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VIRGINIA PARTY POLITICS AND TEXAS ANNEXATION

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The Faculty of the Department of History  
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In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

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by

Margaret C. Martin

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VIRGINIA PARTY POLITICS AND TEXAS ANNEXATION

## Introduction

From 1843 to 1846, the question of the annexation of Texas, a slave holding state more than four times as large as Virginia, threatened to divide the nation along sectional lines.<sup>1</sup> President John Tyler pursued Texas as a means to establish a popular base of support that would re-elect him in 1844. Tyler hoped that annexation would garner voters and either make the Southern controlled Democratic party accept him or help catalyze a third party with him at the helm. Tyler hoped that politicians would not respond along traditional party lines. But, as the annexation debate gained momentum, politicians united behind their parties to support or oppose the movement. The strategy of refusing to address the question of slavery as the central point of contention appealed to both parties when they framed the question of the annexation of Texas. During the debate over Texas annexation, Southern politicians continued to focus on party rhetoric and issues other than slavery raised by expansion in order to limit debate over slavery on the national level.

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<sup>1</sup>Frank L. Owsley, "The Pattern of Migration and Settlement in the Southern Frontier," in The South: Old and New Frontiers, ed. Harriet C. Owsley (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1969), p. 15. Texas contains 175, 587, 840 acres while Virginia has 39, 262, 720 acres.

Because of its link to slavery, annexation was a good candidate to create discord between sections and between political parties.<sup>2</sup> Politicians faced the dilemma of maintaining cross-sectional party appeal without completely alienating themselves from their own sections. Through the end of 1845, ideological divisions between Whigs and Democrats continued to govern Southern political behavior.<sup>3</sup> As the beliefs of the two parties were different to begin with, it naturally followed that they had different plans for keeping the debate from becoming too sectional and for approaching annexation in a manner consistent with their party ideology.

Both Virginia Whigs and Democrats promoted the idea that the expansion of slavery need not be a concern for their respective Northern allies, but again, each took a slightly different approach. Because they supported annexation, Democrats had to persuade Northern allies that the issue was not about slavery or southern power, but rather in the interest of the Union as a whole. They asserted that Texas, "As an integral party of the Union [will] greatly enhance the value of its exports, and at the same time afford a most valuable market for the mechanical and agricultural production of the North and West."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Frederick Merk, Manifest Destiny and Mission in American History (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963), p. 41.

<sup>3</sup>David M. Dunning, The Southern Perception of the Trans-Mississippi West, 1845-1853 (University of Illinois, Ph.D. Dissertation, 1995), p. ix.

<sup>4</sup>Richmond Enquirer, 27 December 1844.

The Whigs opposing annexation did not have to placate their northern wing, but rather had to assure southern members that their best interests lay in refusing Texas. Ultimately, the southern Whigs insisted

that we have not taken ground against the future and ultimate acquisition of this country to the United States. ...What we have contended for was, that Texas should not be *instantly* annexed, in violation of national faith, and our treaty stipulations with Mexico, before the people of the U. States had had time to reflect, and to accomplish speculative ends of land mongers and political aspirants.<sup>5</sup>

Ideally, advocating gradual annexation allowed the question to remain open-ended, thereby retaining both northern and southern support.

During the life of the second party system, the debate over slavery eventually replaced economic concerns and Henry Clay's American System as the key political issue. The Texas issue crowded out economic discussions in newspapers for the first time in 1844 and politicians tried to relegate slavery to the secondary tier of importance.<sup>6</sup> This strategy was mostly successful regarding Texas, which none the less shows the potential of slavery to undermine national party unity.

An examination of the newspaper debate on the issue in one southern city, Richmond, Virginia, reveals that the South was not unanimous in its support for annexation and that partisan divisions influenced voting on the issue. Expansion was not

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<sup>5</sup>Richmond Whig, 12 April 1844.

<sup>6</sup>William J. Cooper, *The South and the Politics of Slavery, 1828-1856* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State Press, 1978), p. 195.

viewed strictly in terms of preservation of slavery by the South. The debate in Richmond Enquirer and Richmond Whig during the push for annexation illustrates the shift in the political arena from economic matters and the role of the government to the politics of slavery because no matter how hard politicians tried, Texas attracted attention as a slavery related issue. The newspapers show Texas annexation as a critical test case in the struggle to contain sectional conflict within traditional political channels.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>Lex Renda, "Retrospective Voting and the Presidential election of 1844: The Texas Issue Revisited." Presidential Studies Quarterly XXIV(Fall 1994), p. 838.

## Chapter I

### John Tyler and The Party System

The annexation of Texas is often seen as evidence of the sectional conflict that was a major cause of the Civil War. Although slavery clearly influenced the tactics of Southern politicians, the larger strategy of party politics attempted to keep the "peculiar institution" a secondary issue. Although slavery did enter the debate over annexation, it did not produce the sharp sectional divisions between slave and non-slave states that emerged in the 1850s.<sup>8</sup>

Party conflict, not sectional conflict, characterized United States history from roughly the 1820s through 1850. The Age of Jackson precipitated the growth of two national, cross-sectional parties, the Democrats and the Whigs. Democratic and Whig politicians forged distinct ideologies and preserved cross-sectional alliances by concentrating on issues like the tariff, National Bank, internal improvements, and defining the role of the federal government. For example, the Democratic party regularly opposed the bank and concluded that, "It is sufficient to say of a National Bank, that it has no warrant in the

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<sup>8</sup>Dunning, Southern Perception, p. 1.

Constitution itself."<sup>9</sup> Democrats also generally opposed protective tariffs. They asserted that the idea that "high duties make low prices" was a Whig fallacy.<sup>10</sup> Whigs, on the other hand, sought to resurrect the National Bank. Opposed to the expansion of presidential power, Whigs declared themselves "united in introducing a thorough reform, in cutting down Executive power and patronage, in turning out faithless officeholders, in putting a stop to the plunder of the Public."<sup>11</sup>

In concentrating on issues seemingly unrelated to slavery, the parties hoped to bury it as a national concern. Southern antebellum politicians thus tried to address political events in a national framework. The Democratic party defended states' rights and strict construction of the Constitution. Democrats were proponents of a small, well-run government and a free play of economic forces. But the Whigs were Madisonian nationalists and proponents of broad construction. They favored distribution of federal funds for internal improvement, public education, and the American system, and could be induced to support a protective tariff as long as their region stood to profit.<sup>12</sup> Both parties concurred that the expansion of the United States drew attention to the issue of slavery.

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<sup>9</sup>Richmond Enquirer, 16 April 1841.

<sup>10</sup>Richmond Enquirer, 12 April 1844.

<sup>11</sup>Richmond Whig, 12 February 1841 and 24 February 1841.

<sup>12</sup>William G. Shade, Democratizing the Old Dominion, Virginia and the Second Party System, 1824-1861 (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1996), pp. 228, 245, 248-249; Joel Silbey, The Shrine of Party, Congressional Voting behavior, 1841-1852 (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1967), pp. 27-28.

The two party system was strong in Virginia. While the voting population was evenly distributed between the Democrats and Whigs, the Democratic party usually controlled the legislature.<sup>13</sup> Partisanship dominated the assembly from the mid-1830s through the 1840s when the two parties put forth competing agendas and defined contested issues differently. Virginia politicians acted much like politicians in other states. In the assembly, major national issues defined the differences between the parties. Whigs supported measures to spend tax revenue, while Democrats were likely to advocate retrenchment and reform.<sup>14</sup>

Southern politicians defended slavery when the issue emerged, but party informed how they defended it.<sup>15</sup> Democrats usually accepted the positive good argument for defending slavery while Whigs were likely to support conditional emancipation at some future point.<sup>16</sup> More often than not, debate over the peculiar institution centered on its effects on the state rather than how to get rid of it. A key concern for slave-holding Virginians was the security of their property rights, human capital in this case.<sup>17</sup> Despite these particularly southern concerns, Virginia politicians understood the incentive to maintain a northern alliance.

