

“Goin’ To Texas” Texas in the American Imagination and Politics, 1821 – 1841 *

Stephen Austin, originally from Virginia, came to Texas in late 1821, his mind filled with optimistic and expansive plans. His father, a longtime entrepreneur and promoter, had persuaded the Spanish government to grant him land there in order to establish a colony of North Americans in the province. Moses Austin died before the project got under way, and his son took over the scheme with the same lofty ambition. He was welcomed by the new reigning authorities in Texas. At the conclusion of their successful revolution against Spain, the newly established Mexican government followed the lead of its predecessor in encouraging Americans to come to Texas and settle there. They granted Austin, and a number of others, large blocks of territory. By the late twenties, Austin had bought many of the others out and amassed a personal holding of one hundred thousand acres of arable land. While doing so he advertised widely in American journals, promoting the attractiveness of his holdings and inviting settlers to come and buy up the fertile land he had to offer.

His efforts paid off. There was an enthusiastic response from north of the border. The opening of new agricultural lands always attracted keen interest in the United States. Austin’s depiction of a bountiful expanse seemed to offer great opportunities to a range of small farmers, adventurers, people on the make, and other would-be investors in the fertile lands and future prospects of the province. Throughout the 1820s, new settlers flocked in, bought land from Austin, and settled down to build a prosperous economy. Texas was soon dominated by these land-hungry and entrepreneurial arrivals from north of the border as more and more of them followed the earlier North American immigrants into the new republic. By the time of Austins death in the mid-1830s, Texas’s non-Indian population was 40,000 or so, and would reach about 150,000 by 1845.

Much of that population growth came from settlers originally from Mississippi, Louisiana, Arkansas, and other southwestern states, many of whom were slaveholders who brought their slaves with them. There were emigrants from the nonslaveholding states as well, but not in the same numbers. Texas was destined to become dominated by those who believed in slave labor and utilized it in pursuit of their own economic well-being. (Mexico had abolished slavery in its territory in 1829, an action first opposed and then largely ignored by the Texans.) In the late 1830s, there were about five thousand slaves in the republic, with more being brought in every day.

The momentum for “goin’ to Texas,” as newspapers dubbed the surging population movement, greatly increased when the American economy faltered and fell into a severe recession in 1837. The downturn was experienced everywhere, nowhere more so than in areas of recent economic expansion. Many western farmers, carrying heavy debt burdens due to their much too optimistic belief in the economy’s continued boom, and overwhelmed by bank loans that they had taken out to increase their landholdings and were now unable to repay, lost or had to abandon their property. Some of them sought new opportunities in land-wealthy Texas.

With so many Americans streaming in, by the late thirties the republic took on many of the attributes that suggested how much it had become an extension of the United States, whatever its current status as an independent entity. As President Andrew Jackson described Texas in a special message to Congress in 1836, “a large proportion of its civilized inhabitants are emigrants from the United States, speak the same language with ourselves, cherish the same principles, political and religious, and are bound to many of our citizens by ties of friendship and kindred blood; and, more than all, it is known that the people of that country have instituted the same form of government with our own.”

From the first, the Texas leaders who followed Austin believed that they could build on such attitudes and the realities underlying them to achieve their ultimate goal. Led by Virginia-born Sam Houston, a former governor of Tennessee, hero of the Texas Revolution against Mexico, and now the republic’s president, they began almost at once to explore, then energetically push for, annexation to their sister, and stronger, republic to the north. They sent agents to Washington who vigorously articulated their cause at every opportunity available to them, to newspaper editors, in the White House, and, at the other end of Pennsylvania Avenue, among congressmen on Capitol Hill. They described Texans and North Americans as “one people . . . united by all the sacred ties that can bind one people to another.”

They found much support in the United States. A powerful expansionist impulse existed among Americans all along the Mississippi Valley in the late 1820s and 1830s. Eight new states were admitted to the Union between 1815 and 1836, all but one of them (Maine) along the nation’s western frontier. Many of these new states were carved out of the vast expanse of the Louisiana Territory acquired in 1803, but organizing and settling that area was not the end of the nation’s ambitions. After a hiatus of twenty years, the United States was entering a period of renewed interest in further territorial aggrandizement.

