

Taylor, the Whigs argued, was "the man for the great crisis at hand" precisely because his election could not be equated with any specific sectional policy. Thus, "to him and to him alone, can the people of the Union--of the whole Union--the *nation*, look with confidence in the approaching perils."¹⁵ Taylor's character proved more important than his politics, for the Whigs praised his honesty, modesty and fearlessness and believed that these qualities would govern his political career. Taylor was "like a good old Virginia ham[;] he is always ready and will prove himself *firm* and *sound* to the last," according to a correspondent of the *Whig*. His sense of fairness and equality would enable him to adhere strictly to the dictates of the Constitution, which, in the southern Whigs' opinion, did not give Congress the power to prohibit slavery in the territories. Character could save the Union, they trusted, while mere politics could not.¹⁶

When Zachary Taylor and Millard Fillmore received the presidential and vice-presidential nominations of the national Whig party in June 1848, Virginia Democrats found these candidates anything but safe. That Taylor's opinion of the Wilmot Proviso remained shrouded in mystery was a large problem for southern Democrats, who believed that ambiguity on this question was dangerous. For men who argued that a constant assertion of southern rights was the only way to shape national policy, the idea of electing a man from Louisiana who refused to stand on a pro-South platform was ridiculous. Taylor maintained a "suspicious position on the slavery question--to say the least," complained the Democrats, who asserted that "the South has a right to demand that he should *speak out*...." The only tangible public evidence of Taylor's convictions, Democrats charged, was his "Signal Letter," which prompted more questions than it answered. In this letter, Taylor had expressed to the *Signal's* editor his "high opinion and decided approval

¹⁵*Whig*, 4 July 1848.

¹⁶*Whig*, 4 July, 29 August 1848.

of the sentiments and views embraced" in a certain editorial that journal had published. That editorial, Virginia Democrats reminded southern Whigs, had called for the adoption of the Wilmot Proviso and spoken out against the presidential veto power. Both of these opinions, especially advocacy of the Wilmot Proviso, would endanger southern interests if held by the Chief Executive.¹⁷

Already suspicious of Taylor's position, Virginia Democrats found further evidence of his supposed anti-southern leanings in the assertions of his northern supporters. The *Enquirer* printed an article found in the *Baltimore Patriot*, a Whig paper, about a letter written by a Colonel Johnson of Ohio, who had been an intimate friend of Taylor's for over thirty years. The article stated that "[Johnson] has heard [Taylor] declare, with much force, that he regarded slavery as a great evil to the country" and "he is the last man to countenance its being extended to any new territory." Even more damning was the address of the Massachusetts Whig State Convention which, after stating that the "Whig party is the true and original free soil party," went on to declare that "on the question of the Ordinance of 1787 [the principle of prohibiting slavery in the territories] the sentiments of General Taylor are believed to be in accordance with those of the Whigs of Massachusetts." In the absence of any denials from Taylor, Virginia Democrats wondered why any southern man would vote for the Whig candidate.¹⁸

The Whigs' arguments that Taylor's impeccable character would cause him to adhere to the true (that is, the southern) interpretation of the Constitution did not satisfy Virginia Democrats. They were unwilling to place faith in an unknown politician's interpretation of the Constitution, and they warned that Taylor was not inspiring confidence by remaining silent. If

¹⁷*Enquirer*, 20 June 1848; 9 July 1847.

¹⁸*Enquirer*, 20 June, 20 October 1848.

he were truly a safe candidate, he would not "allow his opinions on a question vital to the South to be misrepresented by antislavery Northerners; he might easily remove any false impressions which [the Signal] letter may have generated." To the always offense-minded Virginia Democrats, Taylor's silence was more disturbing than his status as a slaveholder was reassuring. To the nonconfrontationist Whigs, Taylor's silence was perhaps the only strategy that could save the Union and, not coincidentally, the Whig party.¹⁹

While it was largely Taylor's strategic silences that perturbed Virginia Democrats, they found his outspoken advocacy of the no-veto policy almost equally troubling. The Whig party, which had originally organized in opposition to what they perceived as President Andrew Jackson's monarchical tendencies, feared executive power. They pointed to Polk's administration as a classic example of the perils of excessive, unconstitutional presidential power. The Mexican War and the acquisition of Mexican territory prompted the *Whig* to lament, "Alas for the Constitution, when men like these are its guardians and defenders. A flock of sheep in the fangs of a famishing pack of wolves would be just as safe." To avoid such executive excesses, the Whigs tried to mitigate presidential power, and one of the clearest ways to do this was to adopt a narrow view of the veto power. Their interpretation of the Constitution held that the veto was to be used only when Congress passed a law that was blatantly unconstitutional. Zachary Taylor enthusiastically endorsed this Whig policy in his "Signal Letter" and also, more explicitly, in his April 1848 letter "nominally addressed" to his brother-in-law John Allison.²⁰

Virginia Democrats were shocked that their fellow Southerners would embrace such a policy, especially when their candidate had not even hinted that he considered the Wilmot Proviso

¹⁹*Enquirer*, 25 July, 4 July 1848.

²⁰*Whig*, 2 July 1847; K. Jack Bauer, *Zachary Taylor: Soldier, Planter, Statesman of the Old Southwest* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985), 233.

unconstitutional and thus worthy of a veto. Taylor, they warned, would "surrender to a majority of Congress absolute and unchecked power," which was particularly dangerous because "the Whigs know that the free soil representation is a majority fixed and determinate in the lower house of Congress." Virginia Democrats revered the veto power, for if southern unity failed to convince Northerners to abandon the Wilmot Proviso, the veto would be "their only security against the reckless invasion of their dearest rights." Without the veto, Democrats charged, disunion would be difficult to avoid, for southern Whigs were equally adamant that if the proviso became law, Virginia should consider secession. When Whig Joseph Segar admitted to holding this conviction in a debate with Democrat Henry Wise, the *Enquirer* reported incredulously that "Mr. Segar was willing to place a man in the White House when it was doubtful whether he would or would not veto this Proviso, and thus runs a risk of dissolving the Union." Ironically, the Whigs' nonconfrontationist tactics would, according to the Democrats, imperil the Union.²¹

While the Democrats were suspicious of Taylor's position on the slavery question, which was reason enough not to vote for him, they had no question about his running mate's convictions. The *Enquirer* exploded with denunciation of Fillmore's congressional voting record, which was entirely antislavery. Fillmore, the paper announced, had "never missed an opportunity of voting against the South whenever the question of slavery came up." During the gag rule debate of the 1830s, he consistently voted to allow petitions for the abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia and the territories to be referred to congressional committees. When Representative Atherton of New Hampshire proposed resolutions declaring that Congress did not have the power to interfere with slavery and that antislavery petitions would be tabled without debate, Fillmore had "stood firm with Adams, Giddings and Co." in voting against them. This

²¹ *Enquirer*, 27 June, 8 August, 18 August, 18 July 1848.

voting record indicated Fillmore's belief that interference with slavery was a legitimate function of Congress.²²

This, Virginia Democrats crowed, was the man that southern Whigs hoped to elevate to the vice-presidency, an office from which he would cast the deciding vote if the Senate were equally divided. By electing this "ultra opponent of the most important institution of the South," the Whigs were taking a risk that could prove fatal to southern rights and safety, for, as the *Enquirer* sarcastically stated, "What a charming opportunity *the tried friend of the South*, FILLMORE, will have when he takes his seat as the presiding officer of the Senate." When the Democrats combined Fillmore's Wilmot Provisoism with Taylor's promise to abstain from the veto power, they foresaw danger for the South.²³

Virginia Whigs did not allow Democratic attacks to dampen their enthusiasm for their party's ticket. They recognized that Fillmore was not a very attractive candidate in the South. The national nominating convention had put Virginia Whigs in a difficult position--when the election inevitably became a loyalty contest between the two parties in Virginia, the Democrats used Fillmore's record as ammunition. Virginia Whigs, who did not consider their vice-presidential candidate's antislavery record reason enough to reevaluate their support for Taylor, accepted his nomination as a political necessity and tried to defend him. This defense, while motivated by partisan politics, helped the Whigs advance their more significant goal of placing Zachary Taylor in the White House. In the harshly competitive atmosphere of Virginia loyalty politics, the Whigs could not afford to remain silent when their candidate was attacked.

Fillmore, Virginia Whigs argued, was "the safest of all public men who reside North of

²²*Enquirer*, 20 August 1848.

²³*Enquirer*, 27 June, 20 August 1848.

Maryland." He personally regarded slavery as an evil, but so, according to the Whigs, did all Northerners.²⁴ They assured Virginians that Fillmore respected the states' sovereignty over their internal institutions, and they tried to de-emphasize his antislavery voting record. Putting a pro-southern spin on Fillmore's votes was indeed difficult, but the *Whig* assiduously attempted to rebuff the *Enquirer's* attacks about the Atherton Resolutions. Digging for any angle it could find, the paper finally came out with an argument that Fillmore had voted against Atherton's proposal because it did not go far enough to secure southern rights. The *Whig* pointed to Henry Wise, a Virginia Democrat and vociferous southern rights advocate, who had abstained from voting on the bill because he denied Congress' right to even discuss slavery. The *Whig* now argued, as Wise had in the 1830s, that Atherton's resolutions, proposed by a Northerner, implied that southern rights depended on the benevolence of Northerners and that "the South had not the ability to take care of itself." Fillmore's vote against the gag rule, then, was actually a bold strike for southern rights and dignity, according to the *Whig*.²⁵

Although the Whigs advanced this argument in all seriousness, the Democrats dismissed it as "flimsy and ridiculous." They pointed out that, with the exception of Wise, every southern member of Congress had voted in favor of the resolutions. The Whigs' assertion that northern assistance placed the South in a vulnerable position of dependence on untrustworthy allies struck at the Democrats' central strategy for dealing with the slavery controversy. In the Democrats' estimation, the Union could only be preserved if Northerners firmly supported southern rights; to dismiss all Northerners as untrustworthy was to beg for the dissolution of the "blessed union." Not only were the Whigs imbeciles, according to the *Enquirer*, for believing "that the South will

²⁴*Whig*, 5 September 1848.

²⁵*Enquirer*, 5 September 1848.

so degrade herself and sacrifice her honor, peace, and safety" by voting for Fillmore, but "the influence of the Whig press, in denouncing northern Democrats who sustain the rights of the South...because of their fidelity to our glorious constitution, has done more to strengthen fanaticism at the North than all the efforts of the abolitionists."²⁶

The party of the southern-rights agitators supported a northern man for the Presidency in 1848. In December 1847, General Lewis Cass wrote a letter to Tennessee Democrat A.O.P. Nicholson in which he announced his opposition to the Wilmot Proviso and urged that popular sovereignty, not Congressional decree, was the only manner in which the slavery question could be answered in the territories. Cass was exactly what Virginia Democrats were looking for--a northern man who clearly advanced the "true conservative position of non-interference on the part of the General Government in all its branches with the subject of slavery." The Democrats resolved in their state convention not to sanction the nomination of any candidate who failed to repudiate the Proviso, and they heartily supported Cass because, as James Seddon affirmed, the Old General "comes up in principle to the Virginia platform."²⁷ While Cass had in the past advocated some antislavery measures, he had never voted for the Wilmot Proviso, and he had now, according to the Democrats, fully come around to a position that all southern men could support.

