgates, inciting political violence, paving the road toward war, and making clear that legislative concessions alone could no longer hold back inflamed passions. The swelling enveloping the heart of the nation, the bruise of slavery, could only be, as John Brown prophesied, "purged away… with blood."[2]

The issue of slavery emerged as a major consideration as ideas of Manifest Destiny drove white Americans west to claim the continent as their own. Stemming from the spirit of compromise that had facilitated the nation's conception in the late eighteenth century, legislation was repeatedly passed by Congress in an attempt to find a middle ground between the competitive vigor of Northern and Southern interests that guided the country's expansion into these vast new territories with unbridled enthusiasm.

The Missouri Compromise of 1820 made it explicitly clear that the "peculiar institution" of slavery that had taken root in the South would not extend into the western territories. The 36º 30' parallel, Missouri's southern border, was established as a fixed boundary in an effort to

contain the institution to the states of the southeast. With the exception of Missouri, the expansion of slavery was now "forever prohibited" north of this line for the remainder of the land acquired through the Louisiana Purchase.[3] The Compromise admitted Missouri as a slave state and Maine as a free state. For thirty years this policy guided the expansion of slavery; for every slave state admitted to the Union, a free state would be added in an attempt to maintain an ideal ratio of slave and free states.[4] Over the three decades that followed, Arkansas and Michigan, and later Florida and Texas, and Iowa and Wisconsin, were all admitted as official states in accordance with this policy.

The Compromise of 1850, however, ignored this precedent when it admitted California as a free state but left the question of slavery in the adjacent territories of Utah and New Mexico to be determined through popular sovereignty, not geography.[5] In the nineteenth century, popular sovereignty was a new political mechanism that permitted the residents of new territories to determine for themselves the local legality of slavery, bypassing the top-down decision-making processes of Congress. By 1854, with the territories of Kansas and Nebraska preparing to organize for statehood, this political model persisted, effectively rendering the Missouri Compromise of 1820 null and void and placing the question of slavery solely in the hands of territorial residents.[6]

The architect of the Compromise of 1850, Illinois Senator Stephen A. Douglas – affectionately known as "Little Giant" for his short stature but loud demeanor and powerful presence – had boisterously advocated for the bill's implementation. Senator Douglas was neither directly for or against slavery.[7] His goals when drafting the Compromise of 1850 were strictly material, not ideological. He dreamed of a western landscape that would serve the commercial aspirations of Northern industrialists over the interests of Southern planters and the expansion of slavery.[8] Despite his Northern-leaning goals, Senator Douglas, having his eyes fixed on the White House, thought that such a compromise would appease enough Southern delegates to favor his future presidential ambitions.[9] He continued to embody this indifference toward the institution of slavery when he drafted the subsequent Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 along the same lines. He genuinely believed that a policy of popular sovereignty could settle a heated national debate through peaceful democratic process and cool the hostilities that eventually culminated into the outbreak of the Civil War.[10] However good-intentioned, it is clear that the Little Giant drastically underestimated the extreme measures settlers, pro- and antislavery alike, would take when it came to securing their rights to land and labor and protecting their political and ideological interests.

The race was on. By placing the power to determine the future of Kansas directly in the hands of territorial voters, Senator Douglas' 1854 bill opened the door for rival factions to flood into the territory, determined to tip the balance of the ballot box in their favor. Unlike the states of the far west, the Kansas Territory shared borders with long-established Southern slave states, Missouri in particular, which left it uniquely vulnerable to the political influence of its neighbors. Proslavery voters had a significant leg-up on the competition. Northern abolitionists, however, did not let their disadvantage of distance deter them. New York Senator William H. Seward declared, "I accept [your challenge] on behalf of the cause for freedom. We will engage in competition for the virgin soil of Kansas…." In response, Missouri Senator David Rice Atchison told his Southern colleagues, "We are playing for a mighty stake. The game must be played boldly…. If we win we can carry slavery to the Pacific coast; if we fail we lose Missouri, Arkansas, Texas, and all the territories."[11] Indeed, the potential prospects of winning the political influence and economic prosperity of the West was paramount for both Northerners and

Southerners, for whoever inherited this land would hold the power to determine the nation's future in the palm of their hands.

