

WILLIAM HENRY SEWARD

WILLIAM HENRY SEWARD, a distinguished American statesman, was born at Florida, N. Y., May 16, 1801, and died at Auburn, N. Y., Oct. 10, 1872. Educated at Union College, Schenectady, and pursuing the study of law, he was admitted to the Bar in 1822, and the next year began practice at Auburn, N. Y. He came to the fore as a politician a year or two later, and for the remainder of his career occupied an eminent niche in the halls of State and national fame. He entered the State senate in 1830, and though defeated for Governor in 1834 was elected by the Whig party in 1837, and again in 1840. Seward was called to the Senate of the United States in 1849, and in a congressional speech in March of that year, on the admission of California, declared that the exclusion of slavery from all new States was demanded by "the higher law," an utterance which the Southern senators promptly dubbed "treason." He was subsequently reelected to the Senate, and continued to be an active opponent of slavery. At a speech delivered in 1858, at Rochester, N. Y., he affirmed that the slavery question offered for consideration "an irrepressible conflict," a characterization at once caught up and quoted far and wide. During the administrations of Lincoln and Johnson, he was Secretary of State. When President Lincoln was assassinated, an attempt was also made to assassinate Seward; he was severely wounded by an accomplice of John Wilkes Booth, but recovered after a tedious illness. After leaving the Cabinet in 1869, he made a memorable tour round the world. Besides many speeches published singly, he was the author of a "Diplomatic History of the War for the Union" (1884); a "Life of John Quincy Adams" (1849); and "Travels Around the World" (1873). His "Complete Works," by G. E. Baker, in five volumes, were issued in 1884. See "Life," by F. W. Seward (1891), and Welles's "Lincoln and Seward." The appended address is one of the notable efforts of this patriotic and highly cultured statesman:

ON THE IRREPRESSIBLE CONFLICT

SPEECH DELIVERED AT ROCHESTER, N. Y., OCTOBER 25, 1858

THE unmistakable outbreaks of zeal which occur all around me show that you are earnest men—and such a man am I. Let us, therefore, at least for a time pass all secondary and collateral questions, whether of a personal or of a general nature, and consider the main subject of the present canvass. The Democratic party—or, to speak more accurately, the party which wears that attractive name—is in possession of the federal government. The Repub-

(458)

licans propose to dislodge that party and dismiss it from its high trust.

The main subject, then, is, whether the Democratic party deserves to retain the confidence of the American people. In attempting to prove it unworthy, I think that I am not actuated by prejudices against that party, or by prepossessions in favor of its adversary; for I have learned by some experience that virtue and patriotism, vice and selfishness, are found in all parties, and that they differ less in their motives than in the policies they pursue.

Our country is a theatre which exhibits in full operation two radically different political systems; the one resting on the basis of servile or slave labor, the other on the basis of voluntary labor of freemen.

The laborers who are enslaved are all negroes, or persons more or less purely of African derivation. But this is only accidental. The principle of the system is, that labor in every society, by whomsoever performed, is necessarily unintellectual, grovelling, and base; and that the laborer, equally for his own good and for the welfare of the State, ought to be enslaved. The white laboring man, whether native or foreigner, is not enslaved, only because he cannot as yet be reduced to bondage.

You need not be told now that the slave system is the older of the two and that once it was universal. The emancipation of our own ancestors, Caucasians and Europeans as they were, hardly dates beyond a period of five hundred years. The great melioration of human society which modern times exhibit is mainly due to the incomplete substitution of the system of voluntary labor for the old one of servile labor, which has already taken place. This African slave system is one which, in its origin and in its growth, has been alto-

gether foreign from the habits of the races which colonized these States and established civilization here. It was introduced on this new continent as an engine of conquest and for the establishment of monarchical power by the Portuguese and the Spaniards, and was rapidly extended by them all over South America, Central America, Louisiana, and Mexico. Its legitimate fruits are seen in the poverty, imbecility, and anarchy which now pervade all Portuguese and Spanish America. The free-labor system is of German extraction, and it was established in our country by emigrants from Sweden, Holland, Germany, Great Britain, and Ireland. We justly ascribe to its influences the strength, wealth, greatness, intelligence, and freedom which the whole American people now enjoy. One of the chief elements of the value of human life is freedom in the pursuit of happiness. The slave system is not only intolerable, unjust, and inhuman towards the laborer, whom, only because he is a laborer, it loads down with chains and converts into merchandise; but is scarcely less severe upon the freeman, to whom, only because he is a laborer from necessity, it denies facilities for employment, and whom it expels from the community because it cannot enslave and convert him into merchandise also. It is necessarily improvident and ruinous, because, as a general truth, communities prosper and flourish, or droop and decline, in just the degree that they practise or neglect to practise the primary duties of justice and humanity. The free-labor system conforms to the divine law of equality which is written in the hearts and consciences of men, and therefore is always and everywhere beneficent.

