

## Report of Speech at Leavenworth, Kansas

Abraham Lincoln

Daily Illinois State Journal

December 3, 1859

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``LADIES AND GENTLEMEN: You are, as yet, the people of a Territory; but you probably soon will be the people of a State of the

Union. Then you will be in possession of new privileges, and new duties will be upon you. You will have to bear a part in all that pertains to the administration of the National Government. That government, from the beginning, has had, has now, and must continue to have a policy in relation to domestic slavery. It cannot, if it would, be without a policy upon that subject. And that policy must, of necessity, take one of two directions. It must deal with the institution as being wrong or as not being wrong.”

Mr. Lincoln then stated, somewhat in detail, the early action of the General Government upon the question---in relation to the foreign slave trade, the basis of Federal representation, and the prohibition of slavery in the Federal territories; the Fugitive Slave clause in the Constitution, and insisted that, plainly that early policy, was based on the idea of slavery being wrong; and tolerating it so far, and only so far, as the necessity of its actual presence required.

He then took up the policy of the Kansas-Nebraska act, which he argued was based on opposite ideas---that is, the idea that slavery is not wrong. He said: ``You, the people of Kansas, furnish the example of the first application of this new policy. At the end of about five years, after having almost continual struggles, fire and bloodshed, over this very question, and after having framed several State Constitutions, you have, at last, secured a Free State Constitution, under which you will probably be admitted into the Union. You have, at last, at the end of all this difficulty, attained what we, in the old North-western Territory, attained without any difficulty at all. Compare, or rather contrast, the actual working of this new policy with that of the old, and say whether, after all, the old way---the way adopted by Washington and his compeers---was not the better way.”

Mr. Lincoln argued that the new policy had proven false to all its promises---that its promise to the Nation was to speedily end the slavery agitation, which it had not done, but directly the contrary---that its promises to the people of the Territories was to give them greater control of their own affairs than the people of former Territories had had; while, by the actual experiment, they had had less control of their own affairs, and had been more bedeviled by outside interference than the people of any other Territory ever had.

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He insisted that it was deceitful in its expressed wish to confer additional privileges upon the people; else it would have conferred upon them the privilege of choosing their own officers. That if there be any just reason why all the privileges of a State should not be conferred on the people of a Territory at once, it only could be the smallness of numbers; and that if while their number was small, they were fit to do some things, and unfit to do others, it could only be because those they were unfit to do, were the larger and more important things--that, in this case, the allowing the people of Kansas to plant their soil with slavery, and not allowing them to choose their own Governor, could only be justified on the idea that the planting a new State with slavery was a very small matter, and the election of Governor a very much greater matter. "Now," said he, "compare these two matters and decide which is really the greater. You have already had, I think, five Governors, and yet, although their doings, in their respective days, were of some little interest to you, it is doubtful whether you now, even remember the names of half of them. They are gone (all but the last) without leaving a trace upon your soil, or having done a single act which can, in the least degree, help or hurt you, in all the indefinite future before you. This is the size of the Governor question. Now, how is it with the slavery question? If your first settlers had so far decided in favor of slavery, as to have got five thousand slaves planted on your soil, you could, by no moral possibility, have adopted a Free State Constitution. Their owners would be influential voters among you as good men as the rest of you, and, by their greater wealth, and consequent, greater capacity, to assist the more needy, perhaps the most influential among you. You

