

January 7, 1861 - Excerpts from Governor Isham G. Harris' Legislative Message



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GENTLEMEN OF THE SENATE, AND THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES:

The ninth section of the third article of the Constitution provides that, on extraordinary occasions, the Governor may convene the General Assembly. Believing the emergency contemplated, to exist at this time, I have called you together. In welcoming you to the capitol of the State, I can but regret the gloomy auspices under which we meet. Grave and momentous issues have arisen, which, to an unprecedented degree, agitate the public mind and imperil the perpetuity of the Government.



The systematic, wanton, and long continued agitation of the slavery question, with the actual and threatened aggressions of the Northern States and a portion of their people, upon the well-defined constitutional rights of the Southern citizen; the rapid growth and increase, in all elements of power, of a purely sectional party, whose bond of union is uncompromising hostility to the rights and institutions of the fifteen Southern states, have produced a crisis. . . resulting already in the withdrawal from the Confederacy of the sovereignties which compose it, while others are rapidly preparing to move in the same direction. . .



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A brief review of the history of the past is necessary to a proper understanding of the issues presented for your consideration.

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The Constitution distinctly recognizes property in *slaves*—makes it the duty of the States to deliver the fugitive to his owner, but contains no grant of power to the Federal Government to interfere with this species of property, except 'the power couples with the duty,' common to all civil Government, to protect the rights of *property*, as well as those of *life* and *liberty*. . .

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. . . there is no power on earth which can rightfully determine whether slavery shall or shall not exist within the limits of any State, except the people thereof acting in their highest sovereign capacity.

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The attempt of the Northern people, through the instrumentality of the Federal Government. . . to appropriate the whole of the Territories, which are the common property of all the people of all the States, to themselves. . . by excluding there from every Southern man who is unwilling to live under a government which may by law recognize the free negro as his equal. . . is justly regarded by the people of the Southern States as a gross and palpable violation of the spirit and obvious meaning of the compact of Union. . .

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As slavery receded from the north, it was followed by the most violent and fanatical opposition. At first the anti-slavery cloud. . . was no larger than a man's hand. . . Weak, diminutive and contemptible as was this party. . . it has now grown to colossal proportions. . . and elected one of its leaders to the Presidency of the United States; and in the progress of events, the Senate and Supreme Court must also soon pass into the hands of this party—a party upon whose revolutionary banner is inscribed 'No more slave State, no more slave Territory, no return of the fugitive to his master'—an 'irrepressible conflict' between the Free and Slave States; 'and whether it be long or short, peaceful or bloody, the struggle shall go on, until the sun shall not rise upon a master or set upon a slave. . . '



Nor is this all; it seeks to appropriate to itself, and to exclude the slaveholder from the territory acquired by the common blood and treasure of all the States. . .

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[This abolitionist party] has caused the murder of owners in pursuit of their fugitive slaves, and shielded the murders from punishment.

It has, upon many occasions, sent its emissaries into the Southern States to corrupt our slaves; induce them to run off, or excite them to insurrection.

It has run off slave property by means of the 'underground railroad,' amounting in value to millions of dollars. . .

It has, by the John Brown and Montgomery ^{Note 1} raids, invaded sovereign States and murdered peaceable citizens.

It has justified and 'exalted to the highest honors of admiration, the horrid murders, arsons, and rapine of the John Brown raid, and has canonized the felons as saints and martyrs.'

It has burned the town, poisoned the cattle, and conspired with the slaves to depopulate Northern Texas.

It has, through certain leaders, proclaimed to the slaves the terrible motto, 'Alarm to the sleep, fire to the dwellings, poison to the food and water of slaveholders.'

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It has, in the person of the President elect, asserted the equality of the black with the white race.

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. . . Moreover, they have quietly submitted to a revenue system which indirectly, but certainly, taxes the products of slave labor some fifty or sixty millions of dollars annually, to increase the manufacturing profits of those who have thus persistently and wickedly assailed them.

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With the earnest hope that your session may be short and agreeable, and devoutly trusting that an All Wise Providence may watch over your deliberations and guide and direct you in the adoption of such measures as will rebound to the general welfare, peace, prosperity, and glory of our State and country, the questions, fraught as they are with weighty responsibilities and fearfully important consequences, are respectfully committed to your hands.

Isham G. Harris.

Robert D. White, *Messages of the Governors of Tennessee*^{Note 2}, Vol. 5, pp. 255-269.

Note 1: According to Herbert Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Rebellions*, 50th Anniversary Edition, p. 357, a plot to start a slave rebellion was discovered in Montgomery, Alabama. 25 slaves and 4 whites were executed. Aptheker cites the Montgomery, Alabama Advertiser, December 13 [1860?]"

Note 2: Robert H. White, *Messages of the Governors of Tennessee, 1859-1869*, Vol. 5 (Nashville: Tennessee Historical Commission, 1959), pp. 255-269 [Hereinafter: *Messages of the Governors of Tennessee*].

