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THE IRONY OF SECESSION

by DONALD R. HADD

THE ELECTION OF Abraham Lincoln to the presidency of the United States marked the beginning of active measures for separation in the state of Florida. Throughout the state mass meetings were held to protest the ascendancy of "Black Republicanism." The term "secession" so truculently advanced by a militant minority since the Compromise of 1850 began to be advanced by an ever increasing number of Floridians inflamed by the spirit of the times.

Late in November, Governor Madison Perry, a firm advocate of separation, addressed a noteworthy message to the legislature. After a firm indictment of the recent election, he concluded with a clarion call to arms:

For myself . . . I most decidedly declare that in my opinion the only hope the Southern States have for *domestic peace and safety* . . . is dependent on their action now; and that the proper action is . . . *Secession from our faithless and perjured confederates.*

But some Southern men . . . object to secession until some overt act of unconstitutional power shall have been committed by the *General Government*. . . . But why wait for this overt act? . . . What is that Government? It is but the trustee, the common agent of all the States, appointed by them to manage their affairs, according to a written constitution of power of attorney. Should the sovereign States, then . . . for a moment tolerate the idea that their action must be graduated by the will of their agents?

. . . Entertaining these views, I most earnestly recommend a call of a Convention of the people of the State, at an early date, to take such action as in their judgment may be necessary to protect and preserve the right, honor and safety of the people of Florida.¹

These very pronounced views met with wide endorsement. Even one of his political enemies conceded that the sentiments he

1. Florida, *Journal of the Proceedings of the Senate of the General Assembly*, 10th Sess., 1860 (Tallahassee, 1860), 12.

expressed would "coincide with the views of a vast majority of the citizens of Florida."²

The legislature acted promptly. A bill was presented on November 28, for the calling of a convention to consider Florida's position in the Union. It passed both houses with but one dissenting vote. On November 30, the bill became law. It provided for a special election on December 22, of delegates to a "convention of the people," which was to meet in Tallahassee on January 3. Its prospective business, as was readily discernible, was to take Florida out of the Union.

On January 3, 1861, the delegates to the momentous convention began to assemble in Tallahassee. On that day sixty members presented their credentials. Among them were some of the best known, most respected, and wealthiest men of the state. They made up a body that was "to take unto itself sovereign powers, repudiate the Union and change in theory, at least, the very nature of the state represented."³

John C. Pelot, of Alachua County, was appointed temporary chairman, and upon him evolved the historic task of delivering the opening address to the assembled group. Briefly summarizing the reason why the convention had been called, he concluded by asking Divine guidance for the deliberations ahead.⁴ Having set in motion the wheels that were inexorably to carry Florida out of the Union and into a tempest, the like of which had never before been seen, Pelot resumed his seat. The curtain was about to rise on the tragic drama that, for Florida, was to begin with its secession from the union known as the United States of America, and end four bloody years later at Appomattox, Virginia.

With a future still screened by time, McQueen McIntosh, the Federal judge who had sworn to resign if Lincoln were elected, arose to introduce the Right Reverend Bishop Rutledge, who delivered the invocation. The convention, after having been formally opened, adjourned for two days until Saturday, January 5, 1861, in order to allow all the elected delegates time to ar-

2. William W. Davis, *Civil War and Reconstruction in Florida* (New York, 1913), 35.

3. *Ibid.*, 56.

4. *Journal of the Proceedings of the Convention of the People of Florida* (Tallahassee, 1861), 3; cited hereafter as *Proceedings of the Convention*.

rive.⁵ On January 5 the convention reconvened and got to business in earnest.

John C. McGehee, a staunch secessionist, was chosen president of the meeting. In his acceptance speech McGehee gave the reason *why* the Convention was called, as well as giving a key to the secession feelings of its members:

In the formation of the Government of our Fathers, the Constitution of 1787, the institution of domestic slavery is recognized, and the right of property in slaves is expressly guaranteed.

The people of a portion of the States who were parties to the government were early opposed to the institution. The feeling of opposition to it has been cherished and fostered, and inflamed until it has taken possession of the public mind at the North to such an extent that it overwhelms every other influence. It has seized the political power and now threatens annihilation to slavery throughout the Union.

