The First Sectional Crisis: The 1844-1845 Texas Annexation Debate

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“I regret that I am now to die in the belief, that the useless sacrifice of themselves by the
generation of 1776, to acquire self-government and happiness to their country, is to be thrown
away by the unwise and unworthy passions of their sons, and that my only consolation is to be,
that I live not to weep over it.”¹ This passage appeared in a letter written by Thomas Jefferson² to
his friend Representative John Holmes in response to the passing of the Missouri Compromise in
April of 1820. The Missouri Compromise was a resolution passed by Congress to maintain the
balance of power between slave and non-slave states within the United States Senate, by
admitting Missouri as a slave state and Maine as a free state. As the balance of slave and free
states were equal at the time each side feared that adding one or the other would tip the balance.
Since several abolitionists advocated for Missouri to ban slavery, Representative James
Tallmadge of New York proposed a bill that would prevent the creation of additional slave state
and would emancipate all slaves when they reached the age of twenty-five. Southern
representatives were enraged by Tallmadge’s legislation. Tallmadge’s responded to the situation
by challenging the Southern representatives, “Sir, language of this sort has no effect on me; my
purpose is fixed, it is interwoven with my existence, its durability is limited with my life, it is a
great and glorious cause, setting bounds to a slavery the most cruel and debasing the world ever
witnessed; it is the freedom of man; it is the cause of unredeemed and unregenerated human

¹ Thomas Jefferson, “Letter to John Holmes,” April 22, 1820, Teaching American History, Ashland University,
² The full letter shows the complex character of Jefferson and how his stance on slavery is such a complex issue. To
fully understand and grasp who he was there are works to investigate, they include, Jon Meacham, Thomas
highly in this book focusing on him as a strong leader of the United States. John Boles, Jefferson: Architect of
book argues that Jefferson is not a hypocrite for his varying stances on issues like slavery and should be
remembered as a great architect for this this country. Lastly Bernard Mayo, Jefferson Himself: The Personal
Narrative of a Many-Sided American, (Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 1942). While Mayo’s book is
older than the others his book contains almost all the major writings of Jefferson. This allows for a more in-depth
look into the works of this complicated man and gives detail into how he viewed this issue of slavery.
beings.”³ With Tallmadge’s bill you have an escalation of the issue of how to resolve these two states, as well as the issue of slavery in states to come, and what is the best measure for Congress to take to solve these issues.

In response to the issue of slavery in these states, as well as the threats of secession, Speaker of the House Henry Clay stepped forward with an idea of passing three bills together. These pieces of legislation would ultimately compose the Missouri Compromise. The first bill was to admit Missouri as a slave state and Maine as a free state under one bill, “when the question was taken on concurring in the amendment reported by the Judiciary Committee, (to unite the Maine and Missouri bills together) and decided in the affirmative by yeas and nays, as follows: For uniting the bill...23. Against uniting the bills...21.”⁴ The second part of the compromise was to agree to draw the line between free and slave,

that in all that territory ceded by France to the United States, under the name of Louisiana, which lies north of thirty-six degrees and thirty minutes north latitude,

excepting only such part thereof as is included within the limits of the State contemplated by this act, Slavery and involuntary servitude, otherwise than in the punishment of crimes whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall be and is hereby forever prohibited.⁵

The passage of the Missouri Compromise temporarily saved the Union and resolved the issue of slavery.\(^6\)

Texas, being outside of the Missouri Compromise, posed an issue of whether Texas should be a slave or free state. Texas gained its independence from Mexico in 1836. While Mexico refused to acknowledge the independence making American annexation difficult as it could lead to war. The Tyler administration in 1843 began secretly negotiating with Texas. By April 1844 he had a treaty of annexation that he submitted to Congress. When the letter of Secretary of State John C. Calhoun was revealed to the senate it stated annexation was for the extension of slavery. By stating this Calhoun brought the question of slavery to the Senate. The addition of the question of slavery to the Texas Annexation resulted in numerous debates and hostility between those who were for or against the annexation of Texas. The debate over slavery led to the rejection of the first treaty in 1844 and a new treaty would not be ratified till 1845. The South saw annexation as a move for the security and safely of their way of life, as well as additional lands for the extension of slavery. The abolitionists of the North saw only the risk of the extension of slavery and sought to stop annexation and the spread of slavery at any cost.

Scholars have written and discussed the results and effects of the Texas debate for decades with varying results. This paper will focus on the main result to come out of the Texas Annexation Debate. Fredrick Merk, in his book \textit{Slavery and the Annexation of Texas}\(^7\) chooses to focus on the propaganda used to convince Americans. Focusing on the idea that the importance

\(^6\) Robert Pierce Forbes, \textit{The Missouri Compromise and Its Aftermath}, (Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 36-37, 112-119. Forbes book does an excellent job discussing the issues that the Missouri Compromise caused in the United States government, looking for more on Clay's role, one twelve to one nineteen talks about the resolution to the second issue with the Missouri compromise that the state didn’t want free blacks in it and thirty-six to thirty-seven talks about clay's role in the Missouri compromise.

of this debate was to see how the propaganda was used to convince Americans to annex Texas. Joel Silbey writes in his book *Storm Over Texas: The Annexation Controversy and the Road to Civil War*\(^8\) that it was a partisan issue more than a sectional issue until the Polk presidency where a few Pro-Southerners flip their vote. Historians like Eugene C. Barker\(^9\) focus more on the international relationships with Britain and Mexico and how Texas annexation impacted their goals in the region. Recent articles by Michael Woods\(^10\) and Michael Morrison\(^11\) talk about the Texas annexation as a sectional crisis, but just one of many not the most important one.

