JAMES K. POLK AND SLAVERY

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Richard Marsh, B. A.
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As a plantation owner, James K. Polk had economic interests which were bound to that peculiar institution. Consequently, many of his decisions as a politician were influenced by his southern background. Although his partiality toward "southern rights" was evident, he did not let his personal bias interfere with his determination to preserve the nation. Throughout his public career, he maintained that slavery was being exploited as a "political question" to divide the United States. Even though his opponents branded him a "sectionalist" for his position on the issues of Texas annexation, the Mexican War, and slavery in the territories, he still remained a staunch nationalist. This study proves that James K. Polk's "southern convictions" were secondary in importance compared to his concern for the preservation of the Union.
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CHAPTER I

JAMES K. POLK: PLANTATION OWNER

By the seventh decade of the twentieth century, James Knox Polk has become one of the least recognized presidents of the United States. Undoubtedly, most textbooks, biographical sketches and historical writings have done little to promote his image. Generally, Polk was either portrayed as the first "dark horse" presidential candidate, the president under whose administration the Mexican War was fought, or else as the president who helped the United States push westward in its search for Manifest Destiny.

Thus, it is little wonder that until recently Polk has received so little recognition. During much of his lifetime, attention was focused on Andrew Jackson and the rise of "Jacksonian Democracy." Although Jackson considered Polk an important politician in Tennessee, Polk remained a relatively unknown figure. This was evident when his nomination as Democratic candidate for the presidency in 1844 was announced. In reply to this news, the Whigs queried, "Who is Polk?" Much to their dismay, they soon ascertained that Polk was the next president of the United States.

However, the question about Polk's identity was never really answered until approximately three quarters of a century
after the Tennessean's death. Not until 1922 was the first scholarly biography of Polk published. The appearance of Eugene I. McCormac's political biography sparked new interest in Polk's reputation as a successful and strong executive. Consequently, Charles G. Sellers in 1957 began the first definitive biography of Polk. Even with this renewed interest, historians have, to a large extent, ignored Polk's relationship with the black and the institution of slavery. Yet, throughout much of his life, Polk was closely associated with blacks both as a plantation owner and as a politician.

James Polk's background was deeply rooted in the slave tradition of America. His ancestors settled in Mecklenburg County, North Carolina, which, by the early 1800's, was producing approximately one-third of North Carolina's cotton. Furthermore, Mecklenburg County ranked near the top of North Carolina counties in the rate of increase in slave population. Slaveholding was common to both the paternal and maternal side of Polk's family. His paternal grandfather, Ezekiel

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2 Ibid.

Polk, owned twenty-four slaves and had accumulated several thousand acres at the time of his death in 1824. 4 Samuel Polk, the father of James Knox Polk, was a man of great wealth. While residing in Mecklenburg County, Samuel Polk owned a 400-acre plantation with an unknown number of slaves. 5 In 1806, he and his family moved to Maury County, Tennessee. It was here that Samuel Polk acquired great affluence. As a result of his talent for land speculation, he soon became the wealthiest member of the Polk clan. 6 By 1821 he not only had a plantation in Maury County, but he also had sent some of his slaves to Hardeman County to clear some more land. 7

The extent of Samuel Polk's affluence was clearly revealed in his final estate, which included over fifty slaves and thousands of acres of land. 8 Although most of this was bequeathed to his wife, Jane, he left something to all his five sons and four daughters. For example, James K. Polk inherited two black boys, Harry and Little Abe, and a sum of $1,000. 9

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4 Sellers, Polk: Jacksonian, p. 65.
5 Ibid., p. 6.
6 Ibid., p. 38.
7 Ibid., p. 64.
9 Ibid.
On the maternal side of his family, James' grandfather, James Knox, was also a man of considerable means. When he died in 1794, he left a sizeable estate including ten slaves, two of which were willed to Jane Knox, mother of James K. Polk.10

It is thus evident that James Polk's descendants were firmly established in slave-holding practices. True to family tradition, James was not to break this bond that had tied his forefathers to the peculiar institution. Even before his father's death in 1827, he had cemented his interests to the institution of slavery through marriage. His marriage to Sarah Childress in 1824 further enhanced his career as a slaveowner. The ten slaves he inherited through marriage had been willed to Sarah by her father, Joel Childress.11 In addition to these ten slaves, Polk also received one more from his father as a wedding gift. This slave, Elias, remained a personal servant for many years.12

Slaves were an important part of Polk's economic life, especially during those years when he served as a public servant in the capacity of a United States representative, governor and president. It appears that a good portion of

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11A court suit, 23 August 1829, Polk Papers.
12A rental agreement, 30 December 1823, ibid.
the revenue from his plantation was utilized in paying personal bills. In a letter written to his sister, Sarah Walker, Polk, in describing the price of a cotton crop, remarked: "By the last account . . . there is every reason to believe that the price this year will be better . . . than it was last year. I hope it so for after all I find it must be my main way to pay my debts. I find that my present position is no money-making affair. Indeed, such has been the case in every public position I have ever held."13

Further evidence that Polk's plantation was a source of monetary value is found in a letter written by James Walker, his brother-in-law, to Polk in 1839. Polk's financial assets had been heavily taxed in his recent bid for the governorship of Tennessee. Consequently, he was in dire need of money. Walker informed Polk, "You ought, if practicable . . . to get your debts so arranged that you could pay them in installments . . . Your plantation would supply this, pay its own expenses, and supply I presume the deficit of your expenses beyond your salary . . ."14

Polk's Tennessee plantation was located in Fayette County near the town of Somerville and it contained approximately 1,000 acres. His farm in Yalibusha County, Mississippi,

13Polk to Sarah Walker, 24 September 1845, ibid.
14James Walker to Polk, 30 December 1839, ibid.
contained approximately 900 acres and was located near the town of Coffeeville. Although Polk's Mississippi plantation was generally profitable, his farm in Tennessee was questionable in terms of net income. It is apparent that by the 1830's the soil in middle and western Tennessee had been so depleted that the returns for the time and labor involved were hardly worth the effort. This is evidenced by a letter written to Polk in 1833 from one John Wormeley, a farmer and friend of Polk's, who declared, "I find that it will not do for me to remain longer in Maury as making of cotton here is out of the question and I have too large a family to stay where I can not make enough for their maintainance." The precise figures on Polk's expenditures and revenues for his Fayette County plantation are unknown, but the sale of his plantation in 1834, and his statement, "I am determined to make more money or lose more," indicate that it was not a successful venture. A letter from Silas Caldwell, Polk's brother-in-law, lends further support to the assumption that the Tennessee plantation was losing money. After Polk had purchased a plantation in Yalibusha County, Mississippi, Caldwell wrote, "I can arrange things in such a way as to make your negroes profitable to you." 

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15Wormeley to Polk, 23 January 1833, ibid.
16Polk to Sarah Polk, 26 September 1834, ibid.
17Caldwell to Polk, 22 January 1834, ibid.
Even after the purchase of the Mississippi acreage, Polk's future economic prospects for good returns seemed doubtful. From 1834 until 1837, clearing of the land, bad weather conditions and the adjustment of the slaves to a new environment greatly hindered Polk's chances to make a profit. The gloom of the situation was revealed in another letter from Caldwell who stated, "Our crop will fall far short of paying the land payment and expenses. Our farming operations thus far have not been very flattering and I am afraid we will not be able to git[sic] in a full crop this year . . . I am afraid that the farm will not be profit-able." 18

However, after the panic of 1837, Polk's Mississippi plantation was generally a profit-making investment. After returning from a visit to his brother's plantation in 1837, William Polk told James that "there is nothing required but a moderate share of attention to make it very profitable." 19 In fact, ten years later, in 1847, this farm had made a profit of approximately $5,000. 20 Although not every year's profit was that large, the money made from raising cotton in rich Mississippi was considerable. Indeed, during the

18Caldwell to Polk, 28 April 1836, ibid.
19William Polk to James Polk, 15 February 1837, ibid.
20Polk to Robert Campbell, 27 January 1847, ibid.
1840's, prospects for economic gain in the deep South appeared great. A continuing rise in the price of cotton and the possibility of new lands being opened in Texas instilled renewed hope in the hearts of the slave owners involved in cotton production. As an example of this, Polk in 1846 authorized Robert Campbell, as his agent, to investigate the possibilities of purchasing another plantation for $3,000.21

Undoubtedly, Polk's economic ties to slavery did not stop with farming. Like many of the southern slaveholders, he engaged in slave trading. The year 1826 marked the beginning of one such slave transaction. In a letter to Polk, William Smith said, "I send you the Negro girl and man which I have . . . by virtue of my deputation . . . There is a claim on the Negro girl and also on the man but I do not think either sufficient to hold the property."22

Another slave sale, which failed to take place, proved, nevertheless, Polk's transactions in the slave traffic. On 26 August 1828 William Rucker offered to trade a horse and some blacks in exchange for the slave, Coy, owned by Polk.23 Approximately two weeks later, Polk replied that he did not

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21Polk to Campbell, 12 December 1846, ibid.
22Smith to Polk, 18 July 1826, ibid.
23Rucker to Polk, 26 August 1828, ibid.
think it in his best interests to exchange Coy for any other slaves.  

A particular receipt proved that in 1831, Polk purchased three negro slaves from Henry Turney of Kentucky. The details of the receipt substantiate Polk's dealings in the slave market: "Know all men . . . that I Henry Turney for and in consideration of the sum of $920 to me in hand paid by James K. Polk have this day bargained, sold and delivered to the said James K. Polk three negro slaves . . . ."  

Throughout much of his life, Polk dealt extensively in slave trading. Numerous receipts and letters contained in his correspondence prove this beyond any question. Even during his presidency, frequent accounts are recorded of slave purchases. For example, in 1846 his agent, Robert Campbell, purchased five teenage slaves for him at a cost of $2,347.  

In his negotiations with slave traders, Polk became somewhat of a consultant on the subject of slave laws. On two separate occasions it is particularly interesting to

24 Polk to Rucker, 6 September 1828, ibid.
25 Turney to Polk, 6 October 1831, ibid.
26 Campbell to Polk, 27 August 1846, ibid.
27 Polk to Campbell, 10 May 1846, ibid.
note that his advice was requested in relation to slave laws. In the first case, one J. Iney wrote to Polk requesting his advice on the recent law of Tennessee with regard to the importation of slaves. He wanted to know whether or not a resident of the state had special privileges as opposed to non-residents. Apparently Polk never answered his letter, or else it was lost, because no record of any further correspondence between the two men was discovered.

The second case involved a runaway slave belonging to Charles McLean. He requested Polk to aid him in recovering her, and, if this was impossible to at least advise him on the procedure involved for her recovery. Although this is inconclusive proof of Polk's knowledge or expertise in relation to slave laws, it does indicate that people relied on his judgment concerning the legal aspects of slavery.

Like many of his presidential predecessors, Polk appeared to have been troubled by the moral aspects of slavery. His conscience was plagued by the realization that slaves were human beings and slavery in the abstract was wrong. Speaking before the members of the House of Representatives in 1826, Polk said, "I have regretted exceedingly . . . that this unfortunate subject of slavery, either collaterally, or

28 Iney to Polk, 26 February 1828, ibid.
29 McLean to Polk, 10 January 1834, ibid.
incidentally," had been introduced in regard to the direct election of the president. He went on to state, "it is a subject of peculiar delicacy . . . affecting the whole nation." As Polk admitted, slaves "were a species of property that differed from all other: they were rational; they were human beings." Even though he viewed slavery as "a common evil," he could see no solution to the problem because he believed that the Constitution protected the slave owner's property. In fact, he said, "this species of population was found amongst us" and was "entailed upon us by our ancestors."30

Throughout his life, Polk maintained the position that slavery was unfortunate and could best be resolved by a policy of non-interference. There is evidence, however, to indicate that he had second thoughts about a solution to the slavery problem. Like several of his contemporaries, Polk envisioned the American Colonization Society as a feasible answer to the slavery dilemma. This organization was founded in 1818 to assist the federal government in founding a colony for free blacks in Africa.31 Four years later the goal of an


African colony was realized with the founding of Liberia. Although the Liberia colony was largely a failure, it did provide a glimmer of hope for a peaceful solution to the slavery issue. Even in 1838, when the colonization movement had declined, Polk had apparently not given up on its prospects for success. In a letter addressed to Polk in 1838, one T. Hall, secretary of the Black Greek Colonization Society, informed his correspondent that the members had collected $12.75 "for the purpose of aiding the American Colonization Society." Hall requested Polk "to pay that amount to the Treasury . . . by letter as early a date as practicable, with whom I shall deposit our collection for you in Tennessee." From this letter, it is reasonable to conclude that Polk was, at one time, a member, if not the chairman of the local society.

There is no further evidence to indicate Polk's involvement in the colonization movement. However, it is reasonable to assume, that Polk, like Jackson, did believe this was a possible solution to the slavery question. Hall's concluding remarks lend support to this when he says, "we hope your compliance with our request will not inconvenience you . . ." for "the cause is one of deep interest to our country and

32 House Committee Report No. 283, 27th Cong., 3rd sess., p. 3.
33 Hall to Polk, 3 January 1838, Polk Papers.
Africa on whose coast the emigrants find a favorable and peaceful refuge."34

During Polk's presidency, the issue of slave trading caused him great anxiety. This time it was not so much out of moral consciousness as it was out of political embarrassment. Most of the American people knew nothing of Polk's dealings in the slave traffic. Consequently, because of his position as president, he took careful pains to see that his business transactions in the slave market were kept as secret as possible. In fact, slave purchases were made in Campbell's name and then sent to Mississippi under his authority.35 Furthermore, in a letter to John W. Childress, Polk's brother-in-law, Polk had warned him to make no open reference of his slave purchases. "I must not repeat the reasons which I assigned to you why it should not be made public that you are making purchases for me." Polk had, in the same letter, given Childress authority to purchase more slaves for him as long as the expenditure did not exceed $2,000.36

Although the exact reasons Polk gave to Childress for not disclosing his slave trading practices are unknown, it is reasonable to assume that the Mexican War had a part in Polk's

34Ibid.
35Childress to Polk, July 1846, ibid.
36Polk to Childress, 2 June 1846, ibid.
concealment of his slave trading ventures. Many of the American people, especially the northern Whigs, opposed the Mexican War. In fact, many regarded this war as a plot to extend slavery into the territories. Martin Van Buren foresaw that many northern Democrats would have to desert their Democratic allies of the South and West on the war issue or commit "political suicide" by voting support for a southern war to extend slavery.37

Consequently, Polk, as president of the United States, was in a precarious position. If information leaked to the public that the president was involved in slave trading, it would not only have caused him great political embarrassment, but it would also provide his political enemies with the ammunition necessary to assert that the war was being waged for the benefit of the slave owners. It is little wonder, then, that seven months later Polk again reiterated his request in a letter to Campbell to keep secret his slave transactions. "I . . . repeat to you my former request, that as my private agent do not converse the public. You will keep it to yourself. There is a great disposition with many

persons to parade anything connected with the President whether private or not before the public."\textsuperscript{38}

Unlike most slaveholders, Polk, because of his political responsibilities, seldom visited his plantations. Although his contact with his slaves was indirect, Polk, nevertheless, maintained a paternalistic attitude toward the personnel on his farms. His correspondence with his managers revealed that Polk, by the standards of the day, was a good master who had the welfare of his slaves in mind. Like a concerned father, he would write to inquire about the health of a black family.\textsuperscript{39} The answer to his inquiry was usually favorable. However, at times, the overseer would report a case of sickness or death. For example, in 1834 Overseer Ephraim Beanland, reported that Jim and Inky had congestive fever, but would be able to go to work shortly.\textsuperscript{40} Another letter dated 1846 is particularly interesting, because it shows Polk's sympathy and paternal consideration for his slaves. Harry, who was Polk's blacksmith, was almost blind. Writing to his agent Campbell, Polk instructed him to build Harry a comfortable house and purchase him a set of coats. Furthermore, he told Campbell that Harry had "never worked a day in the field

\textsuperscript{38}Polk to Campbell, 23 January 1847, Polk Papers.

