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The Civil War and the Origins of the Colorado Territory

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# THE CIVIL WAR AND THE ORIGINS OF THE COLORADO TERRITORY

SUSAN SCHULTEN

*We commonly acknowledge that the extension of slavery into the West was a primary cause of the sectional crisis. Yet we tend to treat these two mid-nineteenth-century narratives as geographically distinct: a battle over slavery engulfs the East while mineral rushes and migration transform the West. Here the creation of the Colorado Territory is framed within both these developments as well as in the shifting conception of American geography in the 1850s.*

**I**N APRIL 1865, PRESIDENT Abraham Lincoln asked Schuyler Colfax, Speaker of the House, to convey a message to the miners of the Far West. Later that spring, after the president was assassinated, Colfax delivered the president's posthumous message in the streets of Central City, a booming mining town in the Rocky Mountains. As Colfax recalled, Lincoln promised to promote the interests of the miners, for "their prosperity is the prosperity of the nation." Lincoln believed the "practically inexhaustible" wealth of the mines would vastly ease the payment of the war debt. And while others feared that discharged Union soldiers would overwhelm Northern industry, Lincoln planned "to attract them to the hidden wealth of our mountain ranges, where there is room for all." If immigrants and veterans would migrate "to the gold and silver that waits for them in the West . . . [we] shall prove in a very few years that we are indeed the treasury of the world."<sup>1</sup>

During the Civil War, Lincoln and the Republican Party forged an economic path for the West that stressed the development of railways, resources, and land. In fact,

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<sup>1</sup> A. Y. Moore, *The Life of Schuyler Colfax* (Philadelphia, [1868?]), 251, 277–8; note of 14 April 1865, folder 4, box 1, Schuyler Colfax Papers, 1782–1929, Indiana State Library, Indianapolis; and Lincoln quoted in Frank Hall, *History of the State of Colorado. . . .*, vol. 1 (Chicago, 1889), 364–5.

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the outbreak of war enabled the party to act on this vision, particularly in the Interior West. Several attempts to organize the region around the goldfields of western Kansas in 1859 and 1860 failed or died in congressional committee, largely casualties of the controversy over slavery. But after Lincoln's election, seven Southern states left the Union. This allowed Congressional Republicans to consolidate their power; organize the territories of Colorado, Nevada, and Dakota; and pass legislation that fundamentally shaped western development. Most histories of the Colorado Territory say little—if anything—about the influence of this sectional crisis and instead emphasize the rush to the Front Range brought by the discovery of gold in 1858. Yet it was the growing conflict over slavery that initially *prevented* the organization of the territory. When the election of Lincoln led to the secession of the Gulf States in the winter of 1860–1861, Republicans reaped the dividends of a smaller legislature that they now controlled.

The tensions over slavery escalated at the same time that mineral discoveries sparked migration to western Kansas. These two urgent developments occurred alongside a more subtle transformation of geographical perception in the 1850s. No longer entirely dismissed as the “Great American Desert,” the area east of the Rocky Mountains began to be described as a coherent region with economic potential. We tend to think of these narratives as both geographically distinct and historically separate: a battle over slavery engulfs the East while mineral rushes transform the American West. The many studies of the secession crisis mention the organization of the territory—if at all—as a minor event that rightly pales next to the war to preserve the Union. Conversely, histories of Colorado rarely mention the territory's political origins and instead emphasize mineral rushes, conflicts with Native Americans, and frontier politics. They generally omit the catastrophic political context that facilitated the organization of the territory in the first place.

This separation of narratives partly explains why scholars treat Colorado as peripheral to the sectional crisis. Two impressive environmental histories of Colorado—by Kathleen A. Brosnan and William Wyckoff—barely register developments outside the state. A fine recent study by Eugene H. Berwanger gives ample attention to the territory's established phase from 1861 to 1876 but glosses over its origins. And one of the only histories of Colorado during the Civil War, by Duane A. Smith, begins not with the creation of the territory but with the opening shots at Fort Sumter several weeks later. With this truncated perspective, the war appears irrelevant to Coloradans.<sup>2</sup> Yet the political crisis was fought over the *future* of the

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<sup>2</sup> Kathleen A. Brosnan, *Uniting Mountain and Plain: Cities, Law, and Environmental Change along the Front Range* (Albuquerque, 2002); William Wyckoff, *Creating Colorado: The Making of a Western American Landscape, 1860–1940* (New Haven, 1999); Eugene H. Berwanger, *The Rise of the Centennial State: Colorado Territory, 1861–1876* (Urbana, 2007); and Duane A. Smith, *The Birth of Colorado: A Civil War Perspective* (Norman, 1989). The standard text for Colorado history pays slight attention to the conflict in the eastern states as a factor in the creation of the territory. Carl Abbott, Stephen J. Leonard, and Thomas J. Noel, *Colorado: A History of the Centennial State* (Boulder, 2005).

nation, especially the new and anticipated territories. By the 1850s, all of these territories were located in the Interior West save for Washington, and by 1861 they constituted 40 percent of the nation's landmass. The creation of Colorado Territory was a function of both the political crisis in the East and the gold rush in the West, both of which occurred as Americans reconsidered the geography of the interior.

I offer this enlarged scope in the same spirit that animates recent scholarship in western history. Elliott West has written with detail and force of the 1859 gold rush in terms of the mounting strife with Plains tribes as well as the financial panic that ravaged the Northeast. By integrating racial conflict, the flux of capitalism, and the dynamics of the natural environment, he captured the era as one of utter disruption. His more recent model of a "Greater Reconstruction" is equally ambitious in framing the mid-nineteenth century as a period of racial realignment in the West and the South. Similarly, Richard W. Etulain has reintroduced scholars of the Civil War and the West to one another by demonstrating the thoroughly reciprocal relationship between the two. My effort to reframe the origins of the Colorado Territory begins with an examination of contemporary perceptions of geography.<sup>3</sup>

For much of the early nineteenth century, Americans regarded the Trans-Mississippi West as a desert, owing to the reconnaissance explorations of Zebulon Pike (1806–1807) and Stephen H. Long (1820). Both men described a region of barren soil and insufficient rain, which entrenched assumptions that the Louisiana Territory would remain permanent Indian country. This geographic idea took root in the 1820s and dominated popular understanding of the region for years thereafter. In 1829 the influential educator William Channing Woodbridge described the region west of Missouri as "a range for tribes of savages, and herds of buffaloes; and there is little probability that it can ever become the residence of an agricultural nation." Maps of the era commonly emblazoned "Great American Desert" across what is now Oklahoma, eastern Colorado, Kansas, Nebraska, and the Dakotas.<sup>4</sup>

In the 1850s, however, this concept began to loosen its hold on the public imagination, in part because migrants came across the Plains during wetter than average years. Western boosters and explorers, who turned their attention to the interior in the late 1840s and early 1850s, also challenged assumptions of an entirely barren landscape. The most vocal of these boosters was William Gilpin, who championed development of what

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<sup>3</sup> Elliott West, *The Contested Plains: Indians, Goldseekers, and the Rush to Colorado* (Lawrence, 1998); Elliott West, "Reconstructing Race," *Western Historical Quarterly* 34 (Spring 2003): 7–26; and Richard W. Etulain, ed., *Lincoln Looks West: From the Mississippi to the Pacific* (Carbondale, IL, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> William Channing Woodbridge, *A System of Universal Geography on the Principles of Comparison and Classification*. . . . (Hartford, 1829), 276. Several years later, Woodbridge described this same "Indian Territory" in a revised edition as follows: "This territory is uneven, but fertile in the east. Towards the west it passes into the barrenness of the Great American Desert." William Channing Woodbridge, *System of Modern Geography on the Principles of Comparison and Classification*. . . . (Hartford, 1853), 415 (italics in original).

he termed the “Cis-Rocky Mountain West.” Gilpin was a Philadelphian by birth, but his early study of maps convinced him that the Mississippi Valley was destined to become the economic heart of the Union. In 1836 he wrote to his sister from his new home in St. Louis and instructed her to “get out Mitchell’s map” (an 1831 continental map by Samuel Augustus Mitchell). He described the magnificence of the “prairie” that lay west of his new Missouri home and explained that it constituted a region unto itself. From 1843 to 1849, Gilpin joined several military expeditions in the West, including John C. Frémont’s second to Oregon in 1843. This gave him firsthand knowledge of the region and the presumed authority to reject prior assessments. Where others saw a desolate country fit only for natives, he saw luxuriant grasses covering a rolling and well-drained timberless landscape. While others saw the Rocky Mountains as an obstacle to overcome, he believed that they held riches just waiting to be discovered.<sup>5</sup>

Gilpin’s first published assessments of the West were issued at the same time that Congress began to consider American jurisdiction in Oregon. In January 1846, Missouri Senator David Rice Atchison asked Gilpin for information about a Pacific mail route, which the latter delivered through a long and forceful case for western development. His letter was actually less about the agricultural potential of Oregon—already well established—than the acquisition of the nation’s first western port, which he believed would open a prosperous trade with China. The Senate Committee on Post Offices and Post Roads was so taken with Gilpin’s letter that they made it part of the official report and reprinted thousands of copies for public consumption.<sup>6</sup>

At the same time Atchison was pressing Gilpin for details on a Pacific mail route, the Senate asked Frémont to create the maps of the Oregon Trail. By April, Frémont’s able cartographer, Charles Preuss, had begun to draw a map that detailed the trail on seven separate sheets. Preuss oriented each section of the trail horizontally on the map in order to maximize the ease of use by the migrants themselves as they traveled west. Each sheet covered a 250-mile stretch of the trail and described topography and climate as well as the presence of fuel, game, and water. Preuss also inscribed the map with relevant material from Frémont’s journal such as warnings about Native tribes or dramatic descriptions of bison. The result was unprecedented—the most detailed pictures of the trail that had been made to that point; the maps of the Oregon Trail so impressed Atchison that he ordered 10,000 copies.<sup>7</sup>

The Senate’s cartographic requests of Gilpin and Frémont indicate the intense interest in the Far West among the nation’s political elite. This interest was heightened

<sup>5</sup> G. Malcom Lewis, “William Gilpin and the Concept of the Great Plains Region,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 56 (March 1966): 36 and Thomas L. Karnes, *William Gilpin: Western Nationalist* (Austin, 1970), 35, 32–5.

