

## "DEMOCRACY" IN AMERICA—1856—1861

### DEFINITION BY CONTEST

HERBERT H. FINCH \*

"Democracy" in America must be a study in shifting semantics. It is a word, and a concept, that has been applied to the America of shortly after the founding of the Federal union and to the government of then; yet, it has full meaning when applied to the vastly different America and American government of today.

"Democracy" was originally a rather lofty and remote political philosophy and a simple technique of government. By extension and re-interpretation, we have now come to fight wars of complex origin to "Save the World for Democracy"; we attempt to promote whole ways of life all over the earth in the name of democracy; the Government gives social security, erects power plants, controls crops, subsidizes air lines, supports anti-lynching bills, and provides for veteran education—all as a part of democracy.

This great change has occurred within merely a century and a half, and it has been suggested that the most significant part of this transition developed during the years immediately before the Civil War. Important, if that be true, is the determination of the meaning and use of the word between about 1856 and about 1861.

### I

Before the time of the rise of the Republican Party and of its consequent early struggle with the Democratic Party, the word "democracy" was not as widely used as later. Webster, spokesman for general conservatism as well as for the Whig Party, in his main statement on the subject informed the New York Historical Society that pure democracy was a system of government used in ancient Athens and not suitable for a country such as ours.<sup>1</sup> The *Richmond Examiner* probably representing equally well the view of the Democratic Party merely states in "Thoughts for the People of Virginia":

\* Department of History.

<sup>1</sup> *The Writings and Speeches of Daniel Webster* (Boston, 1903), v. 13, p. 469.

"Democracy is the term which for centuries has signified the government of the people—and the Democratic Party means the party of the people."<sup>2</sup>

Despite the fact that by the early 1850's "democracy" was a word that lacked any concise, accepted definition, it had become popular among American voters. For this it was valuable but presented a special problem to the disorganized Abolitionists and other potential Republicans that were making up the group opposing the Democrats. The word was a name as well as a principle, and, if one who wanted to refer to it were not careful, an easily confused person might mistake praise of one for praise of the other. Yet, properly used it could have great value.

Some attempted to cope with this very awkward political situation by calling themselves, in the early period of a great number of varying names, the Radical Democratic party. But, most of the men about to rise to Republican prominence at first preferred to omit all references to "democracy" even though they discussed the ideas then ordinarily implicit in it. In 1854, Charles Sumner made a Senate speech, later circulated in pamphlet form, on "self-government" which completely skirted "democracy" without any direct mention.<sup>3</sup> The next year, William H. Seward made one of his most powerful speeches, urging support of the Republican Party on principle without using any form of the word, except as a name for the opposition party.<sup>4</sup> As late as 1858, Benjamin F. Wade was able to talk at length on the rights and dignities of American laborers without reference to "democracy."<sup>5</sup> But, as the Republicans became organized and their principles developed, they came to find that democracy as a principle could be conveniently interpreted and used for their own purposes.

Long before the general recognition of this, Theodore Parker showed that he deserved the title of "prophet" in the dual sense of leader and seer. In his sermon of 1854 on *Dangers which Threaten the Rights of Man in America*, he boldly and clearly states: "the rational theory of all government is a Democracy—the government of all, by all, for all. All officers depend on election, none are fore-

<sup>2</sup> Reprint from the *Richmond Examiner*, February 27, 1856. This and other political pamphlets cited are from the collection of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

<sup>3</sup> *Political History of the United States* (1854), p. 60.

<sup>4</sup> William H. Seward, *The Contest and the Crisis* (Washington, 1855). See also his *Oration . . . at Plymouth* (1855).

