

SPEECH

OF

HON. W. PORCHER MILES,

OF SOUTH CAROLINA,

ON THE

ORGANIZATION OF THE HOUSE.

DELIVERED IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES, JANUARY 6, 1860.

The House having under consideration the election of Speaker, Mr. MILES said:

Mr. CLERK: It was not my purpose yesterday, as I stated when my friend from New York (Mr. JOHN COCHRANE) kindly yielded me the floor, to make an elaborate speech, or to enter at length upon the discussion of the great questions which are now distracting the public mind of the country. I trust I may have an opportunity upon some future occasion to do so; but I now desire to call the attention of the House to a few practical remarks and suggestions, which I propose to throw out in the hope that they may tend, in the first place, to expedite our organization, by producing some concert of action among those elements upon this floor who are, professedly, equally opposed to the Republican party.

I was about to say yesterday, at the time that I yielded to what proved to be a very happy colloquial debate—happy, I think, in its results—I was about to say, that I did not conceive that the Democratic party proper of this House is in any degree responsible for the non-organization up to this moment. I can speak, I think, with impartiality, because it is generally known that I am not a “party man;” that I do not recognize party ties and party obligations in the sense and to the extent which many, perhaps most, of my political friends and associates do. I am, sir, considered rather outside of the political fold of “the great national Democracy.” I have, however, in the main, been able to act conscientiously and heartily with the Democratic party, and I trust that I may continue to feel myself at liberty to do so. But I still hold myself free, untrammelled, and independent, always upon all subjects to take such a position in this House as I believe most conducive to the interests and honor of my immediate State. I am a State-rights man. I do not lay the same stress upon party organization that most politicians in this country do. We assemble here as the representatives of the people of the various sovereign States which compose this Confederacy, and it is our first duty to labor for the best interests of our own immediate people, without doing injustice to the people of any section of the country. It is obvious that political affinities, political associations, political organizations, must arise; and no man can act as an isolated unit, and expect to effect any great political object. I am, therefore, not one of those utterly impracticable men who will never take counsel with those whose political opinions do not absolutely and entirely coincide with his own, and will never have his action in any degree shaped by the judgment of his political associates.

So much for my independent position; and, therefore, as I humbly conceive, my right from my stand-point to discuss this matter of the organization calmly, bravely, and impartially; to throw out suggestions which, coming from no

party source, influenced by no party predilections, or, at least, by no party prejudices, may commend themselves to fair-minded men of all shades of opinion who are opposed to the election of the Republican nominee for the Speakership. I said that there were three elements in this House, all professing to be equally opposed to the principles and purposes of the Republican party; first, the Democratic party proper, which constitutes far the larger portion of this side of the House; secondly, the anti-Lecompton Democrats, who are very few in number—a mere handful; and, thirdly, the southern Opposition, who, although respectable in point of numbers, are still, it may be said, no thoroughly-organized party—still, as it were, in the gristle, not yet in the bone and sinew—not yet sufficiently compact to have, so far as the country at large is informed, any very definite and settled policy. Well, sir, we all meet here, and our first duty is to elect a Speaker. The Republican party put forward a nominee, who not only is objectionable to us as the exponent of their principles in general, but is particularly obnoxious to the greater portion of this side of the House who represent southern constituencies, in consequence of his connection with this Helper book, of which we have heard so much. I do not intend to go into a discussion of that subject, but I would put it to honest and conscientious men everywhere, whether it be strange, in the present excited condition of the public mind in the southern States, that southern gentlemen come here, and find that their political enemies have put in nomination for the high office of presiding over the deliberations of this body, a man who recommended, whether ignorantly or inadvertently or not, the circulation of a book containing doctrines so vile and atrocious that no honest man can find language strong enough in which to denounce them—I ask whether it be strange that we should consider such a nominee utterly unfit to preside over us? And when we find the Republican party, in pursuance of a policy which they think most conducive to their party success, remaining obstinately and pertinaciously silent upon the subject of this infamous book and its indorsement, and refusing to purge themselves of the criminal and treasonable taint, as some one or two individuals of them have done, (and I honor those gentlemen for their manly independence in refusing to submit to the party gag, and to be kept in the party traces by the party lash,) when, I say, we find the whole party, with those few individual exceptions, refusing to repudiate at once all sympathy with Helper's atrocious doctrines, it must concentrate and intensify, upon our side of the House, the opposition to the candidate they have thought proper to nominate.

