

Chapter 267 - The Select Congressional Committees Fail To Find A Compromise

Time: December 28, 1860

Buchanan Stalls For Time And The “Crittenden Compromise” Stalls Out Completely

News of South Carolina’s seizure of the secondary forts arrives in DC on the morning of December 28, along with the three envoys Pickens has chosen arrive to confer with Buchanan as “private gentlemen,” not officials of a foreign nation. He ducks the meeting, telling them:

You are pressuring me too importunately. You don’t give me time to consider, you don’t give me time to say my prayers. I always say my prayers when required to act upon any great State affair.

That same day the prestigious Senate “Committee of 13” meets for a fourth and final working session.

Several variations on Crittenden’s Compromise framework and wording are debated, but is soon becomes clear that an impasse has been reached.

Georgia Senator Robert Toombs makes a final motion:

Resolved, that this Committee has not been able to agree upon any plan of general adjustment and (will) report that fact to the Senate, together with the journal of the Committee, and ask to be discharged.

No one is more dismayed by this outcome than Kentucky Senator John J. Crittenden.

He is convinced that the Republicans still fail to understand that the South is not bluffing and that disunion and civil war will follow unless a compromise is found in time. He also believes that a national referendum would demonstrate support for his six amendment plan. If only party politics weren’t in the way.

(Republicans) are disposed to believe that the threatening appearances in the South will pass away...I firmly believe that a great majority of the people would accept my plan of settlement, but its fate must be decided here and by a party vote...God help us! I mean still to struggle for peace & union.”

Time: December 29, 1860

The “Henry Winter Davis Compromise” Fails To Gain Southern Support In The House

Given the events in South Carolina and the collapse of negotiations in the Senate, the only congressional proposal left standing on December 29 is the “Henry Winter Davis Compromise” in the House.

In addition to a Constitutional amendment to permanently protect slavery in states where it currently exists, it would provide a framework for dealing with all of the “territorial land” in the west still controlled by the federal government.

The answer being to extend a 36’30” line through all of the western land, create one mega-state to the South labeled New Mexico, and then have settlers there vote on a Slave State or Free State designation.

The proposal appears to be bi-partisan in nature, with Davis a Democrat from the Slave State of Maryland joined by Charles Francis Adams a Republican from the Free State of Maryland. Although both men are known as outspoken opponents of slavery.

On December 29, 1860, members of the Committee of 33 approve the Davis Bill by a narrow 12-10 margin, and Chairman Thomas Corwin commits to taking it to the full House in January, 1861.

The vote, however, is misleading since only one Southern member casts a ballot while the other fourteen simply drop out. This assures an eventual loss in the full Congress.

Time: December 31, 1860

The Year Ends With A Growing Sense of Doom

As 1860 comes to a close, President Buchanan is not alone in feeling like events are spinning out of control around him.

On December 29, he decides to shift his Postmaster General, the fiercely pro-Union Kentuckian, Joseph Holt, into the War Secretary slot vacated by John Floyd, and replace him with his assistant, Horatio King.

King expresses his fears for the capital city itself.

I feel as though we are on the verge of civil war, and I should not be surprised if this city is under the military control of the disunionists in less than one month!

Several Republicans go even farther. Maine Senator, William Fessenden, says that Buchanan...

Is frightened out of his wits and in the hands of traitors. It is rumored that Mr. Lincoln's inauguration is to be prevented by force, though I can hardly believe the secessionists are so mad as to attempt it."

Henry Seward tells Lincoln:

The cabinet is again in danger of explosion...The plot is forming to seize the capital and usurp the Government, and it has abettors near the President. I am writing you not from rumors, but knowledge.

With General Winfield Scott breathing down his neck to immediately send 250 troops to Sumter and strengthen the defenses in Washington, Buchanan turns to Jeremiah Black now serving at State to formulate a response to the South Carolina envoys.

Black calls Major Anderson a "gallant and meritorious officer...(who) has saved the country...when its day was darkest and its peril most extreme." This finally stiffens the President's spine, as reflected in the reply to South Carolina he drafts on their demand to withdraw from the forts:

This I cannot do; this I will not do. Such an idea was never thought of by me in any possible contingency.

So ends 1860 with South Carolina having seceded and occupying the secondary forts in Charleston; an undermanned federal force under Major Anderson hunkered down at Sumter; a Congress unable to find a viable compromise; and a sober nation pondering whether it wants to fight a bloody civil war over expanding slavery in the west.