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REPUBLICANS



A HISTORY
OF THE
GRAND OLD PARTY



LEWIS L. GOULD

The Republicans

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The Republicans

Introduction

A VISITOR TO THE WEBSITE of the modern Republican Party finds there a restatement of familiar themes. The Republicans are “the party of freedom, the party of prosperity, and the party of vision.” The Democrats, on the other hand, represent a “fundamentally different” manner of governance. The historical record shows that through more than a century and a half of its existence, the Republican Party has viewed the world of American politics as an arena in which it is entitled to govern against a partisan rival that has always been out of the national mainstream. Thus, for the Republican Party, the issue of legitimacy is not some arcane political science term. Republicans have always believed that they have an inalienable right to hold power because of their record and their values. They see themselves holding firm against the Other: Democrats—potentially if not actually disloyal, influenced by non-American ideas, and never to be trusted. The unfolding of Republican history has been the working out in practice of these fundamental beliefs.

This perspective on American politics arose in the first decade of the existence of the Republican Party. Established to block the spread of slavery and to in time roll back bondage, the party under the leadership of Abraham Lincoln found itself in 1861 in a struggle to preserve the Union against a proslavery, Confederate rebellion. Many Democrats supported the war effort, but others did not. Some in the hierarchy of the Democratic Party wanted a negotiated peace, accepted the disruption of the Union, and would have tolerated the continued presence of slavery in the South. Imagining the consequences of these policies, Republicans concluded that the Democrats had not just flirted with treason: they had consorted with the enemy. Their hearts were prone to treason.

The trauma of the war and the huge casualty lists seared into the minds of the Republicans at all levels that the Democrats lacked true allegiance to the United States. These passions burned bright for a decade or so. As the nation debated industrialism, grew accustomed to racial segregation in the South, and left the Civil War behind, the Republicans regarded the Democrats with bemused contempt as ineffectual representatives of a failed ideology. Leaders might argue about the protective tariff (a key Republican doctrine) or the

gold standard, but these questions could be worked out without putting the assumptions of democracy under assault. For the most part they were resolved in a normal fashion. The two parties differed over government regulation of the economy, but that debate did not become charged with allegations of disloyalty to the nation and its values.

The onset of another war in 1914, however, introduced what would be the second of three tests of Republican toleration of the existence of the Democrats. As Bolshevism and other radical ideologies arose in Europe and Asia, Republicans saw Democratic programs under Woodrow Wilson as offshoots of these noxious systems. In 1920, addressing the Republican convention, Henry Cabot Lodge said: "Mr. Wilson stands for a theory of administration and government which is not American."¹

The questioning of Democratic loyalty returned and became more intense during the New Deal of Franklin D. Roosevelt. Voices on the right asserted that the entire administration of FDR was controlled by the Kremlin. The existence of Soviet espionage rings in the United States validated for Republicans the presumption of a treasonous mindset among Democrats at all levels. Republicans became convinced, as a recent book affirms, that FDR and his party had given away Eastern Europe to Joseph Stalin and his tyranny.²

In the decades after World War II, Republicans also sought ways to break up the Democratic electoral coalition of southern whites and northern minorities. As Harry Truman and John F. Kennedy pursued, with varying degrees of enthusiasm, civil rights legislation and social change, Republicans sensed a bounty of white votes in the states of the old Confederacy. Under Dwight D. Eisenhower and then Richard Nixon, Republicans reaped a rich harvest of white support, and the party dominated the presidency in the 1970s and 1980s. In the minds of Republicans, race became the third test the Democrats failed, as they became outspoken and illegitimate enemies of white ascendancy.

The accession of former southern Democrats into the Republican Party produced changes in the way the Grand Old Party thought and operated. Under leaders like William Jennings Bryan, the Democrats had emphasized the virtues of emotion over reason, conversion over persuasion, religion over science. To win the allegiance of southerners, the Republicans became more in tune with these attitudes. Where once between 1865 and 1940 the Republicans had been the organization of intellectuals and the well educated (alongside the rank and file, of course), after 1970 a greater premium went to spontaneity, authenticity, and intuition. If the choice was between the doctrine of evolution or the creed of creationism, Republican politicians soon

learned where they had the most safety among their voters. Science was not a process that affirmed physical truths about the universe. It was an ideology that was no better and likely worse than the doctrines that seemed so identified with common sense and personal values.

These developments occurred within a nation still struggling with the most explosive human predicament—the question of race. Republicans took justified pride in their record in the nineteenth century of freeing the slaves and enacting the Reconstruction amendments to the Constitution. Democrats had taken an unduly long time to discard their racist past. In the 1960s and 1970s, however, the parties passed each other in opposite directions. The party of Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson became as identified with the aspirations of African Americans as previous members of their party had been with keeping alive segregation and discrimination. Republicans, for their part, found reasons to champion the cause of white southerners and like-minded northerners in the service of victory at the polls and the opportunity to hold power.

In this first edition of this study, the narrative ended with some forebodings of difficulties to come in the wake of the disputed election of 2000. The tragic consequences of the terrorist attacks on 9/11 destabilized American politics and gave the Republicans a chance to show how they would handle national power once again. By 2008, with war in Iraq and a near collapse of a wounded economy, the country was ready for a change. When the change proved to be a first-term Illinois senator who was an African American with a foreign-sounding name, the Republicans found their worst fears confirmed about the future of the nation and the lack of true legitimacy. Some saw Barack Obama as a Socialist usurper. Others concluded that he was not even a citizen but rather a kind of Manchurian candidate out to destroy everything good in America.

Republicans decided that in the profound national crisis brought on by the election of Obama the rules of American political life no longer applied. The party had long believed that the positive workings of such customs were theirs by right and a matter of grace for the Democrats. But in 2008–2009, with the very future of American democracy under assault, the rulebook was tossed aside. Any means—pervasive filibusters in the Senate to block nominations, state legislation to cut back or bar minorities from the polls, changes in constitutional law to enhance the power of corporate money—should be followed to the desired end of a Republican president and a Congress with GOP majorities in both houses. That strategy went into effect once President Obama was in office. Its end is not yet in sight.

American politics can be dramatic, but it is not a melodrama with heroes and villains. Throughout their history, Republicans have pursued policies that seemed plausible and appropriate at the time they were adopted and implemented. It was right to end slavery and defend the Union. Apprehensions about the menace of Communism and internal espionage reflected real dangers from a nation that meant the United States no good. As for race, it is arrogant to sit in judgment of fellow citizens who encountered a volatile set of circumstances with imperfect knowledge, immediate fears, and human frailties. Yet the shift from the aspirations of Lincoln to the chauvinism of electoral restrictions and the denial of minority opportunities is a transition to ponder with sadness.

It is not the task of the historian to propose future answers to historical dilemmas. After studying the Republicans for half a century and writing books about three of their presidents, the subject remains fascinating. There is also a tragic sense that the implanting of doubts about Democratic legitimacy during the Civil War introduced a fault line into national politics that has yet to be remedied. Like a hidden crack in a piece of machinery, this core Republican conviction became so ingrained that party members did not perceive its existence. The press, the public, even the Democrats themselves operated under the assumption that a natural ability to govern was inherent in the DNA of the Grand Old Party. For the most part these elements of society still believe that to be the case. They have failed to notice that one major party has decided that democratic procedures should no longer constrain its behavior. Thus a major breakdown in how American politics works has gone unremarked. The purpose of this book is to address how the history of a major political party led to this situation. If the narrative about the Republicans provokes discussion and (surely) dissent, it will have achieved its goal.

The Party of Lincoln, 1854–1865

CHICAGO HAD NEVER SEEN anything like it. Ten thousand Republicans had crammed themselves into a pine-board frame building called the Wigwam to nominate a candidate for president in mid-May 1860. After two days of deliberation about the platform, the enthusiastic delegates turned to the key business of nominations on Friday, May 18. Everyone knew who the front runners were: William H. Seward of New York and Abraham Lincoln of Illinois. Two or three dark horses were also in the mix. The Illinois crowd clamored for Lincoln; some timely printing of bogus ticket helped inflate the crowd with supporters of “Honest Abe.” After Lincoln’s name was placed in nomination, the arena exploded with noise. “No language can describe it,” said one observer. “A thousand steam whistles, ten acres of hotel gongs, a tribe of Comanches, headed by a choice vanguard from pandemonium, might have mingled in the scene unnoticed.”¹

In the balloting that followed, Seward led Lincoln on the first tally, but neither had the 233 votes needed for nomination. The second ballot produced a big gain for Lincoln. Seward’s lead was a scant three votes. When it became evident on the third ballot that Seward could not win, Lincoln moved toward a majority as the other contenders fell away. When Lincoln reached 231½ votes, four Ohio delegates switched their votes, and Lincoln was then the nominee of the Republican Party. Another tumultuous celebration ensued, while back in Lincoln’s hometown of Springfield congratulatory telegrams poured in. The Republicans had become the party of Lincoln.

