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Laura Ellyn Smith

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Southerners Divided: The Opposition of Mississippi Whigs to Texas Annexation during the Presidential Election of 1844 as Portrayed by *The Republican* of Woodville, Mississippi

by Laura Ellyn Smith

The historic Mississippi newspaper *The Republican* is an important source that provides insight into the socio-political divisions that defined the antebellum South. Most significantly, during the presidential election of 1844, *The Republican* editor opposed Texas annexation due to fears over its potential impact on the slave economy in Mississippi. The election-year issues of *The Republican* provide a new perspective into the calculated risk some Southern Whigs took in opposing Texas annexation while prioritizing the security of their own state's slave economy. The risk in opposing annexation was that it ran contrary to the consistent anxiety of Southern slaveholders to bring more slave states into the Union, a fear that had shaped politics throughout the antebellum era.

The Republican yields crucial insight into Mississippi's divisive antebellum politics from the distinct perspective of a local community dominated by the planter class. The newspaper represented the political opinion of the white inhabitants of Woodville, the county seat of Wilkinson County and one of the state's earliest towns dominated by Whigs.¹ Whigs were frequently viewed as "the party of property," and indeed from the 1836 presidential election to the 1844 election, "the most consistently high correlation is between Whig voting strength and high percentages of slaves within the total population."² The enduring approval received by *The Republican* is evident from the newspaper's creation in 1823

¹ Mississippi Department of Archives and History, "About The Republican," *Library of Congress: Chronicling America*, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84020022/> (accessed March 31, 2018); David Nathaniel Young, "The Mississippi Whigs, 1834-1860" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Alabama, 1968), 48-49.

² Young, "The Mississippi Whigs, 1834-1860," 50, 56.

LAURA ELLYN SMITH graduated in 2019 with a Ph.D. in history from the University of Mississippi. Her research focuses on presidential politics and elections. She has had articles published in both *White House Studies* and *Maine History*.

to its continued publication today, making it the oldest newspaper in Mississippi.³ It was, and continues to be, published weekly. Similar to other antebellum newspapers, *The Republican* reprinted articles from across the nation, which enhances its usefulness as a source by providing different regional perspectives.

The significance of *The Republican* as a neglected source and its historic longevity as a newspaper is emphasized in comparison to other Mississippi newspapers. Although antebellum Mississippi politics has not received a lot of scholarly attention, David Nathaniel Young wrote his 1968 doctoral dissertation on “The Mississippi Whigs, 1834-1860.”⁴ While Young’s discussion of Texas annexation is brief, he describes how divergent views concerning the controversial matter proliferated amongst Mississippi Whigs.⁵ Young concisely summarizes that Mississippi Whigs could be identified as either preferring Texas to remain as an independent republic or supportive of annexation within a particular context—specifically, for example, in a peaceful manner that would avoid war.⁶ Young does not mention *The Republican* or cite an example of a newspaper in favor of the concept of annexation. Nevertheless, he does discuss how both the *Vicksburg Whig* and *Jackson Southron* opposed annexation, with the *Vicksburg Whig* specifically expressing concerns over war and the *Jackson Southron* emerging as “the best champion” of opposition to immediate annexation, in support of the continuance of Texas as an independent republic.⁷ Together, *The Republican*, *Vicksburg Whig*, and *Jackson Southron* represent a consensus of Whig opposition to Texas annexation within the western region of Mississippi, a region dominated by planters predisposed to support Whigs.⁸

Nonetheless, displaying the strength of anti-annexation sentiment in Wilkinson County, *The Republican* of Woodville remains a neglected and significant source, with its endorsement of Whig presidential candidate Henry Clay in opposition to the pro-annexation Democrat Party candidate James K. Polk. The strength of these beliefs is evident both in the newspaper editor’s fervent writing and the fact that *The Republican* continued to thrive as the town’s trusted and established newspaper. As

³ Mississippi Department of Archives and History, “About *The Republican*.”

⁴ Young, “The Mississippi Whigs, 1834-1860.”

⁵ *Ibid.*, 139-140.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, 138.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 48.

the leader of the Whig Party and an eminent statesman with extensive political experience, Clay easily gained his party's nomination. While Clay ran for the presidency without success in the disputed election of 1824 and the election of 1832, he endured as an imposing political figure.⁹ For the Whigs, Clay's leadership in passing the Missouri Compromise of 1820 and mitigating the Nullification Crisis of 1833 made him a formidable candidate who represented Whigs' devotion to the Union, a devotion that was clearly apparent amongst Mississippi Whigs in 1844.¹⁰ Michael F. Holt accurately states that the conviction the Whigs had "in the appeal of Clay . . . was well placed," considering Clay's distinguished political career, in contrast with the inconspicuous Democrat Polk.¹¹

While different in character and political outlook, Clay of Kentucky and Polk of Tennessee nonetheless exhibited some similarities.¹² Both candidates were slaveholders who described slavery as a necessary evil, while possessing no intention of abolishing the practice.¹³ Indeed, Polk owned a cotton plantation in Yalobusha County, Mississippi.¹⁴ Historians including Daniel Walker Howe and David S. and Jeanne T. Heidler, have explained Clay's defeat by emphasizing the role in the election of the antislavery Liberty Party and its presidential candidate James G. Birney.¹⁵ While *The Republican* stresses its anti-annexation, pro-slavery stance, the newspaper mentions the threat of abolitionism more than Texas. This editorial position exemplifies the newspaper's attempt to exploit the Southern fear of abolitionism in order to depict annexation as a threat to slavery and thereby garner more opposition to Polk. Notably, *The Republican* does not fully discuss Clay's inconsistent reaction to Texas, likely in order to avoid any speculation amongst Southerners over whether Clay could be trusted to protect slavery.

