

THE FILSON CLUB HISTORY QUARTERLY

Vol. 18 LOUISVILLE, KENTUCKY, JANUARY, 1944 No. 1

JOHN J. CRITTENDEN, 1787-1863

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This sketch is based on his book on Crittenden now in preparation

To the generation living in the United States in the years before 1863 John Jordan Crittenden was a familiar figure. Today his name is almost forgotten except by historians. When he is mentioned in history books it is in connection with the futile effort of the Constitutional Union Party to win the Presidency in 1860 and his own courageous but hopeless efforts to avert the Civil War by his compromise proposals. Few are aware of his long years of political leadership, first in Kentucky and then in the national capitol. Like so many of his contemporaries he was at the outset a Jeffersonian Democrat, then a National Republican, and later a Whig. For years he supported Clay's political fortunes at the expense of his own advancement. Realizing in 1848 that Clay's presidential ambitions were a vain hope, he was in no small measure responsible for General Zachary Taylor's nomination as President by the Whigs. He was twice Attorney General of the United States, and during most of the time from 1835 to 1863 he was in the United States Senate. During the eventful decade preceding the Civil War his efforts to compromise the ever present slavery issue and his part in keeping Kentucky in the Union are worthy of special commendation.

Crittenden was born in Woodford County, Kentucky, on September 10, 1787. Like so many Kentuckians of that day,

his parents had migrated from Virginia and had settled near Versailles in 1782. The father, Major John Crittenden, had served in the Revolution, was a charter member of the Order of Cincinnati, and during 1783-84 represented Kentucky in the Virginia Legislature. Before her marriage his mother was Judith Harris, a second cousin of Thomas Jefferson. Research has revealed little information on Crittenden's early life. His father was accidentally killed in 1806 and left his widow with a sizable family of youngsters. They were in moderate circumstances, owning plenty of land but little else. However limited the Crittenden income may have been, young John's education was not neglected. The year 1803-04 was spent at the Pisgah Academy, Woodford County, where he seems to have excelled in Latin. He next attended an academy in Virginia, and, in 1807, was graduated from William and Mary College.

Although politics was to be the major activity of Crittenden's life, he was a lawyer by profession. For a time around 1807 he lived in the home and read law in the office of Judge George M. Bibb of Lexington. Judge Bibb, later a United States Senator and a dyed-in-the-wool Jacksonian Democrat, and Crittenden were lifetime friends. Crittenden began practice in Woodford County, but by 1809 he had located in Russellville, in Logan County, in western Kentucky, where opportunities were greater for an ambitious young attorney. Due to his industry, his ability as a speaker, the ease with which he made and retained friends, and above all to his close connections with the influential Ewing family, Crittenden soon became an important figure in Russellville legal and political circles. His papers reveal little except that his law practice was concerned with typical activities of a small town lawyer of that day, and that before long he represented clients in the Court of Appeals at Frankfort.

Until the close of the War of 1812 Crittenden's career was a mixture of law, politics, and war. In 1809 he was appointed Attorney General for the Territory of Illinois by Governor Ninian Edwards, a native of Russellville. The next year Edwards made him an aide-de-camp. Concerning his activities in these offices one finds scarcely anything. In 1811 Crittenden was sent to the Legislature from Logan County.

It was the beginning of a legislative activity that was to continue, with few interruptions, until his death in 1863. The first of Crittenden's three marriages was in 1811 to Sallie O. Lee of Woodford County.

These were the years when the War of 1812 was in the making. England, in a life-and-death struggle with Napoleon, was seizing our ships, impressing our seamen; her agents in the Northwest were stirring up the Indians to resist the encroachment of settlers. War sentiment in Kentucky was potent. Young Henry Clay and other War Hawks finally compelled a reluctant Madison to make war. Crittenden was well aware of the trend of events in Washington through correspondence with Clay, Senator Bibb, and others. He was anxious to get into the war, but Bibb advised him to stay out until more able commanders were appointed. Following this advice Crittenden remained out of the army until the situation in the Northwest became critical after Hull's surrender in 1812 and the Raisin Massacre of 1813. Then General Isaac Shelby made Crittenden his second aide-de-camp in the well known campaign of William Henry Harrison and Isaac Shelby, which was successfully concluded by defeating General Henry A. Proctor and his Indian allies at the Battle of the Thames, October 5, 1813. This brought peace to the Northwest and ended Crittenden's active military career. That he conducted himself well in this brief campaign is attested by the fact that he was complimented for distinguished service in the dispatches of both Harrison and Shelby.'

Without doubt Crittenden's brief military experience constituted one of his fondest memories, since he not infrequently referred to it in the years that followed. It was, nevertheless, only a brief interlude in a life that contained considerable law practice but far more politics. Between 1811 and 1816 he was repeatedly elected to the Legislature from Logan County and several times was chosen Speaker. His law practice continued to increase both in the courts of western Kentucky and in the Court of Appeals at Frankfort.

