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Speech at Hartford, CT

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March 5, 1860

Daily Courant Version

Whether we will have it so or not, the slave question is the prevailing question before the nation. Though it may be true, and probably is true, that all parties, factions and individuals desire it should be settled, it still goes on unsettled—the all-prevailing and all-pervading question of the day. Hardly any other great question, however important it may have appeared, has been before the country several years, that had the power so to excite the public mind as this question of slavery. It has been so for six years, and before this received considerable consideration. It is in reality, older. It was rife before the Revolution, even. But it was settled, apparently. It has been settled many times; but each time it has risen it has come higher and higher. It has been coming up and going down. Its last rise was in January, 1854; it rose then higher than any former time, but this has never subsided. Otherwise than this, it grows more and more in magnitude and importance.

Two years ago, I said in a speech in Illinois, “We are now in the fifth year of an inauguration of a policy which was to settle this question satisfactorily, but we have not seen the end.” It may now be added that since the winter of 1857-8, when the Lecompton imbroglio was created, those who then brought up the question have never been able to see the end. It characterized all the speeches, that the policy they had adopted “was working well, and we were just at the end of it, notwithstanding the efforts of Abolitionists to continue it along. We are just getting rid of this vexed question; and the tail of this hideous creature is just going out of sight.”

Now we hear no more of this; and the question arises, “Why can't this question which we all desire so much to be settled, be satisfactorily arranged?” The reason is, that while we all agree that we want it settled, one faction wants to settle it one way, a second has a different plan, and a third still another. Each pulls in a different direction. All desire its settlement, but differ in the method of doing it; and none of them being in a decided majority have ever been able to accomplish the object.

I think one great mistake is made by them all. I think our wisest men have made this mistake. They underrate its importance, and a settlement can never be effected until its magnitude is properly estimated. Until we do this, the means of settlement will never be properly estimated. Now what is the difficulty? One-sixth of the population of the United States is slave. One-sixth of the population of the United States is slave. One man of every six, one woman of every six, one child of every six, is a slave. Those who own them look upon them as property, and nothing else. They contemplate them as property, and speak of them as such. The slaves have the same “property quality,” in the minds of their owners, as any other property. The entire value of the slave population of the United States, is, at a

moderate estimate, not less than $2,000,000,000. This amount of property has a vast influence upon the minds of those who own it. The same amount of property owned by Northern men has the same influence upon their minds. In this we do not assume that we are better than the people of the South—neither do we admit that they are better than we. We are not better, barring circumstances, than they. Public opinion is formed relative to a property basis. Therefore, the slaveholders battle any policy which depreciates their slaves as property. What increases the value of this property, they favor. When you tell them that slavery is immoral, they rebel, because they do not like to be told they are interested in an institution which is not a moral one. When you enter into a defence of slavery, they seize upon it, for they like justification. The result is, that public opinion is formed among them which insists upon the encouragement or protection, the enlargement or perpetuation of slavery—and secures them property in the slave.

Now this comes in conflict with this proposition that we at the North view slavery as a wrong. We understand that the “equality of man” principle which actuated our forefathers in the establishment of the government is right; and that slavery, being directly opposed to this, is morally wrong. I think that if anything can be proved by natural theology, it is that slavery is morally wrong. God gave man a mouth to receive bread, hands to feed it, and his hand has a right to carry bread to his mouth without controversy.

We suppose slavery is wrong, and that it endangers the perpetuity of the Union. Nothing else menaces it. Its effect on free labor makes it what Seward has been so roundly abused for calling, an irrepressible conflict. Almost every man has a sense of certain things being wrong, and at the same time, a sense of its pecuniary value. These conflict in the mind, and make a riddle of a man. If slavery is considered upon a property basis, public opinion must be forced to its support. The alternative is its settlement upon the basis of its being wrong. Some men think it is a question of neither right or wrong; that it is a question of dollars and cents, only; that the Almighty has drawn a line across the country, south of which the land is always to be cultivated by slave labor; when the question is between the white man and the nigger, they go in for the white man; when it is between the nigger and the crocodile, they take sides with the nigger. There is effort to make this feeling of indifference prevalent the country, and this is one of the things, perhaps, that prevents the sudden settlement of the question. Is it possible that a national policy can be sustained because nobody opposes or favors it? It may answer to serve the ends of politicians for a while, but it falls at last. There may be one way, however, to make it stand, and that is to make the opinion of the people conform to it; must be made to conclude that those who want slavery shall have it, and that it is simply a matter of dollars and cents. I do not believe a majority of the people of this nation can be made to take this view of it.