⁹ Scott Farris, *Almost President: The Men Who Lost The Race But Changed The Nation* (Guilford, CT: Lyons Press, 2012), 20.

¹⁰ "John Q. Adams to Polk: 1825-1849," *The Presidents*, Vol 1, directed by Craig Haffner and Donna E. Lusitana (New York: The History Channel, 2005), DVD; Young, "The Mississippi Whigs, 1834-1860," 142.

¹¹ Michael F. Holt, *The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party: Jacksonian Politics and the Onset of the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 201.

¹² "John Q. Adams to Polk: 1825-1849," *The Presidents*.

¹³ John Seigenthaler, *James K. Polk* (New York: Times Books, 2003), 96.

¹⁴ Amy S. Greenberg, *A Wicked War: Polk, Clay, and the 1846 U.S. Invasion of Mexico* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012), 33.

¹⁵ Daniel Walker Howe, *The Political Culture of the American Whigs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 196; David S. Heidler and Jeanne T. Heidler, *Henry Clay: The Essential American* (New York: Random House, 2011), 392.

The presidential election of 1844 was a pivotal moment in the lead up to the Civil War and foretold the eventual demise of the Whig Party through the sharpening of sectional divisions. The question of American territorial expansion, specifically understood as “the Texas question,” was fiercely debated and the slavery controversy ominously re-emerged in 1844. Both the election of 1844 and the issue of Texas annexation had sectional as well as partisan consequences. In producing one of the narrowest results in American presidential electoral history, the election clearly demonstrates strong partisanship. Clay seemed invincible during the spring of 1844. However, the election results reflect one of the most remarkable transformations of electoral fortunes. In Wilkinson County, a county that demonstrated a strong base of Whig supporters throughout the antebellum presidential elections, the Whigs received only 55 percent of the total vote in 1844 compared to 82 percent in the rambunctious 1840 contest.¹⁶ While this outcome and the survival of *The Republican* both demonstrate that the majority opinion in the county at large was opposed to annexation, it simultaneously exhibits the divisiveness of Texas annexation.¹⁷ The election of 1844 was extremely close with the thirty-six Electoral College votes from New York determining victory.¹⁸ Notably, *The Republican* mentions New York frequently, clearly understanding the political importance of the state within the context of the highly contentious issue of abolitionism.

Historians have tended to overlook political divisions within the antebellum South as evidenced by the election of 1844. The majority of historians assume that Whig support must have been relatively modest as the Democrats swept the Deep South’s electoral votes.¹⁹ Indeed within Mississippi, the Whig Party has been dismissed as irrelevant considering the 19,206 votes Clay gained in contrast to Polk’s 25,126 votes in the state.²⁰ The relegation of Mississippi Whigs to largely “southwestern counties,” reflected the socio-political environment, “where politics were dominated by the conservative, slaveholding planters.”²¹ While Wilkinson County is an example of this demographic trend, Whig support within

¹⁶ Young, “The Mississippi Whigs, 1834-1860,” 48-49, 167.

¹⁷ Young, “The Mississippi Whigs, 1834-1860,” 167; Heidler, *Henry Clay*, 312.

¹⁸ Heidler, *Henry Clay*, 392.

¹⁹ John Bicknell, *America, 1844: Religious Fervor, Westward Expansion, and the Presidential Election That Transformed the Nation* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2014), 227.

²⁰ Westley F. Busbee, Jr., *Mississippi: A History*, 2nd ed. (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015), 97.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 98.

the county has not been adequately researched. *The Republican* provides evidence of Mississippi Whig's political strength that has been neglected by historians. Following Clay's defeat the newspaper emphasized that, "The gallant Whigs of 'Old Wilkinson' have achieved a GLORIOUS VICTORY" in the majority of the county having voted for Clay.²² *The Republican* is thereby a significant example of the degree of party loyalty maintained within some areas in the South, despite the sectional divisiveness encouraged by the campaign and the key issue of Texas annexation.

Despite the common perception of slavery having unified white Southerners, this case study on the 1844 election and its central campaign issue of Texas annexation as portrayed by *The Republican* clearly demonstrates the complex diversity of opinions on how best to strengthen the slave economy. The issue of westward expansion further exacerbated the inherently fractious nature of the Whig Party. The majority of historiography focuses on the geographical/sectional divide among Whigs, neglecting political divisions within regions. Indeed, in his tome *The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party: Jacksonian Politics and the Onset of the Civil War*, Holt briefly attributes the problematic nature of the Texas question for southern Whigs in general to a class and socio-economic divide.²³ Holt explains that, "Texas [was] a compelling issue in the South . . . especially to nonslaveholders."²⁴ While this explanation is persuasive, Holt generalizes that, "Some Whigs went so far as to argue, indeed, that annexation would weaken rather than strengthen slavery."²⁵ Holt's analysis exemplifies how the most dominant recent books concerned with antebellum politics neglect the special dilemma of Mississippi Whigs.

The Republican is thereby an important source that contributes to understanding the election of 1844, the divisive antebellum politics it represented, and the fractured nature of the Whig Party, which foretold its eventual demise prior to the Civil War. As some anti-slavery Whigs became affiliated with the Liberty Party, Democrats utilized the southern fear of abolitionism while successfully attacking anti-annexation sentiments.²⁶ The response of *The Republican* to the central and intertwined campaign

²² *The Republican*, November 9, 1844, University of Mississippi Archives and Special Collections. J.D. Williams Library, (Oxford, MS).

