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Steele, Hon. John B.

Speech on the Question  
of Slavery. 1862.





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# SPEECH

OF

## HON. JOHN B. STEELE,

OF NEW YORK,

### ON THE QUESTION OF SLAVERY.

DELIVERED IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES, JAN. 20, 1862.

The House being in Committee of the Whole on the state of the Union, Mr. STEELE, of New York, arose and said:

Mr. CHAIRMAN: It is not my intention to attempt a constitutional argument; and yet I had supposed, until the very extraordinary remarks of the gentleman from Ohio, the *de facto* chairman of the Judiciary Committee for the time being, that every sane man believed Congress had no constitutional right to legislate upon the subject of slavery in loyal States. I was not aware that the constitutional power of the General Government was unlimited. I had heard that in the constitutional convention there were those who favored a strong consolidated government, but I had supposed that the democratic idea, of certain State rights, and a general government of limited powers, prevailed. I supposed, also, that the Constitution itself had a limiting clause, which provides that—

“All powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States, respectively, or to the people.”

The last Congress, by unanimous resolution, expressed their opinion on this subject, and I supposed it was pretty generally admitted by this; but I will leave this constitutional argument to others, and proceed with what I understand to be a plain, common-sense view of this question.

At the opening of the present session of Congress, when extreme measures on the subject of slavery were inaugurated, and efforts made to secure their adoption with indecent haste, the great heart of the Republic was sad.

Afterwards, as those resolutions were, by the good sense of a majority of the members present, referred to a regular committee for consideration, the public mind was relieved; and hope revived. The conservative men here and elsewhere

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breathed more freely, and sanguine anticipations were entertained that, whatever should come back from the committee, would be in such form as that all Union-loving men could assent to the report, and that in the meantime all discussions upon this troublesome question might be suspended. Unfortunately, however, some gentlemen, unwilling to await the deliberations of a responsible committee, have apparently sought to forestall their action by harrangues of the most objectionable and offensive character; and thus we have been repeatedly compelled to consider this unwholesome subject.

In times of imminent peril, in moments of desperate emergency, men have appeared in all ages of the world adapted to the exigencies of the occasion; and yet it is greatly to be feared, if that portion of this Government of the people more immediately representative, cannot rise to the dignity and importance of their present position, no men will be found capable of grappling with and overcoming our difficulties. If this mighty democracy, which was to have been the pattern of governments, and show the world the road to liberty, has become so tainted with corruption, with passion, or prejudice, that the direct representatives of the people cannot forget the necessity of tinkering for party advancement or the success of some favorite idea long enough to save our country, what hope have we?

Were the forked flames bursting in upon us, would any hesitate or cavil about the cause and probable effect; would we wrangle over a loaded magazine, while the lighted torch moved slowly on its certain mission, until ourselves, and everybody and thing held sacred and dear were shivered to atoms, because not quite certain whose party or favorite theory would succeed if we avoided destruction? Nothing can be more apparent than that we cannot aid in restoring peace and harmony to this distracted country by continually stirring up bad blood, and quarrelling with the Executive Departments, military commanders, and each other. We cannot all take direct control of everything; we are compelled to trust somebody, and undoubtedly we must trust those who are the regularly constituted authorities.

This Administration is not of my choosing, and yet I know it is the duly elected and lawfully constituted head of the Government of these United States—holding authority under that Constitution which we have all sworn before the world, and in the presence of Almighty God, to support, and as such is entitled to the kind consideration and hearty co-operation of every other department, and of every citizen, in whatever is necessary to re-establish and preserve the integrity of the nation; and, for one, I intend to give it with no grudging

hand, until this monster rebellion is crushed; and the mighty moving masses of the people, let me tell you, throughout the entire extent of our loyal territory, are resolved to do the same thing; and when the war is over, and peace again reigns within our borders, those same people, rest assured, will hold everybody in power, from the highest to the lowest, to strict account for the manner in which they discharge the sacred trust committed to their keeping.

If such times as these, and the responsibilities which surround us, cannot induce representative men to reject every personal and political consideration, and apply themselves unselfishly and resolutely to the salvation of their country, then there is very little hope of the permanent success of a republican government; for I am unwilling to believe we are worse than others who might be thus convened; and if the circumstances in which we are placed, the distresses which are but too manifest everywhere—the privations, hardships, sufferings, and death, to which our six hundred thousand brave men in arms, and many others, are exposed—are not sufficient to stimulate every needed sacrifice, insomuch that we would consider it a pride and a glory to lay down our lives, if need be, upon the altar of our country, what right have we to expect that other representative bodies will be more patriotic?

Mr. Chairman, it is shocking to hear men deliberately argue that certain measures are unconstitutional, and in the next breath urge their adoption, and counsel the overriding of all constitutions and laws, for the purpose of advancing a favorite theory. If we are to disregard the Constitution, and trample upon the rights guaranteed by it to States or individuals, what better are we than the rebels we contend against?