Regarding Merks emphasis of propaganda, I think that propaganda may have played some part in the Texas annexation to keep the Northern Democrats from switching sides, but the Southern Whigs switched sides because they choose to. In the Southern Whigs own speeches to the senate, they choose to brush off the question of slavery and even support it, agreeing with the Democrats. This seems to be their genuine feelings that are sectionally based because they are Southern men, not the result of propaganda. To the question of a partisan divide, this paper argues that partisan divisions take a backseat to the sectional ones. Northern Democrats voted to annex Texas because of the Polk’s claim that he would get the Oregon land to balance out the acquiring of land North and South of the Missouri line. Without this agreement there was no guarantee that the Northern Democrats would not revolt and join the Whigs in the resistance.

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Meanwhile the Southern Whigs choose willingly to follow the ideas of the South and joined with the Democrat position to vote for annexation. Foreign relations with countries involved are important to the Texas story as annexation leads to war with Mexico. The question of sectionalism that grows from this debate though will have a deeper impact on America. More so than the fallout of relations with Britain or Mexico as a result of Annexation. While I agree with historians that cast Annexation as a sectional crisis, I disagree with annexation just being called another sectional crisis. In contrast to existing scholarship my paper argues that the Texas Annexation represents the first major section conflict. The conflict would also be the start of the chain of events such as the Mexican American war and the Kansas and Nebraska Act that would lead to a Civil War.

The Texas annexation represents the first major sectional fight. The idea of sectionalism in the alignment of ideological and geographical divisions. Prior to the Missouri Compromise the divide was blurred; while there were more slave sympathizers in the South and abolitionists dominated the Northern states, they still had a mixture of people supporting slaves or emancipation scattered throughout all states. The Missouri Comprise cut the country in two and divided the United States to Northern and Southern sections. These sections then began to take a stronger stance towards either for or against slavery. The idea of a middle ground and compromise was beginning to disappear. The Texas debate strongly showed how the split was affecting Congress as a division between North and South became apparent, since representatives voted based on sectional lines instead of with their parties. This paper looks at the Democratic Party and the Whig Party through the eyes of four of its more prominent and vocal members who by the state they represent and their arguments for or against slavery. It also will engage with the stories of four men who face the growing sectionalism and their stories on how
it shaped their careers and choices during the debate. By seeing how sectionalism affected their choices and careers you can see how there is a split in American ideologies along two sections and compromise and middle ground are not what people want anymore.

The Democratic Party and Pro-Slavery Thought

To understand the question of slavery in the Texas Annexation we need to see it through the eyes of those who defended it the strongest. The party whose stance shifted to supporting slavery was the Democratic Party. The Democratic Party of the Texas debate was founded in 1828 under the leadership of Andrew Jackson. The principles of the party were to expand individual rights and work towards a smaller government. With the focus on individualism, the Democratic Party gained support from Southern slaveholders as the south saw slavery as a question not belonging in the congressional debate. By the time of the Texas debate the Democratic base was drawing heavily from Southern slave owners to carry the party in the South. The Democratic Party embodied many of the southerner’s views regarding slavery, including several racial ideologies which eventually would shape their party on the Texas Annexation. Defending the institution and spread of slavery was becoming a major part of the Democratic stance at this time. With some people fearing they planned to bring Texas in as a

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13 To see just how important the southern vote was this chart will allow you to see how the states voted, you will notice even the states in the south the Polk lost were razor thin loses and shows the strength of Democratic support in the South, “1844 Presidential General Election Data – National,” Official publications from state election agencies, accessed November 22, 2018, https://uselectionatlas.org/RESULTS/data.php?year=1844&datatype=national&def=1&f=0&off=0&eject=0.
slave state in order to expand the slave empire in the south.\textsuperscript{14} This paper will illustrate the Democratic position by focusing on the views of four prominent members John C. Calhoun, James K. Polk, Robert Walker, and George McDuffie. This evidence shows how the Democratic Party moved from a more neutral stance to a very pro-slavery stance.

Slavery had been a part of the United States even before the country existed. In 1790 estimates indicate there were 654,121 slaves in Southern states and by 1840 there were 2,481,390 slaves.\textsuperscript{15} This number increased significantly during the twenty years after the Constitutional Convention. After those twenty years the slave trade would be banned, “at Congress would abolish the slave trade at the end of twenty years, an expectation that was borne out of Congressional Legislation passed in 1807 and taking effect in 1808.”\textsuperscript{16} Even with the ban taking effect in 1808, the growth in number of slaves was not slowed and as the American nation moved further West so did the practice of slavery with around one million slaves moving west over the years of 1790 to 1860.\textsuperscript{17} The South defended slavery in Congress as often as needed because for them slavery was not a moral evil.\textsuperscript{18} It was important for Southern Congressmen to have the question of slavery be beyond the power of Congress. By doing this the South could prevent any legislation from limiting or hurting slavery.\textsuperscript{19} To rationalize the spread of slavery, a philosophy known as “spread theory”, “that it was necessary to extend and spread the institution