Texas was now caught up in this energetic expansionism. There had been a great deal of unofficial encouragement of the Texas Revolution emanating from various sectors of the American population. Public meetings were held in its support, primarily but not exclusively in the western states, and

* Silbey, Joel H. *Storm Over Texas – The Annexation Controversy and the Road to Civil War*. (Chapter 1) New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.

money for arms and supplies was raised on behalf of the Texans. Many American volunteers fought in the rebellion against Mexico. In its aftermath, there continued to be strong support for defending Texas from the ongoing threat from Mexican armed encroachment on its freedom—an encroachment that could be forestalled permanently by joining the nations together.

What made annexation a popular cause among so many Americans was its connection to the nation's values and aspirations as well as the economic benefits promised in the uniting of the two republics. A reigning ideological perspective added to the mix that defined the annexationist outlook. Many proponents of adding Texas to the Union hoped to continue the extension of the republican sphere, and its values and institutions, across the continent, establishing political control over the land absorbed, promoting freedom, and increasing economic opportunity, all at the same time. As many saw it, the virtues and values of white Anglo-Saxon Protestantism should spread over an area that did not as yet enjoy such positive attributes. To these enthusiasts, the course of American freedom ran farther and farther westward across the vast land mass that was North America.

Texas was part of the commitment to such feelings. From the first, the desire to replace what was widely viewed as a rotten, violence-ridden, tyrannical government, that is, Mexico, with a new nation espousing democratic republican values was palpable and widely voiced. To be sure, as one historian has noted, “public declamations about freedom and Mexican tyranny thinly concealed a mounting greed for the cheap, fertile Texan lands.” It was always clear that, besides simple farmers seeking new opportunities, those involved in the movement westward into Texas included land speculators who were already deeply involved in the area. Entrepreneurs had heavily invested in Texas land and the republic's bonds and other public debt and sought the security for their investments that they believed would come from formally tying Texas to the much stronger United States. Their agents were also hard at work in Washington on behalf of the annexation project and adding a great deal of political clout to the efforts underway.

Nevertheless, they, and the specific interests they pushed, were never alone in constituting the impulse that worked so hard on behalf of annexation. The frenetic urge to expand the American nation drew on a constellation of motives—a constellation made up of the mixture of nationalist striving and economic opportunity—that influenced Americans and led so many of them to push settlement farther and farther into the nation's borderlands, and then beyond.

At the same time, even as the expansionist urge continued to be widely expressed in the aftermath of Texas's successful revolt, there was also, from the outset, resistance within the United States to any further territorial growth at all,

and particularly to adding Texas to the Union. Not everyone, policy makers, political leaders, or their constituents, welcomed the idea of additional territory being added to the Union, or agreed with the enthusiastic hopes of the expansionists. In the first instance, there were those who feared the impact of more acquisitions to the already sprawling United States on the domestic tranquility of the American nation. They wanted a smaller republic, or at least one that was little larger than its present configuration. They argued that the nation could not readily absorb additional land without a significant negative impact on the economy and the further orderly internal development of the existing states. Are we “not large and unwieldy enough already?” one hostile congressman summed up the limited-size case against annexation.

Texas raised additional concerns. Many opponents of the push to acquire it warned of the diplomatic consequences that would occur if the annexation project went through. The persistent and bitter postrebellion Mexican-Texas tensions would inevitably draw the United States, anti-annexationists believed, into a confrontation with its southern neighbor. The danger of a war with Mexico was real in these men's minds. To them, it would be an unnecessary war provoked by rash American policies. The support of Americans for the Texas Revolution had provoked strong protests from the Mexican government and further exacerbated the existing bad feelings between the two countries—bad feelings that needed little, the anti-Texas argument went, to stoke them into something larger and more dangerous than they already were.

Still other opponents of annexation argued against it by claiming that adding Texas to the Union would fundamentally and negatively threaten the character of the American republic. No one expressed this attitude about Texas more forcefully than the consummate and always intense political skeptic John Quincy Adams. Adams, nearing his seventieth year, had had a full public career, as a diplomat, senator, secretary of state, one-term president, and, in the 1830s, congressman from Massachusetts. During that long career he had won a deserved reputation as a highly moralistic and inflexible advocate of certain values including a great hostility to slavery. He suffered few fools gladly. He was quick to correct errors and condemn missteps. He made it clear that the country had been on a wrong course for some time. His contempt for the Jacksonians, running the country since the late 1820s—their values, intelligence, and policies—knew no bounds.