Is there any man of the Democratic party, especially the “Douglas wing,” but will say that in his opinion the Declaration of Independence has no application to the negro? I have asked this question many times during the past three years, and no Democrat has yet denied that this was his belief, though I have asked it always where people are in the habit of answering their speakers when they please. So I assume this to be their belief to-day; and I tell you, you are safe to offer a premium to any man who will show you a Democrat who said so five years ago. I avow I never heard it from any man until I heard it from the lips of Judge Douglas. I had, to be sure, in certain portions of the country, heard men say something to this effect, but they didn't sneak around it with any statement like this. They took the bull by the horns, and said the Declaration of Independence wasn't true! Judge Taney might have first broached the doctrine. Perhaps he did; but I heard it first from Judge Douglas, though it was after Taney's Dred Scott decision. If so, Douglas possibly got it from him. Here's half the people of this nation saying what they would not have said five years ago; taking man from his kind and placing him among the brutes. This is a long stride towards bringing about this feeling of indifference in the minds of the people of this country. One more such stride and the object would be reached.

The proposition that there is a struggle between the white man and the negro contains a falsehood. There is no struggle between them. It assumes that unless the white man enslaves the negro, the negro will enslave the white man. In that case, I think I would go for enslaving the black man, in preference to being enslaved myself. As the learned Judge of a certain Court is said to have decided—“When a ship is

wrecked at sea, and two men seize upon one plank which is capable of sustaining but one of them, either of them can rightfully push the other off!" There is, however, no such controversy here. They say that between the nigger and the crocodile they go for the nigger. The proportion, therefore, is, that as the crocodile to the nigger so is the nigger to the white man.

They tell us that they desire the people of a territory to vote slavery out or in as they please. But who will form the opinion of the people there? The territories may be settled by emigrants from the free States, who will go there with this feeling of indifference. The question arises, "slavery or freedom?" Caring nothing about it, they let it come in, and that is the end of it. It is the surest way of nationalizing the institution. Just as certain, but more dangerous because more insidious; but it is leading us there just as certainly and as surely as Jeff. Davis himself would have us go.

If, then, we of the Republican party who think slavery is a wrong, and would mould public opinion to the fact that it is wrong, should get the control of the general government, I do not say we would or should meddle with it where it exists; but we could inaugurate a policy which would treat it as a wrong, and prevent its extension.

For instance, out in the street, or in the field, or on the prairie I find a rattlesnake. I take a stake and kill him. Everybody would applaud the act and say I did right. But suppose the snake was in a bed where children were sleeping. Would I do right to strike him there? I might hurt the children; or I might not kill, but only arouse and exasperate the snake, and he might bite the children. Thus, by meddling with him here, I would do more hurt than good. Slavery is like this. We dare not strike at it where it is. The manner in which our constitution is framed constrains us from making war upon it where it already exists. The question that we now have to deal with is, "Shall we be acting right to take this snake and carry it to a bed where there are children?" The Republican party insists upon keeping it out of the bed.

Again: I met Mr. Cassius M. Clay in the cars at New Haven one day last week, and it was my first opportunity to take him by the hand. There was an old gentleman in the car, seated in front of us, whose coat collar was turned far down upon the shoulders. I saw directly that he had a large wen on his neck. I said to Mr. Clay, That wen represents slavery; it bears the same relation to that man that slavery does to the country. That wen is a great evil; the man that bears it will say so. But he does not dare to cut it out. He bleeds to death if he does, directly. If he does not cut it out; it will shorten his life materially.

