

CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1: CONFLICTING INTERESTS: SLAVERY AND VIRGINIA SOCIETY.....	1
CHAPTER 2: FORMULA FOR CONFLICT: IDEOLOGICAL RIFTS IN VIRGINIA.....	23
CHAPTER 3: PROTECTORS OF THE SOUTH: LOYALTY CONTESTS IN VIRGINIA POLITICS.....	38
CHAPTER 4: THE ELECTION OF 1848.....	49
CHAPTER 5: CONVENTION AND COMPROMISE.....	75

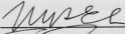

CONFLICTING STRATEGIES AND
OPPOSING PATHS TO SECTIONAL COMPROMISE:
WHIGS, DEMOCRATS, AND THE POLITICS OF SLAVERY IN VIRGINIA, 1847-1851

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1: CONFLICTING INTERESTS: SLAVERY AND VIRGINIA SOCIETY.....	1
CHAPTER 2: FORMULA FOR CONFLICT: IDEOLOGICAL RIFTS IN VIRGINIA.....	22
CHAPTER 3: PROTECTORS OF THE SOUTH: LOYALTY CONTESTS IN VIRGINIA POLITICS.....	36
CHAPTER 4: THE ELECTION OF 1848.....	49
CHAPTER 5: CONVENTION AND COMPROMISE.....	73

CHAPTER 1

CONFLICTING INTERESTS: SLAVERY AND VIRGINIA SOCIETY

As United States forces clashed with Mexican troops in the early stages of the Mexican War, Pennsylvania Congressman David Wilmot, thousands of miles removed from the hostilities, precipitated a battle of another kind. As a member of the Democratic party, which had pursued war with Mexico as a means to territorial expansion, Wilmot hoped and expected that the United States would soon be in possession of new land. New territory meant new debates about the expansion of slavery, an issue that had ignited sectional tension when Missouri sought to enter the Union in 1819 and, more recently, when Congress debated the admission of Texas as a state in 1845. Anticipating renewed sectional conflict, Wilmot made the first move in August 1846 during the waning days of the twenty-ninth Congress's first session. As his colleagues debated an appropriations bill for the war, Wilmot introduced a proviso prohibiting the extension of involuntary servitude into any territories the United States might acquire in the wake of a military victory over Mexico.

Wilmot's proviso produced a surge of alarm throughout the South. In Virginia, both political parties perceived the measure as a direct attack on their political and social equality within the Union. During the intense controversy over slavery that dominated local and national politics for the next four years, Virginia Whigs and Democrats unequivocally voiced their opposition to Wilmot's bill. Although divided by partisan politics, they unified in resenting northern implications that the South did not deserve to expand. They were irate at the prospect of being labeled unworthy of equality in their own country. These political objections to the proviso were compounded by their belief that their second-class status would impede their ability

to defend their own social order. Although many Virginians did not regard slavery as a positive good, they feared the social effects of a politically-driven national antislavery movement.

Virginia Whigs called the proviso "a gratuitous outrage on southern feelings" and expressed the almost universal southern belief that "Congress has no more power to inhibit the introduction of a slave into the common patrimony of the whole Union, than it has of a horse or a sheep."¹ Democrats called the proviso a "blow aimed at our rights and at the most blessed Union." Bipartisan county meetings resounded with a cry that revealed the heartfelt convictions of the great majority of Virginia's citizens: if the North passes any law that unconstitutionally interferes with slavery or infringes on southern equality, we will secede. "All Virginians and southern men," resolved a Fredericksburg gathering, "should unite, heart and hand, in resisting, even unto death, the enforcement" of the degrading proviso. These Fredericksburg resolutions spoke the mind of most white Virginians, for on this question the South was more unified than it had ever been.²

Yet while most white Southerners agreed that they must protect slavery and resist the Wilmot Proviso, they did not unify politically when the proviso made its way to the forefront of national politics. In fact, the slavery controversy pitted Virginia Democrats against Virginia Whigs in a battle almost as bitter as that between Northerners and Southerners. Historians have proposed various explanations for this interparty conflict. William J. Cooper characterizes the clash as purely partisan rather than ideological. He argues that the all-encompassing importance of the slavery question mitigated interparty conflict on substantive issues, and when "confronting the politics of slavery southern Whigs and Democrats acted similarly." The only difference

¹ *Richmond Whig and Public Advertiser*, January 2, June 15, 1849.

² *Richmond Enquirer*, January 22, 1847; *Whig*, March 9, 1847; William J. Cooper, *The South and the Politics of Slavery, 1828-1856* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1973), 238.

between southern Whigs and Democrats, then, was that they belonged to different party organizations--their fundamental strategies for dealing with Northerners were the same. In fact the parties acted so similarly, Cooper asserts, that partisan strife erupted when each organization tried to convince the electorate that it was the true protector of southern interests and its opponent was unsound on the slavery question. Each party saw the slavery controversy as an opportunity to permanently discredit its adversary in the South. Cooper cites the almost unceasing loyalty contests between the two parties as evidence for his contention.³

Another explanation for the interparty conflict comes from John Ashworth, who argues that it was indeed ideology that set the two parties at variance. While he concedes that both parties deplored northern assaults and sought to protect slavery, he points to a "crucial difference" between the two: "Southern Democrats viewed slavery as the foundation of the southern social order, [while] southern Whigs instead viewed it as an interest." Each party's reaction, then, was the result of its different assessment of slavery's importance as a social and economic system. Ashworth's argument rests on the contention that the Whigs were more intent on preserving the Union and "less militant in their defense of slavery" because they were not as attached to the institution and, equally important, they trusted the North not to interfere with it. Democrats, on the other hand, were more aggressive because they saw slavery as a positive good and they believed a fatal attack from the North was imminent.⁴

Neither of these interpretations adequately explains the politics of the slavery controversy in Virginia. Cooper oversimplifies by dismissing the real ideological convictions that separated the parties. Loyalty contests were indeed a critical component of the interparty conflict, but they

³William J. Cooper, *The South and the Politics of Slavery*, xv, 258-268.

⁴John Ashworth, *Slavery, Capitalism, and Politics in the Antebellum Republic: Commerce and Compromise, 1820-1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 487, 477.

were not the result of mere partisanship. Whigs and Democrats competed with each other because real ideological differences caused them to employ substantially different strategies when combating northern aggression. However, these differences were not, as Ashworth argues, related to unequal attachments to slavery. Slavery's existence as a powerful force in society served as a great equalizer; even if more Whigs than Democrats were disenchanted with slavery, the Whigs still insisted that the institution was "inseparably interwoven with all [our] social habits and customs."⁵

Ashworth has equated the Whigs' unionism and lack of militancy with a lack of devotion to slavery. In the case of Virginia, this interpretation is simply incorrect. Virginia Whigs and Democrats were equally intent on protecting their way of life, maintaining political equality between the two regions, and ensuring internal safety. But, for ideological reasons, each party adopted a distinct method of attempting to reconcile respect for the Union with devotion to southern rights. Democrats did indeed adopt a more militant strategy in this process while Whigs were less combative, but this distinction cannot be reduced to an internal argument over slavery's merits.

Any analysis of Virginia's struggle over the politics of slavery must begin with a discussion of involuntary servitude as a social institution. Slavery shaped the structure of southern society more than any other single factor, and it gave rise to complex social and political relationships between blacks and whites and among the ruling race. These relationships were fraught with contradictions and ironies, for the story of the antebellum South is the story of conflicting interests on the communal as well as the individual level. The South as a region was

⁵*Whig*, June 4, 1847.

not unified by ideological conformity, even though the region-wide existence of slavery meant that there was always the potential for unified action if the institution ever came under direct attack.

Even within the various subregions of the South, slavery generated as much disunity as unity. Antebellum Virginia's age, location, economic conditions, and deeply embedded political traditions separated it from the rest of the slaveholding states, but Virginians themselves were far from single-minded. Composed of slaveholders, nonslaveholders, Whigs, Democrats, well-established eastern families, more-recently-arrived westerners, city dwellers, farmers, and manufacturers, mid-century Virginia had a stake in change as well as in conservatism. What Virginia did not have, in a sense, was free will—the existence of slavery, even though the majority of Virginians did not own slaves, pervaded every aspect of society and demanded a special place in public discourse. Saddled with slavery for better or worse, Virginians had to look at public policy questions in terms of their potential effects on an entire way of life that had its very foundations in the enslavement of blacks. While different groups of white Virginians responded to slavery in ways that varied from wholehearted approval to moral repugnance, almost all recognized the institution's centrality in the social framework and understood the risks that tampering with it involved. An understanding of the way in which this attitude became firmly entrenched is critical to any explanation of Virginians' reactions to the national political crisis of the late 1840s and early 1850s.⁶

In the aftermath of the Revolutionary War, many Virginians had a difficult time reconciling revolutionary rhetoric with the enslavement of fellow human beings. While racism

⁶*Statistical View of the United States*, J.D.B. DeBow, ed. (Washington, 1854), 40, 95; Lynda J. Morgan, *Emancipation in Virginia's Tobacco Belt 1850-1870* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1992) 18-21.

was often strong enough to combat moral scruples, many whites wondered with Thomas Jefferson whether both races would be better off if slavery were done away with. Jefferson's "doubts and reservations" about slavery were in part the product of his realization that perpetual bondage was impractical and might prove dangerous to whites in the future.⁷ Jefferson was thus concerned with the political as well as the moral implications of the slave system. The crisis of 1820 confirmed and exacerbated his fears. When Missouri applied for statehood in 1819, James Tallmadge of New York offered amendments providing for the gradual emancipation of Missouri's slaves as a prerequisite for admission. This proposal precipitated a national debate over slavery in which Northerners voiced their opposition to the admission of additional slave states to the Union. Jefferson and his fellow southern whites were alarmed; not only did this proposal strike at their political equality within the Union, but it also sought to contain slavery where it existed. By limiting the area into which slaves could diffuse, free-soilers would perpetuate slavery in Virginia.⁸

Jeffersonians opposed any policy that would result in the intensification of slavery in Virginia; in fact, they were busy looking for ways to ease the institution out of their state. Jefferson himself favored gradual emancipation in theory, but he and the vast majority of Virginians strongly believed that certain conditions must be met before any emancipation program could be safely implemented. First, slave population must be "low and declining," so that dealing with the former bondsmen would be a manageable task. Deportation of ex-slaves and compensation for ex-masters were the other vital conditions, and these could only be

⁷Carl N. Degler, *The Other South: Southern Dissenters in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), 18.