An interesting incident in this phase of Crittenden's life reveals his political partisanship and leadership and also helps to explain his election to the United States Senate. Governor

George Madison died in office in 1817. When Lieutenant Governor Gabriel Slaughter succeeded him and made a number of Federalist appointments, Crittenden and other Jeffersonians, claiming that he was unconstitutionally elected, unsuccessfully attempted to have the Legislature authorize a new election. The Republicans then made it an issue in the August elections. Although the whole State was aroused and excited the move failed because only one-fourth of the State Senate was renewed annually.²

Along with Henry Clay, Crittenden had the distinction of being chosen a United States Senator before reaching the legal age of thirty. He was elected first in 1814 and then again in the 1817-18 session of the State Legislature. Crittenden's first experience in the United States Senate, 1817-19, was brief and not especially noteworthy. Information about it is meager. His few speeches portray him as a nationalist, a zealous exponent of the constitutional rights of the individual, a great admirer of Jefferson, a vigorous critic of the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798, a proud Kentuckian but a prouder American, a strong advocate of a plan for the Supreme Court to settle controversies between states, a man favorably disposed to the demands of Westerners for a less stringent land policy but utterly opposed to the activities of Western land speculators.

Crittenden arrived too late in Washington to participate in the nationalistic legislative program after the War of 1812, but in the light of later experiences and his close relations with Clay it is reasonable to suppose that he would have supported the whole program. His resignation from the Senate in the autumn of 1819 seems strange to the present-day reader. In reality reasons for it are not hard to find. His wife, forced by the difficulties of travel and the care of young children, had to remain behind in Kentucky. To be a Senator was not such a great honor then as now, and the pay was only six dollars per day. Crittenden was relatively poor, though always a good liver and a free dispenser of hospitality. Thus circumstances compelled him to pursue his law practice, as it was more remunerative.³

From 1819 Frankfort was to be Crittenden's home. From then until 1835, when he returned to the Senate, was probably

the happiest period of his life. His law practice consumed much of his energy, but left time for politics, too. The rambling Crittenden home was the scene of much hospitality, especially when the Legislature was in session. Crittenden's cordiality, his sympathetic interest in everyone, his charm, his rare ability as a conversationalist and storyteller, his exceptional powers of dramatizing the speech and mannerisms of others made for him a host of admirers and friends. These qualities along with political astuteness and oratorical skill go far in explaining his rise to prominence.

As anxious as Crittenden was to keep out of politics, he could not escape involvement in the political storm which gripped Kentucky following the panic of 1819. A period of speculation and wildcat banking was followed by years of depression. The Legislature answered the prayers of the debtors by legislation compelling creditors to accept the irredeemable paper of the Bank of the Commonwealth. Two debt moratorium laws were enacted which were voided by the Court of Appeals. After an angry Legislature failed to remove the judges it set up a New Court. Judicial confusion ensued when the judges of the Old Court refused to resign and cases were heard in both courts. The State elections were bitterly contested between the forces of Relief and Anti-Relief. In fact the whole nation was an interested spectator in the fight which agitated Kentucky from the Big Sandy to the Mississippi. Crittenden was deeply involved both in defending the Old Court in a legal battle and as a reluctant candidate for the Legislature. He was elected to the Legislature in 1825, but despite his immense personal popularity he, in 1826, suffered one of his few political defeats. However, in 1826 the Anti-Relief faction won control of the Legislature and repealed the Relief measures over Governor Desha's vetoes.

The immediate fight was over, but its consequences were to significantly affect political alignments in Kentucky for years to come. There was soon to be a sharp cleavage between Democrats and National Republicans (later Whigs). Crittenden was forced—by circumstances, by a natural conservatism, by his close connections with Henry Clay, and his associations with men of property and his defense of their

interests in the courts—into the National Republican party. He was soon to be one of that group of editors and politicians dubbed in derision by the Democratic press "the Frankfort nobility."⁴

Crittenden's connections with the disputed Presidential election of 1824 and events leading to Jackson's defeat of Adams in 1828 are too long and involved to be narrated here except in broad outline. After Clay's elimination in 1824, Crittenden was for Jackson until it became clear that the choice of Adams meant that Clay would become Secretary of State. From then on he was closely identified with the fortunes of Adams and Clay. He became even more so when the Relief party in Kentucky championed the cause of Jackson. Crittenden labored in vain to clear Clay's name in and out of the Legislature of the charges of bargain and corruption and union between "Puritan and Blackleg." His efforts in behalf of Clay and the Adams' administration were rewarded, first by his being made United States District Attorney for Kentucky and later by an appointment as a Justice of the Supreme Court. One of the keenest disappointments of his life was when the Jackson forces in the Senate defeated his confirmation. Jackson's victory over Adams in 1828 was a hard blow for Crittenden, and for years following, next to Clay, he was the outstanding leader of the anti-Jackson forces in Kentucky.

There are one or two other items of interest in Crittenden's life during these years which should be mentioned in order to keep the record straight. In 1819-20 he served with distinction on a commission which aided in bringing to a harmonious conclusion a long-standing boundary dispute between Kentucky and Tennessee. For a time he was a trustee of Transylvania University.

His first wife died in 1824. Two years later he married Maria Todd. This was a very happy marriage in spite of the fact that the second Mrs. Crittenden was a pious Presbyterian and Crittenden's morals were hardly of a puritanical variety. He loved to dance, chew tobacco, drink freely, and enjoyed the company of those who did the same.⁵

When Jackson became President in 1829, Crittenden was removed as United States Attorney. All other Adams supporters lost their federal jobs. Aroused by Jacksonian

proscription, Crittenden was most energetic for the next five years in leading the anti-Jackson forces. He repeatedly represented Franklin County in the Legislature, and time after time was chosen Speaker. In the heated annual State elections he was constantly in demand to speak in all parts of the State at mass meetings and barbeques. He was the most popular man in the State and could have had any elective office he desired. However, Crittenden was not politically ambitious. He was too willing to step aside for other men, especially for Henry Clay. Crittenden readily could have been chosen United States Senator in 1831, but graciously stepped aside for Clay in order that the latter's chances might be furthered in the Presidential campaign of 1832.

