

Conservative to the Last Degree: The Emerging Illinois Republican Party and the Election of

1856

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With the 1856 Illinois anti-Nebraska state convention rapidly approaching, former state legislator Orville H. Browning balanced his optimism for the coming national election with a deep fears for what the meeting might yield. Writing to the state's junior U.S. Senator Lyman Trumbull, Browning explained his plan "to keep the party of this state under the control of moderate men, and conservative influences... If we do so[,] the future destiny of the state is in our own hands." But "if rash and ultra counsels prevail all is lost."<sup>1</sup>

In recent years, James Oakes and other so-called "fundamentalist" scholars have argued that the antebellum Republican Party which emerged from this moment committed itself to the radical goal of placing slavery "on a course of ultimate extinction" through a policy of "freedom national." In the case of the key battleground state of Illinois, historian Graham Peck has insisted that Republican leaders like Abraham Lincoln framed their policies in the language of conservatism and moderation while remaining "radical in practice." Furthermore, both Oakes and Peck have labeled Northern Democrats as explicitly pro-slavery. I believe that this interpretation of covert radicalism among Republicans and pro-slavery activism among Democrats fundamentally misrepresents the intentions and ideologies of both Illinois parties in 1856.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Orville H. Browning to Lyman Trumbull, May 19, 1856, *Lyman Trumbull Correspondence*, microfilm, Library of Congress, reel 2.

<sup>2</sup> James Oakes, *Freedom National: The Destruction of Slavery in the United States, 1861-1865* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2012); James Oakes, *The Scorpion's Sting: Antislavery and the Coming of the Civil War* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2014); Graham A. Peck, *Making An Antislavery Nation: Lincoln, Douglas, and the Battle Over Freedom* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 2017), 182. These recent works build on a foundation laid by scholars who contrasted a modernizing North led by the Republicans with a socially and economically stagnant South supported by Northern Democrats. See Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party before the Civil War*, 2nd ed. (New York, Oxford University Press, 1995) and Richard H. Sewell, *Ballots for Freedom: Antislavery Politics in the United States, 1837-1860*, 2nd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1980).

Instead, Orville H. Browning's hopes and fears for that election reflected the worldview of non-radicals—a broad constituency in Illinois—whom the historian Adam I.P. Smith has recently labeled the “silent majority” of the Northern electorate. By properly situating Illinois within the geography of what William W. Freehling has labeled the “Border North,” it becomes clear that most Illinoisans held distinctly conservative antislavery convictions. To be sure, Illinoisans preferred free labor to slavery, but like the residents of Indiana and some portions of New Jersey, Ohio, and Pennsylvania, the citizens of the state retained deep cultural and economic ties to their slave-state neighbors and proved reluctant to interfere directly with slavery where already established. Although a radical wing, led by the abolitionist Owen Lovejoy, made its presence known within the Illinois Republican Party, the overwhelming majority of Illinois Republicans self-identified as “conservatives” and pursued a “conservative” agenda. Rather than dismissing this language as propaganda, my analysis will take these labels seriously. Throughout this essay, I will refer to “conservative” actors and “conservative” policies. In doing so, I do not intend to tie these individuals or policies to a pre-existing “conservative” ideology.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the vast majority of these self-identified conservatives were anti-ideological. Instead, they advocated a restrained masculinity which prioritized social harmony over exorbitant ideals.<sup>4</sup> Stridently

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<sup>3</sup> This choice contrasts with the work of scholars who label antebellum conservatives as anti-modern and exclude nearly all Republicans from this category. For such a view see Michael F. Conlin, “The Dangerous *Isms* and the Fanatical *Ists*: Antebellum Conservatives in the South and the North Confront the Modernity Conspiracy,” *Journal of the Civil War Era* vol. 4, No. 2 (June 2014).

<sup>4</sup> As established by the historian Amy S. Greenberg, mid-nineteenth century American men practiced a restrained manhood by defining themselves in relation to established institutions, family, and faith. They valued reason over passion, expertise over charisma, and mixed-gendered domestic life over the traditional male arenas of taverns, race tracks, and dueling grounds. The period's rival conception of masculinity, martial manhood, prioritized dominance over cooperation and valued physical strength and personal honor. Although both restrained and martial men could be found in both sections, restrained Northerners increasingly projected the least desirable quantities of martial manhood onto all Southerners. See Amy S. Greenberg, *Manifest Manhood and the Antebellum American Empire* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 9-13.

opposed to “one-ideaism,” these conservatives of mid-century Illinois cherished moderation, continuity, and compromise.<sup>5</sup>

The diverse political geography of Illinois offers keen insights into the process of Northern realignment in the 1850s. Divided by most scholars into three distinct regions—northern, central, and southern—Illinois reflected the diverse range of opinions on the “slavery question” within the free states. Occupied principally by migrants from Virginia and Kentucky, southern Illinois, also known as “Little Egypt,” retained deep cultural ties to the Upper South and remained skeptical of any Northern effort to interfere with the institution despite the region’s commitment to free labor.<sup>6</sup> In contrast, the more recently settled counties of northern Illinois attracted many migrants from New England and Upstate New York and radical antislavery opinions garnered some public support. Despite a rapid increase in this region’s population

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<sup>5</sup> Adam I.P. Smith, *The Stormy Present: Conservatism and the Problem of Slavery in Northern Politics 1846-1865* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 3; William W. Freehling, *Becoming Lincoln* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2018), 168. These recent examinations of Northern conservatism and the rise of the Republican Party draw heavily on the work of so-called “neo-revisionists” who have emphasized the contingency of the sectional crisis instead of the “irrepressible conflict” over slavery. See especially Michael F. Holt, *The Political Crisis of the 1850s* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1978) and William E. Gienapp, *The Origins of the Republican Party, 1852-1856* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987). Although Smith and Freehling grapple primarily with the question of slavery in Northern society, like Holt and Gienapp, they acknowledge the power of socio-cultural issues in the 1850s and the uncertainty which defined the period’s partisan realignment. This essay seeks to build on their analysis, along with other notable works which are broader in scope. See especially David M. Potter, *The Impending Crisis, 1848-1861*, ed. Don E. Fehrenbacher (New York: Harper & Row, 1976); Edward L. Ayers, *What Caused the Civil War?: Reflections on the South and Southern History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2005); Elizabeth R. Varon, *Disunion! The Coming of the American Civil War, 1789-1859* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008).

<sup>6</sup> Despite the formal exclusion of slavery under the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, a small population of slaves remained in portions of southern Illinois through a variety of loopholes until the 1840s. Nevertheless, early settlers from the Upper South rejected an attempt to formally reintroduce slavery in 1824. For slavery’s continued presence in Illinois see Christopher P. Lehman, *Slavery in the Upper Mississippi Valley, 1787-1865: A History of Human Bondage in Illinois, Iowa, Minnesota, and Wisconsin* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2011); M. Scott Heerman, *The Alchemy of Slavery: Human Bondage in the Illinois Country, 1730-1865* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018). For detailed discussions of the state’s 1824 referendum see James Simeone, *Democracy and Slavery in Frontier Illinois: The Bottomland Republic* (DeKalb, Ill.: Northern Illinois University Press, 2000); Kurt E. Leichtle and Bruce G. Carveth, *Crusade Against Slavery: Edward Coles, Pioneer of Freedom* (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 2011).

throughout the 1850s, the state constitution's system of apportionment bolstered the influence of "Little Egypt" and the states' central counties. Central Illinois, the state's only solidly Whig enclave throughout the 1830s and 1840s, remained somewhere between these extremes and would emerge as the key battleground for Democrats and Republicans in the 1850s.<sup>7</sup>

These political distinctions derived in-part from changes in the state's broader economic framework. In the first decades after statehood, Illinois's pioneer farmers, concentrated in the southern and central counties, remained on the periphery of the national market. Producing mostly for their own subsistence, these culturally-Southern yeomen—often called Butternuts because of the color of their homespun garments—sent their limited surplus down the Mississippi to the port of New Orleans. But between 1840 and 1860, Yankee migration into Northern Illinois and a national revolution in communications and transportation reoriented the state towards commercial agriculture and northeastern markets. As technological innovations such as Cyrus McCormick's mechanical reaper increased yields beyond anything imaginable a decade before, internal improvements like the Illinois and Michigan Canal and the Illinois Central Railroad connected entrepreneurial farmers to eager consumers in the expanding eastern cities of Philadelphia, New York, and Boston. Rapidly integrating into the national economy, Chicago swelled from a population of less than one hundred in 1830 to more than one-hundred thousand by 1860. Perhaps more significant for the state's still overwhelming rural population,

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<sup>7</sup> For discussions of the state's political geography see Freehling, *Becoming Lincoln*, 167-171; Eric Foner, *The Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln and American Slavery* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2010), 72-73; Stephen L. Hansen, *The Making of the Third Party System: Voters and Parties in Illinois, 1850-1876* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1980), xv-xvii; Peck, *Making an Antislavery Nation*, 40-43.

grain production expanded so rapidly as to make Illinois the nation's leading producer of both corn and wheat by 1859.<sup>8</sup>

Illinois also reflected the North's sharp cultural divisions and increasingly diverse ethnic makeup. The earliest settlers, "Butternut" migrants from Virginia and Kentucky, dominated Southern Illinois. These hard-scrabble frontier folk and their dependents usually subscribed to the hard-line Calvinism their ancestors had brought with them from Ulster and Scotland. With predestination as their watchword, they perceived moral reform efforts as intrusive and misguided, an offense to God's sovereignty. The "Yankees," who migrated in increasing numbers from greater New England throughout the 1840s and 1850s, carried the zeal for Christian perfectionism sparked by the Second Great Awakening. Preaching a postmillennial Arminian faith which formed the foundation of Northern Evangelicalism, they enthusiastically supported morally oriented social movements such as Temperance, Sabbatarianism, and—among the most radical—Abolitionism. As in so many things, culturally blended central Illinois occupied a

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<sup>8</sup> The premier study of the economic development of Chicago and its vast hinterland is William Cronon's *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1991). See also Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 137, 564-567; Robert E. Ankli, "Agricultural Growth in Antebellum Illinois," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*, vol. 63, No. 4 (Winter, 1970), pp. 387-398; John J. Binder, "The Transportation Revolution and Antebellum Sectional Disagreement," *Social Science History*, vol. 35, No. 1 (Spring, 2011), 23-37.

moderate position and many of its citizens supported the well-established and politically heterogeneous Presbyterian, Methodist, and Episcopal churches.<sup>9</sup>

Although the native-born predominated, the state also contained an increasingly influential population of immigrants. Motivated to emigrate by both economic and political factors, the state's German-speakers generally came from middling backgrounds and had sufficient capital to establish farms, workshops, and stores throughout the state. Although mostly Catholic or Lutheran, a small contingent of free-thinking intellectuals and professionals, exiled after the failed Revolutions of 1848, would emerge as important leaders in this divided community. Impoverished Irish Catholics, on the other hand, migrated *en masse* to work as canal diggers and settled in Chicago where they emerged as one of the Democratic Party's most faithful constituencies.<sup>10</sup>

Representative of the North in many ways, Illinois proved exceptional in its national influence. The two most notable Northern political figures of the era, Stephen A. Douglas and Abraham Lincoln both called Illinois home. But it was Lyman Trumbull, a future author of the

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<sup>9</sup> For discussions on the economic and political implications of mid-century theological debates see Charles Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1846* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 393-395; Richard Carwardine, *Lincoln: A Life of Purpose and Power* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 32-44; Daniel Walker Howe, *The Political Culture of American Whigs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 166-167; Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 176-182. See also, Hansen, *The Making of the Third Party System*, 60-67; W.F. Short "Early Religious Leaders and Methods in Illinois," *Transactions of the Illinois State Historical Society for the Year 1900* (Springfield, Ill.: Illinois State Historical Library, 1900), pp. 56-62; Barton E. Price, "Religion, Reform, and Patriotism in Southern Illinois: A Case Study, 1852-1900," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*, vol. 107, No. (Summer, 2014), 175-188.