⁸William W. Freehling, *The Road to Disunion: Secessionists at Bay, 1776-1854* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 144-154.

accomplished if the black population were a small proportion of the whole. The northern states had already demonstrated the feasibility of gradual emancipation under these circumstances; as their slave population had drifted southward, they peacefully outlawed slavery within their borders. Jefferson now hoped that Virginia's slaves would drift westward, thus allowing his state to follow in the North's footsteps. Slaves accounted for almost 40 percent of Virginia's population in 1820, which, in the view of most whites, rendered emancipation immensely impractical. Diffusion of slaves, which could only occur if new territories and states remained open to masters and their property, would hasten the day when the conditions necessary for emancipation would be met in Virginia. If the conditions were never met, Jefferson would leave slavery as it was.⁹

Jefferson, then, stood opposed to the North's antislavery efforts not because he resented attacks on the institution itself, but because he lived in a region where slavery existed and he recognized the danger that national antislavery legislation posed to southern society. Such legislation would make slavery more difficult to remove, and it would give the North a political majority that might one day be used to strike at slavery in the states where it existed. Jefferson epitomized, and recognized, the fact that the slavery controversy was not merely a matter of antislavery Northerners threatening the interests of solidly pro-slavery Southerners. Abstract, philosophical opinions about slavery's shortcomings as a social and economic institution were almost impossible to act on when its expansion became a national political issue. Even Southerners who remained morally ambivalent, as many in the upper South did, were opposed to federal action that might in any way interfere with the institution's continued existence.

⁹Ibid., 132; William G. Shade, *Democratizing the Old Dominion: Virginia and the Second Party System, 1824-1861* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996), 19.

Slavery, an institution that many Virginians wished had never been introduced on American soil, had emerged as the only issue capable of destroying the Union. By stigmatizing slavery and setting a precedent for preventing its extension to new territories and states, Northerners' demands for a free Missouri in 1820 threatened to render the South politically impotent when it came to controlling the more than 1.5 million blacks who were enslaved.¹⁰

Almost one third of the nation's slaves lived in Virginia in 1820. Africans had been enslaved on Virginia soil since about 1619, and the institution was thoroughly woven into white Virginians' social and economic worldview. Many whites believed that the only acceptable station in life for those with black skin was slavery. A growing body of state legislation designed to limit the number of free blacks and restrict their opportunities demonstrated the white majority's conviction that free blacks were degraded and dissolute beings whose natural shortcomings made them unworthy of freedom. The possibility of being overrun by half a million such beings in the event that control over the slave system broke down was utterly horrifying. It was enough to stifle gradual emancipation plans in the General Assembly in 1831-32, and it immobilized the antislavery tendencies of many individuals, Thomas Jefferson included, who would have preferred to live in an all-white society. As mass colonization and other methods of removing freed blacks proved economically implausible and too socially disruptive, Virginians abandoned serious discussion of gradual emancipation in the early 1830s. These concerns were compounded by the rise of an organized and vocal abolitionist movement in the North, which made white Southerners more conscious of the need to protect their institutions from outside attack. The same contradictory forces that had compelled them to oppose a free Missouri now

¹⁰Carl Degler, *The Other South*, 18-19; William W. Freehling, *Road to Disunion*, 155-157; *Statistical View of the United States*, 82.

prevented Southerners from dismantling their problematic peculiar institution. As Jefferson wrote in 1820, "We have the wolf by the ears, and we can neither hold him, nor safely let him go. Justice is in one scale, and self-preservation in the other."¹¹

A commonly accepted myth asserts that antislavery thought in Virginia reached its pinnacle in the legislative session of 1831-32 and almost immediately gave way to a militant proslavery reaction. This reaction was supposedly a defense against the increasingly strident northern abolitionist movement of the 1830s--the whole South, Virginia included, suddenly turned away from ambivalence and embraced slavery as a "perpetual blessing." After deciding that slavery was there to stay, Southerners allegedly redirected their efforts toward praising its virtues and fending off northern attacks. While moral opposition to slavery did fade over time, at least in the public sphere, many Virginians remained unsure that slavery was right for them. As the midpoint of the nineteenth century approached, Jeffersonian ambivalence was alive and well in the Old Dominion.¹²

Virginians proudly referred to their home, the oldest state in the Union, as the "Mother of States." This name referred to the fact that native Virginians constituted much of the population of the more recently settled western states. Virginia's propensity to produce migrants was not necessarily something to be proud of, however; in the later antebellum period, many Virginians interpreted this population drain (or, more properly, the low rate of population growth) as a sign of economic stagnation. In the eastern part of the state, where the majority of slaves

¹¹*Statistical View of the United States*, 82; Alison Goodyear Freehling, *Drift Toward Dissolution: The Virginia Slavery Debate of 1831-1832* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), chap. 5 passim; Patricia P. Hickin, "Antislavery in Virginia, 1831-1861," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Virginia, 1968, 1.

¹²*Ibid.*, 224, 781; William Freehling, *Road to Disunion*, vii.

resided, farming was becoming less profitable as overused soil ceased to yield sufficient crops.¹³

The proportion of slaves in the population was declining as Virginians found it more profitable to sell their bondsmen South rather than try to support them on worn-out soil. White population grew by 14 percent between 1840 and 1850, mostly in western Virginia, and the number of slaveholders declined, concentrating the state's slaves in the hands of fewer people. By 1850 roughly 33 percent of Virginia's population was enslaved, down from 39 percent in 1830 and 36 percent in 1840. This net export of slaves coupled with the general agricultural and economic decline gave rise to a widespread hope that slavery might gradually and naturally diffuse out of the state, making way for economic development based on free labor.¹⁴

On July 4, 1847, James Coles Bruce, one of the largest slaveholders in Virginia, addressed a meeting of the Agricultural Clubs of Mecklenburg (a tobacco-growing county in southern Virginia) and Granville (which was just across the North Carolina border). After extolling the virtues of the Union in the usual Independence Day fashion, he began to tell his audience of fellow slaveholders why they should sell their human property farther South. He bemoaned the fact that Virginia's agricultural profits for the previous four years had literally amounted to nothing. Western competition was driving down the prices of Virginia's products because the west had the advantage of better land and cheaper transportation. Since Virginians must concede that "slave labor in Virginia cannot compete with the slave labor of the west," Bruce implored his audience to "let labor go where labor is best paid." The old upper South should cease its futile efforts to remain agriculturally competitive on a large scale and should

¹³Henry Ruffner, *Address to the People of West Virginia* (Lexington, VA: R.C. Noel, 1847; reprint, Bridgewater, VA: The Green Bookman, 1933), 16; Charles Henry Ambler, *Sectionalism in Virginia From 1776 to 1861* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1910), 113-115.

¹⁴Henry T. Shanks, *The Secession Movement in Virginia 1847-1861* (Richmond: Garrett and Massie, 1934), 11; Alison Goodyear Freehling, *Drift Toward Dissolution*, 235.

provide the slaves that the new southwest demanded. If Virginians took advantage of this demand, they could invest their newfound capital in manufacturing, which would attract free labor. Population would grow, and with it would come schools, markets, and railroads: "The economy of Massachusetts transplanted to Virginia soil, warmed as it is by a southern sun, would make our State in a few years what it should be, and must become, the most desirable portion of the Confederacy."¹⁵

The slaves, for their part, would be more comfortable where the masters had the means to support them. Likewise, whites would be more comfortable without slaves in areas where they could not support them. Because profitless slaves were a nuisance to the community, "all look to the period when the negro must leave Virginia and North Carolina." Lest he raise suspicion about his loyalty to the institution, Bruce assured his audience that he approved of slavery in the abstract and that his argument merely asserted that slavery was not currently economically expedient in Virginia. Because "the physical and moral constitution of the African renders him unfit for the appreciation or the enjoyment of liberty," and "he is happier and more respectful as a slave," emancipation was not to be heard of. A whiter Virginia was the goal, and the natural diffusion of slaves to the South was the only way to achieve it. As for the blacks, the question "is not whether the negro shall be a slave--his condition is fixed, whatever the abolitionists may say or think--but where--as a slave he shall remain." The answer, according to Bruce, was not in Virginia.¹⁶

Later in 1847, Henry Ruffner circulated the "Address to the Citizens of West Virginia" in which he supported the gradual removal of slaves from the western portion of the state. Like

¹⁵Address to the Agricultural Clubs of Mecklenburg and Granville, 4 July 1847, Bruce Family Papers, *Records of Ante-Bellum Southern Plantations* (mfm), Series E, Part 3, Reel 14.

¹⁶*Ibid.*

Bruce, he denounced abolitionists and rested his arguments on economic expediency. Unlike

Bruce, he hoped to achieve his goal by means of state legislation rather than natural diffusion.

The conditions that many Virginians considered necessary for emancipation existed west of the Blue Ridge. In 1850, the western part of the state held only 63,200 slaves (38,800 of whom lived in the Valley), compared with the east's 409,300. While the percentage of slaves in the total population was near 50 in the east, it was only about 7 in the trans-Allegheny region. Gradual emancipation in western Virginia, then, would not produce an unmanageable number of free blacks and would not profoundly disturb the social order.¹⁷

Ruffner, along with many westerners, resented the eastern minority's domination of the General Assembly, which effectively quelled any western initiatives on the slavery question. The white population of the west had long since surpassed that of the east, but the mixed basis of representation in the General Assembly, which counted slaves in the total population numbers for purposes of district apportionment, gave undue influence to the easterners. Thus, the governmental framework that slaveholding easterners had designed to protect slavery infringed on the political rights of white men in the west. The unrepresentative legislature passed laws against public denunciations of slavery and stifled internal improvements that would help the western economy develop.¹⁸ Measures like these stirred westerners' indignation, and their displeasure with slavery only increased as easterners remained unwilling to subject the institution to full democracy. Ruffner and his fellow westerners continuously called for a constitutional convention so that they could insist on the white basis of representation. They would then use their newfound influence in the legislature to enact a gradual emancipation and colonization law

¹⁷Henry Ruffner, *Address*, 38-40; Alison Goodyear Freehling, *Drift Toward Dissolution*, 287.

¹⁸William G. Bean, "The Ruffner Pamphlet of 1847: An Antislavery Aspect of Virginia Sectionalism," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 61 (July 1953): 266.

that would apply only to western Virginia. Such a law would free yet-unborn slaves at the age of 21, meanwhile encouraging masters to sell their slaves to the South. Emancipation, then, was for the benefit of whites, and not for the "contented inmate[s] of our Southern negro quarters."¹⁹

Ruffner attacked slavery's "deleterious" effect on white society. He advanced economic arguments supporting his contention "that the system of free labor promotes the growth and prosperity of States, in a much higher degree than the system of slave labor." Although Virginia possessed natural advantages, the population of the free states had grown much faster because slavery tended to repel emigrants and drive free labor away. That eastern Virginia's population was actually declining "demonstrates the ruinous effects of slavery upon the countries in which the longest and most complete trial of it has been made." Exhaustive, unprofitable agriculture and industrial malaise plagued a state that, could it be rid of slavery, was naturally suited for such diverse undertakings as iron-making, cotton manufacturing, commerce, and sheep-husbandry. Instead of allowing the free states to consistently outproduce and outearn her in these pursuits, western Virginia should dam up the "Black Sea of misery" at the Blue Ridge and hope that eastern Virginia, whose "black children have sucked her so dry, that now...she has not milk enough for her offspring, either black or white," would soon turn away from slavery as well.²⁰

The Richmond *Whig*, the Whig party's most prominent organ in Virginia, agreed that half a million slaves were stifling the state's development. It editorialized that Virginia "is literally eaten up by her slave population...she resembles a bow of great natural strength, bent by enormous weight to an unnatural position--and that she can never recover her elasticity until a portion at least of her burden shall have been removed." In the mid-1840s, the *Whig* and the

¹⁹George Ellis Moore, "Slavery as a Factor in the Formation of West Virginia," *West Virginia History* 18, no. 1 (1956): 62; Henry Ruffner, *Address*, 9.

