

# Rethinking the Coming of the Civil War: A Counterfactual Exercise

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In their classic work, *The Rise of American Civilization*, Charles A. Beard and Mary R. Beard famously termed the Civil War “a Second American Revolution and in a strict sense, the First.” Over the past seventy years, historians have often debated the merits of the Beards’ classification and the extent to which the Civil War transformed the social structure of the United States. Scholars have shown much less interest in comparing the causes of and preludes to the two great military conflicts that defined American national identity. This lacuna in the historiography is surprising because, on even cursory inspection, the parallels are striking. Both the Revolution and the Civil War broke out roughly a dozen years after the formal conclusion of a war for empire on the North American continent that ended in an overwhelming triumph for Anglo-Americans. In each case, the acquisition of new territory raised critical questions about the authority structure of the empire and the limits of local autonomy. What began as a debate over the powers of the central government developed into a full-blown constitutional crisis that resulted in a declaration of independence and military resistance by several geographically contiguous provinces (thirteen in the case of the Revolution, eleven in the case of the Civil War). Faced with armed insurrection, the central government raised a huge military force to suppress the rebels, and a long and brutal war ensued. Although the ultimate results of the military conflicts differed greatly, the patterns of events leading to war seem remarkably similar.<sup>1</sup>

This congruence suggests that it would be useful to revisit the causation of the Civil War with the model of the American Revolution in mind. For guidance in this task, I turn to John M. Murrin’s provocative essay “The French and Indian War, the Ameri-

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<sup>1</sup> Charles A. Beard and Mary R. Beard, *The Rise of American Civilization* (2 vols. in 1, New York, 1930), II, 54. For recent discussions of the Beards’ thesis, see James M. McPherson, *Abraham Lincoln and the Second American Revolution* (New York, 1990), 3–22; and Roger L. Ransom, “Fact and Counterfact: The ‘Second American Revolution’ Revisited,” *Civil War History*, 45 (March 1999), 28–60. The few efforts to compare the American Revolution and Civil War include Kevin Phillips, *The Cousins’ War: Religion, Politics, and the Triumph of Anglo-America* (New York, 1999); and Benjamin L. Carp, “Nations of American Rebels: Understanding Nationalism in Revolutionary North America and the Civil War South,” *Civil War History*, 48 (March 2002), 5–33.

can Revolution, and the Counterfactual Hypothesis: Reflections on Lawrence Henry Gipson and John Shy.” Noting that “Gipson was one of few American historians to erect counterfactual arguments into explicit research tools,” Murrin accepted Gipson’s methodology but questioned his conclusions. Whereas Gipson posited that “had Canada remained French after 1763, . . . ‘Americans [would] have continued to feel the need as in the past to rely for their safety’” on the mother country and would not have rebelled, Murrin argued almost the opposite. By his account, the “Gallic Peril” had never produced Anglo-American harmony, and after the Canadian cession the mainland colonists were more, not less, vulnerable to military pressure from the north if they wished to secede from the British Empire. Thus the French departure from Canada was not the necessary and sufficient cause of the American War of Independence.<sup>2</sup>

Murrin acknowledged, however, that “important links can indeed be established between [Gipson’s] ‘Great War for the Empire’ and the American Revolution.” With wry delight, Murrin portrayed those connections as more ironic than ironclad. He traced how British policy makers in the 1760s overlooked the successes of the later years of the French and Indian War to address problems from the early years that no longer required solutions. “The war provided a catalyst for all kinds of change,” he concluded, “but evidently it could not alter the habitual way that politicians looked at old problems. . . . Britain may actually have lost her colonies because, in the last analysis, the English simply did not know how to think triumphantly.”<sup>3</sup>

Like Murrin, I want to address the “important links” between a war for empire and a war for independence. My focus is on a different pair of wars: the Mexican-American War of 1846–1848 and the American Civil War of 1861–1865. My counterfactual hypothesis is also a bit different. Rather than project a different military outcome, I posit the absence of the Mexican-American War.