Adams had been suspicious from the first moments of the Texas Revolution. Once, when he was secretary of state in the years after 1815, he had been an ardent expansionist, even about Texas. He now reversed himself about that territory as he spied malignant forces at work in the annexationist impulse. As early as 1836 he was forcefully laying out to his fellow representatives in the House an anti-slavery case against acquiring the republic. Specifically, he saw in the current annexation agitation a conspiracy to extend slavery and further

increase the overweening power of slaveholders within the United States. To him, the conspiracy was clear, as was the role played by the southern-dominated Jacksonian Democrats in pushing it forward—by both fair means and foul.”

Adams did not stop with one speech. (“Old Man Eloquent” rarely did on any matter.) “That mischievous bad old man,” as the ardent defender of southern rights and interests John C. Calhoun described him, kept up his oratorical assaults on the proposal unrelentingly whenever he spied the annexationists at work—which was often—with all of his vituperative guns blazing. His pointed and accusatory sectional argument proved popular among some other northerners in the mid-1830s, particularly in his native Massachusetts and in other parts of New England and the region’s diaspora across western New York and into Ohio. In particular, committed anti-slavery reformers William Lloyd Garrison, Theodore Weld, Benjamin Lundy, Joshua Leavitt, and James Birney took the lead. They had long been critical of the institution’s existence in the United States and demanded that it be ended. At first, they concentrated their efforts on persuading others to join with them. They founded the American Anti-Slavery Society in 1833 to rouse the American people against southern slaveholders and on behalf of black freedom. They took every opportunity from then on to inflame the public against slavery and challenge its continued existence. It was a foul institution that could no longer be tolerated in a free republic no matter what had been acceptable to earlier generations. It had to be erased from the national scene.

In the mid-thirties, as the annexation issue unfolded, they continued their fierce assaults in a flurry of speeches, editorials, and mass meetings and in the thousands of petitions they sent to Congress against the institution. They assailed the placidity of most Americans on the matter and denounced the political leadership of their section for its failure to confront the issue. Their anger was tinged with intense conspiracy paranoia about the existence, reach, determination to have its own way, and growing appetite of the “slave power” in American life. Given the nation’s basic ideological commitments and social values, which were, they passionately argued, clearly hostile to those of the slave power, Texas annexation was unacceptable.

“We Should Still Stand Aloof”

The many speeches in the mid-thirties concerning Texas, from weighty political figures as well as from less renowned speakers, were not the only medium expressing what was at stake and what the United States should do. Petitions from organized public meetings in the countryside and from affected interest groups poured into Congress from all sides in 1836-37. Newspaper editors were fully aroused, and many congressmen added their voices to the clamor for and against Texas. A full-scale debate was under way, filled with expressions of intense anxiety, extraordinary hyperbole, and a range of controversial assertions,

since the Texas matter touched on so many American values, interests, and fears about the future.

Despite the rhetorical force of the anti-expansionists from 1836 on, those Americans who favored adding Texas to the Union when the issue first arose probably outnumbered those opposed to doing so. Nevertheless, there were complications and concerns imbedded in the issue that shrewd political leaders were quick to see and assess. Texas bred opportunity but also provoked difficulties that might be better evaded or postponed. As a result, neither President Jackson nor his successor, Martin Van Buren, gave the annexation movement the support expected by Texas’s advocates in the United States or the republic’s agents on the scene in Washington. Rather, both presidents followed a very cautious policy that went only a little bit of the way toward giving the Texans what they wanted.

The two presidents offered many reasons for their hesitancy. As the pressure on behalf of Texas grew after 1836, political leaders were preoccupied with other policy matters to which they gave priority when they dealt with the forces working on them to bring Texas into the Union. Among them, the diplomatic argument against annexation was certainly important, and probably persuasive, to both presidents. As noted, America’s relations with Mexico were at the least difficult, and more often extremely hostile, in the 1830s, and both professional diplomats and political leaders hesitated about worsening those relationships by taking actions in Texas, an area that Mexicans heatedly claimed was part of their nation. (The United States once had some claim to Texas, but then-Secretary of State John Quincy Adams had ceded it in a treaty with Spain in 1819—although some expansionists continued to argue that our claims to the area remained valid.)

The diplomatic problems present were real and certainly prompted Andrew Jackson’s hesitancy when the matter came up, for he personally wanted Texas to become part of the United States. The first western president, he had expansionist fever in his blood as intense as anyone’s, and he also expressed concern, from the first, for the nation’s security against foreign threats—by which he meant the pernicious British presence on America’s frontiers. He had tried to purchase the province from Mexico in the early days of his administration only to be rebuffed each time that he made the offer. That did not end his interest or his concern after the province’s successful rebellion. Quite the contrary. As one historian has pungently summed up, “Texas existed as a ramshackle republic . . . What was clear was that . . . [it] was too weak to stand alone for long.” Jackson and his colleagues shared that assessment and greatly feared who might rush into the vacuum on America’s southwestern border.

