

Franklin Pierce
14th President




Terms: 1853-1857

Political Party: Democrat

First Lady: Jane Means Appleton Pierce

Vice President: William R. King

Overview

Born: November 23, 1804, Hillsborough, New Hampshire... Pierce's strong support for the [Compromise of 1850](#) <www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/general-article/lincolns-political-landscape/> appeared to indicate that he was not going to press the issue of slavery. With the country in precarious balance, almost every decision made during his administration -- buying Mexican territory for a southern railroad route, a potential invasion of Cuba -- was scrutinized and criticized for its bias toward pro-slavery forces. The Kansas-Nebraska Act effectively nullified the Missouri Compromise, leading to a race to settle Kansas that resulted in pitched battles and a prelude to the [Civil War](#) <www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/films/lincolns/>. Although Pierce sought a second term, the Democratic Party denied him their nomination... Died: October 8, 1869.

The Era

- Henry David Thoreau publishes *Walden, or Life in the Woods* (1854)
- Commodore Matthew Perry negotiates relations with Japan (1854)
- Africa's Victoria Falls (on the Zambezi River) discovered by David Livingstone (1855)
- Crimean War (1854-1856)
- Anglo-Chinese War (1856-1858)

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Domestic Policy

Pierce was elected on a platform of maintaining the status quo in regards to the issue of slavery. However, the Kansas-Nebraska Act (1854) allowed the new territory of Kansas to decide its stance on the legality of slavery (in defiance of the [Missouri Compromise](#) <www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/general-article/lincolns-political-landscape/> of 1820 which did not allow slave states north of latitude 36 degrees 30 minutes). Pro- and anti-slavery supporters rushed to settle the territory, but elections on the issue were plagued by accusations of fraud by both sides, leading to [bloody regional fighting](#) <www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/brown/peoplevents/pande07.html> in the territory. "Bleeding Kansas" was staunchly opposed by the end of Pierce's first term, but the precedent for war had been set.

"The great objects of our pursuit as a people are best to be attained by peace."

– Franklin Pierce, 1853

Foreign Affairs

Pierce's administration was marked by expansionist aims. His minister to Mexico, James Gadsden, helped to settle threads left hanging by the Mexican War by buying disputed territory from Mexico (now the southern parts of Arizona and New Mexico). An attempt to buy Cuba from Spain failed and the Ostend Manifesto (1854), drawn up by three of Pierce's diplomatic ministers (including [James Buchanan](#) <www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/biography/presidents-buchanan/>), suggested taking the island by force. The annexation of Cuba was seen by anti-slavery advocates as an attempt to create a new slave state and Pierce's administration was compelled to repudiate the document.

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Presidential Politics

The Democratic Party required 48 ballots before Franklin Pierce was nominated in 1852. Pierce won the general election against his former commanding officer in the Mexican War, the [Whig](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/timeline/lincolns-timeline/) Party's Winfield Scott (one campaign slogan: "We Polked you in 1844; we shall Pierce you in 1852"). After his first term, Pierce sought to run again but the Democrats chose the less divisive James Buchanan as their nominee.

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