<sup>6</sup> Karnes, *Gilpin*, 35; “The Untransacted Destiny of the American People: Western Expansionist, 1843–1846,” chap. 5 in *ibid.*, 104–37; and *Report to Accompany Bill S. no. 103. United States Senate Committee on Post Offices and Post Roads. . . .* (Washington, DC, 1846).

<sup>7</sup> John Charles Frémont, “Topographical Map for the Road from Missouri to Oregon. . . .” (Baltimore, 1846).

further when the United States entered into war with Mexico in April. By the time Preuss finished the map of the Oregon Trail in December, the United States had gained complete control over the Oregon Territory—and with it the nation's first Pacific port. In February of 1847, the Senate again approached Frémont, this time requesting an improved map of Oregon and Upper California. Preuss finished the map the following June, four months after the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo brought California and the rest of northern Mexico under American control.<sup>8</sup>

We think of this frenzy of reconnaissance and expansion during the 1840s in terms of the Far West, yet it also influenced perceptions of the interior. As Frémont and Preuss delivered their magnificent new map of Oregon and California, William Gilpin was preparing a very different kind of map, one that was equally driven by politics. *Gilpin's Hydrographic Map of North America* appears comparatively straightforward and simple, yet it represents an ambitious attempt to shift the nation's center of gravity. (See Figure 1.) The map marks no national borders but instead organizes the continent through watersheds in order to demonstrate the centrality of the Greater Mississippi Valley. A table on the map reinforces this message by measuring the sheer size of the valley relative to surrounding watersheds. Gilpin also used concentric circles to draw attention to the Plains, where the Smoky Hill and Republican Rivers converge to form the Kansas River. He considered this to be the heart of the continent and, therefore, the center of national and international trade. Gilpin claimed to have issued the map in 1846—well before the United States controlled the Far West—but the elevations on the map are taken from Frémont's maps of 1845 and 1848. So while he might have first published it in another form, it was reissued just after the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo enlarged American territory. His identification of a geographical “center” of the continent was institutionalized soon thereafter when a military survey “marked” the spot as the site for Fort Riley in 1852.<sup>9</sup>

Gilpin's advocacy of the interior intensified in the 1850s. His geographical convictions partly stemmed from important advances in the collection, organization, and interpretation of environmental data. His predictions of explosive growth in the West rested upon new knowledge about temperature, rainfall, and wind, which together formed the emerging science of climatology. The intellectual inspiration for this work was Alexander von Humboldt, who advanced a model of natural science as the search for patterns. Through Humboldt, geography began to move from an emphasis on classification and description to a search for relationships and laws of operation. His grand vision of a unified and interdependent natural world greatly influenced American geographical knowledge in the nineteenth century.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> John Charles Frémont, “Map of Oregon and Upper California from the Surveys of John C. Frémont and Other Authorities. . . .” (Washington, DC, 1848).

<sup>9</sup> William Gilpin, “Gilpin's Hydrographic Map of North America” (St. Louis, [1848?]). For more on the notion of a geographical center, see “Map of Eastern Kansas by E. B. Whitman and A. D. Searl, General Land Agents, Lawrence, Kansas” (Boston, 1856).

<sup>10</sup> Aaron Sachs, *The Humboldt Current: Nineteenth-Century Exploration and the Roots of American Environmentalism* (New York, 2006); Susan Faye Cannon, *Science in Culture: The Early*

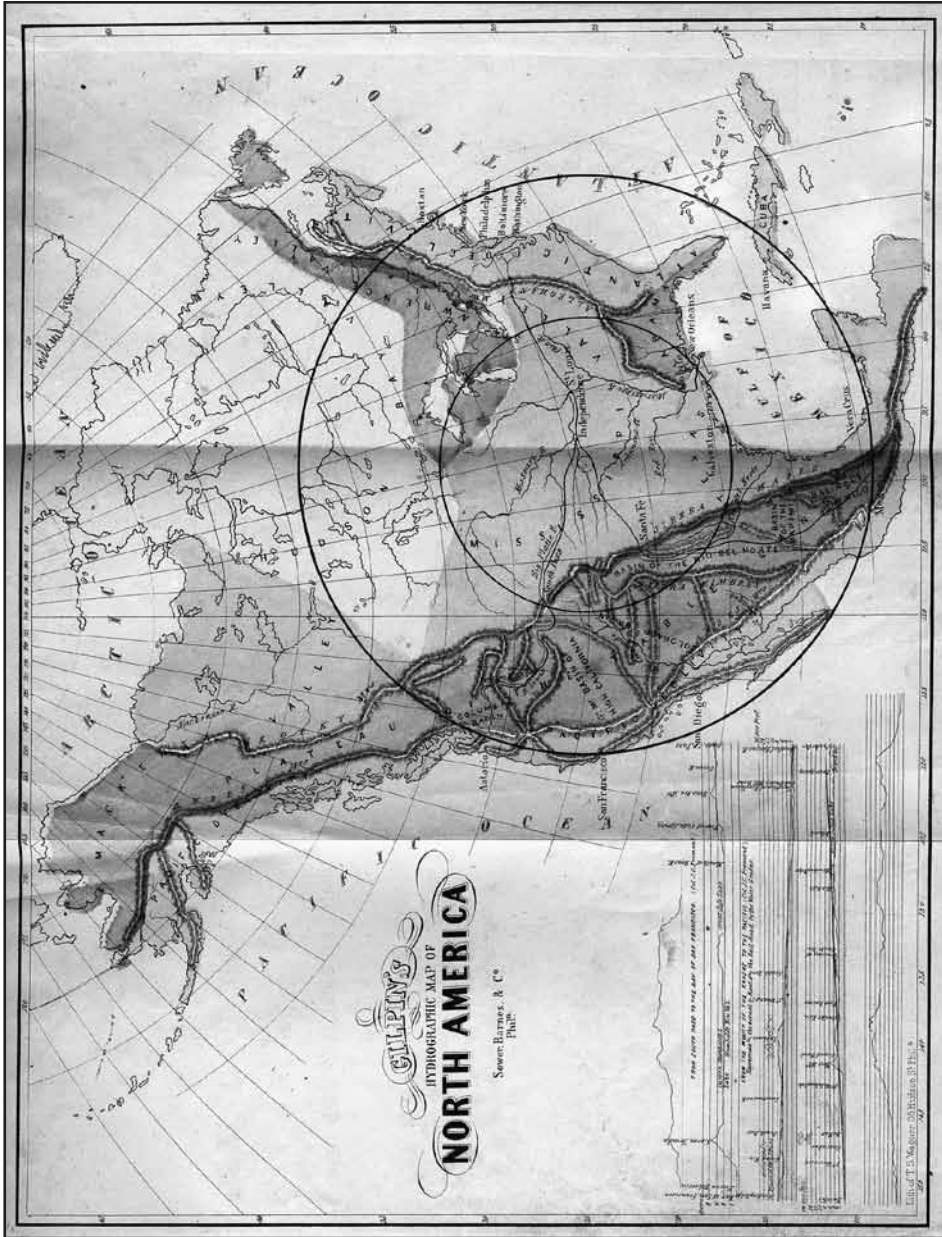


Figure 1. William Gilpin, "Gilpin's Hydrographic Map of North America" (St. Louis, [1848?]), Everett D. Graff Collection of Western Americana. Courtesy of Newberry Library, Chicago.

Humboldt's search for environmental patterns is exemplified by his most notable cartographic achievement: the use of lines to represent areas of common average temperature. This technique of visualizing climate through isotherms captured the imagination of American natural scientists. In an era when epidemic disease was believed to be a function of "salubrity" and the source of storms remained a mystery, isothermal charts held great promise, especially in the West. Little wonder, then, that federal scientific agencies embraced the study of the environment in the early nineteenth century. Beginning in the late 1810s, the newly formed Office of the Army Surgeon General began to collect rainfall, climate, and wind readings in an effort to address disease outbreaks at its western posts. These readings, together with those submitted by farmers, formed an enormous body of data that was transferred in 1846 to the newly formed Smithsonian Institution. Yet this information could only be used to the extent that it could be understood, and this initiated an effort to use maps to discern environmental patterns. After an intense rivalry with the Smithsonian, in 1855 the Office of the Army Surgeon General proudly issued the first comprehensive maps of rainfall and climate in the United States.<sup>11</sup>

These maps and charts were largely the work of Lorin Blodget and were greatly anticipated by the nation's scientists, physicians, and political leaders. His rain charts confirmed prior understandings of an interior of insufficient moisture, though they also revealed important exceptions to that generalization. The climate maps captured similar variation across the West. The chart of average summer temperatures on the High Plains, a detail of which is shown in figure 2, may appear confusing, but note the vast differences in temperature even between adjacent areas, insights that are entirely absent from topographic maps. Blodget's maps presented the West in terms of both the visible landscape and the unseen environment. The maps suggested that geographically distinct areas might experience similar climates while adjacent regions might not. With separate charts of rainfall and climate for each season, the army's 1855 report on climate was nothing less than a revelation that unveiled a region of tremendous complexity and variation.<sup>12</sup>

While Blodget's highly publicized research characterized the region as "semi-arid," Gilpin considered it to have much greater potential for development. Both used isothermal charts to establish the area as a coherent *region*. Yet the depiction of "average" temperatures could be misleading, for they suggested consistency even when wild ranges were typical. In other words, the map had the power to convey stability—just

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Victorian Period (New York, 1978); William H. Goetzmann, *Exploration and Empire: The Explorer and the Scientist in the Winning of the American West* (New York, 1978); and Susan Schulten, "Get Lost: On the Intersection of Environmental and Intellectual History," *Modern Intellectual History* 5 (April 2008): 141–52.