<sup>5</sup> *The Congressional Globe*, March 13, 1858.

ordained. There are to be no special privileges, only natural universal rights." Later, he repeated with amplification: "Now this government, just in its substance must be democratic; that is to say, the government of all, by all, and for all. You see what consequences must follow from such an idea, and the attempt to re-enact the Law of God into political institutions. There will follow the freedom of the people, respect for the natural rights of all men, the rights of their body and of their spirit—the rights of mind and conscience, heart and soul. . . . The ultimate consequence of this will be the material and spiritual welfare of all—riches, comfort, noble manhood, all desirable things."<sup>6</sup>

The first way in which the political leaders of the Abolitionist Republicans sought to utilize the favorable connotation of "democracy" was to prove that, regardless of the modern Democratic Party, they were returning to, and incidentally re-defining for themselves, the "true" basic principles of democracy upon which the nation had been founded. *Putnam's Magazine* for 1856 tried to make its Abolitionist point by telling readers that: "Free society . . . is built upon the original idea of our Revolution—the idea of free and equal rights. It is pervaded by the democratic sentiment, which, towards the close of the eighteenth century spread over the civilized world, and created a new epoch in the history of mankind. But the other system [of Southern slavery], for the most part, has wandered from these primitive aspirations."<sup>7</sup>

When a member of the House of Representatives from Virginia once sarcastically said: "The gentleman from Massachusetts [Nathaniel Banks] gravely speaks of the Democracy on that side of the House. I would very much like to know what Democracy that is." Banks silenced him by, "The Democracy of the Constitution, sir."<sup>8</sup>

Spokesman after spokesman of the Republican Party continued to emphasize its view of democracy as an evidence of its fundamental Americanism. Some Republicans went even further and claimed that this ideal that had come to mean so much to people had been abandoned by the party of the name. An editorial in the *Chicago Daily Tribune* for 1860 found that through the efforts of the op-

<sup>6</sup> Theodore Parker, *A Sermon of the Dangers which Threaten the Rights of Man in America; Preached at the Music Hall, on Sunday, July 2, 1854* (Boston, 1854), pp. 10, 28-29.

<sup>7</sup> "The Political Aspect," *Putnam's Magazine*, VIII (July, 1856), 88.

<sup>8</sup> *The Congressional Globe*, December 22, 1857. See also the debates of February 23, 1858, for a somewhat similar statement by Silas M. Burrough, Republican, of New Jersey.

ponents of the Republican Party, "the purpose if not the framework of our government has been radically changed from a Democracy, the protector and benefactor of the many, to an oligarchy, the insolent guardian of the interests of the few. . . ." <sup>9</sup>

Owen Lovejoy, member of Congress and the brother of one of the Abolitionist martyrs, found: "The real, genuine soul of Democracy has left the party that bears the name, and has come to animate the Republican Party. It has left a soulless carcass in the one place, and a youthful giant [has been?] animated with the spirit of Jeffersonian Democracy in the other." <sup>10</sup>

Many members of the Republican Party supported this view in order to justify their transfer of allegiance from that Democratic Party. Hannibal Hamlin, first elected to the Senate as a Democrat but soon to be nominated by the Republicans as candidate for the Vice Presidency, was understandably vigorous in his scornful references to "what is called the Democratic party—I say called—yes, sir, called; and it is a burlesque indeed to speak of that party which controls the other side of the Chamber as a Democratic party." <sup>11</sup>

A detailed and analytical statement made by C. B. Sedgwick, Representative in Congress from New York, immediately before complete Secession indicates how thoroughly some had become convinced that the Republicans, and the North, were the sole custodians of democracy, as well as convinced of the sort of thing democracy was and was not: "Names sometimes stand for things; it sometimes occurs in politics that names stand after the substance of things has departed. So I have seen in our age the term Democracy abused. The idea of a true Democracy is captivating, admirable. In contradistinction from a despotism, a monarchy, an oligarchy, it represents the government of the whole people, who, by their freely chosen servants or agents, administer the Government for the common advantage and safety; for the benefit of *all*, and not for the glory and benefit of *one*—a king or despot; nor for the benefit of the *privileged few*—a nobility or aristocracy. In its true and honest administration and conception it secures an equality of civil rights; every member poor and humble, of whatever origin or birthplace or creed, is a real sovereign and a possible law-giver or magistrate; not that each inherits equal capacities and gifts of genius, and advantages of educa-

<sup>9</sup> *Chicago Daily Tribune*, December 13, 1860. Given in Howard Cecil Perkins, *Northern Editorials on Secession* (New York, 1942).

<sup>10</sup> *The Congressional Globe*, December 21, 1857.

