

The Democratic Platform (1856)

While the Whig Party shattered under sectional pressures, the Democratic Party struggled to hold on to its partisans throughout the country. It tried to appeal to all its people both in its nominees for the executive offices and in the planks of its platform. The delegates at the Democratic convention in Cincinnati ultimately decided not to endorse the incumbent president, Franklin Pierce, or Stephen Douglas for president because the issues of the last few years, especially the Kansas-Nebraska situation, undermined their chances in a national election. After seventeen ballots, the Democrats chose James Buchanan of Pennsylvania for their presidential nominee; although a Northerner, he was seen as willing to appease southern slaveowners. They nominated John Breckinridge of Kentucky for vice president. In their platform, the Democrats praised compromise and advocated limited federal government in domestic affairs and such traditional American concerns as freedom of the seas and free trade in foreign policy.

From Thomas V. Cooper and Hector T. Fenton, *American Politics from the Beginning to Date* (Chicago: Charles R. Brodix, 1882), pp. 36-39.

Resolved, That the American democracy place their trust in the intelligence, the patriotism, and discriminating justice of the American people.

Resolved, That we regard this as a distinctive feature of our political creed, which we are proud to maintain before the world as a great moral element in a form of government springing from and upheld by the popular will; and we contrast it with the creed and practice of federalism, under whatever name or form, which seeks to palsy the will of the constituents, and which conceives no imposture too monstrous for the popular credulity.

Resolved, therefore, That entertaining these views, the Democratic party of this Union, through their delegates, assembled in general convention, coming together in a spirit of concord, of devotion to the doctrines and faith of a free representative government, and appealing to their fellow citizens for the rectitude of their intentions, renew and reassert, before the American people, the declaration of principles avowed by them, when, on former occasions, in general convention, they have presented their candidates for the popular suffrage.

That the Federal government is one of limited power, derived solely from the constitution, and the grants of power made therein ought to be strictly construed by all the departments and agents of the government, and that it is inexpedient and dangerous to exercise doubtful constitutional powers.

That the constitution does not confer upon the general government the power to commence and carry on a general system of internal improvements.

That the constitution does not confer authority upon the Federal government, directly or indirectly, to assume the debts of the several states, contracted for local and internal improvements or other state purposes; nor would such assumption be just or expedient.

That justice and sound policy forbid the Federal government to foster one branch of industry to the detriment of another, or to cherish the interests of one portion of our common country; that every citizen and every section of the country has a right to demand and insist upon an equality of rights and privileges, and a complete and ample protection of persons and property from domestic violence and foreign aggression.

That it is the duty of every branch of the government to enforce and practice the most rigid economy in conducting our public affairs, and that no more revenue ought to be raised than is required to defray the necessary expenses of the government and gradual but certain extinction of the public debt.

That the proceeds of the public lands ought to be sacredly applied to the national objects specified in the constitution, and that we are opposed to any law for the distribution of such proceeds among the states, as alike inexpedient in policy and repugnant to the constitution.

That Congress has no power to charter a national bank; that we believe such an institution one of deadly hostility to the best interests of this country, dangerous to our republican institutions and the liberties of the people, and calculated to place the business of the country within the control of a concentrated money power and above the laws and will of the people. . . .

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That we are decidedly opposed to taking from the President the qualified veto power, by which he is enabled, under restrictions and responsibilities amply sufficient to guard the public interests, to suspend the passage of a bill whose merits can not secure the approval of two-thirds of the Senate and House of Representatives, until the judgment of the people can be obtained thereon, and which has saved the American people from the corrupt and tyrannical dominion of the Bank of the United States and from a corrupting system of general internal improvements.

That the liberal principles embodied by Jefferson in the Declaration of Independence, and sanctioned in the Constitution, which makes ours the land of liberty and the asylum of the oppressed of every nation, have ever been cardinal principles in

the democratic faith; and every attempt to abridge the privilege of becoming citizens and owners of soil among us, ought to be resisted with the same spirit which swept the alien and sedition laws from our statute books.

And whereas, Since the foregoing declaration was uniformly adopted by our predecessors in national conventions, an adverse political and religious test has been secretly organized by a party claiming to be exclusively Americans, and it is proper that the American democracy should clearly define its relations thereto; and declare its determined opposition to all secret political societies, by whatever name they may be called—

Resolved, That the foundation of this union of states having been laid in, and its prosperity, expansion, and pre-eminent example in free government built upon, entire freedom of matters of religious concernment, and no respect of persons in regard to rank or place of birth, no party can justly be deemed national, constitutional, or in accordance with American principles, which bases its exclusive organization upon religious opinions and accidental birth-place. And hence a political crusade in the nineteenth century, and in the United States of America, against Catholics and foreign-born, is neither justified by the past history or future prospects of the country, nor in unison with the spirit of toleration and enlightened freedom which peculiarly distinguishes the American system of popular government.

Resolved, That we reiterate with renewed energy of purpose the well-considered declarations of former conventions upon the sectional issue of domestic slavery, and concerning the reserved rights of the states—

That Congress has no power under the constitution to interfere with or control the domestic institutions of the several states, and that all such states are the sole and proper judges of everything appertaining to their own affairs not prohibited by the constitution; that all efforts of the Abolitionists or others, made to induce Congress to interfere with questions of slavery, or to take incipient steps in relation thereto, are calculated to lead to the most alarming and dangerous consequences, and that all such efforts have an inevitable tendency to diminish the happiness of the people and endanger the stability and permanency of the Union, and ought not to be countenanced by any friend of our political institutions.

