The Doughfaces

Franklin Pierce was a "doughface". Although born in the north, he strongly sympathized with southern ideas and goals. He was usually seen as a kind and good man, but as an utterly ineffective leader. It was he who would reap the problems contained in the Compromise of 1850, and it was he who would compound them a thousand fold when he made the greatest mistake of the Republic's early life.

The Compromise had certainly kept the peace, but it had also raised the stakes. The long-standing Missouri compromise had been assumed to have resolved the question of whether new states would be free or slave. By postponing the admittance of New Mexico as a state to prevent it from entering the Union as free and by reinforcing fugitive slave laws, the Compromise had reopened a debate that was sure to lead to dramatic conflict. The first way this would manifest was in a new proposal to buy or seize Cuba from Spain, which was assumed by the North to be a way to strengthen the slave states, and by the south as a legitimate expression of Manifest Destiny.

Even after Cuba was off the table, the debate continued to rage. The release of the novel Uncle Tom's Cabin in 1852 had raised abolitionist awareness and anti-slavery sentiment in the North. The problem was mainly that the slave-holding interests were aware of a lessening of power. They worried that if states continued to join the Union as Free states, then slavery was doomed, since it would probably be outlawed once enough free-state senators and representatives were in Congress. To combat this, they believed two things were necessary: somehow, slave states needed to enter the Union, and the rights of slave-owners needed to be vigorously maintained. 1854 would give them several opportunities on both these fronts.

Outrage would flare in the north when Pierce applied the words of the Fugitive Slave Act to their full measure in early 1854. An escaped slave by the name of Anthony Burns was discovered and arrested while at a market in Boston. An outraged crowd of sympathizing citizens and principled abolitionists move to stop the arrest and trial, but were initially forced back. President Pierce chose to use this as an opportunity to show his allegiance with the south by ordering Federal Troops to Boston to enforce Burns' return. Despite the presence of troops lining the streets and protecting the courthouse, a mob of northerners burst into the court in an attempt to free Burns, killing a Deputy Federal Marshal in the process. Despite all this, Burns was returned to his owner as the law mandated, although he would be freed later and live the rest of his short life in the north.

The worse mistake would be the Kansas-Nebraska Act. Southern slave interests were trying to overturn the original Missouri Compromise for an obvious and rational reason: slaves are needed for agriculture, and not for much else. When the original Missouri compromise guaranteeing slave states south of a dividing line was made, no one really realized how much of the southwest was desert or just generally agriculturally poor lands. As it stood, the south had gained a vast stretch of land where slaves were unlikely to ever be found, for simply reasons of ecology. If the south was to maintain the balance of slave states in order to prevent slavery from being outlawed in Congress, then they needed for slavery to move north into the Great Plains. It was too bad that the Missouri Compromise specifically prohibited such an action.

The solution was the Kansas-Nebraska Act. This declared that the new territories of Kansas and Nebraska would be determined to be slave or free based on a vote of the citizens. Clearly, slavers hoped that enough slave-owners or sympathizers would move to the new territories to swing the vote in their favor. At the same time, this effectively destroyed the Missouri Compromise and the Compromise of 1850. The result was Bleeding Kansas. Pro and anti-slave supporters flocked to Kansas before the vote in order to drive out their opponents through terrorism and intimidation. Among these zealots was John brown, a fierce abolitionist who would have a major role in the start of the Civil War.

At the end of the violence, the vote showed Kansas to be a slave state. Despite evidence that this was a result of pro-slave citizens of Missouri (a slave state) illegally crossing the border to vote, Pierce chose to recognize the pro-slave government of Kansas as legitimate. When abolitionists created an alternative state government, Pierce declared them to be in a state of rebellion, and sent troops to prevent their meeting.

All this would in the end come to nothing more than a practice run for the Civil War. At the least, it had proven that each side was more than happy to use violence to gain its ends. Ultimately, the south did gain another group of representatives willing to vote for Slave interests...but this victory would be short lived. The next election in 1856 would witness the removal of Pierce, and the election of the last in a long series of incompetents. In the end, he had not brought peace, but engineered a war.

Unusually, Franklin Pierce was not defeated in the next election. Instead, he was removed by his own party. During the Democratic nomination process, James Buchanan beat out Pierce, and became the Democratic nominee. This was mostly a consequence of Buchanan's good reputation, and due to the fact that Buchanan had recently been out of the country, which meant he had missed the anger surrounding the Kansas-Nebraska Act. He was effectively uncontaminated by the controversy.