What made the moment surprising was the rapid rise of both the nominee and his party to political prominence. Six and a half years earlier, in January 1854, the Republican Party did not exist, and Abraham Lincoln was a successful but politically obscure attorney in Springfield. If anyone in Illinois that winter seemed likely to become president, it was the state’s Democratic senator Stephen A. Douglas. Yet with a speed that in retrospect seems incredible and almost preordained, the new party became one of the two major political organizations in the United States.

To Americans in the 1850s the chain of events that led to the rise of the Republicans and the Lincoln presidency grew out of the crisis over human slavery that convulsed the nation. Twists and turns, unexpected episodes, and some plain historical luck enabled the Republicans to survive the turbulent circumstances of their early years and put Lincoln in the White House in 1860. Once in power the party that had been founded in an effort to restrict the further expansion of slavery found itself in a major war that required an unprecedented expansion of governmental power for victory. At the same time, the struggle with the South posed the problem of how to structure a multiracial society after the fighting ended. That dilemma would divide the country and shape the destiny of the Republicans for the next century and a half.

The Republican Party emerged in a United States that was still an agricultural and rural nation. Census takers counted twenty-three million people in 1850; the figure rose to twenty-six million four years later. There were thirty-one states, with California on the West Coast as the most recent addition. The majority of the population lived east of the Mississippi River, and most Americans still made their living off the land through farming or raising livestock. Industrialization and urbanization had made beginnings in the North, and these forces accelerated during the 1850s. In Lincoln's Illinois, for example, the 110 miles of railroad track in the early 1850s expanded to nearly two thousand miles by the end of the decade.

Economic times were good. The discovery of gold in California in 1848 and an influx of British investment into the United States fueled a robust economic expansion. Railroad building surged as money poured into the new industry. With immigration climbing as well, the country had a growing, hard-working labor force in the North. So dramatic was this rise in prosperity that some commentators predicted an end to the partisan issues that had shaped national politics for two decades: the wisdom of having a national bank, the merits of a protective tariff, and the constitutionality of internal improvements such as canals, wagon roads, and railroads.

Yet Americans knew that beneath the surface the United States was a troubled land. The tide of immigration in the 1850s intensified social tensions. In 1853, 369,000 people arrived from overseas. Almost half were newcomers from Ireland, another 141,000 were of German origin. Immigration peaked in 1854 with 427,000 individuals entering the country. The Irish, because of their Roman Catholic faith, and many of the Germans, also Catholics, aroused fears among native-born Protestants who remembered the Reformation, disapproved of the elaborate rituals, and worried about the fealty of devoted

Catholics to the papacy. These new Americans usually aligned themselves with the Democrats, who were seen as more culturally tolerant than their major rivals, the Whigs.

In the 1850s, religious beliefs and national origin often shaped voting decisions as much as economic class and social status did. These ethnocultural pressures showed themselves in the reaction against the tide of immigrants. So large had been the arrival of newcomers and so powerful was their impact on local and state politics in New York, Pennsylvania, and Massachusetts, for example, that native voters reacted against the immigrant presence with laws to mandate the teaching of English in public schools, the closing of saloons on Sundays, and the prohibition of alcohol. The vehicle for their antiforeign impulses became a new political party that emphasized secrecy in its opposition to both immigrant and Catholic influence. When asked about their organization, members were told to say, “I know nothing,” a phrase that gave the movement its name. Know-Nothings, or the Native Americans, as they were sometimes called, picked up followers during the first half of the 1850s at a rate that stunned politicians. “At the bottom of all this,” remarked a Pennsylvania Democrat, “is a deep-seated religious question—prejudice if you please, which nothing can withstand.” Many public figures hoped or feared that the Know-Nothings might replace the embattled Whigs as the primary alternative to the Democrats.²

Even more troubling to many people in the North was the presence of slavery in the South. There were 3.2 million men, women, and children in bondage in the South in 1850, and the “peculiar institution,” as the South called slavery, dominated every aspect of life in the fifteen slave states stretching from Maryland and Delaware to Texas. Law, customs, and the Constitution meant that slavery also wove its way through American government and daily life. Northerners understood that by law they must help return fugitive slaves to their owners and that slavery could not be eliminated without changing the Constitution. Though the issue had quieted since the approval of the Compromise of 1850, feelings remained volatile. Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* became an instant best-seller in 1852 in the North for its depiction of the cruelties of slavery and their impact on a mother and her family.

The South saw slavery not as a moral burden on the nation or an evil to be expunged but more and more as a positive good for both master and slave. “Slavery has not been a crime,” wrote a Texas judge in 1860, “but has resulted in positive blessings, both to the negro and his master.” If left alone and “not tampered with by misguided white men the slave is for the most part

contented and happy.”³ Believing this, many leading southerners contended that they should have the right to take their human property wherever they wished. Efforts to restrict slavery or limit its expansion would justify secession from the Union.

The North was more divided. Slavery had receded from the region by 1853, but northerners did not have a coherent view of the institution’s future. Radical abolitionists, a definite minority, opposed slavery on moral grounds. Others disliked slavery because its spread might bring blacks into the North and West as competitive cheap labor. In 1848, northern opponents of slavery established a Free Soil Party that sought to block the spread of slavery in the West. Still others, driven by racist impulses, wanted African Americans to stay in the South or be returned to Africa. Whatever their attitudes toward slavery, residents of the North often resented the South’s political power and regarded the land below the Mason-Dixon line as backward, out of step with progressive currents of the nineteenth century. An uneasy sectional peace, based on the Missouri Compromise of 1820 and the Compromise of 1850, existed as 1854 began.

These two historical sectional bargains defined the way in which Americans viewed the politics of slavery as the 1850s began. In 1820, Congress had decided, after heated debates, to admit the new state of Missouri as one where slavery existed, and Maine as one where it did not. In the rest of the territory gained from the Louisiana Purchase of 1803, slavery would be barred north of a line running along the latitude 36°30’ north. Conscious of themselves as sections divided by slavery, North and South accepted this arrangement for three decades. But in the wake of the Mexican War, another crisis threatened over the fate of the western land obtained from the victory in that conflict. Lawmakers decided to let California enter the Union as a free state, to leave the fate of slavery in the rest of the new territory in limbo for the time being, and to strengthen the right of the South to capture and return fugitive slaves from the North. The settlement did not satisfy either side, but most moderate Americans agreed that the Compromise of 1850 maintained the sectional balance and extended the principles of the Missouri Compromise. Undoing these compromises would plunge the nation into renewed turmoil.

American politics responded to these conflicting pressures. At the time and for much of the rest of the nineteenth century, partisan warfare occupied much more of the nation’s attention than would be true a century and a half later. Frequent elections kept voters attuned to the fortunes of their party. Allegiance to a party defined the lives of most white male voters; independents represented only a small fraction of the electorate. The voters did

not scorn parties as corrupt institutions but valued them for their role in democracy. “Party is the great engine of human progress,” said one northern Democrat in 1852. Loyalty to a party was essential and, as a result, “to forsake a party is regarded as an act of greatest dishonour.”⁴

Interest in elections and press coverage of politics was intense. Newspapers did not pretend to be objective dispensers of information. Owned by partisans, they slanted reporting and editorials to advance party fortunes. Yet overall coverage of conventions, rallies, and speeches was far more detailed and elaborate than now. The hundreds of partisan newspapers kept voters up to date on the latest successes or failures of each party.

