In Response to the Compromise of 1850

By: John C. Calhoun
Date: March 14, 1850

Explanation of the Source: John C. Calhoun’s long political career was predominantly devoted to three issues: war against Britain, defending slavery, and vigorously supporting state’s rights. While serving in the Senate, Calhoun devoted much of his energy to protecting the institution of slavery. Calhoun painted slavery as a "positive good" - going well beyond the "necessary evil" argument that was traditionally held by most southern politicians. Until his death in 1850, Calhoun hoped to expand slavery into the western territories and continued to fight against abolitionists, real and imagined, on all fronts. In a response to the Compromise of 1850, he would be unable to deliver a speech protesting against it. This is only a portion of that speech.

“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. 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 has the exclusive power of controlling the government, which leaves the other without any adequate means of protecting itself against its encroachment and oppression.

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.”

Lincoln’s Speech on Sectionalism

By: Abraham Lincoln
Date: December 1857

Explanation of the Source: In December of 1857, Abraham Lincoln drafted a speech against Stephen Douglas over the issue of Sectionalism. He would reference the Kansas-Nebraska as well in this speech.

“We also ought to insist on knowing what the Stephen Douglas now thinks on “Sectionalism”. Last year, he thought it was a "clincher" against us, on the question of sectionalism, that we could get no support in the slave-states, and could not be allowed to speak, or even, breathe, South of the Ohio river-- In vain did we appeal
to the justice of our principles-- He would have it, that the treatment we received, was conclusive evidence that we deserved it--

He, and his friends, would bring speakers from the slave-states, to their meetings, and conventions, in the free-states, and parade about, arm in arm, with them, breathing, in every jesture and tone" How, we national apples do swim"

Let him cast about for this particular evidence of his own nationality now-- Why, just now, he and Fremont would make the closest race immaginable, in the Southern States

In the present aspect of affairs, what ought the republicans to do?

What those should do, who are committed to all it's antecedents, is their business, not ours--

If, therefore, Douglas' bill, secures a fair vote to the people of Kansas, without a device to commit any one further, I think republican members of congress ought to support it. They can do so, without any inconsistency-- They believe congress ought to prohibit slavery wherever it can be done, without violation of the constitution, or of good faith-- And having seen the noses counted, and actually knowing that a majority of the people of Kansas are against slavery, passing an act of congress to secure them a fair vote, is little else than prohibiting slavery in Kansas, by act of congress--

Congress cannot dictate a constitution to a new state-- All it can do, at that point, is to secure the people a fair chance to form one for themselves, and then to accept, or reject it, when they ask admission into the union--

As I understand, republicans claim no more than this-- But they do claim, that congress can, and ought to keep slavery out of a territory, up to the time of it's people forming a state constitution; and they should now be careful to not stultify themselves, to any extent, on this point--

I am glad Douglas has, at last, distinctly told us, that he cares not whether slavery be voted down, or voted up-- Not so much that this is any news to me; nor yet, that it may be slightly new to some of that class of his friends who delight to say that they "are as much opposed to slavery as anybody" I am glad, because it affords such a true and excellent a definition of the Nebraska policy itself-- That policy, honestly administered, is exactly that-- It seeks to bring the people of the nation to not care anything about slavery-- This is Nebraskaism, in it's abstract purity -- in it's very best dress--

Now, I take it, nearly every body does care something about slavery -- is either for it, or against it; and that the statesmanship of a measure which conforms to the sentiments of nobody, might well be doubted in advance--

But Nebraskaism did not originate as a piece of statesmanship-- Gen. Cass, in 1848, invented it, as a political manoeuver, to secure himself the democratic nomination for the presidency-- It served it's purpose then, and sunk out of sight-- Six years later, Judge Douglas fished it up, and glozed it over with what he called, and still persists in calling "sacred right of self-government"--

Well, I too, believe in self-government as I understand it; but I do not understand, that the previlege one man takes of making a slave of another, or holding him as such, is any part of "self government"-- To call it so is, to mind, simply absurd, and ridiculous--

I am for the people of the whole nation doing just as they please, in all matters which concern the whole nation; for those of each part, doing just as they choose, in all matters which concern no other part; and for each individual doing just as he chooses in all matters which concern nobody else--

This is the principle-- Of course I am content with any exception, which the constitution, or the actually existing state of things, makes a necessity--

But neither the principle, nor the exception, will admit the indefinite spread and perpetuity of human slavery--

I think the true magnitude of the slavery element, in this nation, is scarcely appreciated by any one-- Four years ago the Nebraska policy was adopted, professedly, to drive the agitation of the subject into the territories, and out of every other place, and, especially out of congress--

When Mr. Buchanan accepted the Presidential nomination, he felicitated himself with the belief, that the whole thing would be quieted, and forgotten in about six weeks-- In his inaugural, he was just not quite in reach of the same happy consummation-- And now, in his first annual message, he urges the acceptance of the
Lecompton constitution (not quite satisfactory to him) on the sole ground of getting this little, unimportant matter out of the way--

Meanwhile, in those four years, there has really been more angry agitation of the subject, both, in and out of congress, than ever before-- And just now it is perplexing the mighty ones, as no subject ever did before…”

"House Divided"

By: Abraham Lincoln
Date: June 16, 1858

If we could first know where we are, and whither we are tending, we could then better judge what to do, and how to do it.