<sup>10</sup> For helpful discussions of German immigrants and politics in this period see Allison Clark Efford, *German Immigrants, Race, and Citizenship in the Civil War Era*, (New York: German Historical Institute and Cambridge University Press, 2013); Bruce Levine, *The Spirit of 1848: German Immigrants, Labor Conflict, and the Coming of the Civil War*, (Champaign, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1992). For an insightful discussion of the role of Irish immigrants in Chicago's political culture see Patricia Kelleher, "Class and Catholic Irish Masculinity in Antebellum America: Young Men on the Make in Chicago," *Journal of American Ethnic History*, vol. 28, No. 4 (Summer, 2009): 7-42.

13th Amendment, who took center stage amid rise of the Illinois Republican Party. A Jacksonian Democrat with New England roots, Trumbull appears at first glance to have more in common with Stephen Douglas than the Kentucky-born Whig Lincoln. Yet Trumbull's long-standing hostility to slave owners and his absolute commitment to free white labor compelled him to stand against Douglas and much of his own party in the aftermath of the Kansas-Nebraska Act.

Ultimately, while Lincoln played a crucial role in garnering support among former Whigs for an anti-extension coalition with anti-Nebraska Democrats, Trumbull's position in the Senate offered him profound influence over the emerging party on both the state and national levels.<sup>11</sup>

Born into a prominent family in Colchester, Connecticut, Lyman Trumbull received a classical education at Bacon Academy. His father, Benjamin Trumbull, owned a mid-sized farm and used his legal education to secure a position as a local judge. Still, the family's modest income could not keep pace with Yale's tuition and so at the age of twenty, Trumbull, like many other educated New Englanders, took a post as a teacher in a Southern private academy to fund his own legal education. As a teacher and law student in Meriweather County, Georgia, Trumbull developed a life-long distaste for the institution of slavery and the elite Southerners who maintained it. Firmly committed to the dignity of white labor, Trumbull adopted the political philosophy of a Jacksonian Democrat and moved to Illinois shortly after his admission to the bar.

Although firmly "opposed to the immediate emancipation of the slaves and to the doctrine of

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<sup>11</sup> The three most notable biographies of Trumbull are Horace White's, *The Life of Lyman Trumbull* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Riverside Press, 1913), Mark M. Krug's, *Lyman Trumbull: Conservative Radical* (New York: A.S. Barnes and Company, Inc., 1965), and Ralph J. Roske's, *His Own Counsel: The Life and Times of Lyman Trumbull* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1979). Of these, Krug most directly engages with the question of Trumbull's political philosophy. Although his label of "conservative radical" recognizes the profound implications of Trumbull's self-identified conservatism, the term "radical" imposes a label Trumbull never embraced and alludes to debates during Congressional Reconstruction. In keeping with Trumbull's antebellum understanding of the term, my own analysis will refer to Trumbull as a conservative, and his policies as advancing a philosophy of conservatism.

Abolitionism,” Trumbull denounced the mob which killed the abolitionist Elijah Lovejoy (older brother to Owen) in Alton in 1837. Throughout the 1840s, he worked to close proslavery loopholes in the state’s laws, serving as a *pro bono* counsel for the black plaintiff in the noted case of *Jarrot v. Jarrot*. Establishing a place for himself within the Illinois Democratic Party as a state legislator and judge, Trumbull ardently defended the interests of Illinois’ ordinary white farmers against the elites of Northern cities and Southern plantations. After the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854, Trumbull came to believe that the latter posed a greater threat to the integrity of the Union and the dignity of white labor. Although most Illinois Democrats stood behind the Nebraska Act’s author, Senator Stephen A. Douglas, a determined minority joined Trumbull in denouncing him as a lackey to the aristocratic Slave Power.<sup>12</sup>

In contrast to the view of more radical Republicans, for Trumbull and his supporters in Illinois, “freedom national” did not entail a total divorce of the Federal government from slavery. Rather, it meant protecting the Western territories promised to them as white men. Determined to protect their vision for the Union from the aggression of the “Slave Power,” conservative Illinois Republicans objected to the extension of slavery into previously free territories—namely Kansas—but definitively opposed Federal intervention within the slave states themselves. In addition, despite Stephen Douglas’ seeming indifference to slavery’s extension on the national stage, many Illinois “Douglas” Democrats sincerely believed that his policy of popular sovereignty offered the pragmatic solution to blocking slavery’s extension to the West. This common conservative

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<sup>12</sup> Krug, *Conservative Radical*, 20-25; Roske, *His Own Counsel*, 2-10; Trumbull’s extended family included the Connecticut Governor Jonathan Trumbull and the noted artist John Trumbull. For Trumbull’s views on the Alton Riot see the letter dated November 12, 1837 reprinted in White, *The Life of Lyman Trumbull*, 8-11. For his work to end slavery in Illinois see M. Scott Heerman, *The Alchemy of Slavery: Human Bondage in the Illinois Country, 1730-1865* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), 139-150.

goal confirms the weak “antislavery consensus” outlined by I.P. Smith in his recent book *The Stormy Present*. Indeed, partisan rancor within Illinois had little to do with slavery itself, and much more to do with the preservation of the Union.<sup>13</sup>

Although yet to take center stage, the view of former Whig Abraham Lincoln illustrates another perspective from the Border North. In part due to his own unorthodox religious beliefs, Lincoln consistently rejected the coercive tendencies of Yankee evangelical reform efforts which characterized New England’s former Whigs. While he became a dedicated advocate of temperance (if not teetotalism) and a firm opponent of slavery on moral grounds, Lincoln never supported the legal prohibition of liquor and readily acknowledged the protections afforded to slavery under the Constitution. Indeed, Lincoln applauded the “great body of the Northern people” who “[crucified] their feelings, in order to maintain their loyalty to the constitution and the Union.” At least in the antebellum years, Lincoln always prioritized the well-being of the nation, his public duty, over moral conviction, which he viewed as personal.<sup>14</sup>

Rather, Lincoln’s political philosophy reflected a typical border Whig commitment to national development, personal improvement, and law and order. Lincoln’s Kentucky roots and marriage to Mary Todd predisposed him to emulate the Bluegrass State’s favorite son: Henry Clay. A champion of economic modernization and political moderation, Clay sought to commercially integrate a Union of commercially-oriented farmers, thrifty manufacturers, and ambitious entrepreneurs through government-sponsored internal improvements, protective tariffs, and well-regulated banks. Lincoln championed Clay’s vision for internal improvements

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<sup>13</sup> Smith, *The Stormy Present*, 16-20.

<sup>14</sup> Lincoln to Joshua F. Speed, August 24, 1855 in Roy P. Basler, Marion Dolores Pratt, and Lloyd A. Dunlap, eds., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 2: 320; Carwadine, *Lincoln*, 7-8; Freehling, *Becoming Lincoln*, 106-107.

throughout his time in the Illinois legislature, promoting a massive program of state-funded canals and railroads even after the Crisis of 1839 swamped the state's finances. A backwoods boy who had successfully integrated into what he believed to be a higher state of society—a world of interconnected minds and markets—Lincoln's support for national integration and economic expansion grew from an egalitarian commitment to self-improvement rather than an elitist reaction to democratic excess.<sup>15</sup>

A life-long colonizationist, Clay repudiated slavery as anti-republican even as he continued to hold slaves and reject abolitionism. Nevertheless, Clay opposed the extension of slavery and expressed support for gradual and compensated emancipation when “safe and practicable.” Lincoln would echo this preference for colonization and gradual and compensated emancipation well into the Civil War. As the architect of the Missouri Compromise, the Compromise Tariff of 1833, and the Compromise of 1850, Clay fused his progressivism with a pragmatic commitment to peaceful accommodation. Lincoln's decision to re-engage in politics following the passage Kansas-Nebraska Act surely stemmed in part from the bill's express repudiation of Clay's great sectional compromise. Indeed, while Lincoln seems to have had more sympathy for enslaved blacks than many of his contemporaries, his opposition to slavery's extension arose from primarily from a perceived break with tradition. Although most contemporary historians would reject Lincoln's analysis, he sincerely believed the framers of the Constitution had intended to restrict slavery's further expansion. His defense of a free Kansas would develop from this fundamental commitment to anti-extensionist interpretation of the

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<sup>15</sup> Howe, *The Political Culture of American Whigs*, 266-267; Carwardine, *Lincoln*, 14-20; Freehling, *Becoming Lincoln*, 56-57.

Constitution along with his belief that slavery violated the country's commitment to fair competition within a free market for capital and labor.<sup>16</sup>

While they approached the issue from different perspectives, Lincoln and Trumbull found common cause in the defense of the Kansas yeomanry against the Slave Power's aggression. For a Democrat like Trumbull, the Slave Power represented an aristocratic element reminiscent of the Money Power by Andrew Jackson during the Bank War of the 1830s. The spread of slavery into free territory already reserved for freedom cheated ordinary white farmers out of land and degraded their labor. Of course, most Illinois Democrats believed that the people's exercise of popular sovereignty would prevent such an outcome, but Trumbull and his cohort of anti-Nebraska Jacksonians correctly predicted that aristocratic slaveholders would fail to respect the will of the majority. Although Lincoln's hopes for the future of Kansas included commercial and financial plans anathema to Democrats, this border Whig shared their concern for preserving the agency of ordinary white men. Lincoln recognized that men would only elevate their own condition only if their status in society depended on their labor rather than their origin. Slavery violated this principle by depriving the enslaved of their labor power, but more importantly for Lincoln, it imposed an unnatural barrier for the white wage worker who sought to accumulate capital. Only the legal exclusion of slavery could create a society where Lincoln believed "The

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<sup>16</sup> Howe, *The Political Culture of American Whigs*, 136-137, 272-273; Matthew Norman, "Abraham Lincoln, Stephen A. Douglas, the Model Republic, and the Right of Revolution, 1848-1861," in *Politics and Culture of the Civil War Era: Essays in Honor of Robert W. Johannsen*, ed. Daniel McDonough and Kenneth W. Noe, (Selinsgrove, Penn.: Susquehanna University Press, 2006), 181; Freehling, *Becoming Lincoln*, 112-113; Carwardine, *Lincoln*, 24-25.

man who labored for another last year, this year labors for himself, and next year... will hire others to labor for him.”<sup>17</sup>

White Northerners of both parties believed that the Union—the manifestation of America’s experiment in democracy and republican government—represented the legacy of the American Revolution and humanity’s best hope for liberty. For the majority of Northern whites, the Union assured men of all backgrounds the rights of self-government, personal independence, and private property. The threat to this Union posed by radicals of all stripes galvanized white Northern voters throughout the 1850s and helps to explain the bipartisan reaction against secessionist aggression in 1861.