Meanwhile, voters and their families attended “mass meetings” and political rallies where speakers might go on for an hour or two. Such events often lasted all day and into the night, with meal breaks. Audiences knew the issues and expected a sophisticated treatment of contemporary concerns. Orators had to have command of the complexities of their subject, whether it was slavery in the territories, the merits of a protective tariff, or the constitutionality of a national bank. No one used speech writers, and an orator’s thoughts on the stump were very much his own.

On the surface, the United States had a working two-party system in 1854 with the Democrats in power and the Whigs as their main opposition. The Democrats in the mid-nineteenth century were the party of small, limited government and of white supremacy. They did not believe that the national government should be in the business of sponsoring economic growth through canal construction, railroad building, or railroad promotion. Accordingly, their platform in 1852 opposed “a general system of internal improvements,” promised “the most rigid economy in conducting our public affairs,” and asserted that Congress had no power to interfere with slavery in the South. Well established in the North and strong in the South, the Democrats (or “the Democracy” as they were sometimes called) had the stronger national base of the two parties. However, sectional divisions within the Democracy over slavery meant there were in the North among unhappy Democrats potential recruits for an antislavery party. The Democrats were more fragile than they seemed after the landslide election of Franklin Pierce in 1852.⁵

The Whigs, meanwhile, had fallen into disarray after 1852. The party had originated in the turbulent politics of the Jacksonian era when opponents of Andrew Jackson adopted the term “Whig” to evoke memories of the anti-monarchical party in England. “King Andrew” united many men against his strong presidential leadership between 1829 and 1837. Democrats applauded

what Jackson had done with his authority to prevent government excesses. As a result, suspicion of executive power was one Whig tradition that carried over to the Republicans.

So, too, were the Whig economic policies associated with the “American System” of Henry Clay of Kentucky. His program advocated the use of government power to promote the growth of enterprise through a protective tariff, a national bank, sale of public lands, and internal improvements. Whigs stressed the common interests of society and contended that their policies helped all classes. Yet the identification of the Whigs with business and commercial interest led the Democrats to accuse them of being the party of the rich. But throughout the 1830s and 1840s the Whigs were credible rivals to the Democrats in both the North and the South.

As the slavery issue came more to the fore, the Whigs found themselves increasingly divided between their northern and southern wings. Their platform in 1852 labeled slavery a dangerous issue in 1852 but said little more than that the sectional compromise should be maintained. The decisive defeat of the Whig nominee in 1852 raised serious doubts about whether the Whigs could survive. That candidate had been Winfield Scott, a Mexican War hero, but unlike William Henry Harrison in 1840 and Zachary Taylor in 1848, he had endured a stunning defeat in the electoral vote, with 254 electoral votes for Pierce and 42 for Scott. Scott had done better in the popular vote, running two hundred thousand ballots behind Pierce, but the Whig fortunes were on the decline. In fact, the whole party system seemed antiquated and out of touch with the concerns of average Americans.

On January 4, 1854, however, American politics took a dramatic turn that eradicated the Whig Party, split the Democrats, and enabled the Republicans to come into being. The clamor over the Kansas-Nebraska Act thrust the slavery question to the forefront of the national debate. Senator Stephen A. Douglas, an Illinois Democrat, reported out of his committee a bill in Congress to organize the western territory of Nebraska. The measure soon became legislation to create the territories of Kansas and Nebraska. What made it so explosive was the attitude of Congress and Douglas toward the future of slavery in the area and therefore in the nation as a whole.

The Missouri Compromise of 1820 specified that slavery would be outlawed north of the line of 36°30' north. Although Missouri was admitted to the Union as a slave state, the territory west and north of its southern border was closed to bondage. The firm dividing line between slave and nonslave territory that the Compromise established was popular in the North. As time passed, more and more southerners regarded the restriction of slavery on the

basis of a geographic line as an unfair limit on their ability to take their property wherever slavery might prosper.

The Compromise of 1850, in addition to admitting California as a free state and toughening the law on the return of fugitive slaves, dealt with the question of how the territory acquired from Mexico after the war should be organized into territories and states. The Compromise legislation stated, “When admitted as a State, the said Territory, or any portion of the same, shall be received into the Union with or without slavery, as their Constitution may prescribe at the time of their admission.” Since much of the Mexican cession lay below the Missouri Compromise line in areas where the growth of plantation slavery seemed difficult, this approach did not unduly rile northern feelings. In addition, because of Mexican law, the territory did not have slavery.⁶

But in the case of Kansas and Nebraska the situation was much different. The proposed territories were above the Missouri Compromise line, and when Douglas used the language of the Compromise of 1850 in his legislation, he was in effect abrogating the 1820 settlement and opening these areas to slavery. To make this point explicit, Douglas was forced to add wording which stated that the Missouri Compromise restriction was “hereby declared null and void.”⁷ As a northern Democrat who believed that climate made slavery ill-suited to the western plains, Douglas saw the bill as a way to conciliate the South without giving up anything of real substance. The people of the new territories themselves would decide whether to have slavery or not, a doctrine that was known as “popular sovereignty.” Douglas did not like slavery as such, but he saw no moral issue involved, since in his mind African Americans were a lesser order of human beings with few of the rights of their white counterparts.

Because it subverted the Missouri Compromise, which many in the North regarded as a solemn sectional bargain and a way of confining slavery to the South, the Kansas-Nebraska Act ignited a firestorm of criticism in the North during the first half of 1854. By the time the southern Democrats and allies of Douglas enacted the Kansas-Nebraska measure into law on May 30, 1854, protest meetings and political upheaval had convulsed the North.

In two states, protesting citizens from both the Democratic and Whig parties, outraged at the implications of what Douglas was proposing about slavery in the territories, began to shape a new political party almost at once. Antislavery sentiment was strong in Wisconsin and Michigan, while nativist prejudices were not as powerful. At Ripon, Wisconsin, on February 28, a coalition of dissident Democrats, Whigs, and members of the Free Soil Party

vowed to create a new “Republican” party if the Kansas-Nebraska Act became law. This action represented one of the earliest uses of the name Republican for a political organization. Their second meeting, on March 20, 1854, is often called the birth of the Republican Party. Michigan’s claims to primacy as the Republican birthplace rest on a state convention in Jackson, Michigan, that gathered on July 6, 1854, nominated candidates for state office, and wrote a platform for the campaign.⁸

Why did the name Republican gain such favor? Simply as a title it connected voters with the original political organization of Thomas Jefferson in the 1790s, the Democratic-Republican Party. Tying the new name to the framer of the Declaration of Independence underlined the commitment of northerners to doctrines of political equality and expanding economic opportunity. In a broader context, “Republicanism” tapped into a rich historical tradition dating back to the Italian renaissance and the English revolution that saw republics as embodying public-spirited citizens acting in the political sphere to preserve civic virtue and the welfare of all. There was a strong ethical strain in Republicanism that accorded well with attacks on slavery as both unjust and menacing to free labor in the North.

The problem for antislavery northerners in 1854 and 1855 was not how to create a new party in an institutional sense. Most men knew from their own experience as Democrats or Whigs how a party was organized. The key was a system of conventions at all levels where white male voters took part in elections. In a precinct or election district, partisans assembled in a convenient meeting place where they picked candidates, created platforms, and debated issues. Their most important function was choosing delegates to a convention at the next level of the congressional or judicial district. At the top was the state convention that set policy for the party until the next election or the next convention.

Every four years the process culminated in a national convention to select a presidential candidate. These gatherings did not simply ratify a selection already made in preferential primaries (which did not exist as such in the 1850s) but selected a nominee for the party after a series of ballots. Convention strategies evolved based on what delegates from around the nation would do on a second, third, or fourth ballot. Republicans never adopted the Democratic rule that a winning candidate had to receive the ballots of two-thirds of the delegates.

Putting a party organization together was simple once a sufficient number of like-minded men agreed to act in concert. The problem for those who wanted a northern party devoted to curbing slavery in 1854–1855 was the

Know-Nothings. They provided an alluring alternative for voters who were unhappy with the Democrats and their policies, and they attracted those dissidents that the new Republicans needed to become a viable national party. The Know-Nothings (or the Americans, as they now called themselves) asserted that the menace of immigrant voters loyal to the Roman Catholic Church and antagonistic to American values posed a greater danger to the nation than slavery or southern aggression. Before the Republicans could become a credible rival to the Democrats, they had to extinguish the hopes of the Know-Nothings.

