Who Decides West?

Read how competing goals sharpened the debate over slavery in western territories.

8.C.7.4 "Examine the increased tension between Southern sectionalist and Northern nationalist perspectives toward the expansion of slavery into western territories."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline two reasons Northern nationalists opposed the expansion of slavery, and circle two reasons Southern sectionalists defended it. Number two decisions that made the conflict sharper.

A Fight Over the West

1 In 1846, as the United States fought Mexico, lawmakers argued over land the nation might gain. Representative David Wilmot proposed banning slavery in any territory taken from Mexico. Many Northerners backed the plan because they wanted western farms and jobs open to free workers. They also argued that Congress could set rules for the nation's territories. Southern lawmakers saw a threat to their region's power: if new states banned slavery, slave states could lose influence in the Senate. They insisted that slaveholders should be able to take enslaved people into western territories.

2 The Compromise of 1850 tried to contain the dispute after the war. California entered as a free state, while Congress let settlers in the Utah and New Mexico territories decide whether to allow slavery. Congress also passed a tougher Fugitive Slave Act, requiring help in returning people who had escaped slavery. Some Northern nationalists feared that expanding slavery would spread its power across the country and betray the promise of free labor. Southern sectionalists argued that protecting slaveholders' rights in the territories was necessary to keep their states equal partners in the Union.

3 In 1854, the Kansas-Nebraska Act allowed settlers in those territories to decide whether slavery would be allowed, even though an earlier law had barred it in that part of the West. Supporters called this local choice fair. Many Northerners saw Congress giving up a national limit on slavery, and many Southerners viewed the decision as a chance to protect their interests. People from both sides rushed into Kansas to influence the outcome. Rival governments formed, and armed attacks followed. Instead of settling the question, local choice turned a debate in Congress into a violent struggle.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. How did Wilmot's proposal put Northern and Southern goals in conflict?

2. Why might the Compromise of 1850 have left people on both sides dissatisfied?

3. Why did the Kansas-Nebraska Act alarm many Northerners but offer many Southerners hope?

4. How did events in Kansas show that local choice increased tension instead of settling the dispute?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Imagine you are an 1855 lawmaker deciding the rules for a newly proposed western territory. Write a five-sentence speech that explains each side's goal, proposes your own rule, gives a reason for it, and predicts one conflict it might cause.

ANSWER KEY

Who Decides West?

GRADE 8 · 8.C.7.4

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline two reasons Northern nationalists opposed the expansion of slavery, and circle two reasons Southern sectionalists defended it. Number two decisions that made the conflict sharper. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	How did Wilmot's proposal put Northern and Southern goals in conflict?	**It would keep slavery out of land taken from Mexico, supporting free labor but blocking slaveholders from taking enslaved people there and threatening slave states' influence.**
2	Why might the Compromise of 1850 have left people on both sides dissatisfied?	**California entered as a free state, which threatened Southern influence, while the tougher Fugitive Slave Act required help returning people who had escaped slavery, troubling many Northerners.**
3	Why did the Kansas-Nebraska Act alarm many Northerners but offer many Southerners hope?	**It removed an earlier national limit on slavery in those territories, but local decisions gave Southerners a chance to protect their interests there.**
4	How did events in Kansas show that local choice increased tension instead of settling the dispute?	**People from both sides rushed in to influence the decision, rival governments formed, and armed attacks followed.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

Northern nationalists want the new territory to offer opportunities for free workers and limit slavery's spread. Southern sectionalists want slaveholders to take enslaved people there and protect their states' influence. I propose that Congress prohibit slavery in the new territory. This rule would protect free labor without leaving the decision to a contested local vote. Southern lawmakers might reject the rule as unfair to their region, making agreement harder.

Accept other historically plausible rules if the speech accurately explains both perspectives and predicts a conflict connected to the proposed rule. For the marking job, accept relevant reasons and two decisions such as Wilmot's proposal, the Compromise of 1850, or the Kansas-Nebraska Act.