²⁰Henry Ruffner, *Address*, 9, 12, 15, 38, 16.

Richmond *Enquirer*, the most respected voice of Virginia Democrats, encouraged economic diversification and promoted manufacturing and immigration. Both papers "condemned southern lethargy and praised northern energy" and "foresaw the necessity of eliminating slave labor" because they regarded it as an "impediment to economic diversification."²¹

The idea that slave labor and economic development were incompatible was of course quite controversial, especially when northern antislavery agitation made southern advocacy of free labor increasingly dangerous. Slave labor was undeniably a critical component of Virginia's economy. More slaveholders lived in Virginia than in any other state. With 500,000 blacks performing various types of labor, slavery was not about to diffuse out of the state in the immediate future. Slavery may have been in decline in the tidewater region, but the tobacco belt, which contained the highest concentration of slaves, remained dependent on their labor for its economic livelihood. Although a decline in the prices of cash crops in the 1840s made the slave population more difficult to maintain, complaints about slavery's inefficiencies died down when prices began to rise in the 1850s. Unless compelled by outside economic forces, individual farmers did not trouble themselves by thinking about their region's political economy and slavery's impact on economic development.²²

Even people who were consciously concerned with slavery as an inhibitor of manufacturing and diversification turned to proslavery arguments when tension with Northerners increased. In mid-1849, when a clash between North and South seemed imminent, the *Whig* asserted that Southerners could employ slaves in factories "to the great advantage of all

²¹*Whig*, 8 August 1847; J. Stephen Knight, "Discontent, Disunity and Dissent in the Antebellum South: Virginia as a Test Case, 1844-1846," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 81, no. 4 (1973) 443, 445, 448.

²²Lynda J. Morgan, *Emancipation in Virginia's Tobacco Belt*, 19; Patricia Hickin, "Antislavery in Virginia," 778, 781.

concerned." The *Whig* contended that only internal development could "check northern aggression" and "set all interference with our domestic institutions at defiance." Slave labor, now hailed as cheaper than free labor and just as efficient, would provide the foundation for the southern economic development that was necessary to combat northern abolitionism. That the *Whig* was now intent on staving off attacks against an institution that it wished to see eventually removed from Virginia epitomizes white Virginia's dilemma during the slavery controversy.²³

As Northerners rallied around the Wilmot Proviso in the late 1840s, Virginians of both political parties, most of whom did not embrace slavery as a positive good, contemplated severing the beloved Union to preserve their domestic institution. The political intricacies of the crisis of 1850, which will be discussed below, cannot be understood without insight into Virginia's seemingly contradictory outlook on slavery. This outlook can be explained in part by the fact that Virginians who hoped that African slavery would soon depart from their soil did so for almost purely economic reasons. Slavery, however, was more than an economic system. It was also a governing feature of southern society, and most Virginians accepted it as such. Yet while virtually all white Virginians recognized slavery as "a system lying at the very foundation of their domestic polity, and inseparably interwoven with all their social habits and customs," internal criticism of slavery as a social institution was not unheard of during times when threats from northern abolitionists were at a low ebb. Some men, like Ruffner, could not distinguish between the economic and social effects of slavery; they believed that slavery was so economically backward that it poisoned white society, although the actual enslavement of blacks was not a moral evil.²⁴

²³*Whig*, 8, 11 April 1849.

²⁴*Whig*, 4 June 1849; Henry Ruffner, *Address*, 8, *National Globe*, 29 Cong., 2 sess., 185.

Most white Virginians, however, accepted the social order that slavery produced; many may have looked forward to the distant day when the black population would drain out of the state to continue in bondage in the deep South or Southwest, but they did not believe that slavery as it currently existed was poisoning white society. The majority of whites did not question the social implications of slavery. They could praise the "affectionate relationships" that slavery engendered across racial lines and still hope for the eventual removal of Africans from their midst. Whites did not have to believe that slavery was the best economic and social system humanly possible in order to regard their current social institutions in a positive light. Most white Virginians would have agreed with Democratic Congressman Henry Bedinger of Shenandoah when he said, "I do not regard the institution of slavery, as it exists in the southern States of this Union, as a misfortune, a deformity, or a curse."²⁵

Many Virginians (and the number increased as direct attacks from the North became more pointed) would have even turned this negative endorsement of slavery into a positive one. Bedinger took his own defense of the institution a step further and directly contradicted Ruffner when he proclaimed that "Slavery, so far from having cursed and blasted the communities in which it exists, has preserved them from crime, has blessed them with prosperity, with peace, with comfort, and happiness..." He went on to assert the moral superiority of the slaveholding states, alleging that moral decay and social unrest in nonslaveholding Massachusetts gave rise to such disturbances as a meeting of atheists and an unruly mob that burned a convent. Bedinger "proved" the superiority of the South by assuring Congress that "we poor, stupid slaveholders of the South do believe in a God, and I doubt exceedingly if a convention of atheists would be tolerated in any one of our southern cities." "In the slaveholding South," he added, "we do not

²⁵*Richmond Enquirer*, 21 December 1847; *Congressional Globe*, 29 Cong., 2 sess., 165.

frighten feeble women by burning their houses over their heads at midnight."²⁶

Even the minority of Virginians who deplored slavery's effect on white society believed as a matter of course that slavery benefited blacks socially. As James Bruce proclaimed, "Africa is infinitely more indebted to America than America is to Africa." They agreed that blacks were fit only for slavery, and they pointed to the "degraded" state of Virginia's present free black population as evidence. In his annual Governor's Messages in 1846 and 1847, William Smith outlined the social disturbances that free blacks allegedly caused. Besides being morally weak and prone to thievery, they were also, according to the governor, thriftless and unproductive. They were "a cancer in our bosom" that must be removed according to the "great and eternal law of self-protection." Correspondents of the *Whig* and *Enquirer* periodically submitted letters denouncing this "most abandoned, profligate, corrupt and corrupting class of population that ever cursed any people."²⁷

Virginia society, then, was built around the widespread assumption that as long as blacks remained in the state, they had to be enslaved. Senator R.M.T. Hunter, a Calhoun Democrat from Essex County in the tidewater region, articulated this assumption, asking "is it not also for the good of society, if you place two races side by side, widely different in intelligence, and separated by marked distinctions in color, that the superior should control the inferior?" Many Virginians foresaw apocalyptic consequences in the event that whites' control over the "inferior" race should break down. Democratic Congressman James McDowell of Rockbridge, who had favored gradual emancipation in 1832, likewise warned of the "dreadful, but inevitable fatality of giving freedom to the southern slaves without removing them to some other land." Fellow Democrat

²⁶*Congressional Globe*, 30 Cong., 2 sess., appendix, (16 February 1849), 113.

²⁷Address to Agricultural Clubs, Bruce Family Papers; Journal of the House of Delegates of Virginia 1847-1848 (Richmond, 1848), 19-20; *Whig*, 25 June 1847.

Thomas Bayly of the Eastern Shore feared that "Civil War with all its horrors would ensue," if slaves were freed, and that war would ultimately result in the "extermination of the black race."²⁸

At the very least, white Virginians firmly believed that emancipation without Jefferson's preconditions would result in the emergence of a class of free blacks, who, in their "state of semi-barbarism," would corrupt proud old Virginia to the detriment of both races. The general consensus was that "the negro race can only live happily and securely in a state of domestic slavery."²⁹

While whites' concerns that blacks live "happily" were certainly of secondary importance, concern that they live "securely" was a fundamental component of the white worldview. White Virginians may have been at best ambivalent about slavery as an economic system, but they almost unanimously subscribed to the idea, stated unequivocally by the *Whig*, that slavery is "indissolubly interwoven with the very texture of [the South's] social and political organization." Even those who anticipated a purely white society in the future were unwilling to perform or sanction any action that might radically alter the existing social order. Virginians were immobilized; slavery appeared "impossible to get rid of." Unwilling to subject themselves to "the social and moral evils which would inevitably result" from emancipation without removal, they concentrated on ensuring that Virginia's blacks remained in their state of bondage. The slavery question was "delicate" and potentially "dangerous."³⁰

The potential for danger seemed to become immediate when northern antislavery agitation in the form of the Wilmot Proviso threatened the security of the South's slave property.

²⁸*Congressional Globe*, 30 Cong., 1 sess. (11 July 1848), 902; 31 Cong., 2 sess. (3 Sep. 1850), 1678; 29 Cong., 2 sess. (11 Feb. 1847), 348.

²⁹*Whig*, 27 July 1847; *Enquirer*, 19 January 1849.

³⁰*Whig*, 30 November 1847, 8 September 1848, 27 July 1847; *Enquirer*, 13 October 1848.

White Virginians could afford to look toward a distant slave-free future in the absence of threats to the present slave-based society, but the future was irrelevant when the current social order was under attack. Most Virginians believed that the adoption of the Wilmot Proviso would quickly lead to the abolition of slavery in states where it already existed. In early 1849 a bipartisan meeting in Essex County chaired by southern nationalist M.R.H. Garnett approved resolutions declaring the Wilmot Proviso to be the "first step towards the conversion of the federal government into an engine for our degradation and oppression, and by the ultimate abolition of slavery, to change the whole Southern country into another Hayti or Jamaica."³¹ The prospect that Northerners, who did not understand the intricacies of southern social structure, might soon have the power and the desire to impose immediate emancipation was nothing short of terrifying.

Belief in the absolute necessity of local control over slavery was one of the only political maxims that all Virginians, regardless of political party or economic standing, could agree on. For those who saw slavery as a positive good, northern interference was not just an attack on their property, which was appalling enough; it was also a degrading personal insult. By stigmatizing slavery as a moral evil, Northerners struck at slaveholders' very concept of self-worth. Nonslaveholders were just as concerned as others with maintaining local control over slavery, but their focus was on preserving social order rather than staving off personal insults. According to the *Whig*, "Most of those who affect the extreme terror of abolitionists, have not a negro in the world," but they were nonetheless concerned that emancipation would "bring ruin on them."³²

Even Ruffner, who went further than most Virginians in that he believed locally-controlled emancipation to be feasible, denounced Northerners who would interfere in southern

³¹*Enquirer*, 8 February, 1850. *Congressional Globe*, 31 Cong., 2 sess. (21 May 1850), 598.

