

# "I do not know whether I am a Republican at all"

excerpts from the 1860 diary of George Templeton Strong

**10 January 1860** House of Representatives not yet organized, no Speaker elected and government at a deadlock. Members spend their time during the interval between ballotings in speech-making about John Brown, fugitive slaves, Hinton Rowan Helper's *Impending Crisis*, and the irrepressible nigger generally. That black but comely biped is becoming a bore to me. No doubt he is a man and a brother, but his monopoly of attention is detrimental to the rest of the family; and I don't believe he cares much about having his wrongs redressed or his rights asserted. Our politicians are playing on Northern love of justice and a more or less morbid Northern philanthropy for their own selfish ends by putting themselves forward as Cuffee's champion. But the South is so utterly barbaric and absurd that I'm constantly tempted to ally myself with [abolitionist writers] Cheever and George Curtis.

**11 January 1860** News today of a fearful tragedy at Lawrence, Massachusetts, one of the wholesale murders commonly known in newspaper literature as accident or catastrophe. A huge factory, long notoriously insecure and ill-built, requiring to be patched and bandaged up with iron plates and braces to stand the introduction of its machinery, suddenly collapsed into a heap of ruins yesterday afternoon without the smallest provocation. Some five or six hundred operatives went down with it -- young girls and women mostly. An hour or two later, while people were working frantically to dig out some two hundred still under the ruins, many of them alive and calling for help, some quite unhurt, fire caught the great pile of debris, and these prisoners were roasted. It is too atrocious and horrible to think of.

Of course, nobody will be hanged. Somebody has murdered about two hundred people, many of them with hideous torture, in order to save money, but society has no avenging gibbet for the respectable millionaire and homicide. Of course not. He did not want to or mean to do this massacre; on the whole, he probably would have preferred to let these people live. His intent was not homicidal. He merely thought a great deal about making a large profit and very little about the security of human life. . . . It becomes us to prate about the horrors of slavery! What Southern capitalist trifles with the lives of his operatives as do our philanthropists of the North?

**10 February 1860** . . . There is much less talking of politics now that a Speaker is elected. I think a cohesive feeling of nationality and Unionism gains strength silently both North and South, and that the Republican party has lost and is daily losing many of the moderate men who were forced into it four years ago by the Kansas outrages and the assault on Sumner. If the South would spare us its brag and its bad rhetoric, it would paralyze any Northern free-soil party in three weeks. But while [Georgia Senator Robert A.] Toombs speechifies and [Virginia] Governor [Henry A.] Wise writes letters, it's hard for any Northern man to keep himself from Abolitionism and refrain from buying a photograph of John Brown.

. . . [Edmund] Burke announced sixty years ago that "the age of chivalry" was gone, and "that of calculators and economists had succeeded it." Their period has likewise passed away now, south of the Potomac, and has been followed by a truculent mob despotism that sustains itself by a system of the meanest eavesdropping and espionage and of utter disregard of the rights of those who have not the physical power to defend themselves against overwhelming odds, that shoots or hangs its enemy or rides him on a rail when it is one hundred men against one, and lets him alone when evenly matched, and is utterly without mercy for the weak or generosity for the vanquished. This course of practice must be expected of any mere mob when rampant and frightened, but the absurdity is that they call it "chivalry." There was something truly chivalric in old John Brown's march with his handful of followers into the enemy's country to redeem and save those he held to be unjustly enslaved at the peril of his own life. For that enterprise he was hanged, justly and lawfully, but there was in it an element of chivalry, genuine though mistaken, and criminal because mistaken, that is not to be found in the performances of these valiant vigilance committeemen.

**17 April 1860** After an apology for a dinner, I went to [Arnold] Guyot's lecture at the [Columbia] Law School. Well attended and very hot; lecture original and interesting. Thereafter discoursed with Guyot, whom I like, and General [Winfield] Scott, the most urbane of conquerors. Curious it was to observe the keen, sensitive interest with which he listens to every whisper about nominations for the coming presidential campaign.

The [Democratic Party's] Charleston Convention will nominate [Illinois Senator Stephen A.] Douglas, I think. Then comes the sanhedrin of the undeveloped Third Party. It is not at all unlikely Scott may be its nominee. In that case, it is possible the Republican Convention may adopt him. I wish things might take course, but hardly hope it. Neither Douglas nor Hunter nor Banks suits me.