This is only applicable to men who think slavery is wrong. Those who think it right, of course will look upon the rattlesnake as a jewel, and call the wen an ornament. I suppose the only way to get rid of it is, for those who think it wrong, to work together, and to vote no longer with the Democracy who love it so well.

Do you who think slavery is wrong, but still vote with the Democracy, act towards it as you do towards any other thing you consider wrong? I think not; on the contrary, you find fault with those who denounce it. In your view of the case it must not be discussed at all. In your view it must not be spoken of in the free States, because slavery is not there; nor in the slave States, because it is there; you do not want it brought into politics because it stirs up agitation; you do not want to hear of it from the pulpit because it is not religion; you do not want to take it into your Tract Societies because it creates disturbance there.

Are you consistent in this? You say that if the South themselves desire to stir the question, you wish them God-speed in it. Are you certain of that? In 1858 Frank P. Blair of Missouri did just this thing for his State. He went into the fight, and was a candidate for Congress. He was beaten; and when you heard of his defeat did you hang your heads in sorrow? I reckon not! I guess, that you threw your hat into the air and shouted, "Hurrah! for Democracy!" (Mr. Lincoln then proceeded to speak of the provision in the constitution which permitted the slave trade to continue 20 years. Although it was not expressly so stated, it was understood by the framers of that instrument that it was to have been abolished at the end of that time. He argued that if they had not considered slavery a wrong, they would not have thus limited the time of supply.) He continued:

I think the Democracy are pretty generally getting into a system of bushwhackery in this controversy. You all know how Seward has been abused for his “irrepressible conflict” doctrine. The Democracy have repeated it over, and over, and over again; I call this bushwhackery because they have been reminded time after time, but could never be made to admit, that the old fathers said the same thing. They dare not deny it because they know the proof is ready at your hands to meet their denial. Jefferson said it; Washington said it. Before Seward said it, the same statement was made by Pryor of Virginia in his Richmond Enquirer, the leading paper of his State. Pryor is sent to Washington and Douglas hugs him to his bosom, but goes into fits of hydrophobia at Seward's enunciation of the same doctrine which was preached by his Virginia friend.

Another species of bushwhacking is exhibited in their treatment of the John Brown and Harper's Ferry affair. They insist upon it that the Republican party incites insurrections. Did they, can they ever prove their statement? They tried it in the Senate Investigation Committee and failed, but they keep saying it. We have not been fairly dealt with in this matter. We need not [have] expected that we would have been. There was some State elections to come off soon afterwards. They had just passed through elections in other States, and been whipped out. They were glad this occurred at Harper's Ferry. They said to each other—“Jump in---now's your chance!” They were sorry there were not more killed; but taking it as they found it, they howled over it. The elections came off, but they did not result as the Democracy had expected. Each Republican knew that the charge that his party had incited the insurrection was, so far as he was concerned, a slander upon him. That is my philosophy of the result of the elections which ensued. The Democracy is still at work upon John Brown and Harper's Ferry, charging the Republicans with the crime of instigating the proceedings there; and if they think they are able to slander a woman into loving them, or a man into voting with them, they will learn better presently.

Now they are going to work at the shoe strike. I don't know that it comes into Connecticut. It goes into New Hampshire. A Democratic Senator gets up in the Senate Chamber and prompously announces that “I cannot dawt thot this strike is the thresult of the onforchunit wahfar brought about boy this sucktional controvussy!” Now whether this is so or not, I know one thing—there is a strike! And I am glad to know that there is a system of labor where the laborer can strike if he wants to! I would to God that such a system prevailed all over the world.

Now this strike is caused by a withdrawal of Southern trade, or it is not. If it is, what can you do to help it? Have you ever made war upon the South? No. Then how can you help yourselves? They withdraw their trade on a false accusation, because you never warred upon them, and consequently cannot stop the war they charge you with. You can, however, conform to their idea that slavery is right. This will satisfy them, but what is the effect on you? Why slavery comes in upon you! Public opinion against it gives way. The barriers which protected you from it are down; slavery comes in, and white free labor that can strike will give way to slave labor that cannot!