The Republicans accomplished that goal in 1855–1856, thanks in part to Know-Nothing divisions over slavery and better leadership that outfought their adversaries in key northern states. Nonetheless, the success of the new party was not guaranteed. The fragility of the Republicans was one reason that a man such as Abraham Lincoln did not enlist in their ranks in 1854. Other antislavery parties had flourished and then died. Until Lincoln and men like him were sure that the Whigs were indeed doomed, they kept their options open.

The political tide in 1854 ran against the Democrats. Lincoln spoke out against Douglas and the Kansas-Nebraska Act on October 16, 1854, at Peoria, Illinois. He objected to the new law “because it assumes that there can be *moral right* in the enslaving of one man by another.” Lincoln conceded that public opinion and his own views would not allow for freeing the slaves and making them, “politically and socially, our equals.” But he believed that what Douglas had done went against the promise of the Declaration of Independence. “Our republican robe is soiled, and trailed in the dust,” he concluded. “Let us repurify it. Let us turn and wash it white, in the spirit, if not the blood of the Revolution.”⁹

The elections showed that the Whigs were all but dead. Their candidates failed, and the Republicans received much of the antislavery protest vote. But it was not yet clear that the Republicans could surpass the Know-Nothings in the North. Indeed, events in 1855 seemed to indicate that the Know-Nothings might have an edge. Although Republicans joined with Know-Nothings in Ohio to achieve victory, elsewhere, running on their own, the Republican suffered defeats. As one disgruntled Massachusetts Republican remarked in November 1855, anti-Irish and anti-Catholic voters in his state “want a Paddy hunt & on a Paddy hunt they will go.”¹⁰

These comments attested to the problem that the Republicans faced in overcoming the desire of many northerners to pursue ethnic goals rather than antislavery ends. The animus against Irish immigrants permeated a nation

where social and economic change seemed to threaten Protestant values. Many nativists saw these newcomers as unwilling to adapt to American political customs. "It is the prevailing and besetting sin of Irishmen when they come to America that they will not become *Americans*, but persist in remaining *Irishmen*, with all the crochets and absurdities which their national education has given them," said the *Chicago Tribune*, an opponent of Irish immigration. The ease with which immigrants could vote raised the prospect of undue influence at the polling place as well. The Catholic Church appeared to large numbers of voters as a menace at least as potent as the South and slavery.¹¹

Republican fortunes improved during the first half of 1856. The party elected Nathaniel Banks, a former Know-Nothing, as Speaker of the national House of Representatives by combining with the Know-Nothings and thus established their first national base. In May, incidents in Kansas and the United States Senate further boosted the Republicans. On May 21, a proslavery mob attacked the town of Lawrence, Kansas, a center of sentiment to make Kansas a free state, in what the Republicans called the "sack of Lawrence." The next day a more celebrated episode rocked the Senate. Charles Sumner, a Massachusetts Republican and passionate foe of slavery, had denounced, in personal terms, a senator from South Carolina during debate. A relative of the southern solon, Congressman Preston Brooks, attacked Sumner with a heavy rubberlike cane and beat him badly. The assault outraged moderate northern opinion as an example of southern aggression. "*Brooks* has knocked the scales from the eyes of the blind, and they now see!" observed a Vermont Republican.¹²

Coming only a month before the Republicans held their first national convention in Philadelphia, these traumatic events offered encouragement to the young party about potential victory in the fall. The Republicans nominated the popular western explorer John C. Fremont as their presidential candidate and hoped to ride his celebrity into the White House. Their platform was explicit about their efforts to curb slavery. The delegates denied the right of Congress to sanction slavery in the territories. Instead, it was the "imperative duty" of Congress to "prohibit in the Territories those twin relics of barbarism—Polygamy and Slavery." The Mormons in Utah practiced multiple marriages, to the dismay of Republicans. The main thrust of the convention was indicated in the party's new slogan: "Free Speech, Free Press, Free Men, Free Labor, Free Territory, and Fremont."¹³

To win the contest the Republicans confronted a problem about electoral votes that would recur over the next century. With 296 electoral votes in contention, the Democrats had a virtual lock on the slave South and could

thus rely on 112 electoral votes before any ballots were tallied. Republicans had to find their majority of the electoral college from the remaining 184 votes among northern states. Pennsylvania, with 27 electoral votes, thus became a key battleground between the parties.

Fremont and his party did well in 1856, but the Democratic nominee, James Buchanan, carried Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and several other northern states to amass 174 electoral votes to 114 for Fremont. Millard Fillmore, a former president and the candidate of the Know-Nothings, won Maryland's 8 electoral votes. The Know-Nothing Party faded from the political scene after 1856, although the voters it had enlisted remained important in Republican calculations. They had lost the presidency, but the Republicans were pleased with their strong showing in the North. They looked forward to 1860. As one Maine Republican commented: "We are beaten, but we have frightened the rascals awfully."¹⁴

The Republicans now faced the question of how to win the next presidential election. Opposition to slavery had built a strong foundation for their new organization, but would it be enough to win the next election? Republican efforts to broaden the party's base has aroused some of the most intense historical criticism of any aspect of the Republican record. In attempting to secure support through economic appeals such as the protective tariff, for example, were the Republicans demonstrating that they were more interested in power than the moral issues that had brought the party into being? The question of Republican attitudes toward race and Republicans' capacity to measure up to standards of justice and equity has been a point of contention since the late 1850s.

The underlying problem of Republican sincerity and morality on racial issues goes even deeper. Democrats at the time and historians since have questioned whether the Republicans in the 1850s were sincere opponents of slavery, whether their underlying motives were genuine and based on an honest belief in equality, and whether the civil war that broke out in 1861 was worth the blood and sacrifice that ensued. The even larger question turns on the issue of race, a problem that runs through the record of the major political parties for their entire histories. In the case of the Republicans, the test has been whether their opposition to human bondage looked forward to the racial egalitarianism of the twenty-first century. A fair answer must be "Yes and no," depending on which Republicans are examined for the 1850s and 1860s. While even in the nineteenth century it was correct to call the Republicans "the party of freedom," the label requires some clearer definition in light of the racial attitudes of that period.

The United States in the 1850s was a nation where color and ethnic prejudices ran deep. Belief in the concept of the common humanity of all people did not yet exist. Instead, white Americans thought that nature had made them superior to blacks, Native Americans, Mexicans, and Asians. Racial stereotypes, crude jokes, and insulting images pervaded the culture. Those who dared to think that all human beings ought to have political and legal rights were a small minority in the North.

As a result, expressions of racial prejudice show up in the private and public statements of Republicans. "I want to have nothing to do with the free negro or the slave negro," contended Lyman Trumbull, a Republican senator from Illinois. Another party leader said in 1858 that "it is certainly the wish of every patriot that all within the limits of our Union should be homogeneous in race and of our own blood." The most famous such statement, of course, was that of Abraham Lincoln in his fourth debate with Stephen A. Douglas on September 18, 1858: "I am not nor ever have been in favor of making voters or juror of negroes, nor of qualifying them to hold office, nor to intermarry with white people; and I will say in addition to this that there is a physical difference between the white and black races which I believe will forever forbid the two races living together on terms of social and political equality."¹⁵

Southerners and Democrats in the 1850s, and many historians since, have used such statements either to indict the Republicans for insincerity and hypocrisy or to accuse them of having other motives for their opposition to slavery. These goals allegedly include a desire to keep blacks in the South as slaves or wage laborers and thus advance capitalism. More powerful has been the charge that simple antisouthernism fueled the Republican dislike for slavery. The new party is said to have exploited conspiracy fears in the North and thus transformed the South into a proslavery monolith that never existed. The Republicans could then evoke the menace of an internal threat to American liberties for their own purposes. The *Slave Power*, wrote the *New York Times*, "will stop at no extremity of violence in order to subdue the people of the Free States and force them into tame subservience to its own domination."¹⁶

To judge Republican views on race without including the views of either northern Democrats or southerners leaves the misleading impression that if only Republicans had adopted egalitarian positions their political success would have been secure. The opposite is in fact the case. One constant that Republicans confronted was the intensity of northern prejudice against blacks, which Democrats exploited repeatedly. Stephen A. Douglas said in 1858, for example: "I do not question Mr. Lincoln's conscientious belief

that the negro was made his equal and hence is his brother, but for my own part, I do not regard the negro as my equal and positively deny that he is my brother or any kin to me whatever." No Democrat ever received a rebuke from his party leaders for taking bigotry too far. The South was even less restrained.¹⁷

The Republicans were opposing majority opinion in the North when they asserted that slavery needed to be restricted and that the fate of slaves affected the nature of the Union. When a leader such as Lincoln made the case that free blacks in the North were human beings who were entitled to the opportunities of the Declaration of Independence, his opinions represented a significant advance in the understanding of what society ought to do for African Americans in terms of legal rights. Republicans still contended that blacks should not be allowed to vote or hold office, but in the exercise of other political and legal rights they should be treated as all other citizens were. Such a stance might seem modest by today's standards, but in the context of the mid-nineteenth century it represented a significant potential change in the nation's racial practices.

