An American Empire--Would it be for Liberty! Or, for Slavery?

Introduction & Thesis:

The Civil War—fought in the South; but Started in the West!

As both slavery and cotton profits matured in the 1840s; Americans Began two wearisome journeys—one to ignore the growing debate over slavery whenever possible; and a second journey WEST.

It is in the west that Americans and their elected officials finally were forced to confront the issue of slavery. These are some of the compelling events:

Annexation of Texas, 1845
War with Mexico, 1846-1848
Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, 1848
Gold discovered in California, 1848
John C. Calhoun drafts “Address to Southern Delegates”, 1849
California petitions for statehood as a free state, 1850
And the bitter debate over the compromise of 1850 begins.
The Westerly Impulse: Manifest Destiny

In 1803 Jefferson envisioned an Empire of Liberty in the Louisiana Purchase. The vision spelled death for red Americans, and became a crisis over black Americans. Between 1820-1850, acquisitions of new states had maintained a “balance” of free and slave states—at least in the U. S. Senate.

This meant Americans could ignore the slave question—until we moved west. Americans became “obsessed” with the west. Horace Greeley, editor of the New York Tribune & New Yorker, said, “If any young man is about to commence the world, we say to him, publicly and privately, Go to the West” 1838...

Oregon & California Trails meant migration
Hispanic settlement in the southwest
Mormon expedition to Utah, 1847
Texas revolution in 1836
Acquisition of Texas in 1845 BYPASSED the territorial stage—15th slave state
Oregon Compromise accepted by President Polk, 1846

The Mexican War—the Slave debate intensifies as we rehearse for war.

In 1845, President Polk offered $30 million to Mexico for California and New Mexico. To support his options Polk ordered troops to the Mexican border, ordered naval forces into the Gulf of Mexico, and instructed diplomats in Monterrey to agitate for annexation. As a result a new Mexican government came to power that was strongly anti-American. In January 1846 Polk ordered General Zachary Taylor & 4,000 troops to the Rio Grande. The provocation worked as Mexican troops crossed the river in April to attack U. S. forces. Polk asked for and got a declaration of war May 13, 1846. Southerners strongly supported the war since Texas allowed slaves and they saw new territorial potential for slavery. Northern Whigs were against the war at first, up got caught up in patriotic pressure mostly voting for war.

Mexican troops outnumbered Americans, but U. S. forces, U. S. leadership, and U. S. technology won nearly every battle. The war had three phases—taking control of the Rio Grande border (in which Taylor became a hero); taking control of the interior of Texas; and taking California. A final blow came as Vera Cruz was taken by American forces.

Active U. S. leaders included Lee, Grant, Beauregard, McClellan, Bragg, Jackson, Meade, and others.
The Anti-War Sentiment & the Wilmot Proviso

The South and West supported the war, but Northern Americans voiced significant opposition to the war. Had it not been for the constant string of victories, more anti-war sentiment might have developed. Anti-slave ideals believed that the nation could not take over more territory before reforming its own lands—i.e., eliminating slavery. While many in New England spoke out against slavery, critic, essayist, and poet James Russell Lowell wrote lyrically what many people thought—

*They jest want this Californy*
*So’s to lug new slave-states in*
*To abuse ye an’ to scorn ye,*
*And to plunder ye like sin.*


Polk denied the war would expand slavery, but Southern newspapers talked about how well suited California was to slavery. Then David Wilmot of Pennsylvania introduced his “Proviso”—stating that slavery could “never” take place in any territory won from Mexico. Debates defeated the specific amendment—but not the idea. Whigs & Democrats split on the issue & expansion became synonymous with the question of slavery. The Wilmot Proviso set the stage for the slave debate and the call to war from 1846 to 1861!

The war with Mexico set the stage for waging war between the states:

The American Navy successfully blockaded the Gulf waters from the Yucatan to Matamoros, and Pacific waters from Mazatlan to Manzanillo—a lesson for the Union blockade during Civil War.

Extensive overland interior campaigns by Kearny & Fremont provided food for thought for Grant’s moves in western campaigns 16 years later.

Water-borne attacks from Scott & Sloat provided experience that would effective marine force use years later.

Artillery bombardment at Vera Cruz (thanks to Robert E. Lee) proved the worth of big guns.

The major drives to Buena Vista (by Taylor) and Mexico City/Chapultepec (by Scott) proved interior drives to capture capital cities viable.

The dangerous & successful charge at Chapultepec tested James Longstreet, George Pickett, Joseph Johnston, Thomas J. Jackson, and others.

The War with Mexico was the first to use the telegraph and to embed live news Reporters; another prelude to war reporting of the coming Civil War. Tagging along with the troops were many artists who painted and drew the war as Americans wanted to see it.