It is not true, sir, that slavery is an outlaw in this Government. It was guaranteed by the Constitution, and was part of the consideration for the original compact, upon which our Government and Constitution were founded. It has always existed with us, and with it we have prospered beyond every other nation of the earth. It now occupies less territory than at any former period of our history; yet, so long as there is a single State, nay, any part of any State, which is loyal, and entitled to the guarantees of the Constitution in regard to slavery, it is their right; exactly as much as any of us are entitled to any of our rights of person or property. We have no business to attempt any interference with the guarantees of the Constitution in reference to slavery; any such effort cannot fail to divide and distract the country, when harmony and concert of action are indispensable to its salvation.

Gentlemen tell us it is wrong, and, therefore, should not exist. So is impiety wrong, and yet it cannot quite be sup-

pressed by force of law ; and the bloody records of the past show that the strong arm of power is impotent for such purpose. Such is doubtless the case with numberless moral evils ten times more revolting than slavery, and, besides, men cannot agree about these abstractions of right and wrong ; and the only way for us to sustain our Government is to stand by our Constitution. It was sufficient for our fathers, has been for us ; and unless we would invite anarchy and confusion, accompanied by a reign of terror horrible to contemplate, we must adhere to it now. Of course, we cannot all think alike ; but men united in a terrible struggle, not only for self-preservation, and national existence, but for rights and interests as well, too vast and extended for human calculation, ought to have such respect for each other as not to insist upon measures distasteful to any unless believed to be indispensable ; and if, acting upon such magnanimous principle, where disagreement is inevitable, we would sincerely and generously endeavor to bring our minds together without regard to preconceived opinions, or any consideration whatever inconsistent with an honest desire to act together for our country's good, undoubtedly we could agree ; at least so far as to prevent any serious embarrassment to the common cause.

It is sickening to witness the mad ravings of fanaticism at any time, but how infinitely more terrible at such a time as this ; and yet the unaccountable fascinations of a strange insanity, even now and here, seem capable of charming men into submission to what appears an impious hallucination to all except those subjected to its influence.

It certainly seems that some among us have indulged their vivid imaginations in the exaggeration of one dark picture until so completely enveloped in an impenetrably black cloud of their own creation, as to exclude from their disordered intellects the sunlight of truth. And, sir, if the direction of affairs is to be given over to those whose minds are so maddened by the contemplation of this hideous object that they can understand no other right or interest except the necessity of its immediate removal, then farewell to the institutions and Government of our fathers.

No doubt there are those who look upon slavery as a great and crying evil, who can, nevertheless, understand that there are interests of such paramount importance as to demand consideration ; and yet there has been but too much reason to fear that their timid resolves in the right direction were likely to be overborne by the resolute and desperate determination of those who are immovably fixed to their one idea and its accomplishment, without regard to means or consequences.

Sir, it is high time that every member of this House, however humble, should arouse himself to a consciousness of per-



sonal responsibility, and evince at least as great firmness and determination for the preservation of our Constitution and Government, and the protection of such rights and interests as are unquestionably guaranteed to any and every section and portion of our loyal citizens, as any others have, or can exhibit for the advancement of a theoretic philanthropy to the overriding of all constitutions and laws.

Gentlemen tell us that the irresistible tide of war will sweep from the land this curse of slavery. Be it so. Then why divide our councils, distract our country, and demoralize our army, to provide theoretically what can only be accomplished practically by the power of conquering armies, and which, according to the theory of those who would urge us on past the Rubicon of constitutional safety, is so near its fulfillment?

The history of the world shows that the military power, when in the ascendant, is sufficiently regardless of individual or local rights, whenever they come in contact with its exactions; and it is scarcely necessary that the legislative authority should attempt to run in advance of the military, in efforts to destroy the rights of loyal people, upon the plea of providing for possible contingencies, which, should they arise, could and would be promptly met by the inevitable necessities of war, and in regard to which gentlemen themselves contend that the military authority is undoubted.

Sir, there is imminent necessity for legislation by this Congress of a legitimate and practical character; and yet, when the infamous sentiments of that class of men who have openly and solemnly proclaimed to the world over and over again that our glorious Constitution, hallowed by the most cherished memories and hopes of many millions of freemen, and sanctified by divine approval, is "a covenant of death, and a league with hell," are continually urged upon the consideration of this House, and through its published proceedings scattered broadcast over the land, it almost seems that one cannot sit silently and tamely by without becoming *particeps criminis* in such treasonable declarations.

I am in favor—I hope all of us are—of a vigorous, thorough prosecution of this war to the utter discomfiture and annihilation of treason and treasonable sentiments, North and South. But I am not so anxious to see the land drenched in the best blood of our nation, and emancipation, conflagration, and death, moving hand in hand with slaughtering armies, for the mere accomplishment of an insane idea, as to threaten that the work of desolation shall go on, "either through the Administration or over it." Nor am I impatient for the destruction consequent upon the coming together in battle of mighty armies in hostile array, unless indispensable for the

preservation and perpetuation of our glorious Union; and for that, and its re-establishment, as it was before the reckless folly of traitors and madmen North and South distracted it and divided it, so that it can be handed down to future generations with all the hopes of free government that once surrounded it, no needed sacrifice would be too great.

