

Walt Whitman, selected articles from the Brooklyn Daily Eagle, 1846-1847.

Whitman was employed as the Editor of the Brooklyn Daily Eagle, a leading Democratic Party newspaper in Brooklyn, NY (1846-1848). During that time, he repeatedly wrote on political topics relating to the Mexican War (which he initially supported) and the Wilmot Proviso (which he strongly supported). He was also quite critical of the Abolitionist movement, those who would suppress antislavery speech, and those he considered Southern extremists (especially any who threatened disunion).

He was forced to leave this position when his sympathies for the "Barnburner faction" of the New York Democratic Party (i.e., "Free Soil" supporters) put him in conflict with the Paper's owner (who supported the more conservative "Hunker faction" of the Party. After the "Barnburners" defected from the National Democratic Party, Whitman became a delegate to the 1848 founding convention of the Free Soil Party.

Although none of these columns are particularly famous or noteworthy in themselves, the following collection can be quickly skimmed to give a flavor of what were popular perspectives on these issues among many Northern, "Free Soil" Democrats, the group with whom Whitman strongly identified.

NB – I have read that after leaving his journalism job, he became far more active in his poetry.

Whitman's columns for the Brooklyn Daily Eagle (there were many) were collected in Book form, as The Gathering of the Forces, (Putnam 1920) (Rogers & Black, editors). They are available online at

https://issuu.com/dirkjan2/docs/walt_whitman_-_the_gathering_of_the_5c81a5e641978b

THE EXTENSION OF SLAVERY

~~war's cannon, to stop her part of the business, too!~~

December 5, 1846

["ABOLITION" EXTREMISM DENOUNCED]

If a man should set out in the world, (somebody has said the amount of this before us,) with the intention of calling every thing by the name his private opinions might desire to give it, he would be in hot water all the days of his life. Still it is very refreshing to hear folks who *will* say what they think;—to us it is refreshing, even if they say what we *don't* think—if we see that honesty and clearness of heart prompt them in the said say. . . . "Liberty, a nation's glory!" sang the Hutchinsons at their concert last evening, (4th)—whereupon certain zealous persons felt themselves called upon to *hiss*. Is not "liberty a nation's glory?" Even more—is not slavery in this Republic an evil which the good and far-sighted men not only in the North, but in the South—in Virginia, in Tennessee, and in North

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Has not God seen fit to make him, and leave him so? Nor is it any less our fault because the chiefs of that barbarous land fight with each other, and take slave prisoners. The whites encourage them, and afford them a market. Were that market destroyed, there would soon be no supply.

We would hardly so insult our countrymen as to suppose that any among them yet countenance a system—only a little portion of whose horrors we have been describing—did not facts prove the contrary. The “middle passage,” is yet going on with all its deadly crime and cruelty. The slave-trade yet exists. *Why?* The laws are sharp enough—too sharp. But who ever hears of their being put in force, further than to confiscate the vessel, and perhaps imprison the crews a few days? But the laws should pry out every man who helps the slave-trade—not merely the sailor on the sea, but *the cowardly rich villain, and speculator on the land*—and punish *him*. It cannot be effectually stopped until that is done—and Brazil, forced by the black muzzles of American and European men-of-

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Carolina, where "emancipation" has many plump, bold advocates—consider to *be* an evil, and one demanding the anxious consideration of every American Democrat—every American politician?

Come, now, let us be candid with ourselves on this subject. The mad fanaticism or ranting of the ultra "Abolitionists" has pretty well spent its fury—and, by the by, has done far more harm than good to the very cause it professed to aid. But it is useless to deny that far and wide, infused in the newly recruited life blood of the Republic with every successive batch of Democratic young men, as they come to take their part in action and politics—spreads deeply and firmly and vividly, this love of impartial "liberty, our nation's glory!" God speed the holy impulse in the breast of every Democratic young man! And if such an one should read these lines, we enjoin him to let no consideration of mere apparent policy—no dread of vulgar ridicule—bar the full development of his soul in such free thoughts, and the utterance of them!