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\textsuperscript{14} Robert Merry, \textit{A Country of Vast Designs: James K. Polk, the Mexican War, and the Conquest of the American Continent}, (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2009), 8.
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\textsuperscript{16} Peter Kolchin, \textit{American Slavery 1619-1877}, (New York, Hill and Wang, 1993), 79.
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\textsuperscript{17} Kolchin, 96.
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\textsuperscript{18} Sumner Jenkins, 55.
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\textsuperscript{19} Sumner Jenkins, 69.
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into new territory so as to lighten its burden on the old slave communities.”20 This claim was backed by the belief that it was not evil if the number of slaves in an area was balanced, meaning not an overabundance of slaves in one area, and that it was an intolerable evil only if it was out of proportion. The Democratic party had many influential members who advocated for Texas Annexation, Secretary of State and former Vice-President John C. Calhoun, President James K. Polk, Senator Robert Walker, and Senator George McDuffie.

John Calhoun (1782-1850) was the Secretary of State for President John Tyler. Under Tyler the first negotiations for Texas Annexation happened21. Calhoun as Secretary of State worked closely with the Ambassadors from Texas and Britain. This interaction led Calhoun to make a crucial mistake costing the annexation of Texas to fail on its first vote. In a letter to Richard Pakenham, British ambassador to America, Calhoun laid out the position of America on Texas Annexation. Calhoun’s letter points to British attempts to convince Texas to give up slavery in exchange for Mexico granting them independence. Calhoun state this threatens the institution of slavery in America, “under this conviction, it is felt to be the imperious duty of the Federal Government, the common representative and protector of the States of the Union, to adopt, in self-defense, the most effectual measures to defeat it.”22 Calhoun is justifying American annexation in the grounds that Britain’s attempt to have Texas get rid of slavery threatened Americas institution of slavery. He later emphasized the need of the institution of slavery for the United States, “In this view of the subject it may be asserted, that what is called slavery is in

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20 Sumner Jenkins, pg.70. He notes that spread theory is a product of a report on slavery adopted by the Tennessee Convention of 1834. Journals of the Convention of the State of Tennessee convened for the purpose of revising and amending the constitution thereof, held at Nashville, (Nashville 1834), 90.
21 A great resource for more background information on Calhoun is, Richard N. Current, John C. Calhoun, (New York, Washington Square Press, INC., 1966), 19-76. In this area Doctor Current focuses heavily on how Calhoun advocated for slavery as well as his opinions on state rights.
reality a political institution, essential to the peace, safety, and prosperity of those States of the Union in which it exists.” When his letter was published to the senate April 22, 1844 with the treaty it caused an immediate problem within the Senate as it showed plain and clear that America was going to annex Texas to protect the institution of slavery. Calhoun’s letter revealed the South’s fear of being overwhelmed by outside pressures to remove Slavery, therefore it became clear that Texas was essential to both expanding and protecting slavery. "Calhoun could only begin to provoke a 'sense of crisis' with southern Democrats., and "The Packenham Letter could rally southern Democrats against the party's northern establishment." Calhoun shows how the fear of the loss of slaves was a driving factor for the Democrats to support slavery and the south.

In the first year of the James K. Polk (1795-1849) presidency, Texas was officially annexed to the United States. His position within U.S. history will be as an expansionist and Texas was his first acquisition. In his Inaugural address, he stated explained that Texas as a territory that should have always been in the Union,

The Republic of Texas has made known her desire to come into our Union, to form a part of our Confederacy and enjoy with us the blessings of liberty secured and guaranteed by our Constitution. Texas was once a part of our country--was unwisely ceded away to a foreign power--is now independent, and possesses an undoubted right to dispose of a part or the

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23 C. Calhoun, pg.339.
25 Robert W. Merry, A Country of Vast Designs: James K. Polk, the Mexican War, and the Conquest of the American Continent, (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2009), 65-80. While the whole book itself is a good history of all of James K. Polk’s achievements and life, the pages sixty-five to eighty focus on Texas and Polk’s relation to it.
Paul H. Bergeron, The Presidency of James K. Polk, (Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1987), 51-65. This book is another great book to see Polk’s involvement with Texas. The book also shows how he won the Presidency in the South and North and is a great way to see how he campaigned to win the support of both.
whole of her territory and to merge her sovereignty as a separate and independent state in ours.  

Polk believed that Texas was a part of the United States when the Louisiana Territory was purchased from France in 1803, but a treaty with Spain forfeited Texas in order to acquire Florida. Polk echoed common feelings that land that was rightfully America’s was given away. By his first annual address, Texas was within President Polk’s grasp, “The terms of annexation which were offered by the United States having been accepted by Texas, the public faith of both parties is solemnly pledged to the compact of their union. Nothing remains to consummate the event but the passage of an act by Congress to admit the State of Texas into the Union upon an equal footing with the original States.”

