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## **EDITORS' FOREWORD**

Writing in 1936 on the topic "Has the Lincoln Theme Been Exhausted?" James G. Randall answered the question emphatically in the negative. The noted Lincoln scholar pointed to opportunities for new interpretations of a seemingly familiar story. "To interpret," he stated, "will be to avoid merely looking for the familiar. It will mean seeing things anew, judging not by what secondary writers have said, but by a fresh viewing of sources."

In this impressive study of the momentous election of 1860, Michael F. Holt has done just that. He avoids the familiar: Lincoln is "de-centered"; his opponents, who among them won 60 percent of the popular vote, become the focus. Holt sees things anew: the real issue in this election, he persuasively argues, was not slavery but rather the fate of the Union; the campaigns of John Bell and Stephen A. Douglas, in particular, stressed that the election of either John C. Breckinridge or Abraham Lincoln would put the future of the Union at grave risk. Holt judges not by what secondary writers have said. Instead, informed by a thorough mastery of the historiography of the topic, he contends that the Republican campaign—waged in an era when party mattered far more than candidate—focused more on the incompetence and corruption of the Democratic (Buchanan) administration than on the issue of slavery in the territories. And he views his sources freshly. Newspapers, some obscure, allow for a broader and deeper and likely also more reliable probing of what the electorate in 1860 actually was thinking.

Contemporary readers will also be prompted to ask present-minded questions. Is the election of 1860 a case for, or against, the Electoral College? Is it a reminder of the benefits of a two-party system? Is a successful negative campaign that cannot come close to garnering a majority of the popular vote a fundamental threat to national unity? Are there moments, albeit rare moments, in American history when "the center cannot hold," and catastrophe results? Is such catastrophe avoidable?

To pose these questions is to be reminded not only of the critical importance of the election of 1860 but also of the enduring value of historical study. In *The Election of 1860*, Michael F. Holt recasts a familiar narrative and brings to it the freshness that comes, in Randall's words, from "seeing things anew."

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## **PREFACE**

Without question, the election of 1860 was the most consequential presidential contest in all of American history. The victory of Republican candidate Abraham Lincoln quickly triggered the secession of seven Deep South states and led, six weeks after Lincoln took office on March 4, 1861, to a horrific four-year Civil War in which over 700,000 young men (the equivalent of 7 million in today's population) died. No other American presidential election has come close to engendering such a catastrophic outcome.

Because of that result, but also, I think, because the election of 1860 elevated Lincoln, the greatest of all American presidents, to the White House, it has also probably been the most chronicled presidential contest in our history. "Done to death," I told Fred Woodward of the University Press of Kansas several years ago when I reluctantly accepted his request that I take on this assignment for the press's series on American presidential elections. So much had already been written about this election, especially from the perspective of Lincoln's nomination and subsequent victory, that finding something new or different to say about it seemed then—and still seems now—a particularly challenging task.

Even before I began to study the election more closely, however, it struck me that compared to the Lincoln saga, the story of this election in the South and especially the campaign of the newly minted Constitutional Union Party had been relatively understudied. Also improperly discounted in previous studies, it seemed to me, was that a large majority of American voters in 1860 opposed the Republican Party because they feared and/or loathed it. Why they did so was a crucial part of the election's story. Thus, I decided at the outset to de-center the Lincoln tale and give his competitors equal billing with the Republican campaign.

Most American voters in 1860 opposed the Republican Party, not so much for what it did or said in 1860 itself but because of its overtly anti-South rhetoric and seemingly unstoppable rise to power in the North from its emergence in 1854 until that election year. Thus I devote a longish

chapter to telling that pre-1860 story. Similarly, the problems that Democrats faced in this election culminated in 1860 but had their roots in the Buchanan administration. Hence, I also devote a chapter to the pre-1860 Democratic saga.

I began to study antebellum political history when I entered graduate school in 1962, and I taught college courses on the coming of the Civil War from 1965 until I retired in 2012. But I had never focused very closely on the 1860 election itself, other than reading secondary accounts about it. Once I began to do so by examining the appeals to voters the contesting parties made in 1860, I was surprised to discover that the common understanding of what that election was actually about seemed mistaken. Or perhaps it's more accurate to say that southern secessionists' interpretation of what the election was about—slavery and the Republican Party's purported threat to it—had become our common understanding, regardless of what other actors in 1860 said. Republicans were indeed committed to stopping slavery's extension into the western territories, and Lincoln had indeed famously said, or at least implied, on a few occasions that doing so would put slavery "on the road to ultimate extinction." As well, southern proponents of disunion who seized on Lincoln's triumph as justification for secession did indeed despise Republicans as both dangerous to their propertied interests and insufferably insulting.

Of the four groups who appealed to the electorate for support in 1860, however, only the southern Democrats backing John C. Breckinridge insisted that slavery extension was the election's central issue. John Bell's Constitutional Union supporters in both the North and South, where the largest slaveholders usually backed him, consistently declared that territorial slavery extension was a mooted question, a phony issue, since slaveholders had no interest whatsoever in moving into any of the remaining territories of the United States. They stressed instead the danger that both Republicans and Breckinridge Democrats posed to the preservation of the Union. Nor did the supporters of Democratic candidate Stephen A. Douglas emphasize the slavery extension question, though they took a decidedly different stand on it than did Breckinridge men in the South. Their emphasis instead was on the treasonous disunionism of the Breckinridge crowd and their responsibility for shattering the Democratic Party as well as the dangerous anti-slavery extremism of Republicans. Ultimately, the Douglas camp, like the Constitutional Union Party, maintained that the fate of the nation, not the fate of slavery or slavery extension, was what was at stake in the 1860 race.

Finally, while every Republican campaigning for Lincoln's election

did indeed repeat his party's opposition to slavery's extension beyond the states where it legally existed, Republicans did not focus their campaign on that issue. Instead, they primarily railed and ran against the record and especially the corruption of the incumbent administration of Democratic president James Buchanan. Ousting Democrats from power and restoring honesty to the federal government—not stopping slavery's spread, let alone demanding its abolition—was the central theme of the Republican campaign and, so far as campaign issues determined the election's outcome, by far the major reason why Abraham Lincoln was elected.

