CONVENTION IN PITTSBURGH

The story of the national founding convention of a new party

Leonard H. Bernstein

During the 1850's events conspired to force American political leaders to confront the issue of slavery so that it could neither be evaded nor compromised. The old political parties tried both without success; they failed to respond to slavery as a moral phenomenon whose expansion represented a threat to the nation's growth. Heavily influenced by their southern wings, they were reluctant to adjust to the changed relations of forces within the nation. Plantation capitalism became increasingly convinced that it required expansion to protect its political position. The Kansas-Nebraska Act, voiding at one stroke all previous compromises, pushed the issue of slavery forward. It became clear to the new urban-rural coalition that the slave power intended to hold on to its political dominance to the detriment of the coalition's requirements. The old parties were simply incapable of confronting the moral issue of slavery; the Whig Party never recovered from the Kansas-Nebraska Act and the Democratic Party began rapidly to lose its national character. The stage was set for a new party.

In 1856, on the anniversary of the birthday of George Washington, a national convention was held in Pittsburgh to establish the Republican Party as a national organization. One newspaper mistakenly reported Abraham Lincoln's presence at the convention.\(^1\) At the time Lincoln was attending a conference of Republican editors at Decatur, Illinois, which Professor Randall has called the "real beginning of the Republican Party in Illinois."\(^2\) The Decatur meeting helped to lay the groundwork for the state convention held at Bloomington in May; it summoned the delegates to it and created a state central committee. So it was not surprising that Lincoln considered it more important to be at Decatur than at Pittsburgh.

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1 Pittsburgh Gazette, Feb. 22, 1856.
2 James G. Randall, Lincoln the President (New York, 1945), I, 95-96.
The new party's name had its birth just two years earlier in Ripon, Wisconsin. Its organization in most of the states was extremely recent. In some cases, as in Illinois, it was not yet officially formed. During the fall of 1855, after his election as governor of Ohio, Salmon Chase had come to Pittsburgh to confer with David White, publisher of the *Gazette*, on the calling of a national convention. Chase agreed that Pittsburgh would be a good place for one. In January 1856, a group of Republicans and anti-Nebraska Act state chairmen issued the call for the convention to be held on February 22, 1856, to perfect the national organization of the party and lay plans for a national convention to nominate a presidential candidate for the November elections.

When the convention opened, representatives from sixteen northern and eight southern states were present. There were varying estimates of the attendance. The *Pittsburgh Daily Post* put it at less than 1,000, while the *Pittsburgh Daily Dispatch* placed it at 2,000. The *New York Times* and Horace Greeley's *Tribune* agreed that the attendance exceeded their expectations.

There was apparently a great deal of activity on the eve of the convention. The *Times'* correspondent reported a difference of opinion as to whether the nominating convention should be arranged by the convention or by the central committee in Washington. He also reported the prior existence of two addresses to the people; the one in the possession of the New York delegation purportedly treated more broadly of national issues other than slavery than that of the Ohio delegation. There was also much talk of the possibility of a split developing at the Know-Nothing Convention then being held in Philadelphia. The *Times'* man predicted that such an event would have an influence on the actions of the delegates in Pittsburgh.

The convention was opened on Friday, February 22, by a reading of the Call. Rufus King's son, John, was elected temporary chairman and the Reverend Owen Lovejoy, brother of the martyred abolitionist, gave the opening prayer. Years later, one delegate remembered that the "name of Lovejoy was an inspiration, for it recalled the murder of his brother by a mob at Alton in 1837, for merely exercising his constitutional right of free speech in a free state in talking about slavery."
Horace Greeley warned in the name of “our friends at Washington” against acting in such a way as to seem “actuated by ill-will” towards the South. He urged forbearance towards the American Party. “If a man be a good anti-slavery man, I will not inquire into his native notions. ‘Treat your enemies so that they will become your friends, and your friends so that they will remain friends.’”

Greeley touched on one of the most divisive questions of the convention: whether it should select a time and place for a nominating convention. It was likely that he suspected the presidential aspirations of Governor Chase. At any rate, he was careful to assure his readers that no nominations would be made at this convention. To the convention itself Greeley reported that his “friends at Washington were anxious that the convention should not select a time and place for a nominating convention.” Instead he proposed that a strong national committee be appointed to work together with those in the old informal central committee at Washington to choose the time and the place.