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<sup>13</sup>John Edward Buck, Virginia and the Mexican War (M.A. Thesis, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1965), p. 8.

<sup>14</sup>Shade, Democratizing the Old Dominion, pp. 186-189

<sup>15</sup>Cooper, South and the Politics of Slavery, p. 105.

<sup>16</sup>Shade, Democratizing the Old Dominion, p. 194

Cooperation between the northern and southern faction of parties was necessary to insure that national power would protect the South and slavery. Northerners needed southern support to gain national political power, which provided the incentive for them to cooperate. As a result, it was advantageous for both northerners and southerners to keep the slave question out of Congress and national debate. The potential fracture of delicate alliances encouraged politicians to repress the issue of slavery as neither section could afford to alienate the other for fear of losing national power.

The opportunity to annex the Republic of Texas first arose when Texas declared independence from Mexico in 1836. Democratic Presidents Andrew Jackson and Martin Van Buren ignored annexation overtures from the newly independent Texan government because they recognized the sectional danger annexation represented. During their presidencies, they saw no way to make the issue palatable to the Democratic party as a whole. In order to preserve the unity of the party and not risk losing power to the rival Whigs, Jackson flatly refused to consider annexation. His motive was to guarantee the election of Martin Van Buren.<sup>18</sup> Van Buren also chose to avoid the question for, like Jackson, he recognized the potential for a clash between the sections of the Union over the issue of slavery.<sup>19</sup> The issue lay dormant until John Tyler resurrected it during his presidency.

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<sup>17</sup>Shade, Democratizing the Old Dominion, p. 262.

<sup>18</sup>Cooper, South and the Politics of Slavery, p. 182.

John Tyler was not elected to the office of President of the United States. In 1840, the Whig party nominated as William Henry Harrison's running-mate in order to placate Southern Whigs who wanted a supporter of states' rights. Tyler was a states' rightist and former Virginia Senator who, unlike John C. Calhoun, was not so identified with Southern interests that the North objected to him. Although the Whigs purposely nominated Tyler to the vice-presidency, they did not anticipate his ascension to the presidency. When President Harrison fell ill and died a mere month after his inauguration, the office fell into the lap of "His Accidency," John Tyler. The Whig party expected that he would act in ways consistent with their platform and take cues from their more powerful leader, Senator Henry Clay. In fact, Tyler received enthusiastic support from the Richmond Whig which proclaimed, "John Tyler is now elevated to the head of the Whig Party and the American People. ...That he will worthily discharge it—that he will pursue with unfaltering step the good of the country—we have no shadow of a doubt."<sup>20</sup>

The Whig party's optimism was matched by much anticipation from the Democrats. Thomas Ritchie and Virginian Democrats demanded to know if Tyler, "will carry out the Whig measures, or will he recollect the Virginia State Rights' principles to which he was formerly devoted?"<sup>21</sup> Pessimistic Democrats predicted that "we have now more to fear than to hope from the Acting President

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<sup>19</sup>Merk, Slavery and the Annexation of Texas (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1972), p. 6.

<sup>20</sup>Richmond Whig, 6 April 1841.

<sup>21</sup>Richmond Enquirer, 6 April 1841.

of the United States."<sup>22</sup> The Democrats had less to fear than they anticipated. Tyler struck out on his own and vetoed two successive bank charter bills; a national bank was the pet project of Whig leader Henry Clay and enjoyed strong party support. By the end of 1841, Tyler had become a President without a party. Dumped by the Whigs and shunned by the Democrats, Tyler turned his attention toward Texas.

There is evidence that John Tyler had designs on resurrecting the Texas question early in his tenure as President of the United States. Tyler descendent and biographer Lyon G. Tyler mentions an 1841 meeting between Virginia Representative Henry Wise and the new president in which he referred to annexation as the all-important measure of his administration. Further evidence of Tyler's early interest is provided in the form of a letter to Daniel Webster dated October 11, 1841. Referring to annexation, he asked Webster, "Could anything throw so bright a lustre around us?"<sup>23</sup> Tyler looked at Texas with interest even though the issue had been avoided by previous administrations.

Undaunted by the potential disruption annexation presented, Tyler proved to be a southerner committed to pursuing policies that benefited his section.<sup>24</sup> With the 1841 re-election of pro-annexation Samuel Houston as President of the Republic of

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<sup>22</sup>Richmond Enquirer, 23 April 1841.

<sup>23</sup>Lyon G. Tyler, Letters and Times of the Tylers (New York: DeCapo Press, 1970), Vol. 2: 254.

<sup>24</sup> Robert Sobel, Conquest and Conscience: the 1840s (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1971), pp. 224-225.

Texas, the time for a treaty was ripe. Furthermore, having been dropped by both parties, "His Accidency" was anxious to successfully navigate an issue that would redeem his administration.<sup>25</sup>

Tyler presented annexation as a national issue. Although Tyler and his supporters claimed Texas was not a partisan issue, the lack of support from the Whigs made it clear he would have to seek support from the Democratic party.<sup>26</sup> To do so, Tyler employed a two-tiered strategy. First, he stressed the possibility of a vulnerable Texas to fall prey to "some ambitious foreign power," more specifically, to Great Britain.<sup>27</sup> Second, he highlighted the economic benefits for both the North and the South that were sure to follow annexation. According to Tyler, the acquisition of Texas was a matter of national security and economic prosperity for the whole country.

A letter published in the Madisonian, the Tyler organ, outlines the strategy of Tyler's annexation campaign. The letter that appeared unexpectedly on January 23, 1843 was written by Virginia Congressman and Tyler supporter Thomas W. Gilmer. In an effort to give the issue a national flavor, Gilmer asserted that Texas would provide an open market for manufacturers and the agricultural surplus of non-slave holding

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<sup>25</sup>Arthur M. Schlesinger, ed., History of American Presidential Elections, 1789-1968: Vol I. 1789-1844 (Chelsea House Publishers, 1971), Vol 1: p. 759. In Letters and Times of the Tylers, Lyon G. Tyler asserts that until 1843 J. Tyler hoped to return into the Whig fold, but once he realized that Henry Clay was too strong, he turned his attention to the Democratic Party.

<sup>26</sup>Tyler, Letters and Times of the Tylers, Vol. 2: 278.

states. And, while the South might suffer from the standpoint of agricultural competition, reaffirming continental destiny was in the best interest of the whole country. For those who feared annexation was directly linked to the expansion of slavery, that, too, need not be a concern as long as they were willing to leave the issue with the states. Furthermore, the acquisition of Louisiana and Florida had set the Constitutional precedent for annexing Texas.<sup>28</sup>

Tyler and his supporters insisted that failure to annex Texas invited foreign interference on our borders, a potential threat to national security and economic well being. In its struggle to maintain independence, Texas experienced economic depression and built up a large national debt making it susceptible to outside influence. Inspired by the perceived vulnerability of Texas, Thomas Gilmer presented a potential scenario in his letter to the Madisonian: Great Britain offered Texas a loan with the condition that Texas not annex itself to the United States, in effect, becoming a colony of Britain. Tyler himself pointed to the coincidental timing of Secretary of State Daniel Webster's retirement, the statesman who persistently negotiated the terms of the Webster-Ashburton treaty which settled the boundary between Maine and Canada, and the rapid workings of British influence upon the destiny of Texas.<sup>29</sup> His claims seemed to be substantiated, for even as Congress entertained a joint resolution proposal Texas allowed

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<sup>27</sup>Tyler, Letters and Times of the Tylers, Vol. 2: 271.

