

Nominating the first African American for vice president, 1880

Introduction

Born enslaved in 1841, Blanche Kelso Bruce was the first African American to be elected to a full term in the US Senate. During his term as a senator from Mississippi (1875–1881), he advocated the rights of African Americans and other minorities, including American Indians and Chinese immigrants.

In this draft of a circular letter to be published in newspapers, James Milton Turner, chairman of the Negro National Republican Committee, proposes nominating Bruce as the vice presidential candidate on the Republican ticket in 1880. Turner cites Bruce's popularity with both Democrats and Republicans and applauds the senator's commitment to the Republican cause:

You should support him, not because he is a negro gentleman, but because his record is consistent. For years he has been the only Republican Senator from the Southern section where the party has lost control, and hundreds of thousands of citizens are on the verge of disfranchisement. . . . The nomination of Mr Bruce would culminate the idea of Horace Greely, of Thaddeus Stevens, of Abraham Lincoln, of Chas Sumner, of Ulysses Grant, of Jas G. Blaine, of Jno Sherman, and indeed of the great Republican party and relieve the nation at once of the question of caste in American politics.

Although Bruce did not receive the nomination, he did receive eight votes at the Republican Party's convention in Chicago.

Excerpt

You should support him, not because he is a negro gentleman, but because his record is consistent. For years he has been the only Republican Senator from the Southern section where the party has lost control, and hundreds of thousands of citizens are on the verge of disfranchisement who occupies his place without question, and that his official conduct is without reproach, and approved by all parties, while his political vote has been invariably cast with the Republican party is a fact. . . .

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Questions for Discussion

Read the introduction, examine the document, and study the transcript. Then apply your knowledge of American history as well as evidence from the document to answer the following questions.

1. Why did Turner believe that Bruce should be nominated? Cite specific passages from the text.
2. How did Bruce demonstrate that he was a loyal Republican? Quote from the text to support your answer.
3. Who are the politicians mentioned by Turner? Why are they referenced?
4. Put the phrase “the way to resume is to resume” into your own words.

Transcript

Draft of a circular letter by J. Milton Turner to Republican delegates at the National Convention, May 20, 1880.

Circular Letter

Headquarters of Negro National Republican Committee

No. 925 – 18th street N.W. Washington D.C.

May 20, 1880.

Pursuant to instruction of the National Executive Committee of Republicans engaged in promoting the nomination of Hon. B. K. Bruce U.S.S. at Chicago for the Vice Presidency of the United States the following address is issued to the Republican party and particularly to the delegates to assemble at Chicago next month:

In presenting the name of Mr Bruce for the Vice Presidency we are confident that his nomination will bring strength and ~~agreement~~ success to the party. You should support him, not because he is a negro gentleman, but because his record is consistent. For years he has been the only Republican Senator from the Southern section where the party has lost control, and hundreds of thousands of citizens are on the verge of disfranchisement who occupies his place without question, and that his official conduct is without reproach, and approved by all parties, while his political vote has been invariably cast with the Republican party is a fact.

His nomination would raise the issue whether or not it is possible for the Democratic party to lay down the unconstitutional premise, year after year, that ~~minorities~~ minorities can

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compel majorities in eleven States, forming an entire section of the Union. His nomination would give new life and vigor to 780 000 Republican voters in the Southern section.

It would give enthusiasm to the balance of power of 25 000 Republican voters in the State of Ohio; and to a similarly significant Republican element in the pivotal state of New York, and in the States of Indiana, New Jersey, Connecticut and so on.

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This we say to the party and the Nation in behalf of 5,000,000 Americans whose loyalty was all the Nation had to depend on at the South, and whose unrequited toil has redeemed the lagoons and builded cities in the waste places, while they have ramified the base of a substantial commerce. In the language of Backminister they have shown that “The highest exercise of charity, is charity toward the uncharitable.”

This powerful element has come to believe that unless it will assert itself it is unworthy the solicitude of the american people.

J. Milton Turner
Chairman

W St Bell
Secretary

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Images

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Draft of circular letter from J. Milton Turner to Republican delegates, Washington, DC, May 20, 1880, p. 1
 (Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC09400.133)

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