

Gideon Welles to Samuel Medary

Hartford, Connecticut, 10 October 1851.

Autograph letter signed, 4 pages + docket.

Private

Hartford, 10th Oct 1851

Dear Sir

Although it is some time since I have seen or heard from you, except through the Columns of the Statesmen, I assume the privilege belonging to an old brothers soldier in the democratic cause of writing you. In the confusion and derangement of parties, commencing in the action of the Baltimore convention of 1844 there have been and still are alienations and disagreement, but in the main the great body of the party are well disposed. Generally our views have corresponded, for I have been a pretty attentive reader of your paper – and in the embarrassed situation of parties, I have been better pleased with the course of the Ohio democracy than that of almost any other State.

In the efforts that have been made, and are still making to establish a new test in the democratic creed, which certain of our friends at the South imperiously exort and others of our friends in the north obsequiously adopt, I have not sympathized. Indeed I cannot without violence to my convictions and an abandonment of my political principles. If the Fugitive Slave law is not an assumption of power on the part of the central government, the alien and sedition laws were not, and the principle embodied in the Kentucky and Virginia resolutions of 1798 and '99 are equally applicable to the law of 1850. There is no grant of power to congress in either case, and the last named act is the worst unwarrantable violation of the rights and sover[e]ignty of the States we have ever witnessed. [2] The South, in my opinion, are committing a fatal error in urging and insisting on this law. The claus[e] in the Constitution is a mere compact among the States, wherein each State binds itself to two things – first that the State will pass no law relieving a fugitive from service owed in another state – Second that the State will deliver him up on claim from the person to whom service is due. It was the true policy of the South to have demanded that the States should each fulfill its constitutional obligations, and to that end have repealed the law 1793 which was drawn up by George Cabot afterwards President of the

Hartford Convention – a consolidationist, who favored a strong central government and opposed the State rights doctrines.

But the great interest involved has made our Southern friends oblivious to the fundamental doctrines of the party and the teachings of Jefferson, and in their desire to get their runaways, they forget or are unmindful of constitutional rights & restrictions. Not only this departure from the faith on primitive principles, it has I fear had a corrupting tendency in other respects. In no other way can I account for the indifference manifested respecting the stupendous frauds and improper practices involving high official delinquents.

The Fugitive Slave law has done more to break down a correct public opinion and sweep away the distinctions of party through the North than any thing that has occurred in my day. What, I often ask my friends who are striving with the Whigs to maintain “the Compromise”, are the distinctions between the democrats and the whigs, if this is your test? You have different organizations it is true, but wherein do your principles differ? The Whigs can without inconsistency support this law, because they do not hold to a strict [3] construction of the Constitution – they are not believers in the rights & sover[e]ignty of the States, but are advocates of a strong, over shadowing central government. Supposing the State of Ohio were to enact a law in conformity with their constitutional obligations for the rendition of fugitives – requiring their own officers to arrest, try & surrender them. Does any one question her right or authority to do so? No one can. If however the State can do this, the general government cannot, for it is either a granted or a reserved power. The power is not granted to congress and is consequently reserved.

While these are frankly my views, I have not deemed it wise or expedient to break with my party friends who differ with me, nor have I thought it necessary to unite myself with other organizations. The test I do not recognize, and I trust it will never be embodied in any national resolutions. If, from motives of expediency our friends should, some of them, choose to identify themselves with “the compromise” they may reconcile it with themselves to do so – I from principle cannot.

It was not, however, my intention to have entered upon this subject at such length. We are approaching the period when a presidential candidate is to be selected and preliminary movements have already commenced. As yet the people are not, to a great extent, committed in this section, nor do I know that they are in any quarter. Indeed we have not the right man named, nor do I know that he can be designated, but there may be a choice among competitors.

At the present time the men most talked of here are Houston, Douglass & Buchanan, and numerically I should think they stood in the order named. Benton, Marcy & W O Butler are also mentioned. Of all these men my individual preference [4] would be for Benton, for with some failings, he has in my opinions more of the great elements for the part than any of the others. It is said however he will not be a candidate, and there are old antagonisms that would come out strong against him.

I have not mentioned Cass for it seems to be a universal impression in this quarter that he will not be brought forward, and the friends of Douglass intimate that he will throw his influence for the latter.

It is doubtful in my mind whether the South will be willing to take Houston but the active men in this quarter are a good deal engaged for him. Some traits of heroism & romance, with undoubted patriotism, lend a charm to him that others do not possess, and the scope for embellishment is great. Towards Douglass there is no unkind feeling, but an impression that he is young, and if adopted for the plan, he would better fill it twelv[e] years hence than now. He has however some rather active supporters. Buchanan enlists no Zeal. Some of the more influential men who supported Cass in 1848 are very divided for him, [*inserted: (Buchanan)*] but their views do not meet a favorable response with the masses.

You are in a position favorable for a pretty correct survey of the ground, and I should esteem it a favor and trust it may be of service, if you will write me how these matters are viewed by you. It is desirable that there should be an interchange of views, and it is with that object I write you. Your letter shall be strictly confidential, and I trust the same in regard to my own. Since my return from Washington, I have not taken an active part in party affairs, for I found things in a condition not altogether satisfactory.

Trusting you will do me the favor to write me at your earliest convene I am very truly
yours

Gideon Welles

Samuel Medary, Esq

[*docket*]

Private