1843

The Missouri Compromise: or, The Extension of the Slave Power

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Recommended Citation

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The Missouri Compromise:

or,

The Extension of the Slave Power.

By General James Appleton.

Slavery exerted no slight influence over the public mind at the period when the Federal Constitution was framed; but it has continually increased in power, and become more and more malignant, from that time until the present. In proof of this, I might advert to many of the leading measures of the National Government, and to much of the history of our country, since the adoption of the Constitution; but I choose to illustrate this position, by referring to the prevailing opinion of those who framed the Constitution, and to a single subsequent act of the Government, viz., “The Missouri Compromise.” I thus restrict myself, for the purpose of presenting at large the testimony of several witnesses, who were actors in the scene they describe, and who were competent, in all respects, to form a correct judgment.

In the year 1820, Maine petitioned for admission into the Union. This was refused, except upon the unconditional admission of Missouri, which had also applied for admission. There was no objection, from any quarter, to the request of Maine; it was fit, in all respects, that she should be admitted; but not daring to trust the question of the admission of Missouri upon its own merits, the admission of the two States was embraced in the same bill; thus making the admission of Maine dependent on the unconditional admission of Missouri. “You may come into the Union,” said the slave-owner; “we shall be glad to receive you; but if you do come in, you must bring with you Missouri—slaves and all—not only those which she now has, but all that she may acquire, to the end of time!” A great struggle ensued; but the members from the slave States, uniting as one man, and carrying with them, as they are always able to do, a few members from the free States, succeeded in their execrable project. This was the first instance where the admission of a State into the Union was opposed openly, and in the halls of Congress, on the ground of slavery; but slavery triumphed, and liberty, and honor, and the Constitution, were prostrated to the earth.

In 1787, the Ordinance for the government of the North-West Territory was passed, by the old Congress, with scarcely an opposing voice. By this Ordinance, which is the fundamental law of that Territory,
slavery is forever excluded from that vast tract of country. In this feature of that Ordinance, we have the best evidence of the feelings of the American people, at that time, in relation to slavery. This territory was ceded by the State of Virginia, for the purpose of forming new States; and, although she was herself a slave-holding State, she consented that this new country should never be polluted by the footsteps of the slave. This Act of the old Congress was in perfect harmony with the leading principles of the Constitution, which was adopted the year following, and perfectly coincident with the opinions of American patriots, both of the North and South. The patriots of that age were inspired with the ardent hope that the principles of liberty, developed by the Revolution, would everywhere prevail, to the utter overthrow of slavery. The wise men who framed the Constitution expressed their opinions as follows:

Gouverneur Morris. "Domestic slavery is a nefarious institution. It was the curse of Heaven on the State where it prevailed."

L. Martin. "The privilege of importing slaves was inconsistent with the principles of the Revolution, and dishonorable to the American character."

Col. Mason. "The poor despise labor when performed by slaves. Every master of slaves is born a petty tyrant. Slavery brings the curse of Heaven on a country."

Mr. Gerry. "No sanction ought to be given to slavery."

Mr. Madison. "It is wrong to admit in the Constitution the idea that there could be property in man."

Contrast the state of feeling indicated by these facts with that which existed less than thirty-five years afterwards, when Missouri was admitted to the Union. No one can doubt how the Missouri question would have been settled by the fathers of the republic. They would have frowned at the thought of extending slavery. Yet, in 1820, the influence of slavery was so great over the American people, that a majority of their representatives admitted a new State into the Union, with the right of perpetual slavery. It should also be remembered that the territory constituting the State of Missouri was not included in the territory of the old thirteen States, but was embraced in the Louisiana purchase, which, as admitted by Mr. Jefferson, was in violation of the Constitution. Nor can it be doubted that slavery has been constantly accumulating power, in an increased ratio, from the date when Missouri was admitted, to the present time.

Whether any new States will hereafter be admitted to the Union, with the power to establish slavery, time alone can determine. But the hope is fondly cherished that the spirit of patriotism and liberty, which, within a few years, has been revived in the free States, and the wide-pervading conviction that slavery is alike destructive of the prosperity, and honor, and highest expectations, of our whole country, will yet stay the onward march of this enemy of all good, and, at no distant period, banish it from every corner of this goodly land.