\textsuperscript{39}Polk to Mairs, 3 June 1846, ibid.

\textsuperscript{40}Beanland to Polk, 24 August 1834, ibid.
in his life and it would not do to put him at it now. He can do my work and employ the balance of his time as you may desire."41

A noteworthy episode which revealed Polk's paternalistic attitude at its best, was a case involving Carolina, a family servant. Carolina's mate was owned by John Leigh, whose plantation bordered Polk's. Leigh wished to purchase Carolina from Polk. Although Polk desired to accommodate him, he believed that he could not part with her because she had always been a family servant. "Most if not all of her relatives are in our family--and nothing would induce me to dispose of her . . . ." As a further gesture of his concern for the welfare of Carolina and her mate, Polk promised never to sell or move Carolina so that she could always be near him.42

Polk's relations with his overseers reveals a kind but firm master. Polk's wife, Sarah, noticed this on a particular occasion when visiting the Mississippi plantation. She commented that her husband "was very kind to the negroes . . . and careful of their comfort."43 When Polk suspected that an overseer had been unnecessarily harsh with the slaves, he would eventually dismiss him, although it might take over a

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41 Polk to Campbell, 14 November 1846, ibid.
42 Polk to Leigh, 10 October 1846, ibid.
year for Polk to reach this decision. This was the case with Ephraim Beanland. Although Beanland managed to raise some good crops for Polk, his discipline with the slaves was extremely harsh. James Walker, Polk's brother-in-law, informed Polk that Beanland was too severe with blacks. According to Walker's information, Beanland had given Jack 200 and Ben 100 lashes. Whether this information was true or not, Walker admitted he did not know. However, from other letters written to Polk it can be concluded that Beanland was an extremely severe disciplinarian. A letter from Adlai Harris to Polk lends support to this. "I can give you no information on the subject further than I have collected from the negroes Ben and Jim . . . They say that Jack was very badly whipped . . . that Beanland salted him four or five times during the whipping . . . ."45

A few weeks later, Polk again learned from Walker that Beanland would tie up the blacks, "whip them most unmercifully, then let them run away" without making any "exertions to recover them . . . ."46 What was even more shocking was a letter written to Polk in the spring of 1834, in which Beanland attested to his own cruelty. It seems that when Beanland

44Walker to Polk, 14 December 1833, Polk Papers.
45Harris to Polk, 30 December 1833, ibid.
46Walker to Polk, 22 January 1834, ibid.
was about to correct Jack, the slave swore at him and attempted to run away. When Beanland apprehended him, a fight occurred, and Jack was stabbed three times by the overseer.47

Even after this blatant act of violence, Polk did not dismiss Beanland until nearly eighteen months later. It is difficult to discern why Polk waited so long to relieve him of his overseer duties. Perhaps, he did not believe Beanland was as cruel as his correspondents said. After all, he was the one that had hired Beanland and this certainly was not a good reflection upon his judgment of character. Perhaps, he could not find an overseer willing to manage slaves who had been badly mistreated. There is also a good possibility that Polk was unwilling to change overseers when he was about to relocate his plantation from Tennessee to Mississippi. The time involved in moving, adjustment to a new environment, and emotional impact of leaving home would take its adverse effect upon the slaves. However, the emotional strain would be even greater if the slaves had to adjust to a new overseer. Polk, realizing this, probably thought it best to retain Beanland. This reasoning seems even more logical in view of a letter written a few months later to Sarah Polk, in which he told his wife, "I am resolved to

47Beanland to Polk, 1 April 1834, ibid.
send my hands to the South, have given money to James Brown to buy a place and have employed Beanland as an overseer. . . . the negroes have no idea that they are going to be sent to the South and I do not wish them to know it. . . . "48

Although it is uncertain as to why Polk retained Beanland for as long as he did, it did not change his disapproval of harsh and inhumane treatment to his slaves. Adlai Harris's letter readily verifies this. Referring to Beanland's whipping of the slave Jack, he says, "as highly as I approved of your choice . . . in an overseer I am very much afraid that he will not treat your negroes as you would wish."49

Polk did not find a benevolent overseer until he hired John Mairs. Beanland's successors were, for the most part, harsh, but not as harsh as he. George Bratton was, however, an exception, but his overseer's career was ended by death. That Bratton was a competent overseer is shown in a letter written by one Albert McNeal to Polk. "He (Bratton) seems to have the negroes completely under his control now and I was glad to hear him praising them for their good conduct."50

John Garner, Bratton's successor, lasted a little more than

48Polk to Sarah Polk, 26 September 1834, ibid.
49Harris to Polk, 30 December 1833, ibid.
a year as overseer. Polk dismissed him upon receiving a letter from Caldwell in which Garner was reported to have shot one runaway slave and threatened to have shot another. 51

The next overseer, Isaac Dismukes, was likewise relieved of his managing duties because of his severity to blacks. Caldwell's letter to Polk lends support to this picture of brutality. Describing the wounds on Polk's slave, Addison, Caldwell says, "it appears that the overseer intended to kill him." 52 Further evidence of Dismukes' harshness is provided in his correspondence with Polk. Certain slaves had made a habit of running away. In order to stop it, Polk had decided to "make examples of the offenders ... by correcting instead of selling." 53 Although Polk did not believe in cruel treatment, physical punishment as a deterrent to running away was by no means ruled out on his plantation. For example, in the case of one runaway slave, Ben, the fugitive was chained and returned to Polk's plantation. 54 However, when Dismukes asked permission to whip two runaway slaves, Polk denied him the request. Word had probably gotten back to Dismukes that Polk considered him too harsh. In a letter Dismukes wrote to Polk he said that he would have

51Ibid., p. 145. 52Ibid., p. 153
53William Bobbitt to Polk, 29 August 1841, Polk Papers.
54Caldwell to Polk, 4 January 1834, ibid.
whipped some runaway slaves had he "not thought that you would of thought that I would of whip them too much. I should of whip them as soon as they landed had it not bin [sic] your request that Mr. Bobit should bea preasent [sic]."55

Not until John Mairs assumed the role of overseer did Polk's fears about the treatment of his slaves cease. As a master, Polk had finally found an overseer who not only had his interests in mind but who also had the welfare of the slaves at heart. Letters indicate that Polk was satisfied with Mairs. He told Campbell, "I am glad that Mr. Mairs turned out to be so good a manager, and that my people are so well satisfied with him. I am glad that he feeds well, clothes well, and is humane and attentive to the comfort of the hands. I would have no one who would not do so."56 This last statement clearly indicates the concern and paternalistic approach Polk had toward the care of his slaves. It also shows his anger toward overseers who would mistreat his property.

Polk's concern for the welfare of his slaves did not stop with the basic necessities. In addition to this, Polk encouraged Mairs to reward the slaves for good conduct by giving them presents at the end of the year.57 As a special

55Dismukes to Polk, 1 September 1841, ibid.
56Polk to Campbell, 31 January 1846, ibid.
57Polk to Mairs, 24 September 1845, ibid.
bonus, Polk had Mairs pay the blacks in specie for the cotton bales they had produced on their own.\textsuperscript{58} Unlike many slaveholders, he realized that his slaves had more than just physical needs. Consequently, he donated money toward the building of a church where his servants could attend worship services.\textsuperscript{59}

Though Polk was a kind master, he was also firm when cases of insubordination arose. Usually, the insubordination involved slave escapes. Although Polk opposed cruel treatment, he, nevertheless, employed the threat of sale to slave traders as a means of instilling fear and obedience in his blacks.\textsuperscript{60} Occasionally whipping was employed, but confinement, usually to jail, was the more common method of discipline used to correct his runaways.\textsuperscript{61} In all probability, Polk favored good treatment of his slaves over strict subordination. However, he also realized that discipline was essential in operating a successful plantation, as evidenced by his statement to Mairs that insubordination was "not to be excused."\textsuperscript{62}

\textsuperscript{58} Polk to Campbell, 14 November 1846, ibid. Blacks considered paper money worthless. Therefore, Polk always had them paid in specie to keep them happy.

\textsuperscript{59} Polk to Mairs, 3 September 1847, ibid.

\textsuperscript{60} Walker to Polk, 14 February 1834, ibid.

\textsuperscript{61} Polk to Mairs, 1 May 1848, ibid.

\textsuperscript{62} Polk to Mairs, 15 October 1848, ibid.
Although Polk recognized the injustices of slavery, no attempt was made by him to change the course of its existence or expansion. Apparently, the thought never crossed his mind that slaves yearned for freedom. To him, slavery was a matter of practical economics that broached no interference. Even though, he was concerned about his slaves' welfare, it is evident that the economic aspects of slavery was utmost on his mind. Inquiring about Harry, the nearly-blind black-smith, Polk wondered whether he had been "profitably employed." Polk was evidently concerned about the $350 that Harry earned for him as a hired slave. In fact, when Harry asked Polk if he could hire out on his own time, Polk rejected his request. More than likely, Polk realized Harry's services as a hired blacksmith were too valuable to him to let Harry go out on his own.

As a planter, Polk realized that the peculiar institution was indispensible to the plantation system. If Polk was a "good" master, it was mainly because he endeavored to be a successful planter. Letters addressed to his overseers indicate that he was continuously concerned about his livestock and cotton. Evidently, Polk believed that in years to come

63 Polk to Mairs, 5 June 1848, ibid.
65 Ibid., p. 179. 66 Ibid., 24 April 1847, Polk Papers.
slavery would continue to be vital to the welfare of his plantation. If this were not the case, it seems doubtful that he would have written to Campbell explaining his intentions to apply the proceeds of his cotton crop to increase his farm acreage. Even on his deathbed, Polk foresaw no apparent end to the institution of slavery. He told his wife that he had so settled the property that the plantation would support her in the future.

As a slaveholder, Polk put the economic aspects of slavery first. To him, slavery was a way of making money. Although Polk viewed his slaves as economic units, he treated them humanely. He was a kind master, but he was also firm. He expected his overseers to raise him a good crop but not at the expense of the welfare of his slaves. Even though he realized slavery was wrong, he saw no inconsistency in his practice of trading slaves. Yet, Polk's association with slavery extended beyond the bounds of owner and master. He was, after all, a politician and the peculiar institution did not escape the limits of governmental action.

67 Polk to Campbell, 31 January 1846, ibid.
The second quarter of the nineteenth century saw the emergence of a strong sectional conflict in domestic affairs between North and South. Among the important issues were internal improvements, the tariff and the United States Bank. These issues, however, gradually became overshadowed by the ever-rising slavery controversy. As a politician, Polk was confronted on numerous occasions with the slavery dilemma. Although he never defended slavery as being morally right, he opposed any attempt to interfere with this southern institution. Whenever possible, Polk avoided the issue. However, when he was forced to take a stand, slaveholders could depend upon his allegiance to their cause. Throughout his political career, Polk maintained that slavery was being used as a political question to divide the Union. To him, any person who used the slavery issue as a means of political advancement was an enemy of the United States.

Polk served in the House of Representatives from 1825 to 1839. During this time he encountered the full furor of the slavery controversy. One of his first confrontations with this problem involved a proposed amendment to the Constitution for direct election of the president. During
the debate in March, 1826, Henry Storrs, representative from New York, argued that slaves should not be counted in the direct process for electoral votes. Polk, taking issue with him stated, "In fixing the principle of representation, it was thought right, by the framers of the Constitution, that they [slaves] should at least be in part represented." Polk then went on to remind Storrs that the slave population was, according to the Constitution, counted in apportioning direct taxes among the several states. Therefore, Polk argued, they should also be counted in allotting representation and electoral votes. In concluding his argument, Polk remarked, "Do our neighbors . . . sympathize with us, and say we are oppressed with unnecessary burdens because we are required to pay taxes for this species of population? No, sir, we do it cheerfully, and without a murmur. I hope, therefore, that this unpleasant subject, not involved in the remotest degree, in the great questions under consideration, may be suffered to rest."1 As shown by this argument, Polk did not hesitate to defend the interest of the section he represented. Yet, at the same time, it is evident he desired to avoid the subject if possible. However, the seeds of sectional discord would not, as Polk stated, "suffer [slavery] to rest."

Four years later House members were debating a bill to establish a penitentiary for the District of Columbia. The debate revolved around the question whether slaves should be subject to the same punishment, confinement by imprisonment, for various offenses, as other persons. Polk opposed substituting imprisonment for physical punishment as far as slaves were concerned. In fact, he voted in favor of an amendment that would insert the word "free" in the provisions of the penitentiary bill, thus making it applicable to "free persons" only. Even more interesting was an amendment to the original amendment, in which Charles Haynes, representative from Georgia, proposed to insert the word "white" after the word "free." This would have excluded all colored persons from penitentiary punishment. Although both amendments to the bill were defeated, it would have been enlightening to have known how Polk voted on the second amendment. Indeed, if he had voted in the affirmative, this would have indicated that he regarded the blacks' color as a factor in their status. Furthermore, this would have also shown that he considered blacks inferior to whites. Whether Polk advocated white supremacy is a matter of speculation. However, his comments concerning this bill lend support to the picture that his traits as a slaveholder were reflected in his political decisions. Being a firm believer in subordination, Polk asserted, "A slave dreads the punishment of stripes more than
he does imprisonment; and that description of punishment has, besides, a beneficial effect upon his fellow slaves."

According to Polk, imprisonment "did not amount, and could not be considered as amounting . . . to such an efficient restraint as was necessary under the peculiar circumstances of such cases."  

As a politician Polk did not choose to disassociate himself from slave interests. As has been shown, he traded slaves during his entire political career. When Charles Mercer, representative from Virginia, presented in March 1831 a resolution for the suppression of the African slave trade, Polk voted against it.  

Although he regarded slavery as a moral evil, he apparently let his economic convictions outweigh his moral principles.

