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Minnesota's ROLE in the DEMOCRATIC RIFT of 1860

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AFTER completely dominating the political scene in Minnesota during the territorial era from 1849 to 1858, the Democratic party was soundly defeated in the gubernatorial and legislative races of 1859. Not until 1899, four decades later, did it recapture the governorship or a substantial majority in the legislature. There is no simple explanation for this drastic turn of events. The roots of the Democrats' misfortunes in Minnesota, however, can be traced to the critical years 1859 and 1860—years when the whole nation was facing grave political problems.

The Democratic dynasty of Minnesota received its first setback in 1859, when the Republican candidate, Alexander Ramsey, easily defeated the Democratic nominee, George L. Becker, for the governorship.¹ If it were to win the next election, the party needed united and vigorous leadership. That this was lacking became obvious at the state nominating convention of January, 1860, when all hope for unified party action was shattered.

Minnesota Democrats in the early win-

¹ The vote was 21,335 to 17,582. See *Minnesota, House Journal*, 1860, p. 39.

² B. B. Meeker, Thomas Massey, R. G. Murphy, and George Becker to Henry H. Sibley, October 11, 1858, November 21, 1859, January 5, 21, February 11, 1860, Sibley Papers, owned by the Minnesota Historical Society.

ter of 1859–60 faced the future with grave doubts. In that presidential election year the party would send an official delegation to a national convention for the first time. The state's party men were not only apprehensive after letting the "Democratic banner trail in the dust" by losing the governorship, but they were well aware that the national Democratic organization likewise faced critical problems. One Minnesota Democrat who expressed his conviction that only Douglas could "be successful on Election day," added, "But I must confess, that it looks gloomy, from the bad feeling exhibited by the Southern members, in the present Congress."²

Among the constitutional problems over which the national Democratic ranks were deeply split was the question of Congressional power to prohibit the extension of slavery in newly opened territories of the Great Plains. Southern Democratic spokesmen argued that, in accordance with the Supreme Court decision in the Dred Scott case of 1857, no legislative body had the right to deprive a citizen of his property without due process of law. Since slaves were property, according to Southern lawmakers and the court, no legislative body could pass any law to prevent the taking of slaves into the new territories. Northern Democrats maintained

the principle of local option, or squatter sovereignty, which would allow citizens of each new territory to decide for themselves whether or not to admit slavery.

Although the question had no direct relevance in Minnesota, which constitutionally prohibited slavery, the state's Democrats, for reasons not altogether clear, were divided over the issue. The champion of squatter sovereignty, Senator Stephen A. Douglas of Illinois, was warmly supported as a presidential candidate by many Minnesota party men in 1860. These free-soil Democrats included Henry Hastings Sibley, first territorial delegate to Congress and first state governor, Willis A. Gorman, second territorial governor, Earle S. Goodrich, editor of the *St. Paul Pioneer and Democrat* and chairman of the state central committee, and Colonel Daniel A. Robertson, former editor and founder of the *Democrat*. Douglas was stoutly opposed in Minnesota by such important figures as United States Senator Henry M. Rice, his brother Edmund Rice, a St. Paul attorney, and Becker, titular head of the party in the state. Like Democratic President James Buchanan and many Southern Senators, members of the latter group opposed any prohibitory legislation on slavery.³

To name a presidential nominee and elect Minnesota's delegates to the Democratic national convention, which was to be held in Charleston, South Carolina, in April, the state nominating convention assembled in the St. Paul Athaeneum at noon on January 12, 1860. Following a brief session devoted to routine business, the delegates recessed. When they reconvened at 3:00 P.M., they found the hall crowded with spectators who evidently anticipated a fiery session. The report of the credentials committee was adopted after lengthy debate and the business of permanent organization was quickly disposed of. Then Gorman moved the appointment of a committee on resolutions. No sooner had the motion been adopted than Becker was on his feet waving a paper which contained a set of resolutions. He hoped they would be referred to the committee