Now, who are responsible upon this side of the House for its non-organization? The Democratic party selected a gentleman as their nominee eminently fitted, it is conceded on all hands, for the high office to which they desired to elect him. I suppose there is scarcely a gentleman upon this floor who, if put on his oath as a witness, would not testify to the fact that he believes Mr. Bock, of Virginia, most thoroughly competent, and most admirably qualified to fill the Speaker's chair. Now, sir, having voted for him for a sufficient length of time to show that we could not elect him, unless the other two elements of opposition to the Republican party would unite with us, the country may well ask upon whom rests the responsibility of a failure to bring together those different Opposition elements. Sir, I say that the responsibility, in my judgment, rests with that party termed the anti-Lecompton Democrats. Those gentlemen profess—and their very name indicates their profession—profess still to be Democrats. They say they have not abandoned the principles which, as Democrats, they have always held. They say they are not to be “read out of the Democratic party;” and, in fact, that they are holding “the true faith,” while the great body of the Democratic party has departed from it. They reiterate again and again, in the most earnest manner, that they are as much Democrats as ever. Well, sir, have not “Democrats” for years past been first and foremost utterly opposed to “Republicans?” Has it not been a cardinal point of the Democratic faith to oppose the purposes, aims, and ends of the Republican party?

If, then, these “anti-Lecompton” gentlemen are still “Democrats,” they ought still to be as earnestly opposed to “Republicans” as they ever were. Then, what would seem to be their first duty on assembling here? To *prove*, in the most unmistakable manner, that they *are* still “Democrats,” by showing that they are still opposed to the “Republicans.” What practical mode is there

for them to show it? It can only be done by a vote, and what is the very first vote which they have, so far, been called upon to give? A vote for Speaker. Now, how can a man be considered a Democrat when he casts his first vote against a "Democrat" and for a "Republican?" I consider those anti-Lecompton Democrats, who have thought proper to vote for the Republican nominee, as themselves Republicans. That is the necessary common-sense, practical view of the matter. A man anywhere who votes the Republican ticket is a Republican. It is useless to define or discriminate about it. When we talk of the strength of a party in any part of the country, we estimate it by the votes deposited in the ballot-box. That is the only test. And so, when we come to divide and define parties in this House, we do it by the record of votes. The yeas and nays stand forever as the proof of the party affinities and party connections of members.

But, I pass from those gentlemen who have gone over to the enemy to the other anti-Lecompton Democrats who, so far, have not voted for the candidate either of the Republicans or of the Democrats. I say that now, at this moment, the responsibility, in my opinion, of the non-organization of the House rests especially upon their shoulders, and I will prove it. As to those who have already gone over to the enemy, the responsibility which they have assumed is past and gone.

After an interruption by Mr. HASKIN,* Mr. MILES continued.

Now, sir, the point at which I was, was this: that the responsibility for not organizing the House rests upon those anti-Lecompton Democrats who so far have refused to vote either for the Republican candidate or the Democratic candidate. It is well known, certainly universally believed, that, if these gentlemen would cast their votes with us, we could immediately elect a Speaker. How would we accomplish it? Thus: we have been assured by the southern Opposition that, whenever we can show them that their votes will elect, they will come over and vote for us. Whenever the anti-Lecompton men precede, in other words, they will follow. The combination, of course, elects.

Now, sir, it is simply a question of time with these two parties as to which shall hold out the longest, the anti-Lecompton Democrats or the southern Opposition. It is simply a question with them as to which shall go over first. Now, I ask you gentlemen of both of these parties, whether that is really high or patriotic ground to occupy? When the country is distracted, one of the most important departments of the Government suffering through our inaction, actually threatened with atrophy, and honest contractors on the verge of ruin, I ask you whether this is tenable ground for you to occupy?