²³ Holt, *The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party*, 178-79.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 178.

²⁵ *Ibid*.

²⁶ Reinhard O. Johnson, *The Liberty Party, 1840-1848: Antislavery Third-Party Politics in the United States* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2009), 42.

issues during the 1844 election provides evidence of the divisions amongst Southerners. This article will focus on these campaign issues by firstly examining Texas annexation and slavery and secondly by analyzing abolitionism.

Texas and Slavery

The misperception of the South in general and Mississippi specifically, as having been united in support of Texas annexation has been based on the verbal and physical support some Mississippians gave to Texas prior to the 1844 election. White Mississippians had supported efforts for American migration to Texas and were motivated during times of economic hardship to migrate themselves, leaving the abbreviation for “Gone to Texas” (G.T.T), on their doors.²⁷ Mississippians supported both the Texas Revolution in 1836 and the recognition of the independent Republic of Texas in 1837.²⁸ However, the issue of Texas did not promote political consensus within the South or even Mississippi, as historians such as Westley F. Busbee have generalized.²⁹

The divisiveness of the issue of Texas annexation is apparent in that it received neither unified sectional nor partisan support. Holt quotes a Whig newspaper’s description of the Democrats’ pro-annexation resolutions in the Mississippi legislature in February 1844, as “supremely ridiculous.”³⁰ However, Holt does not analyze the fact that nearly two-thirds of Mississippi’s Whig legislators voted in opposition to the Democrats’ resolutions.³¹ While this fact provides evidence of a degree of party unity and policy cohesion, it also demonstrates that Mississippi Whigs were already divided, with one-third voting in favor of Texas annexation. This voting pattern among southern Whigs was replicated a year later in Congress, thereby providing evidence of the continued lack of sectional unity among Whigs.³² In contrast to these regional divisions, both historians Joel H. Silbey and Rachel A. Sheldon concur that in the

²⁷ Busbee, *Mississippi: A History*, 92-93; Dennis J. Mitchell, *A New History of Mississippi* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2014), 108.

²⁸ Busbee, *Mississippi: A History*, 93.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Holt, *The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party*, 177.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Joel H. Silbey, *Storm Over Texas: The Annexation Controversy and the Road to Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 86-87.

short-term, the Whigs maintained national unity.³³

Anti-annexation Whigs were representative of the divided response to annexation amongst southern Whigs. Mississippi Whigs would have been well aware of the divergence within the state legislature. Additionally, Whig Senator John Henderson of Mississippi was the only southern Whig not to vote in opposition to President John Tyler's annexation treaty following the Democrats' pro-annexation endorsement.³⁴ In contrast to the mounting evidence of the divisiveness of annexation amongst Mississippi Whigs, *The Republican* confidently stated, "The Whigs of Mississippi have great reason to take courage" in an attempt to portray extensive and unified Whig support within the state.³⁵

In opposing the pro-annexation platform of the Democrats, *The Republican* used cogent arguments, at first questioning the suitability of slavery in Texas by quoting a report made to the House of Representatives. This report included the statement that, "Slavery forbid by nature may be interdicted by organic law there [Texas]," therefore there was no reason for Southerners to support annexation, as there would be no lucrative gain for their slave economy.³⁶ On the contrary, the newspaper stressed that by the report's estimation the logical conclusion was that, "annexation instead of increasing the power or representatives of slavery in the union, will . . . certainly and greatly diminish their relative weight."³⁷ While recognizing the consistent concern amongst Southerners over the sectional balance of power in the Union, the newspaper followed the logic from the report of slave agricultural labor being incompatible with the topography of Texas and thereby depicted annexation as a threat, rather than a gain. *The Republican* editor concluded by asking, "What argument remains to tempt the South to the perpetration of an act of political suicide?"³⁸ This anti-annexation argument clearly preyed on the political and sectional fear of the South becoming dominated by the North, a fear that had persisted since America's founding.

However, the following week's issue of *The Republican* demonstrated

³³ Silbey, *Storm Over Texas*, 87; Rachel A. Shelden, "Not So Strange Bedfellows: Northern and Southern Whigs in the Texas Annexation Controversy, 1844-1845," in *A Political Nation: New Directions in Mid-Nineteenth Century American Political History*, eds., Gary W. Gallagher and Rachel A. Shelden (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2012), 26-27.

³⁴ Holt, *The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party*, 177-178.

³⁵ *The Republican*, July 27, 1844.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*

the divisiveness of annexation amongst Mississippi Whigs by providing a completely different portrayal of Texas, while continuing to oppose annexation. In contrast to the previous week's assessment, the newspaper altered its characterization of Texas, describing it as, "admirably adapted to the production of sugar, long staple cotton, and tobacco – the other articles, with the exception of rice, which are produced by slave labor."³⁹ It is possible that this change in the portrayal of the conditions for slavery in Texas was in response to the lack of credibility Southerners gave the previous report, as Southerners widely considered Texas as possessing the necessary attributes for slave agriculture. Although *The Republican* now depicted Texas as having the potential to become a slave state, the newspaper utilized this vision to continue to depict the potential harm of expanding the southern slave economy.

The change in *The Republican's* description of the topography of Texas likely reflected how white Southerners, across the political spectrum, associated Texas annexation with the spread of slavery. This contemporaneous association has encouraged the historiographical misconception that Texas annexation was overwhelmingly popular within the South. Silbey asserts that, "Most of the Southern Whigs went along with their party's anti-annexation position, however, although they did not intend to emphasize the issue in upcoming election campaigns."⁴⁰ Furthermore, the newspaper's two different portrayals of Texas both focus on the sectional issue of slavery rather than making a partisan appeal.

