

Suffrage Constitutional Amendment.

REMARKS

OF

HON. WAITMAN T. WILLEY,  
OF WEST VIRGINIA,

IN THE UNITED STATES SENATE, FEBRUARY 5, 1869.

The Senate having under consideration the joint resolution (H. R. No. 402) proposing an amendment to the Constitution of the United States—

Mr. WILLEY said:

Mr. PRESIDENT: I will at once relieve the apprehensions of the Senate by stating that it is not my purpose to detain them more than a very few minutes. I do not intend to protract this discussion, but simply rise to express in terms as brief and succinct as I can employ the reasons which will influence me to vote for this proposition. I can vote for the proposition coming from the House or for that reported by the Judiciary Committee of the Senate and offered now as an amendment to the House resolution. The gist of each proposition is the enfranchisement of the colored race. That is the main purpose intended. On the question of negro suffrage I had the honor to express my views at large some two or three years ago when the bill was pending for the enfranchisement of the colored population in the District of Columbia. I have seen no reason to change those views, and it is not my purpose now to repeat them, but simply, as I have already stated, to mention to the Senate briefly the reasons which impel me to vote for this measure.

My reasons, then, for supporting this bill, are—

1. Because I accept as true the maxim of the fathers of the Republic, that all just government must rest on the consent of the governed. If, therefore, the colored people of this country are to be recognized as citizens and held subject to our laws, then they ought to have a right to a voice in the enactment of those laws and to a participation in the administration of the Government. To deprive them of this would be an infraction of one of the well settled fundamental principles of our political institutions.
2. Taxation without representation is tyranny. If the negro race are to be taxed to support the Government they ought to be allowed an equal voice in the selection of their rulers, who impose and disburse the taxes. If they are to be compelled to bear arms in defense of the Government at the peril of their lives they ought not only to be regarded worthy of political power, but they should be allowed to exercise it.
3. The welfare of the white race no less than of the black race requires the speediest moral, intellectual, and physical improvement and

development of the negro which are practicable. While he remains unenfranchised it were idle to hope for much advancement in these respects. He will be a freeman only in name. The incubus of slavery will still cling to him, repressing all the nobler aspirations and energies of his nature, and suppressing, more or less, all effort to rise to respectability, usefulness, or honorable distinction.

4. This amendment, when adopted, will settle the question for all time of negro suffrage in the insurgent States, where it has lately been extended under the pressure of congressional legislation, and will preclude the possibility of any future denial of this privilege by any change of the constitutions of those States.

5. In those States where the colored race are numerous and remain unenfranchised, the adoption of this amendment will remove a source of disquiet and danger. An emancipated race, subject to our laws, with no voice in ordaining them—subject to taxation, and yet without representation—required to bear all the burdens of civil society without any authority to impose or regulate those burdens, must, in the course of time, if they ever rise to any considerable degree of intelligence, become dissatisfied and restive under a sense of their degradation, and thus be disposed to revolt against the injustice and tyranny which oppress them; or, sinking under this injustice and tyranny into a state of hopeless despondency, they will degenerate into a class of mere lazzaroni, and become pests to society and a burden to the State.

6. The enfranchisement of the negro will remove him from the arena of national politics, and finally relieve the country from those conflicts of opinion and passion which have been disturbing the public tranquillity and retarding the progress and prosperity of the nation ever since the Revolution. He will then not only

be made equal before the law, but equally entitled, with all others, to make and administer the law. "Let us have peace."

7. Suffrage is the only sure guarantee which the negro can have, in many sections of the country, in the enjoyment of his civil rights. Without it his freedom will be imperfect, if not in peril of total overthrow. The ballot will be a safer shield than the laws.

8. The adoption of this amendment will place all the States on an equality in respect of negro suffrage. The exigencies growing out of the late rebellion made it necessary to impose this suffrage on ten of the insurgent States, where a large majority of the colored race dwell. Several of the other States have voluntarily enfranchised the negro. He is now entitled to vote in eighteen or twenty States. If he is entitled to vote in these States, why not in all? The adoption of this amendment will remove all complaint of unjust discrimination, and the remonstrance of the southern States that the other States have imposed on them burdens and evils which the latter were unwilling to share, will be met and answered.

9. Summing up the whole, I believe the political enfranchisement of the colored race in this country is required not only by considerations of policy and expediency, but also by the demands of justice to the negro, by the principles of human liberty, and by the spirit of Christian civilization.

10. And finally, our action here is only initiatory. The passage of this bill does not impose negro suffrage on a single State or a single man. Senators argue as if it did. They denounce the Republican party as guilty by supporting this measure of violating the faith of the party as pledged in its platform of last summer; because they say that this platform proposed to leave the question of negro suffrage, excepting in those lately in rebellion, to the States them-

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selves. Well, sir, that is precisely what this bill proposes to do. It refers the question to the States in the manner prescribed by the fundamental law. It is not a law; it is only a proposition. It does not create negro suffrage in any State; it simply asks the States whether they will have it established or not. It is, in fact, nothing more than an appeal to the people through their immediate representatives in the several Legislatures of the States to decide in the mode and under the provisions of the Constitution whether or not they desire negro suffrage. We can only propose; they must determine. If their decision be favorable, I shall

rejoice; if adverse, I shall regret it; but with this consolation, that an adverse decision will itself be subject to review—a review by the people themselves. And whatever may be the result now, the time is not distant when there will be no political disfranchisement in this country on account of race, color, or previous condition of slavery. That time will come as surely as “truth is mighty and shall prevail;” as surely as the prophetic fulfillment of the universal triumphs of Christianity; as surely as God reigns, and “hath made of one blood all nations of men to dwell on the face of the earth.”

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The following is a list of the names of the  
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