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Democratic Convention of 1860 IV

Lead: The Democratic Party split at its meeting in 1860 and for a time the Southern port city of Charleston played host to two Conventions.

Tag: "A Moment In Time" with Dan Roberts.

Content: The immediate cause of the division was the insistence of deep South states that the Party Platform must contain a slave code, guaranteeing that neither the Federal government nor territories that had not become states could interfere with slavery. If the code was missing, they

were authorized to walk out of the Convention. The Platform Committee brought in two reports. The majority report included the slave code. The committee minority, allied with the front-runner, Senator Stephen A. Douglas of Illinois, produced a platform stating that the decision about slavery in the territories had to be made by the people who lived there. There was no slave code. Douglas knew that he could not be elected with the slave code. Northern states would have nothing to do with it.

William Lowndes Yancey spoke for the deep South. He defended the slave code by saying, "ours is the property invaded, ours is the peace that is to be destroyed, ours is the honor at stake."

He said in effect, take the slave code or we are out of here. George Pugh of Ohio reviewed the party's problems in the North with a vigorous and determined Republican Party they could not hope to win if the South shoved that slave code down the Party throat. 'Northern Democrats,' he said, 'had worn themselves out defending Southern interests and now were being ordered to hide their faces and eat dirt.' "Gentlemen of the South, we will not do it."

When the vote was taken, the slave code was removed and six delegations left Institute Hall to set up a rival convention across town. Stalemate followed and the Democrats would adjourn to meet again in Baltimore in

June. Douglas would eventually receive the regular Party nomination but it was worthless, with the cotton South out he carried only one state, Missouri and Abraham Lincoln became President.

The Democratic Convention in Charleston that cold and wet late April in 1860 reflected the nation as a whole. Civil discourse was quickly being replaced by ultimatum and compromise, the heart of democracy, was being trampled under the feet of principled but stubborn ideologues. Within a year the dogs of war had broken loose.

At the University of Richmond, this is Dan Roberts.

Resources

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