Two other issues have clouded the reputation of the Republicans during this period of their history. If slavery was on the decline as an unprofitable institution and would have disappeared in due course, then Republican attempts to restrict it were not needed and made the situation worse, or so runs the argument. To the contrary, Republicans believed that slavery was dynamic and expanding, and much modern scholarship bears out their claim. While hypothetical scenarios cannot be proved, there is strong evidence from the economic behavior of slaveholders that if the Civil War had not intervened, bondage could have prospered and adapted to industrial conditions, which would have kept it going for many decades.

The second problem relates to Republican fears about the "Slave Power" in the South and whether southern politicians were as determined to protect slavery and imperil the Union as many northerners believed. That there was not a vast web of conspiracy across the South is, of course, correct. But there was a consensus among southern political leaders and their constituents that slavery deserved the right to become a nationwide institution. Accordingly, politicians from Dixie acted in concerted ways, both in and out of Congress, to ensure that law and custom protected the peculiar institution. As this regional agenda developed after 1854, the North saw in operation a troubling southern attitude. The North would have to defer to slavery and allow it to exist, expand, and in the end become established everywhere. As Abraham Lincoln said of the South in 1860, "Holding, as they do, that slavery is

morally right, and socially elevating, they cannot cease to demand a full national recognition of it, as a legal right, and a social blessing.”¹⁸

A judgment on Republican ideology on the slavery question turns in the end on whether the Civil War was justified as a means of preserving the Union and abolishing slavery. It is easy to assert that some way of ending slavery and avoiding disunion that did not entail the death of six hundred thousand soldiers in combat should have occurred. Critics of the Republicans in this regard do not face the question of why black Americans should have been asked to endure more decades of bondage and its cruelties as their contribution to the preservation of the Union in 1860–1865. On this issue, for all their lapses into racial prejudice, political equivocation, and poor judgment on specific aspects of the sectional crisis, the Republican Party was on the right side of the historical argument in the 1850s and its opponents were not. Modern Republicans who find appeal in the neo-Confederate arguments for state rights and limited government separate themselves from the founding traditions and moral high ground of their party.

In 1857, a series of striking events boosted Republican fortunes. The Supreme Court on March 6, 1857, decided in the *Dred Scott* case that Congress lacked the power to keep slavery out of the territories. The ruling intensified Republican fears that the “Slave Power” might, through a court ruling, validate slavery nationwide. The ongoing struggle over Kansas as a free or slave state split the Democrats between the forces of Douglas and President Buchanan. The new administration favored generally the claims of southerners to take their slaves into Kansas and establish the institution there. Moreover, Republicans saw in the efforts of the Buchanan administration and the South to make Kansas a slave state further evidence of the existence of a conspiracy to nationalize bondage. When a severe economic downturn began in October 1857, it triggered a depression that lasted for four years and added to the woes of the Democrats.

As a result, Republicans looked forward to the 1858 elections with confidence. To capitalize on the discontent with hard times, the new party advocated a protective tariff and homestead legislation to encourage western settlement. With the tide of events running their way, the Republicans made important gains. They did well in Pennsylvania, an important state in the 1860 contest, and also won victories in such crucial states as New York and Ohio. Overall, conservative voters in the North rallied to the Republican banner.

The election of 1858 produced one of its most important results in Illinois, where Abraham Lincoln ran against Stephen A. Douglas for the United

States Senate. The seven debates that the two men conducted have become legendary. For the Republicans, the confrontation was decisive because it thrust their greatest leader and most potent political symbol onto the national stage and on his way to the presidency in 1860.

Abraham Lincoln was forty-nine and at the beginning of 1858 would have seemed an improbable presidential candidate. After an impoverished youth, he had made his way as a lawyer in Springfield, Illinois, and gained a reputation as a dedicated member of the Whig Party in the 1830s and 1840s. Following a single congressional term in 1847–1849, he had returned to Springfield, where he prospered and, with his wife, Mary Todd Lincoln, raised their three sons. Lincoln had sought a Senate seat in 1855, but had lost in the balloting in the Illinois legislature.

Though his record as an officeholder was sparse, Lincoln became recognized during the 1850s as a compelling champion of the policy of restricting slavery in the territories. He hated slavery as an institution but accepted that Congress lacked the power to abolish its existence in the South. Believing that slavery contradicted the promises of the Declaration of Independence, Lincoln contended that both North and South should agree to place it “in the course of ultimate extinction.” To that end, Lincoln favored schemes to relocate former slaves to Africa. At this stage of his life, Lincoln did not see a viable future for blacks in the United States, but neither did he have any practical answers for their situation when and if slavery ended.¹⁹

For the moment, Lincoln’s sights were set on his own political future and the defeat of Senator Douglas. As the Illinois lawmaker broke with President Buchanan, some eastern Republicans, such as the editor of the *New York Tribune*, Horace Greeley, looked to a possible alliance with Douglas and a union of Republicans and antislavery Democrats. In Lincoln’s mind, Douglas’ moral indifference to the evils of slavery disqualified him for such a political partnership. The two men agreed to a series of seven debates, and Lincoln sought to draw a bright line between himself and Douglas even before the confrontations commenced. His famous “house divided” speech of June 16, 1858, launched his Senate campaign with the statement that “a house divided against itself cannot stand.” Lincoln continued: “I believe that this government cannot endure permanently half *slave* and half *free*.” Either slavery would be put on the road to extinction “or its *advocates* will push it forward till it shall become lawful in *all* the States, old as well as *new*—*North* as well as *South*.”²⁰

Lincoln pressed the argument during the debates that slavery presented a moral issue for the United States that could not be evaded. If the institution



This photograph of Abraham Lincoln, taken in 1864, shows the first Republican president amid the challenges of the Civil War. Library of Congress, LC-USZ62-984.

was not restricted, it would expand. As the primary social evil in the nation, it must be confined and in time eliminated. When Douglas labeled him an advocate of social and political equality with blacks, Lincoln responded with language that his critics have often identified as racist. Yet, had Lincoln espoused broader rights for African Americans in the United States of 1858, he would have had no political future. The difference between Lincoln and Douglas was that the Republican senatorial candidate did not rule out that black people should have the opportunity to better themselves through their own effort. “I agree with Judge Douglas he [a black man] is not my equal—certainly not in color, perhaps not in moral or intellectual endowment. But in the right to the bread, without leave of anybody else, which his own hand earns, *he is my equal and the equal of Judge Douglas and the equal of every living man.*”²¹

Although Lincoln lost the senatorial election to Douglas, his performance in the debates stimulated talk of a presidential candidacy throughout 1859. The apparent front runner for the nomination, William H. Seward of New York, was identified with the antislavery cause in the popular mind. In a famous speech, Seward had predicted an “irrepressible conflict” between North and South. Yet Seward was weak where Lincoln was strong. The New Yorker

had denounced nativism, which did not sit well with former Know-Nothings. Republicans grumbled that Seward could not win in the five northern states that had gone for Buchanan and the Democrats in 1856 and were essential for Republican victory in 1860.

