

THE QUESTION BEFORE THE PEOPLE.

Shall Slavery or Freedom Prevail?

A SPEECH BY CARL SCHURZ OF WISCONSIN.

Delivered at Chicago Sept. 28, 1858.

The remarks I am going to offer will not be of the exciting and enthusiastic kind. I will make no constitutional arguments, nor will I quote authorities, nor shall I indulge in personal invectives against Buchanan, Douglas or any other man. I will speak to your understanding, and call your attention to some of the simple and broad principles which rule the development of human affairs.

The destinies of nations and countries are indeed not governed by majorities and governmental authority alone. You will sometimes see nations struggle with almost superhuman efforts against certain impending dangers; but an overruling fatality seems to frustrate all their exertions. This overruling fatality, which stands above the power of majorities and governments, I will call with a simple term—the logic of things and events. It is the close connection between cause and effect, between principle and fact—a connection which cannot be severed, and the clear knowledge of which is the only safe foundation of political wisdom.

I have been taught by history that a democratic system of government, although it may overcome local and temporary inconveniences, cannot bear a direct contradiction between political principles on the one and social institutions on the other side. Such inconsistencies will and must bring forth questions and conflicts involving the very foundations of popular liberty. They may appear in different shapes, but when they have once taken possession of the political mind they will be subordinate to them; they will form the only legitimate line of distinction between parties, and all attempts to divert public attention from them or to palliate them with compromises, or secondary issues, will prove futile and abortive. Their final decision, either by one or the other, will decide the practical existence of the system.

Such a contradiction is that between Liberty, founded upon the natural rights of man, and Slavery, founded upon usurpation; between Democracy, which is the life-element of our Federal Constitution, and Privilege, which is the life-element of the slaveholding system of the Southern States.

I do not intend to make an Anti-Slavery speech, in the common understanding of the term, dwelling at length upon the sufferings of the bondmen and the cruelty of the master, and the sinfulness of sin in general. My purpose is to investigate, from a political standpoint, the logical connection between the two questions, which spring from the mixture of the contradictory principles of Slavery and Democracy. When in a democratic community there is a powerful individual, or an association, or a class of men, whose claims and pretensions are in conflict with the natural rights of man in general, or with the legitimate claims of individuals, and who deem their own particular interests above all others, and who are in danger, when such an individual or class of men find that their claims and pretensions cannot stand before a free criticism, they will spare no effort to impose silence upon the organs of public opinion; they will use force and argument to the full extent of their power, and will concentrate all political power in their hands, to use it as machinery for the promotion of their selfish ends, and as a safeguard of their particular interests. They will resort to usurpation, when by constitutional means they can exercise no absolute control.

States which are ruled by absolute monarchs, the public press is uncontrolled for no other reason than that absolute and its excesses cannot stand before the free criticism of public opinion, and the monarchs are therefore obliged to suppress it. In a democratic community, however, the public press is uncontrolled for no other reason than that the monarchs are therefore obliged to suppress it. In a democratic community, however, the public press is uncontrolled for no other reason than that the monarchs are therefore obliged to suppress it.

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by artificial means. It will break forth again and again with increased fury, and will urge on and on to a final crisis. Aye, Sir, your standard bearer is right, in spite of the Federal Constitution. A house that is divided against itself cannot stand. [Loud cheers.] It cannot stand! It must fall unless it cease to be divided. [Continued applause.] By the inexorable, uncompromising logic of things, we must either go one way or the other: not as Mr. Douglas tries to make you believe, make all States slave or free by the principle of equal rights, even among white men, adapt the whole development of our political organization to the paramount interests of a privileged class of slaveholders, but the liberties of speech and press at the mercy of the ruling power, and sacrifice our democratic principles to the aristocratic and despotic tendencies of the slave system throughout, or we must break the political power of Slavery in our national concerns, and return to the original principles on which this Republic was founded. In one word, we must formally recognize Slavery as the ruling interest in our national policy, or we must demand that the government should not be confined to a merely local existence under positive State legislation. [Cheers.] This is the alternative.

Now, quibbles you will, devise side issues and subtuges, invent palliative remedies, delude others and delude yourselves with fictitious compromises. You will say, we will again begin by law, all our plainabilities and sophistries, and say to you with the stern voice of inexorable fate: "Here am I! You have not seen me, perhaps, but here I am!" [Cheers.] And now there comes a man like Mr. Douglas, who ought to understand the signs of the times, and gives it as his opinion that Slavery and Democracy, having lived side by side these eighty years, may live on together, and that the narrow limits of the Federal Constitution do not see it. The same man, who once, in the name of the slaveholders, cried out to the champions of Freedom in the Senate: "We will subdue you! He does not see that somebody or something must be subdued." [Applause.] A blind man does not see the sun, and a deaf man does not feel the bolt of lightning when it strikes him down. [Repeated applause.] Aye, Sir, Slavery and Democracy did live side by side these eighty years. But how did they live? Like two combatants who held each other by the throat, each watching his chance to strangle the other. Is it not so?