Eliminating the Mexican-American War takes an act of imagination, but not an act of wild fantasy. The key to peace in my counterfactual scenario is a victory by Henry Clay over James K. Polk in the very close presidential election of 1844. Had Clay won 5,107 more votes in New York State (out of more than 485,000 cast there), he would have become president. As a result Texas would almost certainly have remained an independent republic in 1845, and the United States would not have gone to war with Mexico the following year. Based as it is on a highly plausible turn of events, this counterfactual scenario promises to advance our understanding of the causes of the Civil War.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> John M. Murrin, “The French and Indian War, the American Revolution, and the Counterfactual Hypothesis: Reflections on Lawrence Henry Gipson and John Shy,” *Reviews in American History*, 1 (Sept. 1973), 307–18, esp. 308.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 312, 316. Other discussions of the connections between the French and Indian War and the American Revolution include Jack P. Greene, “The Seven Years’ War and the American Revolution: The Causal Relationship Reconsidered,” *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 8 (Jan. 1980), 85–105; and Fred Anderson, *Crucible of War: The Seven Years’ War and the Fate of Empire in British North America, 1754–1766* (New York, 2000), esp. 737–46. For recent counterfactual speculations on the revolutionary era, see J. C. D. Clark, “British America: What If There Had Been No American Revolution?,” in *Virtual History: Alternatives and Counterfactuals*, ed. Niall Ferguson (New York, 1999), 125–74; and Steve Tally, *Almost America: From the Colonists to Clinton: A ‘What If’ History of the U.S.* (New York, 2000), 13–51.

<sup>4</sup> For state-by-state results of the 1844 presidential election, see Charles Sellers, “Election of 1844,” in *History of American Presidential Elections, 1789–1984*, ed. Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., Fred L. Israel, and William P. Hansen (10 vols., New York, 1985–1986), II, 861.

## Fundamentalism, Revisionism, and Counterfactual Method in Civil War Historiography

Historians of the coming of the Civil War have commonly been divided into two camps: those who believe the sectional conflict was irrepressible and those who do not. Members of the first camp, whom I will designate fundamentalists, argue that the war resulted inevitably from the divergence of northern and southern social systems—a divergence epitomized by (and, for most fundamentalists, rooted in) the contrast between free labor in the North and chattel slavery in the South. Members of the second camp, usually labeled revisionists, acknowledge that there were important sectional differences, but they contend that the differences, including the contrasting views of slavery, were potentially reconcilable. According to the revisionists, had it not been for poor political leadership, the fanaticism of irresponsible agitators, or extrinsic factors such as the upsurge of nativism in the North, the American political system would have contained the sectional conflict over slavery and ultimately eliminated the peculiar institution without resort to massive violence.<sup>5</sup>

Since the 1960s the fundamentalist perspective has gained ascendancy among academic historians. Eugene D. Genovese, James M. McPherson, and Eric Foner, among others, have argued with subtlety and brilliance that North and South were distinct societies irreversibly headed for a collision by the mid-nineteenth century. It would have been only a matter of time, those scholars contended, until the social divergence of North and South forced a realignment of the political system along sectional lines, which in turn would have triggered secession and the outbreak of war. “As North and South increasingly took different paths of economic and social development and as, from the 1830s onward, antagonistic value systems and ideologies grounded in the question of slavery emerged in these sections,” wrote Foner, “the political system inevitably came under severe disruptive pressures. Because they brought into play basic values and moral judgments, the competing sectional ideologies could not be defused by the normal processes of political compromise, nor could they be contained within the existing inter-sectional political system.”<sup>6</sup>

Yet if the fundamentalist perspective dominates much current historiography, revisionism survives and in certain circles even flourishes. Some new political historians, including Joel H. Silbey, Michael F. Holt, and William E. Gienapp, have challenged what they consider a teleological fallacy embedded in the fundamentalist interpretation. They have argued that the politics of the 1850s were shaped by multiple factors, not just sectionalism, and their close analyses of the demise of the second party sys-

<sup>5</sup> This schematic summary follows Michael F. Holt, *The Political Crisis of the 1850s* (New York, 1978), 1–2. Useful guides to the enormous historiography of Civil War causation include Thomas Pressly, *Americans Interpret Their Civil War* (New York, 1962); Eric Foner, *Politics and Ideology in the Age of the Civil War* (New York, 1980), 15–33; and James M. McPherson, *Ordeal by Fire: The Civil War and Reconstruction* (New York, 2001), B16–B35. Collections of essays include Gabor S. Boritt, ed., *Why the Civil War Came* (New York, 1996); Michael Perman, ed., *The Coming of the American Civil War* (Lexington, Mass., 1993); and Kenneth M. Stampp, ed., *The Causes of the Civil War* (New York, 1991).

<sup>6</sup> Eugene D. Genovese, *The Political Economy of Slavery: Studies in the Economy and Society of the Slave South* (New York, 1967); McPherson, *Ordeal by Fire*; James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York, 1988); Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party before the Civil War* (New York, 1995); Foner, *Politics and Ideology in the Age of the Civil War*, 35.

tem and the rise of the Republicans suggest paths not taken by fallible politicians who could have acted differently. In their dissent from the fundamentalist consensus, these modern-day revisionists raised the banner of historical contingency against the siren call of historical determinism. Gienapp was especially explicit. “The creation of the Republican party, and its emergence as a powerful political organization, was one of the most crucial links, if not *the* most crucial link, in the chain of Civil War causation,” he wrote. “There was nothing inevitable, however, about the rise of the Republican party. Another set of events in the 1850s might have led to a different outcome, and thus the historian must analyze these developments from the perspective of the time, with due allowance for chance and contingency, rather than reasoning backward from the war’s beginning in 1861.”<sup>7</sup>