Representative of Mississippi Whigs, *The Republican* emphasized the importance of slave labor and by extension cotton to the southern economy. The newspaper cogently declared that, "It is the price of cotton which regulates exclusively the value of slaves."⁴¹ Having now depicted Texas as possessing a suitable climate for cotton cultivation, the newspaper continued to explain its anti-annexation position. In a verbose manner, *The Republican* editor declared:

... if the price of cotton is not ruinously reduced by over production, it will not be denied that slave labor can be employed in Texas with at least twice the profit which it yields in the average of the slave states of the Union. Our slaves will then be carried to Texas by the force of a law as fixed and certain as that by which

³⁹ *The Republican*, August 3, 1844.

⁴⁰ Silbey, *Storm Over Texas*, 48.

⁴¹ *The Republican*, August 3, 1844.

water finds its level.⁴²

In making a sectional appeal to voters to support Clay and oppose the pro-annexation Democrats, *The Republican* clearly emphasized the potential negative impact of Texas annexation to the strength of the slave economy within Mississippi. The newspaper's ominous warning to fellow slaveholding Southerners concerning the fate of their valuable slave economy is representative of some southern Whig anti-annexation sentiments, which are only ever fleetingly mentioned in the historiography of the election of 1844. Holt briefly mentions the advent of explanations by southern Whig opponents to Texas annexation as a response to the Democrats' libel, which affiliated the Whigs alongside any opponents of immediate annexation with abolitionism.⁴³ In Holt's convincing portrayal, southern Whig espousal of anti-annexation that stressed the potential impact on the southern economy, stemmed from their belief in the need to defend their loyalty to the South and slavery.⁴⁴ However, it is possible that some slaveholding Whigs, enjoying high economic status and personal political influence in the South, might have believed that annexation would have a detrimental impact on their plantations, while simultaneously feeling the need to defend their "peculiar institution."

Arguably, the potential rise of an abundance of non-slaveholding whites to competing planter status also contributed to anti-annexation Mississippi Whigs' concern over the impact of Texas on the slave economy, as described in *The Republican*. Slaveholding Mississippians represented the large migration of slavery into the Deep South that occurred throughout the antebellum era in response to the advent of King Cotton. From 1820 to 1860, Mississippi's white population increased eightfold, while the state's slave population increased tenfold.⁴⁵ In the decade from 1840 to 1850, Mississippi's overall population rose by over sixty percent with the white population expanding by sixty-five percent and the slave population rising by fifty-nine percent.⁴⁶ The economic benefit derived from this spread of cotton cultivation and slavery suggests that the anxiety of anti-annexation Mississippi Whigs may have reflected a personal fear of

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Holt, *The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party*, 178.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Census, "Statistics of Slaves," *Decennial Census*, <http://www2.census.gov/prod2/decennial/documents/00165897ch14.pdf> (accessed March 31, 2018).

⁴⁶ Young, "The Mississippi Whigs, 1834-1860," 58-59.

losing their coveted influence through the expansion of the planter class, rather than the expressed angst over the impact on the southern slave economy as a whole. *The Republican's* decision to oppose annexation may have reflected the concerns of the established planter community of Woodville. Therefore, the decision could have been motivated both by an attempt to retain elite political influence in Mississippi and as a means of uniting the Whig Party.

When considering the frequently disparate responses of southern Whigs to annexation, as evident in the 1844 Mississippi legislature's voting record and the 1845 vote in Congress, it would seem pertinent to contemplate both longer-term and contextual causal factors leading to the advent of anti-annexationist southern Whigs. Attempts to consolidate national party unity were a key long-term factor. Historian Randolph Campbell persuasively explains the failure of the annexation treaty in the U.S. Senate in June 1844.⁴⁷ He wrote "the annexation of Texas [as] a campaign issue ... cost the treaty the support of many Southern Whigs who otherwise would have voted for the addition of a new slave state."⁴⁸ Desperate to enact Whig policies after the disappointment of Tyler's presidency and having expelled him from their party, Whig unity was critical for a victorious election in the short-term and to endure as a national party in the long-term.⁴⁹ When referring to Tyler, *The Republican* even stated, "But the Ides of March are coming!"⁵⁰ This foretelling of disaster demonstrates the anxiety over annexation that *The Republican* clearly hoped would motivate voters to support the Whigs and, at least in the short-term, oppose annexation.

Nevertheless, partisanship and sectionalism are intertwined and equally important to understanding Southerners' divided response to Texas annexation in the election of 1844. The increasing realization of the danger of sectionalism to the unity of the Whig Party likely contributed to the open opposition of some southern Whigs to annexation. *The Republican* clearly depicted this fear of sectional strife as the newspaper described, a "vote for James K. Polk, (is a) vote for a dissolution of the Union, and the

⁴⁷ Randolph B. Campbell, *Gone to Texas: A History of the Lone Star State*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 183.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Sam Walter Haynes, *James K. Polk and the Expansionist Impulse* (London, United Kingdom: Pearson Longman, 2006), 57.