Neither side wasted time. The Kansas-Nebraska Act was passed in May of 1854 and by that summer both pro- and antislavery voters surged into the future state with the wild intensity of stampeding bison. While many Northerners needed assistance from organizations like the New England Emigrant Aid Company to complete the long journey westward, Missourian proslavers were, as later described by Abraham Lincoln, "within a stone's throw of the contested territory," and could easily cross the state line, vote, then return home.[12] This action constituted voter fraud. An important distinction to make is that most long-distance emigrants from the eastern coast, Northerners and Southerners, were migrating to Kansas to settle, to become Kansas residents. The "Border Ruffians," as they came to be known, composed largely of neighboring Missourians, were not settlers. They were residential, registered Missouri voters crossing into the Kansas Territory to vote illegally; they were active voters in two states at the same time, making their votes in Kansas illegitimate.

But not all Northerners were wholly altruistic either. Many of these emigrants supported the burgeoning Free Soil Party. Free Soilers, though against slavery, did not advocate for the national abolition of existing slavery on any moral basis but instead promoted a much more moderate platform that called for the prohibition of slavery's future expansion westward because of the threat the institution posed to the promise of free labor and the financial well-being of white migrants. They touted their slogan, "Free Soil, Free Speech, Free Labor, and Free Men."[13]

Despite a dramatic influx of Northern Free Soilers and abolitionists, the geographical and numerical advantages held by Missouri proslavers managed to win out. By the time fall elections had rolled around, Missourians – led by Senator Atchison – had illegally dominated the polls, casting quadruple the amount of ballots as there were legal Kansas voters.[14] Through widespread intimidation and voter fraud, the Border Ruffians successfully managed to win the election in a landslide and seat a proslavery legislature by March of the following year.[15]

Abolitionists and Free Soilers were outraged by this unjust exploitation of democracy. The writing of Sara Robinson had inspired many Northerners to flock west and take up the fight to keep Kansas, "where all nature sang a continual song of freedom," out of the clutches of slavery. After the seating of the proslavery government, she lamented that the "blackest of all villainies, the bitterest of all evils" was now allowed to infect the free soil of nation's Heartland, "where the clanking of chains was never [intended] to create a discord in the natural harmony."[16] Antislavers, abolitionists in particular, would not stand for this fraudulently appointed state government. They demanded a revote, and while the proslavery administration abided by this request, which saw antislavery votes improve only marginally, the legislators simply rejected the new results, doubled down on their fraudulently-gained authority, and continued to pass laws that granted further protections for slavery in the territory.[17]

Sara Robinson's husband, Charles, along with other local antislavery leaders such as James H. Lane and Amos Lawrence, defiantly organized the Free State Party in September of 1855 and by the following month had established their own antislavery government in Topeka with Charles Robinson serving as governor.[18] This newly formed counter-government continued to receive financial support from the Emigrant Aid Society, though New Englanders also began sending arms and ammunition. The carbine rifles shipped out west quickly and affectionately became known as "Beecher's Bibles," named after abolitionist Henry Ward Beecher, who compared the stubbornness of slavers to trying to "read the Bible to [a] buffalo."[19] It would appear that abolitionist forces, which had typically stressed nonviolent action up to this point,

were growing anxious and, if push came to shove, were preparing to give proslavers a lesson in Old Testament justice.[20]

The arrival of these rifles signals a major tonal shift brought on by the stressful environment proslavers were creating for antislavery Kansans. Because popular sovereignty is, at its core, a democratic process, it is not impossible to imagine that abolitionists would have begrudgingly accepted the results of a fair election that permitted slavery in the territory. What they could not abide, however, were the results of an election that they knew to be unfairly influenced by illegal voter fraud. Up until now they had tried to pursue justice through the proper legal channels, and though they lost again during the revote, nothing had really changed; Border Ruffians were still interfering, causing the validity of the new results to be just as distorted as those of the initial ballots cast in 1854. They were witnessing democratic compromise crumble before their eyes. The established political rules were being tarnished by people who refused to play the game fairly and honestly. To phrase it plainly, abolitionists were fed up, and now even those who swore by nonviolence were beginning to see that the law offered them little way out of their predicament.