One year later, Polk and Mercer again confronted each other on the slavery issue. This time Mercer presented a memorial from citizens of Great Britain who advocated that Congress give monetary aid to the American Colonization Society as an effectual means of ultimately suppressing the illegal foreign slave trade. In commenting upon the memorial, Polk reiterated some of his opinions he had expressed six years earlier in discussing the direct election of the

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3 Ibid., 21st Cong., 2nd sess., 1830-31, p. 850.
president. He asserted, "the subject itself was one of
greatest difficulty and delicacy . . . the agitation of that
question, even by those who were most deeply interested in
its adjustment, was a matter which required the utmost
cautions . . . ." Furthermore, he believed that foreigners
had nothing to do with the issue at hand, and "their inter-
ference in it in the slightest degree was uncalled for and
impertinent." In conclusion Polk remarked that the House
should reject the memorial because the petitioners had "no
right to apply to them on such a matter" and to "interfere
in the internal concerns of the states."  

As a United States representative from Tennessee, Polk's
first concern was with national issues such as the tariff,
internal improvements and the Bank of the United States.
However, this did not mean he neglected state issues or for-
got about his constituency's interests. Despite his role in
the national legislature, Polk took great interest in the
affairs of Tennessee, especially in the state constitutional
convention of 1834. This convention met in Nashville to
adopt a new state constitution. Although slavery was not
expected to be a main issue, it became the center of an ex-
tended and bitter controversy.  

\[4\] Ibid., 22nd Cong., 1st sess., 1831-32, pp. 2332-33.

\[5\] Chase C. Mooney, "The Question of Slavery and the Free
Negro in the Tennessee Constitutional Convention of 1834,"
Polk chose to be an interested spectator instead of a delegate. A letter from Terry H. Cahal, Maury County delegate, tends to substantiate this view. Writing to Polk in 1834, Cahal told him that "you are sure to be a member of the Convention if you intimate that you can leave Washington, and I am so far from being opposed to it that I am in hopes we agree on this point which is the only thing which could prevent me from supporting you."  

In the same letter, Cahal requested Polk's opinions on proposed changes in the new constitution. This he said, "would influence my vote for a member of the convention." Polk's correspondence contained no answer to Cahal's request. Apparently, Polk realized the potential political explosiveness of the issues involved, especially slavery, and he thought it best to remain silent. In fact the Nashville Daily Advertiser and National Banner cautioned voters about selection of the delegates, but these papers mentioned nothing about black suffrage. Although there were rumors about the agitation of the slavery question, the rapid decrease in antislavery sentiment in the state during the previous seven years seemed to indicate that the slavery issue was no longer

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7Ibid.

as prominent as it had once been. Polk, being an astute politician, probably decided it best to wait before committing himself as a delegate. In fact Cahal had said to him in his letter, "you know better than I do whether a seat there would be likely to conduce to your elevation in the future." Polk did not have to wait long for an answer. Two months later, in March 1834, James Osburn's letter confirmed Polk's doubts about the expediency of his involvement in the forthcoming convention.

"Our convention will meet in May next; and we expect much contention on some important point. The East Tennesseans . . . are about trying the experiment of a constitutional law for the emancipation of slaves. Is it not astonishing some times to see with what santified [sic] and pious enthusiasm we can bear other peoples' misfortunes and give away other mens' property? These people have nothing to lose . . . by the letting loose of such population among us." As a rising politician, Polk undoubtedly realized the political expediency of remaining aloof from the Tennessee convention. Yet, it is intriguing to know why Terry Cahal, a devout Whig and staunch John Bell supporter, took such an interest in supporting Polk as a convention delegate. Perhaps, this was Cahal's way of tricking Polk into declaring

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9Cahal to Polk, 2 January 1834, Polk Papers.
10Osburn to Polk, 23 March 1834, ibid.
his true sentiments about slavery. Perhaps, he was acting on Bell's orders. There is also a strong possibility that sectional interests overshadowed party ties when it came to the slavery question. This apparently meant that Cahal's convictions were in relative agreement with those of Polk on this particular issue.

The latter reason seems quite reasonable when examining Cahal's comments and background. Although Polk and Cahal belonged to opposing political parties, there was a common bond that united and even superseded their political differences; that was the bond of being a Southerner. Unlike Polk, Cahal owned no slaves. However, being a southern Whig, Cahal's political interests were closely aligned with slavery. The Whig party of the South was basically the party of the slaveholder. In fact Whigs were reputed to own two-thirds to three-fourths of the slave property of the South. Although Cahal, like Polk, regarded slavery as a political and moral evil, he realized any attempt to oppose it meant political suicide. Consequently, in supporting Polk, Cahal was not using political chicanery but was backing a man whom he believed held compatible views on the abolition issue. In view

of this it is not unreasonable to assume that Cahal's remarks during the convention reflected Polk's thoughts concerning slavery.

One of the first points of contention in the convention occurred when the pro-emancipation delegates presented their memorials. Cahal stated he would oppose in "every shape the object which their memorial sought to accomplish." However, both men regarded any attempt to interfere in its abolition would inflict a "greater curse than slavery... upon us--the subversion of our prosperity, and the moral and political degradation of our people."1

During the course of the convention, a delegate introduced the issue of black suffrage. Cahal's opinions on this issue are noteworthy because no information discovered ever told how Polk felt toward the voting rights of blacks. Cahal said, "let Tennessee become the asylum for free negroes and the harbor for runaway slaves from other states with the same right of suffrage, extended to white and black man... and the degradation and injury which we would inflict on posterity would call down on this convention its execration."1

Whether Cahal expressed Polk's sentiments on this issue is

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12Nashville Republican and State Gazette, 29 May 1834.
13Ibid., 26 June 1834.
14Ibid., 10 July 1834.
uncertain. No evidence discovered, either pro or con, could link Polk officially with the anti-suffrage cause. However, twelve years later, Campbell White, one of Polk's New York supporters, wrote the Tennessean a revealing letter. New York had recently held a convention to determine whether or not to place before the people the question of granting black suffrage. In this letter White had included a list of the delegates and how they had voted on the question of black suffrage. This, White informed Polk, was to acquaint him with the "abolitionists in this state." Approximately one month later, White again wrote Polk informing him that black suffrage had met with rejection in New York City. These letters indicate that Polk was not only concerned about the outcome of black suffrage but that he was also interested in whites who advocated this privilege for blacks.

Adam Huntsman, delegate from Madison County to the Tennessee convention, was a staunch Polk supporter. As a member of the powerful three member reference committee for emancipation memorials, Huntsman and his friends wielded considerable influence. Although Huntsman was not a political puppet, his ideas on slavery closely paralleled those of Polk's. Like Polk, Huntsman believed the slavery issue to

15White to Polk, 8 October 1846, Polk Papers.
16Ibid., 4 November 1846, ibid.
be a political question contrived by a few extremists for their own gain. In fact the Madison delegate stated that the slavery "excitement" had not spread its "blighting influence" as far west as his county.\textsuperscript{17}

As the convention progressed, the parallel between Polk's and Huntsman's ideas on slavery became more apparent. In the reference committee's report, the three member panel stated that slavery was an evil, but it was impractical to emancipate blacks. This was reminiscent of what Polk had said eight years earlier in the United States House of Representatives. Likewise, the committee reported that the "wisest heads and the most benevolent hearts have not been able to answer in a satisfactory manner" how to solve the slavery issue.\textsuperscript{18} Like Polk, Huntsman and the other two committee members considered the abolitionists to be "misguided fanatics," who were inflicting great harm upon the Union by interfering with southern interests. Huntsman contended, as Polk did, that emancipation of blacks by the federal government would be an infringement upon states' rights.\textsuperscript{19} Although Polk and Huntsman did not agree on every aspect of the slavery question, their sentiments were close enough that they could compromise. Apparently, their philosophies, not only on the

\textsuperscript{17}Nashville Republican and State Gazette, 10 June 1834.
\textsuperscript{18}Mooney, "The Question of Slavery," p. 493.
\textsuperscript{19}Ibid., pp. 492, 495.
slavery issue, but on other issues were compatible. Otherwise, Polk would not have selected Huntsman as his campaign coordinator in his bid for the vice-presidency in 1840.\textsuperscript{20} The Huntsman-Polk political relationship remained intact until Polk's death. As a firm supporter of Polk's cause in 1844, Huntsman wrote from his Tennessee home, "Our cause is still improving here and if you will act out in proportion in middle and east Tennessee we will send Harry of the West to Davy Jones' locker."\textsuperscript{21}

Although Polk was not a delegate to the Tennessee constitutional convention, he was, nevertheless, an indirect participant. Though he never cast a vote or debated a single point, his influence and opinions were apparent in the words of his political supporter, Adam Huntsman, and his political opponent, Terry Cahal. To say that Polk manipulated these men to defeat the proponents of black emancipation would be inaccurate. Polk sensed the political dangers involved in the slavery issue. Therefore, he became involved in this convention only from a spectator's position. Nevertheless, his role, although pacific and indirect, was influential in the adoption of the 1834 Tennessee constitution.


\textsuperscript{21}Huntsman to Polk, 7 October 1844, Polk Papers.
Polk ran for the United States House speakership in June of 1834. Although John Bell defeated him, Polk rebounded in the autumn of 1835 and decisively defeated the same opponent by a margin of 132 votes to 84.22

Prior to Polk's election as House speaker, there was a noticeable increase in anti-salvery agitation. This was indicative of the furor that was to come in the years ahead. Perhaps this is why Polk chose to run for the speakership. As the leader of the House, he would have to make decisions on points of procedure and not on the actual bills. As speaker he would not have to debate slavery bills, he would not have to offer opinions, and best of all, he would not have to vote except in case of a tie. This meant that Polk could remain non-committal if the slavery issue were brought to a head during his term as speaker. Perhaps Polk viewed the speakership as a stepping stone to the Senate or the governorship of Tennessee. No matter how he envisioned this position, it was certain that he was cognizant of the voluminous inquiries and comments people were making in regard to the slavery controversy. Most of the leading newspapers devoted much space to articles pertaining to the abolition question. For example, the pro-Whig journal of comment published in Baltimore, *Niles Weekly Register* of 17 May 1834

reported,

"There has been considerable agitation at New York, in consequence of some apparently violent proceedings of the anti-slavery society to bring into disrepute the colonization society. . . . The abolitionists seem to be a very small minority, but are resolute and thorough-going. Mr. Noah congratulates the people of the South, that all fighting about emancipation of their slaves is to be done north of Mason and Dixon's line."23

Another article, quoted from the Norfolk (Virginia) Herald and published in Niles Weekly Register stated,

"a bundle of incendiary missiles from the abolitionists' pandemonium in New York, were . . . received at this post office in this borough. This new emission of mischief, comes forth under the imposing title of 'Human Rights' and is filled with matter of a tendency to excite sedition among the colored population of the South. . . ."24

In still another report Niles recorded that the postmaster of New York communicated to Postmaster General, Amos Kendall "his intention to set aside all such abolition tracts . . . until he had positive instructions to the contrary from the government at Washington."25

Like Niles Weekly Register, the Washington Globe, edited by Francis P. Blair, and considered the official "voice" of

23Niles Weekly Register, 46(17 May 1834):190.
24Ibid., 48(8 August 1835):402.
the Jackson administration, contained several abolitionist articles. Taking a position similar to Niles, the Globe declared that it was elated to see the democratic press of the East censuring inflammatory attempts by some newspapers to "excite the fears of one section of the country" against "the prejudices of another." 26 Ten days later, the Globe again revealed its position in relation to the abolition controversy by saying, "We observe with much satisfaction that the entirely political press at the North is speaking out on the subject of the attempt of a few zealous fanatics to get up an excitement on the subject of slavery." 27

The Washington National Intelligencer, a leading Whig newspaper of that day, edited by Joseph Gales and William Seaton, also published several articles pertaining to the slavery dilemma. One asserted that Congress had the power to prohibit abolitionists such as Arthur Tappan and his associates from using the United States mail as a means of distributing abolitionist literature. 28 Two weeks later, the Intelligencer reported that the Jackson presses had charged the friends of Daniel Webster with agitating the

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26 Washington Globe, 5 August 1835.
27 Ibid., 15 August 1835.
28 Washington National Intelligencer, 6 August 1835.
slave question, as a prelude to the approaching presidential election in November. 29

Like most newspaper men, the Intelligencer's editors considered the slavery question to be one of political intrigue. This opinion was apparent in an early October edition of the paper in which the editors accused a group of politicians of manipulating the abolitionists to enhance their political careers. 30 The consensus among editors was that the slavery issue was political in nature. Whether at that time it was more political than ethical is uncertain; however, if the Union were to remain intact, the controversy had to be solved. No longer could politicians manipulate one section of the country against the other in order to benefit their own interests. Northerners were tired of appeasing southern demands, while southerners in turn maintained that the federal government could not violate their states' rights. A viable solution to the slavery problem was essential, or else the discords of sectionalism would destroy the nation. This growing discord over slavery was not only noticeable in the newspapers, but it was also apparent in the sentiments of the people. Perhaps this is why Polk chose to remain silent whenever a correspondent would inquire as to his opinions on the abolition issue.

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29Ibid., 22 August 1835.

30Ibid., 3 October 1835.
As early as 1831, four years before the abolition question had made a significant impact, Polk received a letter from J. H. Cahal, which predicted the future trend that abolition would play in United States history. Cahal said, "it does seem to me that I see more in the South, that threatens disunion than ever before. Will it be possible to preserve the Union ten years more? The South may, but the West can't do without it . . . ." Polk never responded to Cahal's question. Perhaps Polk chose to ignore the question, or perhaps he considered any comment inappropriate at that time. Nevertheless, four years later Polk again encountered inquiries as to his sentiments on slavery.

One such query was in the form of a petition from one Oppra Conant of Rochester, New York. In her letter she entreated all government officials to focus their attention on the abolition issue. Furthermore, she pleaded that representatives put aside party feelings and concentrate on securing equal rights for blacks. Again, Polk chose not to answer this letter.

In another inquiry addressed to Polk in September 1835, Jacob Greer of Bedford County, Tennessee, asked Polk whether abolitionists could deprive the slaveholding states of their representatives in Congress and whether any state legislature

31 Cahal to Polk, 31 January 1831, Polk Papers.

32 Conant to Polk, 11 January 1835, ibid.
could pass general emancipation laws without violating Article I, section 2 of the Constitution? Concluding his letter Greer wrote, "You will confer a singular favor by giving your views on the points alluded to . . . ."  

Although Polk's letter to Greer was not discovered, Polk apparently answered Greer's inquiry, because in a letter written a few months later Greer said, "the wide range that the abolition question has taken since you wrote me last has astonished me very much."  

The reason this correspondence was not preserved is unknown. Perhaps Polk told Greer to keep their correspondence confidential or even destroy the letters. Possibly Polk realized that if his letters to Greer were publicly revealed, his chances for the speakership or even higher political positions would be in peril. Consequently, the utmost secrecy prevailed. Polk's position on the abolition issue remained relatively concealed except for a few of his close political confidants. As he was always aspiring for political advancement, this non-committal position was probably what Polk desired.