**1 May 1860** . . . Some eight Southern delegations have seceded from the Charleston Convention. It refused to make a slave code for the territories an article of faith, and hence this schism. So the great National Democratic party is disintegrated and dead; broken up, like so many other organizations, by these pernicious niggers. It is a bad sign.

**11 May 1860** . . . The Baltimore Convention of conservative fogies and fossils nominates [Tennessee's John] Bell for President and [Massachusetts'] Edward Everett for Vice-President [on the Constitutional Union Party ticket]. Not of much practical importance probably, but I for one am tired of talk about niggers and feel much inclined to vote for anybody who promises to ignore that subject.

**19 May 1860** Thy Nose, O W. H. Seward, is out of joint! The [Republican Party's] Chicago Convention nominates [Illinois' Abraham] Lincoln and [Maine's Hannibal] Hamlin. They will be beat, unless the South perpetrate some special act of idiocy, arrogance, or brutality before next fall.

Lincoln will be strong in the Western states. He is unknown here. The *Tribune* and other papers commend him to popular favor as having had but six months' schooling in his whole life; and because he cut a great many rails, and worked on a flatboat in early youth; all which is somehow presumptive evidence of his statesmanship. The watchword of the campaign is already indicated. It is to be "Honest Abe" (our candidate being a namesake of the Father of the Faithful). Mass-meetings and conventions and committees are to become enthusiastic and vociferous whenever an orator says Abe. But that monosyllable does not seem to me likely to prove a word of power. "Honest Abe" sounds less efficient than "Fremont and Jessie," and that failed four years ago.

**30 May 1860** Invited to be a vice-president of a great Republican ratification meeting tomorrow night. Declined on the plea of "engagements," but the truth is I do not know whether I am a Republican at all.

**31 May 1860** Seward's special friends grumble at Lincoln's nomination, but seem disposed to support it in good faith. It looks to me as if "Honest Abe" were going to run well. The Democrats must patch up their domestic difficulties, and select a strong and available candidate, or they will be beat.

**16 June 1860** . . . There is talk of the Democrats nominating [Supreme Court Justice Samuel] Nelson. I'd gladly vote for him, especially so against "Abe," whose friends seem to rest his claims to high office chiefly on the fact that he split rails when he was a boy. I am tired of this shameless clap-trap. The

log-cabin hard-cider craze of 1840 seemed spontaneous. This hurrah about rails and rail-splitters seems a deliberate attempt to manufacture the same kind of furor by appealing to the shallowest prejudices of the lowest class. It ought to fail, and I hope it may; but unless the Democrats put up a strong man, it will succeed.

**21 June 1860** . . . The Democratic Baltimore Convention is still sitting; and none the easier for sitting. The great old Democratic Party is *in articulo mortis*; its convention is abolishing of itself, and just on the eve of suicide by dismemberment and disintegration, after the manner of certain starfishes. . . . If Douglas be nominated, a Southern limb drops off. If any other man is nominated, a Northwestern ray or arm secedes. Southern swashbucklers demand an ultra-nigger platform that would cost the party every Northern state; unless it be adopted, they will depart to put on their war paint and whet their scalping knives. The worst temper prevails; delegates punch each other and produce revolvers. In short, a wasps' nest divided against itself is a pastoral symphony compared to this *Witenagemot*. Its session has abounded thus far in scandalous, shameful brutalities and indecencies that disgrace the whole country and illustrate the terrible pace at which we seem traveling down hill toward sheer barbarism and savagry.

The Convention has made little progress yet -- has not even succeeded in defining its own identity. Its throes and gripings have thus far been on the question whether certain chivalric delegations that seceded at Charleston shall be received back digested and assimilated, or rejected as foreign matter. The New York delegation seems to hold the balance of power. . . . But the elements of the Convention are in unstable combination, and it is likely to decompose with an explosion like chloride of nitrogen, or disintegrate like a Prince Rupert's drop, on the slightest provocation before it nominates anybody. And, if one half of its bullies and blackguards and Southern gentlemen will make free use of their revolvers on the other half, during the general reaction and melee that is like to accompany the act of decomposition, and will then get themselves decently hanged for homicide, the country will be safe; and millions yet unborn will bless the day when the Baltimore Convention of 1860 exploded and the Democratic Party ceased to exist.