But, sir, I have said that I thought the responsibility rested specially upon the anti-Lecompton men, for the reason that they profess to be Democrats; they still retain the name. They call themselves simply anti-Lecompton Democrats, implying that they only differ from the Democratic party upon a single feature, upon a single issue, and that issue one past and gone. I say, Mr. Clerk, can these gentlemen—a mere handful in point of numbers—can they continue to maintain that position before the country, the intelligent people of the country holding them responsible for the non-organization of the House? They are holding off, keeping aloof from us week after week, yet still professing that they are Democrats, still professing that they are opposed to the Republican party; that they stand by the Cincinnati platform; that they have not changed any of their principles; and yet they will not vote with us! One single issue, they say, has torn them apart from their old party associations, and that is an issue which has passed practically from before the country. Why, sir, "Lecompton" has no more to do with the organization of this House than the Chinese war has. Mr. Clerk, what a spectacle do these gentlemen present to the country! May it not be said, "Why here are men who are so embittered by party passions, who have been so soured, rendered so morose," I might almost say "so malignant in their feelings of opposition to the Democratic party, with which they have so long acted, that they are unwilling to make any concession, unwilling to take any step with that party towards a common object and a common end."

Can these gentlemen, then, avoid the responsibility before the country of being, as I termed them yesterday, "the disorganizers" who stand in the way

* The colloquy is too long to insert. It has been published in the *Globe* of the 7th inst.

of the election of a conservative gentleman to preside over the deliberations of this House? They are the wedge that prevents the coming together and coalescing of the elements that would be sufficient to effect an organization; that little wedge removed, and the attainment of our common purpose can be effected. Now, is it not the part of magnanimity and patriotism in those gentlemen to come forward and throw aside the consideration of their personal grievances and their personal wrongs—if they have suffered wrong—and do that which will commend them to the approbation of all good men? Is there any class of their fellow-citizens who would blame them for that act? Is there any party throughout the length and breadth of the country that could justly say that they had been false to any of their professions or recreant to any of their pledges? Some of them have been elected to seats in this House, as I understand, upon the simple question of “opposition to the Administration;” and there is a feeling amounting almost to bitter personal hostility between them and the Administration. But I ask them whether, in effecting the organization of this House—in providing for the payment of debts for which the honor and good faith of the country are pledged—they will allow such motives as these to influence them?

I am a little puzzled, I confess, at the attitude of some of these gentlemen. Either they are in a very vacillating and uncertain frame of mind—constantly in doubt as to which way they should go—or else having arrived at a determination they conceal it from motives of reticence that seem to me as unwise as they are unmanly. I say it is unmanly for any gentleman of the House, at such a time as this, to refuse to announce his principles or to communicate what are his intentions or wishes with reference to its organization. Why should not these gentlemen at once inform this House what course they will pursue? If they desire to show distinctly, openly, and fearlessly, that they have not deserted their principles, are not disposed to follow the evil example of those of their original associates who have already gone over to the Black Republican party, let them come forward now, I again repeat, and show their faith by their works. Let them cast their votes in the only practicable manner in which they can be made effective against the Republican party, by voting for some one who can be elected over the Republican nominee.

Now, sir, with reference to the gentlemen of the southern Opposition I have only this to say, that, while I think the anti Lecompton gentlemen are those who should take the first step in a move toward us, still I think that they, the southern Opposition, should show their magnanimity, manliness, and patriotic spirit, by acting for themselves independently of the action of any other party or set, and in such a way as to defeat our common enemy. If they are willing at some time to vote for us, why not do it now? What is gained by delay? It appears to me nothing under heaven but the mere saving of party pride; and I ask them whether they are not willing to sacrifice that feeling of party pride to attain so great a good as the exclusion of a Black Republican indorser of Helper from a seat in that chair?

Mr. Clerk, I did not intend, as I said, to make a long speech. I do not know what effect these suggestions may have. I have little reason to hope that they will have any more influence than others which have been urged much more forcibly and ably. But believing it to be our first and imperative duty to try every honorable mode of defeating the election of the Black Republican nominee for the Speakership, by endeavoring to combine all the elements which profess undying opposition to him and to his party, I have thrown out hastily these remarks, and let them go for what they are worth.