Even more heartening for Virginia Democrats was Cass's statement in the Nicholson letter that "I am strongly impressed with the opinion that a great change has been going on in the public mind on this subject [slavery]...." Southern Democrats saw this assertion as preliminary

²⁶ *Enquirer*, 13 October, 20 June, 30 June 1848.

²⁷ *Enquirer*, 2 June, 6 June 1848; William J. Cooper, *South and the Politics of Slavery*, 255.

evidence that their strategy was working, and that northern men could and would defend southern rights once they realized that disunion was the alternative. Virginia Democrats did not doubt the sincerity of their northern allies, for "deserting the *strong*, and joining the *weak*, to *strengthen* themselves" would not have been an intelligent move from a purely political perspective. Democrats in Virginia were genuinely excited at the possibility of electing a responsible northern Democrat who "is bound to veto the Wilmot Proviso and will do so."²⁸

If Virginia Democrats were appalled at their Whig neighbors' enthusiasm for the mysterious Taylor, the Whigs were equally wary of southern Democrats' trust in Cass. Unconvinced that any Northerner could genuinely advocate pro-southern positions on slavery-related questions, they characterized Cass as a "political prostitute" driven by ambition. They insisted that Cass's desire to be the candidate of a united Democratic party drove him to deception; he knew that his free-soil convictions would alienate all of his potential southern supporters, so he pretended to repudiate the Wilmot Proviso.²⁹ Cass had written in the Nicholson letter of his belief that many Northerners were beginning to change their minds about the merits of the Wilmot Proviso, but southern Whigs denied that any such movement was taking place. The Whig "suspect[ed] that, like a drunken man, who, because his own brain is giddy, thinks the world turns round, he mistook the sudden change in his own sentiments for a revolution in those of the people."³⁰

That his new position was insincere was clear to the *Whig*, which regularly published excerpts from the Congressional Globe detailing occasions on which Cass had presented abolition

²⁸*Enquirer*, 6 June, 14 January, 18 August 1848.

²⁹*Whig*, 9 June 1848.

³⁰*Whig*, 7 April 1848.

petitions to the Senate. The paper also exposed a copy of Michigan's Wilmot Proviso resolutions, which contained revisions in Cass's handwriting that strengthened the pro-proviso wording. Now Cass was advancing arguments against the proviso that had been familiar to him several months ago when he had favored it; these very arguments, said the *Whig*, "were at first, and for more than 12 months, powerless to satisfy himself of the unconstitutionality and danger of Mr. Wilmot's proposition!" Whigs warned against placing southern safety in the hands of a northern man whose election-year conversion raised questions about his trustworthiness. If Cass could turn his back on his fellow freesoil Northerners, he could just as easily desert the South when it became convenient to do so. The South, argued the Whigs, should not trust "a man who does not know his own mind for any consecutive twenty-four hours."³¹

The Whigs also advised fellow Southerners against trusting a man whose national party sanctioned the principle of the Wilmot Proviso in the bill to admit Oregon as a territory. When President Polk signed the Oregon bill into law in August 1848, it immediately became an issue in the presidential campaign. Virginia Whigs had used this issue in the past to discredit southern Democrats, but now they directed their attack against the Northerner Cass. If even the Southerner Polk could "lay the South completely at the mercy of the North" by advancing his party's interests at the expense of his section, a Cass presidency would be even more dangerous. The Whigs insisted that as long as southern Democrats supported men like Polk and Cass, they had no right to accuse southern Whigs of being unsound on the slavery question. They dismissed the Democrats as hypocrites--if a Whig had signed the Wilmot Proviso into law the Democrats would have condemned him, but since this insult came at the hands of their own party they remained

³¹*Whig*, 7 November, 7 March, 2 June 1848.

"dumb as an oyster."³²

The Whigs were almost certainly right--if a Whig President had signed a bill acknowledging the principle of the proviso, the Democratic press would have spared no energy in denouncing him as a traitor to the South. But now the Democrats found themselves in the same uncomfortable position in which they often tried to place the Whigs. The Whigs had seized the Oregon bill as an opportunity to make the Democrats appear unsound on the slavery question. The Democrats recognized their vulnerability and, instead of denouncing Polk's action, they defended it. The *Enquirer* focused on the message Polk submitted when he signed the bill, in which the President explicitly stated that the Wilmot Proviso was unconstitutional and that he would never sanction it below the Missouri Compromise line. Polk and the 23 southern Democratic congressmen only approved of the bill because Oregon was well above that line. They had voted against the motion to attach the proviso to the bill in the first place, but once the question became a choice between Oregon with the proviso or no Oregon at all, they chose to organize the territory. They defended this breach of principle by arguing that "the bill contains enough which is desirable to justify the vote notwithstanding one objectionable provision." Opposition to the proviso in a territory where no one had any intention of introducing slavery was not worth anarchy in Oregon. Just as they would do during the Compromise debates in 1850, some southern Democrats weighed peace against principle and concluded that blind allegiance to principle was impractical, especially when the common welfare was at stake.³³

Mirroring the Democrats' strategy for casting suspicion on Taylor, the Whigs enjoyed quoting northern Democrats who announced that their candidate was a freesoiler. Cass was a

³²*Whig*, 18, 22 August 1848.

³³*Enquirer*, 22 May, 11 January 1848.

"favorite of abolitionists and freesoilers," according to the Whigs, and they accused him of cultivating this image in the North by distributing different biographies of himself in the two regions. The North was allegedly blanketed by pamphlets in which Cass was portrayed as an opponent of slavery who affirmed the principle of the Wilmot Proviso but believed it unnecessary because nature would exclude slavery from the territories. The South, everyone knew, received biographies that praised Cass as an opponent of the proviso in practice and in principle. The abundance of these biographies disturbed the Whigs, who suggested that Cass be referred to as "the Michigan cat o' nine lives."³⁴

Their own candidate was often accused of presenting himself differently in the North and South, but the Whigs differentiated between Cass and Taylor on this issue. Virginia Whigs were undisturbed by Taylor's sectional double-dealing because it was part of his strategy of ambiguity. Cass, on the other hand, was not being ambiguous—he was merely being deceptive. While Taylor was no-faced, Cass was two-faced, and if elected president he would soon unveil his true antislavery convictions. "It remains for the American people to decide," proclaimed the *Whig*, "whether they will convert the White House into another temple of Janus, with General Cass for the presiding deity."³⁵

To Virginia Whigs, Cass's policy of popular sovereignty was a perfect example of his desire to deceive the South. Historians acknowledge that this doctrine lent itself to various interpretations—northern and southern Democrats supported it because each section had its own conception of how it would actually work. Northerners believed it to mean that territorial governments could legally exclude slavery from their boundaries. To Southerners, this

³⁴*Whig*, 7 November, 21 July 1848.

³⁵*Whig*, 11 July 1848.

interpretation of the policy was every bit as dangerous as the Wilmot Proviso itself. No sane slaveholder would bring his property to a territory where slavery was not secure, so slaveholders would never have the opportunity to become members of territorial legislatures. Dominated by nonslaveholders, the legislatures would certainly vote to bar slavery, and Southerners' voice in the federal government would be diluted when these free territories inevitably became free states. Virginia's Democratic State Convention resolved to oppose the nomination of any candidate who advocated popular sovereignty for governments in the *territorial* stage. Whigs and Democrats in Virginia agreed that the citizens of a territory could only make decisions about slavery when applying for *statehood*--that way, slaveholders would have an equal opportunity to establish themselves and have an impact on the new state's constitution.³⁶

While the Democrats and Whigs shared a conviction about how popular sovereignty should work, the issue still managed to generate partisan strife in Virginia. The source of the conflict was Cass's Nicholson letter, in which the candidate outlined his territorial policies. Impelled by their suspicion of pro-South Northerners, Whigs interpreted the letter as tangible evidence that, once elected, Cass would implement the northern interpretation of popular sovereignty and allow territorial governments to rule on slavery. While this contention was a useful campaign tactic in the ongoing loyalty contest between the two parties, it was also a result of the Whigs' deeply-held belief that no Northerner of either party would sincerely espouse pro-southern policies. Since the only Northerners who were making promises to the South were Democrats, they were the ones whom Virginia Whigs attacked. "Cass," the Whigs warned, "claims for a dozen squatters as much authority as...we claim for the states." He had merely deceived southern Democrats into thinking he was on their side. When Virginia's Democrats

³⁶William W. Freehling, *Road to Disunion*, 475-477.

disregarded their warnings and voted to nominate Cass at the Baltimore Convention in May, the Whigs denounced them as traitors to their own resolutions. The Democrats, they insisted, had made a humiliating retreat from their Virginia Platform, and if they were truly concerned about southern rights they would turn their backs on their party and join Taylor's camp. Southern Whigs were sure that adherence to Cass would end in betrayal, which could only lead to conflict and likely disunion.³⁷

The Democrats, indignant at the charge that they had betrayed their platform, hastily defended Cass and his Nicholson letter. Cass had written that the people of the territories might regulate slavery for themselves "under the general principles of the Constitution" and in a manner "compatible with the relations they bear to the Confederation." To southern Democrats this was a clear statement that Cass would bar territories from making decisions about slavery. They were, of course, predisposed to trust their own party's candidate, especially since he was a northern man making overtures to the South. In this sense, worldview and partisan interests complemented each other. Because Virginia Democrats believed that Northerners could, and must, defend Southern rights, they genuinely trusted Cass. Virginia Democrats were too attached to the Union to threaten secession and then turn around, for purely partisan reasons, and vote for a candidate who was unsound on the slavery question. Despite the Whigs' charges, Democrats found Cass entirely compatible with their platform. He would not betray the South—he would follow the Constitution and save the Union.³⁸

Just as Virginia Whigs saw little hope for avoiding sectional confrontation if Cass's popular sovereignty were implemented, they also dismissed the August 1848 Clayton

³⁷ *Whig*, 4 July, 2 June 1848.

³⁸ *Enquirer*, 6 June 1848. *William T. Cooper, The South and the Politics of Slavery*, 265.