<sup>11</sup> *The Congressional Globe*, March 9, 1858.

tion, and benefits of circumstances and fortune, but that each has equal civil rights, and is to be controlled by equal and just laws. Such is our idea of Democracy—the government of the people. But how is it in practice and in fact? Who are the controlling men, and what are the acknowledged principles of the Democratic party? Their chosen leaders deride and ridicule the idea of equality of human rights; they scoff at the principles upon which our independence was achieved, and upon which our institutions rest; they stand here as the representatives not of freemen, but of property.”<sup>12</sup>

A pamphlet of 1861 “alluded to the enmity which Slavery has contracted toward the Idea of Liberty as expressed in the Declaration of Independence. It was a logical result that it should conceive a like hostility to all Democratic Government; and the proof is abundant that such is the animus of our rebellious aristocracy of the South.”<sup>13</sup>

It was then apparent to all—or, certainly to those ready to be impressed by Northern and Republican statements—that the Republican Party was the party of original American democracy. More than that, it was the sole supporter of democracy. How well the Republicans had done for themselves by the opening of the Civil War! They had reasoned through “democracy” to the point of making it entirely theirs, to the point of being able to use it to their own purposes. According to the authoritative words of Horace Greeley’s *Daily Tribune*, the “democratic principle of equal rights, general suffrage, and government by a majority”<sup>14</sup> was theirs.

## II

However, the future of the use and meaning of the democratic ideal is not explainable only by the Republican appropriation of it. Of equal importance is the attitude before the Civil War of the Southern Democrats themselves toward democracy. It was their retreating, their shifting of ground, that allowed the Republicans to make “democracy” even more their own. A study of the Southern position shows that its speakers and writers gave way ideologically time after time, so opening themselves to further charges and attacks.

<sup>12</sup> *The Congressional Globe*, Appendix, March 26, 1860. See further in the same address.

<sup>13</sup> Americus, *The American Crisis, Its Cause . . . Significance . . . and Solution* (Chicago, 1861), p. 11.

<sup>14</sup> *New York Daily Tribune*, November 27, 1860. Perkins. See also *The Congressional Globe*, December 21, 1857, and Appendix, February 10, 1859.

Originally the Democrats made democracy, for which their party was named, an essential principle. Government participated in by all men and operated for the benefit of all men was with Jefferson important as an ideal and with Jackson important as a working policy. There was probably no stronger principle among the early Democrats than that the country and its government ought to be democratic. Jefferson saw it as a potential condition to be realized through education, while Jackson typified an age ready to begin the practice of equalitarianism.

The circumstances which changed the concept and therefore the definition of democracy and which led to its abandonment by its own party can be well understood by taking as a control group that Democratic minority from the North in Congress, which did not feel the necessity of changing, because the best single index to sectional feeling is probably the speeches made by men in Congress of different states. This Northern view is well typified by Sam Sullivan Cox, a life-long Democrat and a Representative from Ohio, who, oratorically proclaimed on the floor of the House after the ideological lines were well-drawn, that "the highest refinement and the greatest utility of Democratic policy—the genius of our institutions—is the right of self-government . . . in the name of Democratic fealty and Democratic sense, let us stand like men of trust and men of honor, to the sovereignty of the people. . . ." <sup>15</sup> Stephen A. Douglas, leading statesman among the Northern Democrats, once gave a precise definition of this view in stating that "the great principle upon which my public life is identified—the right of the people of each state, old and new, to form and regulate their domestic institutions in their own way." <sup>16</sup> Of course, it was this very principle of rule by the people, albeit within the states, as stated at Freeport, that caused Douglas' repudiation by his party in its convention of 1860.

Despite the fact that the Democrats of the North were willing to continue or even to extend the former definition, those of the South allowed themselves to be maneuvered into the position of increasingly limiting and circumscribing their definition. First, they contended that all men were not equal. It was obvious to the Southern spokesmen that if Negroes were a people, they were a people below and apart. Axiomatic statements of this belief begin to be inescapable in Southern writings, but notable as an extreme is the conclusion of

<sup>15</sup> *The Congressional Globe* December 16, 1857.

<sup>16</sup> *The Congressional Globe*, December 21, 1857.