If there were a real ruler now to march into this congregation of politic knaves and hang a dozen of the worst cases, with their bowie knives round their necks, and set the rest to hard labor on public works for a term of years!!! What a subject he would be for a biography by Carlyle! But there is no such luck. Whatever may be the result of this Convention, the Democracy has disgraced itself and damaged itself beyond cure. I half expect that

Republicanism and Abe Lincoln will sweep every vestige of that party out of existence.

**13 September 1860** Dined at New York Club with Charles E. Strong and Henry Fearing. Thereafter we inspected the grand procession of the "Wide-Awakes," a new notable club organization of the Republicans. It extends through these Northern states, is semi-military, and is intended (as people say) to keep order at Lincoln's inauguration (he will certainly be elected) in case Governor Wise and Mr. Yancey and other foolish Southern demagogues try to make a disturbance. This procession, which we watched in Astor Place and the Bowery, was imposing and splendid. The clubs marched in good order, each man with his torch or lamp of kerosene oil on a pole, with a flag below the light; and the line was further illuminated by the most lavish pyrotechnics. Every file had its rockets and its Roman candles, and the procession moved along under a galaxy of fire balls -- white, red, and green. I have never seen so beautiful a spectacle on any political turnout.

**14 September 1860** . . . Last night's Republican turnout is the town talk. Everyone speaks of the good order and the earnest aspects of the "Wide-Awakes," and likens this to the "Tippecanoe and Tyler too" gatherings of 1840. Certainly, all the vigor and enthusiasm of this campaign are thus far confined to the Republicans. Their adversaries are disorganized, divided, and discouraged. In this state, there is a fusion (worse confounded) of the Union Party (Bell and Everett) with the Squatter Sovereignty Democrats (Douglas and Johnson), and a sort of feebly coherent composite electoral ticket. . . . They are trying to coalesce with the Breckinridge people so as to include in one ticket all the anti-Lincoln elements. But that seems as yet beyond the powers of political synthesis.

. . . I don't know clearly on which side to count myself in. I've a leaning toward the Republicans. But I shall be sorry to see Seward and Thurlow Weed with their tail of profligate lobby men promoted from Albany to Washington. I do not like the tone of the Republican papers and party in regard to the John Brown business of last fall, and I do not think rail-splitting in early life a guarantee of fitness for the presidency.

I could vote for Bell and Mr. Orator Everett. But I can't support them in their partnership with Douglas, the little giant, for I hold the little giant to be a mere demagogue. As to Breckinridge, the ultra Southern candidate, I renounce and abhor him and his party. He represents the most cruel, blind, unreasoning, cowardly, absolute despotism that now disgraces the earth, Garibaldi having probably squelched poor little Neapolitan Bomba before this date. Freedom of speech and of thought is extinct south of the Potomac. Life

and property are as insecure there as in Paris of 1793 or in the Kingdom of Dahomey. Witness the atrocities daily perpetrated, for example, in Texas, where white men are being hanged and niggers burned by terrified Vigilance Committees, self-appointed and irresponsible, on the strength of legends about "one hundred bottles of strychnine" to be used by some nigger toxicologist to "poison the wells" of a whole county. These grisly antics of insane Southern mobs and the idiotic sanguinary babblings of Southern editors and orators tempt me to become a disunion man. Alliance with communities so lawless -- more than semi-barbarous -- seems degrading to the comparatively civilized North.

**9 October 1860** Tomorrow we shall hear of today's state elections in Pennsylvania. Its result, if favorable to the Republicans, will be decisive, and one may in that case predict Lincoln's election by the people with entire confidence. What shall little South Carolina do then? If she doesn't secede, she will be utterly ridiculous. She will have to make her choice between the guilt of treason and the contempt of mankind. . . .

**10 October 1860** Republicanism triumphant in Pennsylvania and by majorities that transcend the wildest prophesyings of the *Tribune*. So the question is settled and Honest Abe will be our next President. Amen. We may as well ask the question at once whether the existence of the Union depends on the submission of the South.