At top left is a printed telegraph message sent to the “Union” penny news in New Orleans noting the fall of Mexico city. Top right is a morbid American Cartoon ridiculing Mexican wounded—who often faced amputation for any Wound. This cartoonist makes fun of three prisoners losing five legs! Bottom left is a poster typical of this era (and the Civil War) showing General Zachary Taylor as the hero of “peace”, “justice”, and “union”.

Telegraph to Union. 1847. Online image. May 2010.  
<http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/rbpebib>  
<http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/cph.3a12358 >  
<http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/ppmsca.07635 >
The Western movement, manifest destiny, and the **Mexican War** also re-shaped existing political parties—another prelude to the elections of 1860. Americans, giddy with victory, expected the war to settle slave issues, and when that did not happen—they expected the national **Election of 1848** to do so!

**Liberty Party** endorsed the Wilmot Proviso—no expansion of slavery into new territories.

**Southern Democrats** endorsed John C. Calhoun’s notion that slave owners could take their horses into new territories; so they could also take their slaves.

The **national Democrats** endorsed Polk’s idea of extending the old Missouri Compromise line to California—as did candidate James Buchanan.

Other national democrats began to endorse the idea of **Popular Sovereignty** where settlers in a territory could decide for themselves the issue of slavery—Lewis Cass of Michigan endorsed the concept and when the Democrats nominated him popular sovereignty became linked to the Democrats.

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As the major parties met in nominating conventions—nothing was clear.

The Democrats refused to adopt a slavery platform of any kind, and members split (north and south), leaving Cass with less support.

The Whigs adopted NO platform at all. Then, after opposing the War with Mexico, they nominated the War’s hero-Zachary Taylor (a slave holder) for President.

The Free-Soil Party labeled slavery a “relic of barbarism”, and nominated Martin Van Buren.

All four groups tried but failed to avoid the issue of slavery. Taylor won in the North due to Whig traditions, and won some support in the South because he was a southerner and a slave holder.

The Free-Soilers won no electoral votes, but did win 14% of the popular vote and elected nine Congressmen and two Senators. The Liberty Party’s Gerrit Smith received less than 3,000 votes.
Immediately after the elections of 1848, the nation faced more sectional crises. First, Southern states witnessed more and more slave runaways—and state-based fugitive slave laws (giving states the right to search for and return escaped slaves) were declared unconstitutional in *Prigg v. Pennsylvania, 1842*. Southern politicians (ignoring their states-rights views) demanded a strong national fugitive slave law; thus igniting more debate.

Second, the western territories demanded attention—fast! It took less than five months for 80,000 Americans to rush into the hills of California searching for gold—the territory was virtually lawless, yet populated overnight. No jails, no mail service, and no courts all stood in the way of profits. New Mexico territory already had 60,000 Mexican-American citizens. And the huge Mormon population of Utah also needed territorial & federal services.

As a lame duck president, Polk wanted to extend the Missouri Compromise line—but the Whigs ignored him, reaffirmed the Wilmot Proviso, and passed legislation to admit California as a free state!!!

In June 1850 Calhoun and others called for a convention to “resist...northern aggression.”
Henry Clay was one of the most effective and well-known politicians in Washington DC. a three time presidential contender...with 30 years of service..he was a nationalistic middle state man from Kentucky. He had been the force behind the Compromises of 1820 and 1833. On January 29, 1850 he presented his original proposals—six boldly set forth in pairs with one plank for the North and one for the South, plus two others.

**Pair One**—California admitted free (N) & Mexican sessions admitted without restrictions (S).

**Pair Two**—Settle the Texas border dispute in favor of giving land to New Mexico (N) & compensate Texas for it’s loss {many Southerner’s held bonds from Texas} (S).

**Pair Three**—Abolish the Slave Trade inside Washington DC (N) & guarantee the continued existence of slavery (S).

Federal government could not regulate international slave trade.

Federal law would provide a **strong fugitive slave law**.

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Passage of the Compromise of 1850 came after three of the most interesting speeches ever given—John C. Calhoun, Daniel Webster, and William Seward shaped the argument over nine months.

Calhoun’s speech March 4, 1850 was read by a friend since Calhoun was near death and could only look on—he had brashly made three demands:

...Northerners must return escaped slaves in good faith
...Northerners must allow expansion of slavery in the West
...and Northerners must adopt a constitutional amendment to “restore ... to the South...the power to protect herself....” This amounted to giving the Southern states a veto over any legislation involving slavery!!!

Calhoun concluded that if the above conditions were not met... “let the States we both represent agree to separate and part in peace”
On March 7 Daniel Webster spoke in response to Calhoun—but also as an appeal to Northerners to reach compromise.