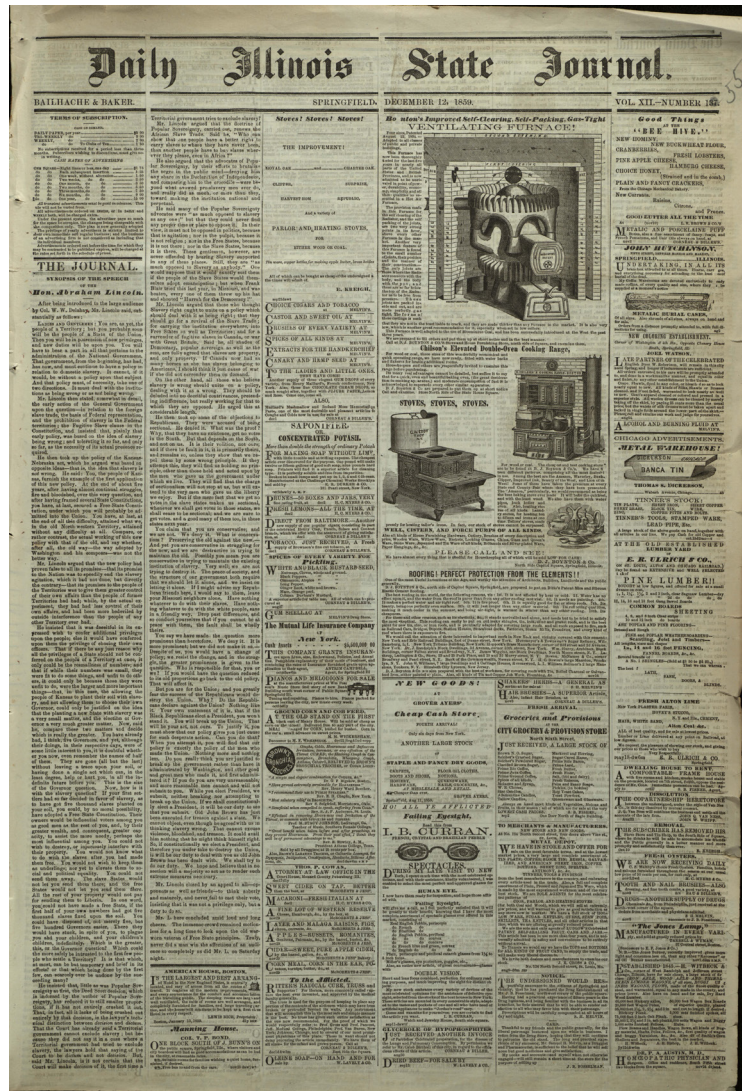


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could not wish to destroy, or injuriously interfere with their property. You would not know what to do with the slaves after you had made them free. You would not wish to keep them as underlings; nor yet to elevate them to social and political equality. You could not send them away. The slave States would not let you send them there; and the free States would not let you send them there. All the rest of your property would not pay for sending them to Liberia. In one word, you could not have made a free State, if the first half of your own numbers had got five thousand slaves fixed upon the soil. You could have disposed of, not merely five, but five hundred Governors easier. There they would have stuck, in spite of you, to plague you and your children, and your children's children, indefinitely. Which is the greater, this, or the Governor question? Which could the more safely be intrusted to the first few people who settle a Territory? Is it that which, at most, can be but temporary and brief in its effects? or that which being done by the first few, can scarcely ever be undone by the succeeding many?"

He insisted that, little as was Popular Sovereignty at first, the Dred Scott decision, which is indorsed by the author of Popular Sovereignty, has reduced it to still smaller proportions, if it has not entirely crushed it out. That, in fact, all it lacks of being crushed out entirely by that decision, is the lawyer's technical distinction between decision and dictum. That the Court has already said a Territorial government cannot exclude slavery; but because they did not say it in a case where a Territorial government had tried to exclude slavery, the lawyers hold that saying of the Court to be dictum and not decision. "But," said Mr. Lincoln, "is it not certain that the Court will make a decision of it, the first time a Territorial government tries to exclude slavery?"

Mr. Lincoln argued that the doctrine of Popular Sovereignty, carried out, renews the African Slave Trade. Said he: "Who can show that one people have a better right to carry slaves to where they have never been, than another people have to buy slaves wherever they please, even in Africa?"

He also argued that the advocates of Popular Sovereignty, by their efforts to brutalize the negro in the public mind---denying him any share in the Declaration of Independence, and comparing him to the crocodile---were beyond what avowed pro-slavery men ever do, and really did as much, or more than they, toward making the institution national and perpetual.

He said many of the Popular Sovereignty advocates were "as much opposed to slavery as any one;" but that they could never find any proper time or place to oppose it. In their view, it must not be opposed in politics, because that is agitation; nor in the pulpit, because it is not religion; nor in the Free States, because it is not there; nor in the Slave States, because it is there. These gentlemen, however, are never offended by hearing Slavery supported in any of these places. Still, they are "as much opposed to Slavery as anybody." One would suppose that it would exactly suit them if the people of the Slave States would themselves adopt emancipation; but when Frank Blair tried this last year, in Missouri, and was beaten, every one of them threw up his hat and shouted "Hurrah for the Democracy!"

