

Minnesota's Attitude toward the Southern Case for Secession

F. Paul Prucha

THE SECESSION of the Southern states and the outbreak of the Civil War were based upon definite grievances which the South and its leaders felt they had suffered in the Union. Editorial writers in Southern newspapers in the months prior to the outbreak of actual hostilities stated these grievances—this case of the South—and discussed with fervor the evils with which they considered themselves beset.¹ The one general argument advanced by the South was the claim that it no longer was guaranteed the rights given to the states when they entered the Union under the Constitution. The South did not wish to withdraw its allegiance to the Constitution; it asserted strong support for the Constitution as it was drawn up in 1787, but maintained that it had been perverted from the original intent of the founders and was no longer the same.

Its rights, the South claimed, were violated in the matter of the common territories because, contrary to the principles of equality laid down in the Constitution, the slave states were not accorded an equal right with the free states in such territories and because slaveholders were discriminated against. The South saw a violation of its constitutional rights, too, in the repossession of fugitive slaves. Although the Constitution provided for the return of fugitive slaves to their original owners, and a Fugitive Slave Law had been passed by Congress, the South insisted that the law was not enforced and it demanded a guarantee of its constitutional right to regain its lost property. The so-called "personal liberty laws" passed by some Northern states served to hamper the enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law. The Southern states vigorously objected to them as flagrant violations of their guarantees.

¹ For selected Southern editorials see Dwight L. Dumond, ed., *Southern Editorials on Secession* (New York, 1931).

The South feared violation of constitutional rights by an outright attack on slavery, an institution which many Southerners had come to look upon as an absolute good. They required a guarantee of their property in slaves, for they feared that Northern hostility toward slavery might cause its eventual destruction. Finally, in an economic sense the South asserted that it no longer possessed equality in the Union. The North, it maintained, had built up its economy by means of taxes and duties at the expense of the South.

The basic case of the South for secession rested upon the loss of constitutional equality and privilege. The formation of the Republican party and its victory in 1860, however, caused the South to have serious fears for its interests and aggravated its misgivings. The election of Lincoln was looked upon by many in the South as the beginning of a destructive attack upon its interests, since the government was in the hands of a sectional majority.

How did the Minnesota press meet these Southern arguments? To what extent did Minnesota editors agree with the case of the South?

Minnesota in 1860 was still a frontier state, although a rapidly growing one. Its population totaled 172,022, an increase of 3,127 per cent within a decade.² It could point to only one city with a population of over ten thousand — St. Paul — though four others had passed the twenty-five hundred mark. The settlements were grouped along the rivers, the Mississippi and the Minnesota; a third of the people were of foreign birth.

Despite the fact that Minnesota had attained statehood only two years earlier, by 1860 political parties had become well defined there. At first the state was controlled by the Democrats, but in the election of 1859 the Republicans won an "overwhelming victory," attributed by one historian largely to the eloquence of Ignatius Donnelly, the lieutenant governor under Alexander Ramsey. Another writer concludes that "During the years 1859 and 1860 Republicanism gained the ascendancy in Minnesota, and the state assumed a national point

² *Minnesota: Its Progress and Capabilities*, 99 (Commissioner of Statistics, *Second Annual Report*, 1860-61 — St. Paul, 1862).

of view in political matters. . . . Action of the parties abroad on the issues of homestead, slavery, and nativism differentiated the various party groups in the state." The Democrats were strong supporters of Douglas, although a small group under the leadership of Senator Henry M. Rice stood firm for the administration and Breckenridge. In the Minnesota election of 1860 Lincoln received 22,069 votes to the 11,920 for Douglas, 748 for Breckenridge, and about 50 for Bell. The new legislature showed a like predominance of Republicans.³

Newspapers developed early in Minnesota. During the territorial period, from 1849 to 1858, about ninety were established.⁴ The *Minnesota Pioneer* of St. Paul, which became the *Pioneer and Democrat* during the Civil War period, was the earliest and the leading paper. Soon after it was founded in 1849, it began to give support to the Democratic party. The rural communities, however, could not boast of daily papers; they had to depend on weeklies, which appeared in large numbers. When the Civil War began, 125 weekly newspapers had been founded in Minnesota. They existed in a pioneer culture which had few means of gathering news, even though the telegraph came into St. Paul in the summer of 1860. Aside from civic news, editorial comment occupied more space than any other category of news, an estimated one-fourth in 1860.⁵ Like the great eastern daily newspapers of the same period, the small Minnesota weekly was characterized by personal journalism, with the editor considering it his duty to direct the thinking of his readers, especially in political matters.