At the South, and with our People of course, slavery is the element of all value, and a destruction of that destroys all that is property.

This party, now soon to take possession of the powers of the Government, is sectional, irresponsible to us, and driven on by an infuriated fanatical madness that defies all opposition, must inevitably destroy every vestige of right growing out of property in slaves.

Gentlemen, the State of Florida is now a member of the Union under the power of the Government, soon to go into the hands of this party.

As we stand our doom is decreed.

Under a just sense of impending danger, and realizing an imperative necessity thus forced upon them to take measures for their safety, the People of Florida have clothed you with supreme power and sent you here . . . to devise the best means to insure their safety

Your presence at this Capitol is the highest proof that your people fear to remain under their Government. With poignant regret no doubt they leave it; but they have no ground of hope of safety in it. . . . I will not presume to indicate your course - your superior and collected wisdom must decide.

I cannot doubt though . . . that you will . . . promptly

5. The four western counties of Escambia, Santa Rosa, Franklin, and Liberty, and one eastern county, Clay, as well as some of the senatorial districts, were not yet represented. Representation was by county and senatorial district.

place them in a position of safety above the power and beyond the reach of their enemies.⁶

Contained within this speech is a point of great significance, a point which supplies an insight into why these men, by nature and occupation of a conservative bent, were not only willing, but anxious, to take a politically radical step, the like of which had not been seen since 1776 and 1787. The prime word seems to have been "property." It made little difference whether this property involved land, material goods, or slaves. The one inviolable factor was property. Furthermore, slaves were property - property that had been guaranteed by the Constitution of the United States as well as by the Supreme Court in the Dred Scott decision. It was impossible to mistake this; the meaning was not ambiguous.

This interpretation is given added strength by an examination of the unpublished census returns of 1860.⁷ Of the sixty-nine delegates elected to represent the various counties and senatorial districts in Florida to the Secession Convention, fifty-eight of them (84%) either owned slaves outright or in several cases held them in trust for others. Of these slaveholders nineteen would be classified as a small slave-holding group, controlling ten slaves or less, while eighteen controlled more than forty slaves. Furthermore, thirty-three of the members gave farming as their principal occupation; and of the remaining thirty-six, twenty-five were farmers in addition to their primary occupation.⁸ The thirty-six members, incidentally, who gave occupations other than farming, described themselves as follows: thirteen merchants, eight lawyers, six physicians, two mill owners, one judge of the United States District Court, one judge of the probate court, one clerk of the Duval County Court, two ministers, one cotton agent, and, of all things, one carpenter. Certainly these men, if occupations can be used as a criterion, should not have been of a radical nature.

Economically, it is the same story. Forty-nine (71%) of the delegates had estates valued in excess of \$10,000; only ten

6. *Proceedings of the Convention*, 11.

7. Unpublished census returns, 1860 (on Microfilm Florida State University Library, Florida State University). I and II.

8. Of the thirty-three farmers, thirty were slave-holders; of the twenty-five who farmed in addition to their regular occupation, all were slave-holders, although two of them held slaves in trust only.

bad estates of less than \$5,000. Actually, thirty-one members owned property valued at over \$30,000, which would place them, considering time and place, in the semi-wealthy group. Even in the age category, these men should have been conservative. Granted that nine of them were aged thirty or less, nevertheless, forty-three of the delegates were over forty years of age.

This should have been a reasonably mellow group - but it was not. Why? One solution that can be rendered is that these men were normally conservative; but where property was concerned they became raging Tartars, willing to risk all for the sake of a principle. This was not just a whim - it was a deep-rooted conviction that their concept of sanctity of property was worth every sacrifice that such a radical measure as secession might entail. The bulk of the ordinary people of the South were undoubtedly too emotionally stirred to look to the future - but these delegates in Tallahassee were mature, deliberate men who knew what they were doing, yet who unfortunately allowed their biased beliefs in one principle to color or distort the rest of their judgment.