Closer examination of the 1860 campaign revealed another misleading aspect of its traditional portrayal. This is the notion that it was fundamentally two separate campaigns—Lincoln versus Douglas in the northern free states and Bell versus Breckinridge in the southern slave states. This characterization distorts how the dynamic of the election developed. It especially effaces the nationwide revulsion of non-Democrats at the sleaze they identified with Democratic governance. The demand in 1860 to throw the Democratic rascals out was a national, not a sectional, passion.

Readers who come to this book unfamiliar with nineteenth-century political culture and practice should know that they differed from politics today. For one thing, people usually voted for or against political parties rather than for or against presidential candidates, who were tellingly referred to as the parties' standard bearers. It was the standard, not its bearer, that usually attracted or repulsed voters. Presidential candidates did not personally campaign in those days, although in 1860 Stephen Douglas would break that rule while Lincoln would win Republicans' nomination because party insiders considered him more electable than any other potential nominee. There is no evidence, however, that the hundreds of thousands of men—and only adult men voted in those days—who supported electors pledged to John Bell or John Breckinridge did so because of any personal attraction of the candidates themselves. And the same was true of the vast majority of men who supported Lincoln.

Presidential candidates then were also utterly dependent on their party organizations to have any chance of election. Until the very end of the nineteenth century, there were no state-printed ballots for voters to mark. Instead, parties had the obligation of printing their own ballots and then distributing them to thousands of polling places so that voters could hand them to election judges for deposit in ballot boxes. If for no other reason, that crucial party responsibility was why the election of 1860 pitted parties, not just candidates, against each other.

An important result of this situation is that, quite unlike the case today, parties' national platforms were deemed to be all-important in 1860. They were so central to the story of that election that I have included all four of the party platforms in Appendix B so readers can easily consult them.

Readers familiar with my previous books will note that this one is based far more on evidence drawn from newspapers and much less on private manuscript sources than those earlier efforts. Here I was interested primarily not in behind-the-scenes strategy-making but in how the campaign was presented to the electorate. Newspapers seemed the best source to explore that matter.

I have relied primarily on newspapers available digitally through the University of Virginia's Alderman Library and other sites. One of these sources—a collection entitled Nineteenth Century U.S. Newspapers at Alderman—gathered what will strike readers as some awfully obscure papers while omitting some far better known ones like, say, Horace Greeley's *New York Tribune*. For me, however, its geographical reach mattered more than its seemingly bizarre selection criteria.

Let me alert readers to one other thing about my use of newspapers. For those whose editor-owners' names I knew, such as James Gordon Bennett of the *New York Herald* and Henry J. Raymond of the *New York Times*, I sometimes attribute editorials in those papers to those individuals even when I did not know who actually wrote the specific editorials in question. My thinking here was that, as owners of the papers, those men would not allow editorials with which they disagreed to appear in their sheets.

The quotation in my title is taken from an address issued by New York Republicans' state convention in April 1860. That address alerted New York's voters that they were entering "a campaign fraught with consequences of the most momentous import."<sup>1</sup> The consequences it referred to were emphatically not the abolition of slavery within the South or the Civil War that it took to achieve that abolition. Rather, it was the opportunity, at long last from Republicans' perspective, to oust a venal Democratic Party regime, and with it the domineering southern Slave Power, from its control of the executive branch of the national government. Republicans would achieve that goal in 1860, but that achievement's concomitant price was a far more momentous consequence—southern secession and a disastrous four years of war.

Let me close by thanking the people who helped me bring this book to conclusion. The staff at the University Press of Kansas was wonderfully prompt and efficient in its preparation. That preparation has occurred un-

der the aegis of three different editors. Fred Woodward initially signed me up for the project. Before I even began to write, he informed me that he was retiring and passing me on to the sure hands of Chuck Myers, who succeeded him as head of the press. Then, before I had finished writing, Chuck informed me that he was leaving to move to the University of Chicago Press. Before he did so, he generously read and passed on most welcome encouraging words about the seven chapters I had then completed. Finally, Joyce Harrison has overseen the completion of the project. I am also deeply indebted to her assistant Cole Anneberg for help in readying the illustrations for publication. The two editors for the presidential election series at the press, Michael Nelson and John McCardell, offered helpful suggestions for revision, most of which I heeded. Chuck Calhoun, who read the manuscript for the press, alerted me to an important factual error in my chapter on the Republican national convention, and I am grateful for his heads-up. But two longtime friends and fellow historians of nineteenth-century America were most helpful of all, even though both were striving to complete book projects of their own. William W. Freehling, who is writing an exciting fresh study of Lincoln, read the two chapters in which he most prominently figures and offered both astute commentary and welcome encouragement. William J. Cooper Jr. read the entire manuscript with characteristic acuity, and he too was most generous in his assessment. "The two Bills," as my one-time editor Thomas LeBien once called them, are true pals indeed.



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# 1

## REPUBLICAN STORM RISING?

In early April 1860 a worried Democratic congressman from Pennsylvania warned his party's main Washington newspaper that "State after State in the North" had been inundated by "the swelling tide of Black Republicanism." Democrats probably now lacked a popular majority in every free state save Oregon, he wailed, with little "prospect of reversing, at present, the disastrous current."<sup>1</sup> Three months later, Democratic congressman James Jackson told his fellow townsmen in Athens, Georgia, that a Republican cloud covered the entire North. "It is black and ominous," he warned, "and threatens to discharge its flood of fury—its storm of hail and lightning upon you at any moment." Republicans, he explained, were motivated by "hostility, uncompromising enmity to you and to your great property interests." "Can this tide of fanatical enmity to you, thus swelling every day, be stopped before it engulfs us and our children?" he asked. "It must be arrested," he insisted, "or your peace is at an end—your property destroyed—your land now blooming like a garden, left desolate as a desert."<sup>2</sup>

Divergent reactions to the seemingly inexorable growth of the Republican Party since its emergence in 1854 shaped the presidential election of 1860 more than anything else. Among less astute Republicans, its apparently unstoppable expansion across the North created overconfidence about winning the White House in November. Among the great majority of American voters who regarded Republicans as a hostile and dangerous force, that growth engendered fear and resentment. Union-loving conservatives in both the North and South dreaded that a Republican victory would rend the nation. Meanwhile, southern Democrats, Repub-



licans' primary political target, raved that they would indeed disrupt the Union rather than submit to the victory of a party they deemed abolitionist fanatics. To boot, they howled, Republicans had repeatedly and outrageously insulted white Southerners' honor by insisting that those Southerners were a minority of the nation's population—that is, an inherently unequal portion of it—who must submit to the rule of the northern majority.<sup>3</sup>