Since communications from the outside world were relatively infrequent, political and governmental news and comments thereon appear to have been of primary interest to the editor and probably also to his readers. Because this was so, local newspaper editorials are a significant source of political opinion concerning the national problems of the day. But of the scores of newspapers, daily and weekly,

³ William W. Folwell, *A History of Minnesota*, 2:61 (St. Paul, 1924); Ruby G. Karstad, "Political Party Alignments in Minnesota, 1854-1860," 165, 255. The latter is an unpublished thesis prepared in 1934; the Minnesota Historical Society has a copy.

⁴ Herman Roe, "The Frontier Press of Minnesota," *ante*, 14:397.

⁵ Irene B. Taeuber, "Weekly Newspapers in Pioneer Minnesota," *ante*, 14:411.

published in Minnesota during the Civil War, only a few seem to have been directed by men who took definite editorial stands on the grievances presented by the Southern editors. The opinions of some of the Minnesota journalists, selected from available files of the state's Civil War newspapers, are quoted in the pages that follow.⁶

Minnesota opinion about the pre-Civil War grievances of the South, as reflected in the press, was divided. Many Minnesota editors condemned slavery as a wrong, but few suggested that slavery should be abolished in the states where it existed. Republicans and Democrats alike were innocent of any designs upon this institution in the slave states, for they realized and admitted that it was protected by the Constitution. Northern abolitionists were condemned as heartily by Minnesota editors as those in the South. Judging from the lack of comment on the tariff in available Minnesota editorials, this issue did not become an important point in the state's discussion of the Southern secession movement. If a reference in the *Hastings Democrat* is typical, Minnesota sympathized with the South on this question, for it affected the state in much the same manner as it did the section. "The new Tariff bill passed at the last session of Congress," commented the editor of this journal in the issue of March 30, 1861, "is a monster of iniquity and injustice to the people of our whole country, but more especially to the West."

Although slave ownership and the tariff did not arouse much discussion in Minnesota, a marked disparity of opinion developed over the two remaining grievances of the slave states—slavery restriction in the territories and the nonenforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law. The Southern case was treated with sympathetic understanding in the state's Democratic newspapers, and even the Republican journals were willing on certain points to admit that the South deserved some concessions and that its complaints were not without justification. Some Democratic editorials echoed the states' rights doctrine of Jefferson, Taylor, Douglas, and the Cincinnati platform. The *Hastings Democrat*, for example, maintained that

⁶ The many newspapers consulted in the preparation of this article, as well as those cited, are in the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society.

"The rights of the States themselves, although being recognized as sovereign under the Constitution, are no longer to be respected. The whole fabric upon which rests the cherished work of the hands of our forefathers, is by the dominance of Republicanism, to be overthrown. Nay, the very Constitution itself is to be swept away by the sacrilegious hands of this *black* party."⁷

The question of equal rights in the territories—the most widely discussed of the points in the Southern case both in the North and in the South—found in Minnesota understanding of the arguments of the South and agreement that its cry of mistreatment was justified. "We believe," wrote the Hastings editor, "that, as the territories are the common property of the whole people of both sections of the Union, the people of the South have a perfect right to take their slaves into any of the territories to be held at their owners risk." He considered that as a result of the Republican victory, the "joint occupancy of the Territories, the common property of all sections of the Union, was denied by withdrawing the protection under the Constitution. . . . The South becoming justly alarmed for their constitutional rights and the safety of their property, resolved to seek in a new confederacy what was openly denied them in the old."⁸

A sympathetic feeling was revealed in the discussion of the compromise measures presented to Congress during the interim between secession and actual war. Support of these proposals, most of which were concerned chiefly with the territorial controversy and the attempt to satisfy Southern demands for a place in the territories, shows a willingness on the part of certain Minnesota editors to concede to the South some of its requests. The *Pioneer and Democrat*, for instance, favored the adoption of the "plan of adjustment embraced in the Crittenden resolution, or that submitted by Hon. H. M. Rice; a modification of either, or combination of the principles of both, such as will secure equal justice to every section of our prosperous Union, reconcile conflicting passions and forever put to rest sectional strife hitherto so fruitful in discord and anarchy." The

⁷ *Hastings Democrat*, October 27, 1860.

⁸ *Hastings Democrat*, May 5, 1860, March 30, 1861.

first proposed a constitutional amendment re-establishing the Missouri Compromise line, with slavery protected south and prohibited north of it. Rice's plan called for the creation of two states out of the territories in order to end the territorial dispute. The Republican *St. Paul Daily Press*, on the other hand, offered a general statement of conciliation and supported a compromise like that suggested by Rice to settle the territorial question, but it was very much against the "slave code" of John J. Crittenden for the Southern territories.⁹

