

William Henry Seward
ON THE IRREPRESSIBLE CONFLICT (Selections)
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[...]

Our country is a theatre, which exhibits, in full operation, **two radically different political systems**; the one resting on the basis of servile or slave labor, the other on voluntary labor of freemen. **The laborers who are enslaved are all negroes**, or persons more or less purely of African derivation. **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.

[...]

One of the chief elements of the *value of human life is freedom in the pursuit of happiness* [like Lincoln]. The slave system is not only **intolerable, unjust, and inhuman, toward the laborer [slave]**, whom, only because he is a laborer, it loads down with chains and converts into merchandise, but is **scarcely less severe upon the freeman**, to whom, only because he is a laborer from necessity, it **denies facilities for employment**, and whom it **expels from the community** because it cannot enslave and convert into merchandise also. It is necessarily improvident and ruinous, because, as a general truth, **communities prosper and flourish**, or droop and decline, in just the degree that they practice or neglect to **practice 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.

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. 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.

[...] 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. [...]

Hitherto, the two systems have existed in different States, but side by side within the American Union. This has happened because the Union is a confederation of States. But in another aspect the United States constitute only one nation. Increase of population, which is filling the States out to their very borders, together with a new and extended network of railroads and other avenues, and an internal commerce which daily becomes more intimate, is **rapidly bringing 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.

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 irre-**

pressible 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. It is the failure to apprehend this great truth that induces so many unsuccessful attempts at final compromises between the slave and free States, and it is the existence of this great fact that renders **all such pretended compromises, when made, vain and ephemeral.**

Startling as this saying may appear to you, fellow-citizens, it is by no means an original or even a modern one. **Our forefathers knew it to be true,** and unanimously acted upon it when they framed the constitution of the United States. They regarded the existence of the servile system in so many of the States with sorrow and shame, which they openly confessed, and they looked upon the collision between them, which was then just revealing itself, and which we are now accustomed to deplore, with favor and hope. **They knew that one or the other system must exclusively prevail.**

[...] **They preferred the system of free labor,** and they determined to organize the government, and so direct its activity, that that system should surely and certainly prevail. For this purpose, and no other, they based the whole structure of the government broadly on the **principle that all men are created equal,** and therefore free – little dreaming that, within the short period of one hundred years, their descendants would bear to be told by any orator, however popular, that the utterance of that principle was merely a rhetorical rhapsody; or by any judge, however venerated, that it was attended by mental reservation, which rendered it hypocritical and false.

By the ordinance of **1787** they dedicated all of the national domain not yet polluted by slavery to free;

[they] they **invited foreign free labor** from all lands under the sun[;]

[they] **interdicted the importation of African slave labor,** at all times, in all places, and under all circumstances whatsoever.

It is true that they necessarily and wisely modified this policy of freedom by leaving it to the several States, affected as they were by different circumstances, to abolish slavery in their own way and at their own pleasure, instead of confiding that duty to Congress; and that they secured to the slave States, while yet retaining the system of slavery, a three-fifths representation of slaves in the federal government, until they should find themselves able to relinquish it with safety. But the very nature of these modifications fortifies my position, that **the fathers knew that the two systems could not endure within the Union, and expected within a short period slavery would disappear forever.** [...]

[...]

It is certain that the slaveholding class of American citizens indulge [the] high ambition [for slavery to exist everywhere], and that they derive encouragement for it from the rapid and effective political successes which they have already obtained. **THE PLAN OF OPERATION IS THIS:**

By continued appliances of patronage and threats of disunion, they will **keep a majority favorable to these designs in the Senate,** where each State has an equal representation.

Through that majority they will **defeat,** as they best can, the **admission of free States** and secure the

admission of slave States.

Under the protection of the judiciary, they will, on the principle of the Dred Scott case, **carry slavery into all the territories** of the United States now existing and hereafter to be organized.

By the action of the President and Senate, using the treaty-making power, they will annex foreign slaveholding States.

In a favorable conjuncture they will induce Congress to repeal the act of 1808 which prohibits the foreign slave trade, and so they will import from Africa, at a cost of only twenty dollars a head, slaves enough to fill up the interior of the continent. Thus relatively increasing the number of slave States, they will allow no amendment to the constitution prejudicial to their interest; and so, having permanently established their power, they expect the federal judiciary to nullify all State laws which shall interfere with internal or foreign commerce in slaves.

When the free States shall be sufficiently demoralized to tolerate these designs, they reasonably conclude that slavery will be accepted by those States themselves.

[...]