⁵⁰ *The Republican*, July 27, 1844.

formation of a Southern Confederacy.”⁵¹ This statement is representative of the Whig attempt to promote national unity and specifically, the attempt of anti-annexation southern Whigs to inspire national unity at the expense of the sectional issue of Texas annexation.⁵² Indeed during the 1844 campaign, support for Clay was evinced by Mississippi Whigs’ combined support for Clay’s vision of an empowered federal government and the Union.⁵³

The focus of the Whigs on national unity directly contrasted with the Democrats, who successfully exploited the sectional divisions exacerbated by the intertwined issue of annexation and slavery. This manipulation of sectional division allowed the more unified Democrats, supported by what Howe accurately describes as, “a handful of Southern Whigs [who] provided the crucial margin,” to win the election.⁵⁴ Through exploiting sectional divisions, the Democrats thereby achieved short-term success in their electoral victory but at the terrible cost of war both in the short-term with the Mexican-American War and in the long-term with the coming Civil War.

Despite the focus of the Whigs on national unity, *The Republican’s* particularly strong anti-annexation stance indicates that both sectional and regional divisions undid the Whigs. Historian Michael A. Morrison briefly describes that, “In the South, anti-annexationists perforce stood by Clay’s moderate position on Texas,” referring to Clay’s convoluted stance of being willing to discuss the eventual possibility of Texas annexation but opposing the immediate annexation policy of the Democrats.⁵⁵ Nevertheless, the consistent and potent anti-annexationist sentiments displayed by *The Republican* question the historiographical trend of understanding anti-annexation southern Whigs as “moderate” by necessity.

The clear pro-annexation platform of the Democrats placed Clay in an awkward position. As demonstrated through his previous leadership as the “Great Compromiser” during past crises, Clay prioritized the Union and as a candidate for president he naturally wanted to avoid alienating

⁵¹ Ibid, August 10, 1844.

⁵² Sheldon, “Not So Strange Bedfellows,” 17.

⁵³ Young, “The Mississippi Whigs, 1834-1860,” 142.

⁵⁴ Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 700.

⁵⁵ Michael A. Morrison, “Westward the Curse of Empire: Texas Annexation and the American Whig Party,” *Journal of the Early Republic*, 10, no. 2 (Summer 1990): 245.

either section.⁵⁶ Additionally, Clay wanted to focus on his national economic programs, collectively entitled the “American System” and could not comprehend that this issue did not appeal to voters as much as Texas annexation.⁵⁷ In contrast to Clay, *The Republican* clearly recognized that annexation had captured the imagination of the voters. The newspaper therefore discussed annexation, while ensuring to avoid descriptions of Clay’s apparent vacillating on the matter.

As exemplified through *The Republican*, explicit anti-annexation sentiments of Mississippi Whigs can be partially understood through the need to respond to the popularity of Democrats’ pro-annexation stance in the South. *The Republican* reprinted an article from the *Lynchburg Virginian* that explicitly identified the sectional divisiveness of the Texas question and attempted to portray their anti-annexation stance in support of party loyalty as a viable alternative to the sectional controversy. The newspaper stated that, “There are Northern as well as Southern friends of the annexation of Texas; but the arguments adapted to their degree of latitude not being exactly suited to ours, it is not surprising if they occasionally come in conflict with and refute each other.”⁵⁸ The fact that another southern newspaper expressed this anti-annexation sentiment in support of party unity further demonstrates the divisiveness that plagued the Whig Party and encouraged regional, rather than sectional, loyalty.

In contrast to the divided response of southern Whigs to the question of annexation, southern Democrats remained confident in their unity. Indeed, Democratic Senator Robert J. Walker of Mississippi declared that, “The Texas question will carry the South.”⁵⁹ *The Republican* reprinted an article from the *Wheeling Times* that quipped that the “*Locofoco Declaration of Principles*” consisted of a list of nine features that included Polk and repeatedly listed “Annexation,” “Texas,” “Texas Annexation,” and “Annexation of Texas.”⁶⁰ Locofoco was a disparaging term used by the Whigs to refer to the Democrats. Through the inclusion of Polk, this article portrays the Democrats as a one-issue party yearning for political power through that one issue. While southern Whigs identified and ridiculed the campaigning tactic of the Democrats, combating the effectiveness of

⁵⁶ Heidler, *Henry Clay*, 229.

⁵⁷ Robert V. Remini, *Henry Clay: Statesman for the Union* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1991), 634.

⁵⁸ *The Republican*, July 27, 1844.

⁵⁹ Walter R. Borneman, *Polk: The Man Who Transformed the Presidency and America* (New York: Random House, 2009), 115.

⁶⁰ *The Republican*, August 10, 1844.

the appeal of Texas became an insurmountable problem.

Whig policies needed to be clearly distinct from the Democrats. In contrast to the explicit pro-annexation platform of the Democrats, the Whig Party platform ignored the issue of Texas, focusing instead on national economic programs detailed in Clay's "American System."⁶¹ However, Whig economic policies could not compete with the allure of westward expansion, as promoted by the Democrats.⁶² Whigs were thereby forced to take a position on Texas, and Clay's equivocation failed to ensure that annexation remained a partisan issue, rather than a sectional or regional one dividing his party. *The Republican* demonstrates the existence of regional divisions within the South that prioritized sectional over partisan matters, as evident in the newspaper going beyond Clay's opposition of immediate annexation by appearing to oppose annexation entirely. Although the debate over Texas occurred amidst heightened partisanship during the 1844 election, annexation and slavery were both integrally sectional issues that existed within a context of rising sectionalism, evident in the fear of abolitionism.

Fear of Abolitionism

Fear of abolitionism was a powerful sentiment within the South throughout the antebellum era, but this fear was exacerbated during the election of 1844 as both Democrats and Whigs tried to utilize the anxiety to their political advantage. Howe explains that during the Second Party System, both "parties committed themselves to nationwide organization, and in both cases, the party's felt need to maintain a southern wing inhibited criticism of slavery."⁶³ While this is arguably accurate, the Democrat and Whig attempts to gain nationwide support in the 1844 election enhanced sectional divisions, evident through the vilifying of abolitionism that proliferated throughout the South irrespective of party.