Drawing on the correspondence of leading Illinois Republicans and a wide range of partisan newspapers, I will show that mainstream Illinois Republicans sought to capitalize on their state’s antislavery consensus while maintaining an authentically conservative defense of the Union. For these Republicans, a free soil agenda did not represent an aggressive first step towards national abolition, but a defensive response to the noxious “ultraism” of slaveocrats and abolitionists alike. Divided among themselves for much of the realignment period of 1854-1856, Illinois’ conservative opponents of the Kansas Nebraska Act overcame their differences at the Bloomington Convention in May 1856. Bolstered by the recent attacks on Lawrence, Kansas and Senator Charles Sumner, the Illinois Republicans took a defensive posture against Southern aggression. “Douglas” Democrats, for their part, distrusted the Republicans as incendiaries willing to risk disunion for free soil and maintained that popular sovereignty provided a

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<sup>17</sup> Jonathan H. Earle, *Jacksonian Antislavery & the Politics of Free Soil, 1824-1854* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 192-198; Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men*, 14-16; “Speech at Kalamazoo, Michigan, August 27, 1856,” *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 2: 364.

reasonable antislavery solution. Undecided voters, wavering Democrats and ex-Whigs alike, balanced their genuine dislike of slavery with a suspicion of abolitionist agitation and a fear of disunion. Ultimately, the more radical national Republican Platform proved too extreme for many skeptics in central Illinois. Still, the Illinois Republicans' local successes with ex-Whigs in these same regions provided a clear path forward for the party as the conservative defenders of the Union in the coming contests of 1858 and 1860.

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At the beginning of 1856, the leaders of the Illinois anti-Nebraska movement faced a set of challenging obstacles. While a popular backlash to Stephen A. Douglas' Kansas-Nebraska Act had propelled dozens of Anti-Nebraska Illinoisans into office in 1854, profound uncertainty and mistrust left the coalition volatile and vulnerable. Previous party allegiances retained potency for many would-be allies. Lifelong Democrats, including Trumbull, balked at the prospect of giving up on "the Democracy" despite their fierce opposition to Douglas and popular sovereignty. Likewise, former Whigs debated whether to cast their lot with the anti-Nebraska Democrats or the nativist American Party—better known as "Know-Nothing" Party—which had also risen to national prominence in the aftermath of the Nebraska Bill. Both sides remained deeply suspicious of the radical Free Soilers, led by Owen Lovejoy, who sought to push the anti-Nebraska movement far beyond its conservative goal of restoring the Missouri Compromise.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> For a general overview of the partisan realignment in 1854 see Hansen, *The Making of the Third Party System*, 37-57. For Trumbull's continued commitment to the Democratic Party, see Roske, *His Own Counsel*, 22-23. For the debates among ex-Whigs, see Joel L. Sibley, "'Always a Whig in Politics' the Partisan Life of Abraham Lincoln," *Papers of the Abraham Lincoln Association*, vol. 8 (1986): 21-42. See also, William E. Gienapp, "Nativism and the Creation of a Republican Majority in the North before the Civil War," *The Journal of American History*, vol. 72, No. 3 (Dec., 1985): 529-540. For suspicion of the radicals, see Victor B. Howard, "The Illinois Republican Party: Part I: A Party Organizer for the Republicans in 1854," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*, vol. 64, No. 2 (Summer, 1971): 142-150.

In October 1854, Lovejoy and his fellow abolitionist Ichabod Coddington had attempted to organize a state-wide Republican party at a convention in Springfield. Former members of the Liberty Party, the pair had traditionally linked their political and economic critiques of slavery with a moralistic denunciation steeped in the language of evangelical Christianity. Their condemnation of slavery had often extended to the Constitution's compromises with the institution, and while they never adopted the Garrisonian "covenant with death" perspective, the Liberty Party explicitly annulled the Fugitive Slave Clause as incompatible with God's law. As a result of this radical reputation, Lovejoy and Coddington failed to attract the support of central Illinois' moderate anti-Nebraska Whigs like Abraham Lincoln, who left town to avoid any connection to the gathering. Although the platform proved moderate relative to previous abolitionist responses to the Kansas-Nebraska Act, this Springfield convention further alienated conservatives after the pro-Douglas press falsely reported that the convention had called for a repeal of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act.<sup>19</sup>

In addition, although anti-Nebraska Whigs and Democrats had coordinated during the campaign, partisan resentments flared in the aftermath of their 1854 victory. The five anti-Nebraska Democrats elected to the state legislature refused to support Lincoln's bid for the open U.S. Senate seat and compelled the body's forty-six anti-Nebraska Whigs to back their candidate—Trumbull—or yield the seat to the regular Democrat Governor Joel A. Matteson. Still committed to their distinct identity as Democrats—albeit irregular Democrats—they hoped that

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<sup>19</sup> Gienapp, *The Origins of the Republican Party, 1852-1856*, 123-124; Howard, "The Illinois Republican Party: Part I," 151; William F. Moore and Jane A. Moore, *Collaborators for Emancipation: Abraham Lincoln and Owen Lovejoy* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014), 13-18. For an overview of the Liberty Party and the Fugitive Slave Act see Corey M. Brooks, *Liberty Power: Antislavery Third Parties and the Transformation of American Politics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016), 70-71, 162-163.

Trumbull's election might bring their estranged allies to their senses and remain true to the Jacksonian tradition. While Lincoln and his supporters ultimately deferred to Trumbull after nine ballots, the experience embittered the former Whigs and showcased the fractious nature of their coalition.<sup>20</sup>

Despite skepticism among the ex-Whigs, Trumbull proved steadfast in his anti-Nebraska convictions. When given the chance, the new Senator immediately locked horns with Stephen Douglas. Renouncing the epithets of "abolitionist" and "Know-Nothing" hurled at him by Douglas, Trumbull seized the populist traditions of the Democracy for his own side on the debate over slavery's extension. Challenging his senior colleague's judgement and integrity on the floor of the Senate, Trumbull detailed the acts of intimidation and violence committed against the innocent free soil settlers of Kansas by their pro-slavery Missouri neighbors. Denouncing the Kansas-Nebraska Act for a lack of "fixed and certain principle" which contributed nothing "except for evil in consequence of its vagueness" this three hour speech, praised by Horace

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<sup>20</sup> Matteson had astutely avoided offering a formal statement on the Kansas-Nebraska Act during his time as Governor of Illinois, but he passively announced his position by remaining within the regular Democratic Party after its passage. Although Stephen Douglas had wished to re-elect the incumbent, the explicitly pro-Nebraska Senator James Shields, pro-Nebraska Democrats switched their support to Matteson when it became clear that wavering Whigs might support him over Shields or Lincoln. See Robert W. Johansen, *Stephen A. Douglas*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 463-464. See also Roeske, *His Own Counsel*, 25-27; Freehling, *Becoming Lincoln*, 177-179.

Greeley's *New York Tribune* as comparable to the orations of Patrick Henry and Daniel Webster, positioned Trumbull as Douglas' "natural antipode" on the national stage.<sup>21</sup>

Indeed, Trumbull's resolute defiance in the face of Douglas won him Whig converts in Illinois as well. Writing "on behalf of the old disbanded Whigs," the Belvidere attorney Stephen A. Hurlburt praised Trumbull for maintaining that "just medium where the sober citizenship of the country can stand unbroken." Equally impressed by Trumbull's rejection of the "radicalism and anarchy" promoted by adherents to "a higher law" and the "southern madness made rampant by political success," Hurlbert encouraged Trumbull to "hold fast" to the "sound national constitutional basis" he had assumed in his debates with the Douglas Democrats.<sup>22</sup>

Meanwhile, although out of office, Lincoln continued to exercise political influence. At a gathering of prominent anti-Nebraska newspaper editors at Decatur on February 22, 1856, Lincoln employed a mixture of folksy charm and hard-nosed pragmatism to reframe the question of slavery's extension on conservative terms. Setting the stage for a fusion of anti-Nebraska activists into a single statewide party, the Decatur resolutions ensured respect for slavery within the slave states and acknowledged their constitutional obligations to honor the Three-Fifths

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<sup>21</sup> A pro-Nebraska challenge to Trumbull's eligibility for office delayed his entry into the Senate. Under the Illinois Constitution, state officers could not seek any other office until one year after their term expired. While Trumbull had resigned his position as a state judge, pro-Nebraska Democrats claimed he remained ineligible throughout his nine-year term. The Senate ultimately confirmed Trumbull's membership on March 5, 1856. See *Congressional Globe*, 34th Congress, 1st Session, 562-584. See also, *Alton Weekly Telegraph*, March 13, 1856. For details surrounding the pair's confrontation see White, *The Life of Lyman Trumbull*, 58-62 Krug, *Conservative Radical*, 123-125, and Johansen, *Stephen A. Douglas*, 495-496. For the text of Trumbull's speech see Appendix to the *Congressional Globe*, 34th Congress, 1st Session, 201-202. For national coverage see *New York Tribune*, March 19, 1856 (quote); *Pittsburgh Gazette*, March 24, 1856; *National Era* (Washington D.C.), March 27, 1856.

<sup>22</sup> Stephen A. Hurlbut to Trumbull, May 2, 1856, *Trumbull Correspondence*. Introduced by Senator William H. Seward of New York in 1850, this "higher law" doctrine claimed that despite the protections for slavery inscribed in the Constitution, divinely-instituted natural law forbade slavery and this "higher law" ought to govern slavery's extension into the territories.

Compromise, return fugitive slaves, and suppress domestic violence (i.e., slave revolts). Indeed, the journalists instead focused their resolutions on unifying policies such as the restoration of the Missouri Compromise, protections for naturalized citizens, and the elimination of graft within the state government.<sup>23</sup>

Despite these concessions, the anti-Nebraska Democrats remained reluctant to unite on a common platform with the likes of Lovejoy. Although the editors at Decatur had made significant overtures to conservatives by acknowledging the proslavery compromises of the Constitution, their broad denunciation of “property in man” and assertion that slavery violated the Constitution’s essential principles alarmed skeptics who remained primed for abolitionist dog-whistles. Furthermore, in addition to their call to restore the Missouri Compromise and ensure a free Kansas, the Decatur Resolutions opposed the entry of any additional slave states. Seemingly inconsequential in hindsight, this distinction remained important for expansion-minded Democrats hesitant to limit the nation’s growth southward.<sup>24</sup>

Trumbull, for one, began a targeted mailing campaign to galvanize conservative voices and marginalize the abolitionists at the state anti-Nebraska convention, set for late May in Bloomington. Circulating his own speeches as well as the works of other anti-Nebraska conservatives to small-town newspapers, Trumbull hoped to rally moderately antislavery ex-Whigs and Democrats to his cause while also combatting pro-Douglas propaganda which labeled him as a radical. But amid the chaotic collapse of the Second Party System, some southern Illinoisans began to mistrust their local editors. Having always identified as Democrats, many

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<sup>23</sup> *Illinois State Journal*, February 27, 1856; Speech at “Decatur, Illinois: February 22, 1856” in Roy P. Basler, Marion Dolores Pratt, and Lloyd A. Dunlap, eds., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 2: 333; Freehling, *Becoming Lincoln*, 182-183.

<sup>24</sup> *Illinois State Journal*, February 27, 1856; Foner, *The Fiery Trial*, 77.

gravitated towards Douglas, who franked hundreds pro-Nebraska tracts to the region.

Encouraged by local leaders such as Lewis Brown, who instructed him to “fight the devil with his own weapons,” Trumbull mirrored Douglas’ use of the franking privilege for political ends.