Both Clay and Crittenden were bitterly disappointed over Clay's humiliating defeat in 1832, and Clay wished to resign from the Senate in Crittenden's favor, but Crittenden would not hear to it. Crittenden, however, was soon to have his opportunity for political advancement. The State election of 1834 was a hard fought one. The main issue was the same as in 1832—the recharter of the United States Bank. The Legislature to be elected would have to choose a Senator. Would it be a bank or an anti-bank man? Would it be Crittenden or would it be someone else? The Whigs won control of both houses of the Legislature and on January 9, 1835, Crittenden was chosen over his Democratic opponent, James Guthrie, by a wide margin. Thus was Crittenden rewarded for years of service in the Legislature where he worked earnestly in support of two leading domestic questions of the day: public schools and internal improvements. Thus also was he compensated for his arduous exertions in leading and directing the National Republicans and Whigs in Kentucky.⁶

In December, 1835, Crittenden returned to the Senate after an absence of sixteen years. It was no easy matter for him to break ties with home and friends. It was necessary to leave his children, and this was a hard experience for an affectionate father. Whig strategy in the Twenty-Fourth Congress was one of obstructing the Jackson administration, and in this Crittenden apparently played his part well. He spoke frequently, and the main point of his able and lengthy remarks was to poke ridicule at the policies of Jackson and his

henchmen. Verbosity was an evident weakness of public men of the day and Crittenden was no exception to the rule.

He gave able support to Clay's bill for the distribution of the proceeds from the sale of public lands among the states. He bent his withering sarcasm on Senator Thomas H. Benton's proposals for spending the Treasury surplus on eastern seaboard military fortifications and on his public land graduation schemes. After Jackson issued his well-known Specie Circular in July, 1836, Crittenden took him sternly to task for ruining the specie paying United States Bank and then trying to put the country on a specie paying basis by means of the Specie Circular. Further evidence of Crittenden's opposition to Jackson is perceived in his vote against Benton's expunging resolutions.

The slavery issue began to show its ugly head again in this session of Congress. Crittenden's views on the question at this time and later were those of a moderate Southerner. He always wished to keep the question out of politics or to compromise it. In 1836 he favored the rejection of Quaker petitions to abolish slavery in Washington, D. C. At about the same time he opposed John C. Calhoun's efforts to keep abolitionist literature from Southern mail and he denounced Calhoun as a dangerous alarmist on the growing abolitionist movement.

There was at least one act of Jackson's that met with Crittenden's approval—his belated action in recognizing the new Texas Republic. Crittenden was then and later greatly interested in Texas, since many Kentuckians had gone to Texas and he himself had an interest in lands there. Crittenden had returned to Kentucky in midsummer of 1836 and had actively participated in the Presidential campaign in which William Henry Harrison carried the State by 2,700 votes.⁷

The second Jackson administration was a time of economic over-expansion, and when Van Buren's Presidency began the country was in the throes of one of its worst depressions. The federal treasury was in extreme difficulties due to the falling off of public revenues. Crittenden and his Whig colleagues continued their earlier policy of obstructing and criticizing the administration. He supported Clay's plan to pay the fourth installment on the Distribution Bill, and the

Whigs generally opposed the Van Buren proposal for relieving the hard-pressed Treasury by issuing Treasury Notes. This afforded Crittenden further opportunity to use his unsurpassed powers of ridicule and sarcasm upon Jackson's and Van Buren's fiscal policies. Crittenden and other Whigs adopted a similar course as to Van Buren's pet Independent Treasury scheme. The Whigs wanted to use the financial embarrassment of the administration as an entering wedge for the re-establishment of the United States Bank. Crittenden, however, frowned upon a proposal to re-establish the Bank by constitutional amendment. When Senator T. H. Benton revived his pre-emption bill, Crittenden countered by offering amendments to permit pre-emption only to poor settlers and not to speculators and foreigners. The Whigs probably would have accepted pre-emption had it been coupled with distribution of the proceeds of public land sales.

One of Crittenden's deepest interest during the Van Buren administration was the approaching campaign of 1840. During all his years in Washington he carried on a heavy correspondence with his political lieutenants in Kentucky. It was a case of political management from afar. As early as January, 1838, he was advising that the Legislature should stand for a National Nominating Convention, that Kentucky Whigs should come out for Clay, and if he should not prove available they could then turn to Harrison. The latter, aware of Crittenden's influence, wrote to him and asked his support. As matters turned out Clay was defeated for the nomination, but there is some reason to think that Crittenden might have had the Vice-Presidential nomination had he wished. He worked hard for Clay before and during the convention and was keenly disappointed when Harrison was chosen. Nevertheless, he stumped Kentucky from one end to the other and spoke in other states, also, for the Whig cause. Crittenden had a particular reason for wishing Van Buren's defeat. In the previous session of Congress he had introduced a bill (a century prior to the Hatch Act) to prevent federal office holders from engaging in political campaigns, which had been defeated by the Democrats. Despite the fact that Crittenden was somewhat ashamed of Whig campaign tactics in defeating Van Buren, he was elated over Harrison's victory.⁶