What is unique about Polk’s position is his unwillingness to make the Texas Annexation about slavery or even make mention of the extension of Slavery. It wasn’t until after the Texas Annexation and Mexican War that in his final address as President he acknowledges question of the extension of slavery, “I have heretofore expressed the opinion that that line of compromise should be extended on the parallel of 36° 30′ from the western boundary of Texas, where it now terminates, to the Pacific Ocean. This is the middle ground of compromise, upon which the different sections of the Union may meet, as they have heretofore met.”

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28 A unique note is that Polk was a slaveholder himself yet would not take a stance here during the annexation to ensure it was a slave state.
below the 36° 30' parallels except for the small bit of Northern Texas. What Polk wants is to simply take the Missouri compromise and drag it from coast to coast eliminating a debate on what to do with lands outside the original Missouri Compromise. Even without taking a side in the argument on slavery Polk was still able to accomplish the annexation that would admit Texas into the United States as a slave state.

Robert Walker (1801-1869) a Senator from Mississippi during the debate on Texas, provided an economic argument for the institution of slavery, as well as its continuation into Texas. In a letter responding to the people of Carroll county Kentucky, who requested the opinion of Walker on the question of slavery. Walker responded with a letter in January of 1844, about how the party that wishes to abolish slavery does not think of the economic issues that such an action would create. He talks of the wealth that Southern states created through their products to the Union, as well as how this wealth allows them to purchase goods from the North and with the removal of slavery that would destroy both of their economies “strike down these products by the immediate abolition of slavery, and the markets of the South, for want of the means to purchase, will be lost to the people of the North; and North and South will be involved in one common ruin.”

He goes on farther to state how it would decimate the world of the interior states, “in the interior, the railroads and canals would languish for want of business; and the factories and manufacturing towns and cities, decaying and deserted, would stand as blasted monuments of the folly of man.” By focusing on the economy Walker reinforces the point for Southern slaveholders on the necessity of the slave driven economy and the need to protect the

31 Walker, 11.
institution of slavery and its spread. Walker is important in showing how the thoughts of slave owners had entered the prominent members of the Democratic Party. By being requested by a county for his opinion Walker shows his importance to the party as people respected his opinion. The opinion of Walker being so strongly in favor of slavery shows how the ideologies are becoming a part of their thoughts.

Georgie McDuffie (1790-1851) a Senator from South Carolina spoke before Congress on the topic of slavery and Texas. In his address on May 23, 1844, McDuffie argues the position of spread theory before Congress, that without Texas annexation the chances of free African Americans, not just the ones who are slaves, are hurt. “Now, if we shall annex Texas, it will operate as a safety-valve to let off the superabundant slave' population from among us; and will, at the same time, improve their condition. They will be more happy, and we all shall be more secure. But if you pen them up within our present limits, what becomes of the free negroes, and what will be their condition?”32 McDuffie giving a voice to the spread theory supports the Southern ideology that expansion is a good thing not only for the Southern planters but for the slaves, saying that this would improve slaves’ lives.

The point of these men was their arguments. First, each of these men are Southern men, meaning they are where the heart of slave thought, and slavery was. The importance of this was what they bring to the debate, meaning their thoughts and ideas. First idea was that the spread of slavery was needed to protect the existing institution. Second was the idea of just extending the Missouri Compromise. Lastly was an economic defense as well as spread theory stating it will

improve lives. The importance that these men are using these ideas was that this was the common thoughts used by slaveholders to defend owning slaves and they are now being used in Congress to justify the expanding slavery as well as being used as a shield against the growing abolitionist voice in the Whig Party and more importantly from Northern States. This is important to the argument of sectionalism because it made the party more centralized to Southern ideologies and brought the position of the South to their politics. Doing this means Northern ideas are being pushed out of the Democratic Party.

**The Abolitionists of the Whig Party**

The abolitionist movement in its early beginnings (1775) found its place in the Whig Party as well as smaller third-parties. By the time of Texas Annexation more and more of this abolitionist thought was becoming a dominate part of the Whig Party, especially among Northern Whigs. The Whig Party was founded by Henry Clay with the purpose of opposing the ideologies of the Democratic party under the presidency of Andrew Jackson. The Whig Party embodied several of the doctrines of the Federalist party which collapsed in 1814 with the conclusion of the War of 1812. The Whigs supported a stronger federal government with a more direct role in the lives of its citizens by working to create a moral citizenry. With the increased abolitionist sentiment in the north, the Whig Party adopted a resistance to annexing Texas on the idea that it was a pro-slavery choice. The four members of the Whigs are the well-known and well-respected members of their party, Salmon Chase, John Quincy Adams, Abraham Lincoln, and Henry Clay. They will show how the Northern ideologies are becoming a part of the Whig Party.

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Abolitionist groups had been around in the United States since its creation and some of the founding fathers themselves fought to end the institution of slavery. The hypocrisy of some of them fighting against slavery was the fact that they had owned slaves in their lifetimes. The movement of anti-slavery grew quickly, especially in the Northern states where slavery was slowly banned, with Vermont in 1777 being the first to outlaw it in their constitution. Several groups opposed slavery such as the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society, New England Anti-Slavery Society, and two female groups opposed to slavery the Pennsylvania and Boston Female Anti-Slavery Societies. At the time of Texas annexation question, it was clear to the growing number of abolitionists that the annexation of Texas would lead to the spread of slavery. This reasoning was reinforced by Vice President Calhoun’s letter to Richard Pakenham stating his reinforcement of slavery. The Whig party had several prominent abolitionists in its ranks, including Senator Salmon Chase, House of Representative and former President John Quincy Adams, Senator and later President Abraham Lincoln, and Senator Henry Clay.