Armed with lists of anti-Nebraska men throughout the state, Trumbull sought to maintain his own Jacksonian bonafides and distributed tracts to local Democratic groups as far south as Massac County which stressed protections for white farmers and the restoration of the Missouri Compromise as the central goals of the “true Democracy.”<sup>25</sup>

Nevertheless, the anti-Nebraska Democrat endorsed by Lincoln for governor at Decatur, former Congressman William Bissell, remained decidedly pessimistic. Writing to Trumbull less than a month before the scheduled Bloomington Convention, Bissell acknowledged that given “a different state of things [he] should have no objections to running,” but with anti-Nebraska Whigs and radicals firmly in control of the proceedings, he could “see no sort of inducement to mix [himself] up with them” and intended to decline the nomination. Acknowledging that altered circumstances might convince him to reconsider, Bissell prayed that providence might intervene “in time for us to save the state.”<sup>26</sup>

Even with these fears, other anti-Nebraska Democrats recognized Bloomington as an opportunity to seize control of the movement and redefine the anti-extension battle. George T. Brown, an Alton newspaper editor and state legislator, reminded Trumbull that their chance of retaining any influence among pro-Nebraska Democrats had evaporated at the Democratic

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<sup>25</sup> Roeske, *His Own Counsel*, 36; *Alton Weekly Courier*, April 3, 1856; Lewis Brown to Trumbull, May 1, 1856, *Trumbull Correspondence*; N.B. Risigner to Trumbull, May 2, 1856, *Trumbull Correspondence*; S.M. Skinner to Trumbull, May 3, 1856, *Trumbull Correspondence*; James Bain to Trumbull, May 3, 1856; *Trumbull Correspondence*.

<sup>26</sup> William Bissell to Trumbull, May 5, 1856, *Trumbull Correspondence*.

Party's state convention at Springfield. There, the pro-Douglas delegates had adopted a resolution which condemned Trumbull as a "black republican" who won his office "against the unanimous voice and wish of the democracy of Illinois."<sup>27</sup> Organizing anti-Nebraska men of both parties throughout central Illinois "to make the Bloomington affair as respectable as possible," Brown hoped to use the convention's platform to frame Trumbull as the "true representative of the state." With promises of support from the anti-Nebraska Democratic Lieutenant Governor Gustave Koerner and former Whig Congressman Richard Yates, Brown was now "satisfied that [Bloomington's] proceedings [would] be conservative."<sup>28</sup>

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To the horror of many, distant events in Kansas and Washington, D.C. fundamentally altered conditions on the ground for Illinois' anti-Nebraskaites. The proslavery raid on Lawrence, Kansas and the caning of U.S. Senator Charles Sumner galvanized anti-Southern feeling throughout Illinois and empowered conservative anti-Nebraskaites to take control of the Bloomington Convention. Reacting against the violence and disorder of the Slave Power, Trumbull, Lincoln, and their compatriots sought to unite conservative Illinoisans on their common commitments to the Constitution and the Union. Advancing the popularly held Northern conception of restrained masculinity, they framed the assault on Lawrence and Sumner as attacks on free white labor and the freedom of speech for white men.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> *Ottawa Free Trader*, May 10, 1856.

<sup>28</sup> George T. Brown to Trumbull, May 12, 1856, *Trumbull Correspondence*.

<sup>29</sup> Although the scope of this essay does not allow for an extended discussion on the state of the nativist movement in Illinois in early 1856, Michael F. Holt asserts that these two events allowed the slavery question to displace immigration as the primary issue among Whiggish conservatives throughout the Border North in 1856. See Holt, *The Political Crisis*, 192-195 and Michael F. Holt, *Political Parties and American Political Development from the Age of Jackson to the Age of Lincoln* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State, 1992), 278-280.

On May 21, 1856 proslavery border ruffians from Missouri attacked the Free Soil settlement of Lawrence, Kansas. Burning the Free State Hotel to the ground, the raiders ransacked private homes and businesses before destroying the printing presses of two antislavery newspapers. One of a series of violent episodes in the territory which created the infamous image of “Bleeding Kansas,” the raid on Lawrence received widespread coverage in Northern newspapers. Anti-Nebraska editors seized on the incident as proof of the folly of popular sovereignty and framed the raid as an attack on the principle of free labor and the manhood of ordinary white Northerners.<sup>30</sup> In the national press, Horace Greeley’s *New York Daily Tribune* identified the “charred and blackened waste” of Lawrence as proof that two years of so-called popular sovereignty had transformed the territory “into a breeding-ground and fortress of Human Slavery.” Illinois’ anti-Nebraska *Alton Weekly Telegraph* described the raid as an outrageous exhibition of “mob law” characteristic of a new era of “brute force” which had superseded the Constitution and order in the territories. The *Freeport Daily Journal* directly tied the “heap of smoldering ruins” at Lawrence to the Bloomington Convention and called on citizens to use the gathering as a platform to defend “all that is dear to American freemen.”<sup>31</sup>

The sense of disorder created by the attack on Lawrence escalated further with following day’s attack on Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts. Perhaps the most radical antislavery member of the Senate, Sumner had delivered a searing five-hour admonishment of Southern aggression in Kansas on May 19 and 20. His tirade specifically targeted several of his colleagues,

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<sup>30</sup> Kristen Tegtmeier Oertel, *Bleeding Borders: Race, Gender, and Violence in Pre-Civil War Kansas* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2009), 85-87; Adam Wesley Dean, *An Agrarian Republic: Farming, Antislavery Politics, and Nature Parks in the Civil War Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 50-58.

<sup>31</sup> *New York Daily Tribune*, May 26, 1856; *Alton Weekly Telegraph*, May 29, 1856; *Freeport Daily Journal*, May 27, 1856.

including Senator Andrew Butler of South Carolina. This insult provoked Butler's cousin, Congressman Preston Brooks, to assail Sumner with a cane on the floor of the Senate on May 22 with the help of fellow Congressman William Barksdale of Mississippi. Beating Sumner to a bloody pulp while onlookers watched helplessly, Brooks received praise throughout the South for defending his kinsman's honor. Northerners, on the other hand, interpreted the assault as an attack on free speech and the rights of ordinary white men.<sup>32</sup>

Although most Northerners considered Sumner as an obnoxious extremist, and recoiled at his demands for racial equality, Brooks' actions seemed to confirm their worst fears about the Southern "Slave Power." No longer content to dominate black slaves alone, the despotic Southern slaveholders now hoped to make slaves of white Northerners, stifling voices of dissent with the rod. Such an egregious act of violence on the floor of the Senate, an offense unbecoming of a man according Northern standards of restraint and self-discipline, also revealed the South's antipathy for order and good government. The choice left for Northerners, as Horace Greeley framed the issue in the pages of the *Tribune*, was between civilization and barbarism, between freedom and slavery for white men, because "so long as our truly civilized communities succumb to the rule of the barbarian elements in our political system, we must be judged by the character and conduct of our accepted masters."<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Joanne B. Freeman, *The Field of Blood: Violence in Congress and the Road to Civil War* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018), 217-234; Manisha Sinha, "The Caning of Charles Sumner: Slavery, Race, and Ideology in the Age of the Civil War," *The Journal of the Early Republic*, vol. 23, No. 2 (Summer, 2003): 233-262.

<sup>33</sup> William E. Gienapp, "The Crime Against Sumner: The Caning of Charles Sumner and the Rise of the Republican Party," *Civil War History*, vol. 25, No. 3, (September, 1979): 218-245; Brook D. Simpson "Hit Him Again: The Canning of Charles Sumner," in *Congress and the Crisis of the 1850s*, ed. Paul Finkelman and Donald R. Kennon (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2012), 213-218; *New York Tribune*, May 24, 1856.

The Illinois press echoed these sentiments. In Bloomington, the anti-Nebraska *Weekly Pantagraph* declared that under the proslavery regime, “no man, in private or public life, who has the manhood to express the sentiments worthy of a freeman, is safe from the attacks of cowardly scoundrels!” In Springfield, the *Illinois State Journal* wondered aloud: what “are matters coming [to] in this free land? Can the north no longer raise her voice in the halls of Legislation, without being outraged and insulted?” The *Freeport Daily Journal* noted that “Conservative men all over the north, men who have never sympathized in the least with Abolitionists, but have always stood diametrically opposed to them, are now standing up to the shameless aggressions of the Slave power.” Notably, even the fiercely pro-Douglas *Ottawa Free Trader* declared that “unquestionably, the attack [on Sumner] must be regarded as a shameful and brutal outrage.” Throughout the state, regular Democratic papers tended to emphasize Sumner’s radical abolitionism, but none could defend Brook’s assault on a sitting U.S. Senator and chastised Southerners for their unrestrained aggression.<sup>34</sup>

Such denunciations went beyond the partisan presses and became the central concern for the politically engaged anti-Nebraska men of all backgrounds. Indeed, as documented by Senator Trumbull’s incoming correspondence, ordinary Illinoisans reacted ferociously against the Slave Power in the days following the attacks on Lawrence and Senator Sumner. Writing to Trumbull on May 23, businessman E.W. Hazard of Galesburg denounced the brutality of the South and Stephen Douglas for having “sold the freemen of the North for office.” Another constituent, the ex-Whig lawyer Abraham Jonas, labeled the Lawrence attacks “a Second Glencoe” after the

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<sup>34</sup> *The Weekly Pantagraph* (Bloomington, Ill.), May 28, 1856; *Illinois State Journal*, May 24, 1856; *Freeport Daily Journal*, May 29, 1856; *Ottawa Free Trader*, May 31, 1856. See also *Salem Weekly Advocate*, May 29, 1856; *Mount Carmel Register*, May 29, 1856.

seventeenth century Scottish massacre made famous by Sir Walter Scott’s poem of treason and pitiless “Southern clemency.” Ebenezer Peck, an anti-Nebraska Democrat from Chicago, made clear that he viewed the assault on Sumner as “an assault upon freedom and free speech everywhere.” Joseph Gillespie, a state senator from southern Illinois associated with the Know Nothings wrote that his constituents shared his belief that “the Union is in great danger” as a result of “these ruffianly proceedings” and noted a growing “aposition [*sic*] to the repeal of the Missouri Compromise” among those previously apathetic to the slavery question. With a dramatic flair, the Reverend Benjamin Franklin Lemen, a Baptist minister from Marion County, called on Trumbull to summon the “moral courage” to stand up to “the ghostly deformed image of iniquity” in “these dagger days—in these secret midnight banditti days.”<sup>35</sup>

This moment also allowed anti-Nebraska activists to attach specific individuals to the seemingly faceless Slave Power conspiracy. Preston Brooks exemplified the tyranny inherent in Southern aristocrats’ code of “chivalry.” Brooks’ “attempt to crush out free speech by brutal violence” revealed that Southern honor amounted to nothing more than “sheer cowardice” and “fiendish malice.”<sup>36</sup> But the attack in the Senate, when coupled with sack of Lawrence, also highlighted the Northern-born targets of Sumner’s “Crime Against Kansas” speech. Following Sumner’s lead, outraged Illinoisians lambasted President Pierce and Stephen A. Douglas as champions of the border ruffians and proslavery mob rule. Both appeared to have betrayed the

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<sup>35</sup> E.W. Hazard to Trumbull, May 23, 1856, *Trumbull Correspondence*; Abraham Jonas to Trumbull, May 26, 1856, *Trumbull Correspondence*; Sir Walter Scott, “The Massacre of Glencoe,” in *The Poetical Works of Sir Walter Scott* (Edinburgh: Archibald Constable & Co., 1821), 7: 477-480, line 40; Ebenezer Peck to Trumbull, May 26, 1856, *Trumbull Correspondence*; Joseph Gillespie to Trumbull, May 29, 1856, *Trumbull Correspondence*; Benjamin Franklin Lemen to Trumbull, June 1, 1856, *Trumbull Correspondence*.