<sup>28</sup>Merk, Slavery and Annexation, pp. 8-9.

Great Britain and France to propose a plan to coerce Mexico into recognizing Texas' independence as long as Texas pledged never to annex itself to the United States.<sup>30</sup> An alliance between foreign powers and Texas, annexationists claimed, threatened the United States politically and economically. Tyler believed that demonstrating British intention to influence Texas would nullify opposition to annexation.<sup>31</sup>

Despite the administration's attempts to frame annexation in national terms, the issue became linked to the spread of slavery. The President seized upon an account from his unofficial aide, Duff Green. Green illustrated the threat Great Britain presented to United States' power by discussing British abolitionists agitating for the end of slavery in the United States. Green's warning was substantiated by the publication of Lord Aberdeen's remarks to Texas abolitionist Pearl Andrews that Britain intended to "encourage abolition in Texas."<sup>32</sup> More threatening, in Tyler's eyes, were Aberdeen's August 18, 1843 remarks to parliament that the "British public and government hoped to see the abolition of slavery in Texas and everywhere else."<sup>33</sup> Slavery gained further attention after a letter from Secretary of State John C. Calhoun to British Ambassador Richard

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<sup>29</sup>Tyler, Letters and Times of the Tylers, Vol. 2: 271.

<sup>30</sup>Tyler, Letters and Times of the Tylers, Vol. 2: 335. Anson Jones replaced Sam Houston as president before the *charge* at Paris was given the authority to enact this plan.

<sup>31</sup> Kinley J. Brauer, Cotton Versus Conscience, Massachusetts Whig Politics and Southwestern Expansion, 1843-1848 (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1967), p. 58.

<sup>32</sup>Tyler, Letters and Times of the Tylers, Vol. 2: 276.

<sup>33</sup>Merk, Slavery and Annexation, p. 23.

Pakenham containing a rousing defense of slavery was made public.<sup>34</sup> For many, annexation and the expansion of slavery became one and the same.

Negotiations for an annexation treaty took place out of the public eye but annexation became a heated public issue in late 1843 when it became clear that Tyler intended to present the Senate with a treaty for ratification. Tyler and a small circle of states' rights theorists and pro-slavery, southern sectionalists had devoted the second half of his term to the acquisition of Texas in hopes of rallying unified Southern support. These Tylerites, atypical Whigs who were not even standard Virginia Whigs (Tyler's home state), did not represent the position of the rest of the party.<sup>35</sup>

Tyler sent the negotiated treaty to Senate on April 22, 1844. The treaty met with plenty of opponents, including William S. Archer of Virginia. He stood before the Senate and proclaimed,

If, then, this was decided to be the election presented to us—annexation in the circumstances of this treaty—by this treaty now, or annexation never—if this were truly the real question—now or never, was there room for hesitation? No! The loud exclamation! Let it go out from this hall—resound through this land—reverberate from Texas—Never! oh, never!<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup>Justin H. Smith, The Annexation of Texas (New York: The Baker and Taylor Co., 1911), p. 201.

<sup>35</sup>Shade, Democratizing the Old Dominion, p. 247.

<sup>36</sup>Congressional Globe, 28<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., App. (1843-44), pp. 693-696., cited in Frederick Merk, Slavery and Annexation, p. 81.

The treaty was blocked on June 8, 1844 by a coalition of Whigs and conservative Democrats.<sup>37</sup> Consequently, annexation became a major issue during the 1844 presidential election and was ardently debated in partisan newspapers.

Two such newspapers were Richmond Whig and the Richmond Enquirer, the most widely read political journals in the commonwealth of Virginia.<sup>38</sup> Richmond was the political hub of a state with active politicians and a heritage of national political involvement. The Enquirer and the Whig were not only the party organs for the state of Virginia, but each paper was headed by a man who was prominent within the party on state and national levels. The popular press was unabashedly partisan and editors played crucial roles as party leaders.<sup>39</sup>

The Richmond Enquirer was the Democratic paper edited and published by Thomas Ritchie. Ritchie, with his many close connections to Democratic politicians, intended the paper to be "a vigorous Democratic journal, in view of the importance of Virginia to the Democratic party, and the tastes of the Virginia voters."<sup>40</sup> The Richmond Whig, edited by John Hamden Pleasants, was a pro-Whig newspaper. Its Whig sentiments were not only clear in its columns, but were also regularly refuted by the

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<sup>37</sup>Arthur M. Schlesinger, History of Presidential Elections, Vol 1: p. 773; Frederick Merk, Slavery and Annexation, p. 81. The treaty was rejected 35-16. Twenty-seven out of twenty-eight Whigs opposed it and fifteen out of twenty-two Democrats supported it.

<sup>38</sup>Elizabeth R. Varon, "We Mean to be Counted": White Women and Politics in Antebellum Virginia (Ph.D. Dissertation, Yale University, 1993), p. 252.

<sup>39</sup>William G. Shade, Democratizing the Old Dominion, p. 99.

Enquirer. The existence of two ideologically opposed papers in itself illustrates the vigor of partisan divisions within the South, and specifically in the state of Virginia, divisions that fundamentally structured the debate over Texas.

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<sup>40</sup>Robert W. Hughes, Editors of the Past (Richmond, VA: Wm. Ellis Jones, Book and Job Printer, 1897), p. 7.

## Chapter II

The Richmond Enquirer:  
"We go for Annexation, Immediate Annexation"

Thomas Ritchie was born in Tappahanock County, the old commercial center of Virginia. The Ritchie family was related to the Roane and Brockenbrough families of Virginia, prominent Virginia politicians and businessmen. After dabbling in various other professions, Ritchie began his publishing career with the encouragement of Thomas Jefferson. He published the first issue of the Richmond Enquirer on May 9, 1804. From the outset, party patronage influenced the temper of the paper. Ritchie, like the Democratic party he was a member of, opposed a strong central government. He also consistently supported states' rights. Biographer Charles H. Ambler asserts that Ritchie was influenced by Henry Clay in his early years, although the two later had a falling out.<sup>41</sup> In late 1831, in the wake of the debate over slavery following the Nat Turner rebellion, Ritchie supported the movement to take action regarding the future of slavery but he clearly believed that the issue should be decided only by Southerners.<sup>42</sup> Throughout his tenure at the Democratic Enquirer,

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<sup>41</sup>Charles H. Ambler, Thomas Ritchie: A Study in Virginia Politics (Richmond, VA: Bell Book & Stationary Co., 1913), pp. 18-23.

<sup>42</sup>Allison Goodyear Freehling, Drift Toward Dissolution, The

Ritchie published a consistently states' right paper. Although he never held public office and avoided the spotlight, he was recognized as the undisputed leader of the Richmond Junto.<sup>43</sup>

The Richmond Junto, a loosely knit alliance of Democratic politicians and prominent members of Virginia society, led the Jacksonian movement in Virginia. Members, including Peter V. Daniel, Andrew Stevenson, William H. Roane, Richard E. Parker, John Brockenbrough, and Philip N. Nichols, are credited with maintaining Virginia Democratic party alliance with Andrew Jackson and Martin Van Buren through the early 1840s. Adhering to the principles of states' rights but desiring a strong federal union, this semi-formal organizing committee oversaw presidential elections and party discipline and corresponded with national party leaders. They were even accused of viewing themselves as the "power behind the throne."<sup>44</sup>

The Junto ensured that Virginia never cast her vote for a Whig presidential candidate.<sup>45</sup> In fact, even in 1840 when Whig William Henry Harrison won the presidential election, Virginia still voted Democratic. When the Whig hinted that the Democrats should concede that the state lost, the Junto mouthpiece predicted correctly, albeit with great estimation of their own influence, "We entertain a confident belief that Virginia will not vote for Harrison. ...So far from knowing that she will go for

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Virginia Slavery Debate of 1831-1832 (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), p. 86.

