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Seward and Douglas in Iowa

Never in the history of Iowa were conventions and campaigns more numerous than in 1860. Great men were sparring for the presidential nomination and election, and transcendent issues depended upon the contest. On one side was the Democratic party, looking to the past, weakened by many defeats and divided in council. In front of it moved the Republican party led on by James W. Grimes, James Harlan, Samuel J. Kirkwood, and John A. Kasson. Strong in the strength of its youth and in its supremacy in every department of political power it looked to the future for the solution of the dominant issues.

For the last time ante-bellum issues were to be led into the arena of debate and discussion. Compro-

[This story of an Iowa phase of national politics just before the Civil War is adapted for THE PALIMPSEST mainly from an article by Louis Pelzer published in *The Iowa Journal of History and Politics*, Vol. VII, in April, 1909.—THE EDITOR]

mises of the past were to be settled by contests. Strained relations were to divide or to harden political ties, and passion was often to sever personal bonds. In brief the year 1860 was the preparation and the prelude for the final act of a drama which had been acted by a generation of statesmen. It is the rôle that Iowa played in this preparation which offers a study of strong political actors, motives, and changing scenes.

Partisan feeling ran high. Governor Kirkwood, in his inaugural address, blamed the Democrats for the "impending crisis" and boldly declared that while the people of the north utterly condemned the recent act of John Brown, they admired his disinterestedness of purpose and "the unflinching courage and calm cheerfulness with which he met the consequences of his failure." Such an official expression of sympathy for the raid on Harper's Ferry provoked severe Democratic condemnation. National issues dominated the political situation and the attention of the public was focused early upon the presidential campaign. Iowa delegates to the national Republican convention were selected on January 18th, while the Democrats of Iowa celebrated Washington's birthday by choosing delegates to attend their national party convention at Charleston, South Carolina, and vote as a unit for the nomination of Stephen A. Douglas.

As early as January 5th, the Tipton *Cedar Democrat* had named Stephen A. Douglas as a consistent,

unswerving, union-loving Democrat who ought to be President, though the *Le Claire Register* claimed the honor of having first printed the name of Douglas at the head of its editorial columns. In common with the policy of Democratic organs, R. H. Sylvester of the *Iowa City State Reporter* reposed his choice in the prospective nominee of the national convention to meet at Charleston on April 23, 1860. This man, everybody expected and the majority of the Democrats of Iowa hoped, would be Stephen Arnold Douglas of Illinois. A few seemed to favor James Buchanan or John C. Breckenridge, but in general harmony was counselled and acrimonious prejudice or abuse was deplored.

Expressions from Republicans as to presidential preferences were conspicuously absent in Iowa. Timidity, doubt, and a fear of creating a discordant discussion made Republican editors withhold the names of their favorites for the presidential race. Even Horace Greeley's early advocacy of Edward Bates roused a protest from the German Republicans of Davenport. A week before the meeting of the national convention in Chicago on May 16th the editor of the *Davenport Gazette* wrote: "We have advocated the claims of no man whose name has been mentioned in connection with this nomination, and we do not intend to do so at this late day. Not a name has been mentioned with any great prominence as a candidate for the nomination of the Chicago Convention, whom we would not heartily

and with our whole might support, if the choice of that body. All maintaining the same political principles, we regard this choice as a mere question of men and popularity."

In the Republican convention at Chicago the Iowa delegation was honored by important places in the organization and upon committees. Horace Greeley thought that the satisfactory character of the platform was due preëminently to John A. Kasson, "whose efforts to reconcile differences and secure the largest liberty of sentiment consistent with fidelity to Republican principles, were most effective and untiring. I think", he wrote, "no former platform ever reflected more fairly and fully the average convictions of a great National party."

The discordant Democratic national convention which met at Charleston in April adjourned after a large body of delegates from the South had withdrawn and the remainder had cast fifty-seven ballots in a futile effort to agree upon a presidential candidate. On June 18th the regular faction reconvened at Baltimore and nominated Douglas as the presidential standard-bearer, while about a week later the seceding Democrats unanimously selected John C. Breckenridge as the Southern hope. Meanwhile the Constitutional Union party had entered John Bell in the race for the Presidency.

Never had Iowa furnished a more brilliant and a more aggressive galaxy of speakers than in this campaign. James Harlan, who had been reëlected

Senator on January 14, 1860, was everywhere in demand; immense throngs listened to Governor Kirkwood; powerful speeches were delivered by Senator Grimes; editors often exchanged their editorial chairs for the stump; William Vandever and Samuel R. Curtis made long speaking tours; while the Republican candidates for presidential electors and scores of minor speakers did noble work for Lincoln and Hamlin.