Compounding the growing tension, two of their own were now dead. In late November 1855, Charles Dow – who had happened to be a Free Stater – had been murdered by Franklin Coleman, a proslaver, over a heated land dispute near the antislavery town of Lawrence. A few weeks later, in early December, Free Stater Thomas Barber was shot and killed by an armed proslavery patrol near Pottawatomie. While the killing of Charles Dow appeared to be personal, not political, it quickly became enveloped in the mounting political strife. Thomas Barber's killing, on the other hand, was politically motivated. While abolitionists were agitated and distraught by the casualties of what became colloquially known as the Wakarusa War, tensions were cooled when Free State leaders successfully negotiated a truce with the proslavery government.[21]

Despite the truce, the situation in Kansas continued to escalate dramatically, and that escalation reached a fever pitch the following summer, in May of 1856. Judge Samuel Lecompte, under his illegitimate, voter-fraud authority, deputized proslavery militiamen and authorized them to go into Topeka and arrest the leaders of the counter-government. On May 21 proslavers sacked the town of Lawrence, where many of the Free State officials lived. These officials were arrested, buildings wrecked, houses and business plundered, farms raided, livestock killed, and livelihoods destroyed. Ruffians also reduced two local abolitionist newspaper offices to rubble and burned down not only the town's hotel but the home of the Governor Charles Robinson.[22]

To make matters worse, tensions were escalating in Washington. Massachusetts Senator Charles Sumner, who had over the previous few days delivered a Congressional address in which he referred to the proslavers of the territory as "murderous robbers from Missouri, hirelings picked from the drunken spew and vomit of an uneasy civilization," had accused South Carolina Senator Andrew Butler of taking "the harlot of slavery" for his mistress.[23] Abolitionists in Kansas may have been consistently playing on the back foot, their dismay always acting reactively to Missourian advances, but the Beecher's Bibles are a clear indication that they were gearing up for the worst case scenario. Their frustration is palpable in their increasingly harsh rhetoric. Even the eloquent Sara Robinson described the Border Ruffians as, "whiskey-drinking, degraded foulmouthed marauders."[24] The language of these abolitionists became more agitated, more aggressive as the Heartland thumped harder and harder.

Strongly opinionated proslavers, however, were not about to take these harsh words in stride. On May 22, Congressman Preston Brooks, a cousin of Senator Butler's, approached

Senator Sumner in his office where he proceeded to beat the Bostonian over the head with his gold-handled cane some thirty-odd times. In his justification during the official investigation, Congressman Brooks called Senator Sumner's rhetoric "an atrocious libel on [the South]," one that he was determined "to punish him for…" It was recommended that Congressman Brooks be removed from office, though the final resolution, by a two-third majority, allowed him to remain.[25] It would take years for Sumner to physically and psychologically recover from his attack at the nation's capitol.[26] The growing inflammation in the Heartland was now bleeding over into the very seat of democracy.

Even though no Free Staters had actually been killed during the sacking of Lawrence, antislavers had already suffered the first two casualties of the conflict at Wakarusa.[27] By this point abolitionists had had enough. Proslavers had repeatedly engaged in mass voter fraud, killed Charles Dow and Thomas Barber, broken the established truce, all but leveled Lawrence, arrested counter-government officials, intimidated antislavery sympathizers in Leavenworth, and attacked a sitting U.S. Congressman. Push had indeed finally come to shove. Lives were being lost and they demanded retribution; the Old Testament justice they had been preparing to dispense was imminent. As revenge for these transgressions and to smite the fraudulent proslavery government of Kansas, John Brown, the militant abolitionist who embodied the zealous air of Biblical prophecy, took action. With the vitriol of a vengeful vanguard, he vowed to vindicate the cause of abolition as a holy crusade and, by God, wage eternal war on slavery. Brown would settle for nothing less than the total vanquishment of the peculiar institution from the face of the earth.