Compromise as an adequate solution for the slavery controversy. As the presidential campaign was growing increasingly bitter and the sectional problem was no closer to being solved, Whig Senator John M. Clayton of Delaware proposed a bill that gave the Supreme Court final jurisdiction over the territorial question. Cass and Virginia Democrats believed the bill to be a genuine compromise that would put the question in the hands of an independent, theoretically fair-minded (and Southern-dominated) tribunal. At the same time, it took the question out of Congress's grasp, thus negating the legislative power of the northern majority and improving the chances of a settlement in the South's favor. The Court's decision would be final, and both sections would have to accept it as a legitimate ruling.³⁹

When eight southern Whigs voted against the bill and it went down in defeat, Democrats accused them of voting against the South's best interests merely because Cass was one of the measure's principal proponents. They would keep the slavery question open, Democrats lamented, rather than do anything that might improve Cass's chances in the approaching election. While politics likely did influence the Whigs' course of action on the Clayton bill, they also rejected it because they found it incompatible with their sectional strategy. After reminding Virginians that the entire slavery controversy existed only because Democrats had insisted on territorial expansion, they argued that the Clayton Compromise was no compromise at all. It would instead be "an entire surrender of southern rights" because the Supreme Court would rule against slaveholders. The legal doctrine that Mexican antislavery law was still in effect in the territories even though they now belonged to the United States would dictate the Court's decision.⁴⁰

³⁹*Enquirer*, 1 August 1848.

⁴⁰*Whig*, 4 August 1848; William F. Cooper, *The South and the Politics of Slavery*, 265.

While most Virginia Whigs simply feared that the Court would *adopt* this doctrine, some actually contended that the doctrine was legally correct. R.T. Daniel, a Whig state politician who belonged to the most Union-minded, nonconfrontational wing of his party, was among a minority of men convinced that Mexican territory was free soil and that slavery could not be established there except by specific, positive congressional legislation. As a result of this conviction, he considered the entire slavery controversy unnecessary; if he and the minority Whig faction could convince Southerners to accept a prohibition of slavery in the territories based on Mexican law rather than the insulting Wilmot Proviso, there would no longer be a point of contention between North and South and the Union would be safe. The Clayton compromise, then, was unnecessary. Hoping to deflate their fellow Virginians' insistence that the territories could be open to slavery, the minority Whig faction argued that the land could never support slavery anyway. Rather than dividing the Union over an abstraction, these Whigs would sacrifice southern honor and concede the lands to the North. They were willing to accept a permanent minority status for the slaveholding states, for, ironically, they had more faith than mainstream Whigs that a northern majority would not harm slavery where it already existed.⁴¹

The majority of Virginia Whigs also believed that slavery could not practically exist in the territories, but they were not willing to concede the land to antislavery forces; they refused to sanction a blow to the principle of constitutional equality. Nevertheless, they opposed Clayton's plan because they considered it dangerous. By inviting a definite decision on the territorial question, it would give everything to one section and nothing to the other. Northerners and Southerners supported the bill for entirely different reasons, Virginia Whigs understood, much as Democrats in the two sections supported Cass for different reasons. Each section's

⁴¹ *Whig*, 18 August 1848; *Enquirer*, 22 August 1848. 22 November 1848.

support relied on the belief that the outcome would be in its favor, and Virginia Whigs feared that the side that came up empty-handed would never consent to the finality of the decision. Thus, according to the *Whig*, the Clayton compromise "plants the seed of endless and unappeasable strife between the two sections of the Union, and threatens to shake the pillars of the national edifice to the very foundation." Striving to keep the pillars as sturdy as possible, the Whigs of Virginia eschewed such a direct, all-or-nothing solution to the problem.⁴²

The campaign of 1848 was particularly bitter because of the extent to which the two candidates embodied the very different worldviews of the Virginia Whigs and Democrats. Each party believed that its candidate could best reconcile southern rights with the preservation of the Union. The other party, each asserted, would harm the South and leave slavery vulnerable. The Democrats remained hopeful that the Whigs, whom they referred to as the "bastard party," would not garner enough southern support to be successful and that their candidate, Taylor--whom Democrats derided as "Old Available"--would meet defeat in the election. The Whigs similarly had faith that Southerners would reject the duplicitous Cass. The Whigs' wishes were fulfilled on election day, when Taylor won a solid victory over his opponent. In Virginia, however, Cass defeated Taylor by roughly 1000 votes. Although disappointed by this loss, Virginia Whigs interpreted Cass's slim margin of victory in this traditionally Democratic state as evidence that Southerners preferred Taylor's ambiguities to Cass's extravagant promises. Democrats remained skeptical about Taylor's abilities to deal with the crisis at hand, but Whigs happily considered his victory a new lease on life for the Union.⁴³

⁴²*Whig*, 4 August 1848.

⁴³*Enquirer*, 15 September, 24 October 1848; *Whig* 28 November 1848.

CHAPTER 5

CONVENTION AND COMPROMISE

The end of the campaign of 1848 brought no peace to Virginia. Since Taylor's election could not, at this point, be equated with any specific territorial policy, the question remained unresolved and debate continued unabated. The plot thickened in late 1848, when, in addition to attaching the Wilmot Proviso to bills to organize California and New Mexico, some Northerners began to discuss the abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia. At the same time, Southerners were beginning to call more seriously for a new fugitive slave law. This law was of special importance to upper-South states like Virginia where, especially in the northwest, slaves did not have far to travel before they reached free soil. The nation apprehensively waited to see how Congress would deal with all of these slavery-related issues. The first controversial act of this phase of the sectional dispute came in late December 1848, when the House of Representatives passed resolutions prohibiting the slave trade in Washington, D.C.

The Virginia Democratic party sprang into action upon hearing the news of this latest act of "aggression." In his December message to the General Assembly, Governor William Smith, a Democrat, had recommended that the legislators reaffirm the resolutions of 1847, which had declared Virginia's intent to resist antislavery legislation. Now, Democratic Governor-elect John B. Floyd responded by proposing a set of resolutions calling the Wilmot Proviso a "gross and palpable violation of the Federal Constitution" and empowering the governor to convene the General Assembly if the proviso or interference with slavery in the District of Columbia should become law. The Assembly would then decide upon "the mode and measure of redress."¹

¹Henry Shanks, *Secession Movement in Virginia*, 24; *Enquirer*, 25 December 1848.

Democrats hailed Floyd's proposal as a modern-day incarnation of the revered Resolutions of 1798--that "Bible of our political faith"--and they saw it as a calm but firm statement that, as the Lynchburg *Republican* put it, the "South will not submit to any intermeddling on the part of Congress with her domestic institutions." Forceful assertion of this sentiment was vital to the Democrats, since this was the only way to divert Northerners from their potentially destructive course and prevent them from making disunion inevitable.²

The *Enquirer*, believing that southern unity was a necessary component of any effective threat to the North, coupled its pro-Floyd commentary with an appeal to Virginia Whigs to do their duty to the South and stand as one with the Democrats. The *Enquirer* was convinced that the current situation was entirely the fault of the Whigs, for "the hesitancy of the South has led to bolder aggressions" on the North's part. The Whigs' refusal to join the Democrats in a preemptive strike against the North was fueling northern attacks, Democrats insisted, but the Whigs could redeem themselves as Southerners by participating in such a strike now.³

Once again, however, Democrats failed to win their adversaries over to their strategy. Although the Whigs deplored northern aggression and supported resistance should the Wilmot Proviso be passed, they saw no use in "legislating upon a possibility." Floyd's resolutions embodied everything the Whigs considered dangerous; not only did the proposal "contemplate a dissolution of the Union" and illegally bind future legislatures to the will of the present one, but such "violent demonstrations" on Virginia's part would "irritate the passions of those who are opposed to her" and "may finally lead to most deplorable consequences." The Whigs also alleged that the resolutions demonstrated an insulting lack of faith in the next president, Zachary Taylor.

²*Enquirer*, 25 December 1848; 5 January 1849.

³*Enquirer*, 25 December 1848.

The true southern policy, the Whigs argued, would be to wait until the North acted rather than to hasten the day when the only options would be submission or disunion. For now, they declared, "we are on the defensive, and we are in the right."⁴

It was in the debates over Floyd's resolutions that the minority faction of the most nonconfrontational Whigs began to distinguish itself from the mainstream of the party. Robert E. Scott of Fauquier proposed counter-resolutions in hopes of radically altering Virginia's position on the territorial question. He first asserted that Mexican law, which prohibited slavery, was still in effect in the territories and that Congress had no power to establish slavery there. Contradicting the great majority of Virginians who firmly believed the Wilmot Proviso to be unconstitutional, Scott conceded that the measure might or might not be constitutional. To him it did not matter whether it was or not—he was not willing to dissolve the Union over what he called "a difference of opinion on an abstract question of constitutional law," even though he recognized the proviso as a "gratuitous outrage on southern feelings." The *Richmond Times*, a Whig paper, took Scott's side, denouncing the Democrats as disunionists and attacking their lack of faith in Taylor's ability to solve the problem to the South's satisfaction.⁵

The *Whig* and the majority of the mainstream Whig press rejected Floyd's resolutions, but they did not embrace Scott's substitute resolutions either. They were not about to concede the constitutionality of the proviso even to save the Union, and they never ceased to believe that the passage of the Wilmot Proviso would and should produce in the South "a position of calm, resolute, determined resistance to such an aggression." Even William Pitts of Wheeling, a city in northwestern Virginia where slavery existed in name only, opposed Scott and favored a

⁴*Whig*, 2 January 1849; 29 December 1848; 2 January 1849.

⁵*Whig*, 2 February, 1 January 1849.

stronger articulation of Virginia's rights.⁶

If most of the Whig press gave what the *Enquirer* called a "cold shoulder" to Scott and his ideas, the Democratic papers lashed out furiously against him. The *Enquirer* argued that Scott's resolutions were not only unrepresentative of Virginia's sentiments, but that they also constituted a surrender of southern rights and a suicidal retreat from the resolutions of 1847. Scott would have Virginia play the degrading role of "a whipt cur who growls as he runs away." Adhering to Mexican law would be ludicrous, and admitting the constitutionality of the proviso was one of the most dangerous things a Southerner could do. "We must contend on principle," the Norfolk *Argus* stated, for "any other course will be productive of evils, which language is inadequate to describe." Scott and his supporters were undoing everything the Democrats constantly worked for; this major breach in southern unity, which would only strengthen the northern aggressors, was "a source of the keenest mortification and of the deepest regret" to the Democrats.⁷

The Democrats implored Virginia Whigs to ignore Scott and join them in a united front against northern aggression. The pleas for unity were sincere; Democrats could have attempted to stigmatize the entire Whig party as submissionists during the debate over Scott's resolutions, but instead they welcomed anti-Scott Whigs as potential allies. For the Democrats in this instance, devotion to principle outweighed the short-term political benefits they might have won by seizing the opportunity to denounce the Whig party as a whole.