The disagreement between fundamentalists and revisionists over determinism and contingency makes the application of counterfactual method to the problem of Civil War causation particularly appropriate. The two sides differ about which causal factor or factors were necessary and sufficient to explain the outbreak of the war. Put another way, they disagree about which factor or factors, *if taken away*, would have stopped the Civil War from breaking out roughly when and how it did. Fundamentalists argue, in effect, that only if the social and cultural systems of North and South had not diverged so strongly from the early nineteenth century forward could the war have been avoided. Removing other historical factors would have made little or no difference. By contrast, revisionists contend that the causal chain was more extended and more tenuous, that the removal of other links would have interrupted or halted the trend toward war as late as the mid-1850s.

Were history a laboratory science, one would design an experiment where various causes were added and subtracted to see which altered the outcome (war or peace) in a statistically significant fashion. But historians can run experiments only in their heads, where they imagine what would have happened if a given factor were absent or, alternatively, if a factor not actually present had been added to the historical mix. Such thought experiments are necessarily speculative, and if a historian imagines something thoroughly outlandish—such as the landing of Martians in 1845—there is little to be gained from the exercise. But when applied seriously and carefully, counterfactual method can help historians to think more clearly about causation and to distinguish between essential factors and coincidental developments that, however striking, were irrelevant to the great train of events. The British historian Niall Ferguson has gone so far as to argue that “it is a *logical* necessity when asking questions about causation to pose ‘but for’ questions, and to try to imagine what would have happened if our supposed cause had been absent. For this reason, we are obliged to construct plausible alternative pasts on the basis of judgements about probability; and these can be made only on the basis of historical evidence.”<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Joel H. Silbey, *The Partisan Imperative: The Dynamics of American Politics before the Civil War* (New York, 1985); Holt, *Political Crisis of the 1850s*; William E. Gienapp, *The Origins of the Republican Party, 1852–1856* (New York, 1987); William E. Gienapp, “The Crisis of American Democracy: The Political System and the Coming of the Civil War,” in *Why the Civil War Came*, ed. Boritt, 79–124, esp. 95.

<sup>8</sup> Niall Ferguson, “Introduction: Virtual History: Towards a ‘Chaotic’ Theory of the Past,” in *Virtual History*, ed. Ferguson, 87. For a contrary argument, see Brian Holden Reid, *The Origins of the American Civil War* (New

The application of counterfactual method to the problem of Civil War causation is not new. In his classic article "The Natural Limits of Slavery Expansion," published in 1929, the revisionist Charles W. Ramsdell declared, "Had this question [whether the federal government should permit and protect the expansion of slavery into the western territories] been eliminated or settled amicably, there would have been no secession and no Civil War." The question could and should have been resolved peacefully, Ramsdell opined, because slavery had already reached its natural limits and was destined soon to disappear. "Even those who wished it destroyed," he hypothesized, "had only to wait a little while—perhaps a generation, probably less"—for its demise.<sup>9</sup>

Writing a half century later, the fundamentalist Kenneth M. Stampp offered an alternative counterfactual scenario. Stampp postulated that an antislavery movement was bound to develop in the North during the early nineteenth century. "In a society notable for its doctrinaire belief in individual liberty, its plethora of reform movements, and its religious revivals in a millennial context," he wrote, "the failure of an abolitionist crusade to materialize would have been a difficult fact for historians to explain." Only if southerners had shunned proslavery ideology and endeavored to reform slavery themselves might sectional conflict have been avoided. They would also have had to accept "a federal policy of confining slavery to the fifteen states that recognized it at the time of the Mexican War" and to engage in public discussion of ways to achieve gradual emancipation. Stampp thought those counterfactual conditions were historically implausible. Contrary to the revisionists, he thought the sectional conflict over slavery irrepressible and the Civil War, "if not inevitable, at least an understandable response to its stresses by men and women no more or less wise than we."<sup>10</sup>

Although Stampp's counterfactual scenario differed dramatically from Ramsdell's, both authors identified the debate over the status of slavery in the federal territories as a critical element in the escalation of the sectional conflict. So have most other historians, regardless of their position on irrepressibility. A counterfactual scenario that begins with a victory by Henry Clay in the 1844 presidential election promises to remove that element from public discourse. For had Clay won, the "manifest destiny" of the United States would probably not have included Texas and the lands ceded by Mexico in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo.<sup>11</sup>

### The Election of 1844

At the opening of 1844, many political observers believed Henry Clay would be chosen the next president of the United States. John Tyler, the incumbent, had acceded to

York, 1996), 7–8.