<sup>36</sup> *Illinois State Journal*, June 2, 1856; *The Moline Workingman*, June 11, 1856.

interests of their free labor constituents in a quest for power. The violence now directed at free soil men in Kansas made Douglas “worse than Benedict Arnold” and “Frank Pierce and his myrmidons...murders and traitors... [responsible for] all the blood shed there.”<sup>37</sup> The anti-Nebraska Press substantiated these charges by emphasizing the pair’s close relationship with former Missouri Senator David Atchison. Atchison, who had pressured Douglas to introduce the Kansas-Nebraska Act back in 1854, now led hordes of proslavery Missourians in cross border raids and served as a dastardly figurehead for the otherwise anonymous vigilantes.<sup>38</sup>

The powerful force of collective indignation lay at the heart of these critiques of Southern aggression. As an emotion associated with the abolitionist movement, indignation on behalf of the enslaved had long failed to stir Northern hearts. Despite their personal distaste for slavery, mainstream party men like Trumbull, Lincoln, and other self-identified conservatives had readily acquiesced to protections for slavery within the Compromise of 1850, including a revised Fugitive Slave Act. But for this same cohort, the attacks on Lawrence and Senator Sumner revealed that the Southern Slave Power now sought to dominate the free men of the North.

Already alarmed by the repeal of the quasi-sacred Missouri Compromise, conservatives were compelled by such overt acts of violence to acknowledge the radical threat posed by the slaveholding class of the South. Far beyond securing the right to slavery within their own states, Southern slaveholders now hoped to subordinate proponents of free labor as their vassals, depriving them their right to representation in the government and their freedom of speech. In his examination of emotion and antebellum sectional conflict, historian Michael E. Woods captures

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<sup>37</sup> Quote concerning Douglas in E.W. Hazard to Trumbull, May 23, 1856, *Trumbull Correspondence*. Denunciation of Pierce quoted in *Alton Weekly Telegraph*, June 12, 1856.

<sup>38</sup> Charles H. Sumner, “The Crime Against Kansas—The Apologies for the Crime— The True Remedy” (Boston: John P. Jewett & Co., 1856); *Alton Weekly Telegraph*, June 12, 1856.

the profound implications for this moment. “Northern indignation was more than an ephemeral outburst of passion. It directly promoted political realignment, bringing former opponents into the Republican camp.” Indeed, to the amazement of many, a fusion of former Whigs, Democrats, and Free Soilers crystalized in Illinois one week later at Bloomington.<sup>39</sup>

Although Richard H. Sewell has argued that these twin assaults strengthened the hand of the radical anti-Nebraskaites, many “fundamentalist” scholars, including Eric Foner and Graham Peck, concur with the “neo-revisionist” historians Gienapp, I.P. Smith, and Freehling that this moment marked a turning point for conservatives in Illinois.<sup>40</sup> For such moderates, the raid on Lawrence and attack on Sumner seemed to prove that the greatest threats to law, order, and the Constitution came not from abolitionists, but the Southern Slave Power and their “dough-faced” Northern abettors. Compelled to build a new political coalition for the defense of Northern white rights, they hoped to unite anti-Nebraska men on the principles of perpetual Union, free speech, and majority rule. Maintaining a defensive posture, they insisted only on a restoration of the Missouri Compromise. This goal, the “lowest common denominator” within the proto-Republican ranks, fell far short of the aggressive goals of political abolitionists. Indeed, the delegates who assembled at the Bloomington Convention had no intention of surrounding the slave states with a “cordon of freedom.” Rather, as captured by a sympathetic Springfield editor, they had gathered “for the purpose rolling back the black tide which [had] swell[ed] upward

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<sup>39</sup> Michael E. Woods, *Emotional and Sectional Conflict in the Antebellum United States* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 166.

<sup>40</sup> Sewell, *Ballots for Freedom*, 279-281; Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men*, 198-200; Peck, *Making an Antislavery Nation*, 166-168; Gienapp, *The Origins of the Republican Party*, 299-303; Gienapp, “The Crime Against Sumner,” 229-232; I.P. Smith, *The Stormy Present*, 84-88; Freehling, *Becoming Lincoln*, 184-185.

from the South and threaten[ed] to snatch away the liberties of the free inhabitants of the North.”<sup>41</sup>

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The 270 anti-Nebraska delegates who convened at Major’s Hall in Bloomington on May 29, 1856 sought to capitalize on this newly awakened Northern consciousness and overcome the lingering barriers of conflicting ideologies and former partisan allegiances. Located in the center of the state and at the intersection of two major railroads, Bloomington proved the perfect for delegates to meet in the middle— both geographically and ideologically. The platform the delegates adopted made no mention of the classically divisive subjects of banking, internal improvements, or the protective tariff. Nor did it protest the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 or the controversial Ostend Manifest of 1854. Instead, the resolutions focused on the Southern Slave Power’s recent aggressions in Kansas and in the halls of Congress. The convention unanimously adopted a stance against the Pierce administration’s “propagation of slavery and its extension into Territories heretofore dedicated to freedom” and denounced its role in forcing slavery into Kansas “against the known wishes of the legal voters of that territory.”<sup>42</sup>

Although Trumbull himself remained in Washington, his ally George T. Brown made sure to bolster his standing among the delegates. He encouraged the adoption of a resolution which endorsed Trumbull’s conduct in the Senate with “unqualified approbation.” Furthermore,

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<sup>41</sup> For the idea of the “lowest common denominator” on the slavery question see Foner, *The Fiery Trial*, 87-88. For the argument that the ultimate goal of the antebellum Republican Party was to establish a “cordon of freedom” see Oakes, *The Scorpion’s Sting*, 13-14; *Illinois State Journal*, May 29, 1856.

<sup>42</sup> A detailed account of the entire convention and its legacy can be found in *The Transactions of the McLean County Historical Society* 3 (1900): 3-184; Contemporary coverage as printed in the *Alton Weekly Telegraph*, June 5, 1856. See also J.O. Cunningham, “The Bloomington Convention of 1856 and Those Who Participated In It,” in *Transactions of the Illinois State Historical Society* (Springfield: 1905), 101-110).

the delegates declared themselves “devoted to the Union” and the Constitution promising, “to the last extremity, [to] defend it against the efforts now being made by the disunionists of this administration to compass its dissolution.”<sup>43</sup>

In his address to the convention, Orville H. Browning reflected that the “strange company... [of] Democrats, Whigs, Free Soilers” gathered together at Bloomington. Long a proud Henry Clay Whig, Browning insisted that he remained one and suspected that his new compatriots retained their own identities. They now “met to defend their common liberties” not because they had apostatized themselves from their old parties, but rather because “*others had changed.*” They met under the old assumptions that Congress could, and should, legislate to keep slavery out of those territories already designated free. Their opponents had abandoned these doctrines in favor of the interests of the elite Slave Power. Drawing on the foundational principle of majority rule, he urged his fellow conservatives to join him so that they might not “by an increase of slave States...come to be governed by a meagre minority.”<sup>44</sup>

These same themes of courageous opposition to Southern disunionists, appeals to traditional statesmanship, and the inviolability of majority rule formed central motifs in Lincoln’s so-called “Lost Speech” at the convention. Praised by all, and yet recorded by none in its entirety (a common practice at the time), later reflections recalled that the speech connected the recent aggressions of the Slave Power in Kansas to the Southern fire-eaters who threatened secession to ensure slavery’s extension westward. In an uncharacteristically animated tone, Lincoln boldly declared “Southern Disunionists, We won’t go out of the Union, and you

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<sup>43</sup> *Alton Weekly Telegraph*, June 5, 1856.

<sup>44</sup> *Alton Weekly Courier*, June 5, 1856.

shan't!"<sup>45</sup> According to Lincoln, these radicals had seized control of the Democratic Party, forming a "Black Democracy" which had announced itself "in favor of white slavery"—by which he meant the subordination of free labor to slave labor. In concluding, he implored his former Whig colleagues to reject the Democrats' demagoguery and instead return to the moderate and constitutional positions of Henry Clay now championed by the anti-Nebraska ticket.<sup>46</sup>

In such rhetoric, the color black served a dual purpose by alluding to both the Democracy's apparent support for black laborers over white and its inherent villainy. These allusions to racial competition—and the possibility of racial dilution—had proven a successful tactic in the earlier Free Soiler campaigns and resonated among many Border North voters. In a letter to Trumbull four days before the convention, former Illinois Attorney General Wickliffe Kitchell described pro-Nebraska Democrats as "Mongrels—a Mulatto Party" committed to "Black autocracy." This type of language suggesting the racial amalgamation would become a standard talking point within both major parties and foreshadowed the centrality of racism in coming campaigns.<sup>47</sup>

The convention sought to further broaden its base of support by balancing its nominations among the various anti-Nebraska factions. As surmised the *Peru Weekly Chronicle*, the organizers hoped to draw in "every man not opposed to freedom" and thus proceeded "with the greatest harmony and concession." Despite his earlier reluctance, William H. Bissell

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<sup>45</sup> Quoted in Freehling, *Becoming Lincoln*, 187.

<sup>46</sup> *Alton Weekly Courier*, June 5, 1856.

<sup>47</sup> For the Free Soilers and racial rhetoric see Eric Foner, "Politics and Prejudice: The Free Soil Party and the Negro, 1849-1852," *The Journal of Negro History*, vol. 50, No. 4 (Oct., 1965), pp. 239-256. Wickliffe Kitchell to Trumbull, May 25, 1856, *Trumbull Correspondence*.

communicated via a letter to Brown that he would accept the convention's nomination for the governorship. Universally endorsed as the strongest candidate, the former Democratic congressman and Mexican War hero from southern Illinois was promptly nominated by the convention to lead the state-wide ticket. Carefully balancing the demands of antislavery German-Americans—mainly Protestants and free-thinkers—who had settled in northern and central Illinois and ex-Whig nativists, they nominated German-born Francis A. Hoffman for lieutenant governor and four native-born ex-Whigs for the remaining state-wide offices.<sup>48</sup> James Miller, the convention's candidate for state treasurer, had already been nominated by the state's American (Know-Nothing) Party but declined in favor of campaigning on the slavery question with the anti-Nebraskaites. His choice reflected the weakness of the Americans' state-wide organization and the priorities of their would-be candidates, including their gubernatorial nominee William B. Archer, who instead became a delegate to the Republican national convention.<sup>49</sup>

Owen Lovejoy, who distanced himself from abolitionism in his own address to the convention, also received an appointment to the national convention as a concession to the radicals. Despite the distinctly conservative disposition of the convention's platform and nominations, radical Free Soilers readily embraced the untied party. While many moderates

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<sup>48</sup> Hoffman would subsequently be found ineligible for office due to the state's residency and naturalization requirements. He was replaced on the ticket by John Wood, an ex-Whig of German descent who was popular among German immigrants in west-central Illinois. For details see Orville Hickman Browning, *The Diary of Orville Hickman Browning*. Theodore Calvin Pease, ed. (Springfield: *Illinois State Historical Society*, 1925), 237-239; *The Daily Whig* (Quincy, Ill.), September 29, 1856; J.H.A. Lacher, "Francis A Hoffman of Illinois and Hans Buschbauer of Wisconsin," *Wisconsin Magazine of History*. vol. 13, No. 4, (June 1930): 337-338; Reg Ankrom, "Wood's German heritage helped him rise to governor," *Herald-Whig* (Quincy, Ill.), July 12, 2015.

