



America in 1857: A Nation on the Brink

Kenneth M. Stampp

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It was a year packed with unsettling events. The Panic of 1857 closed every bank in New York City, ruined thousands of businesses, and caused widespread unemployment among industrial workers. The Mormons in Utah Territory threatened rebellion when federal troops approached with a non-Mormon governor to replace Brigham Young. The Supreme Court outraged northern Republicans and abolitionists with the Dred Scott decision ("a breathtaking example of judicial activism"). And when a proslavery minority in Kansas Territory tried to foist a proslavery constitution on a large antislavery majority, President Buchanan reneged on a crucial commitment and supported the minority, a disastrous miscalculation which ultimately split the Democratic party in two.

In *America in 1857*, eminent American historian Kenneth Stamp offers a sweeping narrative of this eventful year, covering all the major crises while providing readers with a vivid portrait of America at mid-century. Stamp gives us a fascinating account of the attempt by William Walker and his band of filibusters to conquer Nicaragua and make it a slave state, of crime and corruption, and of street riots by urban gangs such as New York's Dead Rabbits and Bowery Boys and Baltimore's Plug Uglies and Blood Tubs. But the focus continually returns to Kansas. He examines the outrageous political frauds perpetrated by proslavery Kansans, Buchanan's calamitous response and Stephen Douglas's break with the President (a rare event in American politics, a major party leader repudiating the president he helped elect), and the whirl of congressional votes and dramatic debates that led to a settlement humiliating to Buchanan--and devastating to the Democrats.

1857 marked a turning point, at which sectional conflict spun out of control and the country moved rapidly toward the final violent resolution in the Civil War. Stamp's intensely focused look at this pivotal year illuminates the forces at work and the mood of the nation as it plummeted toward disaster.

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