Even in correspondence in which no inquiries were made as to his position on slavery, Polk often chose not to acknowledge letters. For example, a group of Portland, Maine,

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33 Greer to Polk, 8 September 1835, ibid.
34 Ibid., 16 April 1836, ibid.
citizens sent Polk a copy of the proceedings of a meeting held to discuss northern interference with master-slave relations in the South. Although no inquiries were made of Polk, he still did not acknowledge or even thank them for writing to him. However, it is particularly interesting to note one fact about this correspondence. It seems peculiar that the secretary of the meeting, John Chandler, would personally address the proceedings of a meeting to Polk when he could have read about them in a newspaper. Evidently, this correspondence was more than just a friendly letter. It appears that Chandler was acting as Polk's spokesman, or even on his orders. There is no evidence to prove this, but the points emphasized in the meeting were in such close conjunction with Polk's ideas on slavery that it seems feasible Polk could have had a role in the proceedings. The members of the meeting echoed some of Polk's philosophy, although in different words, when they stated that slavery was morally wrong but that it was an evil "entailed upon us by the mother country . . . ." They went on to state that slavery was so much a part of the social condition of our country that it was "impossible to eradicate it at once without producing evils, which cannot be contemplated but with dismay."35

Further advocating Polk's sentiments, the Maine citizens

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35Citizens of Portland, Maine to Polk, 15 August 1835, ibid.
stated that they considered the existence of abolition soci-
eties "as mischievous in their practical operation, injurious
to the well being of those, whose cause they profess to plead,
and tending directly to the dissolution of the Union." 36 Not
only had Polk advocated this opinion, but he was also to re-
iterate it several times again before the end of his career.

Throughout his term as speaker of the House, Polk con-
tinued to receive inquiries about his opinions on the slavery
issue. Probably because of the lack of time and his desire
to remain non-committal, Polk failed to respond to this mail.
However, the one exception was to his brother-in-law, William
Rucker. Writing to Polk in 1836, Rucker desired to know
whether or not agitation over the abolition question was de-
signed to prejudice Van Buren with southern voters? 37 Polk
answered, "if it were not for . . . a presidential election,
we should have nothing of the inflammatory speeches . . . The
whole movement is designed to produce another panic for polit-
cical effect." 38 Except for this one instance, Polk remained
consistent in his policy of not answering inquiries about
abolition. During his term as speaker, Polk tried to main-
tain a position of impartiality in relation to the entire
abolition issue.

36 Ibid.
37 Rucker to Polk, 17 January 1836, ibid.
38 Polk to Rucker, 22 February 1836, ibid.
However, no matter how fair Polk tried to be, it was evident from his action and rulings that he favored the southern position. In the aforementioned letter written to Rucker, Polk's stand on abolition was revealed when he said, "The political agitators of the opposition, in the North and in the South will be unable to get up an excitement on the slave question, which they can turn to political account. The unanimous vote of the friends of Mr. Van Buren on Pinckney's resolution [which became known as the Gag Rule] must satisfy the country that they are sound upon that subject . . . ."

Another indication of Polk's partiality toward the southern position was noticeable in his appointments to House committees. As John Quincy Adams pointed out, Polk appointed a southern chairman and a majority of southern members to the District of Columbia Committee. Consequently, any problems over the slavery issue in the District would be more than likely settled in favor of the anti-abolition position. Furthermore, in his opinions, which he was not permitted to give, but which he nevertheless presented on certain occasions, it was apparent that Polk leaned toward the southern position. During a discussion

39Ibid.

concerning Vermont representative William Slade's petition advocating the abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia, Polk reminded the House that he had repeatedly interposed when William Slade, a Whig-Antimason and the first genuine abolitionist in Congress, had introduced this question of slave emancipation in the states. Although "he was not permitted to give his own opinions, he felt it his duty to state, that if it were possibly in his power to allay excitement, and to prevent discussion of this sort, he would do it."41

Polk's pro-southern bias was particularly noticeable in House rulings dealing with the Gag Rule. This rule, introduced by Henry Pinckney of South Carolina during the first session of the Twenty-Fourth Congress, tabled all petitions relating to slavery. When Pinckney first introduced this resolution, John Quincy Adams unsuccessfully tried to get the floor to argue against it. However, Polk refused to recognize him or even let him discuss the resolution. When Adams appealed, the House sustained Polk's ruling by a 109 to 89 vote. Polk's southern bias further manifested itself when the final vote on the Pinckney resolution began. Although the resolution passed by a wide margin, Adams held that it was "a direct violation of the Constitution of the

41Ibid., 25th Cong., 2nd sess., 1837-38, p. 41.
United States, of the rules of the House, and the rights of his constituents," and he desired that his statement be recorded in the House Journal. Polk, however, emphatically denied his request. Adams' protest was, nevertheless, recorded in the Register of Debates.42

When the second session of the Twenty-Fourth Congress began, the Gag Rule had not been reinstated by the House.43 Consequently, John Quincy Adams presented three petitions calling for the abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia. Immediately, southerners rose to a point of order and demanded to know whether he had a right to read these memorials. Polk ruled he had a right to make a brief statement of the contents of the memorials. However, when Adams proceeded to read that Congress had the power to abolish slavery in the nation's capital, Polk called him to order and even ordered him to be seated.44 When this failed, the speaker ruled that members could not read petitions regardless of length.45 Obviously Polk's ruling was designed to


43House, Register of Debates, 24th Cong., 2nd sess., 1835-36, p. 1157.

44Bemis, John Quincy Adams and the Union, p. 342.

45House, Register of Debates, 24th Cong., 2nd sess., 1835-36, p. 1318.
suppress any further presentment or reading of abolition petitions. However, according to House rules, Adams was not out of order in reading his petition because the Gag Rule was not yet in force. In response to Polk's arbitrary ruling, Adams retorted with these words: 

"... since it was no better than mockery to receive petitions, and then refuse to have them read; and, for aught he knew, ... any member who should dare raise his voice on the subject of abolition of slavery would be expelled from this House. Sir, ... I am ready to be that member, whenever the House shall come to that decision." 46

To Adams, the Gag Rule was more than a political issue. It involved the basic constitutional freedom of the right of petition. If the House could refuse to consider petitions concerning slavery, what could prevent it from applying similar gag rules to other memorials involving freedom of speech or even freedom of religion? 47

In another House ruling, Polk's pro-southern bias again manifested itself. Adams presented a petition from fifty-five ministers of a New York Lutheran synod praying for equal protection of all laws and the rights of the Declaration of Independence for all citizens of the District of Columbia.

46 Ibid., p. 1427.

Although the petition made no mention of slavery, it indirectly suggested that free blacks be given the same rights accorded to whites under the law. Of course, Polk recognized the purpose of the petition. Immediately he ruled that it was subject to the Gag Rule and could not be read because it referred to absolute control held over a portion of the District's inhabitants. According to House rules, Adams had not violated congressional procedures. His petition had not alluded to abolition or slavery, and yet he was denied the right to read it. Apparently, Polk sensed the inherent danger present in this petition and chose to interpret it as coming under the Gag Rule. Even though the speaker overstepped his authority, the House overwhelmingly sustained his decision by a vote of 170 to 3. This mandate given to the speaker tends to indicate that most representatives, northern and southern alike, were not willing to grant blacks equality even though many professed slavery wrong.

Still another case which reflected Polk's southern bias was revealed in one of the rulings on the order of House business. In order to quell the relentless number of Adams' abolition petitions, the House, under Polk's leadership, reversed the procedure for calling the roll for petitions.

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48 House, Register of Debates, 24th Cong., 2nd sess., 1835-36, pp. 1430-34.

49 Ibid.
Instead of beginning with the states, the clerk began with the territories and then proceeded to call for petitions from the South and then the North. When Massachusetts's turn came, the House adjourned. When the House reconvened, it suspended petitions as the order of business and proceeded to other business. Technically, those members who had not presented their petitions could leave them with the clerk to record in the Journal. However, Polk refused to allow the petitions to be recorded. This resulted in the suppression of several hundred petitions, some of which did not even pertain to slavery. Consequently, by the end of that session Adams had 200 petitions to present.\(^{50}\)

Although Polk tried to remain impartial as a speaker, it is apparent from his appointments and rulings that he was not completely objective involving the slavery controversy. Obviously, he favored the southern position on the abolition question. Yet, it is noteworthy that being a slaveholder and a southerner, Polk did not seem disposed to support the extreme southern viewpoint. Even though Adams had presented numerous abolition petitions and had caused Polk much distress in the House, the speaker held no grudge against him. For example, when an attempt was made to

\(^{50}\)Adams to the Inhabitants of the twelfth congressional district of Massachusetts, March 1837, Adams Family Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D. C. (On microfilm at North Texas State University).
prevent Adams from presenting abolition petitions submitted by citizens of states other than Massachusetts, Polk ruled that "every member had a right to present a petition, come from what quarter it might." Although this decision opposed the southern view that citizens had no right to concern themselves with grievances of other states, Polk sustained Adams and thus demonstrated a moderate southern position in relation to abolition. Near the end of Polk's term as speaker, Adams proposed a bill to punish dueling in the District of Columbia. Polk promised to appoint a committee favorable to the measure and consulted Adams on its membership. Still another indication of Polk's impartiality as speaker was revealed in a letter he received from one Jacob Greer. Writing to Polk in 1836, he stated, "if you was [sic] to communicate to Congress that you believed it to be unconstitutional to receive and discuss the petitions of the abolitionists, the matter would at once be put to rest, and petitions would cease to come in, the frenzy would die away, and we might all be at rest.


53 Greer to Polk, 1 May 1836, Polk Papers.
Polk did not adhere to this extreme southern position. Being a firm supporter of the right of petition, he did not believe it within his power to execute Greer's request. His job was not to dictate but to direct the House's business. At the same time, he was to remain as impartial as possible on the issues being debated. Although his rulings and appointments as speaker had branded him as pro-southern, his true opinions on the abolition issue were never manifested until be became the head executive of the "Volunteer State."

Throughout his congressional career, Polk had undoubtedly maintained long-held convictions about slavery. However, prior to 1839, these convictions had remained hidden to the majority of Americans. Polk had been reluctant to commit himself on the abolition question for fear of his future political career. Of course, a perusal of congressional proceedings indicates that his votes labeled him a southerner on almost every phase of the slavery issue. Yet, his true sentiments had rarely been expressed. Other than the realization that he considered slavery a moral evil and that he opposed any attempt to interfere with it, there is little information on Polk's private opinions concerning the institution.

However, in his 1839 bid for the governorship, Polk's sentiments about slavery became more outspoken. His Whig opponent, Newton Cannon, was not an eloquent orator, but
he had substantial Whig support. Ever since 1835, when John Bell and Hugh Lawson White deserted the Jackson forces, eventually to join the Whigs, the Democratic party had remained out of power in Tennessee. Consequently, Polk's task of redeeming Tennessee for the Democrats seemed almost overwhelming. Nevertheless, he managed to defeat Cannon by a narrow 3,000 vote margin.\(^5^4\) Although the gubernatorial campaign focused on such national issues as the tariff and the Bank, the abolition issue did have an impact. Polk exploited this issue to its fullest potential by associating Cannon, Bell, White and other Whigs with the abolitionist cause. In fact, Polk went so far as to accuse Bell of supporting the abolition of slavery because he refused to vote for the Gag Rule in the last session of Congress.\(^5^5\)

In addition to denouncing John Bell, Polk also collected evidence of abolitionist sentiment among northern Whigs, as contrasted with the anti-abolitionism of northern Democrats. Polk planned to use this arsenal of materials at the proper time to help convince the people of Tennessee that the Democratic party was the party that had their interests at heart.\(^5^6\)

\(^5^4\) Sellers, James K. Polk: Continentalist, p. 64.

\(^5^5\) Nashville Union, 7 September 1838.

\(^5^6\) Henry Hubbard to Polk, 28 January 1839, Polk Papers.
Realizing that his bid for the governorship would be ineffective without the aid of the press, Polk obtained the services of George Harris as editor of the Nashville Union. Harris directed a dynamic attack against the forces of abolitionism and Whiggery. There can be no doubt that the Nashville Union, under Harris' direction, was the spokesman for the Polk campaign. In fact, some years later, the editor stated, "while we claim to possess an independent press, we do not profess to be independent of that influence which men of superior wisdom and experience always exercise over their fellow men, and therefore must not be understood as saying that Governor Polk's example, services and abilities have no control over us."57 It is no wonder then, that the Union labeled the Nashville Republican Banner, the leading Whig paper of the state, as a "Federal-abolition press" whose editor promulgated the Adams' abolition creed.58 In another issue of the Union, the editor claimed that the white incendiaries who were promoting riots among the blacks should be hung, or "if the poor misled slaves must suffer, double should be the punishment imposed upon these heartless emissaries of a fanatical and reckless sect."59

57Nashville Union, 11 November 1843.
58Ibid., 17 June 1839.
59Ibid., 12 October 1840.
After Polk had been elected governor, his sentiments against abolition became more pronounced. Yet, his opinions were more a vindication of state's rights than a defense of slavery. For example, in his gubernatorial address, Polk declared, "any attempt on the part of the Federal Government to act upon the subject of slavery, as it exists within the states, would be a clear infraction of the Constitution; and to disturb it within the District of Columbia would be a palpable violation of the public faith, as well as of the clear meaning and obvious intention of the framers of the constitution." Polk continued his strict constructionist interpretation of the Constitution by saying, "No power has been conferred upon the Federal Government, either by express grant or necessary implication, to take cognizance of, or in any manner or to any extent to interfere with, or to act upon the subject of domestic slavery, the existence of which in many of the states is expressly recognized by the Constitution of the United States." In his closing remarks, Polk reiterated his long-held conviction that abolition was "purely a political question." In addition to this, he condoned the Gag Rule by referring to the attempts made to its introduction in Congress as having "been met in the proper spirit, not only by southern representatives but by a large portion

60 Ibid., 14 October 1839.

61 Ibid.
of northern delegation in Congress." His final statement about abolition was particularly significant, because Polk said that Martin Van Buren should "receive the support of the states and of the people in every portion of the Union" for his uncompromising stand on the abolition issue.\(^6^2\) Little did Polk realize, that only five years later he and Van Buren would be in direct conflict over the slavery issue and annexation of Texas.