<sup>43</sup>Wade L. Shaffer, The Richmond Junto and Politics in Jacksonian Virginia (Ph.D. Dissertation, College of William and Mary, 1993), p. 11.

<sup>44</sup>Richmond Whig, 19 February 1841.

Gen. Harrison, we most confidently believe, that she will go for Mr. Van Buren by a strong majority."<sup>46</sup>

Ritchie's talent lay in the art of compromise and conciliation. His efforts for party unity served to hold together elements of the anti-slavery and protectionist North with the generally pro-slavery and free trade South, particularly during the 1840 presidential election.<sup>47</sup> Although Ritchie was successful in preserving the Albany Regency/Richmond Junto partnership to give Van Buren Virginia in the 1836 and 1840 elections, after the 1840 election the Junto's power began to fade. The increasing prominence of the question of slavery in Virginia politics, which Ritchie and the Junto had tried to keep out of public debate, undermined their ability to maintain cross-sectional party unity.<sup>48</sup>

Expansionist sentiment among Democrats made the Democratic party a logical ally to the proposed annexation. Southern Democrats had promoted the idea of continental destiny for decades. A "more perfect union" would evolve with a continually expanding frontier, an idea that arose from the tradition of American exceptionalism.<sup>49</sup> The spread of republican values and greater economic success would follow as the size of the United

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<sup>45</sup>Shaffer, Richmond Junto, pp. 2-9.

<sup>46</sup>Richmond Enquirer, 29 October 1840.

<sup>47</sup>Ambler, Thomas Ritchie, p. 218.

<sup>48</sup>Shaffer, Richmond Junto, p. 23

<sup>49</sup>Thomas R. Hietala, Manifest Designs: Anxious Aggrandizement in Late Jacksonian America (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 257.

States increased. The Democratic party was the party of Manifest Destiny.<sup>50</sup>

Democrats in Congress argued that the American federal system provided a flexible government capable of indefinite growth. The federal system of government left control of local affairs such as slavery in the hands of individual states and allowed a large nation without central tyranny.<sup>51</sup> To gain states' rights politicians' support, Democrats argued that expansion increased the federal nature of the government and actually moved the government away from centralized power.<sup>52</sup> The issue of authority over wide areas was not a threat to national ideals.

A real threat to the nation, claimed the Democratic party, was the activity of Great Britain on the country's southern border. With Great Britain pursuing relations with Texas, they reasoned, the United States must act or risk having a neighboring independent republic competing for economic ties with Britain. Even ex-president Andrew Jackson supported that argument. He wrote a letter for publication advocating annexation based on the threat of a Texas/Britain alliance.<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, either an independent or British dominated Texas could thwart Manifest Destiny by creating a barrier between the

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<sup>50</sup>Merk, Manifest Destiny, p. 27. The actual term "Manifest Destiny" was coined by John L. O'Sullivan in an editorial on the Texas issue in the Democratic Review for July and August, 1845, although variations of the same idea were used before that.

<sup>51</sup>Merk, Manifest Destiny, p. 26.

<sup>52</sup>Dunning, Southern Perception, p. 72.

United States and the Pacific Coast. Clearly, from the party's view, this outcome was unacceptable.

Expansionist Southern Democrats also asserted that annexing Texas would not increase the power of slave states. Most Democrats suggested that the line of the Missouri compromise prevented slave states' power from growing too quickly. Democratic Congressman Thomas Bayly from Virginia's Eastern Shore, among others, pointed out that, "The Missouri 'surrender' had thrown the larger portion of territory to the free states making Northern predominance a future certainty." The was no longer an issue to be made out of the balance of power between the North and South.<sup>54</sup> Virginia Democratic Congressman George Dromgoole suggested that 36'30" should "stand forever, and put an end to this question."<sup>55</sup> The Richmond Enquirer insisted that "There is but one course for every true Southern man—stand on the Missouri Compromise line."<sup>56</sup> In the words of one historian, "Most pro-annexation Southerners accepted this as the sine qua non on the slavery question, although their embrace of it ran from ardent to decidedly icy."<sup>57</sup>

After John Tyler raised the issue of annexation, Southern Democrats more vehemently justified annexation in terms of national security. Many of their arguments followed the reasoning of the letter written by Robert J. Walker of

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<sup>53</sup>Richmond Enquirer, 2 April 1844.

<sup>54</sup>Dunning, Southern Perception, p. 102.

<sup>55</sup>Richmond Enquirer, 01 February 1845.

<sup>56</sup>Richmond Enquirer cited in Dunning, Southern Perception, p. 101.

Mississippi. The Walker letter appeared in the Enquirer over the course of two issues, May 24 and May 28, 1844. It was printed for the public in February by the Washington Globe. Senator Walker asserted that annexation should be supported based on the following considerations: In 1836, the Republic of Texas voted for annexation, so the question of support on their end had long been settled. The United States acquired Texas as part of Louisiana purchase and to refuse annexation was to deny the wisdom of the original purchase. The cession of Texas to Spain as per the terms of the 1819 Adams-Onis Treaty violated the treaty of 1803 and was therefore an error.

Texas was a potential threat to United States' security if she were not annexed, which should be easy to do since most of her citizens were former Americans. The growth from 13 to 26 states had only strengthened the Union so, naturally, the addition of Texas would increase the prosperity of every American and bind the country closer together. Slavery should not present a problem, in fact Texas would improve the situation. The soil in the South was worn out, so instead of an increase in population, there would be a shift, draining slaves away from the border commonwealths, eventually to Mexico and Central and South America, relieving the nation of the burden of an enslaved class. Refusal to annex Texas left the door open for a potential alliance between Great Britain and Texas or could force Southern and Southwestern states to secede and ally with Texas. He concluded that "this great measure is essential to the security of the South, the defence of the West, and

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<sup>57</sup>Dunning, Southern Perception, p. 101.

highly conducive to the welfare and perpetuity of the whole Union."<sup>58</sup>

The Enquirer used arguments based on party ideology to support annexation. It emphasized the link between Northern and Southern Democrats on the issue to reaffirm the idea that annexation was a national, not a sectional, issue. Evidence of this tactic is in the October 12, 1844, edition with the assurance that Northern Democrats supported Southern causes and were more favorable to annexation than Southern Whigs.<sup>59</sup> In the November 5, 1844, issue, a most pointed message urged voters to the polls to support James K. Polk for president and all Democratic candidates because

...they stand forth as the advocates of those great national measures, the Annexation of Texas and the Occupation of Oregon, which sectional prejudices and petty party feelings alone prevent being carried by acclamation. They are for making our Republic really independent of all the rest of the world, while our opponents are willing to see Texas thrust away from our threshold and Great Britain encircling us with her territories, by seizing on Oregon in addition to her Canadian possessions, and reducing Texas to a state of commercial vassalage to her.<sup>60</sup>

This passage shows the Democratic paper's invocation of patriotism to make the point that annexation was a national issue of equal concern to North and South because of the threat of foreign interference. The paper decried partisan appeals on

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<sup>58</sup>Richmond Enquirer, 24 May, 28 May 1844, reprinted from the Washington Globe, 03 February 1844.

<sup>59</sup>Richmond Enquirer, 12 October 1844.

<sup>60</sup>Richmond Enquirer, 05 November 1844.

the issue as well as sectional polarization. Ritchie insisted that "we do not desire to see this great subject converted to a sectional question, nor do we entertain the foolish design of attempting to make it so."<sup>61</sup> Annexation reflected the interest of the nation and merited unanimous support from both parties, and especially from all Democrats.