Among the Democratic campaigners Ben M. Samuels and C. C. Cole were foremost in urging the election of Douglas; Lincoln Clark spoke frequently; LeGrand Byington bitterly assailed Kirkwood, Lincoln, and the Republicans generally; the candidates for State offices presented their claims, and the Reverend Henry Clay Dean — more deserving of the cap and bells than the cloth — perambulated the State from one end to the other. Neither the Breckenridge nor the Bell men seem to have conducted an aggressive campaign in Iowa and neither seemed to gather force as the day of election approached.

Never were ratification meetings, mass meetings, rallies, and joint discussions more numerous. Scores of Douglas clubs were formed while the "Wide Awake" clubs of the Republicans guarded the interests of Lincoln. Instances of personal violence were of common occurrence and personal abuse and vituperation were by-products of this campaign. But in all these features there is dis-

cernible a deeper appreciation of the grave and momentous issues of this contest.

A noteworthy event in the campaign was the speech of William H. Seward at Dubuque on September 21, 1860, in which he pleaded earnestly for the election of the man who four months before had defeated him for the nomination for the Presidency. Under Democratic rule, the speaker stated, the policy of the federal government had been to extend and fortify African slave labor in the United States. "Our policy," declared Mr. Seward, "stated as simply as I have stated that of our adversaries, is, *to circumscribe slavery, and to fortify and extend free labor or freedom.*"

The various compromises on the slavery question were then reviewed, free labor in Iowa was contrasted with slave labor, the claims of Douglas and Breckenridge were considered, and he argued that when a Territory is admitted as a State it shall, like Iowa, be left untrammelled and uncrippled by slave labor. "A strange feeling of surprise comes over me," he said, "that I should be here in the State of Iowa, the State redeemed in the compromise of 1820; a State peopled by freemen; that I should be here in such a State before such a people, imploring the citizens of the State of Iowa to maintain the cause of Freedom instead of the cause of Slavery."

Still more notable was the visit of Stephen A. Douglas to Iowa during which he spoke at Cedar Rapids and at Iowa City in the month of October.

The booming of cannon and the cheers from thousands of Democratic admirers greeted the "Little Giant" when he arrived at Iowa City in the forenoon of Tuesday, October 9, 1860. With him came also a group of Chicago Democrats who were escorted to the Crummey House where a reception was held in honor of the candidate. Augustus Caesar Dodge, Douglas's former colleague in the Senate, had also come to enjoy this gala day.

A large number of wagons, bearing hickory poles and Union colors, formed a conspicuous part of the grand procession from the station to the hotel, "perhaps the most attractive feature of which was a delegation of patriotic ladies from Richmond, clothed in honest 'hickory' and indicating by their presence and enthusiasm, a just appreciation of the man and the cause, to which they were doing honor." Music was furnished by three bands.

Stephen Arnold Douglas was in his forty-eighth year when he rose in the afternoon to address the Democracy of Iowa. Veteran and victor in a score of political contests, this campaign was the last time (as it proved) that he attempted to stem the tide of public opinion. He was weary and worn from months of speaking and was suffering from a hoarseness that hindered his speech. He had spoken ten times on the day before, which, he humorously remarked, had been one of his "leisure days".

With his wonted skill he at once gained the confidence of the large audience by complimenting the

intelligence and the greatness of Iowa, and by recounting his own share in bringing the State into the Union. Why could not all factions return to the doctrine of non-interference and non-intervention as all parties did in 1850, he urged. The Democratic platform stood for this and the Democratic party had fought both northern and southern fanaticism. "If you would banish the slavery question from the halls of Congress," he declared, "and leave the people to decide it, northern abolitionism would not last a week, and southern disunion would die in a day."

Northern Republicans, complained Douglas, were demanding that Congress prohibit slavery wherever people wanted it, while the Breckenridge men were insisting that Congress should maintain and protect it where the people did not want it. The Republicans wanted Congress to act for the North and the southern disunionists for the South. "Have you ever seen a Republican leader who did not say he preferred Breckenridge to Douglas?" demanded the speaker.

A voice here interrupted saying that the Southerners were not disunionists. "Why then did they secede at Charleston?" asked the speaker. "Not to defeat Lincoln but to defeat me; they are dividing the party for the benefit of Lincoln."