Nevertheless, the situation was not yet settled enough for any untoward movements toward annexation. There were too many potential complications and dangers, the Jacksonians believed, too much controversy present that might

interfere with their other domestic and foreign policy plans and activities. For one, Texas's boundaries remained uncertain and in dispute, with the Texans claiming more territory than the Mexicans accepted. "Prudence," President Jackson told Congress at the end of his administration, "therefore, seems to indicate that we should still stand aloof." All that he felt able to do, as a result of his fears, was to call official attention to the successful Texas Revolution and then, prodded by a congressional resolution that he do so, to extend formal diplomatic recognition to the new republic just before he left office in early 1837.

Domestic political concerns also influenced the way that the nation's leaders reacted to Texas's eagerness to become part of the United States. In particular, Jackson's successor and political disciple, the New York politician Van Buren, never an ardent expansionist, was always extremely sensitive to political currents that might affect the Jacksonian Democrats' control of the national government. After being the political "little magician," the astute party manager behind Jackson, he was now in command on his own. A cautious leader by training, temperament, and instinct, he had made few rash moves throughout his career, and when he made one he quickly regretted doing so. Now he saw good reasons to follow Jackson's lead and not become involved in Texas's push to become part of the United States. The assaults by those opposed to the annexation proposal raised issues that he did not want to confront. Among these, he was particularly sensitive to anything that might stir up angry debates between northerners and southerners. John Quincy Adams's repeated strong charges against the South and its alleged malign plotting were especially irritating since they provoked a quick and equally harsh southern response, all of which was, to Van Buren, beside the main point of American politics.

Whatever the numbers of those involved in the sectionalist exchanges, or the accuracy of the charges and countercharges being made, they could have, Van Buren feared, some political consequences both at the polls and among Democrats in Congress. He had won the presidency in a troublingly close election in 1836 and wanted nothing to happen that might detach even a few voters or political activists from him and his party in the subsequent contests that were always on tap. Given the closeness of political divisions at election time, even the smallest dissenting minority, as he believed the ardent anti-slavery group to be, was troublesome to the Democratic cause. They were not numerous, but they were intense, loud, and persistent, able to roil the political waters in a number of crucial states and raise havoc with the plans and prospects of the majority. It was enough to make Van Buren wary. Why raise the Texas issue when there were so many other things that needed the president's attention and would not cause the disruptive fallout (no matter how small in scale it might be) that annexation threatened to provoke?

Van Buren made it quite clear, therefore, that, whatever the virtues present in the annexation proposal, the time was not ripe for any action, nor did he give any indications when it would be. He resisted attempts by some congressmen and Texas's agent in Washington to raise the issue early in his administration and stuck to that policy thereafter. He said little about it in his annual messages even as he extensively discussed Mexican-American relations. Texas was not on his agenda. Throughout his term in office he focused instead on the many important matters, other than the new republic's situation, that filled up his very busy days.

Most pertinently, from the opening weeks of his administration, Van Buren was overwhelmed by the severe economic crisis afflicting the nation. The Panic of 1837 occupied almost all of his attention as political battles over the appropriate domestic policies to deal with the downturn bitterly divided the parties in Congress. These disputes were not readily resolved and persisted throughout his administration, as did the economic crisis. As a result, the president found his attention continually focused on the economy as the primary matter before him.

Nevertheless, Van Buren did have to deal with additional problems, outside of the economic realm, that could not be deferred. These included America's difficulties with the British Empire over the uncertain boundary lines that existed along the nation's northern border with Canada. In addition, many Americans along the northern frontier supported the Canadian rebellion against Great Britain, support that remained alive throughout much of Van Buren's term in office. The administration spent much of its time working out peaceful solutions that would be mutually acceptable to all those involved, calm everyone down, and—Van Buren hoped—hold together thereafter.