The slave system is one of constant danger, distrust, suspicion, and watchfulness. It debases those whose toil alone can produce wealth and resources for defence to the lowest

degree of which human nature is capable, to guard against mutiny and insurrection, and thus wastes energies which otherwise might be employed in national development and aggrandizement.

The free-labor system educates all alike, and by opening all the fields of industrial employment and all the departments of authority to the unchecked and equal rivalry of all classes of men at once secures universal contentment and brings into the highest possible activity all the physical, moral, and social energies of the whole State. In States where the slave system prevails the masters, directly or indirectly, secure all political power and constitute a ruling aristocracy. In States where the free-labor system prevails universal suffrage necessarily obtains and the State inevitably becomes, sooner or later, a republic or democracy.

Russia yet maintains slavery and is a despotism. Most of the other European States have abolished slavery and adopted the system of free labor. It was the antagonistic political tendencies of the two systems which the first Napoleon was contemplating when he predicted that Europe would ultimately be either all Cossack or all republican. Never did human sagacity utter a more pregnant truth. The two systems are at once perceived to be incongruous. But they are more than incongruous—they are incompatible. They never have permanently existed together in one country and they never can. It would be easy to demonstrate this impossibility from the irreconcilable contrast between their great principles and characteristics. But the experience of mankind has conclusively established it. Slavery, as I have already intimated, existed in every State in Europe. Free labor has supplanted it everywhere except in Russia and Turkey. State necessities developed in modern times are now obliging

even those two nations to encourage and employ free labor; and already, despotic as they are, we find them engaged in abolishing slavery. In the United States slavery came into collision with free labor at the close of the last century, and fell before it in New England, New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania, but triumphed over it effectually, and excluded it for a period yet undetermined, from Virginia, the Carolinas, and Georgia. Indeed, so incompatible are the two systems that every new State which is organized within our ever-extending domain makes its first political act a choice of the one and the exclusion of the other, even at the cost of civil war if necessary. The slave States, without law, at the last national election successfully forbade, within their own limits, even the casting of votes for a candidate for president of the United States supposed to be favorable to the establishment of the free-labor system in new States.

Hitherto the two systems have existed in different States, but side by side within the American Union. This has happened because the Union is a confederation of States. But in another aspect the United States constitute only one nation. Increase of population, which is filling the States out to their very borders, together with a new and extended network of railroads and other avenues, and an internal commerce which daily becomes more intimate, is rapidly bringing the States into a higher and more perfect social unity or consolidation. Thus, these antagonistic systems are continually coming into closer contact and collision results.

Shall I tell you what this collision means? They who think that it is accidental, unnecessary, the work of interested or fanatical agitators, and therefore ephemeral, mistake the case altogether. It is an irrepressible conflict between opposing and enduring forces, and it means that the United

States must and will, sooner or later, become either entirely a slave-holding nation or entirely a free-labor nation. Either the cotton and rice fields of South Carolina and the sugar plantations of Louisiana will ultimately be tilled by free labor, and Charleston and New Orleans become marts for legitimate merchandise alone, or else the rye-fields and wheat-fields of Massachusetts and New York must again be surrendered by their farmers to slave culture and to the production of slaves, and Boston and New York become once more markets for trade in the bodies and souls of men. It is the failure to apprehend this great truth that induces so many unsuccessful attempts at final compromise between the slave and free States, and it is the existence of this great fact that renders all such pretended compromises, when made, vain and ephemeral. Startling as this saying may appear to you, fellow citizens, it is by no means an original or even a modern one. Our forefathers knew it to be true, and unanimously acted upon it when they framed the constitution of the United States. They regarded the existence of the servile system in so many of the States with sorrow and shame, which they openly confessed, and they looked upon the collision between them, which was then just revealing itself, and which we are now accustomed to deplore, with favor and hope. They knew that either the one or the other system must exclusively prevail.