with instructions that they be reported back for adoption by the convention.⁴

The resolutions expressed generally the position of free-soil Democrats, reaffirming support of the nonintervention platform adopted by the party's national convention at Cincinnati in 1856, acquiescing in the Dred Scott decision, and denouncing equally all attempts to reopen the African slave trade and John Brown's "attack upon the peace, safety and dignity of every State in the Union." The crucial paragraphs stated "that Stephen A. Douglas, of Illinois, is the first choice of the Democratic Party of the State of Minnesota, for the Presidency in 1860," and "that our Delegates to Charleston are expected, as an expression of the will of the Democracy of Minnesota, to support him as such, so long as such support may prove available to him and for the general interests of the Democratic Party."⁵ This apparently represented a prearranged compromise among some of the party leaders whereby the anti-Douglas group would pay verbal tribute to the free-soil sentiments of the majority and agree to support Douglas for at least a few ballots in the national convention. In return the minority delegates would be free to desert Douglas at any time they saw fit to do so.

Gorman immediately seconded Becker's motion and argued for the resolutions, stating that "his hopes were centered alone in a harmonious Democracy, and as the resolutions embodied everything he deemed desirable, he would sacrifice views he entertained,

³One plausible explanation for the split is that Sibley and his followers had supported Douglas instead of Buchanan for the presidency in 1856, while Rice and his group had favored the victorious Buchanan. Neither Rice nor Sibley had changed their loyalties since that campaign. See Ruby G. Karstad, "Political Party Alignments in Minnesota, 1854-1860," p. 236, an unpublished dissertation owned by the Minnesota Historical Society; John H. Stevens and Edmund Rice to Franklin Steele, January 13, 19, 1860, Steele Papers, owned by the Minnesota Historical Society; Meeker to Sibley, October 11, 1858, Sibley Papers.

⁴*St. Paul Pioneer and Democrat*, January 13, 1860.

⁵*Pioneer and Democrat*, January 13, 1860.

DEMOCRATIC
convention
headquarters at
Charleston



FROM HARPER'S WEEKLY, APRIL 21, 1860

for the sake of the party." James M. Cavanaugh and William W. Phelps, both well-known Douglas men, supported him, and for a moment it looked as though a measure of harmony might be achieved on the basis of Becker's platitudes. Others objected, however; rival resolutions were proposed, and the afternoon session ended in acrimonious debate.

The evening session was dominated by Colonel Robertson, who pointed out brusquely that although "there was but one Douglas party among the people" of Minnesota, "there were two Douglas parties in the Convention," only one of which actually supported the candidate. He submitted a resolution which proposed "That the entire vote of Minnesota be cast for him [*Douglas*] and that the delegation from this state continue to vote for him until a majority of them decide otherwise." This was the unit rule, binding and unequivocal, which the Douglas die-hards, sure of controlling a majority of the delegation, hoped to push through. To the opposition it was an assurance that their delegates at Charleston would be helpless and gagged.

⁶ *Pioneer and Democrat*, January 13, 1860; *The Charleston Convention: Statement of a Portion of the Minnesota Delegation to Their Constituents*, 3-5 (Washington, 1860).

⁷ *Pioneer and Democrat*, January 13, 1860.

In the debate which now raged over the resolutions both Gorman and Cavanaugh changed sides, but Phelps stood by the original plan. He "thought the course pursued here was not conducive to harmony. A programme had been marked out which had met the support of the convention. The resolutions subsequently introduced were mischievous in their tendency." He closed by pleading, "Let us compromise — let us arrange the matter," to which a majority of the convention members apparently responded favorably. Robertson's resolutions were defeated, 76 to 39, and Becker's then were adopted 113 to 1.⁶

The final item on the agenda was the election of delegates. Of the eight chosen, three were known to be uncommitted to any candidate. These were Becker, Abram M. Fridley, and Alonzo J. Edgerton. The remaining five — all Douglas supporters — were Gorman, Cavanaugh, Phelps, Sibley, and J. Travis Rosser. When the convention wearily adjourned at 2:00 A.M. the most it could claim was that it had preserved the Minnesota Democratic party as an organization. No basic compromise had been achieved, and the ranks remained bitterly split.⁷

