

LINCOLN LORE

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LINCOLN, DOUGLAS AND THE REPEAL OF THE MISSOURI COMPROMISE

LINCOLN'S POLITICAL REJUVINATION—NO. 3

Stephen A. Douglas made a speech in the Senate on March 13, 1850 extending into the following day which he concluded in part with these words:

"Mr. President, it was my desire to have said something of the resolutions (Compromise of 1850) introduced by the distinguished and venerable Senator from Kentucky, (Mr. Clay) but I find I have trespassed too long on your kindness. I cannot do less, however, in justice to my own feelings to declare that this nation owes him a debt of gratitude for his services to the cause of the Union on this occasion. . . . He set the ball in motion which is to restore peace and harmony to the Union. He was the pioneer in the glorious cause and set a noble example which many others are nobly imitating."

Previous to this compliment to Clay, in relation to his part in the Compromise of 1850, Douglas had made this declaration with respect to the Missouri Compromise in which Clay was also a moving figure:

"All the evidence of public opinion at that day seemed to indicate that this Compromise had become canonized in the hearts of the American people as a sacred thing, which no ruthless hand should attempt to disturb."

Yet on January 23, 1854, eighteen months after the death of Clay, Douglas introduced into Congress a bill which declared the Missouri Compromise invalid and on May 30, 1854, President Pierce signed the bill which made inactive the act "which no ruthless hand should attempt to disturb." Douglas made a speech before the Senate on January 30, six days later, in which he stated that the committee "Took the principles established by the compromise acts of 1850 as our guide and intended to make each and every provision of the bill accord with those principles. Those measures established and rest upon the great principles of self government . . . instead of having them determined by an arbitrary or geographical line. . . . In some part of the country the original substitute was deemed and construed to be an annulment or a repeal of what is known as the Missouri Compromise which in other parts it was construed otherwise." Douglas further concluded that "the Missouri Compromise having been superseded by the legislation of 1850 has become and ought to be declared inoperative."

Abraham Lincoln composed two famous autobiographical sketches. The shorter of the two was prepared in December 1859 and the longer one was written in the third person in June 1860. In the first sketch Lincoln stated, "I was losing interest in politics, when the repeal of the Missouri Compromise aroused me again." This statement was somewhat amplified in the third person writing with this comment: "In 1854 his profession had almost superseded the thought of Politics in his mind, when the repeal of the Missouri Compromise aroused him as he had never been before."

Not only do we have Lincoln's own statement about the cause of his political rejuvenation but he also added to the above citation, "His speeches at once attracted a more marked attention than they had ever before done." Apparently he was not the same Lincoln of the pre-congressional days but now an inspired advocate with a slogan "no extension of slavery." It was the repeal of the Missouri Compromise engendered by his old political rival, Stephen A. Douglas that called him from semi-obscurety.

In one of Lincoln's most important addresses at the beginning of his renewed interest in politics he briefly reviewed the steps leading to the annulment of the Missouri Compromise. He said in part:

"Preceding the Presidential election of 1852, each of the great political parties, democrats and whigs, met in convention, and adopted resolutions endorsing the Compromise of '50; as a 'finality,' a final settlement, so far as these parties could make it so, of all slavery agitation. Previous to this, in 1851, the Illinois Legislature had indorsed it. . . ."

"In 1853, a bill to give it (Nebraska) a territorial government passed the House of Representatives, and, in the hands of Judge Douglas, failed of passing the Senate only for want of time. This bill contained no repeal of the Missouri Compromise. Indeed, when it was assailed because it did not contain such repeal, Judge Douglas defended it in its existing form. On January 4th, 1854, Judge Douglas introduces a new bill to give Nebraska territorial government. He accompanies this bill with a report, in which last, he expressly recommends that the Missouri Compromise shall neither be affirmed nor repealed.

"Before long the bill is so modified as to make two territories instead of one; calling the Southern one Kansas.

"Also, about a month after the introduction of the bill, on the judge's own motion, it is so amended as to declare the Missouri Compromise inoperative and void; and, substantially, that the People who go and settle there may establish slavery, or exclude it, as they may see fit. In this shape the bill passed both branches of Congress, and become a law.

"This is the *repeal* of the Missouri Compromise." . . .

"The Missouri Compromise ought to be restored. For the sake of the Union, it ought to be restored. We ought to elect a House of Representatives which will vote its restoration. If by any means, we omit to do this, what follows? Slavery may or may not be established in Nebraska. But whether it be or not, we shall have repudiated—discarded from the councils of the Nation—the SPIRIT of COMPROMISE; for who after this will ever trust in a national compromise? The spirit of mutual concession—that spirit which first gave us the constitution, and which has thrice saved the Union—we shall have strangled and cast from us forever. . . ."

"But Nebraska is urged as a great Union-saving measure. Well I too, go for saving the Union. Much as I hate slavery, I would consent to the extension of it rather than see the Union dissolved, just as I would consent to any GREAT evil, to avoid a GREATER one. But when I go to Union saving, I must believe, at least, that the means I employ has some adaptation to the end. To my mind, Nebraska has no such adaptation.

"It hath no relish of salvation in it."

"It is an aggravation, rather, of the only one thing which ever endangers the Union. When it came upon us, all was peace and quiet. The nation was looking to the forming of new bonds of Union; and a long course of peace and prosperity seemed to lie before us. In the whole range of possibility, there scarcely appears to me to have been any thing, out of which the slavery agitation could have been revived, except the very project of repealing the Missouri compromise. . . ."