**19 October 1860** . . . Lincoln's election seems to be conceded. Fusionism has lost all heart. What will happen when this result is announced? There is much stir and swagger and note of preparation among the fire-eaters. Can they overcome the conservative feeling and the common sense that doubtless exist at the South, even in South Carolina itself, and carry on an overt act of secession and treason? There is ground for anxiety. Republicans laugh at the vaporings of our Southern friends. I devoutly hope the result will justify their unconcern. It is easy to show that secession would be an act of madness and folly, but we know there are fools and madmen south of the Potomac, and they may do sore and irremediable mischief to us, their wise brethren at the North. . . .

**19 October 1860** . . . I've nearly made up my mind to deposit a lukewarm Republican vote next month. It is a choice of evils, but we may as well settle the question whether a President can or cannot be chosen without the advice and approval of the slaveholding interests; whether 300,000 owners of niggers have or have not a veto on the popular choice. The question must be settled sooner or later, and we may as well dispose of it now. It is impossible for me to vote the Fusion ticket and thereby strengthen the show of the mischief-

making demagogue Douglas, or of Breckinridge, the ultra-nigger-driver and demisecessionist. But I may vote for the ten Bell and Everett electors on that ticket, scratching off the rest.

**23 October 1860** Fine day. Tonight's anti-Lincoln or Fusion Torchlight procession was "a big thing." It was more numerous than any political demonstration I have ever witnessed. It began to pass No. 24 Union Square (where I joined Ellie) a little before ten. We got tired of lanterns, Roman candles, red shirts, and the like by a little after eleven, and came home. The rear-guard had not then reached Union Square. We could see the distinct line of lights still flowing down Fourteenth Street. It's now a quarter past twelve, and band after band is still audible as the procession goes down Fourth Avenue. Its route was up Broadway, through Fourteenth Street to Fifth Avenue, through Fifth Avenue to Twenty-sixth Street, and then down Fourth Avenue and the Bowery. The Fusionists have certainly turned out in great force. (There goes "Dixie's Land"; another band is passing the corner.) There were delegations from Brooklyn, Newark, Paterson, and other cities, but this city furnished the great majority, and this certainly looks as if the Fusionists' boast of 40,000 majority in the city and county of New York might be justified. Here come more drums.

Talked with [father-in-law] Mr. Ruggles about this crisis. He is constitutionally timid when people are angry and excited and Southern bluster has somewhat impressed him. Perhaps his anxiety is well grounded, for blusterers may be mischievous. Both North and South seem to him deeply diseased with sectional animosity, and he thinks the Cotton States may probably commit some overt act of treason and secession when Lincoln's election is announced. Stocks have fallen heavily today.

**24 October 1860** The Board of Brokers is in decided panic. Stocks are going down. Cause, the anticipation of trouble growing out of Lincoln's election. The government loan, just taken at a premium, is a strong indication the other way, especially as Southern bankers bid for it; but a few timid capitalists here are unquestionably converting their securities, and Kearny tells me the deposits in the Trust Company are unusually heavy. There is heavy money-pressure at the South. But that is one of the ordinary fluctuations of trade, due to causes outside of politics, and has not yet reacted on us here.

. . . People begin to look grave and talk anxiously about our prospects. Will this have any serious effect on the vote of New York and Pennsylvania? Panic and pressure in New York and Pennsylvania will not have made themselves felt throughout the country in time to influence the

elections. Had they happened earlier, they might have determined the result, for comparatively few Republicans love niggers enough to sacrifice investments for their sweet sake.

**25 October 1860** We have reason to be unsettled and alarmed. A large and influential Southern party is working hard for disunion, and in South Carolina, at least, is strong enough to overawe and silence the sensible and conservative minority. Lincoln's election will certainly be followed by a revolutionary movement there. Then we shall see. If no other state join her in secession and if she have time to cool down and recover her senses before any actual collision, and if no accident complicate the situation, this dangerous point may be weathered. But if things take another turn, the black year of 1860 will long be remembered. At best, we must expect an ugly shock and an anxious time before this year is ended.