At the time of the Missouri compromise, when Missouri and Maine were admitted to the Union, there were seven representatives in Con-

* Madison Papers.
gress from Maine; but the conditions upon which it was proposed to admit Maine were so reprehensible and insulting, that five of the number* voted against her admission; preferring that Maine should never be admitted into the Union, rather than submit to the dishonorable and arrogant claims of slavery. In explanation of their course, these members of the House published "An Address to the People of Maine." One only of the number survives, the Hon. Ezekiel Whitman, who wrote the Address, and who is the present able and upright Chief Justice of the State of Maine. I shall close this paper with extracts from this Address, which asserts, in plain but strong language, the domination of slavery, and the means by which it has been secured.

If such were the fearful strides of this power twenty-three years since, that statesmen of different parties united in exposing it, and in invoking their countrymen to awake and resist its further advancement, what must be its present potency and virulence, when, during the whole intervening period, it has been widening the field of its activity — gathering new strength from the cowardly submission of its victims; and when, also, it is meditating new schemes of atrocity and unrighteousness, and seeking new countries for spoil and desolation!

"When the bill for the admission of Maine into the Union was first discussed, at an early period of the session, the Honorable Speaker† of the House avowed his opposition to the admission of Maine, unequivocally, until Missouri should have been admitted, with the privilege of continuing the increase of the slave-holding population; and alleged that this jealousy of power, on the part of the South, was justified by a similar jealousy on the part of the North, manifested in the admission of Kentucky. He alleged that Kentucky had been kept out of the Union eighteen months, waiting for Vermont to be admitted, as a counterpoise in the scale of the Union. This piece of history he stated as having been handed down by tradition, and derived from sources on which he could confidently rely. The same facts were again asserted, subsequently, by an honorable member (Governor Barbour, of Virginia) of the Senate. On examination, this precedent turns out not to have had the slightest foundation in fact."

"Of the question of power and influence, the gentlemen of the North have, heretofore, thought nothing; as between the slave-holding and non-slave-holding sections of this Union, we have had our executive, with all his influence and patronage, elected seven eighths of the time, since the formation of the government, from the slave-holding portion of the Union. All this has excited no jealousy on our part. But whatever may be our disposition in this particular, it behoves the people of the North not to be inattentive to the signs of the times. If we profit not by the developments which experience and collisions produce, we shall deserve to be considered a besotted and stupid race, fit only to be led blindfolded, and worthy only to be treated with sovereign contempt."

"Restrictions and impediments, in relation to Missouri, were odious, — unconstitutional, — invidious, — and we know not what. But, in regard to Maine, she might be loaded down with restrictions, or any

* M. Kinsley, Joshua Cushman, Ezekiel Whitman, Enoch Lincoln, James Parker.
† Henry Clay.
and every impediment; and to secure what? The interests and welfare of Maine? No; power—a balance of power: and to whom? To the slave-holding States. They say to Maine, 'You may come into the Union; we shall be glad to receive you; you are entitled to admission upon every principle. But, if you do come in, you must bring with you Missouri—slaves and all—not only those which she now has, but all that she may acquire to the end of time.'

"These proceedings and declarations are to be regretted and to be deprecated. They will have the worst possible effect. The North must, at least, stand upon the defensive. And whatever may be its solicitude for the best interests of the Union, and however anxious it may be for its happiness and prosperity, such proceedings and such declarations should not be passed without animadversion. To be totally regardless of such—not indications merely—but positive declarations—over and over again repeated—and from all the prominent characters of the South, will not and ought not to be forgotten."

"We see here a principle of union—a rallying point—a principle which creates in this Union a solid column—an impenetrable phalanx, forever united for political purposes, and for the acquisition of political power and influence. While the South are united, and the influence of the North neutralized by their divisions, power, over the Union, must continue to reside where it has done ever since the formation of the government."

"It should not be concealed, also, that the power of the executive, which we would not impair or diminish, in this country, is not inconsiderable. He has under his control eight or ten thousand officers, distributed over the Union, comprising the most active and influential men, together with perhaps twice, nay, ten times, that number of expectants of office; all of whom are under an inducement to adhere to him, with all their influence and power. Whenever power in this country, then, shall have taken root in a quarter in which there shall be found such a common principle of union, it cannot be easily eradicated."

"The lessons which have been inculcated in the course of the discussion of the questions in relation to Maine and Missouri, should forever hereafter be borne in mind. Missouri is now to be admitted as a slave-holding State. Arkansas is next to follow. Thus this principle of union—this rallying point—is to be extended and strengthened."

Let the American people ponder this testimony, and, while it is yet within their power, arise and vindicate the principles of their fathers, and drive back the foe of liberty and our country.

Published by the New England Anti-Slavery Tract Association.

J. W. ALDEN, PUBLISHING AGENT, BOSTON.