³²*Enquirer*, 31 August 1849; *Whig*, 25 July 25 1848. *Whig*, 13 October 1848.

affairs and disclaimed any connection with them. "All we ask of them," he wrote, "is that they stand aloof, and let us and our slaves alone." His fellow westerners, although less than fond of slavery and its governmental implications, understood the danger posed by outside attacks. Congressman Thomas Haymond of Wheeling, who admittedly did not share the rest of the state's sentiment about the potential harm of the Wilmot Proviso, urged his northern colleagues to follow a policy of nonintervention because "we have slaves in the South, and they must, for a long time to come, continue to be slaves." The *Whig* concurred, arguing that "slavery will abolish itself if we let it alone. It will run out." James C. Bruce, who likewise hoped that slavery would "run out," emphatically stated "I have not one feeling in common with the abolitionist...." The *Whig* stirred its readers' indignation by asking, "Will you stand idly by, and see the great work of emancipation effected by other hands than your own?" The *Whig* and others could still refer to the idea of emancipation as a "great work" in 1848, but the removal of slavery could only be conducted in a manner consistent with southern whites' safety.³³

White Virginians held diverse beliefs about the institution of slavery. As both an economic and social institution, it had profound effects on the lives of all Virginians. Most whites, including some who owned slaves, were disenchanted with slavery as a labor system and did not want blacks to be the work force of the future. But attachment to slavery as a social institution emerged as the stronger force in this battle of competing interests. Economic antislavery arguments fluctuated with the state of the economy, but the desire for social "self-preservation" remained constant. The vast majority of Virginians were united in their belief that the Wilmot Proviso was incompatible with southern safety. As Thomas Jefferson had feared, the

³³Henry Ruffner, *Address*, 9; *Congressional Globe*, 31 Cong., 2 sess. (21 May 1850), 598; *Whig*, 28 August 1847; Address to Agricultural Clubs, Bruce Family Papers; *Whig*, 13 October 1848.

dangerous nature of slavery had made its protection the white South's foremost priority, and conflict with the North was thus all but inevitable. Virginians of both political parties agreed that safety must be maintained at all costs.

Whigs and Democrats were equally devoted to defending slavery from northern attacks. However, the two parties held fundamentally different ideologies and worldviews that compelled them to employ opposing strategies in their attempts to secure southern rights. Although party partisan politics reinforced the split between Whigs and Democrats, the parties' divergent policies were primarily the result of deep-seated differences in the way each perceived the Union and the northern majority.

When sectional interests began to diverge and pull national policy in opposing directions, the Union and states' rights had the potential to become antagonistic, rather than complementary, forces. Virginians valued the Union highly—they were proud of the role their forefathers had played in leading the Revolution and designing the new nation's government. Whigs and Democrats alike expressed their devotion to the "great, self-governed, Anglo Saxon Republic of America." Yet, as Southerners and slaveholders, they also had a special interest in maintaining clearly-defined states' rights, for the states were the ultimate safeguard against any potential tampering with slavery. When southern rights, expressed politically in terms of states' rights, became increasingly incompatible with the preservation of the Union, Southerners ultimately had to choose between these competing loyalties.

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CHAPTER 2

FORMULA FOR CONFLICT: IDEOLOGICAL RIFTS IN VIRGINIA

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In the controversy of the late 1840s, this choice was not clear-cut; no issues definitively pitted Unionism against sectionalism. Yet between 1847 and 1850, the political landscape was riddled with questions that required Southerners to approach the controversy from either a

¹Whig, 9 January 1849.

nationalistic or a sectionalistic perspective. While the Democrats used a sectionalistic approach, the Whigs in Virginia generally employed a Union-centered approach; their political course of action throughout the controversy was shaped by a firm conviction that the Union must be preserved. That the Whigs' reaction to perceived northern aggression was infused with Unionism is a reflection of their party ideology, not a lack of desire to protect slavery.

While there is no definitive explanation for why some individuals chose to be Whigs and others chose to be Democrats, Whigs were often men who had an interest in economic nationalism. Virginians who were involved in commerce and manufacturing demonstrated an attraction toward the Whig party, which advocated federally funded internal improvements and a solid national banking system. These men shared common interests with northern businessmen and respected (and hoped to emulate) their prosperity. They looked to the Union as an agent of economic development, as did their northern counterparts. While economic development did not necessarily imply a movement away from slavery as a labor system, Union-minded southern Whigs did not want a defense of slavery to become the sole determinant of their political action; they realized, as did the majority of northern Whigs, that other, less divisive, issues were also important. In furthering their mutual commitment to the Union, northern and southern Whigs tried to focus on policies that would strengthen the nation's economy. At the same time, they tried to avoid a direct confrontation on the slavery question.²

Virginia Whigs' unionism does not imply that in a direct confrontation between Virginia and the federal government the Whigs would have chosen to support the Union. In fact, they would most likely have chosen Virginia. Thus, their attachment to the Union simply meant that

²Whig, 19 June 1849; Thomas Brown, *Politics and Statesmanship: Essays on the American Whig Party* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 170-188.

their political responses to slavery-related issues were shaped by a strongly-held belief that the necessity of choosing between state and Union must be avoided at all costs. For this reason, Virginia Whigs tried to sidestep the Wilmot Proviso question and replace it with an emphasis on national unity. They opposed obtaining territory from Mexico; they supported Zachary Taylor's presidential candidacy because he remained vague on the Proviso; and they denounced southern political unity as unnecessarily disruptive. In effect, they approached the crisis from a nationalistic perspective because they believed that a unified Whig party could prevent any outrageous assault on southern rights. If trans-sectional Whig commitment to the Union ever broke down, such an assault was more likely to occur. In this event, most southern Whigs would have been just as eager as the Democrats to side with their section in its resistance to the dictates of the northern majority and thus contribute, albeit reluctantly, to the forcible destruction of the "glorious union."

Just as important as unionism in determining Virginia Whigs' noncombative policy was their belief that the vast majority of Northerners was unalterably in favor of preventing slavery's expansion to any new territories that the United States might obtain. It may seem odd that a party that placed such a high intrinsic value on the Union would distrust its partners in that Union on such a vital issue. But, ironically, Virginia Whigs believed that a certain lack of faith was necessary for the preservation of the Union; if Southerners trusted Northerners and later found out that their faith had been misplaced, disunion would inevitably result.

Virginia Whigs had no doubt that such faith would indeed be misplaced. Northern Democrats, they argued, thought slavery and democracy were "antagonistical," and they would never sanction the expansion of involuntary servitude.³ Southern threats of disunion would not

³*Whig*, 31 December 1847.

change Northerners' minds. In fact, such threats would be harmful because the North, which already constituted a numerical and political majority, would unify in response and use its majority to crush the South. The North's numerical power and antislavery sentiment, then, would combine to doom the South if Southerners did not assume a more conciliatory attitude, for "the most dangerous enemies of [southern] institutions [were those] who would inculcate the idea that there is, on this question, a strong party in those [northern] states upon which the South may rely as friends and allies." Belief that Northerners' minds could be changed was deadly, in the Virginia Whigs' estimation. Since any confrontation with the North would result in disaster, the South must avoid confrontation.⁴

Change The most significant manifestation of the Virginia Whigs' desire to avoid confrontation was their opposition to the acquisition of territory from Mexico. While all Whigs, North and South, had non-slavery-related reasons for opposing expansion in general, Southern Whigs had an added incentive to oppose the annexation of Mexican territory in the aftermath of the war—they did not want to reignite the slavery controversy. This policy allowed northern and southern Whigs to work together for a common goal, thus reinforcing southern Whigs' tendency to look to a unified national party to solve, or to avert, crisis. When David Wilmot introduced his proviso at the end of the first session of the 29th Congress, and Preston King of New York revived the proposal as soon as the second session convened, Virginia Whigs perceived that northern and southern Democrats were on a collision course that could easily splinter the Union. Each wing of the land-crazed Democratic party had assumed "uncompromising ground" on the slavery question, which meant that "there can be neither compromise nor surrender" if the Democrats succeeded in dismembering Mexico. Northern Democrats were not about to change their minds

⁴*Whig*, 8 October 1847.

and repudiate the proviso, for, as the Richmond *Whig* stated, "no northern man, of any party, will dare to resist the unanimous popular sentiment of his section, in favor of circumscribing [slavery] within the limits in which it now exists."⁵

Northern and southern Democrats' collision course was particularly alarming, according to Virginia Whigs, because it could only lead to northern victory or to disunion and war. If North and South engaged in a direct battle over the territories, the North's political majority would crush southern interests; "we have not the votes to carry out our views, and we cannot appeal to the constitution to protect us against the designs of those who have the votes." If the North would not respect southern appeals to the Constitution, it certainly would not extend the Missouri Compromise line, which had established popular sovereignty south of 36° 30'. The southern minority would have no political recourse, "for it is in vain to say that the South will boldly assert her rights and firmly resist this inequitable and insulting attempt to wrong her at her tenderest points"; if Southerners attempted resistance, the northern majority would "laugh them all to scorn."⁶

Thus, the Whigs were convinced that any territory the United States might obtain would just turn into more free states. An increase in the number of free states would weaken slavery where it already existed. The South, surrounded by nonslaveholders, would be subject to their attacks. Fearing such encirclement, the *Whig* declared that "we prefer a nation of foreigners, rather than a non-slaveholding community, belonging to this Confederacy, because the South would have a stronger guaranty, in that case, that its rights would be respected." This concern indicates, contrary to Ashworth's contentions, that the Whigs employed a noncombative stance

⁵*Whig*, 6 July, 27 April 1847.

⁶*Whig*, 12 November, 8 June 1847.

and relied on national Whig unity precisely because they had a large stake in preserving slavery where it existed. As the northern majority grew, the slaveholding states' security would be threatened and "the voice of the South, already almost neutralized, will be scarcely heard or felt in the deliberations of the general government." A prostrate South would be at the mercy of the untrustworthy North.⁷

As degrading as political neutralization would be, that was not what Virginia Whigs expected to occur. What they expected, and feared, was more along the lines of "sectional heart-burnings, intestine dissensions, civil war, disunion, and wide-spread ruin." Southern Whigs knew that southern men would never concede to the North the right to call into question the existence of a way of life based on slavery. The whole South, Whigs and Democrats, would resist northern attempts to ban slavery in the territories because this was a policy "to which, except in a spirit of the most abject submission to aggression and outrage, no southern man ever can or will subscribe." Disunion must inevitably result from any acquisition of territory, then, because the northern majority would certainly make sure that the Wilmot Proviso accompanied such an acquisition. The southern Whigs' remedy for this potential apocalypse was "to kill the Wilmot Proviso by removing the only pretext for its introduction--a proviso involving a principle which he is blinder than the owl at noon-day who does not see that *the North will never abandon*, and which, we need not say to southern people, the South will oppose *'even unto blood.'*"⁸

Northern and southern Whigs also had non-slavery-related ideological reasons for opposing territorial expansion; the Whig consensus on these points advanced Virginia Whigs' nationalistic goals by strengthening intersectional Whig unity. Whigs of both sections believed

⁷Whig, 1 June 1847.

⁸Whig, 18 February 1848; 6 April, 20 July, 1847.

that the Mexican war "was commenced by the act of the President, unnecessarily, without authority, and in plain violation of the Constitution." The reckless James K. Polk, they argued, had plunged the country into a wanton war of aggression against a weaker nation to satisfy his party's "insane" lust for expansion.⁹ Whigs insisted that it would in fact be dishonorable to take land from "a crushed and imbecile enemy." The territory in question, they protested, was "a large body of wastelands," and its "wretched population" was not fit for American citizenship. Territorial aggrandizement was not the path to national strength and prosperity; Americans should focus on developing the land and resources that formed "the ample heritage bequeathed to us by our fathers."¹⁰ Significantly (a point historians have ignored), opposition to expansion also meant that southern Whigs did not have to be on the offensive about southern rights. They had no need to assert these rights because there would be no point of contention between North and South if the United States did not take Mexican territory. For this reason, Virginia Whigs assumed a defensive, noncombative, and reactive stance, in contrast to the Democrats' offensive and proactive stance, on southern rights.