Unlike too many of those who in modern time invoke their authority, they had a choice between the two. They preferred the system of free labor, and they determined to organize the government, and so to direct its activity that that system should surely and certainly prevail. For this purpose, and no other, they based the whole structure of government broadly on the principle that all men are created equal,

and therefore free—little dreaming that within the short period of one hundred years their descendants would bear to be told by any orator, however popular, that the utterance of that principle was merely a rhetorical rhapsody; or by any judge, however venerated, that it was attended by mental reservations, which rendered it hypocritical and false. By the Ordinance of 1787 they dedicated all of the national domain not yet polluted by slavery to free labor immediately, thenceforth, and forever; while by the new constitution and laws they invited foreign free labor from all lands under the sun, and interdicted the importation of African slave labor, at all times, in all places, and under all circumstances whatsoever. It is true that they necessarily and wisely modified this policy of freedom by leaving it to the several States, affected as they were by differing circumstances, to abolish slavery in their own way and at their own pleasure, instead of confiding that duty to Congress; and that they secured to the slave States, while yet retaining the system of slavery, a three fifths representation of slaves in the federal government, until they should find themselves able to relinquish it with safety. But the very nature of these modifications fortifies my position, that the fathers knew that the two systems could not endure within the Union, and expected that within a short period slavery would disappear forever. Moreover, in order that these modifications might not altogether defeat their grand design of a republic maintaining universal equality, they provided that two thirds of the States might amend the constitution.

It remains to say on this point only one word, to guard against misapprehension. If these States are to again become universally slave-holding, I do not pretend to say with what violations of the constitution that end shall be accom-

plished. On the other hand, while I do confidently believe and hope that my country will yet become a land of universal freedom, I do not expect that it will be made so otherwise than through the action of the several States co-operating with the federal government, and all acting in strict conformity with their respective constitutions.

The strife and contentions concerning slavery, which gently disposed persons so habitually deprecate, are nothing more than the ripening of the conflict which the fathers themselves not only thus regarded with favor, but which they may be said to have instituted.

It is not to be denied, however, that thus far the course of that contest has not been according to their humane anticipations and wishes. In the field of federal politics, slavery—deriving unlooked-for advantages from commercial changes, and energies unforeseen from the facilities of combination between members of the slave-holding class and between that class and other property classes—early rallied, and has at length made a stand, not merely to retain its original defensive position, but to extend its sway throughout the whole Union. It is certain that the slave-holding class of American citizens indulge this high ambition, and that they derive encouragement for it from the rapid and effective political successes which they have already obtained. The plan of operation is this: By continued appliances of patronage and threats of disunion, they will keep a majority favorable to these designs in the Senate, where each State has equal representation. Through that majority they will defeat, as they best can, the admission of free States and secure the admission of slave States. Under the protection of the judiciary they will, on the principle of the Dred Scott case, carry slavery into all the territories of the United States now existing

and hereafter to be organized. By the action of the President and the Senate, using the treaty-making power, they will annex foreign slave-holding States. In a favorable conjuncture they will induce Congress to repeal the Act of 1808, which prohibits the foreign slave-trade, and so they will import from Africa at the cost of only twenty dollars a head, slaves enough to fill up the interior of the continent. Thus relatively increasing the number of slave States, they will allow no amendment to the constitution prejudicial to their interest; and so, having permanently established their power, they expect the federal judiciary to nullify all State laws which shall interfere with internal or foreign commerce in slaves. When the free States shall be sufficiently demoralized to tolerate these designs, they reasonably conclude that slavery will be accepted by those States themselves. I shall not stop to show how speedy or how complete would be the ruin which the accomplishment of these slave-holding schemes would bring upon the country. For one, I should not remain in the country to test the sad experiment. Having spent my manhood, though not my whole life, in a free State, no aristocracy of any kind, much less an aristocracy of slave-holders, shall ever make the laws of the land in which I shall be content to live. Having seen the society around me universally engaged in agriculture, manufactures, and trade, which were innocent and beneficent, I shall never be a denizen of a State where men and women are reared as cattle and bought and sold as merchandise. When that evil day shall come and all further effort at resistance shall be impossible, then, if there be no better hope of redemption than I can now foresee, I shall say with Franklin, while looking abroad over the whole earth for a new and more congenial home, "Where liberty dwells, there is my country."