In the end, partisan unity was achieved, but not entirely on Democratic terms. The General Assembly accepted neither Floyd's nor Scott's resolutions. The parties reached a

⁶*Enquirer*, 9 January 1849; *Whig*, 29 December 1848; *Enquirer*, 12, 16 January 1849.

⁷*Enquirer*, 5, 12 January 1849.

compromise by backing more moderately-worded resolutions that articulated Virginia's intention to hold a special session of the General Assembly should the Wilmot Proviso or abolition in the District of Columbia become law--the Democrats, however, were not able to secure a mandate for a special session should the slave *trade* in the nation's capital be abolished. The *Enquirer* was willing to sacrifice strong wording in order to secure a large vote in favor of the principle of the resolutions, while the *Whig* felt more inclined to endorse the measures once they were stripped of the blustery language. The Senate voted 27-3 and the House 117-13 to support the revised resolutions. All dissenting votes were cast by Whigs.⁸

While the majority of the Whig party thus proved itself amenable to resolutions that stated Virginia's position in a matter-of-fact way, as it had done in 1847, Whigs and Democrats were still no closer to political unity. As Congress continued to struggle with the slavery questions, Zachary Taylor became the twelfth president of the United States. When Taylor did not immediately take sides in the congressional fracas, Virginia Democrats maintained that his ambiguity had immobilized him. Any move he could make, they insisted, would antagonize one section or the other and plunge the country into chaos. The Democratic press assailed Taylor as a traitor to the South and encouraged Virginians to work with patriotic northern Democrats in order to ensure southern safety.⁹

Virginia Whigs were outraged by Democrats' attempts to undermine Taylor's administration. In their minds Taylor's presidency was synonymous with the Union, so that "in assailing this administration, this [Democratic] party is assailing the Union itself." Particularly disturbing were southern Democrats' appeals to their northern partisans, since, according to the

⁸*Whig*, 23 January 1849.

⁹*Enquirer*, 20 March, 17 April 1850.

Whigs, "intense abolitionist zeal guides and impels the whole Democratic party of the North."

The Whigs charged that northern Democrats were single-mindedly devoted to antislavery policies--their only purpose was to distract President Taylor and impose their own agenda on the country. Northern Whigs, while similarly opposed to slavery, had "liberal and enlarged views" that allowed them to maintain a national rather than a purely sectional perspective. Free-soilism was "not their sole principle of action."¹⁰

Virginia Whigs did not trust northern Whigs or Democrats to vote with the South on questions related to slavery; they believed that neither group of Northerners could be induced to change their minds on this issue. Yet Virginia Whigs viewed Northern Whigs more sympathetically than they did Northern Democrats. This preference was not merely a result of partisan attachment; southern Whigs were only able to stay united with their antislavery northern counterparts because both wings of the party, animated by a strongly-felt devotion to the Union, were working to sidestep the territorial question and thus avoid what would inevitably be a sectional vote. Northern Democrats, on the other hand, appeared to Virginia Whigs to be encouraging a sectional showdown. Thus, southern Democrats were throwing away their only chance for a reasonable resolution to the controversy by allying themselves with their monomaniacal northern counterparts, for "every accession to the Democrats' strength in Congress from the South, is...an accession to the strength of the enemies of the South."¹¹

Theoretical arguments about Taylor's trustworthiness became secondary to policy arguments in late 1849 when the organization of California took center stage in the slavery controversy. California's population had swelled when gold was discovered, and anarchy

¹⁰ *Whig*, 17 July, 29, 19, 15 June 1849.

¹¹ *Whig*, 15 June 1849.

threatened to run rampant if Congress did not quickly provide the area with some kind of government. In August Taylor appointed General Bennet Riley military commander of California to enforce order while Congress deliberated. Taylor also sent Whig T. Butler King of Georgia as the administration's special agent to guide California residents in the organization of their government. It soon became clear, even before the formal announcement in the President's December annual message to the country, that Taylor's plan was to admit California and New Mexico as states without first subjecting them to the territorial phase of government. In this way the country could avoid debating the divisive Wilmot Proviso, for Californians would write their own constitution and the status of slavery would be entirely up to them. This plan was a modified version of a proposal that Virginia Whig William Ballard Preston of Montgomery had introduced in the United States House in February 1849. Preston, now serving as Taylor's Secretary of the Navy, had drawn up a bill recommending that the people of California and New Mexico form one large state and enter the Union without passing through the territorial stage.¹²

Virginia Whigs warmly embraced Preston's and now Taylor's version of the immediate statehood plan, which, they boasted, was "so happily devised for putting this dangerous question to rest." Even though the constitution that Californians framed in late 1849 did exclude slavery, most Virginia Whigs supported the new state's admission. They held no illusions that slavery could ever flourish there anyway, for California was remote from the existing slave states and the land was not naturally suited for a large-scale slave economy. Yet even though the idea of slavery in the territories was an "abstraction," the Whigs were not willing to forget that the Wilmot Proviso "involve[d] a principle revolting to the feelings of the South."¹³ The beauty of

¹²K. Jack Bauer, *Zachary Taylor*, 233.

¹³*Whig*, 13, 16 November 1849; 29 January 1850.

Taylor's plan was that it removed the insulting principle and thus, in the Whigs' view, removed the point of contention between North and South. No one could constitutionally dispute the right of a sovereign state to make its own decisions about slavery, so the nation would have to accept California's free status. Because Taylor had never sided with the North or with the South, his plan could be seen as an equitable and nationally acceptable way to avert sectional crisis. Taylor's strategic ambiguities and his avoidance of the Wilmot Proviso would save the Union, Virginia Whigs argued, for it was "wisdom, and not fear, that dictated his policy." Like George Washington, who "knew the best way to secure harmony among brothers, was to introduce no irritating topics of discussion," Taylor was acting in the best interest of the Union.¹⁴

Virginia Democrats, so amused with the comparison to George Washington that they sarcastically began to refer to the president as "Zachary Washington," believed that his plan was anything but wise. They accused the president of actively promoting free-soilism in California. They contended that his agents Riley and King had made the administration's wishes known to the prospective state's constitutional convention, which soon thereafter adopted antislavery provisions. Thus, Taylor's plan was no more than the Wilmot Proviso put into effect by the executive branch rather than Congress, and Democrats began to call it the "executive proviso." Democrats contended that through this "disgraceful dodge" Taylor had in fact chosen the northern side, and that his actions would prohibit the South from participating equally in the settlement of California and the other former Mexican land.¹⁵

Through this ploy Taylor was saving himself at the risk of destroying the Union, Democrats insisted, because if California entered the Union as a free state many Southerners

¹⁴*Whig*, 6 September, 24 May 1850.

¹⁵*Enquirer*, 20 November, 3 May, 1 January 1850.

would advise secession. The Calhoun wing of the party was already declaring its desire for disunion should Taylor's plan be adopted. Nonpartisan southern nationalists, appalled that they had promoted Taylor as the candidate of the South, now repudiated him entirely. Upon hearing the president's annual message, James Hammond commented to Beverley Tucker, "I laughed aloud to think that the War Horse we had set up was after all only a Jackass. Such braying!" In short, the *Enquirer* declared, "never was there so bungling, timid, vacillating, and miserably mischievous a policy ever pursued by an Administration." Southerners must assert their rights in order to make the Union a liveable entity; avoiding confrontation, according to the Democrats, was a cowardly way out that would save the Union without acknowledging southern rights.¹⁶

Debates over the president's loyalty to his section did not bode well for southern unity. With the territorial question unresolved and no universally acceptable solution in sight, Democrats in the deep South became increasingly disturbed by their perceived vulnerability within the Union. Fearing the imminent admission of California to the Union and lacking faith that the deeply divided Congress would, on its own, devise an equitable, constitutional plan for the organization of the new lands, Mississippians took matters into their own hands. In October 1849, a state convention composed primarily of Democrats (but including Whigs as well) called for a convention of the slaveholding states to be held in Nashville on the first Monday in June of the next year. The Mississippi convention resolved that the imposition of the Wilmot Proviso or the abolition of slavery or the slave trade in Washington, D.C., would constitute a breach of the federal compact. The Nashville Convention was designed to convince Northerners of the South's intent to resist antislavery legislation. It would also bring southern leaders together so that they

¹⁶Hammond to Tucker, 23 January 1850, Tucker-Coleman Collection, Swem Library; *Enquirer*, 29 March 1850.

could plan a method of defense against unrelenting northern antislavery agitation. If this appeal failed to prevent the North from passing the offensive laws, then Southerners would at least already have a mechanism in place that would allow them to plan for their collective self-defense.¹⁷

Virginia Democrats immediately embraced the southern convention as a sound sectional response. Recognizing that disunion would be all but inevitable in the wake of a direct strike against slavery by the North, they believed that the only way to salvage the Union was to secure southern rights. By unifying as a region and making a frank appeal to Northerners' sense of constitutional responsibility, the South could simultaneously assert slaveholders' rights and make sure that the Union remained both stable and worth living in. That the Union be "worth living in" was the Democrats' ultimate goal; in county meetings and in their newspapers they affirmed their love for the Union but clearly stated that "there are evils worse than disunion, viz: degradation and dishonor, to which we cannot and will not submit."¹⁸ For the offense-minded Democrats, the only way to secure "the preservation of our blood-cemented union" was to "prepare for the worst" and send delegates to Nashville. They saw the convention as a conservative measure, for, as one correspondent of the *Enquirer* wrote, "Caution is the mother of safety. In peace prepare for war. An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure." Hidden in this torrent of clichés was a heartfelt conviction that southern action could forestall disaster. When the General Assembly took up the question in January 1850, Democrats recommended that the state officially endorse the convention by immediately calling for elections for delegates and

¹⁷*Enquirer*, 12 March, 3 May 1850.

¹⁷Thelma Jennings, *The Nashville Convention: Southern Movement for Unity, 1848-1851* (Memphis: Memphis State University Press, 1980), 35-37.

¹⁸*Enquirer*, 16 October, 9 April, 5 March 1850.

paying delegates' travel expenses to Nashville.¹⁹

The concept of the Nashville Convention as a savior of the Union made no sense to Virginia Whigs. From the beginning they associated the Nashville movement with radical disregard for national stability. This conviction was in part a result of their disbelief that a unified South could deter aggression from a unified and numerically superior North. The South had been appealing to the North for years to no avail, they pointed out, and yet another appeal would merely be "lame and impotent." "We decidedly oppose the participation of Virginia in such a farce," editorialized the *Whig*, which considered the prospect of changing northern minds so "ridiculous" that it suspected Virginia Democrats of using this argument as a convenient excuse to mask their true disunionism.²⁰ Most Virginia Whigs opposed the convention because they did not believe it had a prayer of fulfilling the Democrats' ambitious objectives. They tried in vain to convince the Democrats, as well as the undecided voting public, that a preemptive strike would be dangerous as well as ineffective. To act before Congress acted was to invite trouble. Since the mere existence of a convention would not affect northern policy, the only true purpose of the convention could be to organize resistance against the North. Such a convention, and such resistance, could only be useful "when Congress shall have passed the Acts to which we object." Before then, southern agitation would invite, rather than deter, northern aggression.²¹

When the General Assembly addressed the convention question in January, Whigs translated their principled opposition to the meeting into a recitation of legal technicalities that

¹⁹*Enquirer*, 12 March, 3 May 1850.