Even after the United States obtained territory from Mexico, Virginia Whigs maintained their reactive stance and shied away from positive assertions of southern rights. When Democrats worked themselves up into a frenzy of secession threats, the Whigs counseled caution, for they believed that "noisy gasconading" would make the North more aggressive rather than more conciliatory. For this reason, the Whigs advocated a policy of waiting to take action until the Wilmot Proviso or any other offensive bill actually became law. Only in response to a "real" invasion of southern rights should secession be discussed; taking preventive measures would only

⁸Whig, 18 December 1847.

⁹Whig, 6 April, 8 January, 1847.

¹⁰Whig, 18 February 1848; 26 October, 11 June, 16 April 1847.

hasten the invasion.¹¹ The *Whig* announced that "The *Enquirer* will find us quite as true to the South as itself. But we shall always take the liberty of judging for ourselves when the South is in danger. We do not intend to be alarmed by every bug-a-boo...which the *Enquirer* may conjure up for party effect and by which they have done more to strengthen the Abolitionists and to weaken the conservative influence at the North than could have been effected in a century by the fanatics themselves."¹² This reactive mindset came into play during the debate over the Nashville Convention in 1850; most Virginia Whigs opposed the Convention because they considered it unnecessarily antagonistic.

The Democrats, like the Whigs, were strongly committed to both the Union and states' rights, but they approached the slavery controversy from a fundamentally states'-rights perspective. Democrats attached an almost religious significance to the "Doctrine of 1798." With the Virginia Resolutions of that year, the General Assembly had declared the Adams administration's Alien and Sedition Acts unconstitutional and thus invalid. Democratic lore held that the Virginia Resolutions stirred up so much opposition to these Acts that Thomas Jefferson was elected to the presidency two years later with a mandate to repeal them. This, according to Virginia Democrats, was the ultimate example of how government should work. A state, acting calmly and rationally, could protest and overturn a harmful piece of national legislation.¹³

The Democrats naturally sought to apply this logic to the slavery crisis. They perceived the Wilmot Proviso as an egregious violation of southern rights and an insult to southern honor.

¹¹*Whig*, 18 December 1849.

¹²*Whig*, 11 April 1848.

¹³Henry Shanks, *Secession Movement in Virginia*, 18-19; William G. Shade, *Democratizing the Old Dominion*, 253.

If the northern majority ever had the nerve to pass it, the South's position of equality in the Union, both numerically and theoretically, would be obliterated. Moreover, a bill dealing with such an all-consuming and emotionally charged issue was less likely to be repealed once adopted than the Alien and Sedition Acts had been. Therefore the South had to prevent the bill from being passed.¹⁴

While the Whigs advocated a policy of nationalism to achieve this goal, the Democrats fell back on the basic states' rights ideology of 1798. They *openly* advocated disunion in the event that national legislation interfered with southern rights. If the South could only unify around the threat of secession, Democrats contended, the North would back away from its unreasonable and unconstitutional demands. "If the South should rise superior to party and present an unbroken front on the subject of the Wilmot Proviso," the *Enquirer* argued, "its moral effect upon the North would produce a most happy influence in the settlement of the question."¹⁵ No sane northern man would pursue the Wilmot Proviso if he knew it would result in disunion and, most likely, civil war. Thus, the Democrats considered unified southern agitation to be the best strategy, for the Union could only remain intact if Southern rights were preserved within it. If a breakup occurred, it would be the North's fault. The South simply had to convince the North that it was serious when it threatened disunion. The Democrats' sectional strategy was a recipe for conflict with their Whig counterparts, who believed that southern unity and secessionism were the two most dangerous ways to deal with the North. Ironically, the Virginia Democrats' very demand for southern unity made unity that much harder to attain. When Democrats denounced Whigs for not joining them in a united front, they furthered the animosity between the two

¹⁴*Enquirer*, 25 December 1848.

¹⁵*Enquirer*, 27 April 1847.

parties.

Just as the Whigs' defensive strategy was in part born of their ideological opposition to territorial expansion, the Democrats' offensive strategy was a result of their pro-expansion ideology. Southern and northern Democrats alike wanted to extend the United States's borders and thus extend the sphere of republican government. Expansion was, for them, a key component of national strength and development. In 1847 and 1848, it was also a key component of national honor. The United States was embroiled in a war with Mexico that Polk's administration supported (many would say provoked), and Democrats viewed a territorial indemnity from the defeated country as the only honorable conclusion to the hostilities. Already geared towards expansion, southern Democrats had to be prepared to assert their rights in the new territories. Avoiding the question was never an option, as it had once been for the Whigs; the Democratic party always believed that the United States was getting new land, and southern Democrats refused to be relegated to the insulting role of second-class citizens during its organization.

Although an ideological commitment to expansion predisposed Virginia Democrats to adopt an offensive outlook on southern rights, the driving force behind their combative strategy was their conviction that it could influence Northerners. Unlike the Whigs, Virginia Democrats denied that the North was monolithically in favor of imposing the Wilmot Proviso on the South. The Democrats took for granted that northern Whigs supported such a measure, but they clung to their faith that a substantial number of the northern members of their own party would fulfill their constitutional obligations and uphold southern rights. Ironically, this faith caused them to demand and expect more from the northern Democrats than the party-unity-conscious Whigs expected from northern members of either party. As a result of these higher expectations, Democrats were less likely to settle for any compromise that required too many concessions from

the South, and more likely actually to enforce their threat of secession if their demands were not met.

Yet, while secession was not just an idle threat, it was also not a desirable policy or an end in itself for most Democrats. Any discussion about the possibility of secession involved competing loyalties and priorities, and it was difficult to pinpoint what action on the North's part would actually precipitate disunion. By 1850, both parties agreed that the adoption of the Wilmot Proviso or the abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia were grounds for secession. But, where Whigs thought that downplaying the slavery issue would best prevent such a disaster, Democrats believed they could avert the enactment of offensive legislation through constant agitation, which would keep the importance of slaveholders' rights fresh in Northerners' minds and hopefully prevent them from taking any action that would put the Union in jeopardy. For this reason, Virginia Democrats supported the Nashville Convention, which Southerners organized in 1850 to warn the North about the consequences of any hostile legislation.

This two-party dynamic dominated Virginia's response to northern antislavery agitation. However, even the parties themselves were not unified; Virginia Whigs and Democrats each split into majority and minority factions when it came time to make decisions about how best to preserve southern rights. Each party's minority faction displayed a more extreme version of the party's strategy on the slavery question. Why some individuals chose to act in more extreme ways than others cannot be explained in a simple, logical fashion. Personal idiosyncrasies likely played a large role. One point that *is* clear is that an individual's chosen strategy was not a function of his degree of interest in slavery. All of the major strategies pursued by Virginians in the slavery controversy had the same goal: to preserve southern rights within the Union. Strategic

disparities were almost entirely the result of different degrees of attachment to the Union and different characterizations of Northerners.

The Virginia Whig party remained united until the United States acquired Mexican territory in April 1848; Whigs argued against expansion because they wanted to make the Wilmot Proviso irrelevant. When they lost this battle and the Proviso was transformed from threat to reality, the Whig party in Virginia split into two informal factions. The larger of these believed that the South must have equal rights in the expansion that was to take place, but they maintained their functionally nationalistic strategy for defending southern interests—they continued to seek other ways of avoiding conflict. The minority faction among the Whigs wanted so much to avoid confrontation that it denied that the Wilmot Proviso was in fact worthy of resistance. These Whigs contended that the question was not of practical importance; slavery could never thrive in the western territories, and insisting that it be allowed there was not worth risking disunion. The North, they argued, could be trusted not to interfere with slavery where it existed, even though Northerners would insist on prohibiting slavery in the territories. The territories had nothing to do with slavery in the states, they believed, and non-intervention with slavery as it existed was the only important matter. For these Whigs, the preservation of the Union was worth much more than the assertion of what they considered to be empty southern principles.

There were no such things as empty southern principles in the minds of the Democratic party's minority faction. Throughout the South, John C. Calhoun and his followers formed the party's radical states'-rights wing. These Democrats, led in Virginia by Senators Robert M. T. Hunter and James M. Mason and Congressman James A. Seddon, threatened disunion more vehemently than the more moderate, mainstream Democrats, whose most prominent voice in the state was the *Richmond Enquirer*. Where the *Enquirer* wing felt a strong attachment to the

Union and wanted to maintain the traditional Virginia-Massachusetts political alliance that had elected Andrew Jackson and Martin Van Buren to the presidency, the Calhoun faction was more inclined to believe that secession would be preferable to remaining in a Union in which Southerners had to concede any of their rights to the North.¹⁶

The Calhounites' radicalism did not precipitate an internal division over policy until the debate over the Compromise of 1850. While the mainstream Democrats grudgingly accepted the compromise as the best settlement they could get within the Union, the Calhoun Democrats insisted that their objections to the Compromise necessitated further disunion agitation. Only full southern equality would satisfy them. Because only a massive change in northern opinion could appease them, their threats of disunion were louder and more pointed than those of their fellow Democrats. Their high demands of Northerners made them less confident that their goals could actually be reached within the Union, so their calls for secession were much more than threats; for them, disunion was quickly becoming an attractive option. Their radicalism was not the result of a greater attachment to slavery; although Calhounites tended to be from rich, old, eastern families, many other tidewater aristocrats were conservative Whigs. Their radicalism was a function of their weaker attachment to the Union. In the battle of competing loyalties that every Southerner faced, Calhounites came down more definitely on the side of states' rights.

The group that asserted states' rights most emphatically, however, was not a part of either party. Throughout the South, a small group of extreme southern nationalists, in which Nathaniel Beverley Tucker was the most prominent Virginian, did not consider the battle of conflicting interests between states' rights and the Union to be a dilemma. They came down entirely on the side of states' rights and advocated disunion as a positive good. Lucian Minor of Louisa wrote

¹⁶Henry Shanks, *Secession Movement in Virginia*, 27, 35, 39.

to N.B. Tucker that "My indifference to the Union grows mainly out of a persuasion that between us and the northern people there are incompatibilities which render it nearly impossible for us to live peaceably together."¹⁷ These men did not want to remain in a Union in which any southern demands went unmet. Fearing the impending "destruction of our noble Virginia," they embraced the Nashville Convention as a step toward secession, and they were disgusted when the great majority of Virginians supported the 1850 compromise, which, in their minds, was nothing but "the fraud panacea for all the ills our Constitution is heir to."¹⁸

As both parties, the clash between the two strategies was particularly bitter. Each party regarded itself as the most effective guardian of the South and slavery, and, naturally, each believed the other's policies to be dangerous. The Whigs' relatively calm demeanor and their lack of enthusiasm for southern unity angered the Democrats, who accused them of "yield[ing] to the grasping designs of the North." At the same time, the Whigs tried to expose Democrats as puppets of northern abolitionists. Loyalty contests pervaded Virginia politics between 1847 and 1850.¹⁹

These differences between Whigs and Democrats first became relevant in early January 1847, when Congressman Preston King of New York attached the Wilmot Proviso to an appropriations bill for the Mexican War then under consideration in Congress. This proposal generated more excitement than Wilmot's original amendment, which had not attracted serious debate because it had been proposed in the final days of the summer session of Congress. King announced that "the time has come when this Republic should declare by law that it will not be made an instrument to the extension of slavery on the continent of America."²⁰ Two days later,

¹⁷Lucian Minor to Nathaniel Beverley Tucker, 6 April 1850, Tucker-Coleman Collection, Manuscripts and Rare Books Department, Earl Gregg Swem Library, College of William and Mary, Williamsburg.