Lincoln, on the other hand, while opposed to the Know-Nothings, had not said much to alienate them. He could carry Illinois and perhaps Pennsylvania where Seward could not. Lincoln appeared sound on slavery without the appearance of radicalism that dogged Seward. By the spring of 1860, the Republicans sought a candidate with broad appeal. In the wake of John Brown's unsuccessful raid on Harper's Ferry, Virginia, in late 1859 in an attempt to trigger a slave insurrection, antislavery passions had been muted. Since the Democrats had split at their convention and the northern wing of the party had nominated Douglas, Lincoln more and more seemed the best choice to carry the Republicans to victory against Douglas, John Bell of the Constitutional Union Party, and John C. Breckinridge, the candidate of the southern Democrats.

The convention that nominated Lincoln at Chicago in May 1860 also adopted a platform that took into account popular fears about the new party in control of the White House. The delegates affirmed that slavery in the South would not be harmed, and they denounced "the lawless invasion by armed force" of any state or territory as John Brown had done. But the Republicans also asserted that "the normal condition of all the territory of the United States is that of freedom," and they criticized southern calls to reopen the slave trade and any idea that slavery in the territories might be legal.²²

At the end of the platform, the delegates called for a protective tariff, a homestead law, internal improvements, and construction of a Pacific railroad. By these planks the Republicans sought to assemble a majority coalition to win a presidential contest. They thus went beyond an appeal grounded only on their opposition to slavery. For the party to follow such a course was hardly surprising. Political parties grow by winning elections rather than suffering defeats based on perceived moral purity. Yet in 1860 and in historical accounts, Republicans were criticized both for risking the Union because of their antislavery position and for hypocrisy when they muted their opposition to slavery to attract potential voters.

With victory certain if the Democratic split persisted, the Republicans concentrated on keeping enthusiasm high and getting their voters out to the polls. Their style of campaigning, which featured marching units of "Wide Awake" societies, became a characteristic trademark of subsequent campaigns for more than three decades. Meanwhile, Lincoln remained in Illinois and

said almost nothing in public. By long-standing tradition, presidential candidates did not make a personal appeal for votes.

When the ballots were tallied, Lincoln was a sectional and minority president with less than 40 percent of the popular vote. He won all of the northern states except New Jersey, which he split with Douglas. As a result, Lincoln had 180 electoral votes to the combined total of 123 votes for his three opponents. Even if the votes of Douglas and Bell in the North had been lumped together, Lincoln would still have won. The Republicans were well aware that they had not received a popular majority and feared what would happen if the Democrats, North and South, ever reunited.

After the election of Lincoln, southern states seceded from the Union, forming the Confederate States of America, and the Civil War began. For the Republicans, the experience of the conflict transformed their party. During the four years from 1861 to 1865, the nation, under their leadership, achieved the destruction of slavery and the preservation of the Union, in which the power of the South was now much reduced. The war and Reconstruction that followed also created real political rights for African Americans in the United States for the first time. By 1865 the antislavery agenda of the Republicans had been realized in full.

In the effort to win the war, however, the Republicans expanded the power of the national government in the economic sphere. They established a national banking system, imposed an income tax, created a system for dispersing public land in the West, and started a transcontinental railroad. The role of the national government in promoting economic growth went beyond even what the Whigs had contemplated. A corollary was an increasing identification of the Republicans with the ambitions and power of the business community in the North and Midwest. A party that began in an attack on the existing political order became an organization that believed in an identity of interests of capitalists, workers, and farmers. Over time, the commitment to business outweighed the concern for other elements in the economy.

These accomplishments occurred despite the continuation of the partisan struggle with the Democrats throughout the conflict. While many loyal Democrats in the North supported the war and the preservation of the Union, there was less agreement on how the South should be subdued and, more important, on how black Americans should be treated during and after the fighting. The Democratic identification with white supremacy had wide appeal in sections of the North, and Republicans remained a minority party in a significant number of states. In the congressional elections of 1862, the Democrats made gains in the House and Senate. Even in the 1864 election,

when Lincoln defeated George B. McClellan as the Union military triumphs crested, the Democrats still polled 45 percent of the popular vote.

The war shaped a distinctive Republican view of the Democrats that cast a long shadow into the future. While the majority of northern Democrats supported the war effort and, with somewhat less enthusiasm, the Lincoln administration, a substantial minority of the opposition wanted a negotiated peace with the Confederacy even at the price of perpetuating slavery. At the fringes of the party, some Democrats, notably Clement Vallandigham of Ohio, did more to give aid and comfort to the South. Fairly or unfairly, the Democrats gained a reputation in the minds of Republicans as a party that had trifled with treason. In the presidential campaign of 1864, the party's speakers and newspapers assailed the Democrats for their alleged disloyalty. The opposition, said the *New York Tribune*, was "ready to barter the integrity of the Union for the sake of political power." The term "copperhead," meaning a southern sympathizer, became identified with the peace wing of the Democrats.²³

At some instinctive level, Republicans were convinced that their political opposition was less patriotic, even less American, than Republicans in the nation's greatest crisis. As a result, while they did not question in principle the right of the Democrats to hold power, throughout the years in the minds of Republicans a Democratic president lacked legitimacy, especially if the chief executive had come to office with less than a majority of the popular vote. These attitudes originated during the Civil War when, as one writer noted in 1864, the Democratic Party gained "the taint of disloyalty, which whether true or false, will cling to it, like the poisoned shirt of Nessus, for a century."²⁴

The requirements of winning the Civil War led Republicans to champion the biggest expansion of the role of the government in the economy up to that point in the nation's history. Since the Republicans have been the perceived advocates of limited government into the twenty-first century, their record as the party of expanded government in the nineteenth century may seem improbable. The evidence shows them to be the supporters of a large federal role in the wartime emergency, including a strong commitment to income taxes. As one Republican leader in the Senate, John Sherman of Ohio, put it in 1863, "All private interests, all local interests, all banking interests, the interests of individuals, everything, should be subordinate now to the interests of the government."²⁵

The measures enacted from 1861 to 1863 in the Thirty-seventh Congress included the issuance and sale through popular subscription of bonds to finance the Union cause. The government also issued paper money (called

“greenbacks” because of the color of the paper) to pay for the armies and their supplies. The government’s debt rose dramatically because of these moves, but Republican editors contended that there was little risk to such a financial policy. Better a national debt owed to Americans than to foreign bondholders. “*What is owed to our own people is no loss*, the nation is no poorer for it.”²⁶

In 1863, Congress created the National Banking System. Since Andrew Jackson had destroyed the Second Bank of the United States in the 1830s, the country had not had any kind of organized banking structure. The National Banking System established a kind of national currency supported by government bonds that enabled banknotes to circulate. In the process a market for government bonds was initiated. The measure reduced the power of state banks and concentrated financial power in Washington. The bill became law in February 1863. In an amended statute, passed a year later, Congress imposed a tax on state banknotes to reduce the power of these state institutions. John Sherman captured the centralizing philosophy of wartime Republicans: “The power of taxation cannot be more wisely exercised than in harmonizing and placing on the secure basis of national credit all the money of the country.”²⁷

Financing the war required that the Republican Congress impose higher tariff duties and an income tax. In the case of the Morrill Tariff of 1861, Congress imposed duties on more than just manufactures. It sought to protect from foreign competition a wide range of agricultural items and useful minerals. Republicans contended that such policies would help farmers and free laborers as well as business owners. The new law became the basis for Republican tariff legislation for the rest of the nineteenth century.

Even higher tariffs did not bring in enough revenue to sustain the Union cause. The desperate need for more funds led to the adoption of an income tax. The Republicans adopted versions of the income levy in the various revenue laws enacted to pay for the war in 1861, 1862, and 1864. During the congressional debates, Republicans contended that “a tax properly levied upon incomes . . . is an equitable and just tax.” Some party members favored making the tax system graduated so the burden fell more heavily on the wealthy. After much discussion, Congress accepted such a proposal in the tax bill of 1864. Individuals with incomes over \$10,000 would pay 10 percent in taxes. The citizens of the North tolerated most of the revenue legislation as a necessary war measure for ultimate victory. After the war, in 1872, the income tax lapsed. Nonetheless, the Democrats labeled the Republicans the party of high taxes and big government for decades.²⁸

Efforts to promote agricultural settlement on the western plains also embodied the Republican commitment to government activism. The party’s

ideology favored providing the free laborer with easy access to land for farming. The Homestead Act of 1862–1863 granted 160 acres of land from the public domain to actual settlers. As the proponents of the measure argued, the establishment of a prosperous nation of independent farmers was a worthy goal. “What is beneficial to the people cannot be detrimental to the Government; for in this country the interests of both are identical,” remarked a Republican member of the House.²⁹

A similar spirit led to the creation of the Department of Agriculture and the establishment of a system of land-grant colleges to diffuse education among the children of farmers. A key element in Republican thinking, adopted from the Whigs, was the belief in an identity of interests among all the producing elements of society. Accordingly, the federal government should encourage and promote the diverse classes of the economy, and all would profit together.