However unstoppable the growth of the Republican Party appeared, it had not, in fact, been as irresistible as an incoming tide. Instead, it was fueled by Northerners' indignant reactions to a series of contingent events that Republican propagandists persuasively portrayed as slaveholder or Slave Power aggressions against their rights, interests, and liberties. So dependent were Republicans on events, rather than the institutional loyalty that more mature political organizations like the Democrats could rely on to mobilize voters, that Republican leaders constantly felt the need to justify the very existence of a party whose support was confined almost totally to one section of the nation. In early January 1860, for example, the New Hampshire Republican state platform insisted that only “the continued aggressions of the Slave Power upon the rights of free labor and free men . . . force upon us, in common with the people of the Free States, the necessity of renewed and united efforts in behalf of freedom, free labor, and the Union as our fathers framed it.”<sup>4</sup> It was that undeniably sectional nature of the party, indeed, that made it seem so dangerous to the great majority of white Americans. After all, the greatest of the Founders, George Washington himself, had warned against the specter of such a political party.

The event that precipitated the formation of the Republican Party was passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act in May 1854. That law had opened up the remainder of the Louisiana Purchase territory west of Missouri, Iowa, and Minnesota Territory—from which slavery had been “forever prohibited” by the Missouri Compromise of 1820—to possible settlement by slaveholding Southerners. It had declared that thirty-four-year-old ban “inoperative and void.” The vast majority of Northerners, regardless of partisan affiliation, opposed slavery's expansion into western areas where it did not yet legally exist. A Free Soil Party that denounced slavery's possible extension into western territories had garnered 14 percent of the North's popular vote in the 1848 presidential election, but the Nebraska bill outraged a far larger portion of the northern electorate. Mass protest meetings erupted across the North almost from the moment that Democratic senator Stephen A. Douglas's Nebraska bill was introduced in January 1854. As Democratic responsibility for the bill and the unanimous opposition of northern Whigs

and Free Soilers in Congress to it became clearer, these meetings increasingly took on an anti-Democratic hue. So great was the hostile uproar in the North, in fact, that when the House of Representatives finally voted on the bill in May, northern Democrats split down the middle, with 44 supporting the measure and 43 opposing it.

Upon passage of the bill, the Free Soil paper in Washington urged all northern congressmen who had voted against it to call “upon the people to disregard obsolete issues, old prejudices, mere party names, and rally as one man for the reestablishment of liberty and the overthrow of the Slave Power.”<sup>5</sup> In the fall of 1854 fusion anti-Nebraska coalitions contested the state and congressional elections in most Midwestern states, ousting sitting Democratic congressmen from office. (In the congressional elections of 1854 and 1855, as a whole, northern Democrats lost 66 of the 91 House seats they held in 1854.) In only two states, Wisconsin and Michigan, however, did those coalitions dub themselves Republicans. Elsewhere in that region, anti-Nebraska coalitions seemed to be temporary ad hoc alliances intent simply on restoring the recently repealed Missouri Compromise line, rather than building the foundation for a permanent new anti-Democratic party.

Adopted in July 1854, the Michigan Republican state platform spelled out the rationale for a longer-lasting party in memorable language. After denouncing “the Institution of Slavery” as “a great moral, social and political evil” and as “a relic of barbarism,” it insisted that Congress prohibit slavery expansion to check the “unequal representation” of the South in Congress. The fundamental purpose of the Nebraska Act, it declared, was to “give to the Slave States such a decided and practical preponderance in all measures of government as shall reduce the North . . . to the mere province of a few slaveholding Oligarchs of the South—to a condition too shameful to be contemplated.” It then included a ringing justification for the name *Republican*. “That in view of the necessity of battling for the first principles of republican government, and against the schemes of aristocracy the most revolting and oppressive with which the earth was ever cursed, or man debased, we will co-operate and be known as Republicans until the contest be terminated.”<sup>6</sup>

Republican editors and speakers rang changes on these themes for the remainder of the decade. Some denounced slavery as immoral, and the party’s initial national platform in 1856 labeled it “a relic of barbarism.” Moreover, up through the 1860 election, virtually every Republican reaffirmed that stopping the extension of slavery beyond the boundaries of the

existing slave states was a fundamental purpose of the party. Only a tiny minority of Republicans, however, demanded the immediate abolition of slavery in the South.<sup>7</sup> To the contrary, virtually every public pronouncement by the party denied that Republicans would interfere with slavery where it legally existed. Many Republican spokesmen in fact claimed absolute indifference to the fate of slaves or voiced racist contempt for them. In 1856 the Republican Hartford *Courant* defended the party's free-soil principles as follows: "The Republicans mean to preserve all of the country they can from the pestilential presence of the black man." That same year a Republican orator, who would be named Pennsylvania's sole representative on the Republican National Committee in 1859 and then become a well-regarded Radical Republican congressman during Reconstruction, told his Pittsburgh audience that "he cared nothing for the 'nigger'; it was not the mission of the Republican party to preach rebellion—he had a higher mission to preach—deliverance to the white man."<sup>8</sup> By 1860 the nation's leading Republican, New York senator William H. Seward, admitted that "the motive of those who have protested against the extension of slavery [has] always been concern for the welfare of the white man, not an unnatural sympathy with the negro."<sup>9</sup>

With regard to the fate of western territories, the welfare of northern white men required the exclusion of slaves and slaveholders, lest their presence preclude the migration of northern farmers and laborers to those territories. Yet the Michigan Republican platform makes abundantly clear that the welfare of northern white men was also inextricably bound to the balance of sectional power in the national government and that white southern slaveholders, not African American slavery, constituted Republicans' main target. To Michigan's Republicans, the Nebraska Act was a naked attempt to increase white Southerners' power in Washington by creating more slave states. They—and many other Republicans—found it outrageous that a tiny oligarchy of some 400,000 slaveholders, "the most revolting and oppressive [aristocracy] with which the earth was ever cursed," could, through its control of the national Democratic Party, dictate the fate and welfare of 20 million northern people. The first principle of republican government they meant to defend was majority rule by the nation's majority—that is, the North. As a Republican speaker rhetorically asked a New York rally in 1856, "Shall . . . an arrogant oligarchy of slave masters rule as with a plantation whip, twenty million of American citizens?"<sup>10</sup>