¹⁸John Daniel to Tucker, 22 May 1850, Tucker-Coleman Collection, Swem Library; George Harris to Tucker, 15 October 1850, Tucker-Coleman Collection, Swem Library.

CHAPTER 3

PROTECTORS OF THE SOUTH: LOYALTY CONTESTS IN VIRGINIA POLITICS

Virginia Whigs and Democrats embraced fundamentally different methods of preserving southern rights. While the Whigs' strategies were geared toward avoiding situations in which southern rights might be offended, the Democrats sought out situations in which they could assert southern rights. Because preserving slavery was so important to both parties, the clash between the two strategies was particularly bitter. Each party regarded itself as the most effective guardian of the South and slavery, and, naturally, each believed the other's policies to be dangerous. The Whigs' relatively calm demeanor and their lack of enthusiasm for southern unity angered the Democrats, who accused them of "yield[ing] to the grasping designs of the North." At the same time, the Whigs tried to expose Democrats as puppets of northern abolitionists. Loyalty contests pervaded Virginia politics between 1847 and 1850.¹

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¹ *Enquirer*, 26 February 1847; William J. Cooper, *The South and the Politics of Slavery*, 258-268.

² *Congressional Globe*, 29 Cong., 2 sess. (5 January 1847), 114.

Goochland, shot back with a speech that encapsulated what would become standard southern Democratic arguments against the proviso. He maintained that the Constitution guaranteed equal protection for all citizens, and no law that prevented a distinct segment of the population from migrating westward with its property would be tolerated. The South had not sought new territory specifically for the purpose of extending slavery, he pointed out, but such extension would be a necessary consequence of acquiring new land. Democrats (and Whigs, once their anti-expansion arguments became futile) were united in believing that maintaining southern political rights within the federal government was critical. Articulating a sentiment that would be echoed countless times in the coming years, Seddon asserted that if the Constitution "be made the pretext and instrument of gross inequalities and favoritism...it becomes of less worth than the scroll on which it is written, and, like every symbol of tyranny, should be rent and scattered to the winds."³

In the minds of white Virginians, evidence of such tyranny was mounting in early 1847. On January 18 the Virginia General Assembly received resolutions from the legislature of New Hampshire expounding on the evils of slavery and the "slave power" and insisting that the Wilmot Proviso be adopted. Virginia's House and Senate unanimously voted to return the document to New Hampshire, and Democratic Governor William Smith issued a message stating that "we must fortify our position."⁴

The next attack came from the legislature of Vermont, which sent resolutions denouncing the Mexican War and stating that it would sanction no new slave states. This time Virginia's General Assembly did not vote unanimously to return the resolutions. Whig state senators Bondurant and Gallaher opposed Vermont's statement about slavery, but they agreed with its

³Ibid., 29 Cong., 2 sess., appendix (7 January 1847), 76.

⁴*Enquirer*, 19 February 1847.

condemnation of the Mexican War and thus did not vote to return it. The *Enquirer*, along with Democratic state senator Fayette McMullen, was appalled at the lack of unanimity. McMullen argued that the attack on slavery should overrule all other aspects of the resolutions and compel Virginians to speak with one voice.⁵ The *Whig*, which itself opposed the Mexican War, defended Bondurant and Gallaher, arguing that their disgust with the war did not mean that they were weak on the slavery issue. Unlike the Democrats, Whigs were not adamant about southern unity; issues other than slavery could determine their political actions. Democrats, who insisted that southern unity was the only means of saving the Union, perceived the Whigs as less devoted to the protection of slavery and increasingly came to see themselves as the only true defenders of the South and preservers of the Union.⁶

On February 15, 1847, the Wilmot Proviso passed the United States House of Representatives. On the 17th, the Virginia legislature responded with unanimously-adopted resolutions "deeming this proviso to be destructive of the Compromises of the Constitution of the United States, and an attack on the dearest rights of the South, as well as a dangerous and alarming usurpation by the Federal Government."⁷ Although the Democrats and Whigs agreed on the necessity of a statement detailing Virginia's position on this all-important issue, their rhetoric differed substantially. The *Whig* stated quietly and purposefully that, "whenever the South shall be called upon to act, it will present an undivided, stern, inflexible front to its fanatical assailants," but until this should happen "we shall engage in no bluster or bravado on the subject." The paper then added its standard argument that if the United States would not take

⁵*Enquirer*, 9 February 1847.

⁶*Whig*, 9 February 1847; *Enquirer* 9 February 1847.

⁷*Enquirer*, 19 February 1847.

constructive business.⁸

The House's adoption of the Wilmot Proviso engendered more excitement within the Democrats' ranks. Even though the proviso did not pass in the Senate, the Democrats perceived that the House's vote had brought the country one step closer to enacting Wilmot's proposal into law. They issued a warning that danger was imminent. "Diabolical enemies of the South" had trampled the Constitution and the Missouri Compromise, and now it was the "duty of every man, in every section of this confederacy, if the Union is dear to him, to oppose" the Proviso. This appeal to the duty of Northerners backed by the threat of disunion was characteristic of southern Democrats' sectional strategy. It was more than strategy, however. It was an earnest statement, as expressed at a Democratic meeting in Richmond, that Southern men would resist the proviso "even unto death." For, after all, "Do the wicked men of the North imagine that we will be silent or inactive when enactments are proposed incompatible with our existence as free men?"⁹

The Whigs' and Democrats' different responses to the perceived northern aggression became more sharply delineated as almost every local election degenerated into a loyalty contest between the two parties. As historian William J. Cooper describes, the slavery controversy stimulated interparty conflict as each organization presented itself as the true protector of the South. In Cooper's estimation, this conflict was entirely a function of political partisanship, which persisted in the late 1840s and early 1850s even as sectional tension mounted. Finally, the national party system collapsed in the mid-1850s under the weight of the escalating dispute over slavery. Cooper's analysis is correct as far as it goes. Although he neglects to recognize that the

⁸Whig, 19 February 1847.

⁹*Enquirer*, 19 February 1847.

two parties espoused fundamentally different world views that resulted in divergent ideological responses to the slavery controversy, he is certainly correct in maintaining that partisan rivalries were a strong force in the mid-century South. Political parties were vibrant organizations in which membership was taken seriously. In fact, partisan ties were sometimes capable of overriding principle in cases where short-term political gain could be achieved without risk of long-term ideological sacrifice.

Local elections in Virginia provided arenas in which politicians could divorce political tactics from ideological convictions. Local political debate over whom to send to the U.S. Congress reached an audience that almost uniformly had a personal stake in preserving slavery. When Virginia Whigs battled Virginia Democrats for public office, the slavery issue dominated political discourse and the victor was generally the candidate who proved himself most capable of protecting slavery. John Letcher, a western Democrat who had signed Henry Ruffner's pro-emancipation pamphlet in 1847, found himself at a political disadvantage until he publicly recanted his antislavery stance in 1850.¹⁰ Congressman James McDowell, a Democrat from Rockbridge who had advocated gradual emancipation in 1832, likewise found these views to be a political liability in the tension-filled years around 1850; in 1847 he lost the Senatorial election to Calhoun Democrat James M. Mason because, as one of his constituents advised him, "you were opined to be rather too much opposed to the institution of slavery and had expressed your opposition to slavery in the abstract too strongly for a senator from Virginia in this crisis." McDowell's friends foresaw similar problems in his 1849 campaign for reelection to Congress; McDowell had always been more Union-centered and noncombative than his fellow Democrats,

¹⁰F.N. Boney, *John Letcher of Virginia: The Story of Virginia's Civil War Governor*

(University, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1966), 43.

a constituent and frequent correspondent, told McDowell: "At all events, assume as strong a ground in defence of the South as possible...." Wartmann also advised the Congressman to "let it be seen that you are as strong a Southern man in feeling and in principle as" those who employed more combative strategies in sectional politics.¹¹

Both the General Assembly, which elected Senators, and the state's voters, who elected Representatives, paid close attention to the candidates' track records on the slavery question. Whigs and Democrats usually tried to convince the electorate of their respective superiority on this issue by articulating their strongly-felt ideological beliefs; the Whigs argued that they were the true guardians of slavery because they would not provoke the northern majority into attacking southern institutions, while the Democrats contended that only southern agitation could convince Northerners of the need to respect southern rights within the Union. But each party did not merely assert that its own strategy was superior; each also tried to discredit its opponent. Thus, when Virginia Democrats constantly employed campaign rhetoric in which they accused Virginia Whigs of being soft on the slavery issue, the Whigs could not afford to ignore the attacks.

Although engaging in mudslinging battles in which they loudly proclaimed their devotion to the South was inconsistent with their principled intent to downplay slavery as a political issue, the Whigs considered it more dangerous in the state and local arena to remain silent. If they could not maintain their credibility in Virginia, they would lose every election to the Democrats and thus never have the opportunity to voice their nonconfrontationist ideology in the national arena. For this reason, Virginia Whigs sometimes found it to their advantage to emphasize

¹¹John Wartmann to James McDowell, 8 February 1849, McDowell Family Papers, *Records of Ante-Bellum Southern Plantations* (mfm), Series J, Part 9, Reel22; Wartmann to McDowell, 7 February 1849, McDowell Family Papers.

Northern Whigs, even as they remained devoted to their noncombative strategy at the national level. They seized every opportunity to reanimate the slavery issue when they could use the politics of slavery to discredit their opponents. Thus, even a seemingly opportunistic contradiction of their principles was ultimately a step in pursuit of their noncombative grand strategy.

In early 1847, and throughout the subsequent years, one of the Whig press's favorite pieces of ammunition with which to assail the Democrats at election time was the passage of the bill to provide a territorial government for Oregon. This bill passed the House of Representatives in early 1847 with an anti-slavery provision attached. That slavery was to be excluded from Oregon was not in itself a matter of concern. No one thought that slavery could exist there. But the manner in which the North excluded slavery was alarming. Pursuing what the *Whig* labeled a "wantonly aggressive" course, Northerners invoked not the Missouri Compromise but the Wilmot Proviso. The *Whig* delighted in pointing out that 23 southern Democrats, including Virginia's Brown and Johnson, had voted for the bill, while only five southern Whigs voted in the affirmative.¹²

The issue was a difficult one for southern Democrats, who, along with their expansion-minded national party, had previously supported the acquisition and organization of Oregon. Democratic Congressman S.F. Leake of Albemarle was outraged by the House's failure to adopt the Missouri Compromise line as the basis for the prohibition of slavery in the northwest. The northern members had achieved their objective through "the bare exercise of unqualified, uncontrollable power." Congress, he warned, did not have the right to legislate for territories, and

¹²*Whig*, 2 February 1847.

this bill set a frightening precedent for future action on this delicate and most dangerous topic.”