...

The Republicans want to see all parts of the Union in harmony with one another. Let us do our duty, but let us look to what our duty is, and do nothing except after due deliberation. Let us determine, if we can, what will satisfy the South. Will they be satisfied that we surrender the territories to them unconditionally? No. If we promise never to instigate an invasion upon slavery? No. Equally without avail is the fact that they have found nothing to detect us in doing them any wrong. What then? We must say that slavery is right; we must vote for Douglas's new Sedition laws; we must withdraw our statement that slavery is wrong. If a slave runs away, they overlook the natural causes which impelled him to the act; do not remember the oppression or the lashes he received, but charge us with instigating him to flight. If he screams when whipped, they say it is not caused by the pains he suffers, but he screams because we instigate him to outcrying. We do let them alone, to be sure, but they object to our saying anything against their system. They do not ask us to change our free State constitutions, but they will yet do that. After demanding what they do, and as they do, they cannot stop short of this. They may be

justified in this, believing, as they do, that slavery is right, and a social blessing. We cannot act otherwise than we do, believing that slavery is wrong. If it is right, we may not contract its limits. If it is wrong, they cannot ask us to extend it. Upon these different views, hinges the whole controversy. Thinking it right, they are justified in asking its protection; thinking it wrong, we cannot consent to vote for it, or to let it extend itself. If our sense of duty forbids this extension, let us do that duty. This contrivance of a middle ground is such that he who occupies it is neither a dead or a living man. Their "Union" contrivances are not for us, for they reverse the scriptural order and call the righteous, not sinners to repentance. They ask men who never had an aspiration except for the Union, to swear fealty to the Union. Let us not be slandered from our duties, or intimidated from preserving our dignity and our rights by any menace; but let us have faith that Right, Eternal Right makes might, and as we understand our duty, so do it!

Evening Press Version

Slavery is the great political question of the nation. Though all desire its settlement, it still remains the all-pervading question of the day. It has been so especially for the past six years. It is indeed older than the revolution, rising, subsiding, then rising again, till '54, since which time it has been constantly augmenting. Those who occasioned the Lecompton imbroglio now admit that they see no end to it. It had been their cry that the vexed question was just about to be settled—"the tail of this hideous creature is just going out of sight." That cry is "played out," and has ceased.

Why, when all desire to have this controversy settled, can we not settle it satisfactorily? One reason is, we want it settled in different ways. Each faction has a different plan—they pull different ways, and neither has a decided majority. In my humble opinion, the importance and magnitude of the question is underrated, even by our wisest men. If I be right, the first thing is to get a just estimate of the evil—then we can provide a cure.

One-sixth, and a little more, of the population of the United States are slaves—looked upon as property, as nothing but property. The cash value of these slaves, at a moderate estimate, is $2,000,000,000. This amount of property value has a vast influence on the minds of its owners, very naturally. The same amount of property would have an equal influence upon us if owned in the North. Human nature is the same—people at the South are the same as those at the North, barring the difference in circumstances. Public opinion is founded, to a great extent, on a property basis. What lessens the value of property is opposed, what enhances its value is favored. Public opinion at the South regards slaves as property and insists upon treating them like other property.

On the other hand, the free states carry on their government on the principle of the equality of men. We think slavery is morally wrong, and a direct violation of that principle. We all think it wrong. It is clearly proved, I think, by natural theology, apart from revelation. Every man, black, white or yellow, has a mouth to be fed and two hands with which to feed it—and that bread should be allowed to go to that mouth without controversy. (Applause.)

Slavery is wrong in its effect upon white people and free labor; it is the only thing that threatens the Union. It makes what Senator Seward has been much abused for calling an "irrepressible conflict." When they get ready to settle it, we hope they will let us know. Public opinion settles every question here—any policy to be permanent must have public opinion at the bottom—something in accordance with the philosophy of the human mind as it is. The property basis will have its weight—the love of property and a consciousness of right or wrong have conflicting places in our organization, which often make a man's course seem crooks—his conduct a riddle.