<sup>11</sup> A. de Humboldt (Alexander von Humboldt), "Carte de lignes isothermes," *Annales de chimie et de physique* 5 (1817): 102–12 and *Army Meteorological Register, for twelve years, from 1843 to 1854. . . .* (Washington, DC, 1855).

<sup>12</sup> Susan Schulten, "Disease, Expansion, and the Rise of Environmental Mapping," chap. 3 in *Mapping the Nation: History and Cartography in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago, 2012), 79–117 and *Army Meteorological Register*.



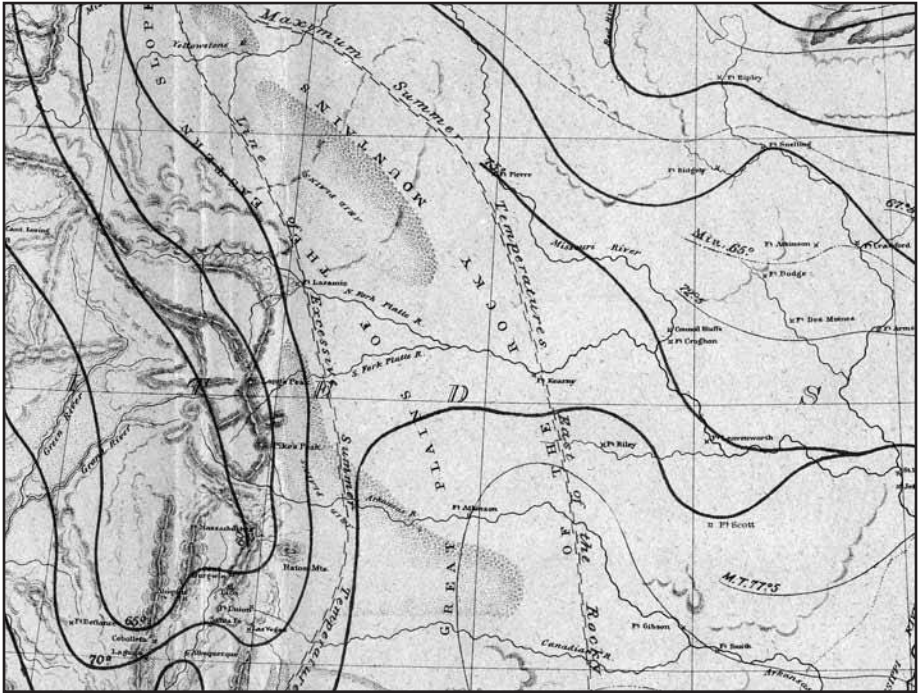


Figure 2. Detail from “Isothermal Chart: Mean Distribution of the Temperature for the Summer Designed and prepared by Lorin Blodget under the Direction of Bvt Brig Gen Thomas Lawson, Surgeon General U.S. Army,” in *Army Meteorological Register, for twelve years, from 1843 to 1854*. . . . (Washington, DC, 1855), Western History Collection. Courtesy of Denver Public Library.

as a boundary line obscures the reality of a contested borderland. The charts of climate were also their own kind of simplification, however “scientific” they appeared. Gilpin used these isothermal concepts as a kind of geographical determinism and insisted that the interior along the middle latitudes could be developed through a transcontinental railroad.

On Gilpin’s return east from Frémont’s second expedition, he crossed the southern Rockies and was especially taken with the San Luis Valley. From 1849 to 1859, he gave several speeches on the region that invoked isotherms as a determining factor in the growth of civilization.<sup>13</sup> Speaking in Independence, Missouri, in 1849, just after attending the St. Louis meeting to discuss the future railroad route, he effusively described the influence of climate:

<sup>13</sup> Geographers have argued that the development of a regional concept of the Plains conveyed an impression of both “areal homogeneity and historical stability.” G. M. Lewis, “Regional Ideas and Reality in the Cis-Rocky Mountain West,” *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, no. 38 (June 1966): 136–9, 146.

Within this belt (from 30 deg to 50 deg) four-fifths of the human race is assembled, and here the civilized nations . . . have succeeded one another. . . . This succession has flowed onward in an even course, undulating along an isothermal line, until in our time the ring is about to close around the earth's circumference, by the arrival of the American nation on the coast of the Pacific, which looks over on to Asia.<sup>14</sup>

Robert G. Athearn correctly noted that nothing "official" in the 1850s dispelled the idea of the desert, but the increasingly detailed picture of the region itself challenged the stereotype. Gradually, a new view replaced it, with the eastern Plains designated as "prairie," a term connoting a region fit for grazing, if not intense cultivation. By the end of the decade, extreme visions of the interior had been replaced by more nuanced and moderate evaluations. Maps had tremendous power to affect this shift.<sup>15</sup>

The nation's attention to the interior in the 1850s was heightened further by the pursuit of a transcontinental railroad. In 1853 Congress authorized the War Department to survey four potential routes in order to avoid the sectional rivalry that such a choice would inevitably entail. Some of these reports used isotherms to represent spatial patterns of climate, which in turn depicted the Interior West as continuous with—rather than separate from—the Far West or the settled East. Such a shift involved erasing Native Americans from both mental and actual maps, and this allowed Americans to reconsider the interior as a place of potential development. As Don E. Fehrenbacher put it, Americans were surprised to discover this geographical "anomaly, conspicuous on any map, of a great region in the heart of the continent, possessed by the nation for a half-century, but still ungoverned."<sup>16</sup> This shifting perception formed the backdrop for two more urgent changes in the 1850s: the gold rush and the deepening sectional crisis.

The region we know as Colorado came into the United States in two different pieces: the eastern half was carved from the western edge of the Louisiana Purchase and the western half was acquired through the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. The status of the region became more complex when the Compromise of 1850 organized the two large territories of New Mexico and Utah under the new principle of non-interference, which gave residents the power to determine the fate of slavery. This provision attracted relatively little opposition, perhaps because that land was neither accessible nor suitable for plantation agriculture. Both New Mexico and Utah Territories passed slave codes in the mid-1850s, though these prompted little concern in the Northeast. The other

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<sup>14</sup> William Gilpin, *The Central Gold Region: The Grain, Pastoral, and Gold Regions of North America*. . . . (Philadelphia, 1860), 111, 170.

<sup>15</sup> Robert G. Athearn, "The Great Plains in Historical Perspective," *Montana The Magazine of Western History* 8 (Winter 1958): 14 and John L. Allen, "The Desert-Garden Continuum: Competing Views of the Great Plains in the Nineteenth Century," *Great Plains Quarterly* 5 (Fall 1985): 207–20.

<sup>16</sup> Don E. Fehrenbacher, *The Dred Scott Case: Its Significance in American Law and Politics* (New York, 1978), 180.

elements of the compromise drew much more attention, especially the Fugitive Slave Law and the introduction of California as a free state.<sup>17</sup>

This relative indifference to popular sovereignty may have emboldened Illinois Senator Stephen Douglas to extend the policy eastward. Douglas chaired the Senate Committee on Territories and had great ambitions for a transcontinental railroad through Chicago. Such a plan required the organization of Indian country for Anglo settlement, which created a problem for Douglas. The Missouri Compromise of 1820 had barred slavery north of the 36° 30' line, yet Southern Democrats would be hostile to new territories that were closed to slavery. To solve this dilemma, Douglas introduced a bill to organize two territories through popular sovereignty: Kansas (from latitude 37° north to latitude 40° north) and Nebraska (from latitude 40° north to latitude 49° north). Douglas hoped that his plan would build his leadership among Southern Democrats, and perhaps even abate sectional divisions. But while a similar proposal had elicited little concern in 1850, the Kansas-Nebraska bill *reversed* restrictions on slavery by repealing the Missouri Compromise. Once it became law in May 1854, the Kansas-Nebraska Act opened the possibility for slavery to expand north.<sup>18</sup>

The act had a seismic effect on American politics. In the South, it confirmed the belief that slavery had a right not just to exist but to extend. In the North, it galvanized antislavery sentiment and divided the Whig Party along sectional lines: every Northern Whig voted against the bill while nearly all of their Southern counterparts supported it. When Kansas Territory opened for settlement in 1855, thousands streamed in, armed and determined to fight over slavery. The ensuing violence was an enormous embarrassment for Douglas, for he had touted popular sovereignty as a peaceful solution to sectional strife. The crisis peaked in May 1856 when a proslavery posse attacked the antislavery town of Lawrence, which prompted John Brown to take his revenge at Pottawatomie Creek. Events in Kansas elevated suspicion between Northern and Southern Democrats, deeply damaged Douglas's leadership, and destroyed the Whigs as a national party.<sup>19</sup>

This chaos in Kansas is relevant for two reasons. The original boundaries of that territory—as determined by the 1854 act—extended west to the area where gold would be found in 1858 at the confluence of the Platte River and Cherry Creek. More importantly, the disaster in Kansas deterred Congress from organizing any new territories for the next seven years. The strife in eastern Kansas was unfolding at the same time that Americans were reconsidering the interior. In 1854 Douglas defended popular

<sup>17</sup> Eugene H. Berwanger, *The Frontier Against Slavery; Western Anti-Negro Prejudice and the Slavery Extension Controversy* (Urbana, 1967), 119–20.

<sup>18</sup> Gilpin was peripherally involved with these discussions about the railroad and was willing to accept the Kansas-Nebraska Act if it paved the way for western development. He was originally a Democrat but switched parties in 1858 or 1859 as Missouri became increasingly proslavery under the leadership of Senator David Atchison. Karnes, *Gilpin*, 229.