Representative Joshua Giddings of Ohio took issue with Greeley: “My friend has brought advice to you from Washington City. Gentlemen, I tell you that is the last place on earth for you to look for advice! It is for you to dictate and me in Washington to follow.” Another Ohioan, W. H. Gibson, terming Washington a “sink-hole of pride and pollution,” observed that “too much power has centralized there already.” He reminded the delegates that the Republican movement had originated, not at Washington, but among the masses. “Let us act,” he concluded, “as if there was no such place as Washington — no, nor Philadelphia, neither.”

Ichabod Coddin of Illinois lamented that “the slave power has gone on unchecked until it attempts, nay does, rule the Union.” It was necessary to “check its aggression . . . . We say to our brethren there, take your pound of flesh — we have no wish to interfere in your internal affairs; but as to making more slave states — ‘thus far have you gone, but no farther shall ye go!’”

The nomination of Francis P. Blair of Maryland as president of
the convention was reported by the Committee on Permanent Organization. Blair, one of the oldest of the delegates and a member of Jackson's "kitchen cabinet," had withdrawn from the Democratic Party and semi-retirement after the Kansas-Nebraska Act. In accepting the nomination, Blair dwelt on the building of the new party in the South. He expressed the view that since southerners equated the young movement to Abolitionism, it was important to explain that the real design of the movement was the defense of northern rights. Blair's "Southern Platform" called for the repeal of the Kansas-Nebraska Act and the restoration of the Compromises of 1820 and 1850. He urged the northern Republicans to unite under their banner all the elements that wished to see the Kansas-Nebraska Act repealed.

At this point the announcement of the split at the American Party Convention, which was being held simultaneously in Philadelphia, accentuated the conflict among the Republicans as to the handling of the "native" question. Some delegates felt that if the convention came out against nativism, it might alienate their northern adherents who were now surely to be counted in support of the Republicans. On the other hand, if the convention failed to come out strongly against nativism, it was likely to lose the support of the considerable German-American population which, although keenly dissatisfied with the Democrats' position on slavery, nonetheless was more immediately concerned with Know-Nothingsm and expected the Republicans to take a clear stand against it.

Charles Reemelin, a German-American delegate from Cincinnati, led the attack on nativism. He spoke, he said, as an independent who had left the Democratic Party because of its stand on slavery. Reemelin felt that the northerners may have erred in taking too sectional a position when "Freedom Everywhere!" should be the rallying cry. He believed the Democrats were right on the foreign question; Know-Nothingism was a crime and a folly. In citing the fact that Catholics were forced to withdraw from a school he directed on account of Know-Nothing agitation, and then attended a Church school, he observed that Know-Nothingism thus strengthened the very Church it intended to injure.

During the evening session the words of Joshua Giddings dramatized the significance of the gathering at Pittsburgh: "For twenty years I had been called a fanatic until I almost believed it myself. Yet if I had ever been told . . . that I should have lived to see

13 Ibid.
14 Pittsburgh Gazette, Feb. 23, 1856; Pittsburgh Daily Post, Feb. 23, 1856.
a sight like this, I would have called my informant a fanatic.” It seemed to him “that years have been condensed into hours, when I see the progress this cause has made.”

Following Giddings, his future son-in-law, George W. Julian, returned to the issue of Know-Nothingism. He reviewed the manner in which nativism had sprung from the ashes of the Whig and northern Democratic parties. As one of the original “free-soilers” he hoped that nativism would not find its way into the Republican platform. Indeed, he favored the old Pittsburgh platform (the Free-Soilers of 1852) which extended the hand of welcome to all exiles from foreign lands. If the Republican Party was to proscribe a man on account of his religion or the accident of his birth, he could not go along. In conclusion, Julian recommended the adoption of a resolution defining the position of the convention in regard to the American question.

Next day the delegates reported on the political situation in their respective states. Dr. Stone of Massachusetts attributed the Americans’ success in the last state election — thirty-seven per cent of the total and the largest vote of any party — to their claim that they were the real anti-slavery men. The Republicans with twenty-seven per cent were runners-up.