Dr. S. A. Cartwright. In *Unity of the Human Race Disproved by the Hebrew Bible*, he found, to his own satisfaction, that Negroes were among the pre-human creations and were, therefore, creatures but not human. The whole story of the fall of man had been misinterpreted and misunderstood. It was not a snake that had caused the fall of man; Eve had really been tempted through the agency of a Negro gardener who was working around Eden.<sup>17</sup> Democracy might well be desirable in other times and areas, in which all the people had been homogeneous, but not otherwise. In the South, "We have a democracy of the ruling class, for among equals equality is right, but, we have acquired natural distinction by union with a race that would seem to be unequal."<sup>18</sup>

Others in the South were claiming with equal vigor that there was democracy even though there were admitted inequalities even among the members of the white population. "Our aristocracy is but the flowering of democratic genius and industry, and the masses constitute the soil in which its roots are earthed and whence they draw their nourishment."<sup>19</sup> This is a subtle way of saying that the common people are merely so much dirt, whether or not the anonymous writer meant it that way. In any case, the public statements of the South, by 1860, when this appeared, had gone a long way from Jacksonian democracy's view of absolute equality.

Those who did not see that aristocracy was undesirable or unnecessary in democracy could easily go a step further and argue for some form of despotism, and so some did. One political thinker wrote, "Democracy, or let us more justly say the principle of civil liberty, won noble triumphs in many lands, but radical innovators appeared no longer content to reject the oppressions and misdeeds of irresponsible potentates, but disposed to pervert the sacred name of liberty into the rallying cry of a crusade against all settled government."<sup>20</sup> The unmistakable implication here is that a potentate of other than irresponsible proclivities could very well find place in a democratic South.

There is, though, more than an implication that the South was thinking in part of the re-establishment of royalty. Northern comment of the period exists on "the Southern States . . . , their hatred

<sup>17</sup> Reviewed in *De Bow's Review*, XXIX, 129-136.

<sup>18</sup> L. W. Spratt, *A Series of Articles on the Value of the Union to the South, Lately Published in the Charleston Standard* (Charleston, 1859), 34-36.

<sup>19</sup> *De Bow's Review*, XXVIII, 559.

<sup>20</sup> "Theory of Political Individualism," *De Bow's Review*, XXII, 147.

of free institutions, and their growing predilection for a monarchical form of government.”<sup>21</sup> The *Savannah Times* in Georgia in 1860 suggested that a constitutional monarchy was the desirable form of government for the United States.<sup>22</sup> A British traveller reported that in a “hundred ways” he had heard people of South Carolina say, “If we could only get one of the Royal Race of England to rule over us we should be content.”<sup>23</sup>

Regardless of the other limitations on democracy, the unfavorable results of popular elections, as in Lincoln’s victory and the admission of Kansas, turned many from the majority principle in democracy. A New Orleans minister stated: “It is alleged . . . that the President elect [Lincoln] has been chosen by a fair majority under prescribed forms. But . . . no despotism is more absolute than that of an unprincipled democracy. . . .”<sup>24</sup> J. L. M. Curry of the House of Representatives found a singular method of proving that democratic majorities were not part of good government. He reasoned that “a government forced by one-half of the community upon the other half, less the difference in numbers . . . is but little, if any, more authoritative and obligatory than if it had been adopted by the lesser half and imposed upon the greater. Government, on such principles would be a mere resort to physical force.”<sup>25</sup>

We can well wonder what was really left to democracy in the South after all this defining. It had been denied that all people were equal; political classes had then been accepted as a sound theory; even monarchy had been desired by some; finally the principle of government by the majority had been discounted in general and upon specific points. There was nothing in democracy that could be accepted by the slave-holding Democrats of the South as a group. The result was that many, not choosing to define and re-define, accepted the objectionable features of democracy as integral and then abandoned democracy entirely. “If a democracy . . . were certainly the best, we would not only want no more slaves, but we would be concerned to rid ourselves of those we have already. But we have not so thought. . . .”<sup>26</sup> In contrast to the Republican eagerness to associ-

<sup>21</sup> Edward S. Morris, *An Address to the Colored People of Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia, 1861).

<sup>22</sup> Perkins, 927.

<sup>23</sup> Americus, 11.

