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SENATE SPEECH ON SLAVERY AND A WAY TO PRESERVE OF THE UNION

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I have, senators, believed from the first that the agitation of the subject of slavery would, if not prevented by some timely and effective measure, end in disunion. Entertaining this opinion, I have, on all proper occasions, endeavored to call the attention of both the two great parties which divided the country to adopt some measure to prevent so great a disaster, but without success. The agitation has been permitted to proceed with almost no attempt to resist it, until it has reached a point when it can no longer be disguised or denied that the Union is in danger. You have thus had forced upon you the greatest and gravest question that can ever come under your consideration: **How can the Union be preserved?**

To give a satisfactory answer to this mighty question, it is indispensable to have an accurate and thorough knowledge of the **nature and the character of the cause** by which the Union is endangered. Without such knowledge it is impossible to pronounce with any certainty, by what measure it can be saved; just as it would be impossible for a physician to pronounce in the case of some dangerous disease, with any certainty, by what remedy the patient could be saved, without similar knowledge of the nature and character of the cause which produce it. The first question, then, presented for consideration in the investigation I propose to make in order to obtain such knowledge is: ***What is it that has endangered the Union?***

To this question there can be but one answer, – that the immediate cause is the **almost universal discontent which pervades** all the States composing the Southern section of the Union. [...] The next question, going one step further back, is: **What has caused this widely diffused and almost universal discontent?**

[**It is not...**] It is a great mistake to suppose, as is by some, that it originated with **demagogues who excited the discontent with the intention of aiding their personal advancement**, or with the disappointed ambition of certain politicians who resorted to it as the means of retrieving their fortunes. On the contrary, all the great **political influences of the [South] were arrayed against excitement**, and exerted to the utmost to keep the people quiet. [...]

[...]

No; some cause far deeper and more powerful than the one supposed must exist, to account for discontent so wide and deep. The question then recurs: What is the cause of this discontent? It will be found in the **belief** of the people of the Southern States, as prevalent as the discontent itself, **that they can not remain, as things now are, consistently with honor and safety, in the Union**. The next question to be considered is: ***What has caused this belief?***

[**A**] One of the causes is, undoubtedly, to be traced to the **long-continued agitation** of the slave question on the part of the North, and the many aggressions which they have made on the rights of the South during the time. I will not enumerate them at present, as it will be done hereafter in its proper place.

There is another lying back of it – with which this is intimately connected – that may be regarded as the great and primary cause. [**B**] This is to be found in the fact that the **equilibrium** between the two sections in the government **as it stood when the Constitution was ratified** and the government put in action has been **destroyed**. At that time there was nearly a perfect equilibrium between the two, which afforded ample means to each to protect itself against the aggression of the other; but, as it now stands, **one section [the non-slave North] has the exclusive power of controlling the government**, which leaves the other without any adequate means of protecting itself against its encroachment and oppression. [pres = Whig, Taylor)

The result of the whole is to give the Northern section a predominance in every department of the government, and thereby concentrate in it the two elements which constitute the federal government: a majority of States, and a majority of their population, estimated in federal numbers. Whatever section concentrates the two in itself possesses the control of the entire government.

But we are just at the close of the sixth decade and the commencement of the seventh. The census is to be taken this year, which must add greatly to the decided preponderance of the North in the **House of Representatives** and in the **Electoral College**. The **prospect is, also**, that a great increase will be added to its present preponderance in the **Senate**, during the period of the decade, by the **addition of new States** [...] increasing the present number of its States from fifteen to twenty, and of its senators from thirty to forty.

On the contrary, there is not a single Territory in progress in the Southern section, and no certainty that any additional State will be added to it during the decade. The prospect then is, that the two sections in the Senate, should the efforts now made to exclude the South from the newly acquired Territories succeed, will stand, before the end of the decade, twenty Northern States to fourteen Southern (considering Delaware as neutral), and forty Northern senators to twenty-eight Southern. This great increase of senators, added to the great increase of members of the House of Representatives and the Electoral College on the part of the North, which must take place under the next decade, will effectually and irretrievably destroy the equilibrium which existed when the government commenced.

Had this destruction been the operation of time without the interference of government, the South would have had no reason to complain; but such was not the fact. It was caused by the legislation of this government, which was appointed as the common agent of all and charged with the protection of the interests and security of all.

[Several paragraphs outlining objections to specific federal legislation and arguments about how the Northern states have attained disproportionate power at the expense of the Southern states excluded here.]

[VIEWS ON SLAVERY AT THE ROOT]

There is a question of vital importance to the Southern section, in reference to which the views and feelings of the two sections are as opposite and hostile as they can possibly be. I refer to the **relation between the two races in the Southern section [slavery]**, which constitutes a vital portion of her **social organization**.

Every portion of the **North** entertains views and feelings more or less **hostile** to it. Those most opposed and hostile (A) regard it as a **sin**, and consider themselves under the most **sacred obligation** to use every effort **to destroy it**.