Burroughs, a New York delegate, expressed the belief that if the delegates wanted a large party, they must go out of the party to get it. “Mr. Lloyd Garrison had a patent right for a small party, which he kept to himself . . . . They must make concessions, and Mr. Greeley had said some very prudent things in regard to this subject.” Burroughs favored holding out an olive branch to the American Party, for “there were many honest, high-minded men in the American Party.” But, he hastened to assure the convention, he was not in favor of adopting the Know-Nothings’ opinions on naturalization. Rather, he would win them over by boldly and distinctly presenting to them the idea of anti-slavery. Referring to the 100,000 farmers in the American Party in New York state, Burroughs said that many of them, cramped for space, were planning to go beyond the Mississippi. “When they go they must take free schools, free speech, and a free press. But if slavery be allowed within the territories which they have settled, thousands of slaves would pour in — and the cost of each slave would not be one hundred dollars a year, including interest upon the land. How could the emigrant compete with labor on such terms?

15 *Pittsburgh Gazette*, Feb. 23, 1856.
16 Ibid.
... The free white looks to educating his children, and for that he must earn from three to five hundred dollars per annum. Go home to your farmers and lay this before them. Then will the basis of a successful Republican Party be laid.”  

A letter from Cassius M. Clay of Kentucky was read. In contrast to Blair's plea for moderation, Clay exorcised in no uncertain terms what he called the despotism of the slave oligarchy. The North with free labor excelled the South in agriculture, mining, commerce, and manufacture. Contrasting North and South, Clay's letter read:

The many 'isms,' in social, political, moral, and religious science, of the North, which are so much railed at by the slave-propaganda are the evidences of intellectual life — the scales which are wastefully thrown off from the stimulated mind and passions, whilst man is being transformed into better metal and nobler structure. The 'conservatism' of the South is the quietude and homogeneity of the unwrought ore, which lies forever unchanged in the dark mines of ignorance and despotism!

Clay pointed out that with the national government in the hands of the slaveholders, civil rights had been hideously battered. "The friends of liberty, driven from the capital, take refuge in the states; but even there, their tameness of spirit ... cannot shield them from renewed insult ... Chains are thrown around the courts; and hired mercenarys obstruct the rightful ingress and egress from the temples of justice and the legal pursuits of ordinary life ..." In Clay's opinion it was no longer a question of whether "the blacks shall be slaves, but whether the whites shall be free?" It was a question of saving Republicanism. "We are no new party; we avow no new principles; we want no new name; we make no new issues; we desire no revolution." Clay considered the Republicans to be men who acknowledged "no distinction of clime, of color, or of caste, but declare the universal brotherhood of the human race."

George W. Julian later wrote of Clay's letter that "as an impassioned and powerful arraignment of slavery by a southern man his letter reminded one of Jefferson's arraignment of George the Third, and through its extensive publication in the newspapers it must have done excellent service in guiding and inspiring the great party then about to be created."  

After the reading of Clay's letter the Committee on National

18 Ibid.
20 Julian, 319-320.
Organization reported its four recommendations. The first was that a national executive committee of one from each state should be appointed with Blair and Wilmot as two of its members. It was suggested from the floor and approved that Governor Charles Robinson of Kansas, as the man who had challenged President Pierce's sanctioning of allegedly "false" elections, be added to the committee.

The second and fourth recommendations did not occasion much discussion. The second was that the executive committee be authorized to fill its own vacancies and add to its membership representatives from additional states and territories. The fourth resolution advised the Republicans to complete their state organizations as soon as possible by appointing state, county, and district committees. The state and county organizations were further requested to organize clubs in every town and township throughout the land.

It was the third recommendation proposing that a nominating convention for the national election be held at Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, on June 17, that aroused the most prolonged discussion. The committee recommended that each state organization was to appoint twice as many delegates to this convention as its state's congressional representation. The committee, however, was divided on its report. Reemelin was a member of the minority which did not want to fix the time or place of the convention. "... He had no love for such bodies: Washington, Jefferson, and Jackson were not nominees of a Convention, and when any great movement was started, like the present, it was successful, by not following in the beaten track of the old parties. If the people can't find the man, for God's sake don't let the politicians find him. By holding a Convention, you prevent a people's choice — the contaminating influences that exist in such places prevent it." 21

Lovejoy spoke for the majority, maintaining that a nominating convention would consolidate strength. "We are not in danger of corruption as long as we remain true to principles." To allay the fears of the minority, he suggested increasing the representation from each congressional district from two to three. 22 But there was objection to this amendment because it had the appearance of enabling each of the old parties to send representatives. A futile attempt was then made to cut the representation to one. After some discussion in which Michigan's Governor Bingham spoke for Lovejoy's amendment, the increase in representation was adopted. 21