Although it was generally known that Crittenden would have a place in Harrison's cabinet, he was re-elected to the Senate in December, 1840. After Clay declined to be Secretary of State, Crittenden apparently could have had his choice of any post, but after long consideration took that of Attorney General. His political star was rising and some were bold enough to suggest that he would be the next Whig candidate for President. Bad times, however, were in store for the Whigs. Harrison died shortly after his inauguration. The Whigs had committed a serious political blunder in making the anti-Jackson John Tyler Vice-President. When they attempted to enact their program of re-establishing the United States Bank, high tariff, and distribution Tyler revolted against Clay's attempt to run the administration. The President vetoed two different bank bills contrary to Crittenden's advice. The latter attempted to compromise the bank issue between Clay and Tyler, but the domineering Clay refused to accede to Tyler's constitutional scruples on the bank. The deadlock resulted in the resignation of the entire Tyler Cabinet, except Webster, in September, 1841. The best of the many theories advanced for the resignation of the Cabinet seems to be that the Whigs generally in and out of Congress felt that Tyler should have accepted the program of the party leaders. Crittenden wrote in justification of his resignation: ". . . I have acted as honor and duty to the country have required." His few opinions as Attorney General dealing with a variety of administrative matters were ably and forcefully written, but were of little constitutional importance.*

Following his resignation, Crittenden returned to Kentucky and his neglected law practice. He could have been one of the great lawyers of his day had not politics absorbed so much of his time. Even now he was not to be in private life very long. Clay wished to resign from the Senate, and in February, 1842, Crittenden was chosen to fill out his term. A fierce feud continued between the Whigs and Tyler until the end of his administration. Crittenden saw red whenever he spoke of the President, and was especially enraged when Tyler vetoed two attempts of the Whigs to raise the tariff accompanied with distribution. The Tyler administration needed increased revenue, but financial need was not sufficient to

compel them to accept distribution. The Whigs had to be content with the passage of the Tariff Law of 1842. Tyler, like Jackson, was charged with executive tyranny and some Whigs wanted to impeach him, but Crittenden condemned the suggestion. He took an active part in shaping the tariff law and was pleased with it. Crittenden favored protection, but at no time was he a high protectionist. He, likewise, favored federal internal improvements if they served the common good. At this time and later he supported appropriations for improving large rivers, the use of public lands for construction of highways and land grants for railroads.

Again in January, 1843, Crittenden was chosen Senator by the Legislature. Some Democrats even supported him, and his victory was an easy one over the old Indian fighter, Richard M. Johnson. As occupied as Crittenden was with matters sketched above, the thought uppermost in his mind in the Tyler administration was electing Clay President in 1844. Clay obtained the Whig nomination, but the platform ignored the annexation of Texas. Later in the campaign Clay made the fatal mistake of first opposing annexation and then giving it a qualified support. Nevertheless, Polk and expansion resulted in a Democratic victory. Crittenden took an aggressive part in the campaign, speaking numerous times in Kentucky, Ohio, and Tennessee, and his gloom was matched only by that of Clay over the outcome. The "old coon's" lack of availability was again amply demonstrated.¹⁰

It is clear that Crittenden personally favored the annexation of Texas, but for political reasons he opposed Tyler's attempt to annex Texas by treaty. He likewise participated in the Whig move to block annexation by joint resolution. His position was that it could not be done under the power to admit new states but only by treaty, and that the matter should be postponed until the Polk Administration came in. Whig obstructionist tactics failed by a close margin and the War with Mexico ensued. At first Crittenden opposed the war, but when it came he favored energetic prosecution of it. As a member of the Senate Military Affairs Committee and as a frequent correspondent with both Generals Winfield Scott and Zachary Taylor he was in close touch with all war

developments. His two oldest sons, George and Thomas, were in the war, the latter on the staff of Scott.

Although a severe critic of the management of the war by the Polk administration, Crittenden was extremely patriotic. He favored using volunteers instead of militia, wanted the pay of the troops increased and decorations freely granted. His frequent remarks in the Senate indicated his intense pride in our military victories. He was quick to resent any derogatory remarks about Scott or Taylor, especially the latter. Both generals wrote to him and complained freely of mistreatment at the hands of the President and the Secretary of War, Wm. L. Marcy. Crittenden replied with expressions of sympathy. With Taylor he was bold enough to offer military advice and to hint that political preferment might well be his reward after the war.

A few other activities of Crittenden during the Polk regime deserve brief mention. The President consulted him on peace terms. He, along with other Whigs, strenuously fought the Walker Tariff of 1846 and the restoration of the Sub-Treasury system. They relentlessly flayed the financial policies of the Democrats. During the excitement over the Oregon boundary question he assumed the role of a compromiser. In this role he made one of his finest speeches. He would have accepted 54 degrees and 40 minutes, but not at the price of war."

