

Chapter 147 - Moderate Southern Whigs Stage A Rebellion In The House

Time: December 1849

The South’s Political Power In Washington Is Steadily Declining

As John C. Calhoun has pointing out for years, the South is losing its grip on power in Washington.

In the U.S. House, the number of seats held by the “Slave States” has fallen below the 40% mark.

Membership In The House Of Representatives

Year	From Slave States	From Free State	Total	% Slave State
1800	65	77	142	46%
1810	81	105	186	44
1820	90	123	213	42
1830	100	142	242	41
1840	91	141	232	39
1850	90	143	233	38

And in the Senate, the simple admission of California would result in 16 Free States vs. 15 Slave State, thus ending the effective power to stop any legislation coming from the House.

Balance Of Free Vs. Slave States As Of 1849 When California Applies

South – Slave (11)	Border – Slave (4)	North – Free (9)	West – Free (6)
1788 South Carolina	1787 Delaware	1787 Pennsylvania	1803 Ohio
1788 Georgia	1788 Maryland	1787 New Jersey	1816 Indiana
1788 Virginia	1792 Kentucky	1788 Connecticut	1818 Illinois
1789 North Carolina	1821 Missouri-23	1788 Massachusetts	1837 Michigan-26
1796 Tennessee		1788 New Hampshire	1846 Iowa-29
1812 Louisiana		1788 New York	1848 Wisconsin-30
1817 Mississippi		1790 Rhode Island	
1819 Alabama		1791 Vermont	
1836 Arkansas-25		1821 Maine -24	
1845 Florida-27			
1845 Texas-28			

Were California admitted as a Free State, it would be the first time for the South to “go first” – reversing the prior pattern whereby any Senate imbalances initially favors the South. Thus Slave Missouri in 1820 precedes Free Maine in 1821; Slave Arkansas in 1836 leads Free Michigan in 1837; and the two Slave States of Florida and Texas join before Free Iowa and Wisconsin.

Even more troubling is the absence of any clear Slave State addition to offset Free State California.

At the Executive level, victories by Harrison (1840) and Taylor (1848) also show that the Democrats can no longer guarantee a President who is reliably pro-South and pro-slavery.

Beyond Washington, two other threats to Southern slavery are looming larger.

The first is the “Free Soil” movement, spawned by Wilmot, and standing in opposition to the presence of all blacks in the new territories.

Second is the American Anti-Slavery Society, now some 2,000 chapters and 150,000 members strong since its 1833 inception, and flooding the North and West with its traveling lecturers, pamphlets, newspapers, and petition drives.

Taken together, even the strongly pro-Union Southern Whigs are sufficiently alarmed to signal their resistance

Time: December 1849

Moderate Southern Whigs Block The Election Of A House Speaker To Flex Their Muscles



Robert Toombs (1810-1885)

Howell Cobb (1815-1868)

The leader of this new Southern resistance within the Whig Party is Robert Toombs of Georgia, who has long opposed Calhoun's inflammatory warnings, and, together with Alexander Stephens, has been a voice of moderation in the House.

Earlier in 1849, Toombs becomes aware of Taylor's comments about prohibiting slavery in the west, but chooses to downplay them as a momentary error soon to be corrected.

General Taylor is in a new position, His duties and responsibilities are vast and complicated, and besides he is among strangers whose aims and objects are not known to him. Therefore, that he should commit mistakes, even grave errors, must be expected. But I have an abiding confidence that he is honest and sincere, and will repair them when seen.

But Taylor's position on the admission of California pushes Toombs over the edge.

To dramatize his outrage, he decides to interfere in the election of the House Speaker. The incumbent is his fellow Whig, Robert Winthrop of Massachusetts, who stands a good chance of repeating given that the Democrats, now back in the majority, already face regional divisions.

Toombs begins by making his demands on slavery clear:

Congress ought not to put any restrictions upon any state institutions in the territories and ought not to abolish slavery in the District of Columbia.

In a fiery speech on December 1, 1848 he goes further, threatening Disunion if slavery is banned in the new territories "purchased by common blood."

I have as much attachment to the Union of these States, under the Constitution of our fathers, as any freeman ought to have. I am ready to concede and sacrifice for it whatever a just and honorable man ought to sacrifice....I do not then hesitate to avow before this House and the country, and in the presence of the living God, that if by your legislation you seek to drive us from the Territories purchased by the common blood and treasure of the people, and to abolish slavery in the District, thereby attempting to fix a national degradation upon half the States of this confederacy, I am for Disunion, and if my physical courage be equal to the maintenance of my convictions of right and duty I will devote all I am and all I have on earth to its consummation.

This speech signals an important sea change among the moderates.

Toombs in particular is noted for his genial manner and long-standing opposition to all inflammatory rhetoric. He has also opposed Polk's initial advance to the Rio Grande and, like Stephens and Crittenden, enjoys a reputation as a fierce supporter of the Union.

But on this issue, Toombs exhibits the unbending determination that will later make him a founder of the Confederacy, its first Secretary of State, and later a field general in its army.

Ballot after ballot, his coalition blocks resolution on the speakership, even for a host of compromise candidates – from Whig Edward Stanly to Democrats W.J. Brown and Linn Boyd.

Finally a frustrated bipartisan group proposes a change in the House rules whereby a Speaker could be elected with a plurality of the votes rather than a majority. On December 22, the 63rd ballot hands the Speakership to a Democrat, Howell Cobb, with a 46% plurality.

The choice is actually a victory for Toombs since Cobb is a close friend, a fellow Georgian, and a supporter of expanding slavery into the West.

Ballots For Speaker Of The House: December 1849

Candidates			#1	#30	#38	#47	#59	#60	#63
Howell Cobb	Georgia	Dem	103	5		1	2	95	102
Robert Winthrop	Mass	Whig	96	102	100	10	13	90	99
Linn Boyd	Ky	Dem		4	1	86	28	3	1
W.J. Brown	Indiana	Dem		2	109				
Emery Potter	Ohio	Dem		77		18	1	3	1
Edward Stanly	N.C.	Whig				66	75		
John McClernand	IL	Dem					50		
David Wilmot	PA	FS	8	6	6		7	9	8
All-Others			14	28	9	44	40	17	10
Total			221	224	225	225		217	221

The voting in the House does not go unnoticed by Henry Clay – an ex-Speaker himself and still patriarch of the Whig Party he founded two decades ago.

It convinces him that Southern moderate Whigs like Toombs and Stephens are on the verge of joining their more radical Democratic colleagues like Calhoun and Yancey in fighting for the expansion of slavery.