<sup>19</sup> Nicole Etcheson, *Bleeding Kansas: Contested Liberty in the Civil War Era* (Lawrence, 2004), 15 and West, *Contested Plains*, 99–100.

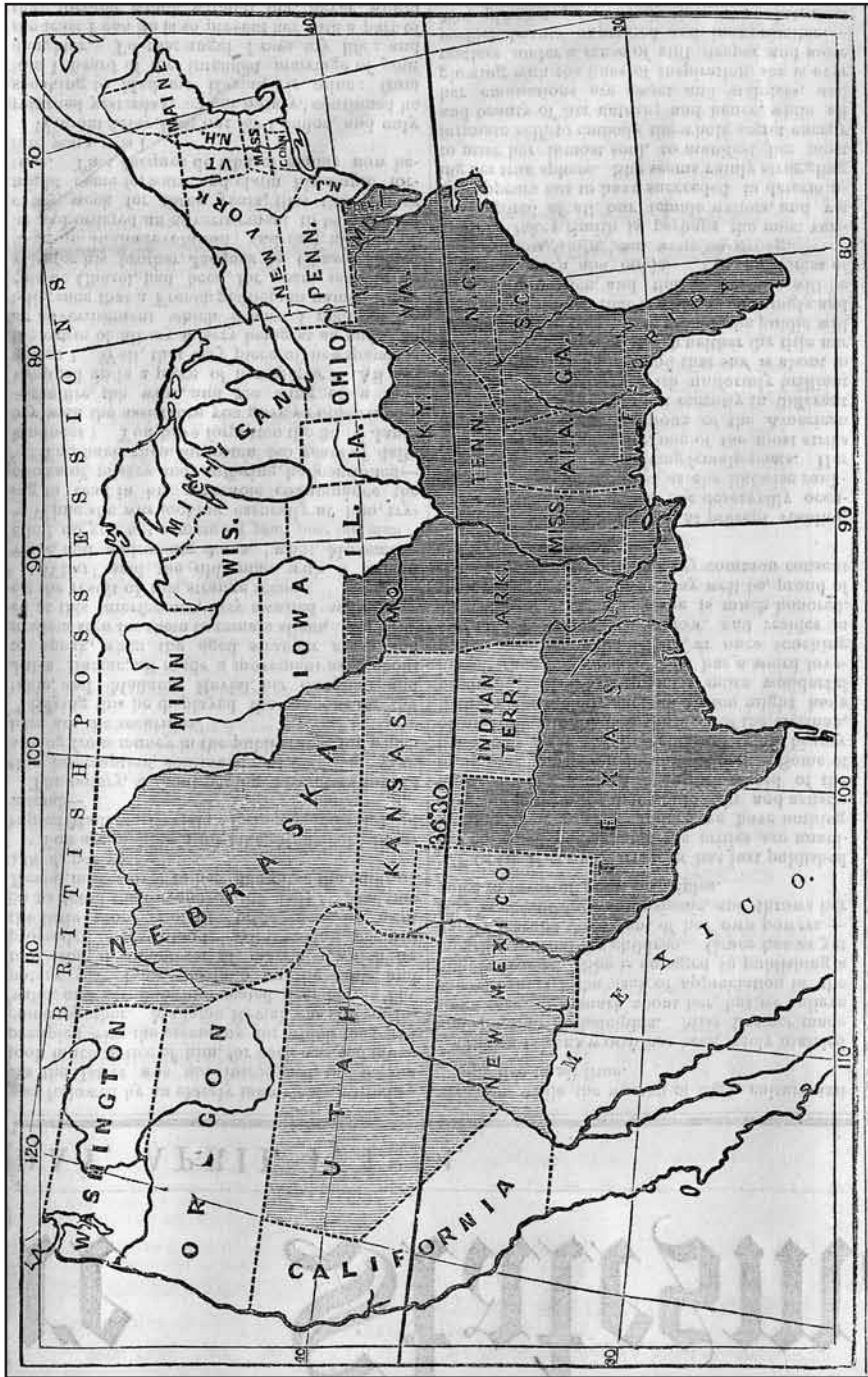


Figure 3. Map of slavery and freedom designed to protest the Kansas-Nebraska bill. Map by George Colton appeared in the *New Hampshire Statesman*, 1 April 1854, reprinted from *The (New York City) Independent*, January 1854. Courtesy of New Hampshire Historical Society, Concord.

sovereignty in the Senate by arguing that “the laws of climate” and production would prevent the growth of slavery into the West. Lincoln rejected this and argued that a mere “glance at the map” would show climate to be no barrier to slavery.<sup>20</sup> The disaster in Kansas prompted massive defections from the Whig and Democratic parties into a new political force that was dedicated to halting the growth of slavery. This new Republican Party maintained that Congress could—and should—disallow slavery from future territories and argued for the admission of Kansas as a free state. It is difficult to underestimate the anger that these early Republicans felt about the possibility of slavery spreading north of the Missouri Compromise line.

This outrage is manifest in a map drawn by commercial cartographer George Colton, which starkly illustrates one vision of the nation’s future. (See Figure 3.) In January 1854, Colton designed a massive map for an emergency meeting of New Yorkers opposed to the Kansas-Nebraska bill. Soon after, a similar map appeared in the New York abolitionist paper *The Independent* and was made available for distribution. The map conveys the fears of those opposed to the bill, with slavery virtually encircling the free states. Sympathetic Northern newspaper editors quickly reproduced or adapted Colton’s map to illustrate the possibilities brought by the repeal of the Missouri Compromise. One editor in Trenton, New Jersey, used the map to warn against a slave-dominated West, but more striking is the way he described the agricultural potential of the territory in terms that would have been unimaginable just a decade earlier: “If the reports of those who have explored it be true, it only needs the hand of civilization to make it also the Flowery Land.”<sup>21</sup> Frank Blair, one of the founders of the Republican Party in Missouri and a longtime friend of Gilpin, predicted in 1854 that the nation’s wealth and power would soon be concentrated “in its Geographical centre.” Within a few years, permanent Indian territory had been rechristened, just as the sectional crisis reached a fever pitch. The Republican Party was founded in the midst of this reorientation, and this reconceptualization of American geography raised the stakes over slavery.<sup>22</sup>

Two years later, the Republican Party mounted its first national campaign and repeatedly invoked these geopolitical visions of slavery. The party nominated John C. Frémont for president, a symbolic choice given his close association with the American West. By this time, Lincoln himself had joined the party, ending his long association with the Whigs. As Michael S. Green noted, the issue of slavery in the territories gave Lincoln not just an issue but a political voice—one that enabled him to carve out a position apart from

<sup>20</sup> Speech of Hon. S. A. Douglas, of Illinois, in the Senate, January 30, 1854 on the Nebraska Territory (Washington, DC, 1854) and speech at Peoria, in *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, vol. 2, 1848–1858, ed. Roy P. Basler (New Brunswick, NJ, 1953), 262.

<sup>21</sup> George Colton’s map was originally published in the antislavery paper *The (New York City) Independent*, reprinted here from the (*Concord*) *New Hampshire Statesman*, 1 April 1854; and *State Gazette* (Trenton, NJ), 28 March 1854.

<sup>22</sup> Blair quoted in Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party before the Civil War* (New York, 1970), 55.

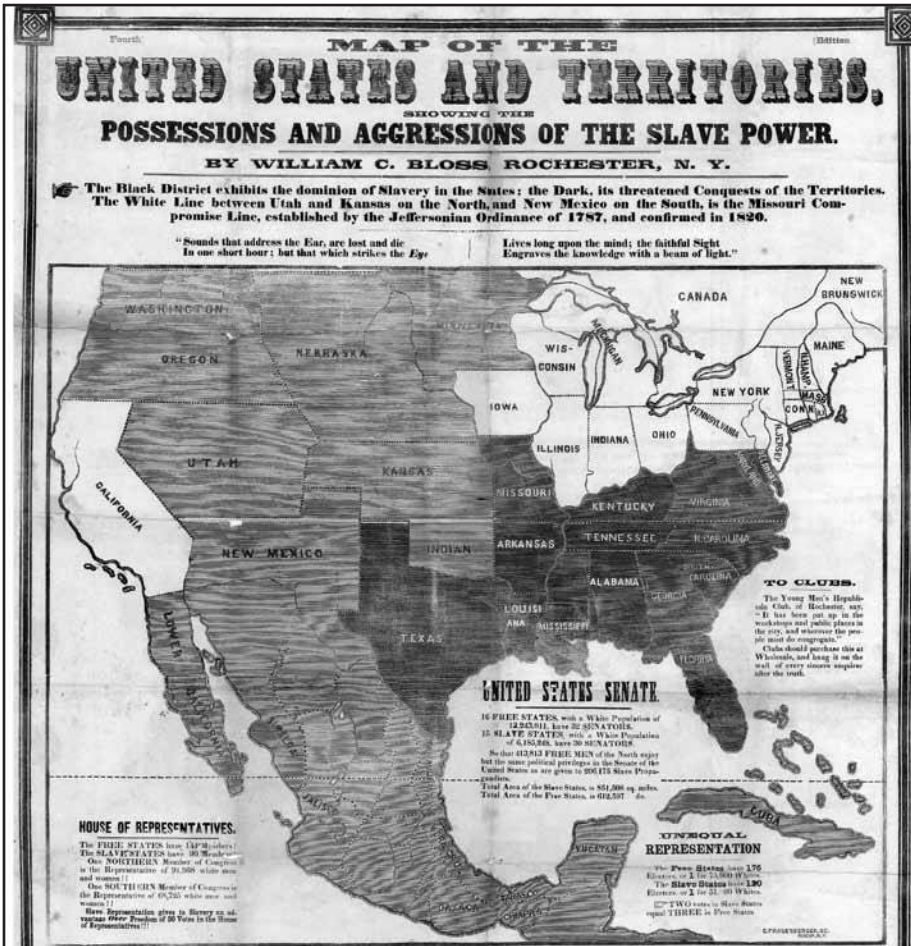


Figure 4. An antislavery activist issued this map to warn of the effects of the Kansas-Nebraska Act and galvanize support for the Republican Party in the 1856 campaign. William C. Bloss et al., "Map of the United States and Territories, Showing the Possessions and Aggressions of the Slave Power" (Rochester, NY, 1856). Courtesy of Jon Dotson, Glen Allen, Virginia.

