Chapter 12: Reform and Conflict, 1828-1836

Overview
The regional differences that had powered American nationalism after the war of 1812 eventually matured into open conflict. Economic growth fueled the change and the tariff was the catalyst. The tariff seemed ready to ignite a far broader debate over the institution of slavery itself. The reform movement also attacked what they called “wage dependency.” The tone of the reform rhetoric of the 1830s was not optimistic. Instead it was combative and reflected a sense that there were insurmountable obstacles to perfecting industrial society. Reformers shifted their efforts from broad programs to those that centered on self-control and where necessary external constraint.

Key Topics
- The controversy surrounding nullification
- The birth of the abolition movement
- Class formation during the 1830s
- The wages system and class conflict
- Immigration and nativism and their effect on U.S. politics
- A culture of self-improvement

Review Questions
- The Nullification Crisis was not the first time Americans had threatened to withdraw from the union. List precedents since 1789, and explain the similarities and differences between those earlier episodes and the Nullification Crisis.
- Why did some white northerners violently oppose abolition?
- Explain the difference between “immediatism” and other forms of antislavery sentiment.
- Although workers had organized and struck in earlier periods, the late 1820s and the 1830s witnessed unprecedented eruption of worker protest. What changing conditions help account for the timing of this activity?
- Was the culture of self-reform and self-regulation entirely a movement of the new urban middle class? Provide specific examples to support your conclusion. Explain why Americans might have become especially concerned about matters of self-control in the 1820s and 1830s.
- Why did the reform impulse, once the very cement of the Jacksonian coalition, become a source of conflict in the 1830s?

Annotated chapter outline
Free Labor Under Attack: By 1832, many American workers felt threatened by the new industrial order. Worker protests had become increasingly common in the nation’s manufacturing centers. President Jackson had rewarded voters’ expectations but his term in office had also revealed many unreconciled tensions within the democratic political economy. These tensions arose in part from the very strengths of democracy and economic growth. Slavery, slave resistance, and free African Americans contributed to growing antislavery activism. White southerners and northerners began to see each other’s differences. Middle-class Americans also began to see differences between themselves and other Americans, especially immigrants. Where perfectionism had been the goal, reform itself became controversial.

The Growth of Sectional Tension: The regional differences that had powered American nationalism after the War of 1812 eventually matured into open conflict. Economic growth fueled the change and the tariff was the catalyst. The tariff seemed ready to ignite a far broader debate over the institution of slavery itself.
- By the 1830s, white southerners had endured many criticisms of slavery and they harbored many ill feelings. The Panic of 1819 and the tariff of 1828 helped give focus to their insecurities. By
the late 1820s South Carolina’s white population was in the numerical minority and rumors of slave rebellions increased. South Carolinians felt threatened on all fronts and interest in theories of nullification were revived. John C. Calhoun articulated the justification for nullification and possible secession and argued that secession was a possibility.

- Southern states did not rush to endorse Calhoun’s theory but it ignited passioned debate in Washington. For Jackson, what was once a regional issue was now a question of national union.
- Among newspapers, journals, and conventions, free blacks along the Atlantic coast propelled the antislavery agenda to a larger public audience. A national society, The American Antislavery Society, was founded in 1833. It dedicated itself to the total abolition of slavery without compensation for owners and to the admission of African Americans to full, free citizenship.

**The Political Economy of Early Industrial Society:** The reform movement also attacked what they called “wage dependency.”

- By 1830 manufacturing labor had changed. The new work demanded little knowledge or skill, and as workers became as interchangeable as their work, their wages dropped. Increasingly dependent on the market for their most basic subsistence needs, workers were able to afford only the bare minimum, the cheapest, and poorest quality goods.
- Workers voiced their anger and frustrations in protests that were published in pamphlets and essays, and they took to the streets.
- Compared to the “working class,” the “middle class” was also urban but received some of its income from fees or salaries, rather than wages and they were employed in jobs that required mental, rather than physical labor. Not immune to the problems of the market economy, members of the middle class benefited from the industrial transformation and their attitudes and behaviors reflected these changes.
- Domestic womanhood became the primary symbol of middle-class respectability and a defense against the many contradictions of the new industrial political economy.
- Americans became increasingly wary of sources of potential danger to their lives and families and their tendency was to focus on the threats they imagined “others” posed to their way of life.
- It was not just European immigrants that heightened the sense that American society was a society in turmoil. Internal immigration was common.

**Self-Reform and Social Regulation:** The tone of the reform rhetoric of the 1830s was not optimistic. Instead it was combative and reflected a sense that there were insurmountable obstacles to perfecting industrial society.