<sup>9</sup> Charles W. Ramsdell, "The Natural Limits of Slavery Expansion," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 16 (Sept. 1929), 151, 171.

<sup>10</sup> Kenneth M. Stampp, *The Imperiled Union: Essays on the Background of the Civil War* (New York, 1980), 225, 234, 245.

<sup>11</sup> On why the territorial issue was especially provocative, see David M. Potter, *The Impending Crisis, 1848–1861*, ed. Don E. Fehrenbacher (New York, 1976), 18–62. For an excellent treatment of this theme, see Michael

office upon the death of William Henry Harrison three years before. Though nominally a Whig, he had thoroughly alienated the mainstream of the party by opposing its fiscal program and repeatedly vetoing congressional initiatives. Consequently, Clay seemed assured of the Whig nomination in 1844, and with the nation's economy still sluggish after years of depression, he planned to run on a platform emphasizing governmental support for economic development. His anticipated Democratic rival was Martin Van Buren, the former president who had been at the country's helm when the economy crashed in the late 1830s. So long as Clay could keep the election focused on traditional economic issues, he appeared almost certain to win.<sup>12</sup>

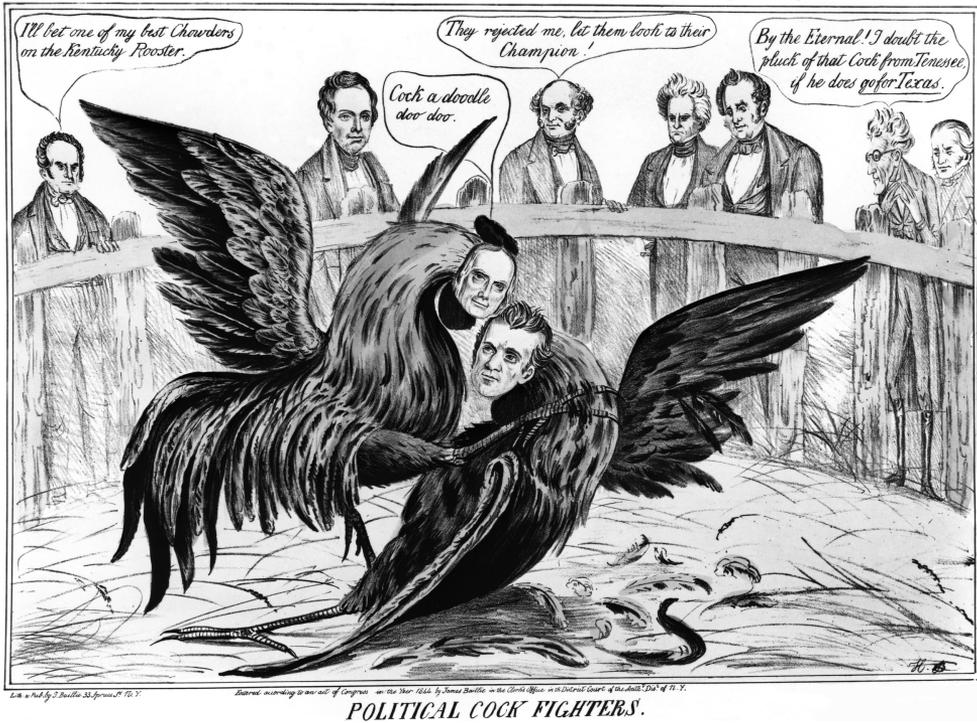
Of course, Clay actually lost the election of 1844, and before we can reverse this outcome even as an act of imagination, we need to consider why. If his defeat resulted from irresistible popular enthusiasm for westward expansion and war, then Clay's election might have only delayed, not prevented, the annexation of Texas and the outbreak of hostilities with Mexico. But if his loss was caused by other, relatively ephemeral factors, then the implications are more significant: his election could have set the nation on a very different course in the mid-1840s, one that might have ended in a permanently smaller United States and no civil war—at least no civil war in the early 1860s.<sup>13</sup>

The most obvious factor in Clay's defeat in 1844 was the Democrats' nomination of James K. Polk at their national convention in Baltimore in late May. Often described as the first dark horse candidate to win a major party nomination for president, Polk triumphed on the ninth ballot after support for Van Buren dissolved and Van Buren's fellow New Yorker Silas Wright declined to be considered. According to the historian Charles Sellers, "Long-running, impersonal tendencies had so divided the Democratic party by the spring of 1844 that Van Buren's nomination was doubtful, even had the Texas issue never been raised." And of course the Texas issue was raised, further alienating Van Buren, who opposed immediate annexation, from expansionist Democrats in the South and West. More mysterious was the behavior of Silas Wright, the widely respected Democratic leader in the U.S. Senate and a close ally of Van Buren's, who shared the Little Magician's reservations about the annexation of Texas. Before the convention began, Van Buren penned a secret letter declaring that if he should prove unable to gain the nomination, he would throw his support behind Wright. But Wright penned his own secret letter flatly refusing to stand for the presidency. "Never before or since has an American politician so clearly thrown away a presidential nomination that was so certainly in his grasp," observed

A. Morrison, *Slavery and the American West: The Eclipse of Manifest Destiny and the Coming of the Civil War* (Chapel Hill, 1997).