Douglas, his future Illinois rival. And given that the threat of slavery in the territories had launched the party, it seems fitting that the campaign used maps to convey its agenda.<sup>23</sup>

The broadside in figure 4 is one of several pieces of campaign propaganda designed to advance the Republican cause in 1856, all of which emphasized the fate of the West. This broadside was designed by Rochester antislavery activist William C. Bloss and was issued between the end of July and early November. On it he

<sup>23</sup> Michael S. Green, "Lincoln, the West, and the Antislavery Politics of the 1850s," in *Lincoln Looks West*, ed. Etulain, 90–112.

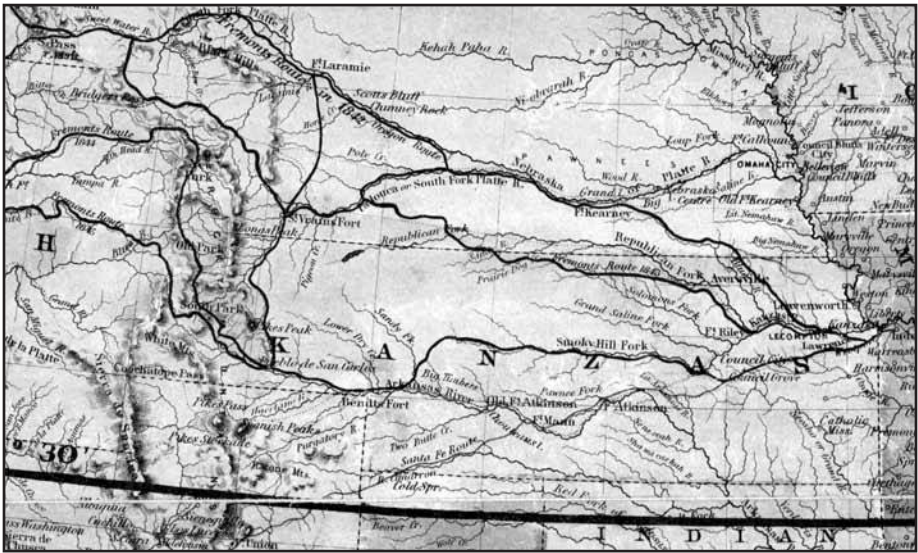


Figure 5. This detail of Kansas is taken from another broadside made to support the Republican ticket in 1856 and marks the expeditions of John C. Frémont. George W. Elliott, "Map of the United States, Showing by Colors the Area of Freedom and Slavery and the Territories Whose Destiny Is Yet to Be Decided. . . ." (New York, 1856), Norman B. Leventhal Map Center. Courtesy of Boston Public Library.

excoriates the westward "aggressions of the slave power" and fumes at the betrayal of the Missouri Compromise, which he commemorates with a white line drawn across the West. Bloss used census data to calculate a conspiracy of geography: a Senate that effectively enlarged the power of the slave states and a House of Representatives that inflated Southern representation through the three-fifths compromise. But above all, the map declares that sectional divisions had replaced partisan ones.<sup>24</sup>

In that same vein, antislavery activist John Jay circulated a pamphlet on the eve of the election to demonstrate that a "small but iron-willed oligarchy" now ruled the South. Speaking in New York, Jay insisted that once Kansas was lost to slavery, the free states would "lose not only the Indian Territory lying to the south of it, but [also] those vast territories stretching to the westward." Nothing less than the nation's future, he insisted, turned on the 1856 election. Much of this campaign ephemera featured Kansas as the heart of the nation both politically and geographically—a symbol of the nation's greatest

<sup>24</sup> William C. Bloss et al., "Map of the United States and Territories, Showing the Possessions and Aggressions of the Slave Power" (Rochester, NY, 1856). For other examples of Republican broadsides, see William C. Reynolds, "Reynolds's Political Map of the United States. . . ." (New York, 1856); Adolphus Ranney and Rufus Blanchard, "National Political Map of the United States" (New York, 1856), both in Geography and Map Division, Library of Congress; and "Political Chart of the United States, with a Comparative Statistical View of North and South" (Springfield, OH, 1856), Chicago History Museum.

promise as well as its darkest failure. Consider figure 5, a detail from a map—previously published by George Colton—in a Republican campaign broadside issued by George W. Elliott in New York. Colton’s map was used to highlight Kansas through color while dark lines boldly marked Frémont’s expeditions across the West. This map used these expeditions to claim the land for the Republicans and connect the West to the party. Republicans intended to hang these broadsides in public places “wherever the people most do congregate.” That the party chose to convey their message through maps is telling, for these images spoke to the widest possible audience, regardless of age or literacy. As Bloss wrote, “that which strikes the Eye lives long upon the mind.”<sup>25</sup>

Despite a vigorous campaign, the Republicans could not match the national power of the Democrats, however fragile. Immediately thereafter, President-elect James Buchanan audaciously called for a constitutional amendment to protect slavery in the territories. The Supreme Court gave him something very close in *Dred Scott v. Sanford* (1857). This remains one of the Court’s strangest and most notorious decisions, full of internal contradictions and blatant overreaching. Chief Justice Roger B. Taney determined that Congress had no constitutional power to restrict slavery in the territories and questioned whether territorial legislatures could do the same. Southerners welcomed the decision, yet its practical significance remained unclear. Donald Fehrenbacher observed that to Southern proslavery leaders, the ruling was “like an enormous check that could not be cashed,” for Utah and New Mexico already had slave codes while Oregon would be admitted as free state in 1859. The decision could be applied only in the interior, most importantly, in Kansas. Yet antislavery candidates won significant victories in that territory’s fall 1857 legislative elections. Several months later, voters defeated the proslavery Lecompton Constitution and confirmed the future of Kansas as free. In early 1858, antislavery leaders in the territory went so far as to test Taney’s ruling by repealing laws that protected slavery. All of these actions halted the proslavery momentum in Kansas and removed the territory from the center of politics by the spring of 1858.<sup>26</sup>

Despite these antislavery victories in Kansas, Taney’s action sparked anger and fear throughout the North. It also complicated Douglas’s defense of popular sovereignty, for he had maintained that territories had the power to disallow slavery even if Congress did not. But while *Dred Scott* troubled Douglas, it enraged Republicans, for it challenged their core political conviction: that Congress had the power—and the obligation—to disallow slavery from the territories. Lincoln, though stunned by the decision, gave little weight to its ruling on congressional power. Once Illinois Republicans settled on Lincoln as their candidate for the Senate in 1858, he used the debates with Douglas to

<sup>25</sup> John Jay, *America Free, Or, America Slave: An Address on the State of the Country*. . . . (New York, 1856), 10; George W. Elliott, “Map of the United States, Showing by Colors the Area of Freedom and Slavery and the Territories Whose Destiny Is Yet to Be Decided. . . .” (New York, 1856), Norman B. Leventhal Map Center, Boston Public Library (hereafter Leventhal Map Center); and Bloss et al., “Map of the United States and Territories” (italics in original).

<sup>26</sup> Fehrenbacher, *Dred Scott*, 377, 450, 449–54, 465.



underscore the problem created by *Dred Scott*: residents of a territory could choose to protect slavery, but it was difficult to see how they could lawfully *exclude* slavery prior to statehood. Lincoln may have lost his bid for the Senate, but he gained national attention by challenging popular sovereignty. By doing so, he exposed a rift between Douglas and the Southern Democrats, who were increasingly skeptical that popular sovereignty would guarantee the rights of slaveholders. Ultimately, the *Dred Scott* decision exacerbated sectional tensions within the Democratic Party, and in 1860 the Republicans reaped the rewards of this division. As Charles Warren once wrote, "Chief Justice Taney elected Abraham Lincoln."<sup>27</sup>

While Lincoln and Douglas debated across Illinois in 1858, credible rumors of gold began to emanate from the far western reaches of Kansas. Historians rarely consider these two events as part of the same story. Prior to this point, Americans had paid little attention to the area, for it offered no easy passage through the Rockies and was dominated by Cheyenne and Arapahoe Indians. No part of what would become the territory of Colorado had even been mapped with any detail until Alexander von Humboldt's 1811 map of New Spain. Stephen Harriman Long's map of 1823 first accurately charted the South Platte River while Frémont's "Map of an Exploring Expedition to the Rocky Mountains in the Year 1842 and to Oregon & North California in the years 1843–44" (1845) was the first to detail North, Middle, and South Park in what would become Colorado and the first to name the Cherry Creek. The territorial legislature of Kansas established Arapahoe County in 1855, but the controversy over slavery in the eastern parts of the territory consumed it thereafter. As a result, the public knew little about the geography of far western Kansas, the area that would form the heart of Colorado.<sup>28</sup>

All that changed with the gold rush. As many as 100,000 migrants came in the spring of 1859 alone, motivated by stories of easy gain and an economy wrecked by the Panic of 1857. This frenzy of migration was fueled by competition between several towns to become the favored point of departure for Pikes Peak (the nomenclature itself indicates the lack of knowledge about geography, for the gold fields were further north). This angling spawned a minor industry of guidebooks, with rival claims about the particular routes, complete with maps that liberally interpreted the topography of the overland passage. The maps were equal parts information, propaganda, and naïveté, but they showcased a new *regional* picture centered on the High Plains that was unfamiliar to most Americans.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 379, 516 and Warren quoted in *ibid.*, 454.

