John Holliday,  
“Conservatists” 

(Address Delivered  
at the Philalethean Society Exhibition,  
March 25, 1863) 

Excerpts from the digitized text in the Hanover Historical Review.

John Halliday was a junior at Hanover College when he delivered this address. As Mark A. Plozay writes (in 1999), “The Civil War greatly affected the lives of many Hanover students. While many enlisted in military service, those who stayed behind found themselves among the combatants in a battle of ideas that may have been as important, at least psychologically, as the military aspect of the conflict. Despite the departure of a large percentage of upperclassmen, many fledgling Hanover College traditions not only continued to exist, thanks to the efforts of first and second-year students, but also served to unify the campus community during a time of disunity. One such tradition, the literary society, gave the students of Hanover the opportunity to assemble together and bring the tremendous events occurring around them into their small college.”

(NB: Paragraph numbers apply to this excerpt, not the original source, and the text has been minimally edited – to add paragraph breaks, for instance. )

{1} Ever since the foundation of all systems of republican government there have been men who discountenanced all acts and measures of the government under which they lived. Surveying the past, we find that there has never been a war in a Republic which all the people supported. No matter for what purpose that war was waged or what end it had in view, there were always some who were opposed to it. . . .

{2} Onward on it went until we see in the halls of Congress fierce and deep quarrels over slavery. Slave holders standing up and defying the power of the North. A prominent northern man attacked in a cowardly manner knocked down and beaten by a southern bully in the Senate of the U.S. No northerners able to hovel safely in the South without uttering great praises for the peculiar institution. . . . Men shot down for the least offenses. Lynch law predominant and worst of all prices offered for the heads of men in the North who were conscientiously opposed to slavery. It is true that a small party in the North proclaimed a crusade against slavery. But the majority of the people discountenanced it and resolved to let the sacred institution alone.
At length the conspiracy was ripe. . . . Silently the North listened to the threats of secession in case Abraham Lincoln was elected. . . . Time passed on. Lincoln was elected and in less than thirty days after the citizens of South Carolina assembled in mock convention passed on ordinance of secession and joyfully withdrew from the confederation of states. Her example was immediately followed by all the Gulf states even down to good for nothing Florida which had been admitted into the Union merely as an act of courtesy. . . .

Then came the great day of Conservatism. From all over the South there came a demoniac yell "peaceable secession." And from the broad prairies of the West and the fertile lands of the East. From New England's rockbound coast to California's golden shore, there came an echoing shriek from the Conservative element "No Coercion No Coercion." The weak imbecile President James Buchanan stood still not knowing which side to join. Frightened by the noise and howls of both parties he resolved to follow his friend as far as possible. So he became a conservativist and willingly obeyed the wish of the motto of his Southern brethren "Let us alone"

Northern democratic secession newspapers were filled with articles . . . abusing the President and recommending a cessation of hostilities. Yet nothing was done to them. Time passed on, bringing alternate victory and defeat to the armies of the Union. Even after a defeat, the Conservatists would creep out of their holes like owls in the day time and rejoice over the victory of the rebels. But if we gained a battle, what an awful loss of life there was! how much it had cost! and how many brave men had fallen! . . . For a time when the cause of freedom was bright, the Conservatists were gloomy and despairing, but their spirits rose as soon as our armies were driven back by the rebels.

Conservatists are composed of conservative conservatists, neutral conservatists, and radical conservatists. As in every other party and faction, the women constitute the great majority of the radicals. Like their sister traitors of the sunny South they have an overwhelming contempt for the Yankee and an indescribable hatred of Lincoln and his "hirelings." Not daring to go as far as the female rebels (who often request the heart of a Yankee as a sign of true love, or his skull as a drinking cup . . . as an emblem of eternal constancy), they content themselves with turning half famished soldiers away from their doors unfed, nursing sick and wounded rebels, washing their dirty feet, and combing their lousy heads, praising the Southern aristocracy (to which of course they belong) and abusing all who support the Administration. Some . . . have even gone so far as to spit at Union soldiers and if accidentally they touched one they would brush the spot as if to rub off such foul contamination. . . .

Is it at all likely that, if [the Conservatists] were loyal men, they would be continually trying to overthrow the power of the President, break up our armies and cast all possible obstacles in the way of success? Is such the course of true patriots? . . . They tell us that by pursuing a radical policy the Administration can only prolong the war indefinitely. But by adopting the conservative plan, the South will immediately come back. They do not remember that the South has again and again expressed her determination never to come back. Had a radical policy been adopted at first. Had we emulated the example of the South in silencing every one who spoke against the
government. at this day there would be few traitors in the North. There would never have been
the stain upon the fair fame of the great American army that now there are more than one
hundred thousand deserters. Conservatism has nearly proved the ruin of the government. if now
we adopted a conservative policy we could not possibly hope to succeed. The time for
compromise and moral suasion has passed away, and the time for hard blows and decisive battles
has come. It is now time that Conservatism with all its accompanying train of evils was laid aside
and Radicalism adopted as a "new base of operations."