<sup>49</sup> *The Transactions of the McLean County Historical Society*, 110-112; For details on the American Party's weakness in Illinois prior to the Bloomington Convention see James C. Sloo to Trumbull, May 16, 1856, *Trumbull Correspondence*; Orville H. Browning to Trumbull, May 19, 1856, *Trumbull Correspondence*; For the anti-Nebraska/Republican nominations see *Alton Weekly Telegraph*, June 5, 1856.

remained unwilling to use the name “Republican” on the state level due to its radical associations, the “Anti-Nebraska Ticket” or “People’s Party” had overcome significant internal disputes to form a united front. Adopting a conservative platform dedicated to protecting the rights of free white men, they formed, as the formerly Whig *Illinois State Journal* described the group, “one common brotherhood to war against the allied forces of nullification, disunion, slavery propagandism, ruffianism and gag law.” Thus, “shorn of its radical image,” the state’s proto-Republicans had finally organized and united on a common platform which they could advocate nationally in the Philadelphia Convention scheduled for mid-June.<sup>50</sup>

The Bloomington Convention, according to former Democratic Congressman John Wentworth of Chicago, had left the people “all wide awake, and resolved to put an end to the damnable acts of violence equally disgracing Washington and Kansas.”<sup>51</sup> Galvanized by their indignation, organized by perceptive moderates, and united on a conservative platform, these new Republicans seized the political offensive.<sup>52</sup> Casting themselves as defenders of white labor and the Union, the state’s Republicans faced off against a Democratic Party bewildered by defections. Taking advantage of the public’s focus on Kansas, the Republicans labeled popular sovereignty a sham doctrine, a proslavery measure conceived by the Slave Power— represented by Preston Brooks—and advanced by their Northern cronies: President Pierce and Stephen A.

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<sup>50</sup> *Illinois State Journal*, May 31, 1856; Foner, *The Fiery Trial*, 79-80; Freehling, *Becoming Lincoln*, 186; Gienapp, *The Origins of the Republican Party, 1852-1856*, 295 (quote); Moore and Moore, *Collaborators for Emancipation*, 40-41.

<sup>51</sup> Quoted in *The Peru Weekly Chronicle*, June 5, 1856.

<sup>52</sup> As previously stated, the label of “Republican” remained controversial for some party activists throughout the 1856 contest. I have chosen to refer to the party organized at Bloomington as the Illinois Republican Party and all of its adherents as Republicans to emphasize party unity in the aftermath of the Convention. This choice adheres to the contentions of recent scholars including Graham Peck and William Freehling. See Peck, *Making an Antislavery Nation*, 137 and Freehling, *Becoming Lincoln*, 191.

Douglas. As a result, Douglas and his followers faced the difficult task of negotiating a position which could draw indignant Illinoisans back to the national party without breaking ranks with the Southern Democracy.<sup>53</sup>

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Convening at Cincinnati on June 2, delegates to the Democratic National Convention sought to reaffirm their commitment to popular sovereignty in Kansas and form a united front against the rising tide of “black republicanism.” Still reeling from their defeats in the 1854 midterms, Democrats from the key Border North states of New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Indiana hoped to reinvigorate traditional partisan allegiances by directing the public’s attention away from recent controversies in Kansas and Washington as well as the figures associated with them. Thus, the convention passed over both the incumbent president Franklin Pierce and Stephen A. Douglas and instead placed Pennsylvanian James Buchanan at the top of the ticket. A former U.S. Senator and Secretary of State, Buchanan had maintained a healthy distance from the Nebraska controversy by virtue of his post as the American Ambassador to the Court of St. James’s. Mature, experienced, and a morally upright bachelor, Buchanan embodied the restrained and dispassionate manhood prized by Northern conservatives of both parties. To conciliate Douglas and his supporters, represented at the convention by Illinois’ Democratic gubernatorial candidate William A. Richardson, the delegates nominated Douglas’ close ally, Representative James C. Breckinridge of Kentucky for the vice-presidency.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> For examples of these attacks on popular sovereignty see the *Illinois State Journal*, June 5, 1856; *Freeport Daily Journal*, June 9, 1856; *The Daily Whig* (Quincy, Ill.), June 9, 1856; *The Weekly Pantagraph* (Bloomington, Ill.), June 11, 1856; *Alton Weekly Courier*, June 12, 1856.

<sup>54</sup> Holt, *The Political Crisis of the 1850s*, 186-187; Johansen, *Stephen A. Douglas*, 506-520. For an extended discussion of the political implications of Buchanan’s bachelorhood see Joshua A. Lynn, *A Manly Doughface: James Buchanan and the Sectional Politics of Gender*.

Highlighting the bi-sectional composition of their party, the Democrats' platform stressed ideological continuity and a respect for precedent meant to appeal to conservatives of all stripes. Claiming the mantle of the Jeffersonian tradition, Democrats denounced their opponents as neo-Federalists bent on destroying state sovereignty through their promotion of banks, tariffs, and sectional discord. The irony in such an accusation, quickly identified by the Republican press, was that Buchanan himself had begun life as a Federalist, abandoning the party only after its political disintegration at the end of the War of 1812.<sup>55</sup> Despite this fact, the Democrats endorsed the Kentucky and Virginia Resolutions of 1798 to demonstrate their opposition to both centralization and nativism, characteristics the party identified with the neo-Federalist "fusionists." Although many of their planks—denouncing banks, federal funding of internal improvements, and high tariffs—appealed to traditional Democratic voters, the party's claim to "fellowship with... all who regard the preservation of the Union under the Constitution as the paramount issue" in the sectional crisis marked an effort to bring ex-Whigs into the fold.<sup>56</sup>

This plank proved especially valuable to the Illinois Democrats, who needed to secure a proportion of the ex-Whig vote to secure a majority under the conditions imposed by the recent realignment. Although they had reason to hope that many of the traditional Democratic voters in central and southern Illinois who had absented themselves in 1854 would return to vote for Buchanan, the party's weakness within the state's antislavery northern counties remained

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<sup>55</sup> *Illinois State Journal*, June 6, 1856; *Freeport Daily Journal*, June 11, 1856.

<sup>56</sup> "1856 Democratic Party Platform," June 2, 1856, *The American Presidency Project*, The University of California, Santa Barbara. <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/1856-democratic-party-platform>. Accessed March 15, 2019.

apparent.<sup>57</sup> Deprived of these votes, Douglas and his allies would have to secure the support of ex-Whigs from central Illinois and begin to emphasize the connection between popular sovereignty and the Compromise of 1850, originally drafted by the Whig hero Henry Clay and famously endorsed by the conservative stalwart Daniel Webster. Declaring themselves “the only national-Union sustaining party of the country,” the Illinois Democracy framed their policy of popular sovereignty as a defense of old-fashioned statesmanship and compromise in the face of a radical opposition.<sup>58</sup>

Crucially, such a position did not preclude antislavery conservatives from supporting the Democrats. With the state’s conservative Republicans firmly in control of that party, Illinois’ Democrats could ill afford direct ties to the Slaveocracy. Douglas himself could not frame popular sovereignty as an antislavery measure without alienating his Southern colleagues, but many other Illinois Democrats operating on the state level argued that the policy would achieve an antislavery outcome. Contrary to Graham Peck’s suggestion that Illinois Democrats shifted towards a proslavery position during the 1856 contest, a careful parsing of the Illinois Democracy’s campaign rhetoric reveals that most Illinois Democrats retained their commitment to white free labor. Indeed, their faith in free labor’s superiority allowed them to discount Republican outcry against the Southern Slave Power as paranoid propaganda. The Illinois Democrats perceived slavery as an undesirable institution, but argued that a true commitment to

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<sup>57</sup> Although northern Illinois had been predominately settled by Northern Democrats, the antislavery proclivities of these voters had alienated them from the national party as early as 1848. For a detailed discussion of voting patterns in this region over time see James L. Hutson, “The Illinois Political Realignment of 1844-1860: Revisiting the Analysis” *The Journal of the Civil War Era* vol. 1, No. 4 (December 2011), 525-528. See also, Hansen, *The Making of the Third Party System*, 51-57.

<sup>58</sup> Johansen, *Stephen A. Douglas* 534-537; James L. Hutson, *Stephen A. Douglas and the Dilemmas of Democratic Equality* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), 119-122. *Ottawa Free Trader*, June 7, 1856 (quote).

the Constitution required local autonomy and popular democracy. Although such a course could, in theory, allow slavery to expand, demographic and economic trends favoring free labor discounted such an outcome in practice. As summarized by Adam I.P. Smith, the Illinois Democracy hoped “to navigate a political path toward a free West while respecting, as the Founders had done, the divergent interests of North and South.”<sup>59</sup>

Illinois’ Democratic editors frequently advanced the practical antislavery implications of popular sovereignty while denouncing their opponents as extremists bent on disunion. The *Ottawa Free Trader* spoke for most Northern Democrats when it argued that under popular sovereignty “the territories, are by nature free; and that slavery, being an institution of purely municipal creation, and congress having no power to either make or unmake a slave, or delegate such a power, slavery cannot be established in any territory that came into the possession of the Union free, until shall become a sovereign, independent state.” Such sentiments seem to echo the principles of “freedom national”—freedom as normative and slavery as the aberration—while emphasizing the people’s ultimate sovereignty in forming a new state. This same column took the argument a step further, declaring that, contrary to the campaign rhetoric of the Republicans, the vital question of the campaign “concerns no issue involved in reference to the slavery question.” According to editor William Osman, both Northern Democrats and Republicans acknowledged that it would be better for the people of Kansas to vote-down slavery themselves since each professed to defend the principles of Jeffersonian democracy. This, in turn, rendered the question of Congressional interference an abstract dispute stressed for political advantage by

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<sup>59</sup> Peck, *Making an Antislavery Nation*, 137-138; I.P. Smith, *The Stormy Present*, 87.

the Republicans while actually making the spread of slavery more likely by agitating the South and endangering the Union.<sup>60</sup>

The indecision which paralyzed ex-Whig Benjamin S. Edwards of Springfield perfectly illustrates the state Democracy's allure to antislavery conservatives. Writing to Trumbull in the midst of the summer campaign season, Edwards identified himself as "an antislavery man" firmly "opposed to the extension of slavery." While he personally would vote to make Kansas a free state, he questioned whether a Congressional edict would permanently resolve the matter and had himself grown "tired of the agitation of the slavery question." He therefore wondered whether it would "not be better to withdraw this question from Congress... [and] leave the whole matter to be settled in time and peaceably by the people themselves?" Such an action would allow the natural course of demographics and economics to resolve the question and relieve the nation of this "political strife" which threatened to destroy the Union.<sup>61</sup>

Attacking the issue from another angle, the *Salem Weekly Advocate* argued that the Democrats' opposition to Congressional interference with slavery mirrored their opposition to laws prohibiting adultery or requiring the observance of the sabbath. By this account, a free society relied on the virtue of the people, rather than the compulsion of law, to repress evil. Such evils included drunkenness, infidelity, sabbath-breaking, and slavery. The Democracy's

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<sup>60</sup> *Ottawa Free Trader*, October 18, 1856.

