

Against Restricting Slavery

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OVERVIEW

During the debate in 1819 over admitting Missouri to the Union as a slave state, the Southern press reacted strongly against the antislavery speeches of Rufus King. The *Richmond Enquirer* ran a series of articles opposing King's position, including the following anonymous article, signed "A Southron."

GUIDED READING As you read, consider the following questions:

- According to this article, why have people like King sought to restrict slavery?
 - What arguments are offered against restricting slavery?
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THE CONGRESS of the United States have again before them the deeply interesting Missouri question. In my judgment, the petty concern of an acquisition of barren territory and even the danger of a war with a decrepit foe, in comparison with it, sink into insignificance. The matter is to preserve the happiness we already possess; to perpetuate this noble confederacy; to brighten the chain which binds together a band of brothers, instead of lighting up the torch of discord which will blaze like a bale fire from one end of the continent to the other. The harmony of the present moment, the happiness of the future, the independence of the states, the continuance of their Union, even the preservation of the unimpaired sovereignty of this ancient and venerable member of the confederacy may perhaps hang upon the decision to this interesting question.

Let not then a disgraceful supineness possess us; let not "the fatal coma," which has been eloquently declared to have seized upon the people, overcome us longer with lethargic slumber; let not a legislative body, which has hitherto been distinguished "for auguring maladministration at a distance and scenting the approach of tyranny in every tainted breeze," sleep upon their posts at this interesting moment when the enemies of our institutions are throwing up outworks which, at a period not remote, may be used for the subversion of our sovereignty and independence.

It were charity to hope that the motives which have dictated the late attempt to introduce restrictions into the constitution of Missouri were as praiseworthy as they affect to be. But we cannot "wink so hard" as to be insensible to the political object which some of the statesmen of the East would fain conceal. The pretexts of humanity and a love of liberty are too flimsy a veil to hide from our view the political hostility which governs these.

Humanity! Where is the humanity of resisting the only feasible plan of future emancipation? Can we expect an event so desirable in the Southern states, while their numbers so far exceed the numbers of whites? Shall we oppose that dispersion of them through the Western states, which, by lessening the excess, may at a future day render practicable the schemes of philanthropy for their relief? Shall we adopt the barbarous principles of affected benevolence in imposing a check on the increase of black population by excluding them from an emigration to a country more salubrious and fertile than they now inhabit, and affording more abundantly the means of subsistence and comfort? Admirable philanthropists, who have religion and humanity on their lips, and look to the diminution of slave population from the combined operations of pestilence and famine!

But while humanity cannot offer an apology for this outrage upon the rights of the South, it is easily explained by the antipathies of certain politicians, and their jealousy of the influence of the Southern states in the councils of the nation. Rob us of our just portion of the territory which has been jointly purchased by the treasures of the nation and the valley of the Mississippi will be settled by the sons of the Eastern people, the inheritors of their fathers' prejudices; new states will spring up, emulous of setting new limits to Southern domination; swarms of "Southern slaveholders" will no longer crowd the halls of Congress and "sear the eyeballs" of their jealous countrymen; "the scepter will depart from Judah"; and Virginia influence—so magnified and deprecated—will be heard of no more!

If rumor has not deceived us, there may be other objects more immediate to be attained by this modern crusade against the rights of the people of the South. Some master spirit of the North may expect to ride on this popular wave to the lofty pinnacle of his ambition. Whatever is indecorous in personality or unparliamentary in abuse has been abundantly poured forth by those frothy declaimers against the unavoidable domestic slavery of the South. They have assumed to themselves the power of making a form of government for others, and have supported so insolent a pretension by arguments and language no less insolent and offensive.

And when they have succeeded in excluding from the Western settlements every Southern man, and shall have sent forth in every direction swarms from the Northern hive, and missionary preachers against the cruelties and inhumanities of Southern slavery, a universal emancipation may be the next scheme suggested by visionary philanthropists or promoted by designing politicians.

With dangers such as these in prospect, can Virginia look on with stoical indifference because it is not her own case? Shall she console herself with the hope that she may be the last to be devoured? Shall she be silent when the great principles of the Constitution are assailed, when the rights of her sons, now peopling a western clime, are invaded, and principles asserted which may one day be turned with fatal effect against her own institutions?

I am not one of those who upon every trivial occasion would have the legislative body exert its rights as a member of the confederacy to protest against the acts of the general government. I would not, it is true, make this medicine of the Constitution our daily bread. But I have known no subject more important than the present, none on which the firm yet dignified and moderate language of this sovereignty was more imperiously demanded. . . .

It behooves us to contest at the threshold a pretension which violates the compact of the states; which sets at nought the great principle of self-government; which will prove an apple of discord among the sisters of this confederacy, and threaten to subvert our free and happy Constitution by a deadly blow at the rights of a part of the nation, and a destruction of the harmony and tranquility of the whole.