<sup>12</sup> Michael F. Holt, *The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party: Jacksonian Politics and the Onset of the Civil War* (New York, 1999), 162–68.

<sup>13</sup> For varied views on the depth and extent of public enthusiasm for westward expansion during the 1840s, see Frederick Merk with Lois Bannister Merk, *Manifest Destiny and Mission in American History: A Reinterpretation* (New York, 1966); Robert W. Johannsen, *To the Halls of the Montezumas: The Mexican War in the American Imagination* (New York, 1985); Thomas R. Hietala, *Manifest Design: Anxious Aggrandizement in Late Jacksonian America* (Ithaca, 1985); and Morrison, *Slavery and the American West*, 13–38. For counterfactual speculations on the implications of a victory by Henry Clay in 1844, see Robert V. Remini, *Henry Clay: Statesman for the Union* (New York, 1991), 668; and Don E. Fehrenbacher, *Lincoln in Text and Context: Collected Essays* (Stanford, 1987), 14.



In this 1844 cartoon, the battling roosters are the presidential candidates Henry Clay and James K. Polk. With Polk injured, Clay appears headed for victory while Daniel Webster (far left), Martin Van Buren (center), and Andrew Jackson (second from right), among others, watch from ringside. *Courtesy Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, LC-USZ62-1972.*

Sellers with some astonishment. As a result of Wright's decision, the Democrats left Baltimore with the pro-annexationist Polk at the head of their ticket and an unprecedented partisan commitment to westward expansion.<sup>14</sup>

By itself, Polk's nomination did not doom Clay's candidacy. Indeed, at first many Whig leaders gleefully predicted Clay would beat Polk by a landslide. After all, Polk had lost his last two electoral forays in fruitless pursuit of the Tennessee governorship. He lacked what we today call "name recognition" with the general public, while Clay was among the most famous Americans of the era. "Who is James K. Polk?" jeered Whigs, who also expected that President Tyler's independent candidacy would divert votes from the Democratic standard-bearer. But by the end of the summer, Tyler had withdrawn in favor of Polk, and the call for immediate annexation of Texas was proving more potent than Clay and his supporters had anticipated.<sup>15</sup>

John Tyler had originally hoped to use the Texas issue to salvage his "accidental" presidency and to win the 1844 election in his own right. At the urging first of Abel P. Upshur and then of John C. Calhoun, successive secretaries of state, Tyler negoti-

<sup>14</sup> Charles Sellers, *James K. Polk* (2 vols., Princeton, 1957–1966), II, 106, 94.

<sup>15</sup> Holt, *Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party*, 168–207.

ated a treaty of annexation with the republic of Texas, which he sent to the Senate for ratification in late April 1844. Along with the treaty the administration conveyed a copy of Calhoun's letter to Britain's minister to Washington, Richard Pakenham, explaining that by annexing Texas the United States sought to protect slavery in the South and to frustrate an alleged British abolitionist conspiracy. While the Pakenham letter generated quite a stir, it did nothing to improve chances of ratification in the Whig-dominated Senate, where the treaty went down to defeat by the overwhelming vote of 35 to 16 in early June. Yet Calhoun's controversial missive served a larger political purpose: it made annexation a litmus test of support for slavery and thereby placed Clay and his fellow Whigs on the defensive in the South after Polk, rather than Van Buren, emerged as the Democratic candidate.<sup>16</sup>

Although Clay had been a rabid "war hawk" early in his career, in 1844 he cited the prospect of military conflict with Mexico as the primary argument against annexing Texas. In a letter from Raleigh, North Carolina, dated April 17 and published ten days later, he declared, "Annexation and war with Mexico are identical. Now, for one, I certainly am not willing to involve this country in a foreign war for the object of acquiring Texas." Even were the United States to win such a war rapidly (and Clay had his doubts about an easy victory), it would be dishonorable. It would also be unwise, he argued, to add territory without a national consensus. "No motive for the acquisition of foreign territory would be more unfortunate, or pregnant with more fatal consequences, than that of obtaining it for the purpose of strengthening one part against another part of the common Confederacy," he wrote. "Such a principle, put into practical operation, would menace the existence, if it did not certainly sow the seeds of a dissolution of the Union."<sup>17</sup>