The year 1848 was a critical year in Crittenden's life, just as it was in that of the Whig party. Had he permitted his friends to push his candidacy, he might well have been nominated and elected President. His position was a difficult one. For years he had given Clay his loyal support and Clay was apparently as ambitious to be President in 1848 as he had ever been. Crittenden along with influential Whigs knew that it would be fatal to nominate Clay again. Recent Clay biographers have insinuated that Crittenden played false with Clay by permitting him to think that he was still loyal to his presidential aspirations and at the same time he was actively promoting the nomination of General Zachary Taylor. Space does not permit a detailed explanation of the painful break in the lifetime friendship between Clay and Crittenden. Suffice it to say, Clay was enraged with Crittenden because the latter realized that Clay had made too many enemies in

his long political life, and above all was not acceptable to many, both North and South, on the slavery issue. There were other reasons for Clay's lack of availability, but these are the most significant. Most men were afraid to tell Clay unpleasant things, but, painful as it was, Crittenden had the courage and good sense to tell him quite frankly that he could not be elected.

Soon after General Taylor began winning spectacular victories in the Mexican War his presidential boom got under way with increasing momentum. Political leaders like Crittenden and Alexander H. Stephens were responsible for starting it, but when once started they had difficulty in controlling it. The General wanted to write his own platform and not be bound by any party. He wrote so many letters on political issues that he had his managers jittery. In order to set the public straight on Taylor's political views Crittenden wrote the well-known First [John S.] Allison Letter. Clay, despite Crittenden's admonition, took a trip through the North and East. Convinced by a warm reception everywhere that he was still as popular as ever, he announced his candidacy. Four ballots were necessary in the Whig convention before Taylor was nominated. Clay was bitter and especially so toward Crittenden over the outcome. He carried this grudge against Crittenden until shortly before his death.

Meanwhile, serious political developments were taking place in Kentucky where the Whig party split over support of Clay and Taylor. Crittenden was forced to become the Whig candidate for Governor in order to prevent a party breach. He was the only man agreeable to both factions. To accept the nomination was a hard decision for him to make. The office was of less significance than that of Senator, it paid less, his growing Supreme Court practice would have to be given up and all of the burning territorial questions growing out of the Mexican War were crying for solution in Congress. Despite the sacrifices, Crittenden accepted the nomination largely to make sure that Taylor would carry Kentucky. One would suppose that Crittenden's immense popularity would have precluded a hard-fought campaign, but such was necessary and he won only by an 8,500 majority over his Democratic opponent, Colonel Lazarus W. Powell. Crittenden

not only campaigned vigorously for the Governorship but equally so in Taylor's behalf. His heavy correspondence with Whig leaders in many states, urging them on to greater efforts, reveals his endeavors in the election of "Old Rough and Ready."¹²

As indicated above, Crittenden had run for Governor to insure a Taylor victory and to heal the split among Kentucky Whigs. The first objective was realized, but the second was never perfectly accomplished. Pressure was put upon him to resign the Governorship and enter either Taylor's Cabinet or the Senate, where he could advise General Taylor and help allay the sectional differences that were threatening to break up the Union. This pressure came from Whig spokesmen in both North and South, but especially from the South, and is highly indicative of the faith that men reposed in Crittenden's ability and fairness.

It was generally accepted that he could have had any place in the Taylor Cabinet that he might seek. It was also believed that due to his closeness to Taylor and his share in the promotion of his candidacy that he would be held responsible for the success or failure of the administration, and, therefore, the only course open to him was to enter the Cabinet and direct governmental policy. As greatly as he would have liked to do this, Crittenden could not. To have done so would have been an admission that the charges of the Democrats as to why he had run for Governor were true. Moreover, the Whig breach was not entirely healed, and to quit the post for which he had just been chosen would constitute a brazen breach of trust.

When General Taylor visited the Crittendens in Frankfort before the inauguration, Crittenden refused a Cabinet appointment but apparently had considerable influence in Taylor appointments. He was probably responsible for John M. Clayton becoming Secretary of State. Crittenden and Clayton were close friends, and the former hoped that the latter would be able to shape Taylor's policies so that harmony would prevail between Northern and Southern interests. Crittenden did not rely alone on Clayton's ability to manage Taylor but on two other close friends—both Kentuckians. The first of these was Albert Burnley who established a newspaper in

Washington, *The Republic*, to support the Taylor administration. The other was Orlando Brown, editor of the *Frankfort Commonwealth*, who became Commissioner of Indian Affairs. Both of these, like Clayton, had close contacts with Taylor, but none of them was successful in handling the old General.

It is a well-known fact that Taylor fell under the influence of Senator William H. Seward, and this might have led to secession. Southerners wanted a complete solution of all the controversial issues: the Texas boundary, a more stringent fugitive slave law, admission of California, etc. Taylor, on the other hand, was willing to go no further than to admit California and New Mexico, if the people of the latter desired it. A stalemate ensued and threats of Southern secession were current. All of this was most distressing to Crittenden, but he seems to have done nothing about it except to admonish his friends to uphold Taylor. At first he seemed to think that Taylor's plan was the right one, but, later, alarmed by growing threats of secession and of a Whig rupture, he came to favor a full solution of all points in the controversy. Why Crittenden did not bring personal pressure on Taylor, instead of relying on his friends, is a question the writer would like to answer but cannot. The extensive exchange of letters between Taylor and Crittenden apparently ceased before 1849.