THE DELEGATES left St. Paul for the national convention in mid-April and arrived at Charleston on April 21. Upon stepping from

the train, they entered a world of elegant architecture, polished manners, and aristocratic traditions. Already the heat was stifling and the perfume of late spring flowers hung heavy in the air. It was an abrupt transition for the Minnesota frontiersmen. To save money, the delegates from the Northwest states had rented Hibernian Hall, a huge, old ramshackle building which they used both as a caucusing center and for sleeping quarters. By the time the Minnesota delegates arrived, offices, desks, and campaign materials had been installed on the main floor and several hundred cots on the second.⁸

On April 23 Minnesota Democrats elected their officers. Gorman was named chairman, Edgerton was elected secretary, and Cavanaugh was named to represent the state on the resolutions committee. Phelps was to be presented by the delegation for the post of vice-president of the convention. Everything proceeded smoothly until Fridley asked for Minnesota's one seat on the credentials committee — an assignment which Sibley seems to have wanted for himself. Gorman challenged Fridley by asking his opinion on the procedure the committee should follow to settle some disputes which had already developed among other state delegations over contested seats. Fridley refused to commit himself, stating that he would listen to both sides and decide on each case as justly as he could. In the vote which followed only Gorman and Sibley opposed Fridley's election.⁹

Rosser then brought up the subject of unit voting, proposing that Gorman as chairman be directed to cast a unanimous ballot for Douglas unless a majority of the state's delegates decided to vote for another candidate. Becker objected, and the delegation split four to four on the issue, Phelps casting his vote with the uncommitted trio of Becker, Edgerton, and Fridley. In the face of this deadlock, Becker rose, and declaring that the delegation had no right or authority to bind anyone by such an action, left the room, to be followed shortly by Fridley. This cleared the road not only for Rosser's unit rule reso-

lution, but for the reconsideration of Fridley's election to the credentials committee. With only Edgerton opposing the action, Sibley was substituted for Fridley and the meeting was adjourned.¹⁰

IN THE MEANTIME another and more violent struggle was taking shape as the convention delegates gathered. Involved were the supporters of Douglas and his major opponents, Senators John Slidell of Louisiana, James A. Bayard of Delaware, and Jesse D. Bright of Indiana. This trio, militantly opposed to Douglas but as yet having no candidate of its own, planned to unite the Southern bloc with the anti-Douglas delegations of California and Oregon to win control of both the platform and credentials committees. This was possible since each state was equally represented on the committees, the size of its delegation notwithstanding. Thus, though the Douglas faction held a firm majority in the convention at large, its opponents hoped to draft a platform on which Douglas himself would refuse to run.¹¹

On the second day two important decisions were made. The first, generally regarded as a victory for the Douglas forces, was the adoption of a rule "That in any State which has not provided or directed by its state convention how its vote may be given, the convention will recognize the right of each delegate to cast his individual vote." With the exception of Minnesota, the Douglas bloc of Northwest states had been bound by their state conventions to follow the unit rule, while most of the Southern states had left their delegates free. There were sizable pro-Douglas minorities in many of the Southern delegations, and these were allowed to vote for their preferred candidate

⁸ Roy Franklin Nichols, *The Disruption of American Democracy*, 288 (New York, 1948); Allan Nevins, *The Emergence of Lincoln*, 2:203, 204 (New York, 1950).

⁹ *The Charleston Convention*, 5.

¹⁰ *The Charleston Convention*, 5-7.

¹¹ Nichols, *Disruption of American Democracy*, 295-297; Nevins, *Emergence of Lincoln*, 2:205-211.

regardless of pressures from the majority of their colleagues.¹²

The second and more fateful decision was the agreement by the leaders of the Douglas forces to the opposition plan of drawing up the platform before making nominations. Thus the crucial battle in the convention developed over the statement of principles rather than about the nominee. The platform committee labored for two days and two nights, only to emerge with three separate reports on the morning of the convention's fifth day. The majority report represented the Southern position, upholding the duty of the federal government to protect slavery in the territories. Douglas had clearly stated that he would never run on this plank, but as the day passed and various compromises were suggested, it be-

came clear that he would be satisfied with almost anything else. One lone member of the platform committee advocated simply reaffirming the Cincinnati platform, agreed upon four years earlier, and as the wrangling continued, he gained support from the members representing New Jersey and Indiana and, for a brief time, from Cavanaugh of Minnesota. In a vote on this proposal the Minnesota delegation split, the three uncommitted members favoring it and the five Douglas delegates, including Cavanaugh, who was listed as one of its sponsors, opposing it.¹³