²⁰*Whig*, 18, 22 January 1850; Robert Hume Tomlinson, "The Origins and Editorial Policies of *The Richmond Whig and Public Advertiser*, 1824-1865," Ph.D. diss., Michigan State University, 1971, 157.

²¹*Whig*, 4, 15 January 1850.

should prevent Virginia's official participation. Whigs used these legalistic arguments as a political tactic to forestall radicalism and to advance their own noncombative policies. Whigs argued that Virginia had no power to send delegates to a meeting that might result in disunion. Only the people of Virginia, not their state legislators, could authorize delegates to attend a convention that might make decisions with which Virginia would be bound to comply. Whig members of the House, hesitant even to discuss resolutions that could have such momentous consequences, asked to postpone the debates so that they could ascertain their constituents' opinions. They continued to insist that the convention would work for disunion, at the same time contending that "public sentiment in Virginia is entirely averse to a dissolution of the Union." Thus, the Whigs believed that if the people of the state were allowed a voice in the legislature's debate over the convention, they would speak out against the meeting and deflate the General Assembly's radicalism. Democrats argued that this widespread desire to preserve the Union was the precise reason that the convention was necessary.²²

Although the Democrats clamored for immediate action, the Whigs managed to secure a delay in the proceedings. When consideration of the resolutions resumed several weeks later, the Whigs were able to amend them into a form they considered more acceptable. In final form the resolutions recommended that each congressional district hold an election to choose delegates to the Nashville Convention. The clause calling for the state itself to appoint delegates and the provision for the state to pay their expenses were stricken out. The House voted 97-20 and the Senate 20-7 to send delegates to Nashville under these circumstances. Should the Wilmot Proviso or abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia pass Congress, the House supported a defensive southern convention by a 125-2 margin and the Senate agreed, registering a vote of

²²*Whig*, 18, 15 January 1850.

24-2.²³

The General Assembly adopted these resolutions in early February 1850, but heated debate over the convention's merits continued until it convened in early June. Beverley Tucker, who eventually attended the convention as a delegate from Virginia, hoped to use the meeting as a springboard toward disunion. He and his correspondent Hammond realized that these plans must be kept secret; Hammond wrote Tucker that, "I told [Calhoun] candidly that if it came to be regarded as his convention it would be a complete failure and to act undercover."²⁴ These secret disunionist schemes were exactly what Virginia Whigs feared, and southern radicals were aware of this fear. Even in light of Hammond's advice, however, Calhoun spoke strongly in favor of southern unity in his March 4 speech in the United States Senate. This speech, which Virginia's James Mason delivered as the dying Calhoun watched, "*discloses the true intent of the Nashville Convention,*" the *Whig* warned. The intent was nothing short of "treason." To the Whigs, the meeting at Nashville was just another doomed secessionist convention, like the infamous meeting New England Federalists had organized 36 years before at Hartford, that would only embarrass the South in the future. In Virginia the Whigs used the cry of treason to dissuade localities from meeting to elect convention delegates. Even their nominal support for the emasculated convention resolutions faded as it became increasingly clear that the majority of southern states would not send full delegations to Nashville.²⁵

The Democrats had merely been disappointed that the General Assembly could only pass a diluted version of the convention resolutions, but they became irate when the Whigs began

²³*Enquirer*, 8, 12 February 1850.

²⁴Hammond to Tucker, 23 January 1850, Tucker-Coleman Collection, Swem Library.

²⁵*Whig*, 12 March 1850; Thelma Jennings, *The Nashville Convention*, 91.

campaigning against the election of delegates. The Whig party had sanctioned the convention, albeit unenthusiastically, in February, and now in mid-March it had again unleashed its anti-Nashville rhetoric. The *Enquirer* complained that "the Whig has changed so often on the subject of the Nashville Convention, that its own friends do not know where to find it."²⁶ Democrats found this vacillation particularly obnoxious because it denied them the southern unity that would be a vital component of the convention's success.

An April public meeting in Richmond to determine whether or not the city would send delegates to Nashville highlighted the Democrats' frustration. The meeting affirmed the unconstitutionality of the Wilmot Proviso but defeated the Nashville Convention by a vote of 214-105. According to the *Richmond Times* (Whig), the denunciation of the proviso was an adequate expression of southern sentiment--nothing else, including the convention, should be made a test of southern loyalty. Democrats accused the Whigs of attaching the stigma of disunionism to the convention as "a pretext for a desertion of the South and her interests in the hour [of] danger." If the Whigs really wanted to make a move against the Wilmot Proviso, they would join the Democrats in ensuring that the Nashville Convention was well-attended, for "divisions and distractions destroy us." The Democrats again tried in vain to convince the Whigs that the South must unify and resist "the hand of aggression before the blow has been struck."²⁷

In the minds of southern nationalists and most Virginia Democrats, the slavery controversy was rapidly degenerating into a situation in which the only viable options for Southerners were submission and resistance. Northern politicians were assailing slavery from

²⁶*Enquirer*, 16 April 1850. February 1850, Tucker-Coleman Collection, Swann Library.

²⁷*Enquirer*, 30, 19 April, 15 March, 16 April 1850. 147-149, 152-153.

various angles--in addition to preventing its expansion, they were trying to stifle it in the nation's capital, and their disregard for the old fugitive slave law was growing more blatant. Each faction of the Virginia Democratic party looked to the Nashville Convention as a method of resistance against any foreseeable aggression that might otherwise require submission. However, the two groups of Democrats had different purposes in mind when they pursued resistance. Calhoun Democrats, along with southern nationalists, saw the convention as a necessary step toward self-defense against evils that were now all but unpreventable. Beverley Tucker's confidant, Hammond, expressed his conviction that the convention must work for disunion unless God "has doomed us to fulfill the destiny of craven idiots." For these men, the time to decide between submission and resistance had arrived.²⁸

When the convention met on June 3, 1850, southern nationalists dominated the proceedings. Few men who opposed the convention in principle bothered to attend, while those most anxious for Southern radicalism seized the opportunity to voice their opinions with an air of authority. The Convention passed resolutions declaring that Congress had no right to exclude slavery from the Mexican Cession and recommended that the Missouri Compromise line be extended to the Pacific. Robert Barnwell Rhett, an overt disunionist from South Carolina, wrote an address to accompany the Resolutions. He proclaimed that the compromise proposed in January by Senator Henry Clay was unacceptable to the South and that acquiescence in its measures would be tantamount to submission. Nathaniel Beverley Tucker rounded out the convention with an inflammatory speech in which he declared that the South would be better off as an independent nation. The tone of the convention was one of uncompromising radicalism.²⁹

²⁸Hammond to Tucker, 15 February 1850, Tucker-Coleman Collection, Swem Library.

²⁹Thelma Jennings, *The Nashville Convention*, 140, 147-149, 152-153.

The majority of Virginia Democrats, however, ascribed a less militant purpose to the convention because they did not believe that the controversy had yet escalated to a point where disunion was the only alternative to craven submission. They were willing to threaten disunion, but they did so with an eye to the North rather than the South. Their purpose was to influence northern behavior, not encourage southern separatism. Their support for the convention was, of course, a result of their extreme displeasure with recent northern antislavery proposals. It demonstrated that they would not submit to what they regarded as outrageous assaults on their equality with the North. Yet historians have equated their participation in the convention with a radicalism that they did not in fact espouse. Because their support for the Nashville meeting brought them into close contact with men like Tucker, whose pleas for resistance ended up dominating the convention, Virginia Democrats appeared more radical than they really were. They may have advocated the same southern unity that the southern nationalists called for, but their reasons for doing so were entirely different. They focused on convincing the North to respect southern rights within the Union. Thus, they saw potential for a resolution other than submission or disunion. It is not entirely surprising, then, that the majority of Virginia Democrats, offense-minded and states' rights-oriented though they were, eventually accepted and indeed promoted the Compromise of 1850.³⁰

On January 29, 1850, four months after Mississippi's call for Southerners to convene at Nashville and four months before the convention actually met, Henry Clay introduced compromise resolutions in the Senate which he hoped would settle the points of contention between North and South. Those Southerners bent on disunion, who included very few

³⁰*Enquirer*, 19 April 1850; William G. Shade, *Democratizing the Old Dominion*, 254-259.

Virginians, paid no attention to Clay because no compromise could satisfy them. To them the Union was worthless unless it guaranteed complete equality for slaveholders. Senator James M. Mason disdainfully remarked to Tucker that he feared the compromise "will be fatal to us--It opens the way to the middle ground, which the timid are so prone to occupy, and detaches all such from our ranks." Mason was right in the sense that the promise of compromise did reconfigure the question for many Democrats; instead of submission or disunion it was now, according to the Democratic party's national newspaper, "compromise or disunion." Faced with that question, most Virginia Democrats would choose compromise.³¹

Yet neither the Democrats nor the Whigs were willing to blindly embrace a Congressional compromise just because it provided an alternative to disunion. Compromise, to be acceptable, had to have tangible benefits for the South. Clay's first proposal, which he promoted in a two-day speech February 5 and 6, fell far short of southern demands. He proposed to abolish the public slave trade in the District of Columbia, while explaining that it was "inexpedient" to abolish slavery itself in the nation's capital. Virginians of both parties took exception to the reference to inexpediency because it implicitly gave Congress the right to legislate against slavery should it want to do so in the future. Clay himself appeared to be looking forward to a time when complete abolition in the nation's capital could be achieved. The current rule was that Maryland and Virginia would have to consent before abolition in the District could be enacted. Clay wanted to change this policy so that only Maryland would have to approve. Abolition would thus be easier to achieve because Maryland was far less attached to slavery than Virginia. The *Whig* expressed the widely-held southern opinion that Clay must not recognize Congressional power

³¹Mason to Tucker, 1 March 1850, Tucker-Coleman Collection, Swem Library; *Enquirer*, 24 May 1850.

over the District, for Congressional abolition there would be unconstitutional and "millions [of dollars] of property would be annihilated at a blow."³²

Clay also used the inexpediency argument in dealing with the former Mexican territories; he argued that Mexican antislavery laws were still in effect in those lands, which made the imposition of the Wilmot Proviso unnecessary. Clay did not expressly deny Congress the right to enact the proviso. To Virginians of both parties this oversight was unconscionable, and Clay's assertion that slavery could not exist in the territories without specific congressional legislation infuriated them. These proposals, when combined with Clay's intention to admit California with its free-soil constitution and his desire to take part of slaveholding Texas and give it to the likely-free New Mexico, drove the majority of Virginians into immediate opposition to the "adjustment."³³

Upon hearing of Clay's plan, the *Enquirer* proclaimed, "we are sorry to hear that there is a probability of such a medley receiving the sanction of the Senate. It would strike a fatal blow at the safety of the Union." Articulating the for-once unified views of Virginians of both parties, it characterized the "so-called" compromise as a "disgraceful surrender of the whole southern ground."³⁴ Yet this opinion is where partisan agreement ended. The Whigs continued to oppose the Nashville Convention, insisting that Zachary Taylor's plan would resolve the slavery controversy without a surrender of principle. The Democrats saw Clay's plan as an indication that they must continue to drum up support for southern unity at Nashville so they could convince the North that a more equitable settlement would be necessary to avert disunion. The Union that

³²William W. Freehling, *Road to Disunion*, 495; *Whig*, 1 March 1850.