**27 October 1860** Today's special rumor is of a scheme of disunion, fathered by the Hon. Howell Cobb of Georgia, Secretary of the Treasury, who is now favoring us "mudsills" of New York with his presence and talking sedition. His plan is said to be the secession of all the Southern states and of the commercial portions of the Middle and New England states. New York, I suppose, is to be divided by a line crossing the Hudson at West Point. This is lunacy incredible of a man who goes at large. But, I fear there is no doubt that this Honorable Cobb, one of our highest officers of state, is in shameful alliance with the most advanced destructives and secessionists of the South, and stands ready to become a traitor upon the first eligible opportunity for treason. There is reason to fear that our disgraceful old chief magistrate, James Buchanan himself, is in the hands of men like Cobb and ready to become their instrument.

Even anti-Republicans seem to find this a little too much to bear. The attempt to bully us is barefaced. If these threats are in earnest, they will drive all the North into earnest, resolute resistance, with very little distinction of party. If they are merely part of the electioneering programme of the administration and the South, it is a rash and indiscreet programme. The crack of the plantation whip is audible.

Caleb Cushing foreshadowed something like this in a speech last summer, when he said in effect that Abolitionists need not suppose the civil war which their fanaticism was bringing upon the country would be remote and confined to the South. "No, we will begin it here, in the streets of Boston." But the dream of setting up insurrection against our "State Sovereignties" of New York and Massachusetts in enthusiastic loyalty to the "peculiar institution" and the nigger-owning aristocracy is too extravagant to



be entertained by any sane man not under the influence of whiskey, opium, or hasheesh.

**28 October 1860** The talk today is that Fusionism may carry this state after all. Then the election goes into the House [of Representatives] and would be long contested before a majority could unite on any one of the three. Excitement would be prolonged and sectional fury intensified. I don't feel like voting for Lincoln, but I should be sorry to see New York frightened into voting for anybody else, even if the inevitable crisis were thereby postponed to 1864. It may as well be met now; and were Lincoln to be beat, I believe the Southern states would go into convention, nevertheless, so scared and angry they are.

**29 October 1860** No new features in today's political talk. Perhaps the Fusionists are rather more confident, though the *Herald* gave the latter up for lost a week ago. I hear it said today that New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania will vote anti-Republican, which I doubt most omnipotently. There is at least an even chance that we are now on the eve of a great public disaster, a calamity to the whole civilized world. Submission by the North would not avert it long if the Southerners are as unanimously in folly as they seem to be, and I'm not sure the North can submit to be rough-riden any longer without disgrace.

**31 October 1860** . . . Republicans refuse to believe secession possible (in which I think they are wrong), and maintain that were it accomplished, it would do us no lasting mischief. I am sure it would do fatal mischief to one section or another and great mischief to both. Amputation weakens the body, and the amputated limb decomposes and perishes. Is our vital center North or South? Which is Body and which is Member? We may wish to settle that question by experiment. We are not a polypoid organism that can be converted into two organisms by mere bisection. China is a specimen of that type, but we claim higher rank. Bisection is disaster and degradation, but if the only alternative is everlasting submission to the South, it must come soon, and why should it not come now? What is gained by postponing it four years longer? I feel Republican tonight.

**2 November 1860** . . . Think I will vote the Republican ticket next Tuesday. One vote is insignificant, but I want to be able to remember that I voted right at this grave crisis. The North must assert its rights, now, and take the consequences.

Think of James J. Roosevelt, United States District Attorney, bringing up certain persons under indictment for piracy as slave-traders to be arraigned

the other day, and talking to the Court about the plea the defendants should put in, and saying that "there had been a great change in public sentiment about the slave trade," and that "of course the President would pardon the defendants if they were capitally convicted."!!! Is Judge Roosevelt more deficient in common sense or moral sense? If we accede to Southern exactions, we must re-open the slave trade with all its horrors, establish a Slave Code for the territories, and acquiesce in a decision of the United States Supreme Court in the Lemmon case that will entitle every Southerner to bring his slaves into New York and Massachusetts and keep them there. We must confess that our federal government exists chiefly for the sake of nigger-owners. *I can't do that.* Rather let South Carolina and Georgia secede. We will coerce and punish the traitorous seceders if we can; but if we can't, we are well rid of them.