Salmon Chase served as Senator of Ohio and later became President Lincoln’s Secretary of the Treasury and a Supreme Court Justice. Chase believed that the country was aware of the dangers of slavery. On with On February 15, 1842, he wrote a letter to Joshua Giddings, that “The country is beginning to awake at length to the danger of slaveholding encroachments, and

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35 Letter quoted on page 8-9.  
36 Salmon chase is a very interesting Senator as he served his time in both the Whig party as well as part of independent parties such as the free-soil party and the liberty party. Two good Sources to look further into Senator Chase are, Fredrick J. Blue, Salmon P. Chase: A Life in Politics, (Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1987). Which looks at the political career of Chase and will allow you to view the anti-slavery views he had. The other is, Salmon P. Chase, Maintain Plighted Faith: Speech of Hon, S. P. Chase, of Ohio, in the Senate, February 3, 1854, Against the Repeal of the Missouri Prohibition of Slavery North of 36, 30, (Washington: Printed at the Congressional Globe Office,1854). This is the work of Chase while later then this debate it shows his strong feeling about the spread of slavery in the Kansas Nebraska Act.
the time is rapidly drawing on, I trust, when the champions of freedom will have the place which of right belongs to them in the confidence and favor of a long deceived and oppressed, but now awakening public.”

Chase holds faith that the resistance to slavery will come from the public. He sees the Texas Annexation as way for people to finally stand up against slavery. He represents the stronger feelings of abolitionists at the time who wanted a full freedom for the slaves and saw their chance now to act.

Northern abolitionists also took a stance against slavery for the moral crisis it presented. Two men who took this position were John Quincy Adams and Abraham Lincoln. At the time of the annexation debate John Quincy Adams was a House of Representative member from the state of Massachusetts. Adams focused not on how slavery would affect the United States directly but instead on its effect on America’s image in the world. Adams’ stance in the House was focused more on shaming people into seeing slavery as a sin. In a discussion in the House of Representatives on June 30, 1838, Adams explained that in the eyes of Europe, Americans were hypocrites for their stance on slavery, “Sir, this philosophy of the South has done more to blacken the character of this country in Europe than all other causes put together. They point to us as a nation of liars and hypocrites, who publish to the world that all men are born free and equal, and then hold a large portion of our own population in bondage.”


38 Leonard L. Richards, *The Life and Times of Congressman John Quincy Adams*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 89-113, 146-173. This book focuses on Adams time only as Senator skipping over his early years and Presidency. Pages eighty-nine to one thirteen are before the Texas annexation and are his rise as an anti-slave Representative. One forty-six to one seventy-three are about the Texas annexation debate and Adams role as an opposition to annexation and the extension of slavery.

to the issue of slavery as an issue of the Constitution as well as pointing to the culture of the South as a stain on the United States.

Abraham Lincoln’s stance is unique because while he decried slavery, he also accepted that, by the Constitution, it was legal for states to choose to establish or prohibit slavery. In a letter to Williamson Dursley, an abolitionist, Lincoln points to annexation as evil and would deprive slaves a chance at freedom, “It is possibly true, to some extent, that with annexation, some slaves may be sent to Texas and continued in slavery, that otherwise might have been liberated. To whatever extent this may be true, I think annexation an evil.” At the same time, he did not fully stand against slavery and instead seemed resolved to let it be a state’s right, “I hold it to be a paramount duty of us in the free states, due to the Union of the states, and perhaps to liberty itself (paradox though it may seem) to let the slavery of the other states alone.” While John Adams takes a harder moral stance against slavery stating plainly how he sees it as a stain, Lincoln takes a closer to middle ground calling it evil but accepting it as a state’s right.

Henry Clay’s views were similar to many of the founders, who would later turn against slavery but still owned slaves. Clay himself owned around sixty slaves throughout his life.

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40 Chris DeRose, *Congressman Lincoln: The Making of America’s Greatest President*, (New York: Threshold Editions, 2013). DeRose covers the Congressional life of Abraham Lincoln, while by the Texas debate time he was beginning to emerge as a Prominent Whig this work is a great source for understanding the Political Career of Lincoln and how he emerged to become later a president. Stefan Lorant, *The Life of Abraham Lincoln*, (New York: Signet Key books, 1955). Like DeRose, Lorant talks about Lincoln’s political career but he also goes further into the Presidency of Lincoln and is a great source for looking at how Lincoln became the President and lead the nation through a Civil War.