Do gentlemen of that class whose incendiary teachings of insanity or wickedness have for years alarmed and distracted the people of this otherwise harmonious and united Confederacy, expect that the abominable idea which would deify the miscreant John Brown, can be introduced into this war without inaugurating an era of blood, devastation, and death, such as the history of the world has never recorded? Do they expect us to forget or ignore the sacred memories of the past, and quietly subscribe to the detestable suggestion that the immortal Washington and the whole list of slaveholding patriots, conspicuous in our armies of the Revolution, were Achans in an unclean camp? The conclusion is irresistible, that some men of genius, if not actually crazy or devilish, have so cramped and contracted their naturally vigorous powers, by perpetually thinking and speaking upon an exaggerated idea, as to have become pigmies, when they ought to have been giants.

It may be asked why it is, if I deprecate the discussion of this exciting subject, that I do not remain silent in regard to it? Sir, the conservative men of the country have kept still too long, and allowed the devotees of this one-idea philanthropy an *ex parte* hearing, at all conceivable times and places, all over the free North. For thirty years and more they have been continually instilling their pernicious sentiments into the minds of the people through their pamphlets, periodicals, and books, in common conversation, and the family circle. From the school-room, the lecture-room, and the pulpit, their wild, extravagant, and dangerous assertions and theories have been forced, uncontradicted, upon the attention of everybody. The opposition to them has only been occasional and incidental; hence they have grown to formidable proportions; and here, upon this floor, almost every day, this disagreeable subject is forced upon us, in season and out of season. All the interests of all the white men of the world seem to be forgotten or ignored by some gentlemen in their determination to hold the black man continually in the foreground. If we keep still and allow them to go on, even if we could escape demoralization here, it goes forth to the world, to the Union-loving men of the North, to our armies in the camps and in the field, and to our loyal brethren in the slaveholding States, that we have an abolition Congress, and distrust and alarm is the consequence.

Do these gentlemen of the one idea expect that they can carry on this war successfully without the aid of the conservative men of the country? If not, why do they continually contrive to insult and irritate us? They may consider it peculiarly their war; and perhaps in some sort it is; but, even then, so long as they ask us, and we are willing to fight their battles for them, they ought to treat us decently, at least until the war is over; or have they talked so long and so much about the crack of a certain lash that they wish to apply it to the backs of their white allies for the edification of their black friends?

These gentlemen, sir, who grow so ferociously eloquent over their emancipation ideas, do not tell us what they propose to do with their black brethren when they get them? Possibly they think their equalizing and humanizing philanthropy has so far elevated the character and tastes of the white men that they will consider it a privilege to fight side by side with black slaves. Let them try it. No, sir, we will not let them thus degrade and disgrace our brave soldiers; but, if they had the power to try it, they would find that human instincts were stronger than all their fine-spun theories.

I have the honor to be a Representative upon this floor from a free State, the great State of New York—a State somewhat important in this crisis as regards men and money. The district that honored me by its confidence is one made sacred by the scenes of the Revolution; and no man can boast a more true and loyal constituency. Our people have not been surpassed by any in a prompt and continued response to the call of their country in her time of need; and we feel that we have a right to urge respect for the memory and institutions of our fathers. I stand not here, sir, as the advocate of slavery; I have no love for, or sympathy with, that institution in the abstract—quite the contrary; but I remember that it was introduced here by our fathers, and by them ingrafted upon our Constitution; so that to each State, as an independent sovereignty, was secured the exclusive power and right to retain or abolish the same within its own limits. I remember, too, that our brethren of the slaveholding States have it now as it was handed down to them by a justly venerated ancestry; and I wonder not that the loyal men of those States, considering the present condition of our distracted country and the cause, are jealous of their State rights, and sensitive to any external efforts to interfere with them, when they know, as we do, that there is no lawful power or authority for any such assumption; and if they are satisfied to trust to the inevitable necessities of war such interests as are undeniably guaranteed to them by the organic law of the land, and so obviously periled by the onward march of armies—is it too

much for them to ask that the unauthorized theories and abstractions of other men should be subjected to the same arbitrament?

If it is supposed that I speak warmly, I have to say that I feel deeply—and the time and the occasion demand it. It is my firm belief that if abolitionism should rule the day, this war would become one of extermination and death all over the country. That “the blackness of darkness” would overshadow the land, and the sun of liberty go down in blood, thereby extinguishing the hopes of freemen for a republican Government, and obliterating all reasonable grounds for expecting the permanent sovereignty of the people.

But let us not despair or despond. Let us trust in God and the Administration which is given us for this emergency. We have a right to suppose it is firm and determined—let us believe it will thus continue; and resolutely strive to do our duty without assumption or arrogance, and trust to the Administration theirs. No doubt, if we stand firm in our efforts to protect and preserve our Constitution and Government in defiance of the ravings of madmen, or the machinations and treachery of wicked ones, the Administration will help us. I will go further and say, that I believe if we are so facile as to yield to the rushing tide of fanaticism, the Administration will still strive to save the Union in spite of Congress.

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