- Whether in self-help societies, self-education, or self-administered herbal medications, the new emphasis was on self-improvement and the celebration of personal ambition. Middle-class Americans responded to this message by embracing it.
- The most long-lived and largest reform movement was the temperance movement.
- By the 1830s, education and prison reform were critical areas for reform.

**Conclusion:** By 1837, the coalition that had elected Jackson was deeply divided. Social and economic inequality, probably created by the market economy, produced sharp conflicts and obvious differences. In this context, Americans embraced a variety of reform movements and as the 1830s passed; the reform attitude was characterized by control and coercion. But one topic loomed on the nation’s horizon: the nation was seen by more and more Americans as stained by the sin of slavery.

**Analytical reading** These questions refer to the passage “Antislavery Becomes Abolition” on pages 276-278.

1. What did the reformers mean by “self-sufficiency”?
2. Why did white antislavery activism take root so slowly?
3. Who would read the Freedom’s Journal or any of the other black newspapers?
Lecture Strategies

Reform and Conflict: twin themes in Chapter Twelve. When added to the market economy we start folding in the ingredients for the conflict over slavery and abolition. The nullification crisis provides the philosophical justification for secession. That it forces Jackson's hand and enhances the power of the presidency is also a topic for discussion. Placing the crisis in social and political context -- the tariff, slave rebellions, white minority population in South Carolina -- help explain why South Carolinians adhere to such an extreme philosophy. Nullification and reform come together as the antislavery movement evolves into abolitionism. Factoring in the infant women's movement as part of the abolition movement will help your students see these reform movements in a broader historical perspective rather than isolated events.

Supplements: Prentice Hall has developed a number of supplements that can enhance your lectures as well as your students' comprehenshion and performance.

Penguin Classics See Olaudah Equiano, The Interesting Narrative and other Writings, edited with an introduction and notes by Vincent Carretta, New York: Penguin Books, 1995. Published in 1789, Equiano's account is among the earliest autobiographical accounts of the colonial slave trade and the effects on its victims. Equiano's slavery spans the period from about 1755 to 1766 but it is also his life story that is interesting. For a collection of slave narratives see Henry Louis Gates, Jr., The Classic Slave Narratives, edited with an introduction by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. New York: A Mentor Book, 1987. The first-hand stories of Olaudah Equiano, Mary Prince, Frederick Douglass, and Harriet Jacobs introduce the reader to slavery from the inside (and over the period of American slavery) and more importantly what it means to be free. See also Frederick Douglass, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave Written by Himself, with an introduction by Peter J. Gomes. New York: A Signet Classic, 1997.

In Immigrant Voices: Twenty-four Narratives on Becoming an American, edited by Gordon Hunter, New York: A Signet Classic, 1999, Hunter has chosen twenty-four narratives of immigrants to tell the stories of immigrants' transformations to Americans. Added to the predominantly European immigrant stories in this late nineteenth century section of the text are Joseph Pickering, "Inquiries of an Emigrant" which features an excerpt from the 1831 guidebook for immigrants; Rebecca Burlend, "A True Picture of Emigration," written in 1846, is the story of her experiences; Anna Howard Shaw, "Story of a Pioneer" is the story of her adjustment to life in the United States in the 1880s. She was a physician and suffragette.

American Stories: Biographies in United States History by Katheryn A. Abbott and Patricia Hagler Minter. See Chapter 10, Economy & Society in the North, 1790-1840, for biographical sketches of Charles and Lydia Finney and Samuel Slater as well as Chapter 11, A New America Society, 1770-1850, for biographical sketches of Mother Ann Lee and Walt Whitman.

Documents Collection see Part Eleven: Reforming the Nation

*Joshua and Sally Wilson Letters to George Wilson 1823
*Lyman Beecher, Six Sermons on Intemperance 1828
*“Early Habits of Industry,” The Mother’s Magazine 1834
*Charles Finney, “What a Revival of Religion Is” 1835
*Temperance and the Washingtonians 1836
*A Lowell Mill Girl Tells Her Story 1836
*Petition of the Catholics of New York” 1840
*Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Self-Reliance” 1841
*Ja Norcom, Letter to Mary Matilda Norcom 1846
*Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions, Woman’s Rights Convention, Seneca Falls, New York 1848
*Horace Mann on Education and National Welfare
*John Humphrey Noyes and Bible Communism 1845 and 1849
*Sojourner Truth, Address to the Woman’s Rights Convention, Akron, Ohio 1851

The documents of particular relevance to this chapter are identified with an asterisk, although previous and subsequent parts have relevant documents.