Over the course of the 1844 campaign, Clay restated his opposition to annexation in a series of public letters. Critics charged that he retreated from his initial stand, while he insisted otherwise. By any reading, he remained explicitly opposed to the immediate annexation of Texas. Did that position by itself cost him the election? It undoubtedly hurt him in the South, where the Democrats could better take advantage of what William J. Cooper Jr. has called "the politics of slavery." "As the campaign closed," Cooper explained, "the Democratic issue of Texas had driven Whig economic issues from the center ring of the southern political arena. The politics of slavery reigned once again as the monarch of southern politics. Not only did Texas smash the politics of economics, it also gave the South to Polk."<sup>18</sup>

<sup>16</sup> William W. Freehling, *The Road to Disunion: Secessionists at Bay, 1776–1854* (New York, 1990), 372–425; Merrill D. Peterson, *The Great Triumvirate: Webster, Clay, and Calhoun* (New York, 1987), 344–48. For a more sympathetic interpretation of John Tyler's motives, see Edward P. Crapol, "John Tyler and the Pursuit of National Destiny," *Journal of the Early Republic*, 17 (Fall 1997), 467–91.

<sup>17</sup> Henry Clay to the editors of the *Washington Daily National Intelligencer* [Joseph Gales and William W. Seaton], April 17, 1844, in *The Papers of Henry Clay*, ed. James F. Hopkins et al. (11 vols., Lexington, Ky., 1959–1992), X, 43, 44. On the intellectual assumptions underlying Clay's approach to foreign affairs, see Daniel Walker Howe, *The Political Culture of the American Whigs* (Chicago, 1979), 140–45; and Major L. Wilson, *Space, Time, and Freedom: The Quest for Nationality and the Irrepressible Conflict, 1815–1861* (Westport, 1974), 114–18.

<sup>18</sup> William J. Cooper Jr., *The South and the Politics of Slavery, 1828–1856* (Baton Rouge, 1978), 217. On Clay's apparent vacillation during the 1844 campaign, see Sellers, "Election of 1844," 788–90; Peterson, *Great Triumvirate*, 360–65; and Remini, *Henry Clay*, 659–62. On Whig opposition to Texas annexation, see Michael A. Morri-

In his comprehensive study, *The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party*, Michael F. Holt presented a more complicated analysis. “More than likely . . . the Texas issue contributed heavily to the Democratic surge in Dixie,” Holt acknowledged. But he argued that the election was decided elsewhere. “The Whigs lost the election in the North, not in the South.” And in the North “the Texas issue, if anything, helped the Whigs far more than it did either the Democrats or the Liberty party.” By Holt’s account, it was mainly a shift in the distribution and magnitude of the immigrant vote that blocked Clay’s presidential ambitions. An “increase in ethnic and religious animosities . . . turned the vast majority of foreign-born and Catholic voters against” the Whigs, Holt explained. “Democrats [were] terrifyingly successful in mobilizing massive numbers of new immigrant voters behind Polk and their other candidates.”<sup>19</sup>

The results in New York were so close that any effort to identify a single cause for Clay’s defeat is futile. Had even one-third of New York’s 15,812 Liberty party voters cast their ballots for Clay in 1844, he would have won the state and with it the presidency. Alternatively, a slightly lower turnout among New York City’s immigrant voters could have made all the difference. In retrospect, the outcome of the 1844 presidential election seems more arbitrary than inevitable. Certainly, it was not caused by an irresistible groundswell of popular support for war with Mexico. That groundswell came eighteen months later—after Polk sent his war message to Congress on May 11, 1846—and it would not have emerged had Clay become president. Indeed, even under Polk popular enthusiasm for the war was short-lived, as the Whigs’ triumph in the congressional elections of 1846–1847 attests.<sup>20</sup>

### Texas, Oregon, and California

Having established that a Clay victory in 1844 was thoroughly plausible, we can, proceeding with our thought experiment, consider the implications of such a victory for American political and social development. First, we must ponder the fate of Texas. Unable to point to the electoral outcome as an endorsement of his policies, Tyler would not have succeeded in pushing through Congress a joint resolution authorizing annexation before he left office. At the urging of the president-elect, Whigs in the Senate—southern as well as northern—would have cited Clay’s victory to justify their continued opposition to annexation. Had Henry Clay taken office as president on March 4, 1845, he would have enjoyed a good deal of flexibility in crafting his policy toward the Lone Star Republic.<sup>21</sup>

son, “Westward the Curse of Empire: Texas Annexation and the American Whig Party,” *Journal of the Early Republic*, 10 (Summer 1990), 221–49.

<sup>19</sup> Holt, *Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party*, 200, 201, 203.