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Mr. Lincoln argued that those who thought Slavery right ought to unite on a policy which should deal with it as being right; that they should go for a revival of the Slave Trade; for carrying the institution everywhere, into Free States as well as Territories; and for a surrender of fugitive slaves in Canada, or war with Great Britain. Said he, "all shades of Democracy, popular sovereign as well as the rest, are fully agreed that slaves are property, and only property. If Canada now had as many horses as she has slaves belonging to Americans, I should think it just cause of war if she did not surrender them on demand.

"On the other hand, all those who believe slavery is wrong should unite on a policy, dealing with it as a wrong. They should be deluded into no deceitful contrivances, pretending indifference, but really working for that to which they are opposed." He urged this at considerable length.

He then took up some of the objections to Republicans. They were accused of being sectional. He denied it. What was the proof? "Why, that they have no existence, get no votes in the South. But that depends on the South, and not on us. It is their volition, not ours; and if there be fault in it, it is primarily theirs, and remains so, unless they show that we repeal them by some wrong principle. If they attempt this, they will find us holding no principle, other than those held and acted upon by the men who gave us the government under which we live. They will find that the charge of sectionalism will not stop at us, but will extend to the very men who gave us the liberty we enjoy. But if the mere fact that we get no votes in the slave states makes us sectional, whenever we shall get votes in those states, we shall cease to be sectional; and we are sure to get votes, and a good many of them too, in these states next year.

"You claim that you are conservative; and we are not. We deny it. What is conservatism? Preserving the old against the new. And yet you are conservative in struggling for the new, and we are destructive in trying to maintain the old. Possibly you mean you are conservative in trying to maintain the existing institution of slavery. Very well; we are not trying to destroy it. The peace of society, and the structure of our government both require that we should let it alone, and we insist on letting it alone. If I might advise my Republican friends here, I would say to them, leave your Missouri neighbors alone. Have nothing whatever to do with their slaves. Have nothing whatever to do with the white people, save in a friendly way. Drop past differences, and so conduct yourselves that if you cannot be at peace with them, the fault shall be wholly theirs.

"You say we have made the question more prominent than heretofore. We deny it. It is more prominent; but we did not make it so. Despite of us, you would have a change of policy; we resist the change, and in the struggle, the greater prominence is given to the question. Who is responsible for that, you or we? If you would have the question reduced to its old proportions go back to the old policy. That will effect it.

"But you are for the Union; and you greatly fear the success of the Republicans would destroy the Union. Why? Do the Republicans declare against the Union? Nothing like it. Your own statement of it is, that if the Black Republicans elect a President, you won't stand it. You will break up the Union. That will be your act,

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not ours. To justify it, you must show that our policy gives you just cause for such desperate action. Can you do that? When you attempt it, you will find that our policy is exactly the policy of the men who made the Union. Nothing more and nothing less. Do you really think you are justified to break up the government rather than have it administered by Washington, and other good and great men who made it, and first administered it? If you do you are very unreasonable; and more reasonable men cannot and will not submit to you. While you elect [the] President, we submit, neither breaking nor attempting to break up the Union. If we shall constitutionally elect a President, it will be our duty to see that you submit. Old John Brown has just been executed for treason against a state. We cannot object, even though he agreed with us in thinking slavery wrong. That cannot excuse violence, bloodshed, and treason. It could avail him nothing that he might think himself right. So, if constitutionally we elect a President, and therefore you undertake to destroy the Union, it will be our duty to deal with you as old John Brown has been dealt with. We shall try to do our duty. We hope and believe that in no section will a majority so act as to render such extreme measures necessary.”

Mr. Lincoln closed by an appeal to all---opponents as well as friends---to think soberly and maturely, and never fail to cast their vote, insisting that it was not a privilege only, but a duty to do so.

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**Transcript Source:** Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln. Volume 3. edited by Roy P. Basler et al

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