For all of these reasons, therefore, Texas remained an independent republic at the end of the 1830s. So far as the United States was concerned, it was clear to everyone interested in its becoming part of the Union that something not yet in the mix was needed to jolt the issue out of its doldrums and bring it to the center of political attention in ways that would force the matter toward a resolution once and for all. But nothing was as yet in sight that could do so. The republic's leaders had certainly gotten the message from north of the border and formally withdrew their proposal for annexation in late 1838. That action solved little by itself. Some of them wanted to continue on their own as an independent republic, but most of the top leaders knew better. They needed assistance and protection. There continued to be serious difficulties between Texas and the Mexican government and the consequent need of Texas's leaders to look around for help to ensure the republic's survival. (Texas and Mexico remained technically at war and continued to engage in armed skirmishes with each other.) Since Jackson, Van Buren, and their associates in Congress were not interested in its fate enough to make the desired moves in their favor,

Texas's leaders began to consider whether other nations, such as Great Britain, might be willing to do so. They began to meet with representatives of the British government about finding ways to bring the two nations into some kind of closer association. To be sure, Texans were not united on the wisdom of these overtures. There was a great deal of political brawling in the republic about what to do. Still, the crucial item for many Texans was that, as the 1830s ended, the United States remained distant and aloof from them and their problems.

“The Shrine of Party”

As the annexation issue remained on the back burner of American political life in the late 1830s, its status and future prospects were being influenced by the way that the American political nation had evolved over the past decade. The intensely charged Texas matter had appeared just as the United States was settling into a system dominated by two national political parties. The Democrats and Whigs emerged in the 1820s and early 1830s, bitterly fighting from then on for control of the government at local, state, and national levels. The parties developed out of post-1815 disagreements about the future direction of the United States and how that future was to be realized, and out of the need to organize a highly fragmented political scene into a more coherent system able to shape and direct the battles under way. Whigs and Democrats differed strongly from each other over a whole range of policy proposals to foster the American economy and to shape and enhance its society. By the early 1840s, the two parties had etched into public consciousness quite different policy agendas and distinct arguments promoting their own claims and challenging the unacceptable plans of their opponents.

Their differences were always expressed in extremely vituperative language. America's political vocabulary was filled with expressions of the many threats, outrages, and most fearsome demons, always about to strike, that constituted the national situation. Election campaigns reverberated with denunciations, expressions of those fears, and the most dramatically articulated warnings of impending doom. Enemies of republican liberty were everywhere and had to be opposed. Each party made it clear how much was at stake in political warfare, how much the fate of the nation would be decided in the next election, and, most of all, how much its partisan opponents posed serious dangers to the well-being of the United States, given their base intentions and active promotion of “ruinous measures.”

Such vigorous presentations of what was at stake in the political world and the realities that undergirded them had the effect intended. The parties bit deeply into the American soil. People listened—and responded. Political leaders and the voters who supported them became deeply committed to their particular party with intensity, conviction, and a great deal of staying power.

They followed its lead, worked for its success, voted for its candidates, and repeatedly made it clear how much they were committed to, and how much they believed in, either Whiggery or in Jacksonian Democracy. They considered themselves to be members of mass armies arrayed against one another in perpetual combat for a good cause.

By the late 1830s, such intensely expressed and acted-on partisan commitment and the impulses behind it had become a widely accepted reality in the United States—the norm that largely defined American political culture. As one editor put it, “there never existed so thorough a separation and so exact a delineation and opposition of the two parties, as at present.” Americans' strong devotion to what one observer would later call “the shrine of party” everywhere defined, mobilized, organized, focused, and directed the nation's popular politics.

“Democratic Principles are Alike . . . Everywhere”

One of the most important aspects of this emerging party system was that both Whigs and Democrats were well established in, and drew support from, every part of the Union. The parties worked hard to sublimate and overcome differences that lay along local and sectional fault lines. Their focus and behavior crossed sectional lines; their policies and appeals drew people to them regardless of where they lived. Party leaders strongly and repeatedly iterated that northerners, southerners, easterners, and westerners faced the same problems and favored the same solutions: those that were offered by their party. As a result, “Democratic principles are alike,” one activist reminded his colleagues, “everywhere. They are the same in New York as in Virginia, in the North as in the South, in the center of the union as at either or every extreme.” By the late 1830s, party leaders had largely succeeded in convincing involved Americans of that reality. Both major parties were national in their organization, reach, commitments, and purpose. They acted as such in election campaigns, state legislatures, and Congress and among executive officers at every level of government, and they were perceived as such by their many devoted adherents.