But, sir, I have another thing to say. Suppose this anti-Lecompton *quintette* still persist in occupying their isolated position. Suppose the southern Opposition still keep aloof from us, and that no effective coalition can be formed; then I have this proposition to make, and I ask the attention of the House while I make it; because I do so in perfect good faith, and with perfect earnestness and sincerity. If, after being here for weary weeks, we find it utterly impossible to organize this House, why should we not follow the example of our brethren in England. Let us “appeal to the country.” We profess to represent the sentiments of our constituents; we profess to come here embodying their views and their convictions on all the great questions that divide the country. Now, sir, either we do or we do not. There is no better time than this to test that question. There is no more effectual mode of doing it than by

“a general election.” Let us have “a dissolution of parliament;” let us “take the sense of the country.” The people of the entire country are more aroused at this particular time to the importance of the great issues of the day than they have been at any previous period in our history.

And, sir, let me say just here to gentlemen of the other side that they greatly underrate, altogether underrate, the profound state of excitement now existing at the South. We are in a state of convulsion. It matters not to argue whether we ought or ought not to be; whether we be so with much or with little reason. I am speaking of *facts*. I am speaking what I know, solemnly know, to be true. It is useless, then, gentlemen, to attempt to ignore the fact that the great mass of the southern people are now in a state of terrible indignation and tremendous excitement. If that fact cannot be demonstrated it is impossible to prove anything by human testimony.

Our position is simply this: that the southern States, being the sole judges of what is best for their own interests, and for their own peace and security, can, whenever they choose, take their destinies into their own hands. We do not intend, therefore, to indulge in any “bluster or bravado” as to what we can do in the event of a disruption of the Union. That is a matter that declamation, menace, rhetorical flourishes, even sober argument, will throw very little light upon; it will have to be submitted to the stern arbitrament of arms. I say that, because I believe that will be inevitable; not because the South would, in case she thought proper (in accordance with her constitutional rights) to retire from this Confederacy, desire to make war upon the North; but because we are constantly warned that, in such an event, the North would make war upon us. Yes, sir, we are told that if we attempt to exercise our undoubted right to withdraw from this Government, in which, as sovereign States, we are peers and equals, we will be treated as revolted provinces, and subjugated by force of arms! Well, sir, the South is arming; and if she be not allowed to secede in peace, she will do it at the cost of war. She is the sole judge of the reasons which shall justify her and the time when it will be expedient for her to break her connections with her northern co-States.

But, sir, there are those, even at the South, who deny the right of peaceable secession, and contend that there is no remedy for intolerable ills arising in this voluntary Confederation of sovereign States short of forcible revolution. Well, in the present condition of things, I will not nicely refine with those who are ready for action. Call it then revolution. Practically it will be that. If we cannot agree on the constitutional right of secession, we can on the inalienable right of revolution. Our forefathers exercised it in 1776, as their forefathers did in 1688. Both of those great events are honored landmarks in the history of our race. I have said that the South, if compelled to dissolve this Confederacy, must be prepared for war; not because she would seek it, but because the North perpetually declares, that if the South does venture to take such a step, the North will not allow her to do it peaceably. And we have been told that the population of the North is too much superior to that of the South to allow us to hope that we could be successful. I do not wish to be diverted into any long argument upon that subject, but I will simply throw out this suggestion to northern men who make the threat: If your eighteen million did overrun our soil, inhabited by but eight million; if you did carry fire and sword with you; if you did deluge our land with blood, burn down our habitations, destroy our property, and devastate our fields, you would still find your work had only begun. Why, sir, the British overran the soil of my State in the Revolution. Did they hold it? No, sir, no power upon earth can hold in subjection, by military force, any considerable portion of the Anglo-Saxon race. The thing is simply an absurdity. Overrun our territory and hold us as subject provinces! Would you have a standing army at the South to hold us in subjection? Would you plant a chain of garrisons from one end of our territory to the other, in order to overawe our people? How preposterous! Do you suppose that the southern States can be held in subjection as Lombardy and Venetia have been held by Austria? I put it to any man of common sense, whether he supposes it possible that the States at the South, with the number of troops which they can at once place in the field, with ample and fertile territory to raise supplies for them, could be subdued and overwhelmed by any force which the North might send against them? I ask any sensible man whether he believes it possible “to whip” those States, as the *Courier and En-*

