

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. . . .

The gentleman from Pennsylvania [David Wilmot] said that all the North asked was, that this Government should occupy a position of neutrality. What kind of neutrality? To allow the people of this country to settle this territory, and then to determine for themselves the form of its government, the character of its institutions? That, sir, would be neutrality in fact, upon the part of this Government. That would be taking no part or lot in the matter. And does the South step forward to ask any single enactment on the part of this Government, in regard to what shall be the character of the institutions of this territory? How is it that the gentleman from Pennsylvania can charge southern Representatives here, and the people of the South, with an intention or wish to violate the spirit of neutrality on the part of the General Government,

when they have not raised their voice for the first time to ask a single provision of law in reference to this subject?

But is the gentleman from Pennsylvania himself willing that the Government should observe that spirit of neutrality which he professes to approve? Is he willing to trust the American people, the settlers upon this territory, to determine for themselves the nature of the institution under which they shall live, and the form of Government to which they shall be subject? No, sir. He steps forward and calls upon this Government to array itself upon the part of the strength of the Union against the weakness of the Union, (for such is the condition of the North and South upon this matter, considered numerically.) And this is the "neutrality" which gentlemen from the North desire.

The Civil War and Reconstruction

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