The language of this passage also suggests Democratic fear for national safety. It was important to assert the will of the United States to defeat competing foreign powers or the country would never have power as a nation. The United States was independent and so was Texas. No less of a power than Great Britain had recognized its independence. To procrastinate was dangerous. Not only did the United States risk the safety of the whole union and jeopardize the governmental system, but wavering on admitting Texas invited foreign interference on our Southern border. In those terms, annexation became a point of national pride and securing international standing.

In November 1844, with the election of pro-annexationist James K. Polk by a margin of six thousand votes in Virginia, Democrats increasingly saw annexation as a litmus test. In January, 1845, Ritchie printed a letter from a reader calling for a Democratic Senator. Virginia was entitled to pro-annexation representation because "if you look to numbers alone, she is [Democratic] by about six thousand majority."<sup>62</sup> Annexation was identified as a party issue, therefore Virginia

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<sup>61</sup>Richmond Enquirer, 05 May 1844.

<sup>62</sup>Richmond Enquirer, 03 January 1845.

needed a Democrat in order to make sure her true opinion was heard. This assumption is again illustrated when the paper stated that it expected Whigs in the South and West to vote along party lines in the January House votes on the Texas question.<sup>63</sup>

After Polk's victory, Ritchie's Enquirer again espoused cross-sectional unity when it stated that "Democrats in the North and South are the same; they act together for the great purpose of preserving our free institutions." As for the future of slavery, Ritchie endorsed Walker's diffusion thesis and claimed that "Texas would be the door through which the negro race of the United States would ultimately pass."<sup>64</sup> The Enquirer mirrored the Democratic sentiment that slavery was best left out of further debate, sharply criticizing those who continued to oppose annexation based on fears of the expansion of slavery. Virginia Democrats favored "setting aside the subject of slavery, [which] ought not to be regarded—and every consideration of prudence, policy, justice and patriotism, seems to demand the reunion at the earliest practicable moment."<sup>65</sup>

Virginia Democrats increasingly equated Whigs sentiments with Northern sectionalism. For example, Ritchie asserted in January, 1845: "The Richmond Whig outstrips its most ultra Northern Federal allies, in its bitter opposition to the annexation of Texas." In the same article, the Enquirer

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<sup>63</sup>Richmond Enquirer, 07 January 1845.

<sup>64</sup>Richmond Enquirer, 27 December 1844.

<sup>65</sup>Richmond Enquirer, 27 December 1844.

recognized that party affiliation would affect resolutions passed by the state House of Delegates in regards to the question of annexation and hoped that the Whigs would "meet the question promptly, throw aside all their former party feelings, and strike one blow for their country."<sup>66</sup> When a resolution barely passed the state Senate because of Whig opposition, the paper observed that it was "now altogether a party question, even in Washington." When the Whigs did cross party lines they were congratulated for rising above party.<sup>67</sup> Additionally, the paper commented on a resolution not passed in North Carolina because of the Whig vote, further illustrating the party influence on the issue.

In January 1845, the Enquirer also acknowledged that if slavery were made an issue, annexation might fail.<sup>68</sup> As the annexation debate grew heated, the Democrats claimed that the South did not want to make slavery an issue but that the North did. Ritchie insisted that despite the efforts of Massachusetts and Connecticut in particular, "we, therefore, do not make the issue. It is forced upon us by the abolitionists—and we stand only upon self defence, in resisting an influence, to which, if we should now submit, on such a measure, we can perceive no stopping place." Virginia Democrats assumed that the Missouri

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<sup>66</sup>Richmond Enquirer, 14 January 1845.

<sup>67</sup>Richmond Enquirer, 28 January 1845.

<sup>68</sup>Richmond Enquirer, 17 January 1845.

Compromise had fixed the line and that the free states had the best side of the bargain.<sup>69</sup>

In support of expansion, there was an extended article on the "Fruits of the Annexation of Texas." It stressed the fact that the Enquirer, and by extension, the Democrats, had always approached the issue of annexation from a national point of view. While acquiring Texas was important to protect the South from foreign intrigue, and even, the paper admitted, to protect slavery, annexation was really an extension of the voice of the people. That voice had been exercised by electing President Polk. More important, annexation was viewed with the future of the West and North in mind, too. The Enquirer insisted that Texas would provide a growing market for the staple products of the West, and the manufactured goods of the North. The threat of Texas infringing on United States' trade relations with Great Britain would have been equally damaging for Northern manufacturers and Southern planters.

The Democratic party used the pages of the Enquirer to champion annexation. In fact, the Whig accused them of printing months of "Texas first—Texas last—and Texas all the time."<sup>70</sup> In his paper's defense, Ritchie stated that "if on occasion we have confined our attention almost exclusively to the question of annexation, it is because it has [of late] assumed its imposing aspect."<sup>71</sup> It had an imposing aspect because as a divisive,

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<sup>69</sup>Richmond Enquirer, 04 February 1845.

<sup>70</sup>Richmond Whig, 05 February 1845.

<sup>71</sup>Richmond Enquirer, 10 May 1844.

slavery-tinged topic occupying the national arena, annexation would determine the future success of the Democratic party.

## Chapter III

The Richmond Whig:  
 "We Can Assure the Public Texas will NOT be Annexed"

Whig publisher John Hamden Pleasants was Thomas Ritchie's chief editorial rival. Pleasants arrived in Richmond in 1824 from the Lynchburg Virginian, one of the papers in a "geographical crescent" that opposed the Richmond Enquirer, to assume the duties of editor at the Richmond Constitutional Whig, later the Richmond Whig.<sup>72</sup> He continually denounced Ritchie and his Junto, playing on public fear of a body of men in the capital controlling political affairs.<sup>73</sup> Like Ritchie's position at the Enquirer, the position at the Whig was a political one. In fact, historians have speculated that John Pleasants used his editorial powers to assist his father's political career.<sup>74</sup>

The Richmond Whig was the principal anti-Jackson paper in the Eastern part of Virginia.<sup>75</sup> Pleasants supported Hugh Lawson White over the Democrat Martin Van Buren during the presidential

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<sup>72</sup>F. Thornton Miller "The Richmond Junto- The Secret All-Powerful Club-or Myth" The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography 99 (January 1991), p. 70 The other areas of the "geographical crescent" were the Valley and Fredricksburg.

<sup>73</sup>Miller, "The Richmond Junto," p. 74.

<sup>74</sup>William Shade, Democratizing the Old Dominion, p. 84; Miller, "The Richmond Junto," p. 71. James Pleasants, John's father, was a Virginia Senator and served as the commonwealth's governor.

election of 1836.<sup>76</sup> Through the pages of the Whig, Pleasants led Whig sentiment in Virginia and labored continually for harmony within the party. For example, in the 1840 election party unity required that the states' rights faction of the Whig party yield. Virginia Whig judge Abel P. Upshur credited Pleasants with stifling Virginia Whigs' states' rights sentiment by "flagging everything like spirit out of the states'-rights men."<sup>77</sup>

Nationally, the Whig party grew out of opposition to Andrew Jackson and his supporters, eventually called the Democratic party. In its own terms, the Whig party viewed its ideal member as, "one who prefers liberty to tyranny—who supports privilege against prerogative—the rights and immunities of the people, as ascertained by the equity of nature, the Constitution and laws of the country, against the predominance of the Crown, or Executive power."<sup>78</sup> In the South, Whigs found strong support among merchants, lawyers, and journalists who operated in markets that served slave-holders.<sup>79</sup> Whig beliefs were compatible with those southern slave owners who saw the key to preserving the institution in finding better markets for slavery-produced products, not necessarily in the expansion of

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<sup>75</sup>Henry H. Simms, The Rise of the Whigs in Virginia: 1824-1840 (Richmond, VA: The William Byrd Press, Inc., 1929), p. 17.