<sup>24</sup> B. M. Palmer, *A Discourse Delivered in the First Presbyterian Church, New Orleans* (New Orleans, 1860).

<sup>25</sup> *The Congressional Globe*, February 23, 1858.

<sup>26</sup> *De Bow's Review*, XXIV, 486.



ate itself with the fundamental Americanism of democracy, this view was disparaging: "it will be tested whether a government hitherto borne on by adventitious circumstances, has the elements even of self-preservation, and can, without alliance to some firmer principle than the fickleness of the popular will, minister to the wants and control the conduct of the untold millions who will people our vast territory." <sup>27</sup>

That firmer basis the South had found. Slavery "will build itself a home, and erect for itself at some point, within the present limits of the Southern States, a structure of temporal power and grandeur, a glorious Confederacy of States, that will stand aloft and serene for ages,—amid the anarchy of Democracies that will reel around it." <sup>28</sup>

It has not been difficult for us to trace the various Southern views of democracy in the period immediately preceding the Civil War. Nor has it been difficult to understand the immediate conditions responsible for most of these. A great problem though is the reason for the willingness, which became greater as 1861 approached, to state that anything was apart from democracy rather than to make an effort to include it within a democratic system.

It was admitted, to use Southern phrases, that democracy was "the ideal of the age" and that "This is the age of democracy." <sup>29</sup> It must have been apparent that there was little chance of success for any group that went against the spirit of its own time, yet that was what an influential part of the South under pressure was ready to do.

The difficulty probably lay with the contemporaneous leaders of the South and with the section of it that produced most of them. The theorists of the South during the Revolution, such men as Jefferson, Madison, and Monroe, were from Virginia; they were the products of a culture then over a hundred and fifty years old. Although these elder statesmen were no longer there by the time of the nullification controversy, the South, by then over two hundred years old, produced in Calhoun an intellectual champion able to cope in a fashion with the theories of the situation. But the dominant section of the South during the Civil War period was the Gulf States. As a cultural area it had existed only between a quarter and a half of a century; its leaders were usually migrants or the sons of migrants. These were men of action rather than of theory. The nearest approach to a sound

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

<sup>28</sup> Spratt, 46.

<sup>29</sup> *De Bow's Review*, XXIV, 474-475, and XXIX, 43.

ideological foundation for the Confederacy is Alexander Stephens' work on the constitutional background of secession, and that appeared from a citizen of Georgia and after the question had been settled by war.

The weakness of the Southern position in a democratic age is plain. But, it would seem that the main reason for the abandoning of a basic principle with an ever-increasing appeal was that there was no one who had the training and intellectual force to meet, and defeat, an ideological challenge, whether made by man or circumstance, on its own ground.

### III

Long before the firing at Sumter, the first ideological battles of the Civil War were being fought. Long before the loyalties of the border states became of prime concern, the North and South had marked out separate areas of thought as their own.

One of the greatest, if not the greatest, of these battles was over "democracy" and its definition. The North and the Republicans claimed it and associated their other beliefs and appeals with it. The South—divided, uncertain, and without an intellectual leader—retreated from Jeffersonian democracy to a theory of democratic natural distinction, played with the idea of a democratic aristocracy, considered the advantages of kingship, and, upon occasion, overthrew all loyalty to democracy. Also with each new evidence of the increasing numerical superiority of the North, such as the census returns of 1850 and 1860, self-interest could not allow the South to recognize a theory which, aside from anything-else, gave all authority to the majority.

The result was that a fairly solid Northern front early won an intellectual battle inevitably lost by the weak and disunited South. The various Southern concepts of democracy were lost with the battle; the North had "democracy" to define and use as it wanted. The relationships between the ideological and the military are impossible to trace. The final victory of the Northern Armies forced complete acceptance of its views. But the North had already won its battle over "democracy," and that, no doubt, made it stronger in the field.

It is said that the Civil War was fought to determine the extent of states' rights, and it was in part. It is said that the Civil War was fought to determine the relative strength of two competing economic systems, and it was, in part. It is said that the Civil War was fought to determine the future of Negro slavery, and that too is partly true. But commonly ignored now is a fact that was also very real to people of the period: The Civil War was fought to determine the future of American democracy.