<sup>28</sup> Alexander von Humboldt, "Carte Generale du Royaume de la Nouvelle Espagne. . ." (Paris, 1811); Stephen Harriman Long, "Map of the Country Situated between the Meridian of Washington City and the Rocky Mountains. . ." ([Washington, DC?], [1820?]); and John Charles Frémont, "Map of an Exploring Expedition to the Rocky Mountains in the Year 1842 and to Oregon & North California in the Years 1843–44" (Washington, DC, 1845).

<sup>29</sup> For an example of such a promotional guidebook, see N. H. Parker and D. H. Huyett, *The Illustrated Miners' Hand-Book and Guide to Pikes Peak. . .* (St. Louis, 1859), Everett D. Graff Collection of Western Americana, Newberry Library, Chicago (hereafter Graff Collection).

The guides to the goldfields could make brazen claims about the ease of overland migration in part because so little reliable geographical knowledge existed; each site could claim to be the most advantageously situated, whether Omaha, St. Louis, St. Joseph, Leavenworth, or Kansas City. One 1859 guide celebrated Cincinnati as the best point of departure, for “here the traveler is fairly on his way to his new home and a certain future, whether he goes to delve in the mines of Pikes Peak and Cherry Creek or to seek the hidden treasures of the rich Western Prairie.”<sup>30</sup>

After a series of rival claims in 1859, the town of Denver was established at the confluence of the Platte River and the Cherry Creek. Soon thereafter, the mineral rush extended into the San Juan Mountains and the Front Range. Many of these early migrants considered themselves separate from both Kansas and Nebraska. They found an ally in Representative Schuyler Colfax, yet his bill to organize the territory of “Colona” failed in January 1859. In May the residents of Denver again attempted to organize by electing a convention and writing a constitution for the “State of Jefferson.” But local voters rejected it out of concern for the financial burden that statehood would entail. Political leaders in Denver responded by simply proclaiming the Territory of Jefferson, then passing laws, electing officials, naming a governor, and sending a representative to Washington, DC. Congress denied recognition to Jefferson, again the result of the sectional crisis. As a result of these failed territorial bids, the structure of power in Denver and the surrounding settlements remained unclear: some refused to pay taxes to a “territory” that Congress did not recognize and continued to send delegates to the Kansas Territorial Legislature. But for over a year, the Territory of Jefferson operated as the local authority, even enacting statutes barring blacks from voting, testifying against whites, or marrying whites, all in a “territory” where the Census of 1860 counted only forty-six African Americans.<sup>31</sup>

By early 1860, many in eastern Kansas feared that the goldfields might shift the territory’s center of power, and in February 1860, the territorial legislators drafted a state constitution that detached the western mining regions and the city of Denver. In response, several Southern congressmen unsuccessfully attempted to reattach the goldfields to Kansas in order to avoid the possibility of another free state encompassing the mining regions (a tacit recognition that Southern interests had little chance of controlling the goldfields). Although statehood for Kansas would be delayed for another year, this constitution established its future boundaries and orphaned the goldfields.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> “Pike’s Peak: Great through Line between the East and West, via Cincinnati and St. Louis by the Ohio & Mississippi Broad-Gauge Railroad. . . .” ([Cincinnati?], [1859?]), Yale Collection of Western Americana, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University; D. W. Meinig, *The Shaping of America: A Geographical Perspective on 500 Years of History*, vol. 3, *Transcontinental America, 1850–1915* (New Haven, 1998), 133; West, *Contested Plains*, 387–9; and Wesley A. Brown, “How the Gold Rush Put Colorado on the Map,” *Journal of the International Map Collectors Society* 105 (Summer 2006): 5–18.

<sup>31</sup> Berwanger, *Frontier*, 118.

<sup>32</sup> Howard R. Lamar, *The Far Southwest, 1846–1912: A Territorial History* (Albuquerque,

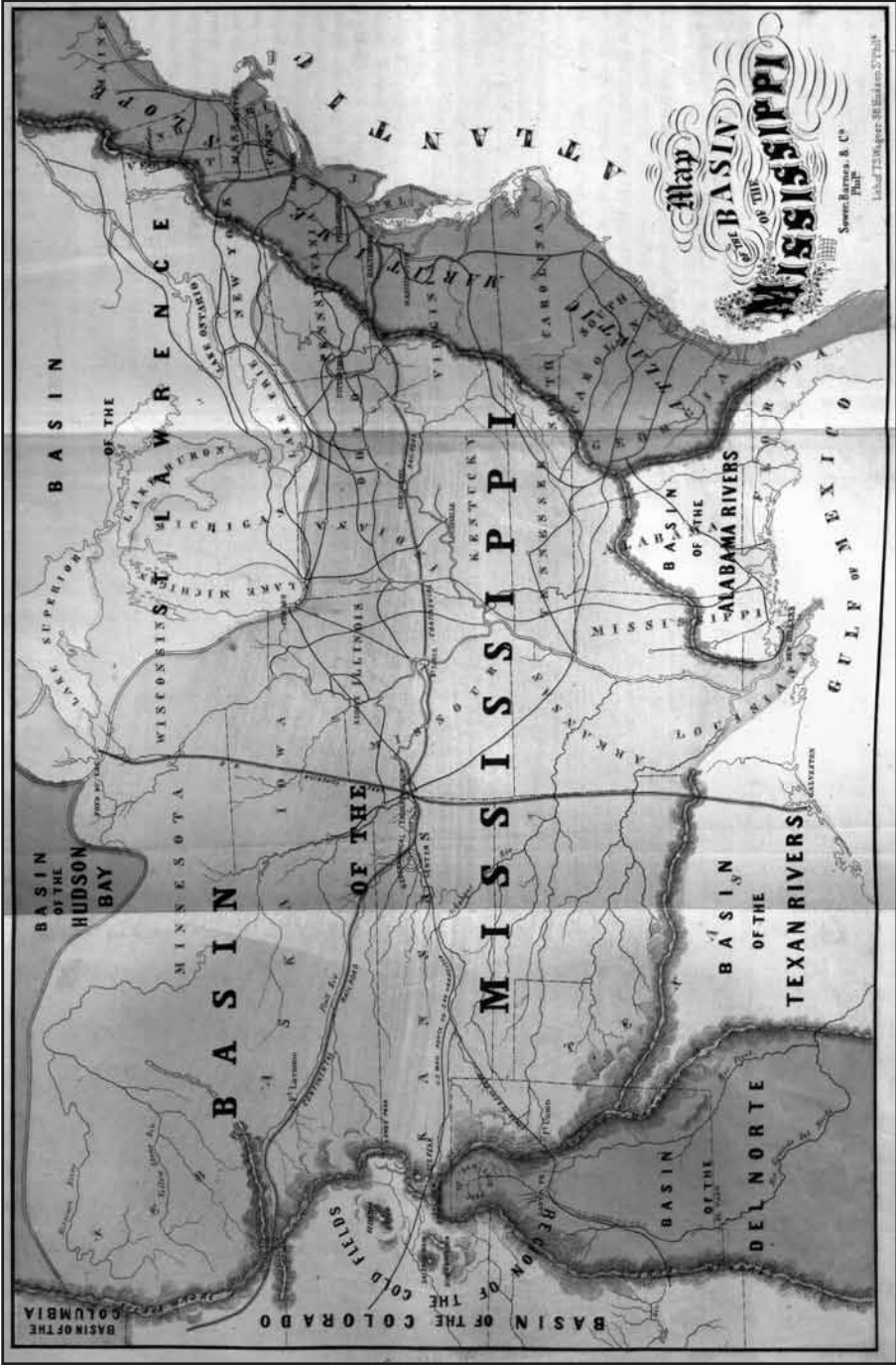


Figure 6. "Map of the Basin of the Mississippi," frontispiece to William Gilpin, *The Central Gold Region: The Grain, Pastoral, and Gold Regions of North America*. . . . (Philadelphia, 1860).

Elliott West has argued that the rapid migration to the Front Range fundamentally altered the nation's perception of the interior. What had been simply an expanse of land between destinations began to take on internal coherence—an area “bound organically into an economic whole.” Throughout the 1850s, William Gilpin had predicted greatness and mineral wealth for the Rockies and High Plains. When gold and other minerals were discovered, he was transformed (albeit temporarily) from an idiosyncratic booster into a respected authority, frequently cited as such in the guides. The exaggerated language of the guides echoed Gilpin's own predictions of a region that offered not just extractive riches but the potential for farming and pasturage. Gilpin had long been preoccupied with the idea of a geographical *center*, and the mineral discoveries confirmed his hopes that the naturally concave structure of the American interior—the “amphitheatre of the world,” integrated by a network of rivers—was destined to be the heart of the national economy.<sup>33</sup> With a central transcontinental railroad, the economic relevance of the interior to the trade of the world was unlimited. Speaking to an audience in St. Louis in November 1858, just after the discovery of gold in western Kansas, Gilpin again used Humboldt's isotherms to describe a region that could not help but flourish:

Look upon this map of the world, upon which science delineates the zodiac of empires and the isothermal axis of progress! We have our homes around the centre of this northern continent, the centre of this our continental Union, the centre of the Mississippi basin. . . . It bisects the temperate zone—it is the line of land and way travel of mankind. . . . It is along the axis of the isothermal zone of the Northern Hemisphere, that the principles of revealed civilization make the circuit of the globe.<sup>34</sup>

Gilpin envisioned a new “empire of mountain and plain” centered on the goldfields of the South Platte and anticipated a day when Europeans and Asians would “traverse familiarly the central region of our country . . . passing to and fro to their homes.” He presented this geographical vision in his “Map of the Basin of the Mississippi” (1860), drawn just after the discoveries of gold in Kansas fulfilled his long-held predictions. Here he returned to the themes advanced in his “hydrographic map” (figure 1). Gilpin organized the continent according to its watersheds, which featured the Mississippi Valley; he also marked the “geographic center” of the continent and emphasized the newly discovered goldfields.<sup>35</sup> (See Figure 6.) But Gilpin also drew the map to advance

2000); Berwanger, *Centennial State*, 3; and Calvin W. Gower, “Kansas Territory and Its Boundary Question: ‘Big Kansas’ or ‘Little Kansas,’” *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 33 (Spring 1967): 1–12.