A railroad to the West Coast would further knit the nation together and hold California and the Pacific Northwest within the Union. The presence of cheap, efficient transportation would also stimulate the development of the agricultural sector. The advocates of the railroad project believed that honest entrepreneurs, acting in the national interest, would build a rail line at a reasonable profit for themselves. As it turned out, the increasing complexity of an industrializing economy brought into the projects capitalists who pursued profit over efficiency. The resulting scandals in the 1870s involving the *Crédit Mobilier* Company suggested that the Republican faith in a congruence of private and public interest was less certain than many party members believed. The Republicans did not want government regulation of the economy, preferring to allow the workings of the marketplace to correct inequities. Promotion without regulation was viable in the 1860s and helped win the Civil War. How it would fare in peacetime in an industrial nation remained an issue for the future.

The war proved a powerful engine of economic prosperity for the North. Even though there were several hundred thousand Union dead and many more wounded, the population expanded as immigrants came to fight and work. Such industries as railroading, clothing manufacturing, and meatpacking expanded to meet wartime demands. Young capitalists—such as Andrew Carnegie and John D. Rockefeller—laid the foundations for their businesses and fortunes. Many unskilled workers did not share in the good times as inflation rose and real wages declined, but skilled workers did well. Overall, the perception that Republican economic policies had promoted prosperity even in the midst of a devastating civil war created an association between

the party and the nation's economic health that endured until the Great Depression of the 1930s.

The Republicans and President Lincoln wielded the power of the government in other ways. The right of habeas corpus was suspended. A draft was instituted after volunteering for the military ebbed. Press censorship of dissenting newspapers occurred and some instances of political arrests took place as well. Despite Democratic protests and the opposition of parts of the judiciary, the federal government sought to punish disloyalty and prevent the undermining of the Union cause with its greatly expanded powers. On the other hand, relatively few dissidents were punished. Amid all of this turmoil, political battles raged and elections took place on schedule.

The Republicans revealed important internal divisions during the first half of the 1860s. The main point of contention was the issue of race and the party's position on the future of black Americans. Those Republicans who favored the expansion of rights for blacks and a stringent policy toward the South became known as "Radicals." A middle ground of the party styled themselves as "Moderates," while those who wanted to win the war but not to do much for freed slaves were labeled "Conservatives." Lincoln acted as a conciliator among these divergent parts of the party. The size and strength of these factions shifted with specific issues and problems as Republican policy toward slavery and then Reconstruction emerged.

Among the Radicals, the most famous members in Congress in historical terms were Charles Sumner, the Massachusetts senator, and Thaddeus Stevens, a House member from Pennsylvania. While both men had influence, neither of them dominated his colleagues in Congress in the manner that Democratic critics alleged. Radicalism was a more wide-ranging movement within Republican ranks and not the brainchild of two leaders.

In the first half of the twentieth century, the Radicals came under fire as militants who sought to impose racial egalitarianism on the South despite evidence that white southerners did not want such social change. Critics also asserted that African Americans were not ready for self-government during the Reconstruction years. The critique of the Radicals, racist in its essential elements, held sway until the end of World War II.

After 1945 and with rising intensity during the civil rights movement of the 1960s, the Radicals were rehabilitated. In a time such as the 1860s, when racism dominated the United States, the Radicals seemed at least a vanguard for a more just and equitable nation. Yet the Radicals did not always embody modern ideals, and their performance often fell short of their proclaimed goals. Historians suggested that the Radicals had not been militant enough.

Instead of seeking social change in race relations with vigor, they had settled for half a loaf. As a result, when Reconstruction faltered and the white South regained control over blacks in the 1870s, segregation closed in and the Radical program became a dead letter. After generations of criticism for having done too much, the Radicals are now indicted for having done too little for African Americans.

From 1861 to 1865, in the midst of the Civil War, the Republican Party wrestled with the issue of what the political role of black Americans should be and what legislative and constitutional means could best achieve these aims. The debate on the Republicans and blacks during the war has centered on Abraham Lincoln. His assassination in April 1865 left forever unsolved the mystery of what he would have done with the defeated South. Historians have gone over and over his record in the White House searching for clues. Was Lincoln close to the Radicals or distant from their program? Was he moving toward the idea of votes for some blacks when he was killed? How would he have dealt with the southern states once the fighting stopped? It is well known what happened when Andrew Johnson became president. Was he carrying on Lincoln's plan (as he said he was), or did Johnson's accession mark a major change in policy toward the South and African Americans? These questions have dogged debate about the nature of the Republican Party during the 1860s.

During the Civil War, Republicans endorsed striking changes in the status of African Americans. At the start of the conflict, President Lincoln recognized the strategic importance of the border states, Maryland, Kentucky, Delaware, and Missouri, to the Union cause. If those states joined the Confederacy, defeating the rebellion would become almost impossible. Accordingly, the president resisted efforts in 1861 and 1862 to make emancipation of the slaves Union policy. As the corrosive effects of the war on the institution of slavery became more apparent, Lincoln concluded that freeing the slaves would strengthen the Union cause with European nations that otherwise might be tempted, for economic or diplomatic reasons, to recognize the Confederacy as an independent state. Freeing the slaves also undermined the economic base of the South as those the military advance released from bondage left their homes.

The Emancipation Proclamation of 1862–1863 was not in itself an inspiring document. It did not free any slaves beyond Union control. It did put the North on a course of changing the situation of African Americans in the United States that would be difficult to reverse. A return to slavery became impossible. Black males who joined the army could provide vital manpower for the North. As blacks performed well in combat and supplied resources to

defeat the Confederacy, it became harder to contend that they were not human beings entitled to some degree of political rights.

Abraham Lincoln pushed northern war aims a step further toward a broader affirmation of political liberty in the Gettysburg Address of November 19, 1863. When he spoke of “these honored dead” who had fought for “a new birth of freedom,” he indicated that the larger purpose of the conflict was to achieve freedom for all Americans, black and white. The leader of the Republican Party thus identified himself with the aspiration of African Americans to a better life after the fighting ended, but he did so within the limits of a nation where currents of racism persisted.³⁰

In 1864–1865, the Republicans looked more and more to a constitutional amendment outlawing slavery as a means of putting the issue beyond the reach of a temporary majority should the South rejoin the Union or the Democrats regain power in the presidential election of 1864. In the Republican senate, the measure sailed through. The amendment fell short of the necessary two-thirds vote in the House on June 15, 1864, with a very solid Democratic vote against it. Once the National Union Party (as the Republicans styled themselves in 1864) had won the election and Lincoln received a second term, the House approved the antislavery amendment on January 31, 1865. Lincoln himself signed the amendment, although he did not have to do so.

The question of what to do with the South once the war was over competed for attention with the issue of the fate of African Americans during the fighting. Although Reconstruction (as the process was known at the time) seemed to have commenced once the hostilities ended, Lincoln and his administration had been grappling with the problem for several years. The president had hoped to use the possibility of amnesty and leniency to pull southerners away from the Confederacy. Like many in the North, Lincoln believed that loyal southerners, their pro-Union views repressed by the Confederates, were ready, with the proper inducements, to support his side of the conflict. In December 1863, Lincoln put forward a plan that allowed southern men who had taken the oath of loyalty to the Union to create state governments in the South based on as little as 10 percent of the white population. Freed slaves would not be allowed to vote. The plan did not attract many southerners, yet it seemed inadequate and much too lenient to Radical Republicans.