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That a man has these notions of liberty does not infer that he "goes" for setting at defiance all discretion, the settled laws of the land, the guaranteed power of citizens, and so on. We wish for the downfall of despotism in Russia and Austria—wish it with all our heart; yet who would be so wild as to violate the organized system of those empires, and our treaties with them, in any way? Such violations could do no good, but harm. *It is to the discoveries and suggestions of free thought, of "public opinion," of liberal sentiments, that we must at this age of the world look for quite all desirable reforms, in government and any thing else.* And the right of free action to that thought, and free expression to it, is a holy right, which once take away, and the advance of the future is checked and dwarfed, as a child by some blighting malady that mars its growth forever. Live, then, the right of thinking, and saying! It may sometimes lead to an excess—but so do the most noble traits of the human character. Without it we might *all* become a nation of slaves!

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December 21, 1846

SET DOWN YOUR FEET, DEMOCRATS!

IF there are any States to be formed out of territory lately annexed, or to be annexed, by any means to the United States, let the Democratic members of Congress, (and Whigs too, if they like,) plant themselves quietly, without bluster, but fixedly and without compromise, on the requirement that *Slavery be prohibited in them forever*. We wish we could have a universal straightforward setting down of feet on this thing, in the Democratic Party. *We must.*

January 16, 1847

DEMOCRATIC DOCTRINE

DESPISING and condemning the dangerous fanatical insanity of "Abolitionism"—as impracticable as it is wild—the Brooklyn *Eagle* just as much condemns the other extreme from that. It likes so well what the Democracy of Massachusetts, in their late State Address, have promulged on the subject—and

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sounder doctrine no one can find—that it transcribes the Address's sentiments as follows: Speaking of a well-developed and healthy Democracy, it says,—“It may regard slavery anywhere and everywhere, as a great evil, a direct, practical denial of the essential truths of Democracy. It may deplore the misfortune, the misconduct, or the inconsistency of every sister State where slavery exists. It may assert and maintain to the utmost, the right of discussing this subject, and all others that can interest the heart of humanity. It may lament that Congress has no power to purchase the freedom of every slave, and proclaim a universal emancipation. But it will not the less remember, that the power of Congress is limited within narrow and well-defined boundaries,” etc., etc. . . . “But while we deprecate,” continue the eastern Democrats, “the perversion of a benevolent association into a fierce political party, we discountenance and despise that morbid and sickly fear of disunion, which sometimes robs our private citizens and public officers of their manhood, so far that they

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dare not whisper an honest word or attempt a proper act, concerning slavery, lest the slave-holding States take offence. This base surrender of opinion, this cowardly apprehension of Southern discontent, is as offensive to the Southern Democrat as it ought to be to all; and let us recollect, as a fact pregnant with meaning, that it was a Virginia Democrat, in the National Congress, who first stigmatized temporizing Northern politicians by the expressive epithet of 'dough faces.' . . . There is a medium between these opposite extremes of rashness and cowardice. That medium is to be found in the bold and honest but courteous and friendly expression of opinion; in a manly adherence to all constitutional rights, as well our neighbor's as our own; in a calm, but determined vindication of all Constitutional remedies; and finally, in a constant regard for each and all of the great doctrines of republicanism, not one of which can safely or wisely be forgotten or disobeyed, and all of which are essential to the Democratic creed and character."

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February 3, 1847

THE MOST EMPHATIC EXPRESSION OF OPINION ON AN IMPORTANT SUBJECT EVER GIVEN BY THE EMPIRE STATE!

LAST Wednesday, (January 27) the Senate of this State passed what are called the "anti-slavery resolutions," by the powerful vote of twenty-three to six. We gave those resolutions, (presented by Col. Young, Democrat) in our paper of Friday; and have now to add that the same resolutions passed the Assembly on Monday, by *ninety-six votes out of a hundred and five!* Democrat and Whig uniting in the "lower house," (as they did in the upper,) to approve and endorse them!

We believe the Brooklyn *Eagle* was the very first Democratic paper which alluded to this subject in a decisive manner—expressing the conviction that it is the duty of its party to take an unalterable stand against the allowance of slavery in any new territory, under any circumstances, or in any way. Every Democratic journal, with the truest pleasure, we have observed, has been actuated by the

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same determination; for, since then, *each without exception*, (as far as we have seen) *has expressed its approval of that rule*. Some difference exists, as to the propriety of discussing the point now—but as to the principle—the soul of the matter—the Northern Democracy show *one solid unbroken phalanx*.