<sup>33</sup> West, *Contested Plains*, 122 and Gilpin, *Gold Region*, 119.

<sup>34</sup> Gilpin, *Gold Region*, 119; West, *Contested Plains*, 122; “Guide to the Kansas Gold Mines at Pike's Peak” (Cincinnati, 1859); *A Handbook to the Gold Fields of Nebraska and Kansas* (Chicago, 1859), Graff Collection; Parker and Huyett, *Miners' Hand-book*; “Map of the Basin of the Mississippi,” frontispiece to Gilpin, *Gold Region*.

<sup>35</sup> West, *Contested Plains*, 238; Gilpin, *Gold Region*, 192–3; West, “The People of the Centre,”

a geopolitical argument against secession. Unlike the campaign maps of 1856, Gilpin's map erases state boundaries and internal political divisions. Instead, a host of railroads—both projected and existing—knits the country together. For Gilpin, nature denied any division along sectional lines.

Yet the political reality of slavery constrained the soaring promise of the region articulated by Gilpin. In other words, the future of Colorado continued to hinge on the sectional crisis. In January 1860, just weeks after the hanging of abolitionist John Brown, Mississippi Senator Albert Brown proposed that all new territories include laws protecting "every kind or description of property recognized by the constitution"—meaning slaves. His bill never came up for a vote, but each attempt to discuss or create new territories sparked a flurry of amendments over slavery. The proposal to organize Jefferson Territory—which emerged from western Kansans themselves—demanded a different kind of racial control, the "extinguishment of the Indian title." Ironically, while locals considered Native Americans the great threat to their future, representatives in Washington, DC, focused on slavery. In both proposals, race was the obstacle to western development.<sup>36</sup>

In May of 1860, Ohio House Republican Galusha A. Grow made another attempt to organize the territory. In the ensuing debate, the problem of race appeared in somewhat unexpected ways. Antislavery Iowa Representative Samuel Curtis warned that Southern proposals to protect slavery would only be "protecting negroes." Instead, "It is for the white men who are there that I want protection." Like so many other Northerners, Curtis envisioned a West free of slavery as well as African Americans. Once again, conflicts over race, the railroad, and popular sovereignty defeated Grow's proposal. Meanwhile, new mines opened in the Rocky Mountains, which only heightened the need for governance.<sup>37</sup>

By 1860 several attempts to organize a territory around the goldfields had ended over race and slavery. Republicans denounced slavery in seven separate planks of their new platform and adamantly opposed its extension westward. Within weeks of Lincoln's victory, South Carolinians had declared themselves out of the Union. Lincoln began to worry that congressional Republicans would soften on the extension of slavery in order to end the secession crisis. He urged them to stand firm on the territorial question.<sup>38</sup>

In January 1861, five additional states of the Deep South seceded, which left the Republicans with a majority that enabled them to admit Kansas as a free state

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chap. 10 in *Contested Plains*, 237–70; Karnes, *Gilpin*, 242; and Gilpin, *Gold Region*, 143.

<sup>36</sup> Brown quoted in Jerome C. Smiley, *Semi-Centennial History of the State of Colorado*, vol. 1 (Chicago, 1913), 299, 299–300, 303–4, 300.

<sup>37</sup> Frederic L. Paxson, "The Territory of Colorado," *American Historical Review* 12 (October 1906): 53–65 and Curtis quoted in Smiley, *Semi-Centennial History*, 306.

<sup>38</sup> Harold Holzer, *Lincoln President-Elect: Abraham Lincoln and the Great Secession Winter 1860–1861* (New York, 2008), 157–8.

on 29 January. On 1 February, Texas joined the Confederacy and the following day, Senator Benjamin Wade revived the effort to organize Colorado Territory (then termed "Idaho"). With little debate, the Senate passed the Colorado Organic Act on 4 February while the House passed it on 18 February. The election had given the Republicans a majority in the House; the secession of seven states had given them an effective majority in the Senate. They quickly introduced additional bills to organize Dakota and Nebraska.<sup>39</sup>

One of the most striking features of all three territorial bills is the absence of any reference to slavery. *Dred Scott* ruled that Congress lacked the power to legislate against slavery in the territories, so this silence might seem unsurprising. Yet the Republicans denied the legitimacy of Taney's decision and prized a West free of slavery. Given their newfound strength in Congress, why did the Republicans omit antislavery language in the territorial bills? The answer reveals how closely the new territory was connected to the sectional crisis. Ohio Republican Wade and Missouri Democrat James Green cosponsored the Colorado Organic Act. In 1858 Green, an ardent defender of slavery and state rights, had become chairman of the powerful Committee on Territories after Douglas was removed for what Southerners deemed an insufficient defense of slavery. That Republicans enlisted Green as cosponsor indicates that they were actively soliciting leaders of the Upper Southern states in the hopes of preventing secession.<sup>40</sup>

In drafting the bill, both sections sought guarantees regarding slavery in the Colorado Territory, though neither was satisfied. The original bill actually included a clause stating that the territory would eventually be admitted as a state regardless of the status of slavery, but even that language was deemed too controversial. The bill's sponsors ultimately kept silent on slavery because secession seemed to be gaining momentum. Seven states had left the Union, though notably Missouri, Virginia, Tennessee, and Arkansas had each defeated secession initiatives by the time of Lincoln's inauguration. The future of these states, as well as Kentucky and Maryland, must have preoccupied congressional Republicans as they organized these new territories. Indeed, unionist Republicans and Democrats alike considered their silence on slavery as a peace offering to Southern states, one that might encourage the border states to reject secession and remain loyal.<sup>41</sup>

Douglas, however, explained the silence very differently. He seized on the absence of antislavery language as evidence that Republicans had embraced popular sovereignty. As he put it, the Colorado bill demonstrated that Republicans had "backed down from their platform" and abandoned Lincoln's doctrine in favor of "non-interference." Yet the Republican platform of 1860 very specifically called for legislation to abolish slavery

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<sup>39</sup> Lamar, *Southwest*, 188.

<sup>40</sup> Robert W. Johannsen, *Stephen A. Douglas* (New York, 1973), 830–1; Fehrenbacher, *Dred Scott*, 539; and Howard L. Conard, ed., *Encyclopedia of the History of Missouri*, vol. 3 (New York, 1901), 99–100.

<sup>41</sup> David M. Potter, *Lincoln and His Party in the Secession Crisis* (New Haven, 1942), 227–9.

only when “such legislation is necessary.” The election actually created the reverse scenario: with a Republican president-elect, the future of slavery in these territories was not in doubt. In light of this, Republicans might have considered antislavery language as unnecessarily provocative. At the height of the secession crisis, with the fate of eight slave states in question, Republicans toned down their language even while they maintained their commitment to a West free of slavery. What Douglas interpreted as Republican abandonment of a cherished principle was, in fact, the opposite: a strategy to incorporate vast areas of the West under Republican control in the midst of a supremely charged political atmosphere.<sup>42</sup>

What must Lincoln himself have thought of this strategy while waiting to take office? Silence over slavery repudiated his party’s mission, yet it was very clearly a maneuver to preserve the Union. No doubt Lincoln realized that a Republican president could effectively bar slavery by appointing like-minded territorial officials. Southerners acknowledged as much, for South Carolina’s justification for secession concentrated on the fate of fugitive slaves, not the future of the institution as a whole. And those most affected by the organization of Colorado Territory saw the situation from yet another angle. While easterners viewed the territories through the lens of the sectional crisis, locals saw it as an issue of self-rule and regional governance. The day after the election, William Byers, owner and editor of the *Rocky Mountain News*, urged Congress to set aside the “inevitable nigger” and “irrepressible conflict” in order to focus on Colorado’s territorial status. From his perspective, slavery was secondary.<sup>43</sup>

The new territory of Colorado was carved out of eastern Utah, northern New Mexico, western Kansas, and western Nebraska. The southern boundary was the most controversial of the borders because it appropriated a Hispano population with historically close ties to New Mexico. Douglas had unexpectedly missed the Senate vote on the Colorado Organic Act and was angered to learn that the border had moved south in his absence. This lower border fragmented the strongly Democratic population of New Mexico, prompting Douglas to accuse Republicans of trying to both amplify their power and weaken slavery by appropriating northern New Mexico (and then staffing the territory with antislavery officials). For this and other reasons, Howard Lamar noted that the Colorado bill was probably “far more than a mere compromise over slavery.”<sup>44</sup>

By 1860 the fight over slavery in the territories was overshadowed by the more immediate concern of disunion. Yet the attempt to evade the slavery issue in the

<sup>42</sup> Douglas quoted in Johannsen, *Douglas*, 831; Fehrenbacher, *Dred Scott*, 541–4; Republican platform of 1860, in *National Party Platforms, 1840–1972*, comp. Donald Bruce Johnson and Kirk H. Porter (Urbana, 1973), 32; and Richard C. Willis, “Colorado Territory,” in *Abraham Lincoln and the Western Territories*, ed. Ralph McGinnis and Calvin Smith (Chicago, 1994), 56.

<sup>43</sup> *Congressional Globe* (Washington, DC), 1 and 6 February 1861; Potter, *Lincoln and His Party*, 277–8; Lamar, *Southwest*, 189–90; and Byers quoted in *Rocky Mountain News* (Cherry Creek, Kansas Territory), 7 November 1860.

<sup>44</sup> Lamar, *Southwest*, 189–90 and Frederic L. Paxson, “The Boundaries of Colorado,” *University of Colorado Studies* 2 (July 1904): 87–94.

