

THE HOUSE DIVIDING

1

DAVID WILMOT

I Plead the Cause of White Freemen (1847)

David Wilmot was an obscure and somewhat lazy Democratic congressman from Pennsylvania when, in 1846, he gained instant notoriety by introducing an amendment to an appropriation bill requested by President James K. Polk to promote peace negotiations with Mexico. Wilmot's amendment, which reflected growing northern resentment over the proslavery policies of Polk and his advisors, prohibited slavery from any territory acquired from Mexico as a result of the Mexican War. Known henceforth as the Wilmot Proviso, his amendment attracted considerable support from northern congressmen and passed the House several times, although it was always rejected by the Senate. In the following speech, delivered in the House in early 1847, Wilmot outlined his reasons for opposing the further expansion of slavery.

I make no war upon the South nor upon slavery in the South. I have no squeamish sensitiveness upon the subject of slavery, nor morbid sympathy for the slave. I plead the cause of the rights of white freemen. I would preserve for free white labor a fair country, a rich inheritance, where the sons of toil, of my own race and own color, can live without the disgrace which association with negro slavery brings upon free labor. I stand for the inviolability of free territory. It shall remain free, so far as my voice or vote can aid in the preservation of its character.

This, sir, is what we ask, and all we ask. Yet the majority of this House, reflecting the will of a vast majority of the freemen of this Republic, a majority of the Republicans of the North, are called upon to yield—what? To make concession of things that ought to be conceded? No; they are required to

surrender the dearest rights, to violate the most sacred obligations. Where is the northern man prepared to do it? I am a man of concession, of compromise; but to compromise on this question is to surrender the right and establish the wrong. It is to carry slavery where it does not now exist, to subjugate free territory. If we refuse to convert free into slave territory, is that an invasion of the rights of the South? . . . The future greatness and glory of this Republic demands that the progress of domestic slavery should be arrested now and forever. Let it remain where it now is, and leave to time and a merciful Providence its results.

Sir, upon this subject, the North has yielded until there is no more to give up. We have gone on, making one acquisition after another, until we have acquired and brought into the Union every inch of slave territory that was to be found upon this Continent. Now, sir, we have passed beyond the boundaries of slavery and reached free-soil. Who is willing to surrender it? Men of the North—representatives of northern freedom, will you con-

FROM *Congressional Globe*, 29th Cong., 2d sess., 1847, Appendix, p. 317.

summate such a deed of infamy and shame? I trust in God not. O, for the honor of the North—for the fair fame of our green hills and valleys, be firm in this crisis—be true to your country and your race. The white laborer of the North claims your service; he demands that you stand firm to his interests and

his rights; that you preserve the future homes of his children, on the distant shores of the Pacific, from the degradation and dishonor of negro servitude. Where the negro slave labors, the free white man cannot labor by his side without sharing in his degradation and disgrace.

2



HOWELL COBB

The South Is at Your Mercy (1847)

A classic political insider accustomed to the trappings of power and influence, Howell Cobb of Georgia was a leading southern moderate. He served as Speaker of the House, was elected governor in Georgia on a Unionist ticket in 1851, and was secretary of the treasury in James Buchanan's cabinet. Following Lincoln's election, the paunchy Cobb suddenly flip-flopped and became a secessionist, but up until that point he had been a spokesman in national politics for compromise and sectional moderation. Invoking a sense of equity, he made the following remarks opposing the Wilmot Proviso in the House in 1847.

Upon this subject of the institution of slavery—this peculiar subject of sectional jealousy—there is a spirit of compromise running through the Constitution, not confined to isolated paragraphs, but breathing throughout the whole instrument. That spirit of compromise recognised the existence of these sectional interests. The object was to guard them, to protect them, to make the one a check upon the other. The inducement held out to the South, at the time this Constitution was framed, was the spirit of compromise upon this question. She asked, and she had granted to her at that time, such power and such influence as would enable her to be a check upon the North; so that no attempt could ever be made successfully to interfere with the rights of the South. But where is

that spirit now? Where is that regard, on the part of the North, for the rights of the South? And where are those rights, when the views presented by the gentlemen who advocate this amendment are carried out? Where is the check which the South was induced by this Constitution to believe she would always be enabled to hold upon her sister States of the North? This amendment [Wilmot Proviso] provides that no territory which may hereafter be acquired, from whatever quarter, from whatever section of the country it may come, shall ever be made subject to settlement by the people of the slaveholding States. You of the North extend your territory, your government, your power, strength, and influence, day by day, and year by year; but here stands the South, her limits fixed, bound hand and foot, subject to your mercy, and to such legislation as you may think proper upon the subject of her institutions and her rights to make. . . .

FROM *Congressional Globe*, 29th Cong., 2d sess., 1847, pp. 361–62.

The gentleman [Wilmot] said that the Government should be neutral in this country to settle the character of the neutrality in fact. That would be a matter. And does a single enactment in regard to what the gentleman from Pennsylvania said with an intention of neutrality on the

3

John C. Calhoun said in 1847. I think of war as a result of the institution of slavery is labored and united Calhoun serve the near dear southern