If disunion should eventually result, Leake bellowed, “I say to gentlemen from the North, upon your heads be the responsibility.”¹³

Although Virginia Democrats spoke passionately against the bill in early 1847, they found themselves in an embarrassing position when they learned of the affirmative vote of 23 Southerners, whose desire for expansion had outweighed their principled opposition to the Wilmot Proviso in an area far north of the Missouri Compromise line. Not wanting to denounce its own party, the *Enquirer* remained relatively quiet on this subject, and the Whigs appropriated it for their political use in local elections and in the 1848 presidential contest between Zachary Taylor and Lewis Cass. The *Enquirer* did not attempt to explain the actions of the 23 southern Democrats who supported the bill until Polk signed it into law in August 1848. Then the *Whig* adopted it as an anti-Cass mantra as election day approached, and the Democrats flew to their party’s defense.

A more immediate election consumed Richmonders’ attention in the spring of 1847, as Democrat James A. Seddon and Whig John Minor Botts competed for the Eleventh District’s seat in the United States House. Seddon was a member of the Calhoun faction of the Virginia Democracy, which was a minority in the party. When the Democratic nominating convention accompanied Seddon’s official nomination with a resolution stating that its decision should not be “considered as giving, directly or indirectly, any color of approval to the political course of the Honorable John C. Calhoun,” Seddon declined his party’s nomination, which then went to Walter D. Leake of Goochland.¹⁴

¹³*Congressional Globe*, 29 Cong., 2 sess., appendix (15 January 1847), 113, 112.

¹⁴Charles Henry Ambler, *Thomas Ritchie: A Study in Virginia Politics* (Richmond: Bell Book and Stationary Company, 1913), 269.

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When campaigning against Botts, Seddon and Leake demonstrated their devotion to the

South by pledging not to support the presidential nominee of the Democratic National Convention if he should be a Wilmot Proviso man. They were willing to dissolve their partisan ties if the national party did not nominate an anti-proviso candidate because, in the end, "that question overrides party." Virginia Democrats were adamant that the South must unify against a pro-proviso candidate and bring the North to its senses. This policy was born of their conviction that the North could indeed be brought to its senses. The *Enquirer* declared that "whatever the signs of the times may indicate, we still believe that the whole Democracy of the Union...will select some man as their candidate who will protect the rights of the South and the Union." Like southern unity and threats of secession, Democrats' insistence that they would leave the party if it nominated a Wilmot Proviso candidate was designed to ensure that Northerners understood the consequences of any moves against southern rights. No northern Democrat, they believed, could understand the consequences and still attack the South. Thus, Virginia Democrats considered their anti-proviso pledge to be a measure of southern loyalty because they believed it could compel Northerners to respect southern rights.¹⁵

While Leake insisted that an anti-proviso policy was vital to southern security, Botts dismissed it as a "humbug." First, the Democrats would create a sectional controversy by taking Mexican territory. Then, when inevitably confronted with the Wilmot Proviso, their remedy, as Botts derisively proclaimed, "is A PLEDGE not to support for the Presidency any individual who may be hostile to the offensive principle embodied in it. Why, what is such a pledge, on such a subject, worth?" Not much, according to the Whigs.¹⁶ On the contrary, Whigs rejected the

¹⁵*Enquirer*, 26 March, 19 March 1847.

¹⁶*Whig*, 16 April, 1 June 1847.

pledge as a test of southern loyalty because it threatened destructive consequences for the South; Whigs did not trust the northern majority to cater to southern demands. In a speech in Louisa, Botts explained that "the pledge not to vote for any man who may be in favor of the Wilmot Proviso furnishes no security for the institution of the South" because it would provoke the northern majority to align against the South, thus guaranteeing the election of the proviso's advocates to high national office. Democratic agitation would only condemn the South to oppression and would most likely lead to disunion. Botts reaffirmed his opposition to the Wilmot Proviso and denied that Congress possessed the constitutional power to implement it. The only way to settle the issue, he insisted, was not to acquire more territory. Contrasting his party's non-territory policy with the incendiary rhetoric of the Democrats, Botts asked, "Which is the best friend to the South and Southern institutions?"¹⁷

In mid-April, Leake and Botts engaged in a debate in Richmond. Leake reasserted his anti-proviso pledge while Botts, according to the *Enquirer*, avoided the question. The *Whig's* report of the debate focused on a different issue that also highlighted an interparty difference of opinion on a slavery-related question. Leake had attacked Botts' loyalty to the South by pointing out that he had voted against the House's Twenty-first Rule, which denied the right to petition Congress about slavery. By granting the right of petition, Leake argued, Botts helped amplify the abolitionists' voice in national politics. The *Whig* defended Botts's vote in the name of southern safety; the repeal of the "humbug" gag rule deflated abolitionists' zeal because it removed the pretext for the charge that the slaveholding states required antirepublican measures to sustain their institutions.¹⁸ The *Whig* regretted that the Democrats, those "self-constituted champions of

¹⁷*Whig*, 16 April 1847.

¹⁸*Enquirer*, 20 April 1847.

southern rights and institutions," felt the need to denounce everyone who had a different perspective on the issues confronting the country. The Democrats were not more pro-southern than the Whigs, the Whig organ insisted. Trotting out one of its favorite arguments, the *Whig* reminded its readers that "we should have been glad if, in his *tragic* zeal for the safety of the South, Mr. Leake had told his hearers something about the 22 [sic] southern Loco-foco members of Congress (*who voted for the principle of the Wilmot Proviso*) on the bill for the organization of a territorial government in Oregon...."¹⁹

Leake tried to cast suspicion on his opponent by claiming that Northerners favored Botts's election. In the last days of the campaign he appealed to Richmonders to come together and take a stand, for if the South would only unite, the North would divide. This was to no avail; on election day Richmond remained divided, and Botts was victorious. The Democrats explained their loss by citing their voters' apathy and their intraparty divisions. They denied that Botts's election accurately reflected Richmond's attitude about the slavery question, insisting that he had been elected "in the face of local prejudices and interests." It was important for Democrats to make this argument because any "faltering of the South on the Wilmot Proviso question" might signify to the Northerners that they did not have to respect southern rights. Slaveholding Whigs, on the other hand, did not equate Botts's election with faltering—they had complete faith that Botts would be true to his section's interests if a real crisis emerged. Until then, they preferred his "safe and conservative ground" to the Democrats' "dangerous and untried ground."²⁰

Loyalty politics, shaped by the two parties' different views of Northerners, also surfaced in a vigorous debate over the possibility of applying the Missouri Compromise to the current

¹⁹*Enquirer*, 13 April 1847; *Whig*, 13 April 1847.

²⁰*Enquirer*, 7 May, 4 June 1847; *Whig*, 14 May 1847, 16 May 1848, 373.

crisis. Virginia Democrats, rejecting the Wilmot Proviso as an acceptable principle for the organization of the territories that the United States must obtain, favored the extension of the Missouri Compromise line to the Pacific Ocean. The Constitution and thus the Union, they pointed out, were based on compromise. "Who...believes for a moment," Congressman Thomas Bayly asked, "that the Constitution ever would have been adopted if it had been understood that it conferred...upon Congress" the power to strike at slaveholders' equality?²¹ Just as compromises on slavery had made union palatable to Southerners in 1787, a mutual adjustment on the question had preserved the Union in 1820. Yet many Virginia Democrats of the late 1840s regretted that the South, by agreeing to the Missouri settlement, had surrendered the vital principle that Congress had no power to touch slavery in the territories. The compromise of this principle had been unconstitutional, they held, and they would vote against it if it were now being proposed for the first time.

But the Missouri Compromise was not new; it had settled the slavery controversy thirty years ago, and it had assumed sacred status because it preserved the sectional balance of power. While Virginia Democrats did not sanction its principles and insisted that any new compromise must not include an affirmation of Congress's right to interfere in the territories, they would settle for an extension of the old compromise line. In advocating this policy Virginia Democrats believed that they were being magnanimous; they emphasized that the South had made important concessions in 1820, while the North had yielded nothing, and now the South was willing to adhere to this unjust compromise for the sake of the Union. Virginia Democrats insisted that this was a compromise that Northerners should find satisfactory. "Upon this line," the *Enquirer* declared, the South "must take an unflinching stand; and self-interest, if not the more lofty

²¹*Congressional Globe*, 30 Cong., 1 sess., appendix (16 May 1848), 573.

motives of patriotism and right, will induce the North to accede to so equitable an arrangement."²²

Virginia Whigs were incredulous that southern men could have such confidence in the North when it came to territorial policy. The *Whig* proclaimed that "the fell spirit of abolition is abroad, and is stalking, with hydra head, through the land," and if the United States should acquire new territory south of the 36 30' line, "the diabolical scheme for prostrating the rights and institutions of the South, will be agitated, and our glorious Union may be dissolved. The Missouri compromise, that suicidal surrender of principle on our part, will then be of no avail to us."²³ Just as Northerners would ignore a southern pledge to oppose a Wilmot Proviso candidate, they would ignore the South's insistence that the Missouri Compromise line be respected. The politically ascendant North did not have to recognize the compromise line, "and she is determined not to jeopard that ascendancy by permitting the territory...to be settled...by slavery." The compromise was barren, deceptive, and "insulting to the intelligence of the Southern people, in holding out to them the semblance of an equal right to a participation in the lands to be acquired...." Whigs once again voiced their conviction that all intelligent Southerners who wanted to preserve their institutions must oppose the acquisition of new lands.²⁴

²²*Enquirer*, 27 August, 9 March 1847.

²³*Whig*, 6 April 1847.

²⁴*Whig*, 12 October, 26 November 1847.

CHAPTER 4

THE ELECTION OF 1848

The United States' military victory over Mexico and the subsequent acquisition of territory made inevitable the vexed question of how the land should be organized with respect to slavery, and the 1848 election had the potential to provide an answer. The slavery issue overshadowed the two parties' usual election-year debates over the tariff and the banking system. Yet even though slavery was the "all-absorbing" topic of discussion,¹ it did not compel Southerners to renounce their partisan divisions and unite in support of a candidate who would protect their interests. Although both southern parties insisted that the territories be open to slavery, partisanship overwhelmed sectionalism. In Virginia, opposing characterizations of Northerners continued to separate the Whigs and the Democrats. Each party believed that its own national organization was better equipped to handle the crisis, and Virginia Democrats and Whigs bitterly accused each other of supporting a candidate who would betray the South and destroy the Union. The campaign of 1848 became a large-scale loyalty contest, and the slavery controversy continued to divide the South even as it threatened to divide the nation.

The bitterness of the campaign of 1848 had its roots in 1847, before territorial expansion was a *fait accompli*, when both parties began to look seriously for potential nominees. The Virginia Democrats made the first bold move when they announced that no Wilmot Proviso man would receive their support. To Virginia's Whigs this signaled a radical shift toward sectionalism, since such a proclamation in their view ruled out all northern contenders. Claiming to have demonstrated their "superiority to sectional feelings," the Whigs wondered how the

¹*Whig*, 1 February 1850. *September*, 9 September 1847.