Colorado Organic Act indicates that the issue was very much alive, though perhaps more symbolic than real. Republicans had previously fought to organize territories with acts that included restrictions against slavery—and failed. But now, when they had the votes, the threat of disunion meant that they could not openly fight slavery in the West. After years of arguing about the status of slavery in the territories, Republicans and Democrats now voted together, just a few weeks before the onset of war. As one of his final acts in office, Buchanan signed the bill organizing Colorado Territory on 28 February, followed by the territories of Dakota and Nevada just days later.<sup>45</sup>

The record of the Senate debate on the Colorado bill is a bizarre document. Between civil discussions of the Colorado territorial border and its constitution, senators nearly assaulted each other over the rights of secession and the meaning of the Union. And yet, absent secession, Kansas statehood would have been delayed further and Colorado, Dakota, and Nevada would not have advanced to the territorial stage. Oddly, the implosion of the Union made the creation of these territories possible. But it was also the reconceptualization of the Interior West, coupled with the gold rush, which explains the timing of Colorado Territory in particular. Because of the war, the Republican Party was able to shape the territory—and the West more generally—in consequential ways. Between 1861 and 1865, Lincoln appointed approximately one hundred men to western offices as governors, secretaries, judges, Indian agents, U.S. marshals, or surveyors-general. Among them was William Gilpin, first governor of Colorado Territory. Gilpin was favored both for his longstanding promotion of the West and his solitary support of the Republican Party in Missouri in the election of 1860. When it came time to name territorial officials, Lincoln was absorbed by the crisis at Fort Sumter and gave little thought to appointing Gilpin. Yet in doing so he implicitly endorsed the latter's vision for western development. Lincoln's 1865 message to the miners at the end of the war reveals that his own aspirations for the West were no less ambitious.<sup>46</sup>

On his journey to the newly formed territory, Gilpin passed through regions of Missouri that were openly hostile to the Union. This sensitized him—perhaps excessively—to the Confederate threat to Colorado and its resources. In retrospect, Gilpin had little reason to worry, for the character of Colorado was deeply shaped in 1862 by the Homestead Act, the Morrill Land Grant Act, and the Pacific Railway Act. This Republican legislative agenda set a template for western development and tied the West closer to the Union: by 1885 three rail lines extended across the arid Colorado plains, which marked a major step toward Gilpin's vision of a nation integrated by railroads. Today we may view this legislation as a series of uncontroversial measures that

<sup>45</sup> Potter, *Lincoln*, 277–8; Richard W. Etulain, "Abraham Lincoln: Political Founding Father of the American West," *Montana The Magazine of Western History* (Summer 2009): 3–22; and *Rocky Mountain News*, 7 November 1860.

<sup>46</sup> Vincent G. Tegeeder, "Lincoln and the Territorial Patronage: The Ascendancy of the Radicals in the West," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 35 (June 1948): 77–90 and Karnes, *Gilpin*, 247.



laid the foundation for western development, creating a path so familiar as to appear almost inevitable. Yet when the residents of Denver petitioned Congress for a railroad from the Missouri River to the base of the Rocky Mountains in 1859, their request was scuttled by the fear in both the North and South that the other section would benefit from such a project. In mid-January 1861, consideration of yet another Pacific Railway bill again foundered on sectional disagreement.<sup>47</sup>

Moreover, Southern Congressmen in the 1850s opposed *any* legislation that made land available to small farmers for fear of creating a constituency opposed to slavery. In solidarity with slaveholders, President Buchanan vetoed this earlier homestead bill. The Homestead Act that Lincoln ultimately signed in May 1862 went into effect on 1 January 1863, alongside the Emancipation Proclamation. Similarly, the Pacific Railway Act settled on a northern route for the transcontinental railroad only after secession ended the debate. And in June 1862, with no debate or even discernible discussion, Congress abolished slavery in the territories. Perhaps the small number of slaves in the western territories made this an inconsequential act, yet it had enormous symbolic importance as the fulfillment of the Republican Party's founding goal.<sup>48</sup>

Lincoln and Gilpin also shared a spatial sensibility that placed the interior at the center of a nation that was indivisible. On the eve of the war, Gilpin urgently spoke of the Union's physical integrity and reissued a few of his maps to make the point. Two years later, Lincoln also reflected on the geographic nature of the Union in his December 1862 address to Congress. In his mind, secession was both politically and geographically futile:

There is no line, straight or crooked, suitable for a national boundary, upon which to divide. Trace through, from east to west, upon the line between the free and slave country, and we shall find a little more than one-third of its length are rivers, easy to be crossed, and populated, or soon to be populated, thickly upon both sides; while nearly all its remaining length, are merely surveyor's lines, over which people may walk back and forth without any consciousness of their presence. No part of this line can be made any more difficult to pass, by writing it down on paper, or parchment, as a national boundary.

Lincoln then turned to the West to dramatize his case, describing the region's mineral and agricultural riches in language that matched Gilpin's own unbridled enthusiasm:

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<sup>47</sup> Karnes, *Gilpin*, 247; Berwanger, *Centennial State*, 59; Johannsen, *Douglas*, 831; and *Congressional Globe*, 17, 18, and 19 January 1861.

<sup>48</sup> James Buchanan, veto message to Senate, 22 June 1860, last accessed 9 November 2012, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=68441> and Susan Schulten, "The Opening of the American Frontier," *New York Times*, 20 June 2012, last accessed 9 November 2012, <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/category/disunion>.

The great interior region, bounded east by the Alleghanias, north by the British dominions, west by the Rocky mountains, and south by the line along which the culture of corn and cotton meets. . . . A glance at the map shows that, territorially speaking, it is the great body of the republic. The other parts are but marginal borders, the magnificent region sloping west from the rocky mountains to the Pacific, being the deepest, and also the richest, in undeveloped resources. In the production of provisions, grains, grasses, and all which proceed from them, this great interior region is naturally one of the most important in the world.<sup>49</sup>

Lincoln referred to a map, one that marked not just topographical features but agricultural regions. He did this in order to acknowledge the irrelevance of internal boundaries, even as he insisted—paradoxically—on the geographical integrity of the nation. It is a remarkable speech given that Lincoln conceptualized the Union as first and foremost a political, rather than a natural or geographical, entity—one *made* by men rather than *discovered* by explorers. Our national strife, he observed, came not from the land (which he considered a force for union and integration) but from the institutions. Yet it was expansion westward into this “natural” Union that forced disunion in 1861.

Early in 1864, Kansas Senator James H. Lane introduced a bill enabling Colorado, Nevada, and Nebraska to become states, which Lincoln promptly signed.<sup>50</sup> All three territories leaned Republican and might yield crucial electoral votes for the proposed Thirteenth Amendment. By contrast, New Mexico and Utah were not offered a path to statehood, even though both had longer territorial histories. New Mexico was considered too Democratic and the Republican Party was openly hostile to the Mormon leadership in Utah. Ultimately, only Nevada became a state during Lincoln’s administration, but the efforts to push Colorado forward reflect its identity as a Republican territory. We continue to see the Civil War primarily as it shaped North and South. Yet Lincoln’s letter to the miners in the spring of 1865 suggests that the war enabled the Republican Party to shape Colorado’s landscape as well. Conversely, Lincoln’s political vision, and that of his party, was a function of western expansion.

No single factor “caused” the creation of the Colorado Territory, though the gold rush remains the most pressing factor. Absent the mineral discoveries, migration to the region would surely have come with a homestead act, but the character of that growth might have been slow and agrarian rather than rapid and urban. Without secession, Republicans would not and could not have organized these territories. Without the overly optimistic reassessments of the areas east of the Rocky Mountains, the end of the gold rush—which drained thousands away from the Front Range in the 1860s—might have left few settlers in this semi-arid region.

<sup>49</sup> Annual message to Congress, in *Works of Abraham Lincoln*, vol. 5, 1861–1862, ed. Basler, 527–8.

<sup>50</sup> Thomas D. Isern, “Colorado Territory,” *Journal of the West* 16 (April 1977): 57–71.

A recently discovered shard of cartographic evidence captures the interdependence of these stories. As discussed above, the broadside in figure 5 featured one of George Colton's previously printed maps of the nation. The Republican Party used that map to promote the candidacy of John C. Frémont in 1856. The authors of the broadside drew dark lines across the West to mark Frémont's western expeditions and also to claim the West as a space closed to slavery. Republicans made the map to serve an urgent political cause at a particular moment in time.

Three years later, that same map was creatively adapted once again after rumors of gold in western Kansas brought national attention to the territory. These mineral discoveries created an enormous demand for maps, and the race to satisfy that demand gave Colton's map yet another purpose. Surplus copies of the 1856 Republican broadside—probably set aside after the election—were first shorn of their political marginalia. Inked manuscript lines were added to illustrate the paths to the gold region. The map was then folded into a pocket size and advertised as showing the routes and necessary gear for the journey.

This map is unrecorded in the secondary literature, for it was never published; instead, it was adapted and repackaged for the purposes of 1859. Its serial uses in the 1850s capture the layers of history: in 1856 heavy black lines were drawn across Kansas to evoke antislavery sentiment by invoking the storied name of Frémont. Three years later, different lines were added hastily across Kansas to sell the map to gold seekers. Maps of the Pike's Peak gold rush are notoriously difficult to find, for they were printed quickly on cheap paper and designed for temporary use. The Pike's Peak map survives in a very fragile state, but this historical remnant reminds us that the Colorado Territory emerged from the convergence of a political crisis, the discovery of mineral wealth, and the rise of a more optimistic view of the region's economic potential.<sup>51</sup>



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<sup>51</sup> John C. Frémont and G. W. Elliott, "Map of the United States," Leventhal Map Center and map showing Pike's Peak and the newly discovered gold regions ([1859?]), private collection of Barry Lawrence Ruderman, La Jolla, CA. I thank Ruderman for bringing this map to my attention.