Hartford 12th May 1858

My dear Sir

I was in New York on the 30th ult. and called on that and the succeeding day at the office of the Ex Post, but you were absent from the city. On my return home, I rec'd yours of the 24th ult. which came during my absence. I have since been afflicted with a cold which has prevented me from using my eyes.

Of Benton's moral organization I am not competent to form a correct opinion. A frontiersman in his youth – a soldier – a politician in Washington for forty years – he was addicted to none of the debasing vices that prevailed among his associates – his integrity was never questioned – he was a good father, husband, brother and friend – was not sordid nor mean – was continent, bold & truthful. Yet his best friends knew he had great weaknesses.

I do not think he possessed great reflective powers, but he had a retentive memory,

a strong will, great self-reliance, patriotic impulses and a fearless determination to do what he believed to be right. Some of these points degenerated into weakness — making him arrogant, egotistical, and sometimes the dupe of designing flatterers.

It has always seemed to me that it would have been well for Benton, if he had been thrown out of public life for four or five years, some twenty years ago. Retirement and exclusion would have been a good school for him, and mellowed and improved his really great traits. He never had the benefits of adversity and severe disappointment when he could have profited by them, and though in old age, when disappointments overtook him he bore his reverses with the fortitude of a hero, it was not grand with the calm and philosophic resignation of a Christian.

The struggles of the last half-dozen years in Missouri have, on the whole, done him little credit — his course in the campaigns

of 1856 was unworthy of him, and his last hours will not elevate him in the estimation of his countrymen.

His strong will enabled him to hold out to complete the many & voluminous works on which he was engaged, for that was the legacy to bequeath his children, to whom he was fondly attached, and for whom he had not otherwise provided. This was the absorbing element with him at the last. He had more confidence in the goodness of God to himself - than that of the world to his children. It was Christian.

What is to be the result of the existing condition of things at Washington and in the country? The position of men and parties is very materially changed since I last saw you. While I have confidence that political problems will ultimately work out their own solution, some effort to give them a right direction an office timely. I want to get your views and opinions on these matters. The Administration is weak, and has folly suffered to keep itself so.

but have the differing elements of the opposition sufficient sagacity and pliability to take advantage of the opportunities that are presented them?

How in regard to Douglas, Walker, Forney, Wise & others? My leaning are strongly toward the democratic element, as the most effective means of breaking down the nigger organization, which, in the name of democracy, is practising centralism. Cast them out of place the administration party would soon cease to exist, but power, patronage and discipline make them formidable — doubly so, if their opponents are divided.

In fighting the battle of freedom, we have thus far occupied rather a negative position — resisting aggressions, but the period is approaching when positive action will be necessary. We have a humanitarian and a political element resisting sectional slavery exactions. The former has little regard for constitutional restrictions and limitations,

while they are the controlling influence with the latter. The humanitarians would have the central government exercise absolute power to carry out their views, while the political friends of freedom would have the federal government abstain from the exercise of any power not granted by the constitution.

We are to resist the errors and usurpations of the Executive, the judiciary and congress on political rather than humanitarian grounds. It is not a mere personal preference, but fundamental, political and constitutional principles that actuate us. Our political rights are guaranteed by our constitutions, state & national – not only in the powers granted but those which are reserved. Our security is in them – not in the fallable men who for the time being constitute and carry judgement of the Executive or the courts. Mr Seward, for instance, may be very earnest and sincere in his opposition to slavery, as a great moral and social evil, and if President might exert himself against it; but he is none the less a centralist on that

and all other questions. The tendency and influence of his administration would be favorable to the cause of freedom, but in a way that might injure that cause by erroneous political action, while on all other subjects, he would centralize and go counter to state-rights.

The old federal and whig idea that the Supreme Court is the citadel of political rights, that its decisions are infallible and that its many adjudications on the sovereignty of the states must be dispelled. In short, we must keep constantly in view that ours is a *federation* not a *consolidated* government.

But a large portion of the opposition have been nurtured in the consolidation school, though the events of the last few years have greatly modified their views. We are now getting to the point, when by proper effort the opposition can be made to occupy the true state-rights, strict construction ground. When this is done slavery will cease to be national & become strictly local.

I have been exceedingly gratified with the development of the last six months and the secession of Walker, Stanton, Douglas, Fering, Wise &c, but there is an obvious jealousy & distrust of them on the part of some.

What is to be the future of this new element? It cannot again be reunited to the administration party in cordial fellowship — as vain attempt to reunite broken glass. If it blends and unites with the Republicans it will infuse a more democratic and state rights feeling into it, and greatly strengthen the whole. If it is repelled and occupies distinct ground it will detach many from both the republicans and administration parties, provided it conducts wisely.

I am wholly in the dark on these matters, and was in hopes to have seen you and got enlightened. If you can & have leisure to give me a little instruction you will greatly oblige me. I do not suppose any distinctive line of policy

is yet marked out, or indicated. Some things show that Seward found intend to be vigilant, but it seems to me they will be unavailing. Honor be their work. I shall be glad to hear from you and am truly thy

Gideon Welles

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