<sup>20</sup> Sellers, “Election of 1844,” 861. For a different perspective on the 1844 election, see Vernon L. Volpe, “The Liberty Party and Polk’s Election, 1844,” *Historian*, 53 (Summer 1991), 691–710. On popular response to James K. Polk’s war message, see Johannsen, *To the Halls of the Montezumas*, 8. On the Whig victory in the 1846–1847 congressional elections, see Merk with Merk, *Manifest Destiny and Mission in American History*, 96–97; and Holt, *Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party*, 208–58. On opposition to the Mexican-American War, see John H. Schroeder, *Mr. Polk’s War: American Opposition and Dissent, 1846–1848* (Madison, 1973).

<sup>21</sup> On Tyler’s success in pushing the joint resolution through Congress, see Frederick Merk with Lois Bannister Merk, *Slavery and the Annexation of Texas* (New York, 1972), 101–61; and Freehling, *Road to Disunion*, 440–52.



### THE TWO BRIDGES.

Lithography and Print Coloring on reasonable terms by James Baillie 112 33 Spruce Street New York.

This pro-Whig cartoon portrays the 1844 election as a choice between two bridges: the well-constructed People's Bridge traversed by Henry Clay and his running mate, Theodore Frelinghuysen, and the dilapidated Loco Foco Bridge which has collapsed and plunged James K. Polk and other prominent Democrats into the water. The Presidential Chair, pictured right, thus awaits Clay. *Courtesy Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, LC-USZ62-1277.*

Clay's private writings indicate that he did not consider the annexation of Texas essential to the national interest. In December 1843, well before Texas became a campaign issue, Clay explained his views in some detail to his personal friend and political ally John J. Crittenden. Declaring that "the territory of the United States is already large enough," Clay laid out his vision of what would happen if Texas were to remain independent:

Texas is destined to be settled by our race, who will carry there, undoubtedly, our laws, our language, and our institutions, and that view of her destiny reconciles me much more to her independence than, if it were to be peopled by another and an unfriendly race. We may live as good neighbors, cultivating peace commerce and friendship. I think you will find that it will turn out that there is not the smallest foundation for the imputation of a design on the part of Great Britain to establish a colony of Texas. Such an attempt, on her part, would excite the hostility of all the great Powers of Europe, as well as the United States.

For Clay, the optimal outcome would be a free and autonomous Texas, friendly to the American nation yet not part of it.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Clay to John J. Crittenden, Dec. 5, 1843, in *Papers of Henry Clay*, ed. Hopkins et al., IX, 898, 899.

Nothing Clay wrote publicly or privately over the next year suggests a significant shift in his perspective. To be sure, in his so-called first Alabama letter, dated July 1, 1844, he declared, "Personally, I could have no objection to the annexation of Texas." Yet he added immediately, "I certainly would be unwilling to see the existing Union dissolved or seriously jeopardized for the sake of acquiring Texas." Likewise, in his second Alabama letter, dated July 27, 1844, he wrote, "Far from having any personal objection to the annexation of Texas, I should be glad to see it without dishonor—without war, with the common consent of the Union, and upon just and fair terms." The conditions he listed precluded immediate annexation. If he were elected, he maintained, "I should be governed by the paramount duty of preserving this Union entire, and in harmony." Electoral defeat did not change his views. In a private communication to Crittenden in early January 1845, Clay reiterated, "Among my fears, one is that [Texas] will, if annexed, disturb the Territorial balance of the Union and lead to its dissolution."<sup>23</sup>

In framing his policy toward annexation, Clay assumed that, contrary to the forebodings of Upshur, Tyler, and Calhoun, Great Britain would not intervene overtly to end slavery in Texas. Yet William W. Freehling has recently reaffirmed the findings of earlier scholars that the British desire to promote emancipation in the Lone Star Republic was quite genuine. In 1843 George Gordon, Lord Aberdeen, the British foreign secretary, floated a proposal coupling Mexican recognition of Texan independence with abolition and British assistance. Sam Houston, then president of the Texas republic, briefly displayed some interest. But Aberdeen withdrew the suggestion of a *quid pro quo* the following year, and thereafter he temporized on the question of Texan abolition for fear of encouraging American annexation. Given competing foreign policy priorities, the British were unprepared to risk major involvement in Texas in the face of American opposition. A President Clay would have objected to any British effort to promote abolition in Texas for the same reason he opposed annexation of Texas: his overriding concern was the maintenance of sectional harmony and American political stability.<sup>24</sup>

In all likelihood, Aberdeen and Clay would have joined diplomatic forces in support of Texan sovereignty. In early 1845 the British and French undertook a new initiative to convince Mexico to recognize Texan independence, and Mexican authorities reluctantly agreed. Although the Mexican government would have felt less compelled to comply had Clay rather than Polk been elected, it could not have comfortably ignored the combined pressure of Great Britain, France, and the United States. We may postulate that sooner or later during Clay's presidency Mexico would

<sup>23</sup> Clay to Stephen Miller, July 1, 1844, *ibid.*, X, 79; Clay to Thomas M. Peters and John M. Jackson, July 27, 1844, *ibid.*, 91; Clay to Crittenden, Jan. 9, 1845, *ibid.*, 187.