That the foregoing proposition covers and was intended to embrace the whole subject of slavery agitation in Congress, and therefore the Democratic party of the Union, standing on this national platform, will abide by and adhere to a faithful execution of the acts known as the compromise measures, settled by the Congress of 1850—"the act for reclaiming fugitives from service or labor" included; which act, being designed to carry out an express provision of the constitution, can not, with fidelity thereto, be repealed, or so changed as to destroy or impair its efficiency.

That the Democratic party will resist all attempts at renewing in Congress, or out of it, the agitation of the slavery question, under whatever shape or color the attempt may be made.

4. That the Democratic party will faithfully abide by and uphold the principles laid down in the Kentucky and Virginia resolutions of 1792 and 1798, and in the report of Mr. Madison to the Virginia legislature in 1799; that it adopts these principles as constituting one of the main foundations of its political creed, and is resolved to carry them out in their obvious meaning and import.

And that we may more distinctly meet the issue on which a sectional party, subsisting exclusively on slavery agitation, now relies to test the fidelity of the people, north and south, to the constitution and the Union—

Resolved, That claiming fellowship with and desiring the co-operation of all who regard the preservation of the Union under the constitution as the paramount issue, and repudiating all sectional parties and platforms concerning domestic slavery which seek to embroil the states and incite to treason and armed resistance to law in the territories, and whose avowed purpose, if consummated, must end in civil war and disunion, the American democracy recognize and adopt the principles contained in the organic laws establishing the territories of Nebraska and Kansas, as embodying the only sound and safe solution of the slavery question, upon which the great national idea of the people of this whole country can repose in its determined conservation of the Union, and non-interference of Congress with slavery in the territories or in the District of Columbia.

That this was the basis of the compromise of 1850, confirmed by both the Democratic and Whig parties in national conventions, ratified by the people in the election of 1852, and rightly applied to the organization of the territories in 1854.

3. That by the uniform application of the Democratic principle to the organization of territories and the admission of new states, with or without domestic slavery, as they may elect, the equal rights of all the states will be preserved intact, the original compacts of the constitution maintained inviolate, and the perpetuity and expansion of the Union insured to its utmost capacity of embracing, in peace and harmony, every future American state that may be constituted or annexed with a republican form of government.

Resolved, That we recognize the right of the people of all the territories, including Kansas and Nebraska, acting through the legally and fairly expressed will of the majority of the actual residents, and whenever the number of their inhabitants justifies it, to form a constitution, with or without domestic slavery, and be admitted into the Union upon terms of perfect equality with the other states.

Resolved, finally, That in view of the condition of the popular institutions in the old world (and the dangerous tendencies of sectional agitation, combined with the attempt to enforce civil and religious disabilities against the rights of acquiring and enjoying citizenship in our own land), a high and sacred duty is devolved, with increased responsibility, upon the Democratic

party of this country, as the party of the Union, to uphold and maintain the rights of every state, and thereby the union of the states, and to sustain and advance among us constitutional liberty, by continuing to resist all monopolies and exclusive legislation for the benefit of the few at the expense of the many, and by a vigilant and constant adherence to those principles and compromises of the constitution which are broad enough and strong enough to embrace and uphold the Union as it was, the Union as it is, and the Union as it shall be, in the full expression of the energies and capacity of this great and progressive people.

Resolved, That there are questions connected with the foreign policy of this country which are inferior to no domestic questions whatever. The time has come for the people of the United States to declare themselves in favor of free seas and progressive free trade throughout the world, and, by solemn manifestations, to place their moral influence at the side of their successful example.

Resolved, That our geographical and political position with reference to the other states of this continent, no less than the interest of our commerce and the development of our growing power, requires that we should hold sacred the principles involved in the Monroe doctrine. . . .

Resolved, That the great highway which nature, as well as the assent of states most immediately interested in its maintenance, has marked out for free communication between the Atlantic and Pacific oceans, constitutes one of the most important achievements realized by the spirit of modern times . . . ; and that result would be secured by a timely and efficient exertion of the control which we have the right to claim over it; and no power on earth should be suffered to impede or clog its progress by any interference with relations that may suit our policy to establish between our government and the governments of the states within whose dominions it lies; . . .

Resolved, That in view of so commanding an interest, the people of the United States cannot but sympathize with the efforts which are being made by the people of Central America to regenerate that portion of the continent which covers the passage across the inter-oceanic isthmus.

Resolved, That the Democratic party will expect of the next administration that every proper effort be made to insure our ascendancy in the Gulf of Mexico, and to maintain permanent protection to the great outlets through which are emptied into its waters the products raised out of the soil and the commodities created by the industry of the people of our western valleys and of the Union at large.

6. Resolved, That the administration of Franklin Pierce has been true to Democratic principles, and, therefore, true to the great interests of the country; in the face of violent opposition, he has maintained the laws at home and vindicated the rights of American citizens abroad, and, therefore, we proclaim our unqualified admiration of his measures and policy.

Review Questions

1. What did the Democrats indicate was the greatest threat to the American nation?
2. Did they address the slavery problem as a civil rights or states rights issue?
3. Why did they praise the legislative compromises of the early 1850s?
4. How did the Democratic Party promote itself at the expense of the Republican Party?