of capital, which uses them as mere machines and "chattels," which, without pity and without remorse, builds up and cements its colossal fortunes with the sweat of their brows? No sir! We never interfere with the North nor with her system of labor. We have always desired to live in amity and fraternal love (but at the same time *equality*) with the people of the North. I say it, without fear of contradiction, here this day, for it stands recorded forever upon the brightest pages of American history, that the truest men to the principles of *constitutional liberty*, (not "higher law" *license*), for which our fathers bled; the firmest supporters and truest expounders of the constitutional compact, which guarantied the equal rights of these sovereign States, have been the great southern statesmen! Nothing can rob us of that proud record! Yes, sir, the people of the South have been truly a Constitution-studying and a Constitution-loving people. They have never desired anything which they did not honestly and sincerely believe the Constitution gave them; which they did not think they could logically demonstrate that the Constitution gave them. Has that been the feeling at the North? On the contrary, is it not notorious that there is throughout all the northern States a party—small in some, large in others—who not only believe that the labor system at the South—African slavery—on which her very existence, to say nothing of her prosperity, depends, is "sinful" "contrary to the natural rights of man," a "moral and political evil," a "social ulcer," as it has become fashionable to term it; but who are unwilling to admit the binding obligations of the Constitution, which guaranties this system to the South, and who denounce the Constitution itself as "a league with hell and a covenant with the devil?"

But not content with trying to convince us of this by argument—in which we have never hesitated to engage—they now insist that it is their duty to *cure* our disease, because we are too blind, brutish, and ignorant to do it ourselves. Yes, sir, they actually invade our borders and endeavor to apply the "knife" and "actual cautery," fire and sword, to what in their folly they consider "a sore" in our body politic! And reverend doctors at the North, professors of Christian gentleness, smile sadly at their failure, and say "the remedy ought to have been more skillfully and thoroughly applied!" Can the southern people endure this without degradation and ruin? Impossible. We only desire to be let alone; and yet we are constantly told that we are aggressors and agitators. "Slavery aggression!" that is the key note of all the tirades that are uttered against the South. But, sir, the South is not to be discomposed or diverted from her purpose by any such invectives or any such misrepresentations. She is, as I have said, perfectly willing to let the impartial record of history speak for her in the past—she is willing to make her own history in the future.

Mr. Clerk, I repeat that, in my judgment, there is no better course for us to pursue than *now* to put on solemn record, in the most practical, the most obvious, the most unmistakable manner, the real judgment of the people of the whole country upon the absorbing issue which has so long rent and distracted it. If, therefore, we will appeal to them and take their sense on the great question now dividing us—the equality or inequality of the South—I believe that it will either tend to allay agitation, to rebuke fanaticism, to compose existing differences, by showing (what I must confess I have little hope of) that there are conservative men enough at the North to give us some security for the future; to show that the mighty tide of anti-slavery sentiment is at last beginning to ebb—or, if it does not do that, then, sir, it will put on solemn record the fact that at this great crisis of our history, when the northern people were urgently and gravely appealed to, to say whether or not they would save this Union of our forefathers by yielding to the South the rights which those forefathers sacredly guarantied, they deliberately decided that the Union was not worth saving, and severed the bond which bound us together!

Now, sir, whenever they make that deliberate decision, the course of the South is plain. She will hold up that decision before the world, and take the judgment of the tribunal of nations upon it. She will assume her independent position among the Powers of the earth, and none "can make her afraid" She will march on steadily to the fulfillment of her high mission, desiring the friendship of all—dreading the enmity of none. If attacked, she will be ready to face the world in arms; for Justice and Truth will be on her side, and her trust will be in the God of battles, who is likewise the God of justice and of truth!