As the explicitly pro-annexationist party, Democrats were able to easily identify the divided southern Whigs with abolitionism. Holt accurately describes the Democrats' ability to convincingly associate "opposition to immediate annexation with abolitionism" and ferment sectional concerns amongst white Southerners over being dominated

⁶¹ Greenberg, *A Wicked War*, 41, 47.

⁶² Farris, *Almost President*, 43.

⁶³ Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 511.

by the North.⁶⁴ In targeting sectional loyalties, “Democrats castigated Clay and the Whig Party as traitors to the South.”⁶⁵ In response, *The Republican* devoted a distinctly greater proportion of articles to the danger of abolitionism than to Texas annexation. This position is likely due to The Republican’s awareness of the need to respond to the Democrat attacks that associated Clay with abolitionism. Furthermore, it is possible that *The Republican* regarded exploiting the fear of abolitionism by attempting to depict the Democrats as abolitionists and convincing voters to support the Whigs, as a more potent approach than subduing the fascination with Texas annexation within the South.

Anti-annexation southern Whigs were consistently forced to defend themselves against being disparaged as so-called abolitionists. Democrats even stigmatized Clay as an abolitionist, a ludicrous misrepresentation considering that Clay himself was a slaveholder. *The Republican* continuously attempted to refute the conspiratorial claim emphasizing Clay’s political experience as “that great statesman” and referring to those who slandered Clay with the term abolitionist as “uneducated political quacks.”⁶⁶

Notably, while annexation was a unique component of the 1844 election, abolitionism was a persistent “slander” throughout the antebellum era. Amy S. Greenberg concisely notes that, “Democrats perennially linked Whigs with abolitionists.”⁶⁷ Nevertheless, the publication of a letter written by Clay’s abolitionist cousin Cassius M. Clay on August 13, 1844, in the *New-York Daily Tribune*, encouraged scrutiny of Clay’s pro-slavery stance.⁶⁸ Cassius Clay wrote the letter in an attempt to convince antislavery Northerners to vote for Henry Clay and the Whigs, as opposed to the abolitionist Liberty Party.⁶⁹ Reflecting this intent, the published letter portrayed Henry Clay’s sentiments as “with the [abolitionist] cause.”⁷⁰

Clay was painfully aware of the sectional divisiveness of the campaign. He exasperatingly described his predicament of being depicted in the South “as a Liberty Man, [while] at the North I am decried as an ultra

⁶⁴ Holt, *The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party*, 178.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *The Republican*, August 17, 1844.

⁶⁷ Greenberg, *A Wicked War*, 116.

⁶⁸ Gary J. Kornblith, “Rethinking the Coming of the Civil War: A Counterfactual Exercise,” *Journal of American History*, 90, no. 1 (June 2003): 93.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

supporter of slavery; when in fact I am neither one nor the other.”⁷¹ Association with the term “Liberty,” in the context of slavery and particularly with reference to the abolitionist Liberty Party, was especially detrimental to the Whig campaign in the South, despite the fact that it distorted Clay’s convictions as a fellow slaveholder. While attempting to clarify his stance on slavery, Clay described the letter as “doing great mischief to the Whig cause.”⁷² *The Republican* demonstrates the amount of “mischief” that occurred through the Democrats’ endeavor to slander and divide the Whigs.

Undoubtedly, abolitionism was a “slanderous” term and deemed an insult to white southern character and honor. In responding to attacks on Clay in July, *The Republican* stated that, “The price of greatness is the envy and hatred of meaner minds.”⁷³ The consistency of the Democrats in attacking Whigs as abolitionists is evident in that the allegation that Henry Clay was an abolitionist had existed prior to the publication of Cassius Clay’s letter, and *The Republican* had rebuked the charge throughout the summer of the campaign. In an article entitled, “Mr. Clay And His Revilers,” *The Republican* attempted to emphasize the good character of the Whigs in contrast to the Democrats.⁷⁴ The newspaper described how, “Every patriotic heart must be pained at the recital of the scenes of riot and disorder that come to us on the wing of every wind.”⁷⁵ This attempt on the part of *The Republican* to inspire party unity by portraying the innocent Whigs being viciously denigrated by the Democrats was altered later in the campaign.

In October and November, perhaps as a result of perceiving the fissures amongst southern Whigs, *The Republican* attempted to rouse party loyalty by attacking the Democrats with reference to abolitionism. The issue published on October 26, 1844, contains two striking headlines.⁷⁶ One heading urged “WHIGS AWAKE!!” and encouraged party unity as, “It is high time that every true Whig girden his armor and go forth to battle.”⁷⁷ The other enlarged heading, “BIRNEY (ABOLITIONIST) FOR

⁷¹ Melba Porter Hay, ed., *The Papers of Henry Clay: Candidate, Compromiser, Elder Statesman: January 1, 1844-June 29, 1852*, vol. 10 (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1991), 114-115.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 115.

⁷³ *The Republican*, July 27, 1844.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, October 26, 1844.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

POLK!" illustrated the sectional stakes of the election.⁷⁸ In attempting to provide evidence that associated the Democratic Party with abolitionism, *The Republican* openly implored voters, "Will you of the South never take heed? Will you of the South never become alive to the insidious designs of the enemy?"⁷⁹ This sectional appeal, depicting the South as cohesive through its protection of slavery, demonstrates *The Republican's* effort to minimize both the appearance of sectional and party divisions that the question of Texas annexation had encouraged throughout the heat of the campaign.