³³*Enquirer*, 1 February 1850; *Whig*, 12 February 1850.

³⁴*Enquirer*, 1, 8 February 1850.

Clay's compromise would preserve was not one worth remaining attached to. Democrats were quickly becoming "despondent" at their prospects for reconciling southern rights with their beloved Union, but Senator Daniel Webster's famous Seventh of March speech in the Senate renewed their hope.³⁵

Webster told the nation that he would not support the Wilmot Proviso because it was unnecessarily insulting; nature would prevent slavery's expansion to the territories. He warned the abolitionists that their agitation was counterproductive, and he spoke in favor of a fugitive slave law. Webster immediately incurred the wrath of the abolitionists, but he also reinforced Virginia Democrats' faith that threats of southern unity and resistance could produce tangible effects on northern policy.³⁶ Most, but not all, Democrats welcomed this conciliatory attitude. William O. Goode of Mecklenburg, a Calhoun Democrat who later attended the Nashville Convention, initially praised Webster's speech. "It could only have been expressed by a generous mind," he wrote to Senator Hunter. "I pray the Genius of Webster may prevail, to save the Union, and give peace and harmony to the land." A month later, however, when it became clear that trust in Webster had helped to deflate the Nashville movement, Goode told Hunter "the chief injury to the South, resulting from Webster's speech, is the hesitation it has occasioned. This has given courage to all who wavered in their resolution or who were secretly opposed to the [Nashville Convention]."³⁷ The *Enquirer* warned that Webster's speech must not draw Southerners into a false complacency--it was still the duty of every Southerner to support the Nashville convention.

³⁵*Enquirer*, 5 February 1850.

³⁶Bauer, *Zachary Taylor*, 305.

³⁷William O. Goode to R.M.T. Hunter, 29 March 1850, *Annual Report of the American Historical Association for the Year 1916: Volume 2, Correspondence of Robert M.T. Hunter 1826-1876*, ed. Charles Henry Ambler (Washington, 1918), 108-109; William O. Goode to R.M.T. Hunter, 20 April 1850, *Correspondence of Hunter*, 111.

If southern agitation had produced Webster's conciliatory tone, then further agitation could convince the rest of the North to follow him. To the Whigs, both the Nashville Convention and Clay's compromise measures were entirely unnecessary. Wanting desperately to remove the "submission or resistance" question from political discourse, they clung to their belief that Zachary Taylor's plan would remove the need to make a decision of the type that Clay's proposals required.³⁸

As a committee of thirteen senators, which included Virginia's James M. Mason, tackled the job of formulating Clay's proposals into a bill on which the Senate could vote, Virginians anxiously awaited the finished product. The possibility of compromise complicated each party's strategy. Although the Democrats continued to rally support for Nashville and the Whigs applauded Taylor's immediate statehood policy, members of both parties hoped that the Senate committee would amend Clay's ideas in such a way that the South could accept the compromise without sacrificing principle or honor. This intense concentration on Congress' actions deflated some of the momentum for the Nashville Convention that might have blossomed within the Democratic ranks. With Whigs arguing against the convention on principle and Democrats hoping that Clay's compromise would provide a satisfactory resolution to the sectional conflict, most localities did not even hold elections for delegates. Even in eastern Virginia, fewer than half of the county meetings sent representatives to the district conventions. The poorly-attended conventions were held in May, and only seven of the states fifteen districts actually chose to send delegates to Nashville. Of the fourteen men selected, only six attended the convention in June. Thus, the *Enquirer's* fears that widespread high hopes for Clay's compromise might be counterproductive were well-founded--southern hope would not scare the North into designing

³⁸*Enquirer*, 12 March 1850; *Whig*, 22 March 1850.

a bill acceptable to the South, whereas southern threats of disunion might.³⁹

The committee's report, issued on May 8, did little to resolve either party's position. The Omnibus bill incorporated statehood for California, territorial governments for New Mexico and Utah without mention of slavery, a Texas boundary settlement, and payment of Texas's debt. A new fugitive slave bill and restrictions on the Washington, D.C. slave trade were proposed separately. Discussion of abolition in the District was dropped, as was Clay's claim that Mexican law still reigned in the territories. While this version of the compromise was slightly more palatable than Clay's initial resolutions, Virginia Democrats still found it problematic. It did not specifically repudiate Congress' right to enact the Wilmot Proviso or abolish slavery in the nation's capital, nor did it divide California at the Missouri Compromise line. Yet, despite these objections, events combined to push the majority of Virginia's Democrats toward accepting the settlement.⁴⁰

One of Virginia's most influential Democrats, Thomas Ritchie, voiced his support for the revised compromise soon after it was proposed. Ritchie had dominated Virginia's Democratic party for 41 years as editor of the Richmond *Enquirer* before moving to Washington in 1845 to edit the Democrats' national newspaper, the Washington *Union*. Along with Congressman Thomas Bayly, Ritchie had met with his old enemy Henry Clay in February 1850 to show his support for a Union-saving adjustment. He had thus been in on the compromise almost from the beginning, and he saw it as a last-ditch opportunity to save the union he had spent his entire career trying to preserve.⁴¹

³⁹Henry T. Shanks, *Secession Movement in Virginia*, 32-35; *Enquirer*, 12 March 1850.

⁴⁰*Enquirer*, 10, 14 May 1850.

⁴¹Charles Henry Ambler, *Thomas Ritchie*, 280-284.

Ritchie's son William, now editor of the *Enquirer*, was less willing to embrace Clay's settlement as a positive good. In attempting to determine his paper's policy, he struggled to sort out competing priorities. He admitted that he did not know whether he should oppose the bill, and especially California's statehood, or whether he should accept the odious provision as part of a settlement for the greater good. It was becoming clear that some sacrifice was necessary to save the Union, but how much sacrifice could the South make before the Union became a curse rather than a blessing? Calhoun Democrats and Ritchie Democrats answered this question differently.⁴²

Southern nationalists and Calhoun Democrats refused to recognize the necessity of sacrifice. They held on to the belief that if they could only convince Southerners of the dangers of compromising their principles, secessionist sentiment would multiply. Mainstream Democrats, on the other hand, gave up on their hopes of achieving southern equality through southern unity as June approached and the Nashville Convention movement stagnated. Political reality had thwarted their strategy; they had to adjust their objectives based on the unavoidable truth that the Nashville Convention would not speak the mind of a united South. This was a bitter truth to accept, and Democrats placed the blame fully on the southern Whigs.⁴³

The Whig and Democratic strategies had been fundamentally contradictory, and the very existence of the Whigs ensured that the Democrats' goal of southern unity could not be met as long as supposedly unconstitutional federal legislation remained a threat rather than a reality. The South could not realistically expect a territorial settlement based on the Missouri Compromise,

⁴²*Enquirer*, 14 May 1850.

⁴³*Enquirer*, 14, 18 June 1850.

which had come to be seen as the ideal southern solution because it preserved sectional equality.⁴⁴ Instead, Southerners had to settle for a compromise that "provides that we shall give up our coat and pantaloons upon the condition that we may keep our shirt and drawers for the present." But, asked the *Enquirer*, "have we not invited such a catastrophe by our imbecile and old womanish course in reference to the southern convention?" The paper went on to denounce those Southerners who had consistently refused to assert southern rights in anticipation of crisis, asking if those who had postponed action in the past would condescend to stand with the South now. But even the *Enquirer* recognized the irrelevance of this question, for the opportunity to make southern unity a successful political tool had passed unfulfilled. "If the Whig party had but served their country and their God as faithfully as they have party dictation," the *Enquirer* lamented, "the disgrace of such a compromise would not have fallen to the lot of the South."⁴⁵

Although the mainstream Virginia Democrats considered even the revised compromise to be severely lacking, they understood that it was the best settlement they were likely to receive within the Union. They maintained hope that some aspects of the compromise, such as the California boundary, would be amended in the South's favor before the final vote, but they also recognized that the bill was not all bad. They were resigned to the fact that, thanks in part to southern Whigs, California would enter the Union as a free state whether or not it was part of a larger compromise. If the bill failed, then, California would be free, New Mexico and Utah would drift toward anarchy, and Texas and New Mexico would fight over their border, possibly dragging the entire country into a civil war. In addition to alleviating these problems, the settlement would leave Southerners with a new, stringent fugitive slave law. Drawn up by Mason

⁴⁴Major L. Wilson, "Ideological Fruits of Manifest Destiny," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 63, no. 2 (1970): 132.

⁴⁵*Enquirer*, 24 May 1850; Thelma Jennings, *The Nashville Convention*, 162.

of Virginia, this law was particularly welcomed in the upper South, which was plagued by losses in the form of runaways. The law was also important because it reinforced the idea that Northerners had a constitutional duty to protect the property of the South.⁴⁶

Democrats saw these concessions to the South as testimony to the effectiveness of their agitation. Of course, southern Whigs' refusal to join them had prevented the achievement of full southern rights, but Democrats' warnings had been enough to forestall a complete obliteration of southern equality. Thus, the combination of the weakness of the Nashville movement in Virginia and throughout the South and the offering of some concessions to the South, along with a strong desire to preserve the Union, led most Virginia Democrats into a grudging acceptance of the revised proposal. Attendees of a June meeting in Albemarle resolved that although they did not agree with all parts of the compromise, it was "the best means of adjusting, at least for the present, and we hope for the future, many of the questions which now divide and distract the country."⁴⁷

The Senate committee's report brought confusion to the Whigs as well. Their ultimate goal was a settlement of the sectional conflict that avoided all discussion of disunion, and the compromise thus qualified as a viable plan. Many Whigs, however, were torn between the compromise and Taylor's plan, some form of which had been their preferred method of peacefully resolving the territorial problem for over a year. But their support for Taylor's proposal was in part a result of their belief that Southerners had no chance of influencing northern policy on the slavery question. They expected nothing from the Northerners. Thus, the appearance of a compromise that included several important concessions to Southerners exceeded

⁴⁶*Enquirer*, 14 June 1850; William W. Freehling, *The Road to Disunion*, 500-504.

