

Scandal

Scandal loomed over James Hammond's political career in the late 1850s, particularly following his unexpected nomination to fill a vacant U.S. Senate seat in 1857.

Hammond, despite facing a series of personal and political challenges, had spent years embroiled in controversy. His previous electoral losses in 1840 and 1842, combined with his involvement in multiple scandals, made his rise to political prominence highly contentious. One of the most damaging aspects of his personal life was his affair with his nieces, which began in 1841 and lasted for two years, during which Hammond engaged in inappropriate sexual conduct with all four girls. He justified his actions in his personal diaries, blaming his irresistible charm and the affection he believed the girls felt for him, portraying himself as a victim of circumstances rather than a perpetrator of wrongdoing.

Hammond's actions came to a head in 1843 when he was confronted by one of the nieces, Catherine, forcing him to end the affair. This personal crisis was compounded when a poorly worded communication with their father, Wade Hampton, made the scandal public. By 1844, whispers of the affair had grown louder within political circles, leading to a concerted effort to derail Hammond's bid for the Senate. Despite his initial political support, the rumors and his tarnished reputation ultimately led to his defeat in the Senate race, with his career being described as "annihilated forever" by his critics. The scandal had a lasting effect on Hammond's reputation, casting a shadow over his future ambitions in public office.

While his personal life remained mired in scandal, Hammond's political career was far from over. In 1850, his long-term illicit relationship with an enslaved woman, Sally Johnson, became public knowledge, adding another layer of personal disgrace. His wife, Catherine, left him, compounding his personal and familial troubles.

Nevertheless, by 1857, the political tide had shifted in his favor, and he was appointed

to the Senate once more, this time amidst the charged atmosphere of secessionist rhetoric and the national debate over slavery. As tensions surrounding the issue of slavery escalated, Hammond became more vocal in his defense of the institution, delivering a speech in which he declared “cotton is king.” This speech, which championed the economic and political power of slavery, strengthened his position among Southern politicians, earning him admiration in his home state of South Carolina.

Hammond’s speech in the Senate was a key moment in his career, as it solidified his ideological stance as a defender of slavery. The declaration that “cotton is king” was meant to assert the South’s economic dominance and its perceived invulnerability, based on the belief that Northern aggression would be deterred by the South’s control over the cotton trade. Hammond’s views resonated with Southern leaders who saw cotton as an economic powerhouse, believing that the Southern economy’s reliance on slave labor would safeguard them from Northern influence. However, this belief in the power of slavery would ultimately contribute to the deepening divisions between the North and South, and, as history would show, the South's reliance on cotton would not be enough to prevent the Civil War. Hammond’s political career, though marked by scandal and personal failings, aligned him with the rising secessionist sentiments, and his staunch defense of slavery further entrenched him in the political struggles of the time.

The escalation of tensions between the North and South, spurred by figures like Hammond, signified the widening chasm that would soon lead to the outbreak of the Civil War. Hammond's personal and political journey serves as a microcosm of the South's growing resistance to abolitionist movements and the moral reckoning that was looming over the nation. His complex legacy, shaped by scandal and the political ideologies of his time, highlights the deeply entrenched beliefs that fueled the conflict. Despite the controversies surrounding him, Hammond’s role in the political climate of the South reflected the increasing polarization and the eventual division of the United States along ideological and moral lines.