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THE POLITICS OF HOPE AND PRINCIPLE IN THE 1850S/39

“mightily excited about the matter.” Douglass mocked the Democrats for splitting because “the head of the sable Africans was thrust between them as an apple of discord.” Could it be possible, Douglass satirized, that the Democrats (if not the nation) would finally be “prevented from making a President by the ever-lasting Negro! Has it come to this . . . can nothing bind these intrusive sons of Ham? Are they so irrepressible that they come unbidden to Democratic communion tables, and thrust their dividing heels into the dish of Democratic love feasts?²²

Douglass had long argued that blacks were the *conscience* of America. If slavery as a political issue could be more and more mingled with the cause of black freedom, then blacks might yet be the beneficiaries of disunion. “Slavery is the great test question of our age and nation,” wrote Douglass in 1859. “It, above all others, enables us to draw the line between the precious and the vile, whether in individuals, creeds, sects, or parties.” In Douglass’ mind, the issue of slavery divided good from evil in America like “the distinctness of summer-lightening upon a black cloud.” Ultimately, slavery would become a moral question for *all* Americans, liberating some and corrupting others. The survival of America’s shared sense of mission between northerners and southerners depended upon how the questions of slavery and race were resolved. Douglass shared deeply with whites this sense of American mission, but in his view, before America’s messianic destiny could be fulfilled, the nation had to be awakened to its folly.²³

As Douglass’ political consciousness grew, his grasp of political rhetoric increased as well. In the concept of the Slave Power, he found a means to convert the enemy of black people into the enemy of all Americans. The idea of a “Slave Power conspiracy” was at least as old as the 1820s, but in the 1850s (especially in the wake of the Kansas-Nebraska excitement) it became the staple of political antislavery rhetoric. Douglass adopted this rhetoric and exploited it to the fullest. In a speech at the annual meeting of the American and Foreign Antislavery Society in May, 1853, he laid out his understanding of the