<sup>61</sup> Benjamin S. Edwards to Trumbull, July 24, 1856, *Trumbull Correspondence*.

opposition to formal prohibitions did not imply an acquiescence to such evils. Rather, they opposed the heavy hand of the state imposing morality on a free people.<sup>62</sup>

At other times, Democratic editors bolstered their antislavery credentials through hyperbole or shameless falsehoods. The *Rock Island Argus* vigorously defended James Buchanan as a man “who never owned a slave, or lived in a slave state, or whispered a sentence in favor of its extension, or cast a vote by which any honest man could construe a wish to support the institution.” Some went even further and accused the Republican presidential candidate John C. Frémont of secretly owning slaves and hiding them away at a home in St. Louis.<sup>63</sup> While completely unfounded, these assertions proved a serious headache for the Republicans throughout the campaign. Indeed, Republican activists in Illinois found the charges sufficiently plausible that nationally prominent officials like Trumbull received requests for clarification from loyal foot-soldiers and Republican organs such as the *Freeport Journal* felt compelled to repeatedly repudiate the accusations in print. Frémont’s ultimate weakness as a candidate in southern and central Illinois highlights the distinctions which emerged between the Illinois Republicans and the national Republican Party during the Philadelphia Convention of June 17-19.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> *Salem Weekly Advocate*, July 24, 1856. For the Democratic reaction to Republicans’s perceived Puritanism see Joel H. Silbey, “The Surge of Republican Power: Partisan Antipathy, American Social Conflict, and the Coming of the Civil War” in *Essays on American Antebellum Politics, 1840-1860*, ed. Stephen E. Maizlish and John J. Kushma, (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 1982), 216-224.

<sup>63</sup> *Rock Island Argus*, September 20, 1856; *Ottawa Free Trader*, August 8, 1856.

<sup>64</sup> Merrit Ransom to Trumbull, July 28, 1856, *Trumbull Correspondence*; *Freeport Daily Journal*, July 16, 1856.

In the three weeks preceding the Philadelphia Convention, Illinois' cohort of newly united conservative Republicans worked to secure a national platform and presidential nominee which reflected their moderate principles. Having previously planned to take the current administration to task on the national stage, Buchanan's nomination in Cincinnati complicated the Republican campaign strategy. As G.D.A. Parks, recently a delegate at Bloomington from Will County, explained to Trumbull, Buchanan's power derived "not from any inherent strength, but by reason of his exemption personally from the causes which made Pierce and Douglas so fearfully odious." To win, the Republicans would need to nominate someone equal to Buchanan in "age, experience, moderation of views, and integrity of character." In other words, Parks felt the Republicans "must make a nomination conservative down to the last degree."<sup>65</sup>

For Trumbull, and many of his supporters in Illinois, Supreme Court Justice John McLean perfectly matched these criteria.<sup>66</sup> A personal friend of Trumbull's, Justice McLean had served as a U.S. Representative from Ohio and Postmaster General to both James Monroe and John Quincy Adams before his elevation to the Supreme Court by Andrew Jackson in 1829. Since that time, McLean's views had shifted across the political spectrum towards Whiggery as he consistently espoused a firm, yet conservative, opposition to slavery's westward expansion. A long-standing member of the political establishment who could relate to moderate Republicans of all backgrounds, McLean could match Buchanan's experience as a statesman and reputation for civil moderation. But McLean's supporters recognized two major flaws as they floated his candidacy. First, at seventy-one he could hardly inspire the faithful through youthful vigor and

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<sup>65</sup> G.D.A. Parks to Trumbull, June 13, 1856, *Trumbull Correspondence*.

<sup>66</sup> Ebenezer Peck to Trumbull, June 10, 1856, *Trumbull Correspondence*; Abraham Jonas to Trumbull, June 11, 1856, *Trumbull Correspondence*; Roeske, *His Own Counsel*, 36-37.

the potential political consequences of dying in office had become apparent in the aftermath of John Tyler's and Millard Fillmore's presidencies. More importantly, the radical wing of the Party, including Salmon P. Chase and Benjamin Wade of McLean's home state, opposed McLean for his conservatism on the slavery issue and his flirtations with Know Nothingism.<sup>67</sup>

Despite these obstacles, Lincoln begged to Trumbull to secure McLean's nomination for the sake of Illinois. In an early June letter which revealed the full extent both of his political savvy and his trust in Trumbull, Lincoln framed the stakes of the Philadelphia nomination in no uncertain terms. Still integrated among the old-line Whigs of central Illinois, Lincoln believed that these undecided conservatives would "go heartily for McLean" but would support Buchanan "against, Chase, [Nathaniel P.] Banks, [William H.] Seward, [Francis P.] Blair, or Fremont." Confident that Bissell's nomination and the Bloomington Platform had secured a victory in the gubernatorial contest "by a very large majority" and recognizing that Trumbull's influence would "be greater than that of any other Illinoisian," Lincoln implored Trumbull to bolster the conservatives. Should Trumbull fail, Lincoln feared the state would inevitably go to Buchanan as conservative Whigs to split their ballots three ways between Buchanan, Know-Nothing candidate Millard Fillmore, and the more radical Republican nominee.<sup>68</sup>

Unfortunately for the pair, Frémont secured the nomination over McLean and the national Republican Party which emerged from Philadelphia presented a substantially more radical agenda for the nation than the goals approved by the Illinois anti-Nebraska delegates at Bloomington. Although careful to avoid controversial and divisive issues such as the Fugitive

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<sup>67</sup> Henry Julian Abraham, *Justices, Presidents, and Senators: A History of the U.S. Supreme Court from Washington to Clinton*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc., 1999), 72-73. Gienapp, *The Origins of the Republican Party*, 311-316.

<sup>68</sup> "To Lyman Trumbull: June 7, 1856," *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 2: 342-343.

Slave Act of 1850 and instead harness the Northern public's indignation over Kansas, the national platform's language reflected the influence of radical leaders like Salmon P. Chase. Framing the extension of slavery as a violation of the Fifth Amendment, the Philadelphia Platform advanced a controversial interpretation of constitutional law. Rather than adopt the defensive stance maintained by the Bloomington Convention, which emphasized the need to restore compromise, sectional balance, and Union, the delegates framed the Constitution as a distinctly antislavery document. The platform expressly denied the "authority of Congress... to give legal existence to Slavery in any Territory of the United States" under the constitution and attacked slavery itself as a "relic of barbarism." Chase and his fellow radicals rejoiced at their triumph. "I can hardly believe that the majority understood what broad principles they were announcing" marveled the Ohio governor. In another blow to the conservatives, Chase's Ohio supporters also blocked McLean's nomination despite his strong support among the other Border North delegations.<sup>69</sup>

Instead, the convention elevated Mexican War hero John C. Frémont, a wildcard who had enjoyed support from New Englanders and the powerful Blair family of the Border South. Aside from a brief stint in the Senate where he had represented California as a Democrat, Frémont had no substantial political experience. A military adventurer best known for his exploits in the trans-Mississippi west, the "Pathfinder" garnered support for less substantive reasons. Born in Georgia and married to the daughter of the powerful Missouri Senator William Hart Benton, Frémont

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<sup>69</sup> "Republican Party Platform of 1856," June 18, 1856, *The American Presidency Project*, The University of California, Santa Barbara. <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/republican-party-platform-1856>. Accessed March 15, 2019; Gienapp, *The Origins of the Republican Party*, 340-341; Sean Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2005), 695-697. Chase quoted in Sewell, *Ballots for Freedom*, 285.

appeared bi-sectional and his relative youth (at the age 43), dashing appearance, and history of daring exploits seemed to make him just the man to stand up to the Slave Power. In reality, Frémont carried significant baggage. Vain and arrogant, Frémont's propensity towards insubordination had ended his career in the army. Since then, he had failed in his reelection bid to the Senate and had made few concrete contributions to the Republican cause. Indeed, his rapid ascendancy speaks more to the political abilities of his wife, Jessie Benton Frémont, than to his own leadership skills. The potential for scandal further hindered Frémont. Although both American-born Protestants, John and Jessie Frémont had eloped in 1841 with the help of a Roman Catholic priest, a fact which—along with John Frémont's French-Canadian heritage—alarmed nativists crucial to the Republican coalition in battleground states like Pennsylvania. Finally, his influential father-in-law, Senator Benton, an early opponent of Kansas-Nebraska Act, endorsed Buchanan rather than break ranks with the Democrats.<sup>70</sup>

Although disappointing in many respects for the Illinois conservatives—Trumbull, disgusted by his experience, determined to avoid all future national conventions—Philadelphia did offer one promising foretaste for moderates from the Prairie State. In an unexpected move, the Illinois delegation asked John Allison of Pennsylvania to nominate Abraham Lincoln for the vice-presidency. State legislators Norman Judd and John M. Palmer, who had blocked Lincoln's senate bid in 1854, now led the charge for his nomination. Outmaneuvered by the supporters of the New Jersey ex-Whig William Dayton, Lincoln's supporters nevertheless garnered 110 votes,

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<sup>70</sup> Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men*, 248-250; Gienapp, *The Origins of the Republican Party*, 316-329; Holt, *The Political Crisis of the 1850s*, 175-181. The gender historian Michael D. Pierson has offered excellent account of Jessie Frémont's political significance during the 1856 campaign. See Michael D. Pierson, *Free Hearts & Free Homes: Gender and American Antislavery Politics* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 144-150. Within Illinois, Jessie Frémont's political influence was largely confined to fiercely Republican communities in the northern portions of the state, especially Freeport.

a strong second-place finish which boded well for the future. This unexpected result demonstrated how far the competing factions of Illinois conservatives had come towards reconciling their earlier differences.<sup>71</sup>

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The subsequent campaign season highlighted the advantages of the Illinois Republicans' conservative stance while confirming the public's skepticism towards radical attacks on slavery. The absence of a viable Know Nothing candidate for governor produced a contest directly between William Bissell and William A. Richardson. While Richardson's close ties to Douglas made it impossible for him to separate himself from the repeal of the Missouri Compromise, Bissell's long history in the state as a Democrat and war hero protected him from any association with abolitionist radicalism. Unfortunately for the Republicans, Frémont's inexperience and innate bellicosity made it difficult to cast him as a moderate figure. As previously discussed, Buchanan had no direct ties to Douglas or the Kansas-Nebraska Act, allowing erstwhile opponents of Douglas to support him in good faith. Finally, the candidacy of ex-President Millard Fillmore, nominated by the Know-Nothings and the last vestiges of the national Whig Party, offered old-line Whigs a means of avoiding both the potential radical and Jacksonian Democrat.

Facing an uphill battle for the state's electoral votes, Illinois Republicans worked to frame the race as a battle between reasonable conservatives devoted to the Union and rabid pro-slavery radicals bent on destroying Northern freedom. By reprinting incendiary pro-Buchanan and pro-disunion excerpts from Southern newspapers such as the *Richmond Enquirer* and

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<sup>71</sup> Foner, *The Fiery Trial*, 80-81; Freehling, *Becoming Lincoln*, 189-190; Roeske, *His Own Counsel*, 37.