Nevertheless, at the same time that national political parties were taking command of the American scene, they were never unchallenged. There were always some political activists present, leaders and voters alike, who thought otherwise. They had different fears, hopes, and agendas, and they consciously stood, therefore, outside the dominant partisan system, resisting its blandishments and denouncing its reach and power. In particular, from the first, some Americans had found themselves capable of forging sectional identities and commitments, identities that fostered anger against other Americans living elsewhere in the nation, and from time to time led to confrontation with them over specific political policies. As John Quincy Adams's hostile intervention

about Texas in 1836 indicated, this sectional consciousness continued to be expressed loudly enough to be noticed and enter into political calculations even as the cross-sectional Whigs and Democrats were rooting themselves in the political soil with so much effect.

There was good reason for this, sectional agitators believed. Slavery was deeply embedded in the national experience and at the center of these sectional rumblings. It was a reality that some Americans tried to ignore, others accepted, and still others confronted and combatted. Among southerners there were always spokesmen ready to defend slavery with passion and determination, because they believed that it was critical to their society and its economic and social well-being. Their arguments were widely accepted in their section even by those many southerners who themselves did not own slaves, though not always with the same rhetorical passion.

This frame of mind was more than a matter of interest, attitude, and expression, however. Some political leaders sought to take advantage of sectional polarization. Their political vocabulary differed in major ways from the partisan rhetoric usually stressed on the political landscape. They held sectional concerns to be the center of affairs in the United States. They argued primarily in sectional terms, stressed their fear and loathing of the values, institutions, and intentions of the people living in other sections of the Union, and sought to reorganize American politics along sectional lines, repeatedly raising dark suspicions about the other section, its excessive power, and its malignant designs against the people and institutions of another area of the Union. In the South, these committed and intransigent sectionalists warned incessantly of the danger that existed in a hostile Union to their way of life and stressed their belief that northerners could not be trusted to go along with them, accept slavery's necessity, and leave the South alone.

Southern politicians were well aware how divided the people of their section usually were over questions of public policy. Most of them accepted this split as normal and not dangerous to their section's basic values and institutions. Others, however, believed that at bedrock southerners' fundamental interests were the same and that there was great danger to those interests in their present situation. Seeing few nuances in the anti-slavery voices among northerners, and not distinguishing between moderate critics of slavery and abolitionists, they argued that northern political leaders would always have to succumb to the pressures of the anti-slavery fanatics living among them. "Vote for a northern President from a free State," one editor warned, "and when the test comes, he will support the abolitionists."

Repeatedly stressing that theme, would-be sectional leaders such as South Carolina's John C. Calhoun warned that unless the people of the slave states united politically in their own defense they had much to lose in the face of an onslaught that would inevitably come from the hostile members of other sections. Magnifying the number of abolitionists, as well as their immediate

political importance and potential danger, he and his followers had little use for the national political parties with their transectional claims and conceits that deceived southerners and led them to ignore the dangers they faced. To be sure, Calhoun had been nominally a Democrat for a time and had cooperated with Martin Van Buren on behalf of the party and its policies in the late 1830s and at the outset of the 1840s, but this had been a brief interlude at best. Most of the time, the Calhounites would gladly see the Whigs and Democrats shattered and driven from the scene in favor of a southern-rights coalition drawing on members of both parties to unite and defend their section against the hostile intentions of its predatory enemies.

Southerners were not alone in expressing hostility to the other section. Resistance to southern institutions, to what some saw as the section's excessive power within the Union, and to its aggressive behavior, in Congress and elsewhere, directed against Northern interests had occasionally flared up since the early days of the republic. As we have seen, when John Quincy Adams challenged southerners in the House of Representatives in the mid-1830s and opposed what he believed was their unacceptable push for Texas, he had not stood alone. Outside of Congress, the abolitionists, led by Garrison, Weld, Lundy, Birney, and the rest, were taking an increasing public role in this and other sectional confrontations. Like Adams, they were determined to prevent any further additions of slave territory to the nation and joined "Old Man Eloquent" in offering passionate anti-slavery protests against annexation when its possibility began to be discussed after the Texas Revolution.

At the same time, northern Whigs, while rarely abolitionists, incorporated in their spectrum of ideas and values a range of antislavery attitudes, including a fierce opposition to adding further slave territory to the Union. Only a relative few of them, Adams being one of the prime examples, were aggressive in their opposition, given their commitment to holding their party together behind the main issues dividing them from their Democratic adversaries. Nevertheless, their sectional attitudes were frequently close to the surface and a potential source of angry confrontation if stimulated.

