

Message of New York City Mayor Fernando Wood Supporting Secession

As a Congressman in the 1840s, Fernando Wood was a strong supporter of slavery and the South. He continued his support of the South when he became Mayor of New York City in the 1850s. On January 8, 1861, *The New York Times* published the transcript of Mayor Wood's annual report to the city's Common Council. In this message, Wood spoke about the city's options as the United States federal union appeared to be dissolving. An unedited version of the text is available in *The New York Times* on microfilm for that date on page 2. *The New York Times'* editorial response is on page 4.

We are entering upon the public duties of the year under circumstances as unprecedented as they are gloomy and painful to contemplate. The great trading and producing interests of not only the City of New York, but of the entire country are prostrated by a momentary crisis.

It would seem that a dissolution of the Federal Union is inevitable. Having been formed originally upon a basis of general and mutual protection, but separate local independence - each State reserving the entire and absolute control of its own domestic affairs, it is evidently impossible to keep them together longer than they deem themselves fairly treated by each other, or longer than the interests, honor and fraternity of the people of the several States are satisfied. It cannot be preserved by coercion or held together by force. A resort to this last dreadful alternative would of itself destroy not only the Government, but the lives and property of the people.

With our aggrieved brethren of the Slave States we have friendly relations and a common sympathy. We have not participated in the warfare upon their constitutional rights or their domestic institutions. While other portions of our State have unfortunately been imbued with the fanatical spirit, the City of New York has unfalteringly preserved the integrity of its principles in adherence to the compromises of the Constitution. Our ships have penetrated to every clime, and so have New York capital, energy and enterprise found their way to every State. New York should endeavor to preserve a continuance of uninterrupted intercourse with every section.

New York may have more cause of apprehension from the aggressive legislation of our own State than from external dangers. No candid mind can fail to perceive the extent of the usurpations that have been made on the municipal rights and civil liberties of New York.

I claim for the City the distinction of a municipal corporation, self-existing and sustained by its own inherent and proper vigor. As a free City, with but a nominal duty on imports, her local government could be supported without taxation upon her people. In this she would have the whole and united support of the Southern States as well as of all other States to whose interests and rights under the Constitution she has always been true. If the Confederacy is broken up the Government is dissolved, and it behooves every distinct community as well as every individual to take care of themselves.

When disunion has become a fixed and certain fact, why may not New York disrupt the bands which bind her to a corrupt and venal master. New York, as a *Free City*, may shed the only light and hope for a future reconstruction of our once blessed Confederacy.

Questions

1. What crisis is facing New York City and the United States in January, 1861?
2. Why does Mayor Wood believe this crisis cannot be prevented?
3. What path does Mayor Wood recommend for New York City? Why does he make this recommendation?
4. In your opinion, what would have happened to New York City and the United States if the city had tried to follow this course of action? Explain.