On the question of fugitive slaves, too, the Minnesota papers recognized Southern feeling. The *Pioneer and Democrat* stated that the Fugitive Slave Law was "in strict accordance with the Constitution, and had been so decided, over and over again, by the highest tribunals in the land." The personal liberty laws, so much opposed by the South, received like treatment in this Northern paper, which considered them unconstitutional. "The so-called personal liberty laws are intended for one purpose," wrote the editor, "and that is to nullify the provision of the Constitution requiring the surrender of fugitive slaves." The *Hastings Democrat* also supported the constitutionality of the Fugitive Slave Law, basing its attitude upon the Constitution and the passage of the law by a majority of the people. And the Republican *St. Paul Press* took its stand thus: "We believe with Mr. Lincoln, that however repulsive to our feelings may be the execution of the terms of the compact between the Free and Slave States under the Constitution, still, by virtue of that instrument, the Slave States are 'entitled to a fugitive slave law,' which should, however, be relieved of the odious features of the present law 'without lessening its efficiency.'" ¹⁰

Most comments on these two grievances of the South, however, were not in agreement with the Southern attitude. The Republican papers generally opposed the South, and the Democratic papers, too, found objections to some of the complaints made by the South. Concerning the contentions of Southern editors that their constitutional

⁹ *Pioneer and Democrat* (St. Paul), January 29, 1861; *St. Paul Daily Press*, January 23, 30, 1861.

¹⁰ *Pioneer and Democrat*, December 17, 1860; *Hastings Democrat*, August 11, 1860; *St. Paul Press*, January 5, 1861.

rights were being violated, Minnesota editors by and large either declared that the Constitution was on the side of Northern action or ridiculed the South's cry of injustice.

In spite of the Southern claim that slaves were property and should be protected like any other property under the Constitution, Minnesota editorials frequently attacked slavery as a wrong. It was, however, the extension of slavery into the territories that was attacked most strongly by the North. The *Wright County Republican* of Monticello, for example, stated this feeling unequivocally: "SLAVERY EXTENSION is what we war against and ever shall. Slavery can extend no farther — not the smallest part of an inch!" The majority of Minnesota newspapers did not agree with the Southern view that slavery was property, that as such it was protected, and that it had as much right in the territories as any other kind of property. In the first place, as the *New Era* of Sauk Rapids pointed out, "the Constitution does *not* recognize the right of property in the slave — as other property. . . . No other property votes! — the Constitution does not under the penalty of death prohibit the importation of other property. If other property escapes into another State, the Constitution does not authorize the calling out of the power of the United States to return such property to its owner. — Now is this not distinction enough? And this distinction is made by the Constitution."¹¹

The Minnesota Republicans argued that slavery was a creature of local law and could exist only where guaranteed by a state constitution; hence Southerners could not take their local law with them into the territories. The exclusion of slavery by definite legislation was not violating the constitutional equality of the South, but was in accordance with the constitution. As one editor wrote, a "majority of the joint owners of the common territory of the Union are of right and in strict accordance with the established principles and usages of the General Government from its foundation to the passage of the Kansas Nebraska swindle of 1854, vested with the full power to determine what institutions shall be established and protected

¹¹ *New Era* (Sauk Rapids), June 28, 1860; *Wright County Republican*, January 5, 1861.

therein so long as such territory shall remain a territorial dependence upon the General Government and until it is admitted into the Union as a sovereign State."¹²

Although the people of Minnesota did not wish to destroy slavery in the states, many of them agreed with the *Daily Minnesotian*, which published the following appeal to the South: "For the sake of Humanity, and for the sake of our Country, which *we* love, we feel it our duty to oppose you by all constitutional means, when you seek to extend it [*slavery*] over territory *now free*." The same paper, in a later issue, sets forth its stand. "Our position," runs the editorial, "is, that Slavery shall not have an inch of Territory more than the Constitution *now* gives it, which is just nothing at all. We are opposed to a wanton violation of the *spirit* of that instrument, by now incorporating a clause that recognizes and justifies *property in man*."¹³

Again the attitude toward the territorial compromises gives insight into Minnesota's opinion. The editors who opposed these conciliatory measures also declared that the South had no grievances of which to complain and that its rights were safely secured by the Constitution. "No more concession to slaveholders," was the cry of the *Faribault Central Republican*, which had no kind words for compromise proposals. The *St. Paul Press* attacked especially the Crittenden plan because it would establish slavery in the Southern territories. On one occasion the editor called attention to the fact that "Now, Mr. Crittenden asks that slavery shall be recognized and protected south of that line [*defined in the Missouri Compromise*] by a special slave code incorporated in the Constitution. To ask the North to agree to that . . . is as purely revolutionary, as indefensible, as absurd, and only less bold and honest in its treason, than the *pronunciamento* of South Carolina."¹⁴

The other grievance of the South, the failure of enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law, met with little sympathy in Republican

¹² *Faribault Central Republican*, December 26, 1860.

¹³ *Daily Minnesotian*, December 15, 29, 1860.