42 Lincoln to Williamson Durley

43 George Rawlings Poage, *Henry Clay and the Whig party*, (Gloucester, Massachusetts: Peter Smith, 1965), 123-139. These pages of Poage focus on how Clay led the Whig party when the question of Texas Annexation happened. It gives good detail into how he and Van Buren tried to prevent the election from being consumed by the question even though it was inevitable with Tyler bringing the Texas Annexation to the Senate.
While he had a long political career in the Senate and House of Representatives, Clay is best remembered as the creator of the Missouri Compromise that drew a line on how far North slavery would be permitted. Clay like Lincoln did not agree with slavery, but admitted it was part of America in his letter to John Switzer on May of 1831 where he stated his position, “slavery is undoubtedly a manifest violation of the rights of man. It can only be justified in America, if at all, by necessity. That it entails innumerable mischiefs upon our Country I think is quite clear. It may become dangerous in particular parts of the Union. But the slaves can never, I think, acquire permanent ascendancy in any part.”44 He takes this opinion to the debate on Texas where he wrote a letter to the editors of the Washington Daily National Intelligencer on April 17, 1844. In this letter he explained,

> Suppose Great Britain and France, or one of them, were to take part with Mexico, and, by a manifesto, were to proclaim that their objects were to assist a weak and helpless ally to check the spirit of encroachment and ambition of an already overgrown Republic, seeking still further acquisitions of territory, to maintain the independence of Texas, disconnected with the United States, and to prevent the further propagation of slavery from the United States, what would be the effect of such allegations upon the judgment of an impartial and enlightened world?45

A few months later in July, he would contradict himself in his stance on Texas in response to pressure from Southern Whigs that stated he would annex Texas if it were assured no war with

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Mexico would occur, “I have, however, no hesitation in saying, that far from having any personal objections to the annexation of Texas, I should be glad to see it without dishonor – without war, with the common consent of the Union and upon just and fair terms.”46 By saying this Clay was leaving open a chance for the annexation of Texas.

The importance of this change is that Clay tried to bridge the separatism and keep the support of both sides. This change of position would lead many of the Northern Whigs who were abolitionists to feel betrayed, and they voted against Clay. They voted for James G. Birney who headed the third party ticket for the Liberty Party. This switch of Northern Whigs cost him the election in New York and a chance to prevent Texas Annexation. Lincoln points out in his letter to abolitionist William Dursley, “If the whig abolitionists of New York had voted with us last fall, Mr. Clay would now be president, whig principles in the ascendent, and Texas not annexed; whereas by the division, all that either had at stake in the contest, was lost.”47 This is important as Clay held a chance to win the election against Polk and with the presidency prevent the annexation from happening. Henry Clay is an example of this growing sectionalism between the North and South by trying to appease both parts he would lose the New York vote and allow the Democrats the White House.

The stances of these men show the drastic differences between the Democratic position and the Whigs who have given a voice to the abolitionists. This can be seen by how their ideas have become the points of the Whigs. The idea that this must be where it stops and was a chance to stand up against slavery was put through by men like Senator Chase. Lincoln and Adams bring the Constitution into the argument. Adams taking a harder stance using it to point to the

46 Merk, 96.
47 Lincoln to Williamson Durley
hypocrisy of it, while Lincoln states that because was a state right it must be accepted even if it
was wrong. Henry Clay is an example of this growing sectionalism between the North and South
by trying to appease both parts of his party he would lose and allow the Democrats to win the
Presidency. Clay is not the only person to have to face this growing sectionalism, nor the only
man whose choices affect the future of this debate.

Sectionalisms Effect on the Debate

While the Democratic and Whig parties both were set in their stance on slavery,
underneath the surface a growing level of sectionalism between North and South was beginning
to emerge. The first vote for Texas Independence was rejected by Whigs and even a few
Democrats joined them in response to the Calhoun’s letter and the secret negotiations of
President Tyler. The second vote only passed when three Whig members flipped their votes to
join with the Democrats to annex Texas. These votes were part of a growing sectionalism
between the North and the South that would later divide and engulf America in a civil war.

The idea of groups or sections within America is not a new or unexpected occurrence by
this point. From the beginning Americans have drawn lines on their ideas. In the first Congress
of the United States splits between ideologies were clear. Americans stood divided between the
Anti-Federalists and the Federalists.48 The fight of Federalists for a strong central government
and the Ant-Federalists for state powers. This was followed by the Democrat and Whig parties
where the fight between the two ideas continued with the Democrats arguing for a strong state

48 John H. Aldrich and Ruth W. Grant, “The Antifederalists, the First Congress, and the First Parties,” The Journal of
government and the Whigs for a stronger central government. By the time of the Texas
annexation the division regarding slavery had dividend the nation for almost eighty years. The
fight between anti-slavery and slavery raged on with the passing of both the three-fifths
compromise (1767) and the Northwestern Ordinance (1787), “The three-fifths compromise
sanctioned slavery more decidedly than any previous action at a national level.’ The
Northwestern Ordinance, on the other hand, was in Ulrich Phillips’ words "the first and last
antislavery achievement by the central government in the period.”49 As the disagreement of
slavery was fought in Congress, Northern and Southern ideologies emerged after the passage of
the Missouri Compromise we see that America had turned slavery into a sectional issue. This
came to head in the summer before the annexation of Texas, 1844, when several Ohio
abolitionists were captured attempting to free slaves and were taken to Virginia for trial. The
citizens of southern Ohio were enraged by this act, “The controversy stirred up by ‘the invasion
of Ohio’ was one indication of the strong abolitionist sentiment felt by many North of the
river.”50 This shift in seen in Ohio shows the more hostile position between the North and the
South. Seeing how sectionalism is entering party politics, makes the stories of these next four
men important. As all of them play a critical role in understanding how sectionalism in America
was happening. It was seen in the Presidency of Martin Van Buren, the Senator Thomas Benton,