Resolved to "fight fire with fire," Brown and his sons, on the night of May 24, 1856, ransacked the homes of five wealthy slaveowners living along Pottawatomie Creek, including Colonel Lewis Washington, the great-grandnephew of President George Washington, before brutally executing them with passionate piety.[28] Though these slavers were not known to be active, proslavery guerillas or to have committed any particular crime other than, in Brown's eyes, the moral crime of owning slaves, Brown's actions were both venerated by abolitionists who were excited to see someone finally take action and vilified by proslavers who saw him as nothing more than a murdering madman driven by pure malice.[29]

Proslavers returned the favor in kind, however, burning Brown's cabin at Osawatomie to the ground. Upon seeing this reprisal, Brown vowed to his son, Jason, "God sees it. I have only one life to live – only one death to die, and I will die fighting for this cause. There will be no peace in this land until slavery is done for."[30]

And indeed, John Brown did pay with his life. Leaving Kansas for Virginia, the nervous center of slave country, Brown, three years later, would go on to lead twenty-one men, including five freed slaves and five of his own sons, in a desperate attempt to seize the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry. Federal troops easily overpowered the gospel gunfighters, however, and Brown himself was tried and hanged for treason later that year.[31]

Brown was a commanding figure; his imposing stature, his impassioned rhetoric, and his fanatical faith meant that neither side could ignore him. With the panache of an impassioned minister, he possessed a certain "moral magnetism," a charisma that allowed him to inspire peoples' deepest sense of altruism.[32] But despite his popular moniker "Captain," he was by no means a tactical expert. For as magnetic as he was many of his fellow abolitionists thought the plot to take Harpers Ferry was a fool's errand, and a premature one at that. Frederick Douglass warned Brown that he would be walking into a "perfect steel trap."[33] Without the help of prominent abolitionists to spread the word, to "hive the bees," the thousands of enslaved people

Brown was counting on arming at the arsenal never came.[34] Without reinforcements, U.S. marines quickly surrounded the building where Brown had taken hostages and, after a thirty-six-hour standoff, managed to take the rebels by storm. John Brown's slapdash plan to ignite a slave insurrection ended the only way it could have, in total disaster.

As for Kansas, the territory was finally admitted into the Union as a free state on January 29, 1861, though the region remained a war-torn border state until the end of the Civil War four years later. While federal troops largely managed to keep a lid on the excitement at Bleeding Kansas until battlelines were officially drawn in 1861, the antislavery casualties of the Wakarusa War, the sacking of Lawrence, and Brown's retaliatory massacre at Pottawatomie Creek only stoked the flames and encouraged further escalation. Kansans continued to wage guerilla warfare on their neighbors until the explosive power of the conflict could be contained no longer. In total, fifty-five people, pro- and antislaver alike, lost their lives at Bleeding Kansas.[35]

Ultimately, the violence at Bleeding Kansas epitomized, in microcosm, the irreconcilable divisions that pitted brother against brother as the nation tore itself in half. What had begun as political compromise quickly transformed Kansas into a literal battlefield of competing and conflicting convictions. The blood spilled on the prairie unequivocally testified to the collapse of not only political compromise but the compromise of the core tenets of nonviolence that guided much of the abolitionist movement, eerily foreshadowing the war to come. The fighting in Kansas demonstrated that compromise was no longer a viable solution, and instead of quelling the debate surrounding slavery it had been inadvertently deepening divisions and intensifying factionalism. The stakes were simply too great to allow ballots alone to determine destiny, and when democracy began to collapse under the weight of fraud and irreconcilable sectionalism the country slipped into cardiac arrest for four long years. The struggle for Kansas was not merely about the fate of one territory, but about the very character of the Union itself – it would not, it *could not*, endure half slave and half free, and the dissolution of compromise is a testament to the failing of that bifurcation. It could bend no more; America would have to break and be reforged by, as even the diplomatic Frederick Douglass phrased it, "the storm, the earthquake, and the whirlwind" that raged within its heart.[36]