¹⁴ *Faribault Central Republican*, December 12, 1860; *St. Paul Press*, January 23, 1861.

circles. "We believe the law unconstitutional, and its passage by Congress an act of usurpation for which there is no warrant in the Constitution," declared the editor of the *Faribault Central Republican* on December 26, 1860. "It made bloodhounds and slave-hunters of every man in the common wealth at the bidding of a federal officeholder," he continued, "and denied to the man whose liberty was to be taken from him more than half the rights and privileges accorded the horse thief, burglar or any other criminal." The personal liberty acts were looked upon as a necessity by the *Minnesotian*. It asserted that the Southerners "*pretend* to have great cause for provocation in the enactment by some of the States of the 'Personal Liberty Bills,' and yet not one, poor, panting negro has ever escaped from their clutches in consequence of any of them. They know as well as we do, that these legislative provisions were passed by the several States for the protection of their own free citizens, or inhabitants—to prevent FREE-MEN and WOMEN from being stolen, kidnapped, and sold into Slavery. Under the operation of the Fugitive Slave Law any free negro in any of the Northern States could be captured 'with or without process,' taken before some U. S. Commissioner, and upon proof manufactured at the South, with no opportunity or means to show its falsity, be summarily condemned to a life of servitude. It was to avoid flagrant outrages upon personal liberty such as these, that gave rise to the passage of the so-called 'Personal Liberty Bills;' and, before any of the States of the North repeal them they will ask and must *obtain* a 'guarantee' from you of the South that no more of our freemen shall be kidnapped, and sold into an infernal bondage."¹⁵

To the South the election of Lincoln was a signal for disunion because it felt that under a Republican regime all the forces of government would be turned against its interests. Many in Minnesota did not share this opinion. "We have carefully read the Chicago platform," said the *New Era*, "we find in it no insult to the South—we find it advocated the faithful maintenance of States Rights—we find it promises security to the domestic institutions of each separate sovereignty of the Confederacy." The *Minnesotian* adds, "We know

¹⁵ *Minnesotian*, December 15, 1860.

the principles of the Republican Party are right, and that its platform is in accordance not only with the letter of the Constitution, but with the spirit that pervades it, and of the times in which it was framed and adopted.”¹⁶

Even the *Hastings Democrat* declared that “The idea that a union of the North and the South is incompatible with the presence or existence of a Republican President, is all fallacy.” The paper continued with an explanation that “The great mass of the Northern mind is opposed to any violation of the rights of the South. The political conflicts of the past have fully demonstrated this fact to be a truism, for the truest friends and warmest advocates of her constitutional rights have invariably been Northern men. Her whole excitement, then, over the probabilities of Lincoln’s election is all a ‘bug bear,’ a wild phantasy of the imagination—but in reality without existence.”¹⁷

The Minnesota papers met the charge of sectionalism under the Republicans in another way—by pointing out the constitutionality of Lincoln’s election and the right of the majority to rule. “The people of this country have chosen a President in a constitutional way,” reasoned one editor. “It was Democratic to do so. It is just what the South has been doing every four years for more than three quarters of a century. No body has been wronged by it. The rights of no citizen of this country have been outraged in the slightest degree.”¹⁸

Some editors voiced a suspicion which apparently existed in the minds of many Minnesotans—that the grievance stated and the demands made by the South were nothing but an attempt to find an excuse for secession. The editor of the *Pioneer and Democrat* wrote: “Their demands are briefly, a slave code for the Territories, and a recognition of slaves as property by the free States. We cannot believe that such demands are made in good faith. They seem to have been devised purposely to receive a rejection which might be alleged as a reason for a contemplated revolution.” The *Waseca Home Views* of Wilton supported the idea that a large portion of the secessionists

¹⁶ *New Era*, June 7, 1860; *Minnesotian*, December 15, 1860.

¹⁷ *Hastings Democrat*, November 3, 1860.

¹⁸ *Weekly Journal* (Lake City), January 17, 1861.

were just using their arguments for secession, which they had wanted anyway. "This question of secession is a preconcerted plan, and has been mooted for years," suggested the editor. "South Carolina has been looking toward disunion since 1832 and has only waited for a more favorable opportunity."¹⁹

The editorials quoted are typical of the attitude of the Minnesota press toward the Southern case for secession. Although they made little attack upon slavery in the states or upon the Southern complaint against the tariff, Minnesota editors did remark frequently about the repossession of fugitive slaves, and, most of all, about slavery extension into the territories. On these points, too, some of Minnesota's spokesmen were willing to go far in fulfilling Southern demands, but most of the expressed opinions took a stand against the case of the South.

¹⁹ *Pioneer and Democrat*, January 10, 1861; *Waseca Home Views* (Wilton), January 2, 1861.



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