⁴⁷*Enquirer*, 11 June 1850.

their expectations. Some Virginia Whigs, including the temporary editor of the Richmond *Whig*, welcomed the compromise with open arms. The settlement "secures all that the South has contended for," rejoiced the *Whig*. "Huzza! we say for the 'Omnibus Bill'." They were not particularly concerned that the bill did not expressly repudiate the Wilmot Proviso; the bill did not apply the proviso to the territories, and that was enough to settle the question without conflict. Under the circumstances, "sectional feelings and prejudices should be laid aside...and every effort directed to the general good of the whole country."⁴⁸

These Whigs accepted the conclusion that the controversy had come down to a decision between compromise and disunion, and to them the terms of the proposed compromise in no way necessitated secession. They denounced those Southerners who opposed the bill as "professional martyrs," and one correspondent of the *Whig* estimated that nine-tenths of Virginians favored it. The *Whig* itself proclaimed, "we doubt whether the population of Richmond was ever so unanimous upon any subject whatever." Whigs and Democrats, although they approached the compromise from completely different perspectives, had finally settled upon a means of preserving southern dignity within the Union.⁴⁹

Yet things were not that simple; just days after the *Whig's* pronouncement about Virginia unity, the paper's senior editor returned and dispelled the hope that the two parties could work together on this question. Overnight, the *Whig* became a bitter opponent of the compromise measures. It now argued that President Taylor's plan was infinitely preferable because it "provide[d] no opportunity to Abolitionists to produce discord in Congress...." Virginia's adherents of Taylor's plan saw the compromise as an avenue to further conflict rather than a

⁴⁸*Whig*, 10, 17 May 1850.

⁴⁹*Whig*, 24, 21 May 1850.

resolution of existing conflict. Their biggest fear was that organization of New Mexico and Utah as territories without mention of slavery would not prevent the Wilmot Proviso question from arising again when the territories applied for statehood. Regardless of what the prospective states' citizens actually decided about slavery, the Whigs wanted to reach an immediate conclusion to the debates over slavery's status. If popular sovereignty resulted in free soil in the southwest, the Whigs would accept the decision, and if the citizens unexpectedly voted to permit slavery, immediacy was vital--in the future, Northerners might refuse to admit slaveholding states even if popular sovereignty had decided the status of slavery. If they settled the question now under Taylor's plan, there would be no prospect of future conflict.⁵⁰

The *Whig* also found fault with the compromise's plan for the Texas boundary, which would take slaveholding Texas land and turn it into new free-soil states. This alleged butchery of Texas would augment the North's power in Congress and "will succeed in putting the entire policy of the country in northern hands." Under Taylor's policy, the Supreme Court would settle the boundary dispute, which it could do in "fifteen minutes." Although the president's policy did not address slavery in the District of Columbia or the fugitive slave bill, its supporters in Virginia felt confident that Taylor would devise an acceptable method of dealing with these issues. They set themselves up as the true defenders of the South, asserting that "the plan of General Taylor is strictly a southern plan," and that "it is the duty of all southern men, and especially of southern Whigs, to set their faces against the compromise." They also made sure to point out that "all this trouble has arisen out of the war of conquest."⁵¹

The need for a territorial settlement grew critical in June as the boundary dispute between

⁵⁰ *Whig*, 28, 31 May 1850.

⁵¹ *Whig*, 21 June, 31 May, 2, 4 July 1850.

Texas and New Mexico appeared ready to erupt into civil war. Commissioners from Texas were organizing the disputed territories into Texas counties, and Taylor sent federal troops to the area to prevent such infringements on the land before an equitable resolution could be reached. To most Southerners of both political parties, Taylor's apparent readiness to use force against Texas signaled a complete obliteration of any hopes that he would use his office to defend the South. Even the *Whig* announced that, "If the sword once be drawn, the whole South will rush to the aid of Texas...."⁵²

Many Virginia Whigs, however, had never seen Taylor as a special southern advocate; they only hoped that he would provide a nonconfrontational method of saving the Union without harming southern rights. As southern voices rose in denunciation of Taylor, the *Whig* defended the president, explaining that he was just doing his duty. Tension continued to escalate, and the Democrats were sure that Taylor was going to plunge the country into war. Instead, the president gorged himself on raw fruits and vegetables after spending hours in the hot fourth of July sun, and after five days of suffering what his doctor diagnosed as cholera morbus, he was dead. All hope of implementing his territorial plan died with him, and the embattled compromise finally emerged as the only working plan for resolving the sectional conflict. President Fillmore gave it his backing, and the Virginia Whigs fell in line behind him. Given the option of accepting the compromise or starting again from square one, Virginia Whigs and Democrats alike chose to put an end to the constant slavery debates that had been disrupting the nation and the South for the last four years.⁵³

On July 31, however, Clay's omnibus bill met its demise in the Senate. With the

⁵²*Whig*, 3 September 1850; W. Freehling, *Road to Disunion*, 490-493.

⁵³Bauer, *Zachary Taylor*, 315; *Whig*, 21 June 1850.

exception of territorial organization for Utah, every component of the compromise was eliminated from the final bill. Stephen Douglas of Illinois picked up the shattered pieces and restructured the compromise so that each of its components stood on its own. The compromise as a package could not attract enough support from deep South Democrats and staunch antislavery Northerners to pass, but the individual bills, with the help of some strategic voting abstentions, were each able to garner the requisite number of votes. On August 9 the Texas boundary bill passed the Senate, with Hunter and Mason both voting in the negative. Both Virginia Senators also voted against California statehood and abolition of Washington's slave trade, which passed by margins of 34-18 and 33-19, respectively. Hunter and Mason voted in favor of the New Mexico bill (which passed 27-10) and the fugitive slave law (27-12). On these two measures alone there was a total of 44 abstentions.⁵⁴ Virginia's House delegation cast the majority of its votes in favor of each of the bills with the exception of California statehood and abolition of the slave trade in Washington, D.C. One Whig and one Democrat, both from western Virginia, even voted for these measures.⁵⁵

Southern nationalists--as well as Calhoun Democrats, who made up half of Virginia's Congressional delegation--were disgusted with the medley of bills that Congress passed. They failed to see California statehood or restrictions on Washington's slave trade as necessary tradeoffs for the fugitive slave law and the dismissal of the Wilmot Proviso. Senator Hunter drew up a formal protest against the California bill, which Mason and eight other southern senators signed. Hunter contended that the method by which California entered the Union was illegal--first the executive branch had insisted that California exclude slavery, and now Congress had

⁵⁴Holman Hamilton, *Prologue to Conflict: The Crisis and Compromise of 1850* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1964), 192.

⁵⁵Henry Shanks, *Secession Movement in Virginia*, 37.

catapulted the state into the Union "without any legal census or other efficient evidence of their possessing the number of citizens necessary to authorize the representation which they may claim." These extraordinary measures, Hunter argued, had only been employed to effect "an odious discrimination...against the property of the fifteen slaveholding States of the Union, who are thus deprived of that position of equality which the Constitution so manifestly designs...." The principle of the bill was repugnant, and no Southerner should endorse it even as part of a Union-saving compromise.⁵⁶

Hunter and Mason continued to express their disapproval of the settlement long after the majority of Virginians accepted it as necessary.⁵⁷ In October, Hunter made a speech to his constituents in which he explained that "the disastrous defeat of the South in the late contest resulted from her own divisions." Instead of accepting the compromise measures as the law of the land, he recommended further attempts at southern unity and continued threats of disunion. Representative Seddon insisted that acquiescence to the compromise would only encourage further northern aggression, for "it is utterly in vain to hope, that, by the concessions already made by the South, the foul spirit of northern fanaticism and aggression can be satisfied." The *Lynchburg Republican*, which likewise recommended resistance to the settlement, denounced the majority of Virginians for choosing to ignore the evils of the compromise for the sake of the Union. "Oh! The iniquity that has been and will be perpetrated in the name of this 'glorious union'!" the paper lamented.⁵⁸ At a dinner for Mason and Hunter held in October, which was

⁵⁶Protest Against the Passage of the Bill Admitting California as a State, *The Public Life and Diplomatic Correspondence of James M. Mason*, ed. Virginia Mason (New York: The Neale Publishing Company, 1906), 79, 78.

⁵⁷Thelma Jennings, *The Nashville Convention*, 162.

⁵⁸*Enquirer*, 15 October 1850.

attended by 47 Democrats and one Whig "who could not resist his gastronomic inclinations," someone proposed a toast that articulated the increasingly futile convictions of the southern radicals: "Compromises between the North and South: What are they? Concessions of southern rights to northern demands, for the sake of peace, which we fail to get. We are tired of them."⁵⁹

Although the most prominent and vocal Virginia Democrats told their fellow Virginians that the terms of the compromise were worth risking disunion, most of the party ignored them. Members of the mainstream Ritchie faction had voted against the same bills that the Calhoun Democrats opposed, but in the aftermath of the compromise they accepted even the offensive bills as part of the total package. Their major reason for doing so was expressed by Congressman Bayly, who said, "The only other alternative was the adjournment of Congress without doing anything. And this I considered equivalent to civil war..." Now that Congress had passed the bills and provided a means of avoiding hostilities, southern agitation could only be seen as an attack on the Union.⁶⁰

When the governor of Georgia called for a state convention to discuss resistance to the California bill, the *Enquirer* expressed its decided disapproval. "Such hot heads as this...do much to weaken the moral position of the South," the paper proclaimed. "We cannot see what redress the South can now have--and what other result than unprofitable agitation can follow the convening of state legislatures at the present time." Similarly, the mainstream Democratic party in Virginia opposed sending delegates to the second session of the Nashville Convention, which was to meet in November. The convention could have no effect; Democrats accepted the compromise as the final word on the slavery question. Should Northerners repeal the fugitive

⁵⁸*Enquirer*, 24, 27 September, 18 October 1850.

⁵⁹*Enquirer*, 18 October 1850; *Whig*, 15 October 1850.