"A house divided against itself cannot stand." I believe this government cannot endure, permanently half slave and half free. I do not expect the Union to be dissolved -- I do not expect the house to fall -- but I do expect it will cease to be divided. It will become all one thing or all the other.

Either the opponents of slavery, will arrest the further spread of it, and place it where the public mind shall rest in the belief that it is in the course of ultimate extinction; or its advocates will push it forward, till it shall become alike lawful in all the States, old as well as new -- North as well as South.

Let anyone who doubts, carefully contemplate that now almost complete legal combination -- piece of machinery so to speak -- compounded of the Nebraska doctrine, and the Dred Scott decision. Let him consider not only what work the machinery is adapted to do, and how well adapted; but also, let him study the history of its construction, and trace, if he can, or rather fail, if he can, to trace the evidence of design and concerted action, among its chief architects, from the beginning.

But, so far, Congress only, had acted; and an endorsement by the people, real or apparent, was indispensable, to save the point already gained, and give chance for more.

The new year of 1854 found slavery excluded from more than half the States by State Constitutions, and from most of the national territory by congressional prohibition. Four days later, commenced the struggle, which ended in repealing that congressional prohibition. (Lincoln is referencing the Dred Scott Decision) This opened all the national territory to slavery, and was the first point gained.

This necessity had not been overlooked; but had been provided for, as well as might be, in the notable argument of "squatter sovereignty," otherwise called "sacred right of self-government (Popular Sovereignty)," which latter phrase, though expressive of the only rightful basis of any government, was so perverted in this attempted use of it as to amount to just this: That if any one man, choose to enslave another, no third man shall be allowed to object.

That argument was incorporated into the Nebraska bill itself, in the language which follows: "It being the true intent and meaning of this act not to legislate slavery into any Territory or state, not to exclude it therefrom; but to leave the people thereof perfectly free to form and regulate their domestic institutions in their own way, subject only to the Constitution of the United States."
Then opened the roar of loose declamation in favor of "Squatter Sovereignty," and "Sacred right of self-government."

"But," said opposition members, "let us be more specific -- let us amend the bill so as to expressly declare that the people of the territory may exclude slavery." "Not we," said the friends of the measure; and down they voted the amendment."

While the Nebraska Bill was passing through congress, a law case involving the question of a negro's freedom, by reason of his owner having voluntarily taken him first into a free state and then a territory covered by the congressional prohibition, and held him as a slave, for a long time in each, was passing through the U.S. Circuit Court for the District of Missouri; and both Nebraska bill and law suit were brought to a decision in the same month of May, 1854. The negro's name was "Dred Scott," which name now designates the decision finally made in the case.

Before the then next Presidential election, the law case came to, and was argued in, the Supreme Court of the United States; but the decision of it was deferred until after the election. Still, before the election, Senator Trumbull, on the floor of the Senate, requests the leading advocate of the Nebraska bill to state his opinion whether the people of a territory can constitutionally exclude slavery from their limits; and the latter answers: "That is a question for the Supreme Court."

The election came. Mr. Buchanan was elected, and the indorsement, such as it was, secured. That was the second point gained. The indorsement, however, fell short of a clear popular majority by nearly four hundred thousand votes, and so, perhaps, was not overwhelmingly reliable and satisfactory. The outgoing President, in his last annual message, as impressively as possible, echoed back upon the people the weight and authority of the indorsement.

The Supreme Court met again; did not announce their decision, but ordered a re-argument. The Presidential inauguration came, and still no decision of the court; but the incoming President, in his inaugural address, fervently exhorted the people to abide by the forthcoming decision, whatever might be. Then, in a few days, came the decision.

The reputed author of the Nebraska Bill finds an early occasion to make a speech at this capital indorsing the Dred Scott Decision, and vehemently denouncing all opposition to it. The new President, too, seizes the early occasion of the Silliman letter to indorse and strongly construe that decision, and to express his astonishment that any different view had ever been entertained.

At length a squabble springs up between the President and the author of the Nebraska Bill, on the mere question of fact, whether the Lecompton constitution was or was not, in any just sense, made by the people of Kansas; and in that squabble the latter declares that all he wants is a fair vote for the people, and that he cares not whether slavery be voted down or voted up. I do not understand his declaration that he cares not whether slavery be voted down or voted up, to be intended by him other than as an apt definition of the policy he would impress upon the public mind -- the principle for which he declares he has suffered much, and is ready to suffer to the end.

And well may he cling to that principle. If he has any parental feeling, well may he cling to it. That principle, is the only shred left of his original Nebraska doctrine. Under the Dred Scott decision, "squatter sovereignty" squatted out of existence, tumbled down like temporary scaffolding -- like the mould at the foundry served through one blast and fell back into loose sand -- helped to carry an election, and then was kicked to the winds. His late joint struggle with the Republicans, against the Lecompton Constitution, involves nothing of the original Nebraska doctrine. That struggle was made on a point, the right of a people to make their own constitution, upon which he and the Republicans have never differed…"