Has Mr. Douglas seen or heard nothing of the din and clamor of that battle which has raged with but short and apparent intermission since the time when the ruling parties of this Republic deviated from the original policy of the Revolutionary Fathers, to concede to the narrow limits of the Federal Constitution a gradual abolition by local legislation? Does he know nothing of the ridiculous failure of all the compromises that were called final settlements? May he, he is not so blind, but what he sees. Perhaps it does not suit him. [Cheers.] The conflict between Slavery and Democracy might have been settled in the spirit of the Revolutionary Fathers, by a simple and direct admission as a Slave State. It is represented to be finally settled by the Missouri Compromise. And there it again is lurking under the tariff question. It assumes threatening dimensions in the question of the annexation of Texas and the Territories acquired from Mexico. It is again said to be finally settled by the Kansas-Nebraska Bill. Mr. Douglas then claims admission as a Slave State. It is represented to be finally settled by the Missouri Compromise. And there it again is lurking under the tariff question. It assumes threatening dimensions in the question of the annexation of Texas and the Territories acquired from Mexico. It is again said to be finally settled by the Kansas-Nebraska Bill. Mr. Douglas then claims admission as a Slave State.

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of that antagonism, which has convulsed the country for the last forty years, but a worthless treacherous counterfeit. It is a wild delusion—if you will not go so far as to call it an imposition and a lie. [Applause.] Popular sovereignty, in the true sense of the term, means the sovereignty of all individuals, so organized as to give a common expression to the collective will. Its foundation only lies in the recognition of man. Its foundation only lies in the recognition of man. Its foundation only lies in the recognition of man. Its foundation only lies in the recognition of man.

But what means Mr. Douglas's great principle of Popular Sovereignty? He says and the people of the Territory have the right to decide whether they will have Slavery or not—that is to say, whether the employer may own his laborer, or whether he shall hire him. Did Slavery exist in those Territories at the time of the enactment of the Nebraska bill? No, it did not. Well, how the people shall decide, it did not. Well, how the people shall decide, it did not. Well, how the people shall decide, it did not. Well, how the people shall decide, it did not.

Common sense tells you that true Popular Sovereignty can have no other basis than the liberty of all men; that true Popular Sovereignty means the removal of all barriers which the ingenuity of despotism has set to human liberty; and that the true foundation of American Popular Sovereignty is the right of Slavery to exist where it is not expressly prohibited; and that it means the removal of all barriers which American patriotism has set to human bondage. [Applause.] If you could ask Washington, Franklin, Jefferson, Madison, or Henry Clay, how they would have acted if they would christen this abominable mixture with the great name of Popular Sovereignty. They would have stigmatized it as a contemptible bastard, begotten in the adulterous embrace of Democracy and Slavery, with the features of liberty on its face, but with the black venom of despotism in its heart. [Loud and continued applause.]

Repeat, I say, this so-called Popular Sovereignty is but a new embodiment of the old antagonism, but a new sign board to the old concern; a new melody to the old song [cheers]; a new trap set for old fools. [Thundering applause.] It is the old mistake, the old confusion of ideas, there is nothing new in it but one feature, and that is, a new period in the history of this country, the contests between Freedom and Slavery struck by the fathers of the Republic and the subsequent generation of statesmen were compromised between a principle and an interest. Endeavoring to reconcile the social institutions of this country to the fundamental principle of the Republic, the fathers of this Republic labored for the gradual abolition of Slavery, wherever they could reach it. But, unable to extinguish it at once, they made concessions to Slavery as an unfortunate existing fact, without recognizing in it any principle from which it might derive any national right, or from which it might derive any national right, or from which it might derive any national right.

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in its direction, or the strength of both being equal, will bear the train to pieces, and I tell you all measures like the Nebraska bill will be torn to pieces by the different constructions put upon them. What else, therefore, is Douglas's "great principle" but wild delusion? What else is his "great principle" but wild delusion? What else is his "great principle" but wild delusion? What else is his "great principle" but wild delusion?

There is the same struggle, everywhere, at all times, and in all places, between the two principles of Slavery and Democracy. The clearest heads of the slaveholding States tell you openly that Slavery cannot thrive unless it is allowed to expand. And common sense must tell you that the Slave Power cannot rule unless you submit to its dictation with a cowardly and a slavish acquiescence. Mr. Douglas, in the name of all that is good and great, if Slavery cannot thrive unless it is allowed to expand—pen it up! [Applause.] If the Slave Power cannot rule unless you submit to its dictation with a cowardly and a slavish acquiescence, Mr. Douglas, in the name of all that is good and great, if Slavery cannot thrive unless it is allowed to expand—pen it up! [Applause.]

I will not waste your time by demonstrating that the power of Congress to exclude Slavery from the national territory is a mere nullity, and that the power of Congress to exclude Slavery from the national territory is a mere nullity, and that the power of Congress to exclude Slavery from the national territory is a mere nullity, and that the power of Congress to exclude Slavery from the national territory is a mere nullity.

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appointment; there is peace and prosperity—choose. [Cheers.] Do you not think that such words will make them stand in amazement at the words, "peace and prosperity," by the alien triumph of an earthquake beneath their very feet? They will certainly not abolish slavery at once. They will not suddenly cast off that singular chain of ideas which has bound them to the old order of things. Per do not forget that interest is with them not only, and perhaps not even the most powerful advocate of slavery. It cannot have escaped you that the slavery question is a question of aristocratic principle, that they look down upon the plebeians of the North with a certain contempt, and want to rule the governments of their States and the Federal Government also, not as mere citizens, but as slaveholders. It is the pride of an aristocracy, the ambition of a caste. Agrarianism, the pride and ambition of a caste. Agrarianism, the pride and ambition of a caste. Agrarianism, the pride and ambition of a caste.

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