It is not necessary here to relate how Clay returned to the Senate and introduced the famous Compromise measures of 1850 and how it was impossible to enact them until after Taylor's death. Fillmore's succession to the Presidency—July, 1850—was highly significant. It not only made possible the passage of the Compromise acts but it made for a reorganization of the Cabinet. Crittenden was made Attorney General and he was now able, by improved political conditions at home, to resign the governorship. He had been an unwilling governor and he felt like a caged lion while holding that office. Research does not reveal what his part was in facilitating the passage of the Compromise of 1850, but one can be certain that it was significant.¹³

Crittenden's second Attorney Generalship began on August 15, 1850. Fillmore's Cabinet was seemingly a harmonious one. There was little criticism of it: its chief task seems to have been to allay the recent violent sectionalism and to secure the

acceptance of the Compromise of 1850. A good example of this was the trip of Fillmore and most of his Cabinet from Washington to Dunkirk, New York. The journey was to celebrate the opening of a through railway from New York to Lake Erie. Members of the party spoke many times en route. The crowds always insisted on hearing Crittenden and he always responded with the same theme—a plea that he was to make earnestly and repeatedly for the rest of his life—to uphold and preserve the Union. While on this tour a foreign correspondent wrote the following interesting characterization of him:

“His frock-coat, with collar not irreproachably adjusted, and pockets gaping open to receive papers, the handkerchief with which he mops his brow, the tie of his cravat—in a word, the whole of his accoutrements denotes him a man of the west, and neither his physiognomy nor his language contradicts this indication. An eye quick, piercing, inquisitive, showing at once a rare discernment and an elevated spirit, and a mouth firmly set, which readily opens for irony, relieve a visage, which, without these merits, would have been ordinary enough. In looking at Mr. Crittenden, one is tempted to exclaim: here is a keen blade, and the epithet so often employed in America, and so expressive, *smart*, seems to have been intended to paint him.”¹⁴

Of all the opinions written by him while Attorney General only one attracted wide attention and criticism. In it he upheld the constitutionality of the recently enacted Fugitive Slave Law. It was indeed a harsh law and was declared void by several Northern states. Crittenden's opinion was doubtlessly motivated by the fear that if it were not upheld the South would not accept the rest of the Compromise of 1850 and secession would again be threatened. He was active in representing the government before the Supreme Court, but in no cases of especial constitutional significance. For a brief time during an illness of Daniel Webster, Crittenden served as Secretary of State and wrote a vigorous warning to France and Great Britain on the Cuban question. When Louis Kossuth, the Hungarian patriot, made his sensational visit to the United States in 1851, Crittenden played an important

part in attempting to prevent the country from deserting its traditional policy of isolation from European politics.

When Clay died in 1852—June 29—Crittenden was the most conspicuous of Whig leaders in Kentucky. Nevertheless, his leadership did not go entirely unchallenged and there were some who felt that the party had amply rewarded him for his services. The days of the Whig Party were numbered because of the slavery issue. Kentucky Whigs complied with Crittenden's instructions to support Fillmore in 1852, but General Scott received the Whig nomination on the fifty-third ballot. Rumor had it that Crittenden might have been the Whig compromise candidate of the convention. General Scott was badly defeated by Franklin Pierce. The former carried Kentucky by a mere 2,700 votes where the Democrats elected their first governor in years. Crittenden was soon to be a leader with only a remnant of a party.¹⁵

At the close of the Fillmore administration Crittenden was for a brief time in private life. Whig factionalism had prevented his election to the Senate in 1851, while he was still Attorney General, and for some reason he did not desire to fill out Clay's brief unexpired term in the Senate. Private life again gave him opportunity to carry on his law practice. Apparently in these years he made some fat fees establishing claims for clients to mining property in former Mexican territory. Although he did not make a business of criminal law he won a great reputation as a criminal lawyer. His success was due to the highly emotional and dramatic appeals that he made to juries in such cases. His most sensational trial was when he successfully defended Matt F. Ward in 1853, a murder trial that attracted the attention not only of Kentucky but also of the whole country.

In September, 1851, his life was saddened by the death of his second wife. Although Crittenden had numerous misfortunes in his life and occasionally had spells of melancholy, his temperament was essentially optimistic. In May, 1853, he was married a third time—to a well-to-do widow from St. Louis, Mrs. Elizabeth Ashley. If the romantic tone of his letters can be taken as a test, this third marriage was as happy as the two earlier ones.

In January, 1854, Crittenden was elected for the last time to the Senate, his term beginning December, 1855.¹⁶

Crittenden's last term in the Senate was by all odds the finest period of his life. It was then that he gave of his best to prevent the Union from being wrecked. Framers of the Compromise of 1850 had their work undone by the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854. Some Whig supporters considering Crittenden a presidential possibility, in 1856 questioned him as to his views on that Act. In general he was opposed to repealing the Missouri Compromise unless the North would agree to it. However, it was his consistent policy that each new state be permitted to determine its own status on slavery. He felt that the great interest of the country required an avoidance of the slavery question as far as it was humanly possible. He would stand by any compromise, even though not entirely just, rather than hazard continued agitation.