Some men would make it a question of indifference—neither right nor wrong—merely a question of

dollars and cents—the Almighty has drawn a line across the land, below which it must be cultivated by slave labor, above which by free labor. They would say: “If the question is between the white man and the negro, I am for the white man; if between the negro and the crocodile, I am for the negro.” There is a strong effort to make this policy of indifference prevail, but it can not be a durable one. A “don't care” policy won't prevail, for every body does care.

Is there a Democrat, especially one of the Douglas wing, but will declare that the Declaration of Independence has no application to the negro? It would be safe to offer a moderate premium for such a man. I have asked this question in large audiences where they were in the habit of answering right out, but no one would say otherwise. Not one of them said it five years ago. I never heard it till I heard it from the lips of Judge Douglas. True, some men boldly took the bull by the horns and said the Declaration of Independence was not true! They didn't sneak around the question. I say I heard first from Douglas that the Declaration did not apply to black men. Not a man of them said it till then—they all say it now. This is a long stride towards establishing the policy of indifference—one more such stride, I think, would do it.

The proposition that there is a struggle between the white man and the negro contains a falsehood. There is no struggle. If there was, I should be for the white man. If two men are adrift at sea on a plank which will bear up but one, the law justifies either in pushing the other off. I never had to struggle to keep a negro from enslaving me, nor did a negro ever have to fight to keep me from enslaving him. They say, between the crocodile and the negro they go for the negro. The logical proportion is therefore; as a white man is to a negro, so is a negro to a crocodile; or, as the negro may treat the crocodile, so the white man may treat the negro. The don't care policy leads just as surely to nationalising slavery as Jeff. Davis himself, but the doctrine is more dangerous because more insidious.

If the Republicans, who think slavery is wrong, get possession of the general government, we may not root out the evil at once, but may at least prevent its extension. If I find a venomous snake lying on the open praire, I seize the first stick and kill him at once. But if that snake is in bed with my children, I must be more cautious—I shall, in striking the snake, also strike the children, or arouse the reptile to bite the children. Slavery is the venomous snake in bed with the children. But if the question is whether to kill it on the prairie or put it in bed with other children, I think we'd kill it! (Cheers and laughter.)

Another illustration. When for the first time I met Mr. Clay, the other day in the cars, in front of us sat an old gentleman with an enormous wen upon his neck. Everybody would say the wen was a great evil, and would cause the man's death after a while—but you couldn't cut it out, for he'd bleed to death in a minute. But would you engraft the seeds of that wen on the necks of sound and healthy men? He must endure and be patient, hoping for possible relief. The wen represents slavery on the neck of this country. This only applies to those who think slavery is wrong. Those who think it right would consider the snake a jewel, and the wen an ornament.

We want those (democrats) who think slavery wrong to quit voting with those who think it right. They don't treat it as they do other wrongs—they won't oppose it in the free states for it isn't there, nor in the slave states for it is there; don't want it in politics, for it makes agitation; not in the pulpit, for it isn't religion; not in a Tract Society, for it makes a fuss—there is no place for its discussion. Are they quite consistent in this?

If those democrats really think slavery wrong they will be much pleased when earnest men in the slave states take up a plan of gradual emancipation and go to work energetically and very kindly to get rid of the evil. Now let us test them. Frank Blair tried it; and he ran for Congress in '58, and got beaten. Did the democracy feel bad about it? I reckon not—I guess you all flung up your hats and shouted “Hurrah for the Democracy!” (Laughter—three cheers for Blair and three for Clay.)

He went on to speak of the manner in which slavery was treated by the Constitution. The word “slave” is no where used; the supply of slaves was to be prohibited after 1808; they stopped the spread of it in the territories; seven of the states abolished it. He argued very conclusively that it was then regarded as an

evil which would eventually be got rid of, and that they desired, once rid of it, to have nothing in the constitution to remind them of it. The Republicans go back to first principles and deal with it as a wrong. Mason,[2] of Va., said openly that the framers of our government were anti-slavery. Hammond[3] of S. C., said “Washington set this evil example.” Bully Brooks[4] said: “At the time the Constitution was formed, no one supposed slavery would last till now.” We stick to the policy of our fathers.