From the founding of their party through the 1860 election, Republicans continually portrayed Northerners as victims of political and even physical

assaults by white Southerners, the hated Slave Power, who would politically rule them “as with a plantation whip.” Events during the remainder of the decade would provide fresh evidence of an aggressive and bullying slavocracy that, Republicans insisted, only they could resist, for, as Seward averred in 1858, “The Democratic party . . . is identical with the Slave Power.”<sup>11</sup>

Despite the forcefulness of Republicans’ anti-Southern rhetoric and the widespread northern outrage at the Kansas-Nebraska Act, in 1854, as noted, Republicans as a distinct party planted roots in only two Midwestern states. Elsewhere in that region, Whigs or fusion People’s Party coalitions battled Democrats that year. East of Ohio, the existing Whig Party capitalized on anger at the legislation and often refused flatly to fuse with Free Soilers or anti-Nebraska Democrats. In 1854 most northern Whig leaders, who had unanimously opposed the Nebraska measure both inside and outside Congress, were determined to preserve the Whig Party, not fold it into a broader anti-slavery-extension coalition, because they believed that straight-out Whigs could win both the congressional elections of 1854–1855 and the presidential election of 1856.

Two of the men who would vie for the Republican presidential nomination in 1860 were among these initial Whig holdouts. In Illinois, Abraham Lincoln rejected attempts by Chicagoans to put him on a fledgling Republican committee and instead ran for the state legislature in 1854 as a Whig. More important, New York senator Seward, the leader of Senate opposition to the Nebraska bill, clung to the Whig Party while his alter ego, state Whig boss Thurlow Weed, editorialized in his *Albany Evening Journal* that only the Whig Party had ever done anything effective to stop slavery’s expansion and that therefore “it is best, now and ever, ‘for the Whig party to stand by its colors.’”<sup>12</sup> Until the leaders and followers of that party consigned it to the scrapheap, the Republican Party had no prayer of surviving its birth pangs, let alone growing to maturity.

Far more worrisome to early Republican organizers than northern Whig holdouts during 1854 and 1855 was the astonishing spread of the rival anti-Catholic, anti-immigrant, and anti-politician Know Nothing movement. Organized initially as a secret nativist fraternity, its members answered queries about it by saying, “I know nothing about it.” Hence the popular sobriquet. By mid-1855 Know Nothings publicly called themselves the American Party. Most northern Know Nothings undoubtedly shared other Northerners’ outrage at the Nebraska Act and at the apparent aggressions by an autocratic Slave Power that legislation seemed to prove. Nonetheless, to incipient Republicans’ dismay, Know Nothings clearly placed priority on

smashing the political influence of foreigners and Catholics as well as any politicians who sought those groups' support. Know Nothings gravely complicated the task of putting together an antislavery, anti-southern Republican coalition precisely because they seemed capable of defeating Democrats and capturing control of local, state, and congressional offices on a nativist, not an anti-slavery-extension, platform. They scored stunning successes in New England and the Middle Atlantic states in 1854 and 1855, often stymieing attempts even to launch Republican parties there, and they were crucial components of the opposition parties in Ohio, Indiana, and Michigan as well.

However irrepressible the rise of an anti-southern Republican Party appeared to some observers by 1860—and to some contemporary historians today, Republican leaders in 1854 and 1855 knew all too well that many northern voters worried more about Catholics, immigrants, and booze than they did about slavery extension. They also knew that those priorities inhibited the growth of the Republican Party. "This election has demonstrated that, by a majority, Roman Catholicism is feared more than American slavery," wrote a *New Yorker* in 1854. The following year a frustrated Massachusetts Republican complained that "the election is most disastrous. . . . The people will not confront the issues at present. They want a Paddy hunt & on a Paddy hunt they will go."<sup>13</sup>

By the time the Thirty-Fourth Congress opened in December 1855, however, some of the Northerners elected as Whigs or Know Nothings in 1854 and 1855 stood ready to embrace the new Republican organization. One reason was that the extent of Know Nothing victories in the North's 1854 elections destroyed northern Whigs' hopes that their party could survive intact. Congressmen who, just like Lincoln and Seward, had refused to join the Republicans in 1854 were now ready to do so. Probably more important, however, was how the Kansas-Nebraska Act actually played out in Kansas. Stephen Douglas and other northern Democrats had argued that under Douglas's popular sovereignty formula settlers from northern states were bound to control the first territorial legislature and that it would bar the entry of slaveholders into the territory. When the first Kansas election for a territorial legislature occurred on March 30, 1855, however, proslavery Missourians, soon notorious as Border Ruffians and led by former senator David R. Atchison, poured across the border, stuffed ballot boxes with fraudulent votes, and elected a proslavery majority to the legislature. Then, when the legislature met in the summer of 1855, that majority passed a series of draconian proslavery laws that forced legislators elected by North-

erners who opposed slavery in Kansas to resign and, ultimately, set up their own so-called Free State territorial government. In short, other incidents that could be interpreted as Slave Power aggressions against Northerners' rights turned more men to the Republican Party, which portrayed itself as the paladin of the North against the South.

Of vast political importance to Republicans, who began as an anti-Democrat opposition party, Democratic president Franklin Pierce, who had helped write the Kansas-Nebraska Act and pronounced it an administration measure, defended the legitimacy of the proslavery territorial government in Kansas and labeled the Free State government an outlaw regime, which he was prepared to put down with federal troops. Fear and anger at purported Slave Power aggressions fueled the initial growth of the Republican Party, but because Republicans ran candidates almost exclusively in the North, and not directly against southern Democrats, they had to portray northern Democrats as lackeys of the Slave Power. Pierce's stance made that task much easier.

Nonetheless, it was a series of events in 1856 that determined that the new Republican Party, not the old Whigs or the rival Know Nothing Party, would be Democrats' primary foe for the rest of the decade—and, as it has turned out, up to the present day. When the Thirty-Fourth Congress opened in December 1855, it was clear Democrats were a minority in the House, but it was not clear who held the majority. Anti-Nebraska Northerners, Know Nothings, and even former Whigs could reasonably claim that position, although the latter two groups would require cooperation between Northerners and Southerners to achieve it. In the end, after a titanic two-month struggle, most non-Democrat Northerners rallied behind Massachusetts' Nathaniel P. Banks, a former Democrat elected in 1854 as a Know Nothing, to make him the Republican Speaker of the House. "The importance of this victory cannot well be overestimated," rejoiced Maine's Republican congressman Israel Washburn, for it demonstrated, in the words of a different Maine Republican, that "there is a North."<sup>14</sup> Banks's triumph, in sum, convinced Northerners that they could control the federal government without any help from Southerners if they held together as Republicans.