The sectional sensitivities expressed on both sides of the Mason-Dixon line had earlier flared up in a most powerful fashion over the admission of Missouri as a slave state in 1819. After a long and acrimonious battle filled with great sectional outbursts against the other side, Congress was able to settle the matter by a compromise, admitting Missouri as a slave state and dividing the rest of the Louisiana Purchase between a free-labor area north of the line—36° 30' north latitude—and another area south of that line in which slavery would be allowed if the people living there desired to have it.

Sectional calm returned to the political arena, although there continued to be occasional outbreaks of sectional sensitivity in subsequent years, as

evidenced by John Quincy Adams's assault on Texas in 1836. In the late thirties, these sharp feelings intensified once again as anti-slavery agitation was clearly on the increase in parts of the North, a fact that stimulated, in its turn, tremendous anger among southerners and harsh confrontations and occasional scuffles in Congress between representatives from the different sections. The battle over the "gag rule," for example, a pro-slavery-instigated congressional rule against receiving abolitionist petitions, inflamed the House of Representatives at the opening of each of its sessions in the late 1830s and early 1840s.

The restrictive rule passed (with some critical northern support for it) each time, and the gag was imposed. But this did not stop continued anti-slavery agitation against the South's core institution by petitions, speeches, pamphlets, and newspaper editorials, which intensified, in turn, the southern reaction against the apparently undaunted abolitionist crusade. Overt sectional anger was clearly part of the intellectual framework of American politics as Martin Van Buren settled into the presidency to confront, among other matters, the continued push to annex Texas.

The bitter eruptions between North and South seared the political landscape for a time, and among some participants more permanently. Despite the ferocity of the rhetoric offered, however, and the clear willingness of some activists in both the North and the South to look for a fight with one another, in general these sectional tensions did not as yet shape a wide range of political conflict. While such sectional polarization was important to some, those who put sectional issues ahead of all other matters, that is, those who wished either to advance or retard slavery in the United States, kept meeting serious difficulties. Whatever the intensity of the sectionalist uproar at certain moments, and the reactions evoked by it among politically aware northerners and southerners, the leadership of the two major parties found ways to contain the tensions through evasion and compromise and, most particularly, by their constant harping on what they argued were the more important issues that Americans faced, that is, the traditional ones that the parties had long fought over. As the editor of a leading Ohio Democratic newspaper familiarly put it, in good Jacksonian style, although he and his colleagues might oppose slavery, "we do not waste our energies upon a single sectional evil... and let the shylocks of the money power forge the galling chains of a monster bank upon us. Neither do we waste our sympathies upon the slaves when a tariff taxation is bowing our necks to earth at home. We act with a party who fights for liberty upon its broadest basis."

Whig and Democratic leaders below Mason and Dixon's line followed a similar course as they went about their political activities, believing that they, too, had other interests to focus on and that they could control the rhetorical outbursts of "a few reckless men in the South who sought to agitate along sectional lines." They would manage this by shaping their political agendas, as their northern colleagues were doing, to emphasize the range of other policy

issues that they considered to be more important to their section's, and the nation's, present and future well-being.

They were right in their belief. Sectional animosities remained a lesser theme among most of those involved in American politics at the end of the 1830s. Most politically involved Americans, while recognizing the differences that existed and the tensions arising from them, did not react positively to, or adopt, the Calhoun-Adams assessment of what was at stake in American politics. They did not take up the sectionalist cause, whatever their personal attitude about slavery or the challenge emanating from the behavior of people in the other section. Most members of the two political parties remained uninterested in "venting sectional grievances."⁴⁷ Why should they not? The national political architecture of partisan conflict and management continued to work well for them, and they preferred it in their approach, rhetoric, and behavior on the political landscape to the sectionalist approach to current issues.

As a result, while the elements advancing sectional confrontation were always present on the political scene, and while sectional flare-ups occurred more often than national party leaders wished, the sectional rumblings were only spasmodically intense enough to take over the nation's political agenda. They never cohered into a sustained confrontation between the North and the South that was of sufficient power to overcome the other political impulses present. Thus the angry sectional agitators found themselves to be far in advance of other political leaders and the general public in both sections, and thus very out of step with them, in seeing these matters as the most critical ones facing the nation. As a northern editor summed up, terms such as "Northern and Southern ... are rarely or never correct, and are only calculated to create unkind sectional feelings which otherwise would not exist."

