

AMERICAN CONSTITUTIONALISM  
VOLUME II: RIGHTS AND LIBERTIES  
Howard Gillman • Mark A. Graber • Keith E. Whittington

Supplementary Material

Chapter 5: The Jacksonian Era – Foundations/Sources/Slavery and Civil Disobedience

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*Daniel Webster, Seventh of March Speech (1850)*<sup>1</sup>

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*Daniel Webster (1782–1852) led the Northern Whigs. His Supreme Court arguments and speeches in the Senate urged that constitutional powers be broadly construed. Toward the end of his career, Webster became concerned with the sectional conflict over slavery. His last major speech in the Senate, the “Seventh of March Address,” urged both sides to compromise. He pointedly insisted that northerners abide by the Fugitive Slave Clause and Fugitive Slave Laws. The speech ruined Webster’s electoral career in the North. Later in 1850, he resigned his Senate seat to join the Fillmore administration.*

*Consider the following questions when reading the excerpt below. Why did Webster claim that northerners had a duty to return fugitive slaves? Is his analysis correct? Was Webster more willing to compromise than other northerners because he was less opposed to slavery or more committed to national Union? Was the speech a statesmen’s effort to achieve compromise or a craven attempt to appease slaveholders? Consider the “Seventh of March Address” in light of contemporary politics. Do contemporary Americans need a “Seventh of March Address?” What political conditions enable partisan politicians to deliver a “Seventh of March Addresses?”*

Mr. President, I wish to speak today, not as a Massachusetts man, nor as a northern man, but as an American, and a member of the Senate of the United States. . . . I speak today for the preservation of the Union. . . .

Now, sir, upon the general nature, and character, and influence of slavery there exists a wide difference between the northern portion of this country and the southern. It is said on the one side, that if not the subject of any injunction or direct prohibition in the New Testament, slavery is a wrong. . . . These are the sentiments that are cherished, and recently with greatly augmented force, among the people of the northern states. . . . The South, on the other side, having been accustomed to this relation between the two races all their lives, from their birth, having been taught, in general, to treat the subjects of this bondage with great care and kindness . . . have not yet taken this view of the subject which I have mentioned. . . .

. . . It is in the nature of man . . . that religious disputes are apt to become warm, and men’s strength of conviction is proportionate to their views of the magnitude of the questions. In all such disputes, there will sometimes be men found with whom everything is absolute—absolutely wrong, or absolutely right. They see the right clearly; they think others ought so to see it, and they are disposed to establish a broad line of distinction between what is right, and what is wrong. . . . There are men, who, with clear perceptions, as they think, of their own duty, do not see how too hot a pursuit of one duty may involve them in violation of another, or how too warm an embracement of one truth may lead to a disregard of other truths equally important. . . . There are men, who . . . are of opinion, that human duties may be ascertained with the exactness of mathematics. They deal with morals as with mathematics, and they think what is right, may be distinguished from what is wrong, with the precision of an algebraic equation. They have, therefore, none too much charity toward others who differ with them. They are apt, too, to think that nothing is good but what is perfect, and that there are no compromises or modifications to be made in submission to difference of opinion, or in deference to other men’s judgment. . . .

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<sup>1</sup> *Congressional Globe*, 31st Cong., 1st Sess., App. (1850), 269–76.

. . . [T]here has been found at the North, among individuals and among the legislatures of the North, a disinclination to perform, fully, their constitutional duties, in regard to the return of persons bound to service, who have escaped into the free states. In that respect, it is my judgment that the South is right, and the North is wrong. Every member of every northern legislature is bound, by oath, like every other officer in the country, to support the Constitution of the United States, and the article of the Constitution, which says to these states, they shall deliver up fugitives from service, is as binding in honor and conscience as any other article. No man fulfills his duty in any legislature who sets himself to find excuses, evasions, escapes from this constitutional obligation. . . . I put it to all the sober and sound minds at the North, as a question of morals and a question of conscience, what right have they, in their legislative capacity, or any other, to endeavor to get round this Constitution, to embarrass the free exercise of rights secured by the Constitution, to the persons whose slaves escape from them. None at all—none at all. Neither in the forum of conscience, nor before the face of the Constitution, are they justified, in my opinion. . . .

. . . .  
Again, sir, the violence of the press is complained of. The press violent! Why sir, the press is violent everywhere. There are outrageous reproaches in the North against the South, and there are reproaches in not much better taste in the South against the North. Sir, the extremists of both parts of the country are violent, they mistake loud and violent talk for eloquence and for reason. They think that he who talks loudest reasons the best. And this we must expect, when the press is free, as it is here—and I trust always will be—for, with all its licentiousness, and all its evil, the entire and absolute freedom of the press is essential to the preservation of government on the basis of a free constitution. . . .

. . .  
Mr. President, I should much prefer to have heard, from every member on this floor, declarations of opinion that this Union could never be dissolved, than the declaration of opinion that in any case, under the pressure of any circumstances, such a dissolution was possible. . . . Shame upon us! If we of this generation should dishonor these ensigns of the power of the government, and the harmony of the Union, which is every day felt among us with so much joy and gratitude. . . .

Sir, I hear there is to be a convention held at Nashville. I am bound to believe that if worthy gentlemen meet at Nashville in convention, their object will be to adopt counsels conciliatory—to advise the South to forbearance and moderation, and to advise the North to forbearance and moderation; and to inculcate principles of brotherly love, and affection, and attachment to the Constitution of the country, as it now is. . . .

. . .  
And now, Mr. President, instead of speaking of the possibility or utility of secession, instead of dwelling in these caverns of darkness, instead of groping with those ideas so full of all that is horrid and horrible, let us come out into the light of day; let us cherish those hopes which belong to us; let us devote ourselves to those great objects that are fit for our consideration and our action; let us raise our conceptions to the magnitude and the importance of the duties that devolve upon us; let our comprehension be as broad as the country for which we act, our aspirations as high as its certain destiny; let us not be pigmies in a case that calls for men. Never did there devolve, on any generation of men, higher trusts than now devolve upon us for the preservation of this Constitution, and the harmony and peace of all who are destined to live under it. Let us make our generation one of the strongest, and the brightest link, in that golden chain which is destined, I fully believe, to grapple the people of all the states to this Constitution for ages to come. It is a great popular constitutional government, guarded by legislation, by law, and by judicature, and defended by the whole affections of the people. No monarchical throne presses these states together, no iron chair of despotic power encircles them; they live and stand upon a government popular in its form, representative in its character, founded upon principles of equality, and calculated, we hope, as to last forever. . . .