<sup>76</sup>Simms, Rise of the Whigs, pp. 94-95

<sup>77</sup>A.P. Upshur to Judge N. Beverly Tucker, February 22, 1840, cited in Tyler, Life and Times of the Tylers, Vol 2: 701-703; Arthur C. Cole, The Whig Party in the South (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1962), p. 88.

<sup>78</sup>Simms, Rise of the Whigs, p. 86.

<sup>79</sup>William W. Freehling, The Road to Disunion (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 361.

slavery. They believed in a republic limited in size, not a vast empire.

The Whigs feared that a large country necessitated a powerful central government under an executive with unlimited power and a formidable military, all conditions that threatened republicanism.<sup>80</sup> If expansion was unavoidable, accession should come voluntarily and not through military might.<sup>81</sup> The Whigs cautioned against a headlong rush to the Pacific. They promoted a gradual, orderly process to expand westward with the twin goals of avoiding war with other nations and eventually securing Pacific harbors. Fundamentally, rapid expansion threatened a republican way of life.

Whigs revised the classical Republican formation laid out by Drew McCoy and preferred, "expansion through time over expansion through space."<sup>82</sup> Virginian William C. Rives thought that the nation's present boundaries which stretched from ocean to ocean contained "ample area for hundred millions of human beings." He asked, "Ought not this reconcile gentlemen to some little delay? Were we so pent in, so crowded for room, that we must burst through the barriers of the Constitution to get a little breathing space?"<sup>83</sup> The domain of freedom, Whigs said, could be extended by other nations following the example of the

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<sup>80</sup>John H. Schroeder, Mr. Polk's War: American Opposition and Dissent, 1846-1848 (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1973), pp. 6-7.

<sup>81</sup>Schroeder, Mr. Polk's War, p. 28.

<sup>82</sup>Drew McCoy, The Elusive Republic: Political Economy in Jeffersonian Virginia (Chapel Hill, NC; University of North Carolina Press, 1980).

United States, not necessarily by the United States controlling more land. This request for slower growth appeased Southern supporters because expansion in general was not unconditionally rejected, merely delayed.

The Virginia Whigs enjoyed a successful, if short, existence. The Whig party materialized in the wake of the nullification crisis and attracted many tidewater conservatives and states' rights advocates. Like the Democratic party, the Virginia Whigs considered themselves a party of the people.<sup>84</sup> However, the Whigs built on the strong banking interest in the commonwealth and were generally associated with the emerging bourgeoisie and cosmopolitans, most of whom were in the east.<sup>85</sup> They encompassed many conservative elements and property holders who believed that the control of wealth belonged with those who held the wealth.<sup>86</sup> As a result, although they had statewide support, the Whigs are often seen as an Eastern Virginia party.<sup>87</sup> Still, the party's statewide appeal was illustrated by the statewide support for both candidates in the 1836 presidential election between Martin Van Buren and Hugh Lawson White.<sup>88</sup>

While Virginia Whigs may have supported slavery, it was not on the same terms as the Democratic party. Virginia Whigs

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<sup>83</sup>Dunning, Southern Perception, p. 79.

<sup>84</sup>Cooper, South and the Politics of Slavery, pp. 26-29.

<sup>85</sup>Shade, Democratizing the Old Dominion, p. 179; Simms, Rise of the Whigs, p. 12.

<sup>86</sup>Simms, Rise of the Whigs, pp. 36-37.

<sup>87</sup>Buck, Virginia and the Mexican War, p. 8.

viewed the protection of slavery in terms of the protection of the rights of white men to hold slave property.<sup>89</sup> Whig ideology and views of the responsibility of the national government shaped their views on slavery more than their southern orientation.<sup>90</sup> Therefore, in their own eyes, opposition to annexation did not equal opposition to slavery.

Whig papers were as heated and partisan as the Democratic Richmond Enquirer. In the Richmond Whig, for example, John H. Pleasants used party ideology to protest annexation just as the Enquirer used party position to support it. The first argument the Whig advanced was that annexation repudiated a treaty with Spain. While Texas had at one time belonged to the United States, the government had ceded it to Spain in 1819 in exchange for Florida. According to the Whig, saying "we want it again" did not provide ample reason to annex the land.<sup>91</sup>

As it became clear that the issue was not going to fade, the Whig proclaimed that the question was a "subject of gigantic magnitude to the whole Union." Whigs referred to the United States as an "already overgrown territory." The Whigs' second concern was that there was no way to predict the effect of annexation on the Union or its institutions. William C. Rives warned that "the precedent-setting evils of violating the Constitution in order to secure Texas annexation far outweighed

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<sup>88</sup>Richard P. McCormick, The Second American Party System, (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1966), p. 194.

<sup>89</sup>Shade, Democratizing the Old Dominion, p. 13.

<sup>90</sup>Dunning, Southern Perception, p. 149.

<sup>91</sup>Richmond Whig, 02 January 1844 and 16 January 1845.

any advantages the South might obtain." He also predicted that annexation would drain the slave population from Virginia and further collapse the glutted cotton market. Additional lands threatened to drain slaves away from border states, Virginia included, thereby weakening Whig strength in the East.<sup>92</sup> For the good of the nation, he insisted, Virginia must oppose annexation.<sup>93</sup>

Thirdly, the nation needed to determine the will of the people with a "clear, decided and *unsectional* majority." To set the precedent of annexation without public support was dangerous. The Enquirer, the Whig reported, asserted there was a mandate for annexation in Virginia, but in return, the Whig asked,

"WHERE IS THE EVIDENCE THAT PUBLIC OPINION IS MADE UP ON THIS SUBJECT IN VIRGINIA? WHAT COUNTY, OR WHAT PUBLIC MEETING IN ANY COUNTY, HAS EXPRESSED ITS SENTIMENTS? WHEN WAS HER LEGISLATURE CALLED UPON TO DECIDE UPON THIS MOMENTOUS QUESTION? WHEN WAS IT EVEN HINTED AT IN THAT BODY?"<sup>94</sup>

The Whig also supported the national Whig party's request for more cautious expansion in demanding more time to study the question.<sup>95</sup> Clearly, the nation needed more time to consider the issue, given the many problems that the Democrats had not addressed or incorrectly evaluated.

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<sup>92</sup>Dunning, Southern Perception, p. 81; Schroeder, Mr. Polk's War, p. 7.

<sup>93</sup>Dunning, Southern Perception, p. 98.

<sup>94</sup>Richmond Whig, 26 March 1844.

<sup>95</sup>Richmond Whig, 22 March 1844.

Among the problems Democrats had raised, according to Virginia Whigs, was that the United States had inappropriately initiated the idea of annexation to the Texan government. The Whig backed this up in the April 2, 1844 edition citing an article from the Houston Telegraph stating the Texas administration's confirmation that the United States had indeed initiated the annexation overtures. Pleasants observed that begging for land was a "new and humiliating position for the United States to be placed in."<sup>96</sup>

The Whig party also differed from the Democratic party in their view of the threat Great Britain presented to the United States' constitutional destiny and economic security. The Democratic party's worries of an alliance between Texas and Great Britain were unfounded, Virginia Whigs asserted. As a republic, Texas despised monarchies and would never submit to one. Also, Great Britain would insist on abolishing slavery and Texas could not survive without it. Moreover, the Whigs believed that England had no real designs on Texas.<sup>97</sup>

Rather, Texas annexation was the product of desperate politicians and land speculators and not in the best interest of the country. There was a conspiracy to annex Texas, the Whig asserted. As presidential hopefuls, John Tyler wanted to claim the glory of annexation and Democrat Martin Van Buren supported it to try to win Southern support. They were allied with

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<sup>96</sup>Richmond Whig, 2 April 1844.