In the campaign that followed, Buchanan was confronted by a new creature on the political scene: a Republican. The republicans were a regional party, belonging to the north, Midwest, and some border states. The entire goal of the republicans was to provide support for abolition (which they saw as bad for the country overall) and to limit the influence of the southern democrats, which they saw as disproportionate. The 3/5 compromise continued to give the south considerable control in Congress, even though the north was more populous. Something had to change.

The republicans had formed their party in 1854, and nominated the war hero John C. Fremont to run against Buchanan. While not victorious in the end, the elections of 1856 and 1858 saw the Republicans rise to dominance in the North. Still, they lost the battle for the White House, and the Democrats retained control of the Presidency.

To be fair to (arguably) our worst President ever, Buchanan did sort of step into a hornet's nest. The country was at its own throat, arguing about the future of slavery and whether the federal government could even regulate slavery in territories that were not yet states. Buchanan was happy to avoid the issue, and in fact was lucky enough that he wouldn't need to: the Supreme Court was about to hear a case dealing with slavery in the Territories. Dred Scott was coming to Washington.

The Dred Scott case was a critical one, and it is difficult to imagine the frenzy of interest that surrounded it. Dred Scott was a slave that had traveled with his master throughout several moves, including locations in Wisconsin and Illinois. He sued for his freedom, claiming that in the course of his travels, his owners had freed him by bringing him to Free states. An initial jury ruled in his favor in Missouri, but the case was appealed. Despite decades of earlier cases ruling that once a slave was moved to a free state, they were always free, the higher courts chose a different course. By 1857, the case had reached the Supreme Court.

The ruling in 1857 was shocking in its breadth. Summarily, the court ruled that African Americans *could not be citizens of the United States under the Constitution.* Further, it was ruled that the federal government could not regulate slavery in the territories because slaves were property, and owners were protected from unreasonable search and seizure by the 5th amendment. This basically nullified the Missouri compromise, and legalized the idea of popular sovereignty by vote as a means to regulate slavery in states. It even at a stroke turned free African Americans across the country from citizens to mere residents. At this point, small crisis built upon small crisis until the country felt on the verge of disintegration...but Buchanan's greatest failing was yet to come.

The country was in the throes of the election of 1860 when Buchanan's flaws became truly manifest. A small-time former congressional representative and country lawyer by the name of Abraham Lincoln had been nominated as the compromise candidate at the Republican Convention held in Chicago Illinois. Lincoln was running a four way race. In a divided country, there were several candidates who represented the options available. Lincoln stood for ending the expansion of slavery as the Republican Candidate. Meanwhile the Democrats fragmented. The southern branch of the party nominated Vice-President Stephen Breckenridge as their presidential candidate. The northern branch chose to nominate the legislative architect of the Compromise of 1850 and the Kansas-Nebraska Act, Stephen Douglas. Yet another group broke off and nominated a man who declared himself neutral on slavery but for preserving the Union: John Bell.

The net effect of all these democratic candidates was to thoroughly split the electoral vote in the south. Lincoln won the North as a solid bloc, and with it, the presidency. This was a clear problem, because the Southern States were finally prepared to do exactly what they had always threatened: secede from the Union to create their own republic. Buchanan had been warned of this possibility by the commanding General of the Army. If the south were to succeed, then it would be necessary to take steps to protect federal property contained in those states such as armories and forts. Buchanan stepped forward and did precisely nothing other than talk. In a speech to Congress, he announced that secession was illegal, but that the federal government could not and would not use force to prevent it. This pleased neither faction, and by late December, southern states beginning with South Carolina voted to secede. As they did so, Senators, Representatives and members of the Cabinet resigned to join their home states. Shortly, these states began seizing federal property. Throughout, Buchanan vacillated, accomplishing nothing. Far too late, he finally dismissed southern sympathizers from his cabinet and began plans to use force to hold the Union together. At this point in his lame duck months, no one would listen to him. At the most critical time, he had talked when he should have acted. The task of preserving the Union would fall to his successor, the 16th President: Abe Lincoln.

1. Explain three factors that contributed to tensions about slavery during Franklin Pierce's presidency, and how.

2. Describe the events causing Bleeding Kansas, and explain how it contributed to the Civil War.

3. Explain the significance of the Dred Scott trial.

4. Describe the important facts surrounding the 1860 election.

5. Explain Buchanan's final acts as President, and describe why in your opinion they were insufficient.