A successful first national meeting of Republicans in Pittsburgh on February 22, 1856, that stressed opposition to slavery extension and to the Pierce administration as the party's twin principles furthered the new party's momentum. Moreover, simultaneous with that Republican meeting in Pittsburgh, a presidential nominating convention of Know Nothings, who now called themselves the American Party, split along sectional lines in

Philadelphia. Most northern Know Nothings refused to accept the nomination of former president Millard Fillmore, whom Southerners and a few Northerners supported. Angry northern American Party members bolted the convention, but they were not yet ready to join the incipient Republican organization. Instead they called for a North American Party convention to nominate its own presidential candidate in New York City on June 12, five days before Republicans would hold their own national nominating convention in Philadelphia. These American Party men hoped they could pressure the Republicans into accepting their nominee. In the end, however, most of the former supported the Republicans' presidential candidate, John C. Frémont.

Some trickery at the New York convention and horse-trading between Know Nothings and Republicans on subpresidential candidate slates and platforms facilitated the merger. Nonetheless, Northerners' outrage at a series of explosive events with sectional ramifications in May 1856 primarily caused it. On May 21 a federal posse that included many Missouri Border Ruffians invaded the "Free State" town of Lawrence, Kansas. They destroyed two free-soil newspapers, burned a few buildings, and fired on one particularly stout edifice with cannons in an attempt to raze it. Although no one was killed, this armed assault by proslavery Southerners on Northerners helped cement the image of Northerners as victims of southern aggressions. Thus "Bleeding Kansas" became one of the pillars of the Republican campaign in 1856.

The national platform the Republicans adopted in Philadelphia stressed the assaults on Northerners' rights in Kansas. It invited the support of everyone, regardless of previous partisan affiliation, who opposed slavery extension and the Democrat Pierce's presidential administration, and it insisted on "both the right and the imperative duty of Congress to prohibit in the Territories those twin relics of barbarism—Polygamy and Slavery." But its longest sections focused on the fraudulent and violent deprivation of "the dearest Constitutional rights of the people of Kansas." After listing a litany of such assaults, it added "that all these things have been done with the knowledge, sanction, and procurement of the present National Administration." "For this high crime against the Constitution, the Union, and humanity," the platform continued, "we arraign the Administration, the President, his advisers, agents, supporters, apologists, and accessories . . . before the country and before the world."<sup>15</sup> That this direct attack on Franklin Pierce was written after he had failed to win renomination and was not the Democratic presidential candidate in 1856 is noteworthy. In

1860 Republicans would again attempt to make the election a referendum on the incumbent Democratic president's record even though he too was not a candidate that year.

Surprisingly, the 1856 Republican national platform made no mention of two events in Washington in May of that year that arguably did more than anything else to expand the Republican electorate. On the morning of May 8, Philemon T. Herbert, a Democratic representative from California and the son of a slaveholding family in Alabama, got into a brawl with an Irish waiter named Thomas Keating at Willard's Hotel and shot and killed him. Far more notorious and politically consequential than this assault, precisely two weeks later South Carolina representative Preston S. Brooks caned Massachusetts Republican senator Charles Sumner into bloody unconsciousness on the Senate floor. Both events showed southern slaveholders brutally treating northern freemen like slaves, and both became fodder for the Republican presidential campaign against Democratic candidate James Buchanan. "Mr. Buchanan is the candidate not only of Pierce and Douglas, but of Herbert who shot the Irishman [and] of Brooks, who assaulted Sumner," Republican John Jay told a New York Republican rally. "The Murder of Keating Approved by the Democratic Party in Congress and out" was part of the title of a Republican campaign pamphlet distributed in Michigan. By allowing Herbert to resume his House seat, it huffed, "the Slave Power has not only justified the infamous act, but has invited its repetition upon all Northern men."<sup>16</sup>

It was the combination of "Bleeding Kansas" and "Bleeding Sumner"—that is, events, not Republicans' free-soil platform—that did the most to help Republicans build a broad electoral base in the North in 1856. "The feeling all over our State, in relation to Kansas affairs and the assault on Sumner, is more intense and determined than I thought it would be," testified a New York Republican at the end of May. By June, Republicans exulted that "the outrage upon Sumner & the occurrences in Kansas have helped us vastly." At the same time, southern Know Nothings recognized that Northerners' anger doomed all chances of maintaining the national American Party at full strength. Thus a Virginian despaired to a northern Fillmore loyalist, "Recent events in Kansas and Washington seem to be driving the masses of your people into the arms of the Republican party." Nor would many northern Whigs, once friendly to Fillmore, support him after the events of May. As one Vermonter lamented in July, "The outrage upon Mr. Sumner and upon the people of Kansas has strengthened [Republicans] as a party and placed it out of our power to carry this State unless

Congress settles the Kansas question soon.” Another one-time Whig from Vermont told the hapless Fillmore much the same in October. That state’s Whigs had gone as a “body” to the Republicans because of the “deep & extensive revulsion of feeling at the present state of things.”<sup>17</sup>

Various Republicans’ private correspondence clarifies the substance of that revulsion better than Republicans’ public statements. Their letters indicate that Republicans were far more concerned about their own potential political enslavement by southern tyrants than they were about the bondage of African Americans or even slavery’s potential spread. What seemed at stake to these writers were the precious legacies of the American Revolution—republican self-government and white men’s political liberty. “Did you ever see such infernal, outrageous, liberty-crushing, persecuting, tyrannical, I can’t find any word to express it but damnable, proceedings as those engineered by Pierce & Douglas in Kansas?” fumed Indiana’s Schuyler Colfax on May 21, 1856, the day before Sumner was caned. “It makes my blood boil.” In July a Massachusetts Yankee wrote about the Kansas and Washington attacks: “The Missouri savages seem determined to prevent Northern settlement in the Territory except as servants or slaves of the South. . . . What has taken place in Kansas and at Washington within the last few months is a disgrace to the country and a reproach to our republican form of government.” A month later, an Ohioan echoed, “It is high time that the people of the whole country should know and understand, that the degraded negro is not the only class of *slaves* among us, but that the arrogance of the *slave power* tramples ruthlessly upon *all* who pretend to fix the limits of its dominion.” A different Republican expressed a similar complaint a year later. “The Slave Power will not submit. The tyrants of the lash will not withhold until they have put padlocks on the lives of freemen. The Union which our fathers formed seventy years ago is not the Union today. . . . The sons of the Revolutionary fathers are becoming *slaves* or *masters*.”<sup>18</sup>