21 Pittsburgh Daily Post, Feb. 25, 1856; Pittsburgh Gazette, Feb. 25, 1856.
22 Pittsburgh Gazette, Feb. 25, 1856.
23 Pittsburgh Daily Post, Feb. 25, 1856.
There was also disagreement as to the place the committee chose for the convention. The Pennsylvania delegate who had proposed Harrisburg had done so because he felt "Pennsylvania was to be the battleground, and the Convention in this State would be productive of much good to the cause of the Republican movement." But Judge Spaulding of Ohio pointed out that "the accommodations at Harrisburg were well known to be of most limited character." He proposed instead Cleveland or Cincinnati, or even Philadelphia. The latter city was finally selected and the committee's report, with these two changes, was adopted.24

Differences among the members of the Committee on Address had been amicably adjusted. The Address itself was reportedly written by a non-committee member, Lieutenant Governor Raymond of New York, ex-editor of the Times.25 The chairman of the committee, Elijah Mann, observed that the Administration had created the issue before them: whether slavery should be engrafted upon the Constitution and so made national. Declaring its devotion to the Union, the Address pointed out that all citizens had the same rights and liberties.26 Yet the Administration was destroying Constitution and Union alike, governing in behalf of the two per cent of its people who were slaveholders, to secure the extension of slavery.

The framers of the Constitution had, according to the Address, empowered Congress to prohibit slavery in any new states and, after 1808, to prohibit the slave-trade. But an early national drift towards emancipation was abruptly halted when increased cotton culture made slavery more profitable. The southern states eventually came to regard attempts at emancipation as assaults upon their section.

Until 1820 new states had been carved from territories where the slavery-prohibition of the Ordinance of 1787 had been in force. The sectional quarrel flared up over Missouri, the first part of the Louisiana Purchase to ask for admittance as a state. Objections to admitting Missouri as a slave state were countered with the argument that Congress had no right to impose conditions upon an applicant for statehood. In the end, the slaveholders' representatives in Washington had to compromise. Missouri was admitted, but henceforth all the rest of the Louisiana Territory north of 36°30' was to be free. When Arkansas was admitted in 1836 as a slave state, it looked as if civilization would never penetrate the region north of 36°30'. But in winning

24 Pittsburgh Gazette, Feb. 25, 1856.
their victory the southerners had conceded the right of Congress to prohibit slavery in territory which at the time of its purchase from a foreign country had been slave territory.

Between the year of the Missouri Compromise and that of the annexation of Texas the slaveholders consolidated their power in the South. Despite the fact that they numbered less than six per cent of the white population, they and their friends monopolized positions of authority. In national conventions the southerners voted as a bloc and insisted that others join them on matters pertaining to slavery as the price for their attendance. For twenty years no president had appointed anyone who opposed slavery to an important office. The Address charged that “millions of our citizens have been thus disfranchised for their opinions concerning Slavery,” and the vast patronage “of the federal government has been systematically wielded in its service.”

Following the Mexican War, attributed by the Address to the annexation of Texas, which had been admitted as a slave state in 1845, Mexico ceded us certain territories in which slavery had already been abolished. In spite of this and the preponderance of free settlers in these territories, only California was admitted as a free state.

At the time of Pierce’s inauguration there was no conflict on the Missouri Compromise. Under it, sixteen free and fifteen slave states existed. Both parties — and President Pierce — were pledged to support the Missouri Compromise.

But with the settling of some of the territory north of 36°30’ came the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which voided the Missouri Compromise and left the issue of slavery up to the new settlers. In addition, the inhabitants of Oregon, Washington, New Mexico, Deseret, and those new states to be formed from Texas which would be above 36°30’ were authorized to make laws for the establishment and perpetuation of slavery.

The Address charged that armed bands from Missouri took possession of the Kansas polls during the first election of members for the territorial legislature. Residents were prevented from voting and so the Missourians elected the Kansas legislature. When his own governor refused to acknowledge this legislature, Pierce removed him.

This legislature excluded from settlement in Kansas all those who opposed the admission of slavery to the territory, made it illegal to write anything against slavery, and required all who wanted to vote to take an oath to help recapture fugitive slaves. President Pierce threw the power of the army behind these acts. This section of the Address concluded by stating that, if the President carried out his words, the
states would be justified in resisting, for these Kansas acts were worse than the Alien and Sedition laws.