Indeed, to the extent that they conceive that they have power, they regard themselves as implicated in the sin, and responsible for not suppressing it by the use of all and every means. Those less opposed and hostile regard it as (B) a **crime** – an offense against humanity, as they call it and, although not so fanatical, feel themselves **bound to use all efforts to effect the same object**; while those who are least opposed and hostile regard it as a (C) blot and a **stain on the character** of *what they call the "nation,"* and feel themselves accordingly bound to **give it no countenance or support**.

On the contrary, the Southern section regards the relation as one which can not be destroyed without subjecting the two races to the greatest calamity, and the section to poverty, desolation, and wretchedness; and accordingly they feel bound by every consideration of interest and safety to defend it.

THEREFORE . . .

Unless something decisive is done, I again ask, What is to stop this agitation before the great and final object at which it aims – the abolition of slavery in the States – is consummated? **Is it, then, not certain that if something is not done to arrest it, the South will be forced to choose between abolition and secession?** [...]

It is a great **mistake** to suppose that **disunion can be effected by a single blow**. The cords which bind these States together in one common Union are far too numerous and powerful for that. Disunion must be the work of time. **It is only through a long process, and successively, that the cords can be snapped until the whole fabric falls asunder.** Already the agitation of the slavery question has snapped some of

the most important, and has greatly weakened all the others.

If the agitation goes on, the same force, acting with increased intensity, as has been shown, will finally snap every cord, **when nothing will be left to hold the States together except FORCE**. But surely that can with no propriety of language be called a Union when the only means by which the weaker is held connected with the stronger portion is force. **It may, indeed, keep them connected; but the connection will partake much more of the character of subjugation on the part of the weaker to the stronger than the union of free, independent, and sovereign States** in one confederation, as they stood in the early stages of the government, and which only is worthy of the sacred name of Union.

[GENERAL DEMANDS/SOLUTIONS]

Having now, senators, explained what it is that endangers the Union, and traced it to its cause, and explained its nature and character, the question again recurs, **HOW CAN THE UNION BE SAVED?** To this I answer, there is but one way by which it can be, and that is by adopting such measures as will satisfy the States belonging to the Southern section that they can remain in the Union consistently with their honor and their safety. There is, again, only one way by which this can be effected, and that is **by removing the causes by which this belief has been produced**. Do this, and discontent will cease, harmony and kind feelings between the sections be restored, and every apprehension of danger to the Union removed. The question, then, is, **How can this be done?** There is but one way by which it can with any certainty; and that is by a **full and final settlement, on the principle of justice, of all the questions at issue between the two sections**. The South asks for justice, simple justice, and less she ought not to take. *She has no compromise to offer* but the Constitution, and *no concession or surrender to make*. She has already surrendered so much that she has *little left to surrender*. Such a settlement would go to the root of the evil, and remove all cause of discontent, by satisfying the South that she could remain honorably and safely in the Union, and thereby restore the harmony and fraternal feelings between the sections which existed **anterior to the Missouri agitation [1820]**. Nothing else can, with any certainty, finally and for ever settle the question at issue, terminate agitation, and save the Union.

[SPECIFIC DEMANDS/SOLUTIONS]

But **can this be done?** Yes, easily; **not by the weaker party**, for it can of itself do nothing – not even protect itself – but by the stronger. The North has only to will it to accomplish it – to do justice by conceding to the South an **(a) equal right in the acquired territory**, and to do her duty by **(b) causing the stipulations relative to fugitive slaves to be faithfully fulfilled** – to **(c) cease the agitation** of the slave question, and to **(d) provide for the insertion of a provision in the Constitution**, by an amendment, which will restore to the South, in substance, the power she possessed of protecting herself before the equilibrium between the sections was destroyed by the action of this government. [...]

But **will the North agree to this?** It is for her to answer the question. But, I will say, she can not refuse if she has half the love of the Union which she professes to have, or without justly exposing herself to the charge that her love of power and aggrandizement is far greater than her love of the Union. **At all events, the responsibility of saving the Union rests on the North, and not on the South**. The South can not save it by any act of hers, and the North may save it **without any sacrifice whatever**, unless to do justice and to perform her duties under the Constitution should be regarded by her as a sacrifice.

[THREATS]

[...] **If you** who represent the stronger portion [the North], **can not agree to settle** them on the broad principle of justice and duty, say so; and **let the States we both represent agree to separate and part in peace**.

If you are unwilling we should part in peace, tell us so; and we shall know what to do when you reduce the question to submission or resistance. **If you remain silent**, you will **compel us to infer** by your acts

what you intend. [...]

I have now, senators, **done my duty** in expressing my opinions fully, freely, and candidly on this solemn occasion. In doing so I have been governed by the motives which have governed me in all the stages of the agitation of the slavery question since its commencement. I have exerted myself during the whole period to arrest it, with the intention of saving the Union if it could be done; and if it could not, to save the section where it has pleased providence to cast my lot, and which I sincerely believe has justice and the Constitution on its side. Having faithfully done my duty to the best of my ability, both to the Union and my section, throughout this agitation, I shall have the consolation, let what will come, that I am free from all responsibility.