This was perhaps an optimistic assessment of the way that matters stood as the 1840s got under way, but clearly, while sectional tensions were palpable in American society, national political leaders had learned how to deal with sectional eruptions. More was needed to bring the many Americans who remained unconvinced of their centrality to fall in behind the sectionalists in their vision of a nation hostilely divided by critical issues, institutions, and ways of thinking that defined the different parts of the Union and separated them from one another. We "have seen no evidence of recreancy in our Northern friends, to the faith in which we battled under a Northern leader in 1840," the editor of the *Mobile J Register* editorialized in 1842, "and see only omens of disaster in the attempts to foment divisions within ourselves, resting on sectional grounds."

“Texas Will Be Annexed”/ “The Union is Sufficiently Extended”

An issue such as Texas was bound to get caught up in these existing political currents in some direct fashion. And it did. Despite the intensity of the sectional discourse on the matter, raised, as we have seen, by a number of speakers, led by Congressman Adams in the mid-1830s, the annexation proposal was viewed, at the outset, largely through the lens of the prevailing partisan political situation. Although territorial expansion had not been at the center of their concerns in the 1830s, both parties had had something to say about adding more land to the American republic. Each had, not surprisingly, adopted a position congenial to itself, a position that contrasted with that offered by its opponents. It was the Democrats who subscribed to the old Jeffersonian dream of building a landed empire across the continent, an endeavor in whose ultimate achievement Texas would be an important first step.

“Texas will be annexed,” an Ohio Democratic congressman celebrated, “and not only Texas, but every inch of land on this continent. Our republic is to be an ocean bound republic.” Only good—for all Americans wherever they lived—would come from that expansive achievement. “To me,” the Pennsylvania Democratic leader George M. Dallas told a group of supporters,

the incorporation of Texas into the Federal Union seems not only the opening of a natural and exhaustless resource for the fabrics of the eastern and middle states, the agricultural products of the southern and western, and the activity of our extensive eastern seaboard, but it assumes the aspect of a just and necessary consequence upon the genius and maxims of our confederated system. I regard our present ability to fulfill the high duties of our political existence, in welcoming successively every community freshly formed upon the North American continent, within the circle of the national compact, as a legitimate and lineal offspring of Gen. Jackson’s valor.

In sharp contrast to their opponents, the Whigs articulated intense resistance to any further territorial acquisitions. Their spokesmen constantly repeated their familiar litany, that “the union is sufficiently extended and cumbrous without purchasing or accepting any more territory,” to make very clear their determined opposition to what they saw as overreaching and destabilizing acquisitions of additional land outside of the nation’s borders that brought with them not prosperity and national greatness, as Democratic bluster claimed, but, rather, many difficulties for the nation. The Whigs, one student of their mind set has written, were always primarily interested “in the qualitative development of American society both economically and morally, not its mere quantitative extension.”

Nothing was clearer among the Democrats’ political antagonists as the Texas debate got under way. To the Whigs, “bloated empires, scattered settlements, and alien people attenuated the bonds of union.” As their great

leader, the Kentucky slaveholder Henry Clay, told his closest political confidant, “it is much more important that we should unite, harmonize, and improve what we have than attempt to acquire more.” Territorial extension, Massachusetts’s Whig leader, Daniel Webster, added, “often produces weakness rather than strength. We have a Republic . . . Instead of aiming to enlarge its boundaries, let us seek, rather, to strengthen its Union.” Nothing could be further from the Democratic Party’s long-standing and determined perspective on territorial acquisition as these words were uttered.

The lines between the nation’s two main partisan combatants were, therefore, quite sharply drawn on territorial expansion, perhaps as much as they were on the other policy matters that divided Whigs from Democrats at the end of the 1830s. This was so whatever the hesitations of the leaders of the pro-expansion party, Presidents Jackson and Van Buren, about moving forward on Texas’s request for incorporation into the Union in 1836 and 1837. The Whigs were against further expansionist adventures; the Democrats were eager to engage in them, and their leaders had indicated that they were only awaiting the proper time, when the diplomatic and domestic complications associated with annexation were resolved, to move ahead to fulfill their expansive dreams in the Southwest. Of course, when Texas’s moment would actually be was not apparent, nor was it being intensely searched for by most of the political establishment as Van Buren left office to be replaced by the first Whig president, William Henry Harrison.

Matters, however, never stood still. They were always subject to some unforeseen action that stimulated new impulses and altered the normal trajectory of the nation’s concerns and behavior. The partisan imperative was all-powerful; the nation’s political leaders remained determined to push Texas, for the present, to the sidelines of American politics. Then President John Tyler unexpectedly took up what appeared to be a moribund political matter and succeeded in moving it to the center of the nation’s attention.