It was an unruly Congress to which he returned in December, 1855, after an absence of seven years from the Senate. "Bleeding Kansas" was the disturbing issue. His role was to try to pacify the troubled scene and to bring peace and a just solution of the Kansas question. He was the oldest member of the Senate as to seniority, and, although usually mild and courteous, he, on occasion, could display a flashing eye and stern bearing in attempting to restore decorum in the Senate. One finds the following contemporary and revealing description of him:

"A man of medium height, and rather spare figure, his face is strongly marked, years and thoughtful experience completing the original outlines of nature. He is a much more youthful person than we imagined. He is now about seventy years of age, but does not look it. His form is erect and spare, well formed and vigorous, his dark grey eyes gleam vividly beneath heavy grey eyebrows, and are canopied by long lashes; his nose is aquiline; his mouth, and all his features are large; lips, firmly set; chin, square; forehead, broad, high, and massive; head, long, splendidly developed, covered with grey, but not white, and his complexion is dark"¹⁷

Desirous of a fair settlement of the situation in Kansas, Crittenden introduced a bill early in 1856 providing for sending

General Scott to Kansas to see that a fair election be held. White House obstruction prevented its passage. In May, 1856, while younger Senators looked on, Crittenden interfered in the Sumner-Brooks episode, and probably prevented Sumner from being beaten to death. Although the Toombs Bill of 1856 did not exactly suit him, he warmly supported it as a step to bring peace to Kansas. Never in his long public career did he win more praise or censure than in his fight against admitting Kansas under the Lecompton constitution. Against the bill he made one of the great speeches of his life, and it is possible that if there had been a presidential election in that year, he might have ridden the wave of his great popularity into office. Crittenden's influence at the time is interestingly illustrated by the fact that the Kentuckian's endorsement of Douglas in the Illinois senatorial election of 1858 probably caused Lincoln's defeat. At least Lincoln felt that it did.

The pathetic disintegration of the Whig Party in the 1850's left, or almost left, Crittenden without a party. For a time he, as was the case with many Whigs in Kentucky and elsewhere, took refuge in the Know-Nothing or American Party. This is not as surprising as it might seem. He could not, of course, join the newly formed Republican Party. To affiliate with the Democrats, a party that he had fought for years, was quite out of the question. Crittenden might not have subscribed to all Know-Nothing principles, but Whigs had long had an anti-foreign bias—they believed in high protection and were strongly nationalistic. The short-lived American Party in Kentucky was in reality nothing more than the old Whig Party organization with a new name. The slavery issue broke up the Know-Nothing Party, but it did run Fillmore for President in 1856, and in that futile campaign Crittenden took an active part.

From 1858 to 1860 he tried to organize a party of conservative and responsible men from all sections who would compromise the vexatious slavery and territorial questions. His efforts culminated in the formation of the Constitutional Union Party of 1860. As we know, this was a vain hope. No better illustration can be given of the political trend of the times than that in Kentucky. The Democrats carried the State by 6,000 in 1856, and in January, 1857, they elected their first Sena-

tor in years. In the North the Republicans were growing with startling rapidity.¹⁸

Although Crittenden failed to bring peace to Kansas and to calm the ugly sectional clash that was soon to bring on the Civil War, he did not cease to try. In numerous speeches, in and out of Congress, his theme was the same: compromise sectional differences and preserve the Union. It seemed virtually impossible to keep slavery contention out of Congress. The discussion of almost every subject brought up the question. Thus the Kentuckian had full opportunity to put to use his persuasive powers and conciliatory spirit. Again and again he pleaded with angry Senators for moderation.

He was especially anxious to relieve Southern fears relative to the protection of slave property in the territories. He subscribed to the principle of the Dred Scott Decision, but he felt, in January, 1860, when Jefferson Davis introduced his resolutions, that Southerners were unduly alarmed over slavery in the territories. Moreover, federal interposition to protect slavery was unlikely because there was no further territory to which slavery might go. At the same time that he was trying to calm Southerners he made his attitude clear toward the Republicans. He asked them why their party should be perpetuated after it had accomplished the only object it had been organized to accomplish—that of preventing the further extension of slavery? Was their purpose to enjoy political power? He rebuked them sharply by declaring that they would have to do it by using their familiar anti-slavery tactics. Slavery, Crittenden felt, would gradually disappear if extremists on both sides would cease to agitate the matter. To stop the illegal slave trade, he advocated the return of captured slaves and a provision for their safety and security in Africa at federal expense.

In the last months of 1859 and early 1860 he was conducting a considerable correspondence with Whigs and Americans, trying to organize them into a third party. A National Union Executive Committee was formed with Crittenden as chairman. It was first composed of members of Congress and journalists from various sections. Their hope was to attract supporters among conservatives from both Democrats and Republicans in addition to Whigs and Americans. In short, all

who were deeply alarmed over the possible dissolution of the Union were their objectives. They tried to interest men as far apart in their views as Alexander H. Stephens and Abraham Lincoln.

The Union Convention met in Baltimore on May 9, 1860, with every state represented except Oregon. There was a noticeable absence of young men in the gathering. The delegates were representative of a generation that was losing power and was fearful of the trend of events. Crittenden was the convention's keynoter and his theme was summed up in the party's platform, "The Union, the Constitution, and the Laws." He was given enthusiastic ovation, but refused to become the party's candidate despite insistent demands from many quarters. Why did he refuse? The best answer seems that it was because of his age and declining vigor. He was nearing seventy-three and his thoughts were turning to retirement from political life. Furthermore, he was discouraged over the alarming bitterness and the lack of idealism in politics. He was apparently responsible for John Bell's nomination, which failed to effect a hearty response in some quarters. One cannot help feeling that had Crittenden been the nominee results would have been more favorable. In the campaign he was flooded with requests to speak in many places, but his physical strength would not permit it. His speeches were confined mostly to Kentucky and Tennessee. It was the last presidential campaign in which he participated.¹⁹

Following Lincoln's election, the Southern states turned to secession. Crittenden rejected the Buchanan idea that nothing could be done to prevent it. His distress over it, as Congress convened in December, 1860, prompted him to do something to avert it. His correspondence indicates that the country expected him to do something. Others suggested compromise measures, but many of their features were included in the Crittenden Compromise introduced in the Senate on December 18th.

