

DAVID WILMOT

## I Plead the Cause of White Freemen (1847)

*David Wilmot was an obscure and somewhat lazy Democratic congressman from Pennsylvania when, in 1846, he gained instant notoriety by introducing an amendment to an appropriation bill requested by President James K. Polk to promote peace negotiations with Mexico. Wilmot's amendment, which reflected growing northern resentment over the proslavery policies of Polk and his advisors, prohibited slavery from any territory acquired from Mexico as a result of the Mexican War. Known henceforth as the Wilmot Proviso, his amendment attracted considerable support from northern congressmen and passed the House several times, although it was always rejected by the Senate. In the following speech, delivered in the House in early 1847, Wilmot outlined his reasons for opposing the further expansion of slavery.*

I make no war upon the South nor upon slavery in the South. I have no squeamish sensitiveness upon the subject of slavery, nor morbid sympathy for the slave. I plead the cause of the rights of white freemen. I would preserve for free white labor a fair country, a rich inheritance, where the sons of toil, of my own race and own color, can live without the disgrace which association with negro slavery brings upon free labor. I stand for the inviolability of free territory. It shall remain free, so far as my voice or vote can aid in the preservation of its character.

This, sir, is what we ask, and all we ask. Yet the majority of this House, reflecting the will of a vast majority of the freemen of this Republic, a majority of the Republicans of the North, are called upon to yield—what? To make concession of things that ought to be conceded? No; they are required to

surrender the dearest rights, to violate the most sacred obligations. Where is the northern man prepared to do it? I am a man of concession, of compromise; but to compromise on this question is to surrender the right and establish the wrong. It is to carry slavery where it does not now exist, to subjugate free territory. If we refuse to convert free into slave territory, is that an invasion of the rights of the South? . . . The future greatness and glory of this Republic demands that the progress of domestic slavery should be arrested now and forever. Let it remain where it now is, and leave to time and a merciful Providence its results.

Sir, upon this subject, the North has yielded until there is no more to give up. We have gone on, making one acquisition after another, until we have acquired and brought into the Union every inch of slave territory that was to be found upon this Continent. Now, sir, we have passed beyond the boundaries of slavery and reached free-soil. Who is willing to surrender it? Men of the North—representatives of northern freedom, will you con-

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FROM *Congressional Globe*, 29th Cong., 2d sess., 1847, Appendix, p. 317.

summate such a deed of infamy and shame? I trust in God not. O, for the honor of the North—for the fair fame of our green hills and valleys, be firm in this crisis—be true to your country and your race. The white laborer of the North claims your service; he demands that you stand firm to his interests and

his rights; that you preserve the future homes of his children, on the distant shores of the Pacific, from the degradation and dishonor of negro servitude. Where the negro slave labors, the free white man cannot labor by his side without sharing in his degradation and disgrace.

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