**5 November 1860** . . . I confidently predict that Lincoln will be elected by the people, and that South Carolina and Texas, and probably Georgia and Mississippi, will thereupon be foolish enough to commit themselves to revolution, which will be a grave calamity. Also that [Virginia] Governor Wise will make several great speeches, and make himself singularly ridiculous. Also that there will be Northern men enough interested in Southern trade to paralyze our Northern protest against treason and disunion, and that their special organ will be the *New York Express*. Also, that Southern conservatives will be crushed and silenced, though in a majority, and that the Reign of Terror in the Carolinas, Georgia, and other states will be so strengthened that it may become intolerable and be thrown off. I fear the question may have a grim solution in an uprising of the slaves, from Richmond to Galveston, stimulated by their masters' insane talk about the designs of the Black Republican party.

**6 November 1860** A memorable day. We do not know yet for what. Perhaps for the disintegration of the country, perhaps for another proof that the North is timid and mercenary, perhaps for another demonstration that Southern bluster is worthless. We cannot tell yet what historical lesson the event of November 6, 1860, will teach, but the lesson cannot fail to be weighty.

Clear and cool. Vote very large, probably far beyond that of 1856. Tried to vote this morning and found people in a queue extending a whole block from the polls. Abandoned the effort and went downtown. Life and Trust Company meeting. The magnates of that board showed no sign of fluster and seemed to expect no financial crisis. Uptown again at two, and got in my vote after only one hour's detention. I voted for Lincoln.

After dinner to the Trinity School Board at 762 Broadway. Thence downtown, looking for election returns. Great crowd about the newspapers of Fulton and Nassau Streets and Park Row. It was cold, and I was alone and tired and came home sooner than I intended. City returns are all one way, but they will hardly foot up a Fusion majority of much above 25,000. Brooklyn said to be Fusion by 14,000. An anti-Lincoln majority of 40,000 in New York and Kings, well backed by the river counties, may possibly outweigh the Republican majorities in the western counties, but that is unlikely. The Republicans have gained in the city since 1856, and have no doubt gained still more in the interior.

**7 November 1860** Lincoln elected. Hooray. Everybody seems glad of it. Even the Democrats like Isaac Bell say there will be no disturbance, and that this will quiet slavery agitation at the North. DePeyster Ogden's nerves are a little unstrung, but they are never very steady.

Republicans have carried every state on which they counted, except New Jersey, and it may be they have carried that, too. They have a very fair show in Delaware!!! Wilmington gives them a majority. Kentucky, Virginia, Maryland, and Tennessee are believed to have gone for Bell, a sore discouragement to the extremists.

Telegrams from the South indicate no outbreak there. There is a silly report from Washington that Governor Wise contemplates "a raid" on that city at the head of a ragged regiment of rakehelly, debauched Virginians. He has few equals in folly, but this story is incredible. I wish it was true and that he would proceed to do it. Nothing could make Southern ultraism more ridiculous. I would not have him hanged for his treasonable attempt, but publicly spanked on the steps of the Capitol.

The next ten days will be a critical time. If no Southern state commit itself to treason within a fortnight or so, the urgent danger will be past. Now that election is over, excitement will cool down rapidly, and even South Carolina will not secede unless under excitement that blinds her to the plain fact that secession is political suicide.

If they were not such a race of braggarts and ruffians, I should be sorry for our fire-eating brethren, weighed down, suffocated, and paralyzed by a nigger incubus 4,000,000 strong, of which no mortal can tell them how they are to get rid, and without a friend in the world except the cotton buyers who make money out of them, and the King of Dahomey. The sense of the civilized world is against them. They know that even the manufacturers and traders who profit by them condemn the institution on which their social

system rests. And now their own country decides against their real or imaginary interests, and gives a judgment which they consider (and perhaps correctly on the whole) to be a censure, and which many of them suppose commits the government to a policy hostile to them and endangering their peace and safety.

---

SOURCE: Allan Nevins and Milton Halsey Thomas, editors, *The Diary of George Templeton Strong: The Civil War, 1860-1865* vol. 3 (New York: Macmillan Company, 1952), pages 3-4, 7-8, 22, 24-25, 26, 28, 30, 33, 36-36, 41-42, 44-45, 52-60.