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Mocking a Perilous Prediction: Currier and Ives' Political Cartoons

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Mocking a Perilous Prediction: Currier and Ives' Political Cartoons

Abstract

Currier and Ives' political cartoons, while comical, also represent the general undertones of the time as well as people's feelings regarding this era of political controversy. The election of 1860 was an incredibly important one because, not only were there numerous political and social divides, but the South had threatened to secede. The political cartoon "The Irrepressible Conflict" or "The Republican Barge in Danger," released in 1860, gives historians a good understanding of the reactions to not only Seward's speech but also the wariness of Lincoln's nomination and eventual election. [*excerpt*]

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Disciplines

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Mocking a Perilous Prediction: Currier and Ives' Political Cartoons

March 3, 2014

By: Meg Sutter, '16

Currier and Ives' political cartoons, while comical, also represent the general undertones of the time as well as people's feelings regarding this era of political controversy. The election of 1860 was an incredibly important one because, not only were there numerous political and social divides, but the South had threatened to secede. The political cartoon "The Irrepressible Conflict" or "The Republican Barge in Danger," released in 1860, gives historians a good understanding of the reactions to not only Seward's speech but also the wariness of Lincoln's nomination and eventual election.



**"The Irrepressible Conflict" or
"The Republican Barge in Danger" (1860)**

states and slaves states could not co-exist and that one day the United States would have to be either an all free state Union or an all slavery Union. He even went as far as to say that this "irrepressible conflict" would occur "even at the cost of civil war." Seward, until this point, had been the frontrunner for the Republican Party's presidential nomination; however, this speech caused so much controversy that it may have lost Seward the presidency in 1860. Republican Party members viewed Seward as too radical and they turned their eyes to a more moderate Abraham Lincoln.

The cartoon shows the "Republican Barge" slowly sinking with Lincoln at the helm. Horace Greeley and Francis Preston Blair are throwing Seward overboard with help from Edward Bates.

"The Irrepressible Conflict or the Republican Barge in Danger" is an 1860 political cartoon lithograph. As the title suggests, Currier and Ives were mocking William Seward's "Irrepressible Conflict" speech that he gave in Rochester, New York, in 1858. Seward was a public anti-slavery advocate whose previous "High Law" speech had influenced the decision to allow California into the Union as a free state. In Seward's speech on the "irrepressible conflict," he proclaims slavery as "intolerable, unjust, and inhumane." He claimed that free-

While the “Republican Barge” is intended to present a disapproving view of the Republican Party, it is interesting to note the composition of the barge. The Republican Party was a new party that emerged in 1854 with a mixture of anti-slavery supporters from all parties: Conscience Whigs, Anti-slavery Democrats, Free-Laborers, and Know-Nothings. The people in Currier and Ives’ barge represent different factions of the Republican Party. Horace Greeley, initially a Whig, created the New York Tribune in 1841. While his views were against slavery, he was fearful of how radical Seward was, initially supporting Bates during the presidential election of 1860. In Currier and Ives’ cartoon, Greeley is saying: “Over you go Billy! Between you and I there is an ‘Irrepressible Conflict.’” In the end, Greeley voted for Lincoln. Edward Bates, Lincoln’s future Attorney General, is sitting next to Greeley saying: “Over with him Horace never mind his kicking!” Bates never officially joined the Republican Party; he remained a Whig who supported the Know-Nothings. However, Greeley and Blair wanted Bates to run for president in 1860. While Bates was against slavery, he still viewed African-Americans with disdain. Francis Preston Blair, founder and editor of the (Congressional) *Washington Globe*, is the third man pushing Seward into the water. What gives him away is his exclamation: “He can’t stand my muscle, for I once moved the Globe.” Blair had been one of the members of Andrew Jackson’s “Kitchen Cabinet.” When Polk became President, Blair retired. He remained a Democrat until the Missouri Compromise of 1820 was repealed in 1854 and joined the newly formed Republican Party. He initially supported Bates in the 1860 election, but ended up backing Lincoln when he realized Bates would not get a nomination. James Watson Webb, warning “Breakers ahead” on the right of the cartoon, was similar to Blair. Initially a Jacksonian, he joined the Whig party during the “Bank Wars.” He later joined the Republican Party and was appointed Lincoln’s U.S. minister to Brazil. There is a black man sitting in the middle wearing a “Discord’s Patent Life Preserver.” From the shore Brother Jonathan – similar to our version of Uncle Sam today – chides the Republicans who are throwing Seward overboard. Instead, Brother Johnathan tells them to “heave that tarnal Nigger out.” Fortunately we know that the Republican Party indeed does not sink! Abraham Lincoln wins the election of 1860 and becomes the president who would get our nation through the Civil War that Seward originally predicted in his “Irrepressible Conflict” speech.

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Image:

Currier and Ives. “The Irrepressible Conflict or the Republican Barge in Danger.” Image Courtesy of Gettysburg College Special Collections.