

Chapter 286– A New Constitutional Union Party Holds Its Convention



Dates:
May 9, 1860

- Sections:**
- Many Senior Public Figures Fear The Loss Of The Union
 - The Delegates Pass A Platform Designed To Alienate No One
 - Bell And Everett Chosen To Head The Ticket

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Many Senior Public Figures Fear The Loss Of The Union



John Bell (1796 – 1869)

One week after the Democrats recess in Charleston, the new Constitutional Union Party holds its first and only convention in Baltimore. The prime mover behind the event is Kentucky Senator, John J. Crittenden, and the venue is the Eastside District Courthouse. Roughly 250 delegates from 23 states show up for a tightly choreographed session completed in a single day.

What draws the attendees together is a shared fear that the Union of States is about to collapse over the controversies surrounding slavery in the territories. All present agree this must not happen.

Their antidotes lie in rallying emotional support among the public for the “grand old flag” and persuading their fellow politicians to abandon harsh rhetoric and embrace “forbearance, concession and conciliation.”

The leadership of the Constitutional Union Party includes many nationally recognized figures whose service includes the military, the nation’s leading universities, the clergy, as well as the legislative and judicial branches of government. Their home states run from Massachusetts to Texas, albeit concentrated in the upper south, from Virginia and North Carolina through Kentucky and Tennessee. Several are slave owners, but without insisting that the institution be expanded to the territories.

Many are former Whigs, whose political roots trace back to Henry Clay and Presidents Zachary Taylor and Millard Fillmore. After the demise of their party in 1852, some shift to the now defunct American Party. None seem comfortable with the new Republican alternative, whose policies on slavery seem likely

to provoke disunion. A few former Democrats are also in the mix, troubled by the growing divisiveness of its overtly Southern stances.

Another characteristic of this group is their advanced age. Many have been born before the turn of the century and several have fought in the War of 1812. Together they have a shared memory of the early days of the Union, when its very survival remained in doubt.

One man in particular has become the spokesman for the birth of the nation. He is Edward Everett, America's leading lecturer at the time, who tours the country with a stirring, fully memorized, speech about George Washington and the Revolutionary War era – delivered in the name of raising funds to acquire and preserve the Mt. Vernon estate.

In 1851, Everett publishes his compendium on Daniel Webster, including a famous line that captures the spirit of the movement he now joins:

I was born an American; I will live an American; I shall die an American!

Profiles Of Several Constitutional Union Party Leaders

	State	Age	Party History	History
John Bell	TN	64	Jacksonian then a Whig, American & Constitutional Union	House '27-41, Speaker '34, Sec of War '41, Senate '47-59, opposes KN Act, Comm on Territories, owns slaves but opposes expansion and secession, but finally goes with CSA.
John Minor Botts	Va	57	Whig, American, Constit. Union	Planter and slave owner, House '39-43 & '47-49, opposes extension of slavery & Kansas admission as slave state and Virginia secession, ferocious Unionist.
John Crittenden	Ky	72	Whig, American, Constit. Union	War of 1812, Senate '17-19, '35-48, US Atty General '41, opposes Texas annexation, Mexican War, Taylor campaign mgr & AG '50-53, opposes KN Act and Lecompton, Senate '55-61, fails to support Lincoln for Senate, deflects runs for President, House '61-63, last will shows he was a slaveholder.
Edward Everett	Mass	64	Cotton Whig & Constit. Union	Harvard president and Unitarian minister, House '25-35, Mass Gov '36-40, Amb to UK '41-45, Sec of State '52-53, Senator '53-54, Committee on Territories, famous national lecturer.
William Graham	NC	55	Whig & Constit. Union	Planter family, owns slaves & supports practice, but fears for Union, Senate '40-43, NC Governor '45-49, Sec of Navy '50-52, Whig VP nominee in '52 to reassure South, opposes secession, but eventually a CSA Senator in war
Sam Houston	TN/TX	67	Democrat, Union, Constit. Union	War of 1812 (w), House '23-27, Tenn Governor '27-29, commands Texian