The Democracy are given to “bushwhacking.” After having their errors and mis-statements continually thrust in their faces, they pay no heed, but go on howling about Seward and the “irrepressible conflict.” That is “bushwhacking.” So with John Brown and Harper's Ferry. They charge it upon the Republican party and ignominiously fail in all attempts to substantiate the charge. Yet they go on with their bushwhacking, the pack in full cry after John Brown.

The democrats had just been whipped in Ohio and Pennsylvania, and seized upon the unfortunate Harper's Ferry affair to influence other elections then pending. They said to each other, “Jump in—now's your chance;” and were sorry there were not more killed. But they didn't succeed well. Let them go on with their howling. They will succeed when by slandering women you get them to love you, and by slandering men you get them to vote for you. (Great applause.)

Mr. Lincoln then took up the Massachusetts shoemakers' strike, treating it in a humorous and philosophical manner, and exposing to ridicule the foolish pretence of Senator Douglas—that the strike arose from “this unfortunate sectional warfare.” Mr. Lincoln thanked God that we have a system of labor where there can be a strike. Whatever the pressure, there is a point where the workman may stop. (Applause and cheers for free labor.)

He didn't pretend to be familiar with the subject of the shoe strike—probably knew as little about it as Senator Douglas himself. This strike has occurred as the Senator says, or it has not. Shall we stop making war upon the South? We never have made war upon them. If any one has, [he] better go and hang himself and save Virginia the trouble. If you give up your convictions and call slavery right as they do, you let slavery in upon you—instead of white laborers who can strike, you'll soon have black laborers who can't strike.

I have heard that in consequence of this “sectional warfare,” as Douglas calls it, Senator Mason of Va., had appeared in a suit of homespun. Now up in New Hampshire, the woolen and cotton mills are all busy, and there is no strike—they are busy making the very goods Senator Mason has quit buying! To carry out his idea, he ought to go barefoot! If that's the plan, they should begin at the foundation, and adopt the well-known “Georgia costume” of a shirt-collar and pair of spurs! (“Irrepressible” laughter and applause.) It reminded him of the man who had a poor old lean, bony, spavined horse, with swelled legs. He was asked what he was going to do with such a miserable beast—the poor creature would die. “Do?” said he. “I'm going to fat him up; don't you see that I have got him seal fat as high as the knees?” (Roars of laughter.) Well, they've got the Union dissolved up to the ankle, but no farther! (Applause and laughter.)

All portions of this confederacy should act in harmony and with careful deliberation. The democrats cry John Brown invasion. We are guiltless of it, but our denial does not satisfy them. Nothing will satisfy them but disinfecting the atmosphere entirely of all opposition to slavery. They have not demanded of us to yield the guards of liberty in our state constitutions, but it will naturally come to that after a while. If we give up to them, we cannot refuse even their utmost request. If slavery is right, it ought to be extended; if not, it ought to be restricted—there is no middle ground. Wrong as we think it, we can afford to let it alone where it of necessity now exists; but we cannot afford to extend it into free territory and around our own homes. Let us stand against it!

The “Union” arrangements are all a humbug—they reverse the scriptural order, calling the righteous and not sinners to repentance. Let us not be slandered or intimidated to turn from our duty. Eternal right makes might—as we understand our duty, let us do it!

[1] Hartford Daily Courant, March 6, 1860; Hartford Evening Press, March 6, 1860. Both versions are reproduced. Neither is clearly superior to the other as a whole, and each contains passages not in the other. An attempt to collate the two versions proved to be so unwieldy and saved so little space that it has been abandoned in favor of reproduction of both sources. Typographical errors have been corrected by the editors, but the reports are otherwise unchanged.

[2] James M. Mason.

[3] James H. Hammond.

[4] Preston S. Brooks.

Return to top of page.
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