During his tenure as governor of Tennessee from 1839-1841, Polk continued to vent his once concealed opinions about abolition. One of the first persons Polk reprimanded for his stand on abolition was the 1840 Whig presidential candidate, William Henry Harrison. The presidential campaign of 1840 had attracted attention to the slavery issue and saw the emergence of the first antislavery political party, the Liberty party. Harrison contended that it was within the legitimate scope of the powers granted to Congress to remove blacks from the states. Through the Nashville Union, Polk expressed his sentiments about the Whig presidential contender by saying that Harrison desired to see the day when "a North American sun should not shine upon a slave . . . We are well satisfied that the safety of the slave property of the South depends entirely upon a rigid adherence to the strict Jeffersonian construction of the Constitution."\(^6^3\)

\(^6^2\)Ibid.  
\(^6^3\)Ibid., 17 February 1840.
The next person to receive a rebuttal from Polk was Seth Gates, a Whig member of Congress from New York. Gates had sent Polk an official communication, under his franking privilege, asking the governor to endorse a British convention which had advocated the abolition of slavery. Polk responded by saying that Gates' part in this "dark transaction" was an act of "high treason" to him. He concluded by saying, "The only further notice which I shall take of these nefarious proceedings of foreigners, with whom you stand associated, will be to expose them to the indignant reprobation of the people of Tennessee." 64

One year later, Polk again lashed out at an Antimason turned Whig, Francis Granger of New York. Polk alluded to Granger's voting record in Congress as pro-abolitionist. He further implied that Granger, as postmaster general, was incompetent to execute his duties impartially in the distribution of the mail. Being partial to the abolitionists, Granger, according to Polk, promoted the dissemination of incendiary publications among the states of the Union. 65

There can be no doubt that Polk favored the southern position in relation to the abolition issue. Yet, at the same time it is evident that he was not a radical; he did not favor the extreme southern view of slavery. Like Jackson,

64Ibid., 5 October 1840.
65Ibid., 1 April 1841.
Polk was first and foremost a Union man. He regarded any attempt to introduce the abolition question into politics as an attack upon the nation. As a United States representative, Polk tried to remain as non-committal as possible in relation to the slavery question. However, when he was forced to make decisions his votes were against the abolitionist cause. As speaker of the house, Polk's job was simplified by the Gag Rule. According to this rule, all petitions relating to slavery were automatically laid on the table. Yet, Polk still had to decide many points in which the slavery question was involved. Usually he ruled in favor of the southern cause. However, this did not mean that he was so biased that he ignored the interests and rights of other people. This was evident when he upheld Adams' right to present abolition petitions from a state other than Massachusetts.

As governor of Tennessee, Polk became more pronounced in his stand against abolition. Yet, his position was not that of a radical or a sectionalist but rather that of a Unionist. Although he was more outspoken against abolition, his chief goal as a politician was to preserve the Union.

Throughout his political career, Polk tried to divorce the slavery issue from politics. However, he failed to recognize that abolition was more than a political question
involving selfish ambitions. Yet, it was not by accident that Polk's next encounter with the slavery issue was highly political. In fact, the annexation of Texas and the presidential election of 1844 became so wedded to the abolition issue that it prompted the Democratic Review to say it had been "nationalized."
CHAPTER III

JAMES K. POLK: NATIONALIST OR SECTIONALIST

The famous English poet, Alfred, Lord Tennyson wrote, "the old order fadeth giving way to the new." These words appropriately described the Jacksonian Democratic party at the beginning of the fourth decade of the nineteenth century. Although this Jacksonian organization remained an influential political force in American government until 1860, its demise began as early as 1844. The term, Jacksonian Democratic party, is somewhat misleading. Although Andrew Jackson was the nominal leader of this party for almost two decades, the founder of this party and the man who largely united the different sections of the country under the Democratic banner was Martin Van Buren.¹ Starting in 1826, Van Buren broached his plan for a united Democracy by "substituting party principle for personal preference."² In order to achieve a coalition between the different sections of the United States, "Old Kinderhook" established party principles upon the tenets of egalitarian democracy


²Ibid., p. 131.
and hard money (specie). This plan was successful for a decade. However, in 1837, the stability of the Democratic party began to weaken as a result of a general business depression. Consequently, Van Buren's presidential aspirations for a united party under his leadership began to crumble.

Three years later, the Whig victories in the congressional contests as well as the presidential election of 1840 heightened the dissension in the Democratic ranks and allowed bitter rivalries within the party come to the fore.

These rivalries emerged in the contest to secure the presidential nomination in the campaign of 1844. As Jackson's choice, and as the most popular contender, Martin Van Buren seemed assured of his party's nomination. In fact, the Democratic citizenry seemed to be highly disposed toward Van Buren's candidacy, as evidenced by a letter written to him from one G. S. Crockett of Murfreesboro, Tennessee. The writer declared, "I have never had but one opinion as the proper person to be run by the Democracy in 1844 for President of the United States, since our defeat in 1840 and I rejoice to see so much unanimity ... in the leading men of our party." However, this fragile unity among the Democratic leaders soon dissipated.

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Early in 1843 Democrats began to question the "availability" of Van Buren, that is his prospects of being elected. The stigma of his 1840 presidential defeat had endured, and politicians as well as the rank and file members of the party began to speculate whether he was still the peoples' choice. Supreme Court Justice John Catron declared that Van Buren was unpopular with the people at large. Arkansas Democrats believed him to be "rather cold blooded," while Mississippians claimed that the "campaign of 1840 was so disastrous" that they were afraid to launch another election under his leadership. Ohio Democrats asserted that the New Yorker had never had the "sympathies of the western people."4

In addition to these convictions concerning Van Buren's poor chances of achieving election, there was also an anti-Van Buren sentiment among those aspiring Democratic leaders who desired to attain the presidency. These "Democratic hopefuls" realized that if the "Little Magician" was nominated a third time, their presidential chances would be thwarted. Consequently, one of the first to challenge Van Buren's right to the leadership of the party was James Buchanan.

Senator Buchanan of Pennsylvania did not have a large personal following, and outside of the Keystone state his support was virtually nonexistent. His efforts for the presidency were further obstructed by the power and popularity of Van Buren, who was a native of the same region, although not of the same state. Nevertheless, the Democracy in Pennsylvania made Buchanan their choice for first place on the 1844 ticket.\(^5\) However, when his candidacy failed to materialize, the rival factions within the Pennsylvania Democracy championed the cause of another aspirant, Richard M. Johnson of Kentucky.

Although Johnson was more popular than Buchanan, his candidacy made little progress. "Old Dick's" popularity stemmed from his fame as the reputed slayer of Tecumseh at the battle of the Thames River in 1813 and from his opposition to imprisonment for debt. Defying convention rules that forbade presidential contenders from campaigning, Johnson toured the country making speeches in order to win support.\(^6\) However, outside the West, his political strength was negligible. Though he managed to infuse in his listeners his personal concern for the interests of the workingmen, too


many people realized Johnson lacked those attributes possessed by presidential winners. George Bancroft of Massachusetts asserted, "He has no fixed opinions, and he has not mind enough to form fixed opinions." An even more accurate appraisal of "Old Tecumseh" came from William L. Marcy of New York. "It may be there never was so much of him as we were formerly led to suppose." In addition to Johnson's indecisiveness concerning issues, another factor which greatly thwarted his presidential hopes was his mulatto mistress, Julia Chinn. It was no secret that she lived with him in Georgetown, Kentucky, managed his household, and even bore him two daughters. Miscegenation, especially to southerners, was a social taboo which guaranteed Johnson's defeat in the South and proved detrimental to his chances in the North.

When Johnson's candidacy failed to catch on, many of his supporters shifted their efforts to Michigan's Lewis Cass. This conservative contender, originally from New Hampshire, was deeply indoctrinated in the Jacksonian philosophy. He had served as Jackson's secretary of war, as governor of Michigan and as minister to France.

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7 Bancroft to Van Buren, 9 December 1842, Van Buren Papers.
8 Marcy to Van Buren, 1 November 1843, ibid.
Throughout his public career he had managed to avoid a stand on most controversial issues. As a result, he enjoyed broad support in all sections of the United States. In the East, he found support among Pennsylvania protectionists such as Richard Rush, Charles J. Ingersoll, George M. Dallas and Governor Mahlon Dickerson of New Jersey. In the West, his support was even stronger among the property-minded men of Ohio and the commercially-inclined citizens who favored a cheap paper currency. Cass appeared to be the most available of all the conservative candidates. Yet, his mediocrity, the absence of any tangible statesmanship and his lack of confidence in his own abilities, failed to secure him the coveted nomination.

Another obstacle to the pro-Cass movement was John C. Calhoun. Although Calhoun withdrew his name from contention in December 1843, his followers remained loyal and refused to support Cass. Calhoun entered the presidential race early in 1843. Relying upon a "central committee" composed of Robert M. T. Hunter, Dixon Lewis and Duff Green to propagate his philosophy of sectionalism and states' rights, Calhoun's strategy focused upon the creation of rival organizations within the framework of the Democracy. In New

England, Calhoun's fortunes depended upon the Boston banker, David Henshaw, and the New Hampshire senator, Levi Woodbury, who was offered the vice-presidential nomination. In New York Joseph Scoville tried to destroy Van Buren's control of the state delegation, but he had no success. The southern drive for Calhoun centered on Virginia. Calhoun's triumvirate tried to convert Richmond editor Thomas Ritchie to the cause, but again it was unsuccessful. When the Democratic conventions of New York and most of the New England states declared for Van Buren, Calhoun despairingly withdrew his name. However, even in defeat, Calhoun would not give in and support the front-runner. Instead he said, "I honestly believe . . . [Van Buren's] defeat is necessary to save the party, not by our joining the Whigs but by standing fast and rallied on our own ground." 

Ironically, Calhoun was to play a prominent part in Van Buren's defeat. Joining forces with John Tyler, Calhoun and the president managed to force settlement of the Texas question. Tyler, who had been ostracized by both the Whig and Democratic parties, was anxious for an issue that would

12Paul, Rift in the Democracy, p. 44.
redeem his administration and also give him a chance for re-
election. Consequently, his supporters enlisted the help of
Mississippi senator Robert J. Walker and several other Demo-
cratic enthusiasts in instigating the plan for Texas annex-
ation. However, in order for the Texas annexation scheme
to be successful, the nominating convention had to be post-
poned until the spring of 1844. Walker was cunningly aware
of this. Consequently, in February 1843 he persuaded Silas
Wright, Van Buren's spokesman, that a delay was necessary in
order to placate the various factions. However, Walker, in
the meantime, failed to mention to Wright that the Texas
annexation question was to be broached as an issue in which
the Democratic nominee would be forced to take a positive
stand in order to win the nomination. Reluctantly Wright
agreed to the fateful postponement. As a result of the
Walker-Wright negotiations concerning the Democratic con-
vention, Van Buren was confronted with a dilemma in 1844.
On the one side, he had to consider the South's growing de-
sire for land open to slavery, especially in Texas. Cave
Johnson of Tennessee informed him that the Texas question
"seems destined to override all other questions." In addition
to this, many Democrats in the North desired Texas.

15 Wright to Van Buren, 27 February 1843, Van Buren Papers.
16 Johnson to Van Buren, 20 April 1844, ibid.
Nevertheless, Van Buren had to consider the rising strength of antislavery opposition to Texas annexation in New York and the other eastern states. Furthermore, he had to contemplate the morality of absorbing Texas when a weaker neighbor, Mexico, still claimed the territory. Still another problem was the fear that annexation would inflame the dangerous passions of sectional conflict and destroy the New York-Virginia alliance he had so carefully maintained in the Democratic party.17

To complicate the situation further, Van Buren's political rival, John C. Calhoun, had equated the annexation issue with extending slavery. Calhoun manipulated this by writing a letter to Richard Packenham, the British minister, in which he said the United States was annexing Texas to prevent British interference with the abolition of slavery in this territory.18

Regardless of which position Van Buren maintained, he was sure to alienate one section of the country. If he advocated annexation, northerners would accuse him of desiring to extend slavery. On the other hand, if he declared against annexation, southerners would brand him a traitor to their

17 Wright to Van Buren, 22 March 1844, ibid.

cause. Consequently, in responding to William Hammet's letter asking him to state his views on annexation, Van Buren avoided any direct reference to slavery. The only comment he made in alluding to it was that he said he would not be influenced by local or sectional feelings. However, in opposing the immediate annexation of Texas, based largely on the reason that it would lead to war with Mexico, Van Buren maintained that there was no danger of foreign, i.e., British, interference in Texas.19

As a result of this letter, Van Buren's chances for the Democratic nomination were greatly jeopardized. As one of his correspondents, William Brown, stated, "I can assure you your Texas letter has had a dreadful effect."20 Another writer informed him that it would be best if he withdrew from the presidential race.21 The detrimental effect that Van Buren's Texas letter had on his nomination had just the opposite result in promoting Polk's nomination. Although Polk was not actively seeking the presidential nomination, he, nevertheless, realized that the presidency was within his grasp. This is evident in reading a letter from Gideon Pillow, addressed to Polk prior to the convention, in which

19Washington Globe, 28 April 1844.
20Brown to Van Buren, 29 April 1844, Van Buren Papers.
21Lucius Elmer to Van Buren, 6 May 1844, ibid.
Pillow told Polk that his name had a strong possibility of coming up for the nomination. In addition, Andrew Jackson told Polk that in the light of Van Buren's stand on annexation, the Democratic candidate for president should "be an annexation man and reside in the Southwest." Jackson further stated that he believed Polk to be "the most available man" for the presidency, while the vice-presidential candidate should be from the North.

Although Polk strongly favored Texas annexation, he in no way advocated extending the slaveholding area of the United States. Like Jackson, he desired to expand the boundaries of the United States, but neither man was interested in promoting the spread of slavery. In supporting annexation, Polk was first and foremost a nationalist. This is apparent from an editorial in the Nashville Union. This pro-Polk organ declared that pro-slavery interests were playing a prominent role in Texas annexation. However, it reassured its readers that Polk would not be the president of any section of the Union but that he was committed, as were his forefathers, to the preservation of the United States. Further evidence

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24 Nashville Union, 23 January 1845.
that Polk was a Union man was revealed in a letter written
to him by Gideon Pillow. Referring to the presidential elec-
tion, Pillow said that Polk's name should be brought forward
as the compromise candidate of all sections of the Union.25

Even though Polk's desire for the annexation of Texas
was not influenced by any personal motives for the expansion
of slavery, his position was, nevertheless, influenced by it
in a negative sense in that he desired to protect the insti-
tution where it already existed. During the 1840's Great
Britain's role in Texas affairs was rapidly increasing. In
fact, that nation posed a threat not only to the slave-
holders but also to the northern businessmen. This was
apparent in a communication written by Ashbel Smith, Texas
minister to Great Britain, in which he said that Lord Aber-
deen (the foreign secretary) told him "... The British
Government greatly desire the abolition of slavery in Texas
as part of their general policy in reference to their colo-
nial and commercial interests and ... in reference to its
future influence on slavery in the United States."26 Und-
doubtedly, Polk realized the detrimental effect a British-
dominated Texas would have upon the South. As a slaveholder,
he was concerned with the possible effects a change in the

25Pillow to Polk, 28 May 1844, Polk Papers.
status of the institution in Texas would have upon his own economic interests and those of his friends. In a letter addressed to Polk, Andrew Donelson, Jackson's nephew, revealed the concern of southerners over the election and annexation when he wrote, "But if Clay be elected what . . . become all the speculation respecting the question of slavery--what a dark cloud will at once hang over the prospect of all our southern states. Great Britain will first resume her projects for the abolition of slavery, and with the aid of Webster and Adams will consider her game is ensured." 27