The decisive vote, taken on the seventh day of the convention, approved the minority report of the platform committee. This included a reaffirmation of the ambiguous Cincinnati platform plus a statement which in effect referred the doctrine of squatter sovereignty to the Supreme Court for decision. Minnesota voted as a unit for this platform, which carried the convention 165 to 138.¹⁴

A bloc of Southern states, including Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, South Carolina, Florida, and Texas, was determined to withdraw at this point, having failed to se-

¹² Democratic National Convention, Charleston, *Proceedings*, 6-9 (Washington, 1860); Nichols, *Disruption of American Democracy*, 297; Nevins, *Emergence of Lincoln*, 2:212.

¹³ Democratic National Convention, *Proceedings*, 9, 19-27; Nichols, *Disruption of American Democracy*, 297-303; Nevins, *Emergence of Lincoln*, 2:213-219; *The Charleston Convention*, 10.

¹⁴ Democratic National Convention, *Proceedings*, 29; *The Charleston Convention*, 12.

SLEEPING quarters of the Northwest delegates in Hibernian Hall, Charleston

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cure a positive proslavery platform. In a final effort to prevent the disruption of the convention and of the party, the Douglas forces agreed to drop the reference to the Supreme Court and to readopt the Cincinnati platform as it stood. Again the Minnesota delegation was unanimously in favor of the proposition.

Even this step, however, did not prevent the break. Leroy P. Walker of Alabama read a statement protesting the convention's denial of Southern rights and then led his delegation out of the hall. Delegates from the other five proslavery states joined the procession and assembled for their own convention in another hall, assuming the name "Constitutional Democrats." Later they were joined by some delegates from Arkansas, Missouri, Virginia, Georgia, and Delaware.¹⁵

The way now seemed clear for Douglas' nomination, since his group easily commanded a two-thirds majority of the remaining delegates. The representatives of the border states and of New York, however, were determined that the door should not be shut on further chances of compromise. A delegate from Tennessee proposed a rule that the nomination should require not only a two-thirds vote of those present, but two-thirds of the original convention. After long debate the motion was passed by a vote of 141 to 112. It was at this point that the first vital split occurred in the Minnesota delegation, Becker, Fridley, and Edgerton voting for the proposition, and the five remaining members opposing it bitterly.

As the followers of Douglas had feared, this action prevented his nomination. Minnesota voted unanimously for the Little Giant through the ninth ballot. Then Edgerton and Fridley broke ranks and voted for Andrew Johnson of Tennessee. When Johnson's name was withdrawn on the thirty-seventh ballot, the two Minnesotans switched their support to Daniel S. Dickinson of New York. As ballot followed ballot and still a victor failed to emerge under

the two-thirds rule, the convention delegates began to realize that their continued efforts would be futile. A move for adjournment was proposed and soon gained strength. On the eighth day, after fifty-seven ballots had ended in deadlock, the delegates adjourned for six weeks, and planned to reconvene in Baltimore on June 18. On hearing this news, the Southern bolters at Charleston agreed to meet a week earlier in Richmond.¹⁶

AFTER the Charleston parley adjourned, Sibley spent a week in New York and the other Minnesota delegates went home, traveling in separate groups. Upon arriving in St. Paul, Gorman addressed a spirited rally at Concert Hall on May 12. Following a fifty-seven gun salute, the delegation leader praised the actions of his faction and condemned Becker, Fridley, and Edgerton. The rally closed by approving the action of the Douglas wing and by singing:

Secessionists may fly the track,
Yet we'll stand firm and true
And our old friends will welcome back
When they their faith renew,
With Douglas as our candidate
Our candidate, our candidate.
And hail it with a loud hurrah,
Hurrah! hurrah! hurrah! hurrah!
But DAMN those who misrepresent
Our choice for the next President, President,
Our choice for the next President.¹⁷

In June the Minnesota delegation, with Robertson substituting for Phelps who had become ill, went to Baltimore for the showdown. At the convention, Sibley continued as Minnesota's representative on the credentials committee. The work of that group,

¹⁵ Democratic National Convention, *Proceedings*, 31-40; Nichols, *Disruption of American Democracy*, 304-306; Nevins, *Emergence of Lincoln*, 2:219.