*Charleston Mercury*, the *Chicago Tribune* highlighted the relationship between Southern Democracy and secession. Northerners faced a choice to either “aid those who deliberately avow such treasonable designs” or support Frémont “who is for maintaining the Union.” By this same account, the Republicans represented “the only National party” and “the Constitutional party” because of their unwavering support for compromise and Union. The *Alton Weekly Telegraph* endorsed Frémont as “the only conservative candidate before the country” committed to equality for the North within the Union. Highlighting a recent speech delivered by Fillmore which seemed to acknowledge the right of secession, the *Weekly Telegraph* framed both Fillmore and Buchanan as hopelessly beholden to Southern extremists. Republican moderation, on the other hand, in the words of the *Belvidere Standard* represented “the true policy of men who love the Union—conservative, businessmen, who hate turmoil, and bloodshed, and internal struggles, and wild excitement.” This period of Southern aggression required “a bold, decided, manly front” against the slaveocracy to restore sectional balance.<sup>72</sup>

Local Republican leaders, recognizing that central Illinois would determine the election’s outcome worked tirelessly to co-opt conservative ex-Whigs inclined towards Fillmore. In Greene County, William Herndon—Lincoln’s law partner—and ex-Congressman Richard Yates negotiated a truce with Know Nothing activist Jim Matheny so that both factions would advocate for anti-extension policies. Lincoln himself wrote to many leading Fillmore supporters urging them to throw their support behind Frémont. Presenting a pragmatic plan for limited cooperation,

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<sup>72</sup> *Chicago Tribune*, September 9, 1856; *Alton Weekly Telegraph*, August 7, 1856; *Belvidere Standard*, August 12, 1856. The Republican claim of being the only truly national party paralleled the antipartisan ideology of the early republic period. For an extended discussion of antipartisanship in late antebellum politics see Adam I.P. Smith, *No Party Now: Politics in the Civil War North* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 10-30. See also Mark Voss-Hubbard, *Beyond Partisanship: Cultures of Antipartisanship in Northern Politics Before the Civil War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 178-216.

Lincoln explained that by supporting the Republicans and depriving Buchanan of Illinois, the Know Nothings could potentially send the election to the House of Representatives—where Fillmore might emerge triumphant as a compromise candidate. Yet despite these efforts, ex-Know Nothing William B. Archer recognized that “the friends of Fillmore [would] not come over” to the Republicans thanks to Frémont’s association with Catholicism and the increasing number of German-born Republicans.<sup>73</sup>

As discussed earlier, the Democrats took advantage of the Frémont’s relative obscurity to tar him with a variety of blatantly false and contradictory charges. Recognizing the tenuous and sometimes conflicting elements of the Republican coalition, they hoped to alienate at least one of the party’s key constituencies through this campaign of misinformation. Republican organs thus found themselves in the strange position of simultaneously denying Frémont’s status as “a Know Nothing or Catholic, an Abolitionist or a slaveholder.”<sup>74</sup>

Meanwhile, after battling Democratic attempts throughout the summer to admit Kansas to the Union prematurely, Trumbull took to the stump in support of Bissell and Frémont. Drawing on his Democratic roots to infuse the campaign with the popular energy sometimes lost amid conservative rhetoric, Trumbull accused Douglas and his followers of acting as “political chameleons.” Such Democrats would take up proslavery policies at one moment and antislavery at another to suit their own desire for power. Trumbull’s public speeches throughout the state stressed continuity of principle and dedication to compromise. Focusing his attention on the repeal of the Missouri Compromise, Trumbull spoke directly to would-be Fillmore voters. Citing

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<sup>73</sup> William H. Herndon to Trumbull, July 12, 1856, *Trumbull Correspondence*; “Form Letter to Fillmore Men, September 8, 1856,” *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 2: 374; William B. Archer to Trumbull, August 11, 1856, *Trumbull Correspondence*; See also, Foner, *The Fiery Trial*, 81-82.

<sup>74</sup> *The Moline Working Man*, August 20, 1856.

the hopelessness of Fillmore's prospects, Trumbull appealed to their shared desire to bring order to Kansas "and to save the country from anarchy and blood, from the spread of odious institutions." A vote for Frémont would, as paraphrased in the *Chicago Tribune*, mark "the first step towards bringing back the policy of the government to the days of Washington and Jefferson."<sup>75</sup>

The overwhelming prejudice against African Americans fueled charges of radicalism on both sides. Democrats regularly labeled the Republicans as "nigger-worshipers" bent on extending equal civil and political rights to African Americans alongside radical abolitionists.<sup>76</sup> Republicans responded by accusing the Democrats of degrading white laborers by arguing "that niggers were more honorable than poor whites." According to the *Belvidere Standard*, Democrats endorsed "niggerism" and had produced a "nigger aristocracy" to defeat ordinary white republicanism. Even the more radical *Chicago Tribune* presented the issue in starkly racial terms, asking its readers "Are you for the freedom of the white Anglo-Saxon, or are you in favor of making slaves of us all? Are you in favor for the white man or you for the slavery of him and his posterity forever?" The Republicans had taken a bold stand against the "Black Democracy" in favor of free white labor, while their opponents facilitated "the onward march of the Southern despotism." Eager to distance Frémont from abolitionism, the *Illinois State Journal* pointed to Gerrit Smith's National Liberty Party campaign as evidence that "the abolitionists of the North avow precisely the same doctrines as the nigger drivers of the South" by calling for "disunion,

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<sup>75</sup> *Chicago Tribune*, September 17, 1856; *Illinois State Journal*, September 26, 1856; For the influence of Democratic campaign traditions on Trumbull and other ex-Democrats see Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men*, 165-168.

<sup>76</sup> For examples see *The Rock Island Argus*, June 16, 1856; *Ottawa Free Trader*, July 12, 1856; *Salem Weekly Advocate*, July 31, 1856; *Salem Weekly Advocate*, August 14, 1856.

the separation of the North from the South, and the destruction of the Constitution and the Bible.”<sup>77</sup>

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The final results of November’s vote marked what some contemporaries and scholars have labeled a “victorious defeat” for the Republican Party.<sup>78</sup> Hampered by unfavorable districts, the Republicans in Illinois still managed to secure four of nine state’s congressional seats. Owen Lovejoy, nominated by the radical Third Congressional District to the horror of Trumbull and Lincoln, emerged among the victors. While never fully abandoning his abolitionist views, Lovejoy would nevertheless prove a loyal ally of more moderate Republicans and apply the energy of the radicals to the party’s shared goals. In addition, voters elected the entire Republican state ticket with Bissell securing the governorship by more than two points. As expected, the Republicans performed remarkably well among Yankee-born voters in Northern Illinois, with Frémont winning 74 percent of the vote in that region. The efforts of Gustave Koerner and other leading German-American Republicans paid dividends as German Protestants voted for Frémont throughout the state. Irish immigrants remained overwhelmingly Democratic with the exception of several Chicago wards long dominated by John Wentworth. Unfortunately, the most cautious ex-Whigs could not bring themselves to vote for Frémont and split their tickets to vote for both Bissell and Fillmore. Although Fillmore secured only fifteen percent of the vote throughout the state, key counties including Piatt, Bond, and Madison offered a plurality to the Know-Nothing

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<sup>77</sup> *Illinois State Chronicle* (Decatur, Ill.), August 28, 1856; *Belvidere Standard*, July 1, 1856; *Chicago Tribune*, September 9, 1856; *Chicago Tribune*, September 13, 1856; *Illinois State Journal*, September 17, 1856; For an informative discussion of the uses of racist rhetoric by early Republicans see James D. Bilotta, *Race and the Rise of the Republican Party, 1848-1865* (New York: Peter Lang, 1992), 231-249.

<sup>78</sup> Gienapp, *The Rise of the Republican Party*, 413; Potter, *The Impending Crisis*, 265.

candidate. As a result, Frémont won only 37 percent of the vote in central Illinois and trailed behind Buchanan for a plurality by four points. Southern Illinois, predictably, firmly rejected Frémont by a margin of 3-1 and small pockets of German-Americans proved the only reliable Republicans in the region.<sup>79</sup>

In many respects, Frémont's performance in Illinois paralleled the outcome of the national contest. Winning overwhelming majorities in Upper North, the "Pathfinder" struggled in the Border North states of Indiana, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey and received only a handful of votes in the slave states. Buchanan's relative distance from the Nebraska controversy and the anti-extension potential of popular sovereignty prevented many Northern conservatives from crossing over to the Republicans despite their opposition to Southern aggression. Stephen Douglas and other Northern Democrats, could, for a moment, celebrate the public's faith in a united Democracy despite the violent outbursts in Kansas and Washington. Yet the subsequent actions of the Supreme Court and the Buchanan administration in Kansas quickly shattered any hope of easing sectional tensions. Rather than offer proof of sectional balance, the new Democratic administration espoused an explicitly pro-Southern position on the slavery question.

Moving forward, Illinois Republicans could point to the success of their state ticket and platform as evidence that their party could win over cautious former Whigs. Only by avoiding any association with radicalism and presenting themselves as conservative Unionists devoted to the Constitution could the Republican coalition achieve a majority in the Border North. As the Northern Democracy divided on the questions raised by *Dred Scott v. Sanford* and the

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<sup>79</sup> Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men*, 163-165; Freehling, *Becoming Lincoln*, 193; Gienapp, *The Rise of the Republican Party*, 417; Hansen, *The Making of the Third Party System*, 81-87; Holt, *The Political Crisis of the 1850s*, 198-199; Hutson, "The Illinois Political Realignment," 526-529.

Lecompton constitution, Republicans seized on this new evidence of a Slave Power conspiracy against Northern freemen. Stephen A. Douglas' own break with the administration complicated Republican efforts to secure Democratic votes, but ex-Know Nothings began flocking to the Republicans. Southern demands had pushed beyond the realm of reasonable compromise for many Northerners, Democrats and Republicans alike. While Douglas would continue promote the virtues of popular sovereignty through the election of 1860, Republican demands for decisive action against corruption and coercion in the territories appeared increasingly necessary.

Having distinguished himself throughout Illinois in the campaign of 1856, Abraham Lincoln would take on Douglas directly in 1858 for his Senate seat and then again in 1860 on the national stage. The state party he and Trumbull had helped to build grew increasingly influential as revealed by Lincoln's nomination for the presidency at the 1860 Chicago Convention. The nationalist vision promoted by Trumbull and Lincoln's Illinois party did not advance a radical antislavery vision of "freedom national," but echoed the Bloomington Convention's commitment to Union and the North's rights within it. Dedicated to protecting ordinary white Northerners from the greed of the slaveocracy, the Republicans promoted a defensive stance against further Southern aggression. Promising never to interfere with the "peculiar institution" within the slave states, they merely sought to maintain soil set aside for free labor. While some, including Lincoln, maintained a vague hope of "slavery's ultimate extinction" in some distant future, mainstream Republicans in 1860 neither offered nor endorsed a plan to end slavery nationally. Of course, a Southern war against the Union would eventually lead the Republican Party to embrace emancipation. But this course of events underlines the contrast between fire-eater radicalism and Republican conservatism.

For all of these reasons, the story of the Bloomington Convention and of Illinois' early Republicans remains essential to the broader narrative of sectional conflict. Far from united at the outset, conservative opponents of the Kansas-Nebraska Act drew together as a defensive measure against the perceived aggressions of the Slave Power and endorsed a political program of restoration. These early Illinois Republicans wanted free soil to remain free soil for the sake of their state's white yeomen. The actions of Southern extremists compelled them to give-up their traditional issues of political economy and the role of the national government to combat an aristocratic plot against ordinary Northerners. Recognizing the power of these claims, Northern Democrats moved to the center on the slavery question to retain political relevance in a region which enjoyed a broad antislavery consensus. Eventually, these Democrats had to choose between their national alliance with Southerners and their constituents' understanding of the Union. Most, including Stephen A. Douglas, would chose the latter course. As a result, despite deep political divisions, Northerners of both parties would rally behind Lincoln in the aftermath of Fort Sumter—the ultimate aggression of the Southern slaveocracy. The fate of the Union, the “last best hope” for ordinary white men hung in the balance. Thanks in large part to the moderating influences of Trumbull, Lincoln, and other Illinois conservatives on the national Republican Party, Northerners of both parties would wage war in defense of this Union against aristocratic Southern radicals.