Van Buren was the eighth president of the United States and during his administration the
first discussions to annex Texas were offered. Van Buren was a non-conformist Democrat; while

50 Kim Gruenwald, “Space and Place on the Early American Frontier: The Ohio Valley as a Region, 1790-1850,” Ohio
valley History, Vol. 4, no. 3, (Fall 2004): 45. accessed October 25, 2018,
he lived in a northern state his family had owned slaves, however he became an avid abolitionist. His abolitionist views were apparent in his inaugural address, where he pushed to end the slave trade in Washington D.C., "I must go into the Presidential chair the inflexible and uncompromising opponent of every attempt on the part of Congress to abolish slavery in the District of Columbia against the wishes of the slaveholding States, and also with a determination equally decided to resist the slightest interference with it in the States where it exists." Van Buren realized the delicate balance of the question of slavery between the North and South and recognized the discord that was growing within both parties. Texas approached the administration of Van Buren to attempt to join the Union. While considering the offer Van Buren decided to not approach the problem from fears of the growing sectionalism in America. By choosing to not engage in annexation Van Buren hoped to avoid the question and fight of slavery, “The assaults by those opposed to the annexation proposal raised issues that he did not want to confront. Among those, he was particularly sensitive to anything that might stir up angry debates between northerners and southerners.” Van Buren could see the growing tension within the parties and decided to avoid forcing the issue further during his administration. But by refusing to act or take a strong stance before the 1844 election Van Buren would lose the support of some democrats and with that loss, he would lose the nomination to a pro-annexation Democrat, James K. Polk. This shows how sectionalism affected the party convention as Van Buren could not convince the Southern voters to support him as he wasn’t pro-annexation or pro-

52 Silbey, 15.
slavery. By being neither of those he was not aligned with the Southern ideologies and they rejected him for a candidate that was, James K. Polk.

Senator Benton from Missouri faced the growing sectionalism within his own state. When it was discovered that President Tyler was secretly working with Texas on a plan for annexation, Senator Benton in outrage, voted with the Whigs to defeat the first annexation bill. Immediately after the bill’s defeat on Benton proposed a bill to have the President open negotiations between Texas and Mexico to settle its border dispute. To gain support for his bill, he talked about how he wants Texas back without unnecessary bloodshed, “I wish to get it back, and to get it with peace and honor at all events without unjust war, unconstitutionally made, on weak and groundless pretexts.” He went on to talk about how this should be able to pass without the interference of slavery in the question. Though he appeared to understand that avoiding the question of slavery is impossible, and talked about the growing sectionalism and how the South is taking on its own identity, “So far as slavery is concerned, then, the question is neutralized: it is as much free as slave; and it is greatly to be regretted – regretted by all the friends of the Union – that a different aspect has been given to it. I am southern by my birth southern in my affections, interests, and connections and shall abide the fate of the South in every thing in which she has right upon her side.” Senator Benton could see how America was shifting as he tried to reach for compromise, but he was pressured by the people of his state to be tougher in supporting the values of his Southern heritage. With the question of Texas annexation in the open both the House of Representatives and Senate went about creating bills to try to

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53 What is interesting about Senator Benton’s legacy is that after the Mexican American war he would proclaim on the senate floor that he was now opposed to slavery and would fight it, this would cost him his career in the South.
55 Benton, 619.
resolve the annexation crisis. Trying to reach a compromise Benton offered an idea that would split Texas into two parts, free and slave. He was forced to withdraw this offer after receiving pressure from his own state which was heavily pro-slavery. He then wrote what would become one of the Texas bills passed which called for a simple five-man commission to annex Texas, without the question of slavery, “The bill which I now offer is the same which I have presented heretofore, divested of its conditions, and committing the subject to the discretion of the President to accomplish the object in the best way that he can, and either negotiate a treaty to be submitted to the Senate, or to agree upon articles of union to be submitted to the two Houses of Congress.”\textsuperscript{56} His legacy will be that he submitted the bill that would annex Texas, but his underlying story will be how he attempted to reach a compromise and offer a middle ground to and the people of his state did not want this. This shows that they were no longer interested in deals like the Missouri Compromise that appeased both sides and kept balance in the senate, they saw their chance to seize the majority.

Senators John Henderson of Missouri and Henry Johnson of Louisiana were members of the Whig party but because of being senators for Southern states their views contrasted with their party. They, along with another Whig, William Merrick, flipped their vote to join with the Democratic party to pass the Texas annexation bill.\textsuperscript{57} Both senators represented the sectionalism within America by representing the North South division. By choosing to ignore the party’s stance as well as going further and embracing the Southern ideologies, even joining Democrats in defending the institution of slavery. Henderson would state, “it cannot be doubted but the

\textsuperscript{56} Benton, 635.
slave’s condition is bettered by the operation.”\textsuperscript{58} Johnson’s opinion was that Texas was, “to strengthen those rights, and to promote the permanent prosperity and glory of the nation.”\textsuperscript{59} Because of their beliefs that Texas Annexation was good and by not voting with their parties, they are the reason Texas was annexed. If they had stayed with their parties’ position of the annexation they would have voted to reject and would have stopped the annexation. They show the real issue of annexation at that time. They voted with their region’s ideologies and not with their parties. Showing that the divide was no longer by party lines but by ideological lines between North and South.