"The General Government proclaims its determination to use all the power of the U.S. to enforce upon the people obedience to laws imposed upon them by armed invaders, establishing slavery." This, despite the fact that two-thirds of the nation's people and five-sixths of its capital resided in the free states.

The repeal of the Missouri Compromise was upheld by the contention that it was not a compact, but a law subject to repeal. But the Address insisted that Missouri would never have been admitted had not the southerners pledged to keep faith with the compromise "forever"; certainly this last word was proof of a compact.

Did Congress have the power to prohibit slavery in the territories? Yes, said the Address, twitting the pro-slavery adherents for granting that point to secure the Missouri Compromise; Congress bore the same relation to the territories as the state legislatures did to the states, the Address held. Article I, Section 9 of the Constitution provided that "the migration or importation of such persons as any of the states now existing may think proper to admit, shall not be prohibited by Congress prior to 1808." Certainly this implied that Congress had the power to forbid the importation of slaves even in the states; it followed that it could have no less power over the territories. To the argument that slaves were property, the Address cited the use of the word "persons" in Section 9, quoted above, and in that section which dealt with apportionment of representation.

As for popular sovereignty, the Address quoted the South's own spokesman, Calhoun, as having once said that it "involves an absurdity; if the sovereignty over the Territories be in their inhabitants, instead of the U.S., they would cease to be Territories of the U.S. the moment we permit them to be inhabited." In addition, the Republicans were of the opinion that popular sovereignty was alien to the principles of our government. Congress had always exercised the right of prohibiting slavery in the territories, reaffirming the prohibition provision of the Northwest Ordinance as early as 1789 and then prohibiting slavery in other territories in 1820 and 1848.

But as a result of a divided population in the free states all questions of public policy turned simply upon their effect on the interests of the slaveholders. Many northern leaders decried agitation against slavery because they felt economics would lead to the South's voluntarily relinquishing it. Instead, the slave power brazenly broke com-
pacts in order to place slavery "under the protection of the national flag."

Not satisfied with control of the federal government, the slaveholders infringed on states' rights. Virginia contested the right of New York to forbid slavery within its borders and Pennsylvania was denied the right "to decree freedom to slaves brought [there] by their masters."

Why, on the very floor of the Senate one could hear it argued that the government should cease restraining the slave trade! Certainly, when slavery gained complete control over all Americans, it could not fail to commit such outrages as would "awaken storms that will sweep it in carnage from the face of the earth." Already, by establishing the power of Congress to protect slavery, the slavocracy had proved the inefficacy of compromise. Now why should Congress not turn the tables and use its power to destroy what it had thus far protected?

By 1856 it had become clear that the issue was whether slavery or other interests would occupy the national government; both could no longer do so. Quoting Calhoun to the effect that he who fails to resist aggression is as much at fault as he who commits it, the Address issued a call to the people to deliver the Constitution and the Union from the subjugation which threatened both.

The Address concluded by placing before the people of the nation as objects of political action resolutions on (1) the repeal of laws allowing slavery to be introduced into territories from which it had previously been excluded, (2) the resistance to the introduction of slavery in any territory, (3) support for the Kansas free-staters, and (4) opposition to the Pierce administration because "its continuance in power is identified with the progress of the slave power to national supremacy, with the exclusion of Freedom from the Territories, and with increasing civil discord."

The Address made it forcefully evident that the Republican Party's objective was a radical shift in the American political balance. Laissez-faire through the two-party system had permitted the growth of the power of slavery over the political system. The Republican Party reintroduced principle into that system. Accepting 1787 as the fulfilment of 1776, the Party's Address reminded Americans that the Constitution-makers had assumed that slavery was on its deathbed. That the Party's radicalism was a return to the foundation of American democracy made it no less radical for that, as its first victorious presidential candidate was to make clear when he refused to compromise its opposition to the extension of slavery. For the Republican
Party was more than a new party; it was a new force whose objective was the destruction of an aristocracy that was threatening the achievement of 1776 and 1787.

Shortly after this Address was accepted and its resolutions unanimously adopted, the convention was adjourned. The delegates returned to their homes to continue the agitation which had resulted in the convention and to throw themselves into the organizational tasks resulting from it. One of their number, Joshua Giddings, had indeed uttered prophetic words when he had said, “Years have been condensed into hours.” 27 In less than five years the new Party’s candidate became the President of the United States.

27 *Pittsburgh Gazette*, Feb. 23, 1856.