Honor was an explicit component in *The Republican's* attempt to slander the Democrats as abolitionists. Referring to an article from the "locofoco paper," the *Philadelphia Spirit of the Times*, the Democrats were disparaged by *The Republican* as possessing "the honor of being 'opposed to the traffic in human flesh!'"⁸⁰ The emphasis of the term "honor" both confronted the abolitionist portrayal of slaveholders, and especially slave traders, as dishonorable men, while simultaneously it connoted the supposedly chivalrous code of southern honor that was meant to define society and the behavior of white gentlemen of the planter class. *The Republican's* endeavor to incite the widespread sectional concern shared by white Southerners over abolitionism is further evident in the emphasis of another quote from *Philadelphia Spirit of the Times* that stated, "FREEDOM FOR THE BOUND!"⁸¹ It is easy to deduce that *The Republican* was trying to depict the Democrats as untrustworthy on the issue of slavery.

In attempting to convince more Southerners that the Democrats could not be trusted to protect slavery, *The Republican* also invoked Martin Van Buren, the last Democrat to hold the office of President. Referring to Van Buren's re-election attempt during the presidential election of 1840, *The Republican* stated, "You need not be reminded of your indignation against the abominable abuses of Van Buren's government – the chicanery of the loco party – the prostitution of its presses . . . you contended against . . . negro suffrage."⁸² The emphasis on "negro suffrage" was likely intended to stoke fear amongst white Southerners by associating the Democratic Party with abolitionism and thereby encourage southern voters to

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid, November 2, 1844.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² *The Republican*, October 19, 1844.

support the Whigs. As a northern Democrat, Van Buren was an easy target for southern Whigs to encourage suspicions over his opinions on slavery, although Van Buren had recognized the importance of sustaining the Democrats as a national party by previously courting southern planters.⁸³ It is probable that as southern Whigs “feared association with abolitionists,” they considered it necessary to strongly oppose the Democrats’ allegations and respond in kind with libelous charges, as demonstrated by *The Republican*.⁸⁴ This fear of southern Whigs correlated to the understanding that the sectional nature of abolitionism represented an insurmountable challenge to the viability of a nationally unified party.

In their final issue prior to the election, *The Republican* made a direct appeal to Wilkinson County voters that reflected concerns over both the future of southern interests and the Union. Following their presentation of the Democrats as abolitionists, the newspaper asked, “Which party now do you consider the abolition party?”⁸⁵ Confident of their ability to persuade voters, the article continued by stating, “Vote then for Henry Clay. He is the only hope of the South – the only hope of the Union.”⁸⁶ The use of the term “Union,” which avoided any reference to the North, is significant within the context of portraying Clay as a candidate representative of white southern interests, while simultaneously suitable to be entrusted with the national interests. In contrast, Holt describes how white Southerners, “could indeed be excited by Democratic warnings that it was now or never for Texas and that on the issue of annexation, the future of the South was at stake.”⁸⁷ It is therefore important to understand *The Republican*’s comparative emphasis on the election and the Democrats’ pro-annexation platform as being simultaneously detrimental to the future of slavery and therefore the South, as well as the future of the Union.

Intertwined fears existed amongst some white Southerners over anti-annexation sentiments and abolitionism. These fears were equally integral to the advent and persuasiveness of the apocalyptic predictions the Democrats made over the future of the South during the campaign. *The Republican* attempted to effectively respond to the fears of some white Southerners that had been fueled by the Democrats. The newspaper did this by incorporating the catastrophic predictions of the Democrats

⁸³ Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 508-509.

⁸⁴ Greenberg, *A Wicked War*, 116.

⁸⁵ *The Republican*, November 2, 1844.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ Holt, *The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party*, 179.

that would have been familiar to southern voters, into their rationale for supporting the Whigs. *The Republican* focused on encouraging party unity within the South. In an article entitled, "SOUTHTRONS!" the newspaper prayed that, "God grant it may not be too late," to inspire sectional party unity.⁸⁸ Referring to New York, *The Republican* predicted that Polk would "receive the whole abolitionist vote of that State!"⁸⁹ The newspaper illustrated this prediction as further evidence of the connection between Democrats and abolitionism, describing "The Polk battery is now fully unmasked!"⁹⁰ Furthermore, *The Republican* presented the supposed association between Democrats and abolitionism as a conspiracy, "To conceal their own turpitude towards the South, the cry has been raised and kept up, that Henry Clay was an abolitionist!"⁹¹ Nevertheless, the Democrats were very successful in their tactic of adapting and localizing their campaign platform of westward expansion to effectively respond to widespread sectional sentiment.

In the South, Democrats emphasized the necessity of Texas annexation as a bulwark against the impending threat of abolitionism. By comparison, Democrats in New York did not advocate their party's policy of annexation due to recognizing the strength of the abolitionist Liberty Party within the state.⁹² *The Republican* endeavored to expose the sectional contradictions within the Democrats campaign in an article entitled, "*The Whig Spirit in New York*."⁹³ The article optimistically described how, "The late effort to scratch Texas from the democratic ticket has brought utter disorganization and hopeless confusion into the party."⁹⁴ The Democrats' tactic of making separate appeals to the North and South was clearly apparent to *The Republican*, but its effectiveness appeared impossible to diffuse amongst divided southern Whigs.