<sup>97</sup>Richmond Whig, 22 March 1844.

speculators, land grabbers who would rush the proposal through to make money. John Pleasants and the Whigs were appalled that

Such a proposition is now unblushingly advanced, under the influence of Texas pecuniary interests.....to the Senate of Virginia itself. We hope that honorable body, without the least regard to party, and in defiance of party influence, will spurn the proposition out of their Hall, never before so debased by a proposal so unjust.<sup>98</sup>

Once again, the Whig insisted that the people of the nation, even in the Southern states, demanded more time be taken to examine the issue.<sup>99</sup>

Additionally, the Whig carried articles outlining the dangers of annexing Texas. It would mean assuming Texas' public debt of \$10-20 million. The price of land in the rest of the country would fall so low that it would not be worth anything. The superabundance of agricultural production would compete with that of Virginia. This would affect the agricultural states and the wealth of the nation as a whole.<sup>100</sup> Furthermore, Pleasants asserted that there was no benefit to annex Texas for the South because annexation would glut the cotton market, and besides, the North would never let annexation pass because of the issue of slavery. So, even while the Whig tried to stick to partisan economic issues, it could not ignore the lurking presence of slavery that threatened to sectionalize Texas annexation.

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<sup>98</sup>Richmond Whig, 10 January 1845.

<sup>99</sup>Richmond Whig, 05 April 1844.

<sup>100</sup>Richmond Whig, 10 October 1844.

The desire to prevent annexation explains the relief voiced by the Whig when it announced that voters had elected Anson Jones, a man perceived to be opposed to annexation, to succeed Houston as President of Texas. With a leader who favored an independent Texas in office, surely the matter would be dropped.<sup>101</sup> If the Democrats persisted in pursuing annexation, Pleasants insisted that "the Whigs [intended] to retain their self-respect [and ignore] the Enquirer's attempt to dragoon them into supporting Texas."<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>101</sup>Richmond Whig, 19 October 1844.

<sup>102</sup>Richmond Whig, 5 February 1845.

Chapter IV  
The Joint Resolution

The election of 1844 marks the transition between the politics of Jacksonian America and those of sectional controversy.<sup>103</sup> Texas emerged as a defining issue after the Senate failed to ratify Tyler's treaty. Tyler himself declined to run after it became clear that the Democratic party would run a pro-annexation candidate. In a tightly contested election, the Democratic party's expansionist theory handed them a solid victory in the South although with a national majority of only 38,000 votes.<sup>104</sup>

Ritchie's Enquirer carried the Democratic party's position regarding annexation and the 1844 election. Virginia withdrew support for Martin Van Buren's presidential bid after he came out weakly for annexation. In early May the Enquirer reprinted Van Buren's position letter in which he stated that although Louisiana had set the precedent for the constitutionality of annexation, he did not support immediate annexation because the situation between Mexico and Texas had yet to be resolved,

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<sup>103</sup> John Ashworth, Slavery, Capitalism, and Politics in the Antebellum Republic (Cambridge University Press, 1995) Vol 1: 414.

<sup>104</sup> Freehling, The Road to Disunion, p. 438; Sobel, Conquest and Conscience, p. 237.

Mexico did not recognize Texas' independence, and Great Britain presented only a minimal threat.<sup>105</sup> Not long after the publication of those remarks, the Virginia Democratic Central Committee released its delegates to the Democratic National Convention from their instructions to support Van Buren's presidential bid, ostensibly to nominate an aggressively pro-annexation candidate.<sup>106</sup> In fact, it was in the pages of the Enquirer that a potential new candidate emerged. Tennessee Democrat James K. Polk wrote for the benefit of the voters that he favored, "the *immediate re-annexation* of Texas to the territory and Government of the United States."<sup>107</sup> Thomas Ritchie encapsulated the sentiment of the Virginia Democratic party when he asserted in his paper that "The annexation of Texas must be met."<sup>108</sup>

The minority southern branch of the Democratic party, then, with the support of a good fraction of Northerners, was in a unique position to hold sway over the majority party of the country.<sup>109</sup> Ritchie's mandate for annexation and Martin Van Buren's refusal to unconditionally support annexation cost him the support of Virginia and other southern delegates.<sup>110</sup> Virginia delegates never cast a vote for Van Buren's nomination

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<sup>105</sup>Richmond Enquirer, 3 May 1844.

<sup>106</sup>Richmond Enquirer, May 1844.

<sup>107</sup>Richmond Enquirer, 14 May 1844.

<sup>108</sup>Cooper, South and the Politics of Slavery, p. 190, from the March 29, 1844 Richmond Enquirer.

<sup>109</sup>Freehling, The Road to Disunion, p. 429.

and led the rally behind Polk as soon as his name was added to the ballot.<sup>111</sup> As a result of southern pressure, James Polk was elevated to the position of presidential candidate and subsequently voted into office. Polk's platform balanced Northwest and Southern concerns by promising to "re-annex Texas" and to "re-occupy Oregon."<sup>112</sup> His nomination meant that the Democrats favored annexation, and by implication, the spread of slavery, while Henry Clay and the Whigs tried to appeal to both sides of the issue.<sup>113</sup>

Henry Clay had been the front-runner for the Whig nomination since 1841 and received near unanimous support at the nominating convention. Concerning annexation, it was a matter of fine-tuning a platform to garner cross-sectional support. Clay and the Whig party tried to appease the South by taking a cautious stance against annexation without ruling it out completely. In a letter written on April 17, 1844, Clay stated,

I consider the annexation of Texas, without the assent of Mexico, as a measure compromising the national character, involving us certainly in a war with Mexico, probably with other Foreign Powers, dangerous to the integrity of the Union, inexpedient to in the present financial conditions of the country, and not called for by any general expression of public opinion.

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<sup>110</sup>Schlesinger, 760; Cooper, South and the Politics of Slavery, p. 199; Buck, Virginia and the Mexican War, p. 14.

<sup>111</sup>Richmond Enquirer, 28 May 1844, 4 June 1844.

<sup>112</sup>Dunning, Southern Perception, p. 65; Merk, Slavery and Annexation, p. 95.

<sup>113</sup>Sobel, Conquest and Conscience, p. 235.

In an effort to reassure the North, he addressed the issue of slavery and concluded that Texas would not add strength to the South because only two of five perspective states had potential as slave states. The other three, which would fall west and north of San Antonio, would most likely remain free states because of soil and climate.<sup>114</sup>

The Whig urged Virginian voters to do their duty and let the politicians remember "that we oppose a party who openly go for the annexation of Texas," and the "vilest of all propositions," paying the debt of Texas.<sup>115</sup> Their appeals went unheeded as Polk ascended to the presidency. The election far from resolved the dangers of annexation. The Whig feared that despite cross-sectional parties the Union would dissolve because the North and South would fight over the tariff, Texas, and slavery.<sup>116</sup>

Tyler interpreted Polk's election as a mandate for annexation and adopted a proposal made by both Mississippi Senator R.J. Walker and South Carolina Democrat Senator George McDuffie earlier in the year, to annex Texas by a joint resolution of Congress.<sup>117</sup> A joint resolution allowed Tyler to bypass the Senate, whose Whig majority would never give him the two-thirds vote necessary to ratify a treaty, and lobby for a simple majority in each chamber to approve annexation. His move

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<sup>114</sup>Richmond Enquirer, 30 April 1844.

<sup>115</sup>Richmond Whig, 29 October 1844.

<sup>116</sup>Richmond Whig, 15 November 1844.

met with disgust from Whigs who noted with contempt that "the Power of Congress to annex a foreign power by joint resolution— is an absurdity—the discovery of which seems to have been reserved for this age of political empyricism and folly."<sup>118</sup>

As the joint resolution to annex Texas appeared before Congress, the Whig continued to denounce "reckless, immediate annexationists."<sup>119</sup> Later that month, the Whigs reiterated the idea that the United States had no right to claim Texas, especially since the United States still retained Florida, for which it was originally traded.<sup>120</sup> This should have been obvious to Whig readers even without questioning the constitutionality of the annexation, which the paper went on to do.