In late August 1856, a surviving veteran of the Revolutionary War made a similar connection between that war and Republicans’ struggle against the Slave Power. The comment appears in a remarkable letter written for him to Vermont congressman Justin Morrill, who had been elected as an anti-Nebraska Whig in September 1854 but was by the summer of 1856 firmly in the Republican camp. Morrill had sought a relief bill for the veteran, who then asked an acquaintance to write Morrill to express his thanks. “The old man . . . has always been a democrat but he says he shall vote for Frémont if God spares his life and that if a few years younger he would go to fight the Border Ruffians in Kansas,” wrote his scribe. “He says he fought for liberty

eighty years ago and that Republicans are struggling for the same principles which he then maintained through a long and bloody war. He is now in the second century of his life, but may he never live to see the principles of the Revolution die before him.”<sup>19</sup> Quite clearly, the emancipation of African American slaves is not what this aged New England veteran thought he had been fighting for in the 1770s.

Fueled by northern indignation at what seemed like repeated Slave Power aggressions and reinforced by most northern Know Nothings after May’s events, Republicans scored what their ablest historian aptly calls a “victorious defeat” in the three-candidate presidential election of 1856.<sup>20</sup> Democrat James Buchanan won the electoral vote handily, with a majority of 174 out of a total of 297. He also led in the national popular vote, with a total of 1,832,955, or a plurality of 45.3 percent. Frémont ran second, with 115 electoral votes and 1,340,537 popular votes, 33.1 percent of the national total. Fillmore, the American Party candidate, carried only Maryland for 8 electoral votes; his popular vote of 871,731 constituted 21.6 percent of the whole. Yet it was the skewed sectional distribution of the votes that was pregnant with implications for the future. Frémont carried eleven of the sixteen free states with 45.2 percent of their popular vote whereas Buchanan won only 41.4 percent of the North’s popular vote and carried only five northern states—California, Illinois, Indiana, New Jersey, and, most important, Pennsylvania, which together had 62 electoral votes, slightly more than a third of Buchanan’s total. Far, far more important, Republicans’ popular vote in the North more than tripled Fillmore’s, signaling that Republicans, at least temporarily, had bested Know Nothings in the contest to replace Whigs as Democrats’ major opponent. As Table 1 in Appendix A shows, Fillmore’s northern support was concentrated in only a few states. Had that vote been thrown to Frémont, he would have carried California, New Jersey, and Illinois and come within a whisker of carrying Indiana and Pennsylvania as well.

Combining Frémont’s and Fillmore’s votes in northern states to calculate the size of the anti-Democratic vote in the region is the way historians most often look at the results. By that measure almost three-fifths of the section’s voters opposed Buchanan. Thus, historians correctly point out, Republicans would have to do better in the Lower North to aggregate that anti-Democratic vote in order to win the election of 1860. With regard to the 1860 contest, however, it is equally revealing to combine the Fillmore and Buchanan votes as an index of hostility to Republicans in the free states. By this measure, a majority of northern voters opposed Republicans in eight

states, not just five, for Republicans were also a minority in Iowa, New York, and Ohio, all states that they won with a plurality of the popular vote. In other words, of the five most populous states in the North, Republicans had an absolute majority only in Massachusetts (see Table 1 in Appendix A). Because both the Fillmore and Buchanan campaigns in 1856 had stressed that their candidates were the safest bets to preserve the Union and that a Republican victory made southern secession inevitable, the combined Fillmore and Buchanan vote was interpreted as representing Northerners, to say nothing of Southerners, who regarded the Republican Party as far too dangerously sectional to merit support. All politically aware men in both sections understood that fact. As a result, one of the key themes of the 1860 election would be that all campaigns in that four-candidate race tried to assume the mantle of being the “national” party for themselves while pillorying their various opponents as being too “sectional.”

Outside of New England, where states held gubernatorial elections annually, the elections of 1857 provided little evidence of further Republican penetration across the North, although they did signal a substantial drop in the Know Nothing vote in most states. Voter turnout fell everywhere from its 1856 levels, so what those elections portended for the next presidential contest was unclear. Nonetheless, Republicans failed to carry a single free state in 1857 that they had lost in 1856, and Democrats recaptured two of Connecticut’s four House seats. In those states holding gubernatorial elections, the Republican proportion of the total vote ebbed everywhere except Iowa, where it edged above the 50 percent level; and Pennsylvania, where David Wilmot, running as a Union candidate, not a Republican, secured two-fifths of the vote, compared with Frémont’s meager 32 percent. Still, 40 percent was hardly a majority; nor were Wilmot’s 146,000 votes any match for the 231,000 Buchanan had rolled up in 1856. Additional evidence that the supposedly inexorable spread of the Republican Party had in fact stalled in 1857 came from Ohio. There the Republican Salmon P. Chase, with the help of many Know Nothings, had won the governorship in 1855 by almost 16,000 votes. Running for reelection in 1857, he eked out victory with only a 1,400-vote margin over his Democratic opponent, a plurality that was less than a tenth of that won by Frémont in Ohio in 1856 and one still shy of a popular-vote majority.

Most alarming to Republicans, they lost New York’s few statewide races to resurgent Democrats. As a panicked Republican editor in Buffalo saw it, “This result shows that there is no Republican party, and that what appeared to be such one year ago was a sort of mirage which was thrown

upon the public view by a peculiar condition of the atmosphere and which disappeared when a change of wind came.”<sup>21</sup> Put differently, the outrage at Slave Power aggressions that had fueled Republican gains in 1856 had apparently dissipated.

The meaning of the 1857 results was clear. Despite the Supreme Court’s notorious *Dred Scott* decision that year, to extend their base in the North Republicans needed further evidence of Democrat-aided Slave Power aggressions against Northerners’ rights. An attempt to force Kansas’s admission into the Union as a slave state in 1858, and especially James Buchanan’s support for that effort, provided that evidence while at the same time so splitting his Democratic Party that it lacked the will, as well as the votes, to resist Republican gains. Indeed, anti-administration Democrats often assisted those gains in 1858’s important congressional elections.