Even though a Clay victory and a British-controlled Texas was possible, Polk did not relinquish his unionist stand on annexation. Being a devout nationalist, Polk reasserted his convictions that a British-dominated Texas would adversely affect all Americans when he told Salmon P. Chase and other Ohioans that "if the application of Texas, for reunion, into our confederacy shall be rejected by the United States, there is imminent danger that she will become a dependancy, if not a colony of Great Britain--an event which no American patriot, anxious for the safety and prosperity of his country, could permit to occur; without the most strenuous resistance . . . ." 28

27 Donelson to Polk, 5 November 1844, Polk Papers.

28 Nashville Union, 30 April 1844.
Further evidence of Polk's unionist sentiments appeared in an issue of the Washington Globe. According to this pro-Jackson organ, Polk considered Oregon and Texas on equal grounds as far as expansionist policies were concerned. Since 1818 the United States and Great Britain had maintained a joint occupation agreement in Oregon. However, in the 1840's, sizable groups of pioneers from the United States had migrated to the Willamette River Valley in Oregon. Consequently, the possession of Oregon had become a primary concern of many Americans. Although the United States had proposed to compromise on the boundary line at 49°, Great Britain had made no effort to cooperate, and a stalemate had resulted. Therefore, during the 1844 election a clamor was again voiced by expansionists to extend American control over this territory to 54°40'. During the campaign Polk never stated whether he desired the "all of Oregon" proposal or the compromise agreement. 29 Nevertheless, he considered the man who opposed the acquisition of Oregon as much a traitor as the person who opposed the annexation of Texas. Polk stated, "let Texas be re-annexed and the authority and laws of the United States be established and maintained within her limits, as also the Oregon territory, and let the

fixed policy of our government be not to permit Great Britain or any other foreign power to plant a colony or hold dominion over any portion of people or territory of either."30

Polk's nationalistic views greatly enhanced his nomination chances in the Democratic convention. Polk had written to Gideon Pillow and Cave Johnson, his old political confidents, about a startling conversation he had had with Andrew Jackson just before the Tennessee delegation left for Baltimore. "Old Hickory" had suggested that in a case of a deadlocked convention "that I [Polk] would be the most available man" for the nomination.31 With this encouraging news, Polk urged Johnson and Pillow to act upon this suggestion in case Van Buren's nomination proved impossible.32

When the Democratic convention met on May 27, 1844, in Baltimore, the Van Burenites were totally unprepared to cope with what ensued. Before the delegates were seated, the anti-Van Buren forces under the leadership of Romulus Saunders of North Carolina unexpectedly nominated Hendrick B. Wright of Pennsylvania to preside over the convention. Immediately, Saunders and Wright moved to adopt the rules used by the Democratic conventions of 1832 and 1836, which required a

30 Washington Globe, 6 May 1844.
32 Ibid., p. 242.
two-thirds majority for nomination. However, before they could railroad this motion to passage, Cave Johnson demanded an official poll of the delegates be taken. After this was accomplished, a lengthy debate ensued. Finally, after much controversy, the two-thirds rule passed by a vote of 148 to 116.33

The presidential nominating began on Tuesday afternoon. With a total of 266 votes, 177 were needed to nominate under the two-thirds rule. On the first ballot Van Buren received 146 votes, Cass 83, Johnson 24, and there were other scattered votes for Buchanan, Woodbury and Calhoun. As the afternoon wore on, six more ballots were taken with no candidate receiving the necessary two-thirds vote. However, with each successive ballot, it was apparent that Van Buren's support was eroding while Cass' vote continued to grow. Consequently, the Van Burenites realized that unless they could broach an adjournment, Cass would surely reach the 177 votes needed in the forthcoming ballots. When their pleas for adjournment were rejected, the Ohio Van Burenites provoked a "real western fight," and the delegates consented to adjourn.

That night, three men diligently labored to promote the nomination of James K. Polk. Pillow worked nearly all night to persuade the southern delegates to support the Tennessean.

Realizing it was unmistakably clear that Van Buren could not be nominated, George Bancroft, a Massachusetts delegate, also labored for the Polk cause, concentrating his efforts on the New York and Ohio delegates. Somewhat reluctantly, Benjamin F. Butler of New York also furthered the Tennessean's chances. Although Butler had originally promoted the Van Buren ticket, he realized that was a futile effort. Consequently, he proposed the idea of a Silas Wright-Polk ticket. Wright, however, adamantly refused the nomination. Butler then threw his support to the Polk cause.\textsuperscript{34}

When the eighth ballot began on Wednesday morning, it was generally known among the Van Burenites that "the general idea appears to rally on Polk." Although Polk received only 44 votes in this ballot, it was clear he was the only candidate on whom the convention could unite. Consequently, on the ninth ballot Polk received the unanimous vote of the delegates and became the Democratic party's nominee for president.\textsuperscript{35}

The following day the convention delegates completed the Democratic ticket by unanimously nominating Senator George M. Dallas of Pennsylvania as the vice-presidential nominee.\textsuperscript{36}

\textsuperscript{34}Sellers, "Election of 1844," pp. 766-69.

\textsuperscript{35}O'Sullivan to Van Buren, 29 May 1844, Van Buren Papers.

Thus, by the end of May 1844, the Democratic party had, according to historian Glyndon G. Van Deusen, nominated the first "dark horse" candidate in American presidential history.37 Theoretically, Van Deusen was correct in the sense that Polk was not a major contender for the presidential nomination. However, contrary to popular opinion, Polk was not an unknown political figure who was arbitrarily selected from the convention delegates. In contrast, he was regarded by many politicians in both parties as being worthy of high national office. As speaker of the House of Representatives, as governor of Tennessee, and as a close friend of Andrew Jackson, Polk had achieved national recognition as a Jacksonian advocate. As early as 1839, some of Polk's friends foresaw the possibility of him becoming president. Amos Kirkpatrick regarded Polk's election to the governorship as a stepping-stone to his bid for the presidency.38 In 1841, Alfred Nicholson expressed his confidence in the Tennessean's abilities by declaring that Polk's success as governor would lead him to the presidency.39 Prominent politicians such as Silas Wright and Andrew Jackson also advanced Polk's claims to the White House. Prior to the Democratic

38 Kirkpatrick to Polk, 17 October 1839, Polk Papers.
39 Nicholson to Polk, 13 January 1841, ibid.
convention, Wright told Cave Johnson that Polk "was the only man he thought the Northern democracy would support if Van Buren was set aside because he was known to be firm and true to the cause." 40 "Old Hickory" also boosted Polk's presidential hopes. He denounced Van Buren's opposition to annexation as political suicide and proclaimed Polk to be the "most available man" for the nomination. 41 That Polk was not a "dark horse" is also given credence by the strong support he received, prior to the convention, from the Massachusetts delegation headed by Governor Marcus Morton and George Bancroft. 42

While the Democratic convention was enshrouded in party divisions, the Whig convention, which had previously met on May 1, 1844, was harmoniously united behind their candidate, Henry Clay, making his third (and final) attempt to secure the presidency. By the middle of 1843, Clay had been nominated by Whig conventions in thirteen states, and by early 1844 the remaining states had pledged their support to the Kentuckian. Clay had presumed that Van Buren would be his opponent in the forthcoming election. Consequently, he, like

40 Johnson to Polk, 30 April 1844, ibid.


the "Little Magician," perhaps by pre-arrangement, had declared his opposition to Texas annexation. However, when he realized Polk was to be his opponent, Clay hedged considerably on his annexation views. As a result of his inconsistency, Clay lost several thousand votes.\textsuperscript{43}

In contrast to Clay's disastrous handling of the Texas question, Polk's annexation views were consistent and precise. Once he had obtained his party's nomination, he continued his efforts for Texas annexation based on a unionist theme. However, the annexation question was a divisive issue that made Polk's job seem almost impossible. The bitterness of the Van Burenites over the defeat of their leader and the victory of Polk became deeper when Calhoun and his associates tried to force the Texas question to a final showdown before the November election.\textsuperscript{44} At this point the schisms in the Democratic party appeared so great that Silas Wright believed the nation was on the threshold of division. He informed Polk that Calhoun and the southern radicals had all but broken the New York-Virginia alliance that had united the Democracy for so long.\textsuperscript{45}

More discouraging news reached Polk about two weeks later when Cave Johnson told him that a few southern


\textsuperscript{44}Smith, \textit{Annexation of Texas}, p. 299.

\textsuperscript{45}Wright to Polk, 2 June 1844, Polk Papers.
politicians would attempt to appropriate him and the nomination for their exclusive benefit. Johnson was evidently referring to the southern radicals. One such extremist, Robert Barnwell Rhett of South Carolina, declared that "the safety, if not the very existence of the institution of slavery" was dependent upon the annexation of Texas. "The only true issue before the South should be Texas or disunion." Another radical, James H. Hammond, also of South Carolina, echoed Rhett's sentiments when he said, "If the Union is to break there could not be a better pretext" than the failure to annex Texas.

Polk, however, did not agree with this position. His correspondence indicates that he desired to avoid an affiliation with the southern extremist wing of the Democratic party. Cave Johnson wrote to Polk in late June of 1844:

I have the most serious apprehension of the southern movement not only to our cause but the country--Mason and Dixon's line now divides the Methodist church and will soon divide the other churches--this movement will tend to divide political parties by it--the Texas question brings into the contest the fanaticism of the North with increased fervor--our only safety for the country and our cause depends upon the southern democracy maintaining the position we have heretofore occupied firm and consistent friends of the northern democracy--yielding much for conciliation and harmony.

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46 Johnson to Polk, 13 June 1844, ibid.
48 Sellers, James K. Polk: Continentalist, p. 112.
49 Johnson to Polk, 21 June 1844, Polk Papers.
Johnson's apprehensions were not unfounded. Shortly, after the writing of this letter, some Carolinians started a movement to hold a southern convention at Nashville as a rallying point for "southern" principles. When Polk learned about this plan, he replied that "the idea of a southern convention or sectional meeting to be held at Nashville or elsewhere must not for a moment be entertained." Polk further urged that representatives from all the states attend the proposed meeting so as not to give it a sectional flavor. As shown by these letters, Polk was not a sectionalist. He was foremost a unionist, concerned primarily about the divisions facing his nation.

Throughout the campaign of 1844 Polk faced several issues which could have branded him a sectionalist. However, he never urged additional protection for the South or championed the cause of slavery. With reference to the tariff, Polk adopted the Jacksonian policy of favoring a "judicious" tariff, which meant that he did not commit himself for or against any degree of protection. Like a true Jacksonian, Polk skillfully worded his reply to Pennsylvanian John Kane's inquiry about his views on the tariff. He stated that he had heretofore sanctioned such moderate discriminating duties as would produce the amount of revenue

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needed and at the same time afford reasonable incidental protection to American industry. He went on to say that he thought it "the duty of the government to extend as far as it may be practicable to do so by its revenue laws . . . fair and just protection to all great interests of the Union, embracing agriculture, manufacturers, mechanic arts, commerce and navigation." Consequently, Polk had, in the words of Gideon Pillow, pleased "all but the ultra" with his stand on protection. Southerners were, for the most part, satisfied with his views on revenue. Franklin Elmore of South Carolina now described Polk as "a southern man--a friend of free trade and identified with us and our institutions, and an enemy of the protective policy and abolition . . . ."

Polk maintained his unionist image not only on the tariff issue, but he also kept it intact concerning the abolition issue. Near the end of September, Robert Walker of Mississippi, chairman of the Democratic national committee and later Polk's Secretary of the Treasury, issued a pamphlet entitled, "The South in Danger! Read Before You Vote." The purpose of this document was to show that the Whigs and abolitionists had united in the North to defeat the annexation of Texas. Walker had intended that the pamphlet be

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51 Polk to Kane, 19 June 1844, Polk Papers.
52 J. G. Harris to Polk, 20 December 1842, ibid.
circulated only in the South. However, the Whig campaign committee somehow obtained a copy and distributed it throughout the North, where it was interpreted as advocating Texas annexation as a measure to preserve and extend slavery. Polk knew nothing of its publication, and he regarded its circulation as a purely sectionalist move.

In reality, his presidential chances were greatly threatened by Walker's inappropriate action. One correspondent reported that Walker's pamphlet would have such a detrimental effect in the North that it would cause tens of thousands of voters to turn against the Democracy. The writer declared it was exactly what the Whigs had intended to do—link the extension of slavery and Texas annexation to the Democratic party. Although Polk disassociated himself from any connection with Walker's actions, the Whigs, nevertheless, did not give up in their attempt to label Polk a pro-slavery candidate.

During the 1844 campaign, both candidates fell victims to slander and mud slinging. Although Polk's character was exemplary, he, nevertheless, was identified with the most vicious slaveholders. Whig journals exploited to the fullest a purported extract from one Roorback's tour of the South and

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54 *Niles Register*, 17 (5 October 1844):73, ibid., 17 (2 November 1844):140-41.

55 W. E. Cramer to Polk, 4 October 1844, Polk Papers.
West, in which Polk was accused of having sold a gang of slaves, with the initials J. K. P. on them, to a certain slave driver. This extract was promptly proved to be a Whig fabrication, based on a similar passage, having nothing to do with Polk, in G. W. Featherstonhaugh's book on his American travels. Although the term "Roorked" was incorporated into the American political vocabulary to denote preelection falsehood, the stigma still remained that Polk was a slaveholder who represented the sectional interests of the South.

The election results of 1844 were indicative of the balance achieved by a fully matured two-party system of the Jacksonian era. Although Polk won the electoral vote by a margin of 170 to 105 for Clay, his popular vote lead was only a mere one and four-tenths percentage points (38,367 votes) over that of Clay's. Many historians have maintained that the Texas issue was the decisive factor in the election. Yet, the party parity within a majority of the states indicates that other factors besides annexation had a significant


57 Moses Dawson to Robert Armstrong, 25 September 1844, Polk Papers.
impact on the election. There can be no doubt that the Texas annexation question was the most talked about and the most important single issue in the campaign. Yet, at the same time, tension between the radical and conservative Democrats, the intraparty dissension over the tariff, and even the candidates themselves had as much, if not more, of an effect on the final outcome than did the annexation issue. Polk's astute handling of the tariff issue saved Pennsylvania for the Democrats, while Clay's unskillful management of the Texas issue caused many antislavery voters in New York to vote for the Liberty Party.

This political organization, founded in 1836, had been established to achieve the eventual emancipation of slavery through the ballot box. Although it had won only a small vote in the 1840 presidential election, its vote had steadily risen to the point where in New York it held the balance of power between Whigs and Democrats. Consequently, both Polk and Clay realized the importance of trying to win this segment of the electorate. Early in the campaign, the Liberty men had joined the Democrats in denouncing Clay's "immoral" character. However, as the Texas issue became more pronounced, these same Liberty men now represented Clay as "the

58Sellers, James K. Polk: Continentalist 1843-1846, p. 160. In 15 of the 26 states the winning party had a lead of less than eight percentage points. See also, Glyndon G. Van Deusen, The Jacksonian Era, 1828-1848 (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1959), p. 188.
Abolitionist candidate of the North." Clay, identifying himself as a nationalist, repudiated this abolitionist claim and declared that he favored annexation as long as it was "without dishonor, without war, with the common consent of the union, and upon just and fair terms." This refutation of his previous statement, in which he had opposed annexation, irreparably damaged his chances among northern Whigs. Clay's election hopes were further dampened when James G. Birney of Michigan, a former Alabama slaveholder and the Liberty party candidate for president, announced that he preferred Polk over Clay. This immediately alienated many of the abolitionists from the Whig party. As a result, many antislavery voters, who had intended to vote for Clay, cast their ballots for Birney and thus caused the pivotal state of New York to swing for Polk by 5,106 votes. Without New York, Polk would have lost the election.