Southern Whigs, pointing out that unilateral annexation of a sovereign state was unconstitutional, held that Tyler was invoking a dangerously loose construction of the Constitution when he proposed legislative annexation as the legal means to acquire Texas.<sup>121</sup> Virginia Whigs reminded their opponents that it was the Constitution that provided the legal safeguard for slavery and that any loose interpretation of that document threatened to set a precedent for extinguishing slavery. Therefore, Whigs protested against Tyler's broad interpretation

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<sup>117</sup>Richmond Enquirer, 28 May 1844; Tyler, Letters and Times of the Tylers, Vol. 2: 331.

<sup>118</sup>Richmond Whig, 8 February 1845.

<sup>119</sup>Richmond Whig, 03 January 1845.

<sup>120</sup>This refers back to the Adams-Onis Treaty of 1819 between the United States and Spain.

<sup>121</sup>Dunning, Southern Perception, p. 138.

of the Constitution.<sup>122</sup> Opposing a joint resolution on Constitutional grounds as a tactic to block annexation appealed to Southerners who feared for the future of slavery and to Northerners who opposed expansion.

However, it was Whig Representative Milton Brown from Tennessee who proposed the terms of the accepted resolution. Texas would be admitted as five states whose boundaries were set by the United States. Residents in states formed below the Missouri Compromise line of 36'30" would determine the status of slavery; states above that line would be free states. Texas would retain its public lands and sell them to pay the public debt.<sup>123</sup> In February, the Enquirer championed the Brown plan for annexing Texas. The paper stressed that the plan was based on the Constitution and that no section of the country should be upset by its provisions. Both chambers approved the resolution on March 1, 1845. To secure his place in history, Tyler dispatched an invitation of statehood to Texas on March 3, the night before he was to defer his powers to President-elect, James K. Polk.

Both papers reiterated their party's position on annexation after the passage of the resolution. The Enquirer and the Democrats were clearly pleased. The paper gleefully announced a "glorious result," and Ritchie gave annexation supporters "a feather in their Caps." Party unity had been

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<sup>122</sup>Dunning, Southern Perception, p. 98.

<sup>123</sup>Richmond Enquirer, 18 February 1845.

achieved as all the Democrats in the Senate, and all but two in the House, voted for Texas.<sup>124</sup>

The Whigs, on the other hand, denounced Tyler as an "uncrowned monarch." In the Whig, Pleasants bitterly noted that "the Annexation of Texas—the favorite hobby of Mr. Tyler—has succeeded in Congress, but at the expense of the Constitution." The only good news was that "the mean, weak, ignoble, and corrupt administration of John Tyler is closed."<sup>125</sup>

The Enquirer and Whig show that the debate in Virginia surrounding the annexation of Texas did follow partisan ideology. While the issue of slavery was recognized as a factor, politicians continued to downplay its importance in contrast to the larger issue of expansion. Virginia Whigs and Democrats debated the possibility of annexation using arguments that supported party ideology and rhetoric and encompassed the issue of slavery within concerns such as the constitutionality of annexation that were less likely to ignite sectional division. Virginia politicians were successful; among Virginia congressmen, voting for the joint resolution fell along strictly party lines. In the rest of Congress, all but five Southern Whigs opposed it and only one Democrat joined the Whigs in opposition to the annexation.<sup>126</sup>

After the passage of the annexation resolution, the Enquirer's attacks on the Whig newspapers grew increasingly

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<sup>124</sup>Richmond Enquirer, 26 February 1845.

<sup>125</sup>Richmond Whig, 7 March 1845, reprinted from the New York Courier and Enquirer.

bitter. On September 30, 1845, the Enquirer accused the Whig press in Virginia of trying to undermine the confidence and ability of the current national administration because they continued to oppose Texas.<sup>127</sup> In addition, Ritchie addressed the tendency of Whig editors to denounce the annexation as a "plundering scheme of territorial aggrandizement" bound to bring about the downfall of the Republic. Pleasants and the Whigs, the Enquirer insisted, contradicted themselves if they supported the movement for Oregon and not Texas.<sup>128</sup> When Texas was finally annexed, the Enquirer was proud to note that, "The annexation of Texas came about through high moral and political grounds."<sup>129</sup>

The result of Tyler's maneuvering was that an issue voted along party lines unleashed clear sectional undertones. The Democrats supported Texas and recaptured the Virginia congress in the 1845 state elections. The Whigs stayed the party line and lost representation in Virginia.<sup>130</sup> Before the 1844 presidential election, James Pleasants wrote, "If J.K. Polk prevails over Henry Clay, THE WHIG PARTY IS NO MORE!"<sup>131</sup> Perhaps he was accurate in his prediction. Historian William Cooper suggests that "because of Texas the divided, dispirited Democrats became united and jubilant. Because of Texas the

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<sup>126</sup>Dunning, Southern Perception, p. 96.

<sup>127</sup>Richmond Enquirer, 30 September 1845.

<sup>128</sup>Richmond Enquirer, 18 November 1845.

<sup>129</sup>Richmond Enquirer, 09 October 1846.

<sup>130</sup>Freehling, The Road to Disunion, p. 427.

<sup>131</sup>Richmond Whig, 1 November 1844, cited in Cooper, South and the Politics of Slavery, p. 225.

united, jubilant Whigs became, albeit more slowly, fragmented and dispirited."<sup>132</sup>

What Tyler had promoted as a national issue, albeit with clear southern motives, was determined along party lines with sectional repercussions. Ultimately, annexation affected the ways the parties presented their platforms in the 1844 elections. While the Democrats experienced immediate success, annexation contributed to the growing resentment of Southern power that affected the Democratic party. Slavery forced the Whigs into an anti-annexation stance that cost them support in the South. So, while the actual roll-call vote on the joint resolution seemed to support a vibrant party system, the wheels of change had already set in motion the movement for sectionalism to replace partisan loyalty as the prime consideration of voters and politicians.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>132</sup>Cooper, South and the Politics of Slavery, p. 218.

<sup>133</sup>Smith, Annexation of Texas, pp. 345-347. In the final Senate vote, annexation was approved by the margin 27-25, with three Whigs crossing party lines to support it. Similarly, in the House vote of 132-76, only one Whigs supported the measure and two Democrats opposed it.

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## ABSTRACT

In the 1830s and 1840s, the Whig and Democratic parties were distinct, cross-sectional parties with loyal followers. Because slavery had the potential to create rifts between the North and South, Jacksonian politics stressed party loyalty over sectional loyalty. While antebellum politicians often debated the future of slavery, it was common practice to address slavery as part of larger party questions.

The annexation of Texas is one example of an issue that had clear ties to the future of slavery, yet was determined as a party question. Savvy politicians focused the debate away from slavery to economic issues, the role of the government, and the Constitutionality of annexation. By doing so, they hoped to strengthen cross-sectional political parties which tended to unify the country as a whole.

Partisan newspapers played an active role in antebellum politics and the debate over annexation. In Richmond, Virginia, each party published an influential, widely read party paper.

The Richmond Enquirer promoted the Democratic party and annexation. The Richmond Whig championed the Whig party and opposed annexation. The purpose of this thesis is to use partisan papers to demonstrate Virginia politicians' attempts to frame annexation in broad party terms, not as sectional issues. In the end, however, the underlying association between slavery and annexation fixed each party's reputation in the minds of Southern voters. This association undermined the second American party system. Thus, the debate over annexation foreshadowed the sectionalism that would lead to the Civil War.