Buchanan’s top priority upon taking office as president in March 1857 was to reverse the growth of the Republican Party, which, he correctly perceived, jeopardized the Union. That goal is why he persuaded Robert Grier, a Pennsylvanian associate justice on the Supreme Court, to join five southern justices in support of the *Dred Scott* decision, which by clear implication ruled Republicans’ most concrete policy proposal—congressional prohibition of slavery from all federal territories—unconstitutional. But Buchanan also recognized that so long as Kansas remained in a disputed territorial phase, Republicans could exploit the turmoil there for partisan gain. Thus, he tried to facilitate statehood for Kansas as soon as possible. To achieve that goal he recruited a Democratic heavyweight to the thankless position of territorial governor.

Born and raised in Pennsylvania, Robert J. Walker had moved as a young man to Mississippi, where in the late 1830s the legislature chose him as one of the state’s U.S. senators. As senator, Walker played the lead role in making annexation of the proslavery Republic of Texas a central Democratic issue in the presidential election of 1844. As reward for the help that program gave his candidacy in the South, newly elected president James K. Polk made Walker his treasury secretary in a cabinet where James Buchanan was secretary of state. When Polk’s term ended in 1849, Walker did not return to Mississippi. Instead he moved to New York to speculate in stocks, and during the Civil War he helped the Union cause by trying to sell its bonds in England. Walker, in sum, was no proslavery zealot despite his service as a Mississippi senator.

When accepting Buchanan’s request, Walker told the president that he could probably bring Kansas in as a Democratic free state, but never as a

slave state. The great majority of settlers in Kansas opposed slavery. More important, he insisted that Buchanan guarantee him in writing that the president would back up his determination that any constitution drafted for statehood by Kansans be submitted in its entirety to a vote by all the legitimate adult male residents of Kansas. Buchanan gave him such a written pledge, and that pledge would be publicized widely by the anti-Buchanan press during the 1860 election.

When the diminutive Walker reached Kansas in the late spring of 1857, the proslavery territorial legislature had already called for a June election of delegates to a September convention in the town of Lecompton, Kansas. That body was to write a constitution with which Kansas could apply to Congress for statehood. Walker tried frantically to persuade the heavy free-state majority of settlers to participate in the June election, but they refused because the hated proslavery legislature had called it. As a result, only 2,000 out of approximately 28,000 potential voters came out in June, and they chose an overwhelmingly proslavery constitutional convention. Walker, however, did persuade the free-state men to participate in an October election to choose a new territorial legislature, and along with Walker's rejection of fraudulent ballots cast by Missourians, Northerners gained control of the official territorial legislature for the first time.

Angered by Walker's actions in October, delegates to the Lecompton constitutional convention refused to submit the entire constitution they composed to a public referendum. That document specified that the 200 or so slaves already in Kansas and their descendants would remain slaves in perpetuity, and it prohibited any revision of that constitution before 1864. The convention gave voters a choice only on the question of whether additional slaves would be permitted into or prohibited from Kansas once it became a state. They were denied a direct vote on accepting or rejecting the entire constitution, that is, the procedure upon which Walker insisted and that Buchanan had endorsed in his letter to Walker.

Walker denounced this violation of popular sovereignty, but, after hesitating for several months, Buchanan refused to back him up. Free-state settlers thus boycotted the December 21 referendum on the Lecompton constitution, and it passed with the clause allowing additional slaves by a vote of 6,153 to 569. Free-state men, however, did vote in another referendum on the constitution scheduled by the new antislavery majority of the territorial legislature on January 4, 1858. With loyalists of the former territorial legislature boycotting the election this time, over 10,000 votes were cast against the Lecompton constitution in its entirety. A clear majority of

Kansas' voters, in sum, opposed its admission as a new slave state. Just as clearly, James Buchanan was aware of that fact.

Even before the December 21 referendum in Kansas, Stephen Douglas told Buchanan in the White House that he would oppose the Kansas constitution on the Senate floor because the Lecompton convention did not represent the wishes of the majority of Kansans either in its composition or in the rules it set for the constitution's ratification. Determined to achieve statehood for Kansas no matter what, Buchanan took umbrage at Douglas's challenge. Thus began a titanic battle between the two men that split the Democratic Party until the ballots were cast in the 1860 presidential election. Its ramifications for the Democratic Party will be discussed in the following chapter.

Starting in January 1858 Buchanan sent three messages to Congress urging it to admit Kansas as a slave state under the terms of the Lecompton constitution. If free-state men had failed to vote in the original election of delegates to Lecompton or in the December 21 referendum, he argued, that was their own fault and they would have to live with the results of their abstention. In a February message, before a single vote on Kansas statehood had been taken in Congress, Buchanan proclaimed that "Kansas is at this moment as much a slave state as Georgia or South Carolina."<sup>22</sup> Buchanan, in sum, appeared committed to helping Southerners make Kansas another slave state.

Despite vigorous attacks by Douglas against this proposal, it easily passed the Senate, where Democrats loyal to Buchanan held an unassailable majority. The House with its heavy majority of Northerners was another matter, for most northern Democratic members, who had doubled their numbers in the congressional elections of 1856–1857, had to face the electorate in the fall of 1858. Buchanan used every weapon at his disposal to twist the arms of reluctant northern Democrats, as later congressional investigations would reveal—threats or promises about federal jobs and federal contracts in members' districts, the lure of wine and women, and ultimately outright cash bribes. Nonetheless, prodded by the furious Douglas, enough rebellious northern anti-Lecompton Democrats joined Republicans to defeat the statehood measure and substitute one calling for yet another referendum on the Lecompton constitution in Kansas. A conference committee dominated by Democrats worked out a compromise to save face for Buchanan. It called for another vote on Lecompton in August, packaged with a warning that should Kansans reject that constitution it could not be admitted as a state until it had 93,000 verifiable residents, the population

of the then least-populated congressional district. On August 2, 1858, the voters of Kansas rejected entry as a slave state by a vote of 11,300 to 1,800. Thus, over two full years before the 1860 presidential election, the last credible possibility that another slave state would be admitted from land then belonging to the United States was dead.

