Missouri Compromise DBQ

Document 1)

“How is it that we hear the loudest yelps for liberty among the drivers of negroes?” This question of English author Samuel Johnson strikes at the core of the slavery controversy in the American quest for self-government. Americans affirmed their independence with the ringing declaration that “all men are created equal.” But some of them owned African slaves, and were unwilling to give them up as they formed new federal and state governments. So “to form a more perfect union” in 1787, certain compromises were made in the Constitution regarding slavery in hopes that they would eventually be able to wean themselves off the “peculiar institution.” This settled the slavery controversy for the first few decades of the American republic.

This situation changed with the application of Missouri for statehood in 1819. It changed the political landscape so dramatically that when former president Thomas Jefferson heard about the enactment of the Missouri Compromise of 1820, he wrote, “This momentous question, like a firebell in the night, awakened and filled me with terror. I considered it at once as the knell of the Union.”

There had always been differences between northern and southern states, the former more commercial and the latter more agrarian in outlook and livelihood. But no difference was so potentially divisive as the South’s insistence on the right to hold slaves and the North’s growing aversion to it. The newly acquired territory to the West, resulting from the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, brought the issue of the extension of slavery to a slow boil in 1819. Both sides, North and South, were concerned about the balance of power in the Senate being disrupted by the admission of new states carved out of the Louisiana Territory. The legislative and rhetorical interventions of Kentucky Representative Henry Clay, a slaveowner who worked for gradual emancipation and colonization, were crucial to averting a sectional division of the American union.

When Maine requested admission as a free state in 1820, Congress agreed to a compromise where Missouri was permitted to come into the union with a constitution of its own choosing, which meant no restriction regarding slavery. In addition to Maine’s admission in 1820 as a free state and Missouri’s eventual admission as a slave state (in 1821), Illinois Senator Jesse B. Thomas suggested that in the balance of the Louisiana Territory north of the 36º30’ parallel (which ran along Missouri’s southern border) slavery would be prohibited forever. The Missouri Compromise thereby maintained an equal number of free and slaveholding states in the American union. But it proved only a temporary settlement of the slavery controversy. Another territorial dispute, involving Texas and Mexico, would later stoke the fires of sectional conflict over the spread of slavery into the western territories.

But slavery in the territories was not the only issue dividing North and South. The question of tariffs (or taxes) on foreign imports proved so volatile that one state tried to nullify an act of Congress and threatened to secede from the Union. South Carolina saw tariffs imposed by the national government on foreign imports not for general revenue purposes, but to help domestic, manufacturing industries located mainly in the North. With depressed cotton prices and reduced foreign demand for raw goods from the South, the 1828 and 1832 tariffs eventually provoked South Carolina to desperate measures.

Flags were flown at half-mast in Charleston, South Carolina, and throughout the South there was talk of boycotting northern goods. By 1832, when Congress passed a new tariff bill that did not lower tariff rates enough to please the southern states, talk turned openly to nullification. South Carolina went so far as to call a state convention that declared the Tariff Acts of 1828 and 1832 “null, void, and no law, nor binding upon” the state. Whereupon President Andrew Jackson rebuked South Carolina and threatened to invade the state. When Congress passed his 1833 “Force Bill,” which empowered the military to collect the tariffs, the now Senator Henry Clay fashioned yet another compromise that revised the tariff to South Carolina’s satisfaction. This kept the tariff on the books and South Carolina in the Union.

Answer the following questions in complete sentences.
1) How did the Missouri Compromise of 1820 attempt to settle the debate over the future of slavery in the growing American republic?

2) How did the Nullification Crisis a decade later demonstrate the widening divide between northern and southern states?

3) “This momentous question, like a firebell in the night, awakened and filled me with terror. I considered it at once as the knell of the Union.” Jefferson wrote this about the Missouri Compromise, what did he mean?

Document 2) Excerpt from the Missouri Compromise

An Act to authorize the people of the Missouri territory to form a constitution and state government, and for the admission of such state into the Union on an equal footing with the original states, and to prohibit slavery in certain territories.

SEC 8. And be it further enacted. That in all that territory ceded by France to the United States, under the name of Louisiana, which lies north of thirty-six degrees and thirty minutes north latitude, not included within the limits of the state, contemplated by this act, slavery and involuntary servitude, otherwise than in the punishment of crimes, whereof the parties shall have been duly convicted, shall be, and is hereby, forever prohibited: Provided always. That any person escaping into the same, from whom labour or service is lawfully claimed, in any state or territory of the United States, such fugitive may be lawfully reclaimed and conveyed to the person claiming his or her labor or service aforesaid.

APPROVED, March 6, 1820

Library of Congress

4. What provisions regarding slavery was contained within this legislation?

Document 3 & 4)

5. Based on these documents, what were two effects the Missouri Compromise had on the nation?

Essay question: Discuss the impact of the Missouri Compromise on the nation. Did it hinder or help the spread of slavery in America?
Be sure to cite the documents and write in the 3rd person.