The Democrats clearly modified the appearance of their pro-annexation platform in order to gain support amongst both Northerners and Southerners. Nevertheless, Howe emphasizes the long-term distinction between the parties evident in that, "The Whigs tolerated antislavery among their Northern supporters, while the Democrats

⁸⁸ *The Republican*, November 2, 1844.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² Holt, *The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party*, 175.

⁹³ *The Republican*, August 31, 1844.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

did not.”⁹⁵ This analysis seems to be a generalization that contrasts with the 1844 campaign in New York, when it would appear that the Democrats altered the focus from their pro-annexation platform so as to attract antislavery supporters in this extremely close election. However, the difference between the parties that Howe stresses is significant in demonstrating the Whigs’ longstanding focus on the Union and desire to retain a national party, despite its members representing sectional divisions within the Whig Party’s increasingly non-cohesive coalition.

The Republican utilized the final publication of the newspaper prior to the election in another effort to expose and emphasize the hypocrisy of the Democrats. The newspaper described the repeated Democratic slander that accused, “against all truth, Mr. Clay of having a Northern and a Southern face.”⁹⁶ The Democratic portrayal of the Whigs as a party divided by section was hypocritical to *The Republican* considering how Democrats, “wear themselves sore on the Texas hobby, while they kick it out of the question at the North.”⁹⁷ This characterization of the Democrats portrays how they had successfully turned the election into a referendum on Texas annexation. The depiction of Clay as a vacillating sectional candidate was arguably effective in veiling the sectional nature of the Democrats’ campaign.

For *The Republican*, the result of the election was evidence that the Democratic tactic of utilizing sectional divisions had triumphed over the Whigs. Following Clay’s defeat, the newspaper described how, “the false charge of Abolitionism against Mr. Clay has been preserved.”⁹⁸ Indeed *The Republican* came to the conclusion that the Democrats were responsible for causing “every sectional feeling” to have been incited.⁹⁹ While this was clearly an exaggerated partisan response to the electoral defeat of their favored candidate, the role of the Democrats in increasing sectional tension by making westward expansion the core of their campaign cannot be denied. The centrality of sectionalism in determining the campaign result is evident specifically through Clay’s loss of New York and overall in Polk’s victory being a result of a campaign that utilized sectional discord to exploit the divisions within the already fractured Whig Party.

Explaining the Whig Party’s loss of the election of 1844 remains a

⁹⁵ Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 511.

⁹⁶ *The Republican*, November 2, 1844.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, November 9, 1844.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

controversial question. The majority of historiography has reflected the party's explanation for its loss in emphasizing the role of the Liberty Party in New York, which took 3.3 percent of the vote away from Clay.¹⁰⁰ In fact, if Clay had won only one-third of the Liberty Party's votes in New York, he would have won the election.¹⁰¹ In contrast, the Democrats inspired unity through a campaign focused on westward expansion that actively sought to exacerbate sectional divisions so as to cause a schism within the Whig Party. However, the divided response of Southerners to the question of Texas annexation demonstrates that regional divisions were one of the unforeseen consequences of the Democrats' campaign. The Democrats had not acknowledged that some voters in the Deep South would support the Whig Party and openly advocate against annexation as a threat to their slave economy.

As demonstrated by *The Republican*, despite being a national party some southern Whigs seem to have felt compelled to respond to the abolitionist "slander" by defending their identity as white Southerners. A defense of slavery and slaveholders as honorable defined this identity, which some southern Whigs, as reflected by *The Republican*, argued was compatible with opposing annexation. However, the unintended consequence of this method of responding to the Democrats' attacks by emphasizing the Whigs' identity as representative of one section, was that it became impossible to depict the Whigs as a unified national party. As Greenberg explains, "Because the Whigs and the Democrats were national parties, a candidate who alienated the mass of his supporters in one or another region lost all hope of winning a national election."¹⁰² This accurately describes the inability of the Whigs to coalesce as a national party under the increasing pressure of sectionalism.

Conclusion

The Republican provides an insightful lens that increases understanding of the divisions amongst Mississippi Whigs during the election of 1844. The newspaper clearly demonstrates how the intertwined issues of Texas annexation and abolitionism incited division amongst the Whigs on both a sectional and regional level. *The Republican* also

¹⁰⁰ Vernon L. Volpe, "The Liberty Party and Polk's Election, 1844," *Historian*, 53, no. 4 (June 1991): 706.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 691.

¹⁰² Greenberg, *A Wicked War*, 14.

demonstrates that through the existence of some southern Whigs opposing annexation, Texas was simultaneously a sectional and regionally divisive issue. Contrastingly, abolitionism persistently divided Northerners against Southerners.

Although the Democrats' sectional campaign tactics of focusing on Texas and tarring anti-annexationists as abolitionists exacerbated these divisions, the schism they aggravated had greater implications in foretelling the eventual demise of the Whig Party. Abolitionism and anti-slavery sentiments were constant representations of the sectional divide that threatened the existence of the Whig Party. While Whigs consistently sought to inspire national unity, representative of the party's devotion to the Union, the intertwined nature of the question of Texas annexation and the future of slavery fanned the flames of sectionalism.

Through its anti-annexation stance, *The Republican* demonstrates the necessity of recognizing how this neglected source demonstrates the existence of regional divisions in Mississippi. The newspaper thereby provides a unique perspective of the 1844 election specifically and the socio-political environment of the antebellum South more broadly. *The Republican* stood strong against the Democrats' sectional campaign favoring annexation, instead arguing that annexation would threaten the slave economy. *The Republican* thereby defies the perception of the Deep South as united in favor of westward expansion and significantly demonstrates how Southerners were divided.