Webster’s drive to reach almost any type of compromise turned some of this supporters away. His eloquence, however, was undeniable. He claimed to speak not as a Massachusetts man or Northern man—but as an American. He called romantically for the restoration of “harmonious harmony” whatever that was? Shocking some Northerners, he called for enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law. And in the end of the speech he raised his voice to an emotional pitch against “peaceable secession” asking practical questions about “what will become of the Army”, “what will become of the public lands”? Webster’s emotional conclusion is below:

To break up this great government! to dismember this glorious country! to astonish Europe with an act of folly such as Europe for two centures [sic] has never beheld in any government or any people! No, Sir! no, Sir! There will be no secession!
Finally on March 11 William Seward gave his famous “higher law” speech supporting anti-slavery positions. Seward was very different for two reasons. First, he was twenty years younger (49) than Calhoun & Webster, representing a younger generation of men form the north elected to national office. He was a former governor and married an ardent abolitionist. But it was his speech that was radically different—he boldly said no compromise was possible. He moved the argument from legal and constitutional grounds to morality. He spoke of slavery as wrong; but emotionally spoke of any compromise as “radically wrong and essentially vicious”.

He concludes,

*there will be no secession, no disunion...*
In the summer and fall of 1850 several events finally came together to allow passage of the compromise.

As the emotional speeches created headlines, Clay worked in committee to pass his bills. But he had two massive roadblocks.

President Taylor wanted California admission immediately, with no deals for the South. And Clay insisted on keeping his eight bills all together in one big bill. In June Clay left the Capitol discouraged and asked the young Senator from Illinois, Stephen A. Douglas, to gain the compromise.

Douglas began to separate the bills and worked to find coalitions to support each one in turn. As he was making progress, Taylor died on July 9, and Millard Fillmore, the new President, supported compromise.

Joining the behind the scenes work on the bills was a group of lobbyists representing Texas bond holders who helped give land Texas claimed to the new territory of New Mexico in exchange for $10 million.

A 1855 engraving Depicting the Compromise debates

http://www.loc.gov/rr/program/bib/ourdocs/Compromise1850.html
Here are terms of the bills passed & supporters:

California admitted as a free state—support from northerners

New Mexico & Utah Territories organized without restriction to slavery—support from southerners [known as popular sovereignty]

Settlement of the Texas border dispute. New Mexico getting land—supported by northerners; and Texas being compensated—supported by southerners.

Abolition of slave trade in Washington DC—supported by northerners; but the guarantee of the right to enforce slavery there—supported by southerners.

Passage of a new fugitive slave law—supported by southerners.

President Fillmore claimed it was a “final settlement”??

Would Americans be a nation of slave catchers? The return of fugitive slaves was guaranteed in the U. S. Constitution—but early efforts were unsuccessful in the eyes of the South. This 1850 law was different from earlier laws. It made slave catching a federal issue instead of state responsibility. It paid deputies to catch and return escaped slaves. And it reinforced the notion that no African caught could defend himself or herself. Approximately 1,000 slaves successfully escaped to the north each year; but Southerners insisted on enforcement.

The law created a federal commissioner who issued arrest warrants when any slave-state issued a claim on a person. Fugitives, once caught had no rights. The commissioner received a fee of $10 if the fugitive was termed guilty; and only $5 if the fugitive was freed. Federal marshals could deputize anyone to be a slave-catcher.

During the first 18 months 80-90 fugitives were caught, and only 5 released. The public outcry on both sides became emotional. In April 1851, President Fillmore sent 250 soldiers to help detain a Boston fugitive fearing violence. Northern states passed “personal liberty laws” that eventually made the slave-catching impractical. In 1861, seceding Southern States would cite the failure of the government to enforce the Fugitive Slave Law as motivation to secede.

This detailed drawing shows four African Americans tending a cornfield ambushed by six armed slave-catchers. The bottom of the illustration features Biblical quotations. Such sympathetic art work was widely disseminated in the North. The public wrath increased for years as new cases of violence were reported. In Christina, PA a gunfight killed two slave-catchers. Wisconsin even declared the Fugitive Slave Law unconstitutional. The most celebrated case focused on Anthony Burns, a fugitive from Virginia in Boston. When his supporters attacked a federal court house—President Franklin Pierce sent a U. S. revenue cutter to force Burns back to Virginia.
Questions to ponder:
Which side, slave or free, won the most concessions? Why?
How did existing and planned railroads impact the compromise?
Plans for Illinois Central Railroad
Where would the first test of Popular Sovereignty begin?

Conclusions. Western expansion forced the U. S. to openly debate slavery for the first time.

The urge for Manifest Destiny and the War with Mexico both became a prelude to the Civil War.

The strong fear of slave expansion produced the Wilmot Proviso which shaped the debate over slavery for 15 years.

The election of 1848 focused on slavery with the Free Soilers getting 14% of popular vote.

Sectional differences deepened in 1849-1850 as the population boom in California demanded action.

Clay submitted one large bill with eight parts; but Douglas separated the bills to secure passage.

The speeches by Calhoun, Webster, and Seward outline the arguments for and against slavery.

As the bills are passed, the Fugitive Slave Law becomes the most controversial.