Yet, it is inaccurate to assume that the abolitionists alone elected Polk to the presidency. In the New York election, the Democratic presidential ticket won largely because of the popularity of Silas Wright, who was running for governor. What is probably more striking and more accurate

59Ibid., p. 146.
60Niles Weekly Register, 17 (16 November 1844):166-67.
61Van Deusen, Jacksonian Era, p. 188.
than trying to pinpoint who, or what elected Polk, is the realization that people voted for the party with which they identified. No single issue, or no single group of people was more influential than any other in the 1844 election. A combination of factors elected Polk to the presidency. Yet, out of all the speculation there emerged a prevailing theory. This theory was that sectionalism had triumphed supreme over nationalism in 1844. As the Washington Globe declared, Polk's election was "a victory gained by the South over the North--by the slave states over the free--by the repudiating states over the honest ones--by the partisans of the annexation of Texas over its opponents..."62

The Globe's appraisal of the 1844 election is incorrect. Although Polk was a southerner who had a stake in slave-holding, he was not a sectionalist. Despite his opponents' beliefs, Polk proved to be a true Jacksonian. Like Jackson, he was interested in the expansion of the nation and not in the expansion of slavery. In relation to the Texas annexation issue, he was first and foremost a unionist. In the presidential campaign of 1844, he did not favor the South over any other section. He rebuked Calhoun's efforts for a southern convention, and he repudiated Walker's move to base the election on a purely sectional basis. He also

heeded his colleagues' warnings and avoided the designs of southern radicals to exploit him as their candidate. Yet, the most difficult job was ahead—the presidency. If he could continue to remain a loyal unionist in the unknown confrontations that awaited him as chief executive, his reputation as a nationalist would be preserved.
CHAPTER IV

JAMES K. POLK AND THE ISSUE OF SLAVERY IN THE TERRITORIES

As Polk embarked upon his presidential duties in the spring of 1845, there was an expansionist sentiment gripping the nation. This nationalist desire for more land was a product of the Texas annexation issue. While the most avid advocates of Texas annexation came from the West, this section of the nation did not claim all its proponents. One southern Whig asserted that it should be the policy of the United States to own "all the cotton lands of North America if we can."¹ Another southerner claimed that in half a century the world "would hear the song of the American reaper on the shores of the Pacific."² From the Northeast the New Englander, a conservative anti-slavery journal, reported that the annexation of Texas was an "index of the future policy of the United States."³ The New York Herald asserted that it was the "stepping stone to popularity now

¹John D. P. Fuller, The Movement for the Acquisition of all Mexico, 1846-48 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1936), p. 22.
²Ibid.
to invent some new annexation scheme." Polk, being an avowed expansionist, was, in the words of his definitive biographer, Charles G. Sellers, "superbly fitted to initiate and direct the drive to the Pacific." Yet, within this drive to fulfill America's "Manifest Destiny" there existed the seeds of disunion. The controversy focused on the question of whether or not slavery could be prohibited in the territories that were under consideration for statehood. Despite his nationalist position on expansion, Polk was still considered by many northern Democrats and most Whigs to be a "southerner."

Unfortunately, the Texas issue gave credence to this accusation. Four days prior to the Tennessean's inauguration, the Texas annexation bill was still in danger of being defeated. Since Tyler's treaty of annexation had been overwhelmingly defeated by the Senate in June, his administration proposed to annex Texas by a joint resolution of Congress. However, Van Buren Democrats objected to this measure because they regarded it as a means of extending slavery and increasing the political power of the South. Jacob Brinkerhoff of Ohio appropriately expressed the sentiments of Van Burenites when he declared, "[Annexation] was

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4New York Herald, 1 January 1846.

not a national question. It was a sectional question, hatched and got up as a southern question, for the benefit of the South; for the strengthening of her institutions... for the advancement of her influence." After much debate, several proposals, and many days of delay, the House bill, which finally passed in late January 1845, admitted the entire area of Texas as a state but provided that up to four additional states might be formed out of the territory in the future. The bill also provided that slavery be excluded from any states created north of the Missouri Compromise line of 36° 30'. The Van Burenites, especially in New York, considered this bill "a cheat and a fraud." Most of them believed it would give the South a predominance, at least in the Senate, in political power. Consequently, Van Buren Democrats in the Senate refused to support the House bill. This rejection prompted Thomas Hart Benton of Missouri to propose an alternative. His bill demanded the immediate admission of the settled part of Texas as a state and a renegotiation of the terms of annexation for the remainder of the territory.

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Although most of the Van Burenites accepted Benton's new proposal, John C. Calhoun and his followers objected to this alternative.\(^{10}\) Once again, Texas annexation seemed doomed to defeat. However, at this point, Senator Robert J. Walker of Mississippi, acting as Polk's spokesman, introduced a compromise bill.\(^{11}\) According to the Walker compromise, the Benton and House bills were combined, giving the president the alternative of negotiating a new treaty or accepting the House bill.\(^{12}\) Polk assured the Van Burenites that he would follow through with the Benton plan. He told Frank Blair "that the first men of the country would fill the Commission" for the Texas negotiations.\(^{13}\) In a conversation with Senator John A. Dix of New York, Polk again claimed support for the Benton plan by telling Dix that "if he had any discretion placed in his hands, he would exercise it [Benton's plan] in a manner to satisfy us . . . ."\(^{14}\)


\(^{12}\) Senate, Congressional Globe, 28th Cong., 2nd sess., 1844-45, pp. 16-17, 19, 359.


\(^{14}\) Sellers, James K. Polk: Continentalist 1843-1846, p. 218.
Relying upon Polk's word, Van Burenite senators gave their votes to the compromise bill and thus gave it a narrow margin of passage. Two days before Polk assumed the presidency, John Tyler, the outgoing chief executive, decided to settle the Texas question and give his administration at least one positive achievement. He dispatched a message to the United States agent in Texas asking the Texas government to consent to annexation under the House plan. Polk could have reversed his predecessor's instructions, but he took no action. As a result, Texas came into the Union as one enormous slave state. The Van Burenites believed they had been deceived. When questioned about his commitment to them, Polk replied, "if any such pledges were made, it was in a total misconception of what I had said or meant." Although it was possible such a misunderstanding could have occurred, this was not the only incident in which Polk's alleged duplicity was manifested.

Shortly after becoming president, northwestern Democrats had occasion again to charge the Tennessean with accusations of southern domination. This time, surprisingly, the cries of disingenuousness were directed toward the president's Oregon policy, which for all practical purposes seemed

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entirely divorced from the slavery issue. The origin of this controversy revolved around the Democratic platform of 1844, which called for the reannexation of Texas and the reoccupation of the entire Oregon territory to 54°40'. In the presidential campaign, Polk had not stated whether he favored the "all of Oregon" proposal or the compromise of 49°. However, in his inaugural address, Polk advanced the United States claim to the entire Oregon territory. When the British government rejected Polk's offer for a compromise settlement at the 49th parallel, the president firmly adopted the extreme position of the Democratic platform in his message to Congress on December 2, 1845. This move alleviated most northern Democrats' fears of a southern-controlled administration. However, their assurances were short-lived. Under the leadership of John C. Calhoun, a coalition emerged to push for the compromise settlement of Oregon. Since no northern Democrat had voted against the final admission of Texas, the northern Democracy viewed this move by Calhoun and his associates as a plot to deny them the support on Oregon that they had given the South on Texas. Immediately, cries of intrigue were heard from northern representatives. Senator Edward A. Hannegan of Indiana protested the Calhoun proposal


by saying, "Texas and Oregon were born in the same instant, nursed and cradled in the same cradle--the Baltimore Convention . . . There was not a moment's hesitation, until Texas was admitted; but the moment she was admitted the peculiar friends of Texas turned and were doing all they could to strangle Oregon."18 Stephen A. Douglas of Illinois confirmed Hannegan's suspicion of bad faith on the South's part when he said, "There now appeared to be a great terror in the Oregon question that made gentlemen shrink from it, who had met the Texas question boldly and without shrinking last year."19

As the diplomatic correspondence between Great Britain and the United States became more intense, the 54° 40' advocates realized that British military preparations had shaken Polk's firm commitment to the entire Oregon territory. In fact, the first indication of Polk's backing down on his commitment came when he spoke to his cabinet about a scheme for settling the controversy through mutual tariff reductions, accompanied by a British payment which the United States would use in compensating the Hudson Bay Company.20 Although

18Ibid., p. 110. 19Ibid., p. 125.

20Polk, Diary, 1:191-92. The Hudson Bay Company, a British fur organization, was economically and politically dominant in the Oregon territory, especially north of the Columbia River. Estimates vary, but it was generally accepted that less than ten Americans had occupied land north of this river. Thomas A. Bailey, A Diplomatic History of the American People (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1955), pp. 229, 242.
this plan failed, it was apparent that Polk intended to re-
treat from his extreme position of demanding all of Oregon. In the ensuing months Polk told Calhoun and William Allen of Ohio that he would submit any compromise offer of 49° to the Senate for its advice.\textsuperscript{21} When the compromise treaty with England was signed, settling the Oregon boundary at the 49th parallel, many northern Democrats regarded this as an indication of Polk's duplicity and of his willingness to sacrifice the interests of other sections to those of the South.\textsuperscript{22} John Wentworth of Illinois was so enraged that he claimed southern patriotism seemed to disappear when the acquisition of free territory was involved.\textsuperscript{23} Approximately two months later, Polk further alienated the western Demo-
ocrats when he vetoed a much desired rivers and harbors bill.\textsuperscript{24} This rejection of a favorite measure of the pro-internal im-
provement-minded westerners only lent further credence to Whig charges that Polk's administration was southern-controlled.

\textsuperscript{21} Polk, \textit{Diary}, pp. 249-52.


\textsuperscript{23} Senate, \textit{Congressional Globe}, 29th Cong., 1st sess., 1845-46, pp. 205-06.

\textsuperscript{24} Polk, \textit{Diary}, 2:65-66.
What was even more suspicious was that practically all southern Democrats voted to sustain Polk's veto.\textsuperscript{25}

However, five days later northern Democrats sounded their loudest cries concerning southern domination of the Polk administration. On August 8, 1846, Polk, at a most inopportune time, requested that Congress appropriate two million dollars for the purpose of negotiating a settlement with Mexico. The United States and Mexico had been at war since the spring of 1846. The primary cause of this conflict had been the annexation of Texas to the United States without Mexican consent. Although Polk had assured the nation that the Mexican War was a purely defensive conflict, many Van Burenites had serious doubts as to his real intentions. In fact, Van Buren had openly accused Polk of waging the war for the "extension of slavery."\textsuperscript{26} Two New York Whig congressmen also reiterated "Old Kinderhook's" charges. They claimed Polk desired the appropriation for the purpose of "buying territory at the South."\textsuperscript{27} Polk's alleged duplicity concerning Texas annexation and the Oregon territory issue had certainly given the


northern and western Democrats sufficient cause to doubt his nationalist views. Just one month prior to his request for the funds, Polk had assured John A. Dix of New York that he had no intentions of annexing Mexican territory. Yet, it was generally understood that Polk intended to use the appropriation to purchase land from Mexico. Consequently, the Van Burenites, who previously believed they had been deceived in the Texas and Oregon questions, wisely devised a congressional plan whereby slavery was prohibited in any new territory to be acquired from Mexico. This plan, known as the Wilmot Proviso and generally considered to be the product of Pennsylvania representative David Wilmot, provided a great obstacle to Polk's expansionist policies.

Although Polk seemed to favor the South in his first months in the presidency, he did not intend to use the proposed two million dollar appropriation for the extension of slavery. He wrote in his diary that he saw no connection between slavery and making peace with Mexico. Nevertheless, much to his dismay, the appropriation bill was killed by a filibuster in the Senate. Though he would have preferred to have kept slavery out of politics, Polk realized

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29Polk, Diary, 2:76-77.

30Polk, Diary, 2:75.
the dissident Van Burenites would not allow the Wilmot Proviso to die. As Gideon Welles told Van Buren, "The time has come, I think, when the northern Democracy should make a stand." 31

When the twenty-ninth Congress reassembled in December of 1846, Polk renewed his request for a two million dollar appropriation. Realizing that the tide of antislavery sentiment was extremely high in the North, especially in view of the recent Whig victories in New York, Polk was cautious not to push his request. 32 In order to get the proslavery and antislavery views on his request, Polk summoned John C. Calhoun and David Wilmot, respectively. Questioning Calhoun, Polk discovered that the South Carolinian was amenable to his project of utilizing the appropriation for the annexation of California and New Mexico. 33 However, he informed the president that he opposed any appropriation or peace treaty which included an antislavery amendment. Like Polk, Calhoun believed slavery would probably never exist in the territories to be acquired. Yet, the South Carolinian insisted that the South's peculiar institution demanded that the principle of territorial exclusion be defeated. 34

31 Welles to Van Buren, 28 July 1846, Van Buren Papers.
33 Ibid., p. 27.
34 Polk, Diary, 2:283-84.
Surprisingly, when Polk interviewed Wilmot, the Pennsylvanian agreed not to attach his amendment to the appropriation. Evidently Polk convinced him of his sincerity in not wishing to extend slavery in the territories. Polk further assured Wilmot that slavery could never exist in the territories and that it would probably never be broached in the governmental organization of these lands. Although Polk's appropriation appeared to stand a good chance of passing, he further queried other congressmen on the bill and discovered their responses to be unfavorable. Consequently, Polk decided to delay the appropriation measure.

Despite Polk's deferment of the monetary bill, the question of excluding slavery from the territories could not be silenced. Primarily through the efforts of Preston King of New York, the "two million dollar bill," with Wilmot's amendment attached to it, was reintroduced on January 4, 1847. Although many Van Burenites tried to dissuade King from reinstating this sectionally explosive issue into politics, Silas Wright justified Kings' action by claiming "the Mexican War is rapidly becoming unpopular with the people of this section of the Union, as I fear it is in all sections; and here the great and universal objection made to it is that its effect is to be, if its object and design is not, to extend slavery." 36

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King, like Wright, maintained that the Mexican War was being fought to extend slavery. The Polk administration, he claimed, would "take no territory unless it shall be arranged that the territory shall be open to slavery." 37 King's accusation clearly demonstrated that the Van Burenites were committed to fight for free soil. In addition, it also proved that the question of slavery in the territories could no longer be ignored. In response to King's charge, Polk wrote in his diary, "The slavery question is assuming a fearful and most important aspect. The movement of Mr. King today, if persevered in, will be attended with terrible consequences to the country, and cannot fail to destroy the Democratic party, if it does not ultimately threaten the Union itself." 38 Polk reiterated that slavery had no connection with the Mexican War and that its introduction was a "mischievous and wicked" move. Though King's version of the two million dollar bill never passed, he had a second opportunity to append it to a three million dollar request. Although this appropriation bill passed Congress unencumbered by the Wilmot Proviso, the issue of slavery in the territories had, nevertheless, been thrust into the scope of national politics where it had to be dealt with.