Democrats, who appeared to be bogged down in petty sectional disputes, would react when their party nominated a Northerner. Botts and other Whigs began to point out that all possible candidates would be unsatisfactory if the Wilmot test were imposed on them; James Buchanan and Martin Van Buren opposed the extension of slavery, they asserted, and Lewis Cass "will unquestionably be in favor of the principle of the Wilmot Proviso" once territory was secured.² The Democrats, of course, denied these early attacks. The *Fredericksburg Recorder* assured its readers that some northern Democrats were "as sound and as safe on the slavery question as the South can desire." The *Whig* wondered who these men were, for, it inquired, "What northern man, however deeply imbued with southern feelings, is ass enough to expect to gratify his aspirations, by uniting himself with a southern minority, and forfeiting thereby the support of the northern majority?"³

Answers to this question began to emerge in the fall of 1847. The *Enquirer* made its expectations of Northerners clear, announcing that Southerners would not "be deluded into any concessions with regard to slavery." The paper unequivocally stated: "We demand that our own institutions may be under our own control." When James Buchanan of Pennsylvania announced in a letter that he was against the Wilmot Proviso and in favor of the extension of the Missouri Compromise line, Virginia Democrats welcomed the Northerner's conciliatory tone. The *Enquirer* stopped publishing its demands and started praising Buchanan's "spirit of compromise." Virginia Democrats emphasized that it was men like him who would save the Union through their patriotism and sense of fairness.⁴

²*Whig*, 2 July, 16 April, 27 April 1847.

³*Whig*, 2 July, 1 June 1847.

⁴*Enquirer*, 24 August, 3 September, 9 September 1847.

Other signs from the North were encouraging as well; the *Boston Courier* (Whig) and the *New York Globe* (Democrat) reported that northern Democrats were turning against the Wilmot Proviso. The New York State Democratic Convention voted to table resolutions favoring the proviso. Signs from the deep South were encouraging as well--the Charleston *Mercury* voiced its support of Buchanan and the Missouri Compromise extension. Relieved that the *Mercury* was not steering a more radical course, the *Enquirer* hoped that a moderate Democratic coalition was finally coming together to put an end to the sectional dispute. Now the southern Whigs would have to desert their uncompromising northern counterparts and join the Union-saving Democrats.⁵

The Whigs found this last proposition ludicrous. "It is the *Enquirer* and such as it," declared the *Whig*, "that are dealing the most fatal wounds to the interests of the South," by believing that Buchanan and other northern Democrats were really going to respect southern rights. Buchanan himself was only pandering for southern votes, they asserted, as "he is still the same inveterate, wool-dyed federalist now, that he was in 1815"--a hypocrite who "will not hesitate to betray [the South]...as soon as it becomes profitable to do so."⁶ The *Whig* denied that there was any widespread movement in the North to repudiate the Proviso. Ten northern states had passed resolutions approving the antislavery measure. For Virginia Democrats to assert that the New York Democrats' vote to lay the proviso on the table indicated opposition to it in principle was both untrue and dangerous. According to the *Whig*, such arguments deceived southern Democrats into believing that they had northern allies, when in fact the Northerners tabled the measure only because it was irrelevant to their proceedings. Virginia Whigs warned

⁵*Enquirer*, 15 October, 14 September 1847.

⁶*Whig*, 3 September, 7 September 1847.

that the Democrats should not place faith in any northern politician.⁷

The *Enquirer* responded to the *Whig*'s accusations with indignation. How dare the Whigs accuse the northern Democrats of anti-southern sentiment when their own northern party members were avowedly antislavery? That question aside, how could southern Whigs reject prosouthern overtures from a northern man? To Virginia Democrats, northern support on the slavery issue was of the utmost importance. Now that this goal appeared to be coming to fruition, the Whigs were ruining it by branding the Northerners hypocrites. "Mr. Buchanan has taken a position which the *Whig* admits to be satisfactory to the South," the *Enquirer* explained, "and would it not be mad and suicidal policy in the South to spurn and reject such friends?" According to the very foundations of southern Democratic strategy in the slavery controversy, Southerners must have faith that their threats of secession could have a genuine positive effect on northern leaders. "What," the *Enquirer* asked, "is a northern Democrat to do on the question, to satisfy the *Whig*? The only course left, it seems, is to sustain the Wilmot Proviso as all the northern Whigs do--and, then, he will be regarded by the *Whig* as honest and sincere." Democrats accused the Whigs of working against a peaceful reconciliation of southern rights and Unionism.⁸

When the 30th Congress convened in December 1847, the Virginia Whigs further enraged the Democrats by supporting a known Wilmot Proviso man for Speaker of the House. Robert C. Winthrop, a Massachusetts Whig, often spoke against the institution of slavery, and it was he who had moved to attach the Wilmot Proviso to the Oregon territorial bill. Virginia Whigs did not consider this an obstacle to his election. Concerned as always with Whig unity, they refused to

⁷*Whig*, 21 September, 22 October 1847.

⁸*Enquirer*, 24 September, 1 October 1847.

make the proviso a litmus test that would undoubtedly split the party. This was especially easy for southern Whigs to do in 1847, when they still harbored a hope that a unified Whig party could prevent the United States from acquiring Mexican territory. All northern men were for the proviso anyway, they argued, and at least northern Whigs did not try to hide their true position from their southern colleagues. Winthrop was "as unobjectionable as any northern man who could have been selected," stated the *Whig*. He had in fact rejected a bargain proposed by the abolitionist Congressman Palfrey; Palfrey had offered to deliver him votes in the Speaker election in return for a promise to appoint abolitionists as chairmen of key House committees. Southern Whigs were satisfied that "the South had nothing to fear from the election of Mr. Winthrop."⁹ Democrats argued that the South had nothing to fear but southern Whigs who sanctioned northern proviso men--they might give Northerners the idea that the South was not serious about its opposition to the proviso.

The election of Winthrop and the interparty bickering over Buchanan's sincerity foreshadowed the 1848 presidential battle. With much more at stake, the presidential contest provoked bitter partisan attacks in Virginia as each party sought to expose the other's weakness on the slavery question. As the Whig party coalesced around Southerner Zachary Taylor and the Democrats rallied around Northerner Lewis Cass, the politics of slavery continued to divide Virginians.

Contrary to supposed fears about the incompatibility of democracy and the military, Americans have tended to make politicians out of war heroes. Zachary Taylor entered the Mexican war as a career soldier with no party identification, and he emerged at its conclusion as the presidential nominee of the Whig party. During the course of the war both parties recognized

⁹*Whig*, 10, 14 December 1847.

Tucker, 24 January 1847, Tucker-Coleman Collection.

Taylor's political potential and tried to draw him into their ranks, but he initially refused to accept a partisan label. Unable to win a commitment from the general, the Democratic party turned to its own pool of professional politicians to search for a suitable candidate. The Whigs were not so quick to give up on Taylor, however, and by mid-1847 they were claiming him as one of their own. Proof of this conversion was at first hard to come by; amid letters from Taylor declaring his nonpartisanship and his desire to be president of the whole country, the *Whig* focused on his correspondence with a Mr. Graves of Louisville, in which "he twice *speaks of himself* as 'a WHIG'...." Democrats, although no longer interested in the general for themselves, were less than optimistic about their chances in a campaign against him. They emphasized his letter of May 18, 1847, to the editor of the Cincinnati *Signal* in which, among other things, he stated that he would not run as the candidate of any party.¹⁰

Since Taylor remained silent except for periodic statements of his political independence, various political groups tried to appropriate him as a figurehead for their own particular agendas. Radical southern nationalists who functioned outside of either major party saw in Taylor an opportunity to unite the South behind a nonpartisan southern candidate. For these men, strict constitutional construction and states' rights were the cornerstone of southern safety within the Union, but they believed that both existing parties tended toward centralism. James H. Hammond, a prominent South Carolina politician, concurred with Nathaniel Beverley Tucker that the Whigs were dangerous because they overtly encouraged centralization, while the Democrats were dangerous because their claims to be the party of states' rights were "fatally self-deluded."¹¹

¹⁰*Whig*, 23 July 1847.

¹¹James Henry Hammond to N.B. Tucker, 24 January 1847, Tucker-Coleman Collection, Swem Library.

Hammond, Tucker, and other southern nationalists wanted to convince southern Whigs and Democrats that regional solidarity on the slavery question outweighed partisan labels. Attachment to a national party only weakened their ability to defend the peculiar interests of the South. Hammond and Tucker personally embraced disunion as a positive good, but they realized that such action was politically unfeasible as long as partisan relationships with Northerners remained intact. They believed it was their duty to "rally the whole Slave region" around a presidential candidate who could be counted on to protect the South. Taylor, the slaveholder who shunned political labels, seemed a perfect choice. Hammond assured Tucker that "I will not omit to respond most heartily to your cheer for 'Old Zack'." Taylor had the potential to be the rallying point that southern nationalists had long searched for. "Would it not make you ten years younger," Hammond asked Tucker, "to see the South vote unanimously on any question for any man?" Even if Taylor did run as a Whig, which became increasingly likely as time passed, southern unity in his favor would still be a groundbreaking step. Hammond wrote, "They might call it a Whig victory, but we should know it was ours." If a unified South could capture the presidency against a divided North, southern rights would finally be secure.¹²

The prospect of Taylor as a southern unifier terrified Virginia Whigs. Southern unity, they feared, would mobilize the northern majority to take decisive action against the South. The true path to a guarantee of southern rights was national Whig unity. As in 1840, "The Union of the Whigs for the sake of the Union" became a rallying cry throughout the South. Many southern Whigs suspected that the slavery controversy, and especially southern Democrats' continuous harping about southern rights, was merely "a device of the enemy, to divide and distract, and thus

¹²Hammond to Tucker, 12 November 1847; April 1848; 1 June 1848, Tucker-Coleman Collection, Swem Library.

conquer," the Whig party. The Whigs advanced this contention to delegitimize the Democrats' offensive strategy; by characterizing states'-rights agitation as nothing but political bluster, Whigs could discredit their adversaries and win adherents to their own quite different strategy, which rested on intersectional Whig unity. "The election even of General Taylor can be secured alone by the cooperation of the Whigs of the South with those of the North in a National Convention," the *Whig* advised. Such a convention would legitimize Taylor as a national rather than a sectional candidate.¹³

As a presidential candidate, Zachary Taylor fit perfectly into the Virginia Whigs' strategy for dealing with the slavery controversy. He was trustworthy, in their eyes, because he was a Southerner and a slaveowner; he did not need to make a pledge against the Wilmot Proviso because "his interests are our interests....He is of us, he is with us, and he is for us." Yet, even as the Whigs assumed that Taylor could be trusted on the slavery question, they supported the general precisely because his stance on the slavery question was quite ambiguous. Taylor made no public statement about the Wilmot Proviso. His refusal to come down on one side or the other allowed northern and southern Whigs to interpret his position in different ways.¹⁴ This ambiguity did not concern the Whigs, for they did not fear that he would have to choose between the sections once elected. They hoped and believed he would sidestep the issue, for to avoid the slavery question was to avoid the bitter sectional conflict it would certainly generate. Virginia Whigs considered their candidate's personal opinion about the Wilmot Proviso less important than their conviction that a Whig victory would deflate Democratic radicalism and provide a nonviolent solution to the slavery controversy.

¹³*Whig*, 12 August 1847; 7 January 1848.

¹⁴*Whig*, 1 August 1848.