"They can't divide us here," assured a faithful Democrat. "We are all for Douglas."

The patriotism of the politician now showed itself,

when he denounced all threats of disunion. "I tell you people of Iowa to-day," rang his words, "that whoever is elected President, must be inaugurated, and after he is inaugurated he must be supported in the exercise of all his just powers. If after that he violates the Constitution, I would help punish him in obedience to it, by hanging him as a traitor to his country."

Cheers, applause, and shouts of approval punctuated this speech which found a warm response in Democratic hearts. His hoarseness increased but he continued. "This Union can not be dissolved without severing the ties that bind the heart of the daughter to the mother and the son to the father. This Union can not be dissolved without separating us from the graves of our ancestors. We are bound to the South as well as to the East, by the ties of commerce, of business, and of interest. We must follow, with our produce in all time to come, the course of the Mississippi River to the broad ocean. Hence, we can not permit this Union to be dissolved. It must be preserved. And how? Only by preserving inviolate the Constitution as our fathers made it."

Partisan newspaper accounts varied widely as to the character and reception of Douglas and his ideas in Iowa City. The Democratic *State Press* asserted that his welcome was "the largest and most enthusiastic political demonstration, ever witnessed in Iowa City, if not in the State." A Republican editor con-

sidered the crowd "very respectable being fully one half Republican", and estimated that four thousand people were in attendance; but other "competent judges", probably Democratic, thought that the throng numbered twelve or fifteen thousand. The Democrats were delighted over the "bold and logical" speech by "the foremost statesman of the country and the boldest champion of principles which can only be trampled under foot upon the ruins of a dismembered Republic." They were convinced that no man was dearer in the affections of the party than Douglas, the "Giant of the West".

But the Republicans viewed the Douglas rally in quite a different light. Under the caption, "Ye Little Giant", the editor of the *Iowa City Republican* wrote: "According to programme, the great 'Squatter' made his appearance in our City, on Tuesday. His coming on the cars from Davenport was announced by the firing of cannon, a condition we are told precedent to his consent to visit a town or city. He was welcomed at the Depot by some thousand men, women and children, and immediately thereafter fell into a mixed procession, which marched about town for an hour or more, fetching up at the Crummey House, on Washington Street. At two o'clock he was escorted to the Park, and delivered himself of a characteristic speech of about forty-four minutes. It abounded with sophistry, assertions unsupported by truth, egotism and brag. To hear him talk, a person unacquainted with

Douglas' political life, would think that he was the Maker of heaven and earth, and held the keys to the 'other place', whither he purposed consigning Breckenridge and all such as do not fall down and worship him. His speech was a medley of bold assertions and denunciations against all who refuse to shout hosannas to Douglas and 'my Great principle'. His speech fell far short of the public expectation, and disappointed many of his political friends. We heard from a number of sources, so far from making converts to his political creed, that his coming actually augmented the Republican ranks. Neither his appearance nor his speech met the measure of the people's expectation. This we knew would be the case, and from the first information of his coming, we have publicly and privately expressed our gratification at the promise of his visit to Iowa City. A Presidential Stumper always appears better in the distance." After mentioning some other efforts of the Democrats to instruct the "great unwashed", the reporter concluded that "if claptrap, gammon, and unexampled mendacity, would elect a man President, Douglas would be elected over the combined forces of the opposition."

Prophecies and forecasts — those volatile elements of all political campaigns — became more and more numerous. The October elections of other States gave moral stimulus to Republicanism in Iowa. But Democrats as well as Republicans were surprised at the magnitude and number of Repub-

lican majorities in the election of November 6, 1860. The Republican triumph was as complete as it was overwhelming. The popular vote in Iowa for President stood: Lincoln, 70,118; Douglas, 55,639; Breckenridge, 1,034, and Bell, 1,763. At the head of the State ticket Elijah Sells polled 70,706, a majority of 13,670 over J. M. Corse, for the office of Secretary of State. The remainder of the Republican ticket was elected by almost equally large majorities.

With the election of Abraham Lincoln the antebellum period of Iowa political history ends: decades of slavery agitation and compromises evolve into the issues of secession and union. The political historian must write "of arms and the man"—and the man is Lincoln, rather than Douglas; Kirkwood, rather than Jones; and Grimes, rather than Dodge. And no longer can the questions of the hour be settled by Chief Justice Taney in the Supreme Court, but rather by General Grant at Appomattox Court House.

LOUIS PELZER