The While this did not mean that some men in the North didn’t support slavery, or that some men of the South didn’t oppose the question of slavery. It was still becoming apparent that the Missouri Compromise not only divided free and slave states but becoming more of a line to divide free and slave ideologies. AS Van Buren shows he understood that this issue would cause a debate and division between the North and South but by not siding with the South they would reject him as their Presidential Candidate and would vote Polk in as he supported the Southern Ideologies. Benton tried to be like Henry Clay and reach a Compromise when it came to Texas. This middle ground though was not going to be enough for his state and they forced him to rescind the offer for something that would support their ideologies and expand slavery. Henderson and Johnson show that party loyalty is no longer going to be a thing as they reject their parties’ position in favor of their state’s ideologies and stance on both slavery and annexation.

\textsuperscript{58} Congressional Globe, 409, accessed November 22, 2018, https://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=llcg&fileName=015/llcg015.db&recNum=832.
\textsuperscript{59} Congressional Globe, 224, accessed November 22, 2018, https://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=llcg&fileName=015/llcg015.db&recNum=239.
Conclusion

Following the Texas annexation, the next event is the war with Mexico, the feeling of both events is described by Ulysses S. Grant, “Generally, the officers of the army were indifferent whether the annexation [of Texas] was consummated or not; but not so all of them. For myself, I was bitterly opposed to the measure, and to this day regard the war, which resulted, as one of the most unjust ever waged by a stronger against a weaker nation.”60 Next, Kansas and Nebraska Act of 1854, which would throw out the rules of the Missouri Compromise. The result was the event know as bloody Kansas, where a mini Civil War took place between the supporters of slavery and abolitionists. The final step is the snap that splits America into the Civil War. Multiple times across America the issue of sectionalism would be played out, with its roots right here in the events of the Texas annexation.61

Southern Democrats were vocal in their support of the Democratic party regarding the question on slavery. The importance of the strong Southern support shows the split of ideologies that existed between the North and South. Similarly, Northern abolitionists from within the Whig party were vocal in their opposition to slavery. The two sides began to line up support, not by their ideologies, but the support of the regions that shared their ideologies. This can be seen in the four prominent men for each party this paper talked about. In the four Democrats you see four Southern men defending the position of slavery very strongly. For the Whigs you have four

Northern men pushing the idea of abolitionism forward. Men who oppose the ideas of slavery within their region faced the danger of political lose, many had never faced this threat in their career. One example is Benton who opposed Texas annexation but, in the end, due to the pressure of his region voted for annexation. Van Buren who was anti-slavery and opposed the Texas annexation, would lose the opportunity to be the Democratic nominee. From where America was, with more of a mix, with more people in the North, while not owning slaves, supported the ideologies of slavery. The same for the South with men who disagreed with institution but still lived and held their opinions in the South. This demonstrates that America was not a mixture of those who supported slavery or opposed it, but instead it was beginning to make clear where the support of slavery was and those individuals and regions in opposition. The significance of this is the continual separation between North and South in ideologies to the point of the Civil War.

This paper follows the work of other political historians in emphasizing the importance of the Texas debate in the larger picture of the sectional crisis that would divide America. Where it differs is the importance assigned to this single event. This paper argues that the debate on Texas is the beginning of the end, the Missouri Compromise drew the line across America and the Texas debate is the first event which initiates events such as the Mexican American war and the Kansas Nebraska Act which lead our nation into a civil war. From this point there is no further compromise in the eyes of the North or South. As shown by these men the voices of the party had taken stronger stances one way or the other. The South wanted to see the spread of slavery and the North was unbending in its fight against it. They felt their ideas and their way of

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62 Political historians that talk about the sectional crisis are Michael Woods and Michael Morrison, mentioned page four, footnotes ten and eleven.
life was threatened by the other side in a way not seen prior to the Missouri Compromise and Texas debate. The Texas annexation and question of sectionalism are critical events to understanding this period of history, in addition the subsequent path our nation chose that would lead to the Civil War. By understanding this growth of sectionalism brought on by the Texas debate you see how the two lines of thought clashed and differed on a national scale. By being able to understand the importance of the Texas debate you can see how the people of the United States were becoming more and more split on their ideologies. The Texas Annexation leads to the Mexican American War another decision that further drives the North and South apart. The Kansas Nebraska Act, which destroys the Missouri Compromise and starts an almost Civil War in Kansas. These events are finalized in 1861 when the Civil War finally begins.

This paper engages the Democratic party and the Whig party through the eyes of four of its more prominent and vocal members, this does leave gaps for the many other members from both parties whose opinions are not included, therefore additional work and analyzation of each member of both parties may offer a more comprehensive view of the situation. Another shortcoming is the focus on largely senators and presidents, so further work into complete House of Representatives and Senate views may give more information into the sectionalism debate. Further research may also investigate how the Texas debate connects to the other events, both before, and after the annexation. By doing so you can create the road to the Civil War though the events leading from Texas. Examining Texas as the focal point you can expand further into these events with a better understanding of their place in this question of sectionalism.
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