The Compromise of 1850 was a series of five bills that were intended to stave off sectional strife. Its goal was to deal with the spread of slavery to territories in order to keep northern and southern interests in balance. Here is a summary of the five bills:

1. California was entered as a free state.
2. New Mexico and Utah were each allowed to use popular sovereignty to decide the issue of slavery. In other words, the people would pick whether the states would be free or slave.
3. The Republic of Texas gave up lands that it claimed in present day New Mexico and received $10 million to pay its debt to Mexico.
4. The slave trade was abolished in the District of Columbia.
5. The [Fugitive Slave Act](http://americanhistory.about.com/od/beforethewar/a/fugitiveslave.htm) made any federal official who did not arrest a runaway slave liable to pay a fine. This was the most controversial part of the Compromise of 1850 and caused many abolitionists to increase their efforts against slavery.

The [Missouri Compromise](http://www.socialstudiesforkids.com/wwww/us/missouricompromisedef.htm), as it was called, found its greatest champion in [Henry Clay](http://www.socialstudiesforkids.com/wwww/us/henryclaydef.htm), who was at that time the Speaker of the House. A [War Hawk](http://www.socialstudiesforkids.com/wwww/us/warhawkdef.htm) from his days advocating war with Great Britain, he tried desperately to keep the North and South from fighting over the slavery issue. Largely because of Clay's efforts, the Missouri Compromise went into effect.

Here are some details of the Compromise:

* Missouri was admitted as a slave state
* Maine was admitted as a free state
* Slavery was forbidden north of the 36 degree latitude mark, the southern boundary of Missouri.
* People in the North were encouraged to return runaway slaves to their masters.
* Slavery was not prohibited anywhere, not even in the free territories.

The Missouri Compromise solved the immediate problem but didn't solve the slavery issue as a whole. As many people on both sides were sure, that would take a war.

In March of 1857, the United States Supreme Court, led by Chief Justice Roger B. Taney, declared that all blacks -- slaves as well as free -- were not and could never become citizens of the United States. The court also declared the 1820 Missouri Compromise unconstitutional, thus permitting slavery in all of the country's territories.  
  
The case before the court was that of *Dred Scott v. Sanford*. Dred Scott, a slave who had lived in the free state of Illinois and the free territory of Wisconsin before moving back to the slave state of Missouri, had appealed to the Supreme Court in hopes of being granted his freedom.   
  
Taney -- a staunch supporter of slavery and intent on protecting southerners from northern aggression -- wrote in the Court's majority opinion that, because Scott was black, he was not a citizen and therefore had no right to sue. The framers of the Constitution, he wrote, believed that blacks "had no rights which the white man was bound to respect; and that the negro might justly and lawfully be reduced to slavery for his benefit. He was bought and sold and treated as an ordinary article of merchandise and traffic, whenever profit could be made by it."