Notes

1. Robinson, Sara T.L., *Kansas; Its Interior and Exterior Life*, 1856, Chapter 1, http://www.kancoll.org/books/robinson/r_chap01.htm.
2. Dennis Frye, "Purged Away With Blood: John Brown's War," American Battlefield Trust, November 21, 2023, https://www.battlefields.org/learn/articles/purged-away-blood.
3. *Missouri Compromise (1820),* National Archive and Records Administration, https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/missouri-compromise.
4. Etulain, Richard W, *Beyond the Missouri: The Story of the American West*, University of New Mexico Press, 2006, 213.
5. While they were not slave states in the traditional sense, the territories of Utah and New Mexico were established by the Compromise of 1850 with "no restrictions of slavery." Etulain, 213; Martin H. Quitt, "The Compromise of 1850," Bill of Rights Institute, https://billofrightsinstitute.org/essays/the-compromise-of-1850/.
6. Etulain, 214.
7. Milner II, Clyde A., *The Oxford History of the American West*, Oxford University Press, 1994. 172.
8. Delbanco, Andrew, *The War Before the War: Fugitive Slaves and the Struggle for America's Soul from the Revolution to the Civil War*, Penguin Press, 2018, 324.
9. William Loren Katz, *The Black West: A Documentary and Pictorial History of the African American Role in the Westward Expansion of the United States*, Fulcrum Publishing, 2019, 97.
10. Etulain, 213-214; Katz, 97.
11. White, Richard, *It's Your Misfortune and None of Mine: A New History of the American West*, University of Oklahoma Press, 1993, 160.
12. Delbanco, 326; White, 160.
13. A. James Fuller, "The Free Soil Party," Bill of Rights Institute, https://billofrightsinstitute.org/essays/the-free-soil-party/.
14. White, 161; Katz, 98.
15. Napier, Rita G, "The Hidden History of Bleeding Kansas," *Kansas History*, 2004, 44–61, https://research-ebsco-com.fortlewis.idm.oclc.org/linkprocessor/plink?id=8dba5ca1-fae8-34cc-a05d-4a3f3c39a0bb.
16. Robinson, Chapter 1.
17. Delbanco, 326.
18. While Free Soilers belonged to a national political party that opposed the expansion of slavery on the basis of free labor for white workers, the Free State Party was merely a local coalition dedicated to ensuring that Kansas joined the Union as an antislavery state. Napier, "Hidden History of Bleeding Kansas", 49; White, 161.
19. Delbanco, 326-327.
20. Napier, Rita G, "Origin Stories and Bleeding Kansas," *Kansas History*, 2011, 28–39, https://research-ebsco-com.fortlewis.idm.oclc.org/linkprocessor/plink?id=20b1768e-5c51-3f7d-a329-49252cb35546.
21. Tony R. Mullis, "Wakarusa War," *Civil War on the Border*, Kansas City Public Library, https://civilwaronthewesternborder.org/encyclopedia/wakarusa-war.
22. White, 162-163.
23. Delbanco, 328.

24. Napier, “Origin Stories,” 30.
25. “Assault of Senator Charles Sumner,” History, Art & Archives, United States House of Representatives, https://history.house.gov/HouseRecord/Detail/15032436187.
26. White, 162; Delbanco, 329-330.
27. Mullis, "Wakarusa War.”
28. White, 162.
29. Berg, Manford, *Popular Justice: A History of Lynching in America*, Rowman and Littlefield Publishing, 2011, 43.
30. Katz, 98.
31. Katz, 99.
32. Tony Horwitz, Interviewed by Scott Simon, “The Harpers Ferry ‘Rising’ That Hastened Civil War,” National Public Radio, October 2, 2011, https://www.npr.org/transcripts/141564113.
33. Frederick Douglass, *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass, Written by Himself*, De Wolfe & Fiske Co., 1892, 389, https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/dougl92/dougl92.html.
34. Ibid, 390.
35. “Bleeding Kansas: 1853 - 1861,” Public Broadcasting Service, https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4p2952.html.
36. Frederick Douglass, “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?” 1852, https://www.americanyawp.com/reader/democracy-in-america/frederick-douglass-what-to-the-slave-is-the-fourth-of-july-1852/.

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