38 Polk, *Diary*, 2:305.
Polk, however, chose to remain noncommittal in his policy toward slavery in the territories. For more than a year, his administration adopted no positive policy toward this question. As early as January 1847, the cabinet had suggested an extension of the Missouri Compromise line, but Polk made no effort to commit himself. His indecision in this all important issue was quite puzzling. Perhaps he believed a better compromise would evolve. Perhaps he hoped that the issue of slavery in the territories would dissipate in time. There is also a distinct possibility that the Tennessean had second thoughts about running again for the presidency. Although he had declared that he would not seek reelection, many "Democratic hopefuls" considered this meaningless because of his duplicity in the Texas and Oregon issues. Despite his denials of seeking reelection, several politicians were convinced that his real intention was to secure a second term. No matter what his reasons for deferment were, Polk considered agitation on the territorial issue as a scheme to promote the interests of those candidates seeking the presidency. In fact, Polk criticized both parties

39Polk, Diary, 2:309.
40Polk to Henry Hubbard, 12 June 1844, Polk Papers.
41Cambreleng to Van Buren, 16 May 1844, Van Buren Papers.
for their unpatriotic conduct in trying to use slavery as a means to advance their "favorite sons" for the presidency.42

While Polk continued to play down the slavery issue, his opponents advanced their familiar claims that the president was a "southern sectionalist." As before, Van Burenites blamed Polk's expansionist policies as a cover-up for the extension of slavery. In December of 1847, John Niles told Van Buren that although Polk had not advocated any policy promoting slavery in the territories, he was, nevertheless, ruled by the slavocracy and that was "made the test and tie of fealty to his administration."43 Joshua R. Giddings of Ohio, a Whig antislavery radical, contended in 1847 that the motivating force behind the Mexican War was the extension of slavery. Unless, Giddings argued, Congress denied this objective, southern predominance would be magnified tremendously in the legislative branch.44 Gamaliel Bailey, editor of the Washington National Era, the Liberty Party organ, argued, as Giddings did, that the war was a tactic of a southern-controlled administration "to obtain a large portion of her [Mexico's] territory, and to establish therein human slavery."45

42Ibid., p. 348.

43Niles to Van Buren, 16 December 1847, Van Buren Papers.


45Washington National Era, 18 March 1847.
Despite his opponents' charges of southern domination, Polk indicated throughout the war that his primary concern was preserving the United States. He told John J. Crittenden of Kentucky, that although he was a southerner and a slaveholder, he "did not desire to acquire more Southern territory than that which I had indicated [California and New Mexico], because I did not desire by doing so to give occasion for the agitation of a question which might sever and endanger the Union." Further evidence of his unionist sentiments was shown early in July 1847 when he made a goodwill tour through the northeastern states. No doubt his primary purpose for the trip was to undermine support for the Wilmot Proviso. Yet, it is not unreasonable to assume that Polk was sincere in his pleas for harmony and union among the different sections of the country. While visiting in Maine he said, "I would recommend in all parts of our beloved country cultivation of that feeling of brotherhood and mutual regard, between the North and South, and the East and the West, without which we may not anticipate the perpetuity of our free institutions." In his third annual message to Congress, Polk again demonstrated his concern for the value of the Union when he declared, "how unimportant are all our differences of opinion upon minor questions of public policy

46 Polk, Diary, 2:350.

47 Morrison, Democratic Politics and Sectionalism, p. 77.
compared with its preservation, and how scrupulously should we avoid all agitating topics which may tend to distract and divide us into contending parties . . . .”48

Although it cannot be denied that Polk showed favoritism toward the South, the claims of his opponents that he waged the Mexican War for the extension of slavery cannot be justified. Contrary to abolitionist propaganda, Calhoun's correspondence clearly refutes the theory that the majority of southerners demanded Mexican territory for the extension of slavery.49 The pro-slavery leader and chief defender of the peculiar institution was adamantly opposed to acquisition of Mexican territory because he feared that it would come into the Union as free land.50 On numerous occasions he warned the Senate against the "evil and hazard" involved in the conquest of Mexican territory.51 The abolitionist Washington National Era reported that Calhoun regarded the annexation of the New Mexico and California areas "as the deadliest blow

48McCormac, Polk: A Political Biography, p. 629.


50Ibid; Washington National Era, 3 February 1848.

that could be inflicted upon the system of slavery.\textsuperscript{52} Not only were southern Democrats opposed to the acquisition of Mexican land, but many southern Whigs also objected. Like the Democrats, the Whigs were convinced that the institution of slavery could not be extended beyond Texas because the Southwest was unfit for slavery.\textsuperscript{53} A prominent Whig organ in Georgia, the \textit{Augusta Chronicle and Sentinel}, urged all true southerners to abandon all annexation schemes for Mexico because it would only result in the South's eventual isolation and political demise.\textsuperscript{54}

John A. Campbell of Alabama, who later became an associate justice of the Supreme Court, further advanced Calhoun's fears that acquisition of Mexican territory would be detrimental to the South. He maintained that Mexican land was "wholly unfit for a negro population" and that it would increase the strength of the free states while decreasing the strength of the South.\textsuperscript{55}

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\textsuperscript{52}\textit{Washington National Era}, 3 February 1848.

\textsuperscript{53}\textit{Fuller, The Movement for the Acquisition of all Mexico}, pp. 73-74.


\textsuperscript{55}\textit{John Fuller, "The Slavery Question and the Movement to Acquire Mexico, 1846-48," Mississippi Valley Historical Review} 21(1934-35):41.
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Further evidence that the interests of slavery and expansion were not identical appeared early in 1848 when antislavery forces began to demand all of Mexico. The New York Herald declared that the abolitionists would offer little resistance to Mexican annexation because it would enter the United States as free territory. Like the Herald, the National Era advanced the cry for all of Mexico because it also believed this would weaken the peculiar institution. George Hatcher, a northern clergyman, explained to Calhoun the philosophy behind the movement by antislavery forces for the absorption of Mexico. According to Hatcher, even if slavery were allowed on Mexican soil, which was unlikely, it would eventually be overthrown because "in proportion as you extend slavery over a greater area in that proportion you weaken it."

In view of the preceeding evidence, the charge of Polk's critics that he was a southern president motivated by the extension of slavery in the Mexican territories has little credibility. Although the president was concerned about slavery in the territories, it was mainly from a negative viewpoint. If it had been feasible, Polk would have preferred to eliminate the slavery question entirely from the

56 New York Herald, 6 January 1848.
57 National Era, 3 February 1848.
58 Fuller, "The Slavery Question and Mexico," p. 45.
territories because of its harmful effect on the Democratic Party and the Union. However, the end of the Mexican War in February of 1848 forced the president to decide upon a policy of governmental organization for the newly-acquired territories. Consequently on June 24, 1848, Polk advocated extension of the Missouri Compromise line as the "only means of allaying the excitement and settling the question" of slavery in the territories. In speaking to Senator Edward A. Hannegan of Indiana, Polk told him that "the distracting subject of slavery" was thwarting his administration's efforts to establish a territorial government in Oregon. He advised Hannegan to "bring forward and press the adoption of the Missouri Compromise line and extend it to the Pacific."59 This policy, Polk urged, was necessary in order to combat the movements of Van Buren. The New Yorker in 1848 bolted the regular Democratic party, and became the presidential candidate for the Free Soil party. This organization based its political principles upon the prevention of slavery in the territories.60 According to Polk, "Old Kinderhook's" move constituted a "most dangerous attempt to organize geographical parties upon the slavery question." Polk further insisted that unless the Missouri Compromise line were adopted as a counter-measure against Van Buren's course, the

59Polk, Diary, 3:501.

Union would face the distinct possibility of disruption. 61

For several weeks the thirtieth Congress debated the alternatives for the territorial governments. When Polk realized Congress would not create governments for New Mexico and California during the present session, he was willing to approve slavery restriction for Oregon because he knew this territory needed legal organization and protection. However, he told his cabinet that he did not wish it to be inferred that he would sanction a restriction south of 36° 30'. 62 Although disappointed at the rejection of the extended Missouri Compromise line, Polk decided to sign the Oregon bill because, as he put it, "the very existence of the Union" depended upon it. When Calhoun and other southerners tried to persuade him to veto the measure, Polk responded, "if I were to veto it after all that had occurred, and in the present excited state of Congress and of the public mind, I should do more to inflame that excitement . . . and to rend the Union, than any act which had ever been done by any president . . . ." 63 Although Polk doubted the constitutional power of Congress to apply such a restriction, he believed it best to concede his personal opinions in the interests of the Union and domestic peace. Polk was quick, however, to point out in his message to Congress that had

61 Polk, Diary, 3:501-02.
62 Ibid., 4:67-68.
63 Ibid., p. 74.
the Oregon bill "embraced territories south of the compromise the question presented for my consideration would have been of a far different character, and my actions upon it must have corresponded with my convictions." Although this statement classified Polk as a "southerner," it is not unreasonable to assume that Polk said this more as a concession to the South than as a southerner concerned about slavery extension.

As Polk's presidential term drew to a close, he became more and more anxious for a settlement of the issue of territorial governments in New Mexico and California. Although this goal was never realized during his tenure, Polk did remain a staunch Union man in his attempts to broach the statehood of these territories. However, no matter how Union orientated he was, his slaveholding interests would not allow him to abandon the South. Though he did not defend slavery as a positive good, his conception of slavery in the territories was almost as "southern" as Calhoun's. He claimed that the South was entitled to the privilege of occupying the Mexican cession with its slaves. All the states, he said, had participated in the war, and therefore "it would not be just for any one section to exclude another from all participation in the acquired territory." No doubt Polk

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64 Richardson, Messages of the Presidents, 4:608.
65 Ibid., p. 640.
was willing to defend "southern rights." To the end of his term he insisted that he would veto any bill prohibiting slavery south of the Missouri Compromise line. However, his sentiments about slavery in the territories were not prompted by a selfish interest in the institution. His interests were, rather, motivated by a desire for expansion. This was evident when Polk urged the admission of California as a state. Although California's constitution would likely prohibit slavery, Polk tried everything to get Congress to agree to statehood. Further evidence of his negative attitude toward slavery extension was his insistence upon prohibiting slavery north of 36° 30', even though Calhoun claimed it was the right of southerners to take their property above this line.

Polk's constitutional views concerning slavery in the territories were, like his political views, pro-southern. As he pointed out, the Constitution had imposed no duty upon Congress to legislate on the question of slavery in the territories. Polk maintained that in all probability the true doctrine of Congress should be one of non-interference in relation to slavery and the rights of states in the territories.

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66Ibid.
67McCormac, Polk: A Political Biography, p. 647.
68Ibid., p. 639.
69Richardson, Messages of the Presidents, 4:640-42.
No matter how inclined Polk was to defend slavery where it already existed, his first allegiance was to the Union. Throughout the closing weeks of his term, he repeatedly proved this. When Calhoun asked him about resisting northern aggression in relation to the territorial question, Polk responded that he "gave no countenance to any movement which tended to violence or the disunion of the states." 70
In another interview with Representative Frederick P. Stanton of Tennessee, Polk urged "that the slavery question be settled in Congress and not in southern caucuses nor by unconstitutional means." 71 To his cabinet Polk reiterated his sentiments about the admission of California when he said, "I put my face alike against southern agitators and northern fanatics, and should do everything in my power to allay excitement by adjusting the question of slavery and preserving the Union." 72

During his presidency, and throughout his political career, Polk had tried to avoid the slavery issue. However, much to his dismay, this question became a national issue as a result of his expansionist policies. Although Polk saw no connection between the extension of slavery and the expansion of the United States, his opponents alluded to his duplicity in the Texas and Oregon issues as evidence of

70 Polk, Diary, 4:288.

71 Ibid., p. 291.

72 Ibid., p. 299.
his sectionalist propensity. They claimed that he favored the South over the other sections of the nation. Some of his opponents such as John Q. Adams and Joshua R. Giddings, even adhered to the theory that he desired more territory for the purpose of extending the peculiar institution. Though Polk did show favoritism toward the South, he was not a sectionalist nor did he advocate slavery extension in the territories. In his speeches and in his policies he demonstrated that he was a nationalist, concerned primarily about the safety of the Union.
CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

James K. Polk's relationship to the institution of slavery was paradoxical. On the one hand, his position was that of a southerner. He defended slavery where it already existed. This, he maintained, represented protection of property rights as guaranteed by the Constitution. In reality, Polk advocated a policy of non-interference as his official position. Throughout his years in the House of Representatives, he consistently supported this stand. His appointments of fellow representatives to committees, his rulings as House speaker, and his support of the Gag Rule verify this. In terms of economics, Polk believed that the institution of slavery was indispensable to the plantation system. Consequently, many of his decisions as a congressman reflected his views as a slaveholder.

In the Texas annexation controversy, Polk, like most southerners, believed that a British-controlled Texas would be detrimental to slaveholders. As a result, his support of annexation was partially influenced by his pecuniary interests. Even on the territorial issue, Polk, although theoretically opposed to the extension of slavery, maintained that slaveholders had a right to transfer their slaves to newly-
acquired lands. It is not unreasonable to assume that Polk foresaw the harmful effects the territorial exclusion principle would have upon the economic interests of slaveholders in the near future.

On the other hand, Polk was a staunch nationalist. Even though he defended "southern rights," he recognized that slavery was morally wrong. Although he never favored abolition, he did everything possible, as a slaveholder, to see that his slaves were well-treated. As a member of a Tennessee colonization society, he apparently considered deportation of free blacks as a possible solution to the slavery dilemma. However, when this movement failed, he chose to ignore the slavery question as a political issue. Indifference, as he soon discovered, would not silence antislavery sentiments. When the sectional controversy became more heated, Polk, as the Democratic presidential nominee in 1844, chose nationalism as his course of action. Refusing to be simply the candidate of the South, which would have meant political disaster, Polk based the presidential campaign of 1844 on a theme of national harmony. However, during the early months of his presidency, Polk's alleged duplicity in the Texas and Oregon issues soon convinced his opponents that he was a sectionalist devoted to the extension of slavery. Polk disproved their charges when he restricted slavery in Oregon territory. His continuous advocacy of the Missouri Compromise line of 36° 30' also gave
further credence to his unionist image. Throughout his public career Polk's convictions as a slaveholder and as a southerner conflicted with his devotion to the nation. However, the Tennessean did not hesitate to place the Union first. This unselfish loyalty to his nation proved that Polk was a nationalist first and a southerner second.
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