

Chapter 234 - Henry Seward's "Irrepressible Conflict" Speech

Time: October 25, 1858

The Mid-Term Elections Get Under Way

Throughout the Fall of 1858 another Republican, Henry Seward, is out stumping for his party's candidates in the mid-term elections – hoping they will support his candidacy for the presidential nomination in 1860.

Among many observers he is already considered a shoo-in for that honor.

The New Yorker has been a recognized force at the national level since being elected to the US Senate in 1850.

His time there begins with a remarkable maiden speech, delivered on May 11, 1850, amidst the contentious debates over the Compromise Bill put forward by Henry Clay and Stephen Douglas, and already commented on by the likes of John Calhoun and Daniel Webster.

In this speech he not only calls for an outright ban on slavery across all of the new western territories, but then justifies this on the basis of a "higher law" than the U.S. Constitution.

That "higher law," being the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness granted to all men by their heavenly Father and held sacred by the founding fathers.

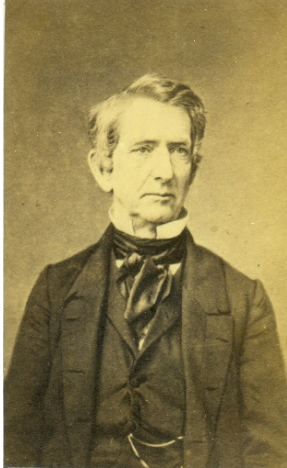
Seward's proposed ban immediately makes him the enemy of the South, while his rationale will forever strike many of his fellow Whigs as radical and dangerous.

But his proposed ban does become the basis for the Republican Party in the years to follow – even though many converts will sign on not to end black slavery on moral grounds, but to insure the supremacy of white men and the "dignity" of their free labor.

On October 25, 1858, Henry Seward is in Rochester, New York, speaking to potential voters, when he delivers what becomes another famous speech, where he posits an "irrepressible conflict" to come.

Time: October 25, 1858

Seward Issues A Warning



Henry Seward (1801-1872)

William Henry Seward is by no means a natural orator. He speaks softly; appears almost introspective; avoids the flamboyant gestures common among his more animated peers. His power instead emanates from the sheer clarity and logic of his arguments.

His address in Rochester quickly posits America as a theater with “two radically different political systems” vying for control:

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

He says that the servile system is rooted in a belief that physical labor is “groveling and base” and asserts that its proponents would enslave white men as well as blacks, if they could!

The laborers who are enslaved are all negroes ...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.

The slave system came to the states via the Portuguese and Spain and it leads inevitably to poverty and imbecility; free labor is the norm in the UK, Germany, Holland and Scandinavia and yields wealth, intelligence, freedom.

This African slave system is one which, in its origin and in its growth, has been altogether foreign from the habits of the races which colonized these States, and established civilization here. It was introduced on this continent as an engine of conquest...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.

The presence of slavery punishes not only blacks, but whites as well, limiting their access to land and resources, and also eroding the moral fiber of their communities.

The slave system is not only intolerable, unjust, and inhuman, toward the laborer...but is scarcely less severe upon the freeman, to whom...it denies facilities for employment, and..because, as a general truth, (their) 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 man, and therefore is always and everywhere beneficent.

Slavery breeds the threat of insurrection and leaves the population living in constant fear.

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.

It promotes an aristocratic form of government, with all power residing among the masters.

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.

With the exception of Russia, most major nations have abandoned slavery in favor of free labor.

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.

That trend, he says, is because the two systems are simply incompatible. In America this becomes evident when a new state declares itself either Free or Slave.

The two systems are incompatible. They never have permanently existed together in one country, and they never can...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.

To cement the outcome, the Slave states went so far in the 1856 election as to keep anti-slavery candidates from even appearing on their ballots.

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.

As the country's infrastructure develops, the two labor systems come together more often and more intensely.

Hitherto, the two systems have existed in different States, but side by side within the American Union. (But)... 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.

The result, says Seward, is an "irrepressible conflict," that must end with an America that is "entirely a slaveholding nation or a free-labor nation:"

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 slaveholding 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 of 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 becomes once more markets for trade in the bodies and souls of men.

Importantly, the founding fathers understood the incompatibility of the two systems from the beginning, and, according to Seward, set up the amendment process to eventually abolish slavery in every state.

The fathers knew that the two systems could not endure within the Union, and expected 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.

But the South will not surrender its slaves easily, and they are on the march to nationalize the institution.

(It) 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 slaveholding 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.

He then makes an extraordinary declaration, announcing that he would leave America were slavery to prevail.

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 slaveholders, 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 shall be no better hope for 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."

The Democrats have been co-opted by the South and has become the party of slavery. It must be defeated for America to prosper, and that is the challenge for the new Republican Party.

At last, the Republican party has appeared. It avows, now, as the Republican party of 1800 did, in one word, its faith and its works, " Equal and exact justice to all men." Even when it first entered the field, only half organized, it struck a blow which only just failed to secure complete and triumphant victory.

Seward closes with another charged line -- "a revolution has begun" – and the people are now ready to take back the nation from the Democrats, the "betrayers of the constitution."

I know, and you know, that a revolution has begun. I know, and all the world knows, that revolutions never go backward. Twenty senators and a hundred representatives proclaim boldly in Congress to-day sentiments and opinions and principles of freedom which hardly so many men, even in this free State, dared to utter in their own homes twenty years ago. While the government of the United States, under the conduct of the Democratic party, has been all that time surrendering one plain and castle after another to slavery, the people of the United States have been no less steadily and perseveringly gathering together the forces with which to recover back again all the fields and all the castles which have been lost, and to confound and overthrow, by one decisive blow, the betrayers of the constitution and freedom forever.

Time: October 1858 Forward

The Address Alarms Many Of His Listeners

As with Lincoln's "house divided" metaphor from his June 1858 speech, Seward's description of an "irreconcilable difference" between slave labor and free labor is intended to alarm his listeners.

These two men share the same intent: to warn Northerners that the Democrat's goal is to nationalize slavery; that the Kansas-Nebraska Act, the *Dred Scott* decision and the Lecompton Constitution facilitate this outcome; and that the only way to prevent it lies in electing Republicans to govern the nation.

Both also share a deeply held conviction that slavery is morally indefensible, that it violates America's core value of freedom, and that the founders had every intent of insuring that it withered away over time.

Both have concerns about their own warnings and predictions, two in particular: will a civil war be required to put an end to slavery, and what will happen to the millions of slaves once they are freed?

Neither wants a war and neither has a good answer regarding the fate of freed blacks in a white society that sees them as inferior and fears their revenge.

But in their minds, something must be done to prevent the sustained violence and governmental chaos witnessed in Kansas from repeating itself one territory at a time across the west. Thus their joint call for a flat out ban on any more expansion of slavery.

The exact rhetoric they employ to make these points does, however, differs in ways that will affect their chances of becoming president – with Lincoln coming across as more tempered and Seward viewed, especially in the press, as more of the “arch agitator.”

Some of Seward's reputation as a “radical” may trace to his tendency to express quite unconventional thoughts -- the notion of a “higher law” than the Constitution, of a “revolution” in progress, of slaves again for sale in New York and Boston, of his commitment to abandon his country should this happen.

While these images energize many to join the Republican cause and back his personal candidacy, they also seem to scare others away, to position him as one whose election would eliminate the possibility of compromise and restored unity.