¹⁶ Democratic National Convention, *Proceedings*, 43-53; Nevins, *Emergence of Lincoln*, 2:219-223; *The Charleston Convention*, 12; *Pioneer and Democrat*, May 13, 1860. The meeting of Southern states was held as planned, but since all except South Carolina had by then elected delegates to appear at Baltimore, no action was taken at Richmond. See Nichols, *Disruption of American Democracy*, 314.

¹⁷ *Pioneer and Democrat*, May 13, 1860.

which reported on the fourth day, tipped the balance to Douglas. Since the convention had been adjourned from Charleston to Baltimore "for the purpose of filling up the delegations from those States who seceded at the former place," the committee refused to accept any delegates from bolting states who had not been elected specifically to appear at Baltimore. All the states in question except South Carolina had held new conventions, and though in many cases the original Charleston delegates had simply been re-elected, their credentials were not on this account ruled invalid. In several cases, notably those of Louisiana and Alabama, rival conventions had been held, one dominated by the seceders and one by the free-soilers. There, the pro-Douglas credentials committee tried in various ways to solve the problem of admitting friends and excluding enemies. It ruled that in contested cases the delegation which had credentials directed exclusively to the Baltimore convention should take precedence. Some Southern groups held credentials which authorized their appearance at both Richmond and Baltimore. The committee also decreed that the delegation which endorsed the Charleston platform "without any alteration" should be given the preference.¹⁸

Sibley, participating freely in the committee debates, proposed on June 19 "that the rules of the convention are the rules of the committee in contested cases." He also appears to have been largely responsible for the compromise solutions reached in the cases of Arkansas and Georgia, whereby both newcomers and seceders were seated

and the states' votes divided between them.¹⁹

The committee presented two reports to the convention. That of the majority proposed to seat the original delegations of Texas, Mississippi, and Delaware, to divide the seats of Georgia and Arkansas, and to seat the free-soil delegations from Alabama and Louisiana. The minority report called for readmission of all the bolting delegates on the grounds that they had never in fact resigned from the convention. The majority report was adopted by a decisive vote, and almost immediately the Virginia delegation announced that it would withdraw. It was followed by delegates from North Carolina, Tennessee, Maryland, California, and Oregon. By Saturday, June 23, only a handful of anti-Douglas delegates remained. On the second ballot for the presidential nomination, Douglas received substantially more than a two-thirds majority and became the party's candidate. Becker, Edgerton, and Fridley had left the convention before the voting began. They joined the other bolters, meeting in another hall to nominate John C. Breckinridge of Kentucky as their presidential candidate.²⁰

Thus the rift in the national Democratic party also divided the Minnesota organization. Douglas and Breckinridge factions throughout the state campaigned against one another as well as against Lincoln, the Republican nominee, during the autumn months of 1860. The final outcome was not surprising: 22,069 Minnesotans voted for Lincoln and 11,920 for Douglas, while Breckinridge received a scant 748 ballots.²¹

The Republicans doubtless would have swept the North Star State regardless of the Democratic rift. The election, however, thoroughly demoralized the state Democratic party. Just as the failure of the national leaders to compromise their differences at Charleston and Baltimore contributed to the secession of the Southern states in 1861, so the refusal of Minnesota Democrats to unite helped to mark the end of their early domination of state politics.

¹⁸ Nevins, *Emergence of Lincoln*, 2:266-268; minutes of Baltimore convention credentials committee, in Orlando E. Clark Papers, owned by the State Historical Society of Wisconsin. The Minnesota Historical Society has a photostatic copy of this item.

¹⁹ Minutes of credentials committee.

²⁰ Nichols, *Disruption of American Democracy*, 314-320; Nevins, *Emergence of Lincoln*, 2:268-272; *Daily Minnesotian* (St. Paul), June 26, 1860.

²¹ Minnesota Secretary of State, *Annual Report*, 1860, p. 9-11 (St. Paul, 1861).



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