Its lengthy provisions, briefly summarized, provided for: extending the Missouri Compromise Line to California; federal protection for all slave property south of that line; Congress was forbidden to abolish slavery on federal property in any slave state or in the District of Columbia without the consent

of Maryland; government officials were guaranteed the right to bring slaves to Washington; Congress could not interfere with the inter-state slave trade; federal compensation for fugitive slaves rescued by anti-slavery groups; the federal government authorized to sue counties where such rescues took place; there were to be no future amendments of the Constitution which would affect any of the clauses of that document which dealt with slavery; strict enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law; repeal of personal liberty laws of the states; equal fees to judges whether detaining or freeing a fugitive; marshals were forbidden to summon a posse, except in cases of actual resistance; and effective suppression of the African slave trade. In short, the measure covered almost all Southern grievances and it was hoped that it would stop secession.

In support of his proposals, Crittenden made one of his truly great speeches, and had his compromise been accepted it would rank with those of Clay and Webster in 1850. Had Northerners comprehended, as he did, that the South was not bluffing, his program would have been given more serious consideration. It failed to pass the Committee of Thirteen especially appointed for its consideration. Responsibility for its failure rests clearly on Republican members. When it appeared impossible of securing congressional approval of his measures, Crittenden then tried to have them referred to the people for a vote, but in that he again failed. There are good reasons for believing that had it been submitted to a popular vote it would have been approved. He was virtually swamped with petitions, particularly from the North, praying for a speedy enactment of his proposals. These petitions often signed by thousands were introduced into the Senate by Crittenden, much to the irritation of Republicans.

The aged Kentucky Senator was not entirely unrewarded for his efforts. Hundreds of persons wrote him letters of commendation and the Kentucky Legislature authorized him to remain in Washington beyond the expiration of his term of office as long as there remained any hope for his compromise. He continued the struggle until the bitter end of the session on March 1st, but Republican resistance to any compromise remained adamant.²⁰

Retirement for the seventy-four-year-old Crittenden was impossible. His best efforts were now given to averting the serious possibility of Kentucky's seceding. In late March he made a most persuasive speech to the Legislature in which he argued that Kentucky had everything to gain by remaining in the Union. If he was not the conceiver, he at least gave wide popularity to the prevailing notion in the State that there was a real difference between loyalty to the Union and loyalty to the Black Republican administration. In the spring of 1861 he likewise helped to obtain wide acceptance of the notion that a policy of neutrality and armed resistance should prevail. In May he was one of the conferees in Frankfort who rejected secession and adopted a policy of neutrality and armed resistance, which the State maintained for a time. He also enjoyed the rather empty honor of presiding over the futile Border State Convention which met in Frankfort in late May.

In the crisis which the State was in, people expected him to perform miracles, even to the point of preventing war. Miracles he could not perform, but he lent his hand and voice in every conceivable way to keep the State in the Union. In the secret distribution of the Lincoln guns he had an active part. Pressure was put upon him to run for Congress, and despite advanced age and declining health he agreed to advance the Union cause. His active campaign resulted in a sweeping victory over his secessionist opponent.

The venerable statesman was soon hurrying off to attend the special session of Congress. Numerous Kentuckians thought by sending him to Congress that he might still be able to check the war. He had no such expectations, but did hope to confine the war to the single objective of restoring the Union. His well-known resolutions embodying that idea passed Congress by huge majorities in late July. However, that high resolve was soon to be superseded by movements sponsored by Radical Republicans to free slaves in the District of Columbia, slaves used by the South in war work and by the Confiscation Acts of 1861-62. Against all such actions Crittenden spoke out vigorously. Lincoln's plan of compensated emancipation in the border slave states was rejected by him. His idea was that all such moves were unconstitutional since Congress had no authority to interfere with slavery in the states. All his pro-

tests were in vain. He was struggling against the inevitable forces turned loose by civil war, and, like all those who try to maintain the *status quo*, he was to suffer defeat, but it is to his eternal credit that he went down fighting for what he thought was just.

Likewise, he condemned both conscription and the enlistment of Negro troops. In his estimation, conscription was necessary because the war was now being fought for the Negro and not to save the Union. In fact, his whole term in the House was largely one of protest. In addition to those things just mentioned, he took the Lincoln administration to task in 1861 for: establishing camps; recruiting troops; depositing arms; destruction of salt works; and harboring, by federal troops, escaped slaves in Kentucky. Despite his protests he wanted the war vigorously prosecuted so that it could be ended as soon as possible. Then he desired to make a lenient peace restoring the Union as it had been prior to the outbreak of hostilities.

But he was not to see the close of the war he had struggled so hard to avert. In the light of the kind of peace imposed on the defeated South it is well that he did not. In the midst of a campaign for re-election to Congress the seventy-six year old statesman died, after a brief illness, on July 26, 1863.²¹

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