February 17, 1847

SLAVERY IN NEW TERRITORY

THE stand which the United States House of Representatives has taken in reference to the extension of slavery, over new States, to be acquired by the present war, cannot but meet the approval of all who take ample views of consequences and the future. And yet we must confess to an aversion to the agitation of this subject; there has been so much foolish and fanatical stuff, written and said, on it—so much fiery passion aroused, and prejudice formed—that it is full of trouble! But as to building up the edifice of slavery any firmer—spend the money and lives of the North, (for the North and West bear five-sixths of the

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burthen of the war,) to make additional slave States, the thing is out of the question, and it seems to us no man worthy the name of true Democrat could wish it.

March 11, 1847

THE OPINIONS OF WASHINGTON AND JEFFERSON ON AN IMPORTANT POINT

WASHINGTON and Jefferson, instead of claiming a constitutional right to engraft slavery on free territory, looked with anxious solicitude to the period when even the soil of the slave States should become free, as has actually occurred in New York. Mr. Jefferson had contemplated the insertion of a section for prospective emancipation in the slave laws of Virginia. This is the language of Jefferson, the great apostle of liberty, and clearly shows that instead of claiming a constitutional right, as Mr. Calhoun does, to engraft slavery on all new and free territory which might be acquired, he looked with hope to the time when the slave States should be free States. Mr. Jefferson was no doubt anxious that the time

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should arrive when the words which he put forth in the Declaration of Independence, "that all men are born free and equal," should be as true in fact as self-evident in theory.

April 22, 1847

NEW STATES: SHALL THEY BE SLAVE OR FREE?

It is of not so much importance, the difference in the idea of a proper time to discuss, if we are only united in the *principle* that whatever new territory may be annexed to the United States, shall be free territory, and not for slaves. With the present slave States, of course, no human being any where out from themselves has the least shadow of a right to interfere; but in new land, added to our surface by the national arms, and by the action of our government, and where slavery does not exist, it is certainly of momentous importance one way or the other, whether that land shall be slave land or not. All ordinarily "weighty issues" are insignificant before this:

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it swallows them up as Aaron's rod swallowed the other rods. It involves the question whether the mighty power of this Republic, put forth in its greatest strength, shall be used to root deeper and spread wider an institution which Washington, Jefferson, Madison, and all the old fathers of our freedom, anxiously, and avowedly from the bottom of their hearts, sought the extinction of, and considered inconsistent with the other institutions of the land. And if those true and brave old men were now among us, can any candid person doubt which "side" they would espouse in this argument? Would the great apostle of Democracy—in his clear views of right and wrong, and their linked profit and loss—would he *now*, seeing the stalwart giants of the free young West, contrasted with the meagre leanness of the South—meagre with all her noble traits—would *he* hesitate in bending his divine energies to the side of freedom?

The man who accustoms himself to *think*, when such matters are put before him, and does not whiff his opinion rapidly out, from mere heedlessness, or from a more degrading

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motive, will see the wide and radical difference between the unquestionable folly, and wicked wrong, of "abolitionist" interference with slavery in the Southern States—and this point of establishing slavery in fresh land. With the former we have nothing to do; but with the latter, we should all be derelict to our highest duties as Christians, as men, and as Democrats, if we did not throw ourselves into the field of discussion, using the utmost display of every energy wherewith God has endowed us, in behalf of the side which reason and religion proclaim as the right one. Is *this* the country, and *this* the age, where and when we are to be told that slavery must be propped up and extended? And shall any respectable portion of our citizens be deluded either by the sophisms of Mr. Calhoun, or those far, very far, lower influences of the darkest and meanest phases of demagogism, which are rife more in the North than the South, to act in a matter which asks consideration purely on points of high justice, human rights, national advantage, and the safety of the Union in the future?

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April 27, 1847

RIGHTS OF SOUTHERN FREEMEN AS WELL AS NORTHERN FREEMEN.—MR. CALHOUN'S SPEECH

IN the speech of Mr. Calhoun delivered at Charleston in March last he says:

Indeed, after all that has occurred during the last twelve months, it would be almost idiotic to doubt, that a large majority of both parties in the non-slaveholding States, have come to a fixed determination to appropriate all the territories of the United States now possessed, or hereafter to be acquired, to themselves, *to the entire exclusion of the slaveholding States.*

Now is it not strange that a man of the conceded ability of Mr. Calhoun, on his reputed precision of logic and accuracy of expression, should use language like this? "*The entire exclusion of the slaveholding states!*" Mr. Calhoun surely cannot mean what he says. He speaks as though the people of the slaveholding States were all slaveholders. This is any thing but true. In every slaveholding State, we believe, except perhaps South Carolina, a majority of the white freemen are non-slaveholders. Will the exclusion of slavery