Their answer was embodied in a bill that Republicans Benjamin F. Wade and Henry Winter Davis of Maryland introduced in 1864. This measure imposed much more stringent requirements on the South. Confederate veterans would be barred from holding office, and a majority of white male citizens in each southern state would have to endorse a constitutional convention to establish



"Platforms Illustrated." The 1864 presidential election had intense racial overtones in the midst of the Civil War. This Republican cartoon contrasts Liberty endorsing Lincoln on a platform upheld by U. S. Grant and other Union stalwarts with the racist rhetoric of the Democrats. Library of Congress, LC-USZ62-7176.

a new state government. The Wade-Davis Bill looked to reshape southern society to ensure black freedom and to give the Republicans a chance to be competitive in the region. Although the Wade-Davis Bill passed both houses, Lincoln used a pocket veto to prevent it from becoming law. The president did not want Congress to tie his hands in reconstructing the South.

For the 1864 presidential election, the Republicans nominated Lincoln for a second term at their Baltimore convention in June of that year. The delegates adopted the name of the National Union Party in an effort to make it easier for pro-war Democrats to support Lincoln. Some Republicans believed that the party had achieved so many of its goals from the 1850s that it was time to break with the abolitionist past of the Republicans and find a label more appealing to a broad spectrum of voters. For all of their success, the Republicans understood that they had not yet become the majority party in the North. In any case, the "National Union" tag seemed reasonable at a time when the military progress of the North was still stalemated in the bitter fighting between Ulysses S. Grant and his Army of the Potomac and the Confederates under Robert E. Lee.

The desire to present a broad front against the Democrats and their probable candidate, former general George B. McClellan, led to one fateful decision

in the convention. Lincoln's vice president was Hannibal Hamlin of Maine, a state the party was sure to carry. In the historical tradition of balancing the ticket, the delegates dumped Hamlin and selected Andrew Johnson from Tennessee to run with Lincoln. Johnson was a war Democrat who had served as military governor of his state. As American politicians have always done, the Republicans assumed that Johnson would perform the routine duties of the vice president and stay out of Lincoln's way. No one inquired about Johnson's views of African Americans, his possible style as president, or his character as a politician.

The National Union strategy worked in the short run. Lincoln gained from Union Army victories during the fall of 1864, the support of the soldiers who voted for him in large numbers, and the ineptitude of the Democrats. While Lincoln won all but three states, he received just 55 percent of the popular vote, attesting to the residual strength of anti-Republican sentiment. The Republicans understood that Democratic assaults on them as champions of black equality provoked a strong response among a sizable minority of the northern electorate.

Union victory arrived in April 1865 when Lee surrendered at Appomattox. The outcome made the Civil War a struggle that the Republican Party had fought and won despite all the internal disagreements and temporary setbacks of those painful four years. The preservation of the Union and the end of slavery imparted a sense that the Republicans and the United States were identical entities. In a profound sense, that perception of themselves as the only natural and legitimate governing party has never left the Republicans' ethos.

As April 1865 unfolded, Republicans turned to the task of fulfilling their promise to make the country a more prosperous and just society. Much remained to be done with the defeated South, but with the wise, war-tested Lincoln in the White House, all things seemed possible for a party that had not existed even a dozen years earlier.

The last thing that Americans expected after four bitter years of war was that the president would be assassinated. Angry over Lincoln's commitment to black rights and determined to avenge the defeat of the South, John Wilkes Booth murdered Lincoln on the evening of April 14, 1865, at Ford's Theater in Washington, D.C. The nation was plunged into mourning. A president who had been the subject of vicious attacks just months earlier became a martyred hero to a grieving nation. As Lincoln was almost deified, the party he had led embraced him as their transcendent political symbol. Republicans boasted that they and they alone were "the party of Lincoln."

They had reason to be proud of their fallen leader. In the crisis of the Civil War, Lincoln had shown himself to be a masterful wartime president and an eloquent advocate for the Union cause. Although he never adopted the agenda of the Radical wing of the party, Lincoln had come a long way from the views of blacks that he had expressed in his debates with Stephen A. Douglas. In his own person, he had little of the color prejudice that so many white Americans displayed. By the end of his life, Lincoln endorsed a limited form of suffrage for blacks. Whether he would have gone further with the Republicans toward the Fourteenth Amendment granting the vote to black males is unknowable. It seems improbable that Lincoln would have moved toward the Democrats and away from his own party as he implemented Reconstruction.

But Lincoln was now dead, and a southern Democrat, Andrew Johnson, sat in the White House. The new president hated the Confederacy and its leaders and spoke in harsh terms about those who had waged the rebellion. Yet he really did not oppose slavery as such. Perhaps Johnson would prove to be a wise choice for vice president. As April 1865 brought the first peacetime spring in Washington in four years, Republicans waited to see where President Johnson would lead them.

The Republicans and Reconstruction, 1865–1877

THE LINES OF MARCHING MEN stretched for miles down Pennsylvania Avenue. On May 23 and 24, 1865, the Union veterans made their way from the Capitol to the White House in review. Crowds cheered and waved handkerchiefs, and the bands played “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” and “Marching through Georgia” as the armies paraded one last time before the grateful residents of the nation’s capital. The conflict that dominated several generations of American history and shaped national politics for decades was over. The leadership of the country had already turned to the vexing issues of Reconstruction—the return of the South to the Union and the place of newly freed African Americans in postwar society.

A burst of exuberant nationalism followed. The population soared from nearly thirty-six million people in 1865 to more than forty-six million eleven years later on the nation’s centennial. New states, Nebraska in 1867 and Colorado in 1876, swelled the total to thirty-six. The purchase of Alaska from Russia added another vast expanse to the continental territory. Railroads penetrated the West as a transcontinental line was completed in 1869. On the frontier, the new territory of Wyoming instituted woman suffrage as a way of attracting immigrants to its arid spaces. Above all, there was a strong sense that the Civil War had marked a turning point in American history. The older society had been remade in the crucible of the bloody conflict. A historian concluded in 1869 that a “great gulf” existed “between what had happened before it in our century and what has happened since, or what is likely to happen hereafter.” He added: “It does not seem to me as if I were living in the country in which I was born.”¹

Although the Republicans came out of the war with the luster of victory and an indelible link to the memory of the martyred Abraham Lincoln, the dozen years from 1865 to 1877 proved fateful for the party. Their policies on Reconstruction left permanent changes in the Constitution as the Fourteenth

and Fifteenth Amendments joined the Thirteenth in defining the rights of the former slaves under the law. However, the effort to create a viable Republican Party in the South, despite some initial success, proved to be a transitory one. By 1877 the white Democratic South was on its way toward dominance in the region and the establishment of a one-party structure that would remain in place for seventy-five years.

The other development that affects the historical reputation of the Republicans stemmed from its increasing identification with the business community and rapid economic growth. In the wake of the war, ethical standards collapsed; a series of scandals in the federal government touched many Republican officials and imparted a sense of pervasive corruption to the period. The labels of the misdeeds tell the story: the Gold Corner, the Whiskey Ring, the *Crédit Mobilier*, and the Salary Grab. As a result, the Republicans in power found themselves the object of popular derision. In fact, neither party had a monopoly on virtue, but the Republicans sometimes acted as though they did. The 1870s showed the error of that presumption.

Reconstruction became intertwined with scandal. Democrats used examples of malfeasance to undercut the racial policies of their opponents. As the pressures of war subsided, moreover, the traditional American suspicion of government resurfaced along with the racial prejudices that persisted throughout the fighting. Since they were perceived as the party of black rights and stronger government, the Republicans suffered the most as these forces emerged. By 1877 the natural partisan balances of American politics had reasserted themselves. Any hope that the Republicans could become the nation's majority party seemed illusory. Perhaps the Civil War had not transformed politics after all.

The murder of Abraham Lincoln and the accession of Andrew Johnson to the presidency proved a permanent disruption for Republican policy on Reconstruction. While Lincoln's policies before his death were ambiguous as to how the South would be brought back into its proper relationship with the rest of the Union, the slain president had recognized that freed slaves would have to play some part in the government of the South. In his last speech, on April 11, 1865, Lincoln said about black suffrage, "I myself would prefer that it were now conferred on the very intelligent, and on those who serve our cause as soldiers." At the very least that would have meant enfranchising several hundred thousand black men. The president had earlier endorsed the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands that Congress had created on March 3, 1865, to assist the transition from slavery to freedom.²

Having been a member of the Republican Party since 1855 and then its first president, Lincoln saw his political future in his second term as linked to