Naturally, in this, as in all else, there were exceptions. Of the seven delegates who voted against the Ordinance of Secession, six were farmers, and the seventh gave his occupation as a merchant-farmer; five were slave-holders - one of whom owned 112 slaves; and five of the seven held property valued in excess of \$7,000.⁹ The only inference that can be drawn is that the seven were either Whigs or Jacksonian Democrats; or while the rest subordinated their normal political conservatism to the threatened, as they saw it, loss of their property, these men refused to become overwrought. Possibly they realized as the others should have, that although the Democrats had lost the Presidency, they still retained control of Congress, and so all was not lost. Unfortunately for all concerned, the majority refused to view the subject dispassionately. Their minds were set and all the logic in the world could not swing their minds from the single track to which they had been switched. Even without the threatened loss of property, how could argument sway those who truly felt they had been enjoined by the Bible to separate from

9. The two who were valued at less than \$7,000 were both from Orange County; one of the two was the poorest of all, having a total estate valued at only \$750; both were non-slave owners.

the abolitionist. Triumphantly they could point out:

In the first Epistle of Timothy, Chapter IV, Paul lays down the duty of servants to obey their masters, and adds "these things exhort and teach. *If any man teach otherwise and consent not to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which was according to Godliness, he is proud, knowing nothing but doting about questions, and strives of words, whereof cometh envy, railings, evil surmisings, perverse disputings of men of corrupt minds, and destitute of the truth,* supposing that gain is Godliness. From such withdraw thyself."¹⁰

With the double attitude of haste and determination, the Convention proceeded to get down to the business of taking Florida out of the Union. There was no doubt that this was the primary function of the Convention.

Ultimately it was determined to adopt a plan submitted by McQueen McIntosh which would have secession proclaimed a state right, Florida proclaimed justified in exercising the right, and the Convention proclaimed competent to act for the state. Acting immediately after addresses by commissioners from Alabama, South Carolina, and Virginia, the convention voted that the people of Florida possessed the right to sever political connections with the United States when in their opinion a just and proper cause existed. It further contended that a "just and proper cause" did exist, and that Florida should exercise her sovereign right of political severance.¹¹

Immediately after the passage of the resolution a "select committee" of thirteen was appointed by the chair to prepare an ordinance of secession. Two days later, on January 9, the committee read its report, which boiled down to a reaffirmation of the Compact Theory of Government, quoting as partial authority the fact that New York, Virginia, and Rhode Island, when ratifying the Constitution, asserted their right to reassume the powers delegated to the Federal government "whenever it should become necessary to the happiness of their people, or should be perverted to their injury or oppression." It concluded by recommending that Florida "secede now, and reassume all the rights by her delegated to the Federal Government known as

10. St. Augustine *Examiner*, December 22, 1860.

11. *Proceedings of the Convention*, 18.

the United States of America, and declare herself to be a Sovereign and Independent Nation, and to this end advise the adoption of the Ordinance of Secession.”¹²

The final desperate efforts made to amend the ordinance by the conservative element in the Convention was not so much to cancel the ordinance as to see that Florida did not end up taking the fateful step without the backing and support of her more powerful Southern neighbor states. It was all to no avail; each effort to amend the ordinance was decisively voted down.

On the following day, January 10, all efforts to slow passage of the ordinance having been defeated, the consequential issue was presented to the convention. As the packed gallery watched and listened in a strained silence, the delegates voted for secession, sixty-two to seven.¹³ At twenty-two minutes past twelve noon the president declared the ordinance adopted.¹⁴ The die was cast. Florida had crossed her Rubicon. The delegates could look upon their handiwork with satisfaction. The Constitution was vindicated; their property safe. In the exultation of the moment the final irony was hidden from them - that after four years of bitter struggle the least of their losses would be their slaves.

12. *Ibid.*, 26.

13. Those who voted against secession were Baker of Jackson County, Gregory of Liberty, Hendricks of Clay, McCaskill and Morrison of Walton, and Rutland and Woodruff of Orange.

14. *Proceedings of the Convention*, 31.