Within a few months Republicans would realize the political problems inherent in that fact. Initially, however, the fight over the Lecompton constitution seemed enormously beneficial to them. Not only had another Democratic president thrown his weight behind the Slave Power's mistreatment of northern settlers in Kansas, but northern Democratic divisions clearly helped Republicans in the North's congressional elections of 1858 and 1859. It was in those elections, not those of 1857, that Republicans' sway, at first blush at least, appeared to expand further across the North.

In twenty-two congressional districts in five northern states in 1858 anti-Lecompton or anti-Buchanan Democrats ran candidates against party regulars, and eight of those dissidents, usually with overt Republican backing, won House seats. Elsewhere anti-Lecompton men sat out the election or supported Republicans, allowing Republicans to carry the districts. When one includes the 1859 contests in calculations, administration loyalists among northern Democrats shrank from 53 to 26 while the number of Republican seats in the House swelled to 112—a plurality but, significantly, not a majority, of the chamber's 231 seats.

In those 1858 congressional elections Republicans won a majority of the popular vote for the first time in the crucial Lower North states of Indiana, Ohio, and Pennsylvania while reducing Democrats' margin to fewer than 700 votes in Illinois.<sup>23</sup> Understandably, Republicans rejoiced in and Democrats bemoaned these results. For several reasons, however, they hardly guaranteed that Republicans could sweep the North in 1860. Anti-Lecompton Democrats clearly voted to punish the Buchanan administration; they might easily support a Democratic candidate more to their liking in 1860, especially if that candidate were Stephen A. Douglas, the leader of the revolt against Buchanan. The customary lower turnout in off-year elections should have cautioned people not to make confident predictions based on these off-year results. As Table 2 in Appendix A demonstrates, in both Indiana and Pennsylvania the anti-Democratic vote lagged behind the totals Buchanan had achieved in 1856. In both, indeed, Democrats had suffered significant drop-off since 1856, and Democratic stay-at-homes might well return to the Democratic column in a presidential year. Finally, it is vastly important that the party that contested Pennsylvania's elections against

Buchanan's supporters was *not* the Republican Party. To effect a coalition between Americans who had supported Fillmore and Frémont's 1856 supporters, these men called themselves "the People's Party" precisely because they considered the very name "Republican" too radical to carry Pennsylvania. Republicans' antislavery, anti-Southern rhetoric simply seemed too dangerous to too many Pennsylvanians for Democrats' foes in the Keystone State to embrace the Republican name. Indeed, the People's Party state platform in 1858 primarily stressed not the Lecompton fiasco but instead the need for a higher tariff to protect American workers from foreign competition, a position that of course was viewed quite favorably by one-time Fillmore voters.

The People's Party coalition was more than an effort to improve on the 40 percent of the vote David Wilmot had won as a Union Party gubernatorial candidate in 1857. It was also an attempt to ward off an appeal from a new conservative party to Fillmore's 1856 supporters and perhaps others who had supported Frémont in 1856 only because of outrage at Bleeding Kansas and Bleeding Sumner, outrage that had demonstrably waned by 1857, to say nothing of 1858. This threat grew out of the Buchanan administration's mishandling of the Lecompton constitution and a depression ignited by the economic Panic of 1857. It constituted the biggest challenge the new Republican Party faced between 1856 and 1860. Perhaps more than anything else, it gave the lie to the supposed inevitability of a Republican storm rising. It exposed instead a popular perception of plasticity or malleability in the tumultuous political circumstances that had replaced the predictability of the competition between Whigs and Democrats.

In early 1858 Republicans and northern anti-Lecompton Democrats were not the only ones outraged by Buchanan's efforts to bring Kansas into the Union as a slave state. So too were the remaining southern Whigs still serving in the Senate, most of whom had supported Fillmore in 1856. Of these, the most important were John Bell of Tennessee and, especially, John J. Crittenden of Kentucky. They saw in Buchanan's actions an opportunity to build a new bisectional party that could displace the fledgling Republicans as Democrats' primary political opponent. Crittenden gave two major Senate speeches in the spring of 1858 to define the basis for the new party he and Bell envisioned. The first flayed Buchanan's Kansas policy, demanded another referendum on the Lecompton constitution in which all eligible Kansans participated, and insisted on majority rule in all territories, even if it produced free soil. The second speech denounced the fiscal extravagance of Buchanan's administration, which had resorted to deficit financing in

response to the Panic of 1857, and demanded instead an increase in tariff rates to generate more federal revenue and protect American workers from hard times, an increase Democrats had theretofore steadfastly opposed. Together with nativism and assaults on official corruption, these themes would provide the platform for a new party that all opponents of Buchanan, and not just Yankees, might support.

Congratulations inundated Crittenden from around the country along with predictions that he would win the presidency in 1860. Fillmore's northern supporters from 1856 rejoiced that Crittenden's anti-Lecompton stance had given them new life, for it eradicated the stigma of cooperating with Southerners under which they had labored in 1856. "You can have no conception of the importance of your position," hymned Washington Hunt from New York. "It gives assurance to the whole country that patriotism and love of justice do not belong to North or South, but both sections have men true to the Union, and to the principles of constitutional liberty." From Buffalo a correspondent predicted that American Party members and Republicans would unite in a "new party" behind Crittenden and elect him president. A resident of Erie, Pennsylvania, echoed: "I look to a reorganization of parties within the next year on a basis similar to the principle embodied in your great speech."<sup>24</sup>

A Kentuckian concurred that "this Lecompton Business" presented "a field for a new organization of parties, or rather the organization of a new party with a new name." It would have "the principles of truth and justice of the old Whigs, the national principles of the Americans, without their fanaticism and proscription, and some of the best features of the National democracy." In it, "all the Americans, all the national [anti-Lecompton] Democrats North, all the old line Whigs, and the soundest portion of the Republicans could unite."<sup>25</sup>

That last possibility gave Republican politicians the willies. With the final defeat of the Lecompton constitution on August 2, 1858, and with it the last realistic possibility of slavery expansion into existing territories, the justification for an exclusively northern party like the Republicans had seemingly disappeared. A new conservative party based on bisectonal opposition to Buchanan's administration, rather than northern resentment of Slave Power aggressions, could prevent Republicans from absorbing the northern Fillmore voters in the Lower North they needed to win in 1860. But it might also draw off 1856 Frémont voters who now no longer saw the need for the sectional paladin Republicans had portrayed themselves as being.