You will tell me that these fears are extravagant and chimerical. I answer, they are so; but they are so only because the designs of the slave-holders must and can be defeated. But it is only the possibility of defeat that renders them so. They cannot be defeated by inactivity. There is no escape from them compatible with non-resistance. How, then, and in what way shall the necessary resistance be made? There is only one way. The Democratic party must be permanently dislodged from the government. The reason is, that the Democratic party is inextricably committed to the designs of the slave-holders, which I have described. Let me be well understood. I do not charge that the Democratic candidates for public office now before the people are pledged to—much less that the Democratic masses who support them really adopt—those atrocious and dangerous designs. Candidates may, and generally do, mean to act justly, wisely, and patriotically when they shall be elected; but they become the ministers and servants, not the dictators, of the power which elects them. The policy which a party shall pursue at a future period is only gradually developed, depending on the occurrence of events never fully foreknown. The motives of men, whether acting as electors or in any other capacity, are generally pure. Nevertheless, it is not more true that "hell is paved with good intentions" than it is that earth is covered with wrecks resulting from innocent and amiable motives.

The very constitution of the Democratic party commits it to execute all the designs of the slave-holders, whatever they may be. It is not a party of the whole Union—of all the free States and of all the slave States; nor yet is it a party of the free States in the North and in the Northwest; but it is a sectional and local party, having practically its seat

within the slave States and counting its constituency chiefly and almost exclusively there. Of all its representatives in Congress and in the electoral colleges, two thirds uniformly come from these States. Its great element of strength lies in the vote of the slave-holders, augmented by the representation of three fifths of the slaves. Deprive the Democratic party of this strength and it would be a helpless and hopeless minority, incapable of continued organization. The Democratic party, being thus local and sectional, acquires new strength from the admission of every new slave State and loses relatively by the admission of every new free State into the Union.

A party is in one sense a joint stock association, in which those who contribute most direct the action and management of the concern. The slave-holders contributing in an overwhelming proportion to the capital strength of the Democratic party, they necessarily dictate and prescribe its policy. The inevitable caucus system enables them to do so with a show of fairness and justice. If it were possible to conceive for a moment that the Democratic party should disobey the behests of the slave-holders, we should then see a withdrawal of the slave-holders, which would leave the party to perish. The portion of the party which is found in the free States is a mere appendage, convenient to modify its sectional character without impairing its sectional constitution, and is less effective in regulating its movement than the nebulous tail of the comet is in determining the appointed, though apparently eccentric, course of the fiery sphere from which it emanates.

To expect the Democratic party to resist slavery and favor freedom is as unreasonable as to look for Protestant missionaries to the Catholic Propaganda of Rome. The his-

tory of the Democratic party commits it to the policy of slavery. It has been the Democratic party, and no other agency, which has carried that policy up to its present alarming culmination. Without stopping to ascertain critically the origin of the present Democratic party, we may concede its claim to date from the era of good feeling which occurred under the administration of President Monroe. At that time, in this State, and about that time in many others of the free States, the Democratic party deliberately disfranchised the free colored or African citizen, and it has pertinaciously continued this disfranchisement ever since. This was an effective aid to slavery; for, while the slave-holder votes for his slaves against freedom, the freed slave in the free States is prohibited from voting against slavery.

In 1824 the Democracy resisted the election of John Quincy Adams—himself before that time an acceptable Democrat—and in 1828 it expelled him from the presidency and put a slave-holder in his place, although the office had been filled by slave-holders thirty-two out of forty years.

In 1836 Martin Van Buren—the first non-slave-holding citizen of a free State to whose election the Democratic party ever consented—signalized his inauguration into the Presidency by a gratuitous announcement that under no circumstances would he ever approve a bill for the abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia. From 1838 to 1844 the subject of abolishing slavery in the District of Columbia and in the national dock-yards and arsenals was brought before Congress by repeated popular appeals. The Democratic party thereupon promptly denied the right of petition and effectually suppressed the freedom of speech in Congress as far as the institution of slavery was concerned.

From 1840 to 1843 good and wise men counselled that