⁶⁰*Enquirer*, 15 October 1850.

slave law or win abolition in the District of Columbia, however, the *Enquirer* would embrace disunion as the only method of preserving southern rights. The *Enquirer* accurately stated that Virginians "all unite in the conclusion that the repeal of the fugitive slave law would lead to an instant rupture of the Union."⁶¹

The *Whig* agreed that if the fugitive slave law should be repealed "all the South without distinction of party or section will unite" and "the value of the Union will be speedily calculated." But, in the absence of unforeseen northern treachery, the Whigs considered the compromise "a great victory" for the South. The measure accomplished what the Whigs had been working for during the past four years—it simultaneously averted disunion and left the Wilmot Proviso "rotting in its dishonorable tomb." The achievement of both of these goals was a pleasant surprise to the Whigs, and the mere idea of further southern agitation infuriated them.⁶²

In March 1851 the two parties agreed to adopt resolutions in the House of Delegates to inform the rest of the nation about Virginia's attitude toward the compromise. This would assure Northerners as well as Southerners that Virginians "see nothing in the terms of settlement to justify secession." The resolutions, which were adopted with only one dissenting vote, stated that Virginia would send no delegates to any proposed southern convention because "if fairly executed [the compromise measures] will restore to the country that harmony and confidence which of late have been so unhappily disturbed." The resolutions also recognized that diversity of sentiment did exist within the state on this question; Calhoun Democrats and southern nationalists still refused to sanction the compromise.⁶³ Nathaniel Beverley Tucker was mortified

⁶¹*Enquirer*, 24, 27 September, 18 October 1850.

⁶²*Whig*, 18 October, 13 September 1850.

⁶³*Whig*, 28 March 1851; *Acts of the General Assembly of the State of Virginia, 1850-1851* (Richmond, 1851), 201.

that Virginia officially approved the compromise that had been formulated in "that synagogue of Satan...that meets at Washington." Virginia was now, according to Tucker, "a subject province, oppressed, insulted, outraged...." Her politicians had disgraced themselves by "kissing the hand that smites and the foot that spurns her." Tucker urged South Carolina not to follow in Virginia's footsteps; his own state might have deserted its principles, but Carolinians could maintain their honor by renouncing the Constitution and leaving the Union.⁶⁴

Tucker's denunciations of his fellow Virginians were passionate and unrestrained, but they had no effect on public opinion. By 1851, Virginia's Whigs and Democrats had accepted the Compromise of 1850 as a final settlement to the four-year-long sectional conflict that the Mexican War had ignited. That the two parties eventually arrived at the same conclusion should not obscure the long and tortuous debate that dominated Virginia politics between the introduction of the Wilmot Proviso and Congress's adoption of the five compromise bills. Even agreement on the compromise did not mean the same thing to Whigs as it did to Democrats; the two parties approached the settlement from opposite directions. While the Whigs ultimately welcomed the measure as a victory for the South, the Democrats embraced it only after the South's failure to unify at Nashville demonstrated the futility, and the danger, of continuing to make uncompromising demands of Northerners.

The Whigs and Democrats' paths to the compromise were diametrically opposed to one another, even though both parties were striving to maintain southern rights and preserve the federal Union. In pursuing this common goal, each party evinced a paradoxical relationship between its fundamental view of Northerners and its grand strategy with regard to the slavery

⁶⁴*Southern Quarterly Review* 4, no. 8 (1851), 276.

controversy. Virginia Whigs employed a strategy of national conciliation precisely because they did not trust their partners in the Union; they did not believe that the numerically superior North would ever respect southern rights on questions related to slavery. They remained politically united with their northern Whig counterparts because the majority of both wings of the party, terrified at the prospect of disunion, were committed to avoiding a definitive sectional showdown. Virginia Whigs feared that if Southerners were to violate this mutual commitment to avoidance by making overt demands of Northerners, the northern majority--Whigs and Democrats alike--would unite and crush southern rights in the territories. Such a strike would be a blow against southern honor as well as against white Southerners' physical safety, and it would make secession all but inevitable.

This was a scenario that mainstream Virginia Democrats also devoted themselves to preventing. Unlike the Whigs, they believed that southern agitation could have a positive influence on Northerners' policies toward slavery. This very trust in Northerners impelled Virginia Democrats to employ a combative, sectionalistic strategy when dealing with them. Democrats' tactics rested on the belief that a unified southern threat of disunion would jolt Northerners into a realization that they must withdraw the Wilmot Proviso and other offensive pieces of legislation. In this manner, Democrats would preserve southern rights and southern safety within the Union.

Virginia Whigs and Democrats' worldviews, and thus their strategies, were fundamentally contradictory. As long as the Whigs espoused their noncombative policy, the Democrats' tactics could not succeed, and vice versa. This situation made partisan politics particularly bitter in the aftermath of Wilmot's proposal. While pure political maneuvering and jockeying for voters' support in endless loyalty contests exacerbated narrowly partisan strife, the fundamental split

between the parties was ideological. Each organization tried, and consistently failed, to convince the other to abandon its strategy and join a united front. Constant failure in this endeavor reinforced the natural tendency of each party to attack the other in the local arena, and in so doing each party inevitably undermined its own basic principles. When Whigs attacked Democrats, they ironically adopted Democratic strategies by addressing the slavery issue head-on. When, for example, Whigs denounced southern Democrats for supporting the Oregon bill, they assumed the confrontational attitude toward federal prohibitions against slavery in the territories that the Democrats had tried to convince them to adopt in the first place. Virginia Democrats, however, could not harness this confrontational attitude and direct it at Northerners because they were too busy denouncing the Whigs, and, in the process, undermining their own position favoring a united southern front. When the Democrats attacked Virginia Whigs for their refusal to contribute to southern unity, they ruined any chance for unity that might have existed.

Thus, neither party had the opportunity to pursue its strategy fully. Of all the possible ways to resolve the sectional conflict, the Compromise of 1850 was not the first choice of Virginia Whigs or Democrats. Yet when the compromise emerged in mid-1850 as the only nationally acceptable plan for defusing sectional tension, Virginians were confronted with a simple choice between compromise on one hand and likely disunion on the other. With the question framed in these terms, even the profoundly different Whigs and Democrats agreed on compromise. The Compromise of 1850, in the end, was a settlement between feuding Virginians as much as it was an agreement between conflicting sections.

Bibliographical Note

My analysis of Whig and Democratic ideology and strategy is based primarily on information obtained from the *Richmond Whig and Public Advertiser* and the *Richmond Enquirer* for the years 1847-1851. Each paper was the most firmly-established, well-respected, and widely-read mouthpiece of its party in Virginia. By examining each issue of both papers' semi-weekly editions, I was able to gain a solid understanding of each party's motivations and worldview. The slavery controversy dominated the columns of both the *Whig* and the *Enquirer*. In addition to editorials and commentary on the pressing political issues of the day, each paper included transcripts of debates that took place in the United States Congress and the Virginia House of Delegates. Both papers also published descriptions of public meetings in addition to articles and editorials from other newspapers throughout the state, providing the reader with a well-rounded view of Virginia politics. The *Whig* and *Enquirer* often directly addressed each other and printed the viewpoints of their opponents as well as their friends, highlighting the diversity of opinion within the state.

Several other important sources augmented the picture of Virginia society provided by the two newspapers. Nathaniel Beverley Tucker's correspondence, found in the Tucker-Coleman Collection in Swem Library, provided valuable insight into the mentality of southern nationalists (a small but vocal component of Virginia society that the *Whig* and *Enquirer* mentioned only in negative terms.) Tucker's letters from James H. Hammond are particularly revealing, as they demonstrated the frustration and anguish of men who waged a futile struggle for southern separatism.

The papers of James McDowell and James Coles Bruce, both found on microfilm as part of the *Records of Ante-Bellum Southern Plantations* collection edited by Kenneth

Stampp, highlighted the conflicting interests that plagued individuals who lived in a politically vulnerable slave society. McDowell's correspondence revealed a common dilemma--the Congressman personally wished for a slave-free Virginia, but he deplored northern abolitionism and had to adopt an aggressive defense of slaveholders' rights in order to win reelection. Bruce's speech of July 4, 1847, demonstrated another kind of ambivalence that slavery produced; one of the largest slaveholders in the state implored his fellow planters to sell their bondsmen to the deeper South to cleanse Virginia society. Henry Ruffner's address to western Virginians also stressed economic and social problems associated with slavery, but even he spoke against outside interference with the institution.

Virginians' political voices were revealed most clearly in the two newspapers as well as in the *Congressional Globe*, the record of congressional debates and speeches. Virginia's representatives often addressed the slavery issue on the floor of the House and Senate, and these records indicate the different strategies that Whigs and Democrats followed in the national arena. The *Correspondence of Robert M.T. Hunter* includes letters from various correspondents throughout the state that reveal Virginia's political climate and, once again, highlight the frustration felt by Virginia's most radical politicians. The *Journal of the House of Delegates of Virginia* and the *Acts of the General Assembly of Virginia* were not particularly useful for local politics because they did not include transcripts of debate or speeches, but they do contain the annual Governor's Message as well as slavery-related resolutions and laws passed by the General Assembly.

Several secondary sources played a significant role in shaping the questions addressed in this paper. William J. Cooper's *The South and the Politics of Slavery* and John Ashworth's *Slavery, Capitalism, and Politics in the Antebellum Republic* served as points of departure for

my analysis. Cooper's work, which focuses on the South as a whole, provides an excellent discussion of interparty loyalty contests. Cooper contends that the slavery issue erased all significant differences between southern Whigs and Democrats except their party labels. His contention that each party was devoted to protecting slavery is accurate, but he overlooks the fact that real ideological differences, and not simply partisan animosity, fueled interparty disputes. Ashworth's work, a Marxist interpretation of the sectional conflict, directly contradicts Cooper. He focuses on deep-seated ideological beliefs that separated the two parties, but he takes this idea too far when he asserts that Whigs were less attached to slavery than were Democrats. Ashworth's book is the only source that mentions Whigs' and Democrats' divergent characterizations of Northerners. Interestingly, he contends that southern Whigs were noncombative because they *trusted* the northern majority, while Democrats' militancy was born of their fear of Northerners. Ashworth's conclusion is based on an analysis of the entire South and may be valid in that context, but all evidence for Virginia points in the opposite direction.

There is no sophisticated analysis of the politics of slavery that focuses entirely on Virginia. The only work that discusses Virginia politics in any detail is Henry Shanks's *Secession Movement in Virginia*, which chronicles the differences between the two parties without providing an explanation for them. Other sources offer valuable information about Virginia without directly addressing the political discourse of the late 1840s. William Freehling's discussion of Jeffersonian ambivalence toward slavery in his *Road to Disunion* is of interest, as are Carl Degler's (*The Other South*), Alison Goodyear Freehling's (*Drift Toward Dissolution*) and Patricia Hicken's ("Antislavery in Virginia, 1831-1861") analyses of Virginians' contradictory feelings about slavery. William Shade's *Democratizing the Old*

Dominion discusses Virginians' attitudes toward slavery in the 1830s and 1840s, but it does not provide a detailed analysis of the crisis of 1850.

For information about the proceedings of the Nashville Convention I consulted Thelma Jennings' *The Nashville Convention*, and for a detailed discussion of the Compromise of 1850 I consulted Holman Hamilton's *Prologue to Conflict*. K. Jack Bauer's biography of Zachary Taylor provided information about Taylor's territorial policies.

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