				army, win at San Jacinto, Republic of Texas President '36-38, '41-44, Senate '46-59, slave owner, but opposes KN Act & against expansion, Governor of Texas '59-61
John McLean	Ohio	75	Democrat, Anti-Mason, Whig, Free Soil & Republican	House '13-16, Postmaster General '23-29, Supreme Court Associate Justice '29-61, declines Tyler offer as Sec of War, anti-slavery, dissenter in <i>Prigg v Pa</i> (fugitive slave case) & <i>Dred Scott</i> .
William Rives	Va.	67	Democrat, Whig	Planter family, T Jefferson protégé, House '23-29, Minister to France '29-33, Senate '32-34, candidate for Dem VP but falls short, Senate '36-39, '41-45, switch to Whigs in '44, Minister to France '49-53, opposes secession but then goes with Va into CSA.

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The Delegates Pass A Platform Designed To Alienate No One

Members of the Constitutional Union Party are well aware that they have no chance of winning enough popular votes in the 1860 presidential election to defeat the Democrat and Republican nominees.

Instead their strategy lies in denying both the Electoral College majority required to win outright, and thus throw the election back into the House. Once there, they foresee a prolonged stalemate ending with a compromise candidate in the form of their own nominee.

To preserve this middle ground position for their candidate, the delegates approve a two paragraph platform that avoids any fixed position on the issue of slavery in the territories – and instead promises loyalty to time honored principles of the Constitution and all measures to insure domestic tranquility and preserve the Union. Here it stands in its entirety:

Whereas, Experience has demonstrated that Platforms adopted by the partisan Conventions of the country have had the effect to mislead and deceive the people, and at the same time to widen the political divisions of the country, by the creation and encouragement of geographical and sectional parties; therefore

Resolved, that it is both the part of patriotism and of duty to recognize no political principle other than THE CONSTITUTION OF THE COUNTRY, THE UNION OF THE STATES, AND THE ENFORCEMENT OF THE LAWS, and that, as representatives of the Constitutional Union men of the country, in National Convention assembled, we hereby pledge ourselves to maintain, protect, and defend, separately and unitedly, these great principles of public liberty and national safety, against all enemies, at home and abroad; believing that thereby peace may once more be restored to the country; the rights of the People and of the States re-established, and the Government again placed in that condition of justice, fraternity and equality, which, under the example and Constitution of our fathers, has solemnly bound every citizen of the United States to

maintain a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquillity, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity.

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Bell And Everett Chosen To Head The Ticket

The final task for the delegates lies in selecting their nominees for the top of their ticket.

Enthusiasm runs highest for John Crittenden, but, as in the past, he continues to opt out of a run for the presidency.

The next most popular choice is Edward Everett, but his Massachusetts' roots fail to correspond to the party's upper southern demographics.

Almost by default this leaves John Bell in the spotlight. His colleagues consider his manner to be aloof and formal, hardly the stuff of an inspirational leader. But he has steered a middle course in government, mustered enough personal support to have been chosen as Speaker of the House, held a cabinet post, and is a Southern slave owner who has avoided alienating those in the North.

On the first ballot, Bell and Sam Houston take the lead. By the second, however, almost all of the "favorite son" candidates have dropped out and their votes have gone to Bell, who wins the nomination.

Constitutional Union Party Ballot Results

Candidates	State	1st	2nd
John Bell	Tenn	68.5	138
Sam Houston	Tex	57	69
John Crittenden	Ky	28	1
Edward Everett	Mass	25	9.5
William Graham	NC	22	18
John McLean	Ohio	21	1
William Rives	Va	13	0
John Botts	Va	9.5	7
William Sharkey	Miss	7	8.5
William Goggin	Va	3	0
Total		254	252
Needed to Win		128	127

After the Vice-Presidential slot goes easily to the popular northerner, Edward Everett, the convention adjourns.