<sup>24</sup> Freehling, *Road to Disunion*, 395–401, 433–34. On British behavior, see Merk with Merk, *Slavery and the Annexation of Texas*, 3–32; Justin H. Smith, *The Annexation of Texas* (New York, 1941), 356–81; David M. Pletcher, *The Diplomacy of Annexation: Texas, Oregon, and the Mexican War* (Columbia, Mo., 1973), 121–22, 134–35; Sam W. Haynes, "Anglophobia and the Annexation of Texas: The Quest for National Security," in *Manifest Destiny and Empire: American Antebellum Expansionism*, ed. Sam W. Haynes and Christopher Morris (College Station, 1997), esp. 117; and Lelia M. Roeckell, "Bonds over Bondage: British Opposition to the Annexation of Texas," *Journal of the Early Republic*, 19 (Summer 1999), 257–78.

have recognized Texan independence and entered into international arbitration over boundary issues. Even had the Mexican government continued to refuse official recognition, it would probably have shrunk from open warfare and allowed the Lone Star Republic to consolidate authority and power further.<sup>25</sup>

Under Clay, diplomatic collaboration between the United States and Great Britain would have extended beyond Texas to the Oregon controversy. Lord Aberdeen and Edward Everett, Tyler's ambassador to Britain, had already worked out the basic contours of a settlement in 1843. Unlike Polk, Clay most likely would have kept Everett, a Whig, at his post in London. Clay would also have accepted the forty-ninth parallel as a compromise boundary in the Northwest more quickly than Polk did—probably in time to get the treaty through the Senate before midterm state and congressional elections. Nor would Clay have felt great political pressure from his political opponents; both Thomas Hart Benton and John C. Calhoun were against fighting a war for “greater Oregon.”<sup>26</sup>

The destiny of California under a Clay presidency is harder to project with confidence. Even without the advent of war with the United States, Mexico would have sustained its claims to sovereignty only with difficulty. In early 1844 the beleaguered governor of California, Manuel Micheltorena, recommended to his superiors in Mexico City that they consider handing the province over to British creditors rather than let it fall into the hands of American immigrants and *californios* (Californians of Hispanic descent). “In August 1844,” wrote David J. Weber, “a group of *californios* met secretly with British vice consul James Forbes in Monterey and told him they were ready to drive Micheltorena out of California, declare independence, and ask for British protection.” Without instructions from London, Forbes was stymied, but the rebels nonetheless succeeded in ousting Micheltorena in early 1845. They stopped short of declaring independence, however, and soon divided among themselves. Meanwhile, Americans in California prepared to take matters into their own hands, and in June 1846 they staged the Bear Flag Revolt. “Even if [the Mexican-American War] had not occurred,” Weber asserted, “Americans in California had become numerous enough to think they could play the ‘Texas game’ and win.”<sup>27</sup>

Whether the discovery of gold in 1848 would have prompted President Clay to show more enthusiasm for annexing California than he did for annexing Texas is hard to know. Fellow Whig (but political rival) Daniel Webster had long hoped to acquire San Francisco and the surrounding area for the United States. Yet Clay was more sensitive than Webster to sectional tensions and to the explosive consequences of adding new territory to the federal domain. As with Texas, Clay might well have preferred strong commercial ties with California to the national and international controversies sparked by annexation. For this reason, he would probably have encouraged California to remain independent so long as it avoided an open alliance

<sup>25</sup> Pletcher, *Diplomacy of Annexation*, 190–93; Smith, *Annexation of Texas*, 382–431. On the boundary dispute, see Mark J. Stegmaier, *Texas, New Mexico, and the Compromise of 1850: Boundary Dispute and Sectional Crisis* (Kent, 1996).

<sup>26</sup> Pletcher, *Diplomacy of Annexation*, 217–20, 319.

<sup>27</sup> David J. Weber, *The Mexican Frontier, 1821–1846: The American Southwest under Mexico* (Albuquerque, 1982), 269, 206.



A Lesser United States

This map represents one of the “might-have-beens” imagined by the historical geographer D. W. Meinig in his analysis of nineteenth-century America. Henry Clay’s election to the presidency in 1844 would, this article argues, have produced a similar distribution of territory. *Reprinted from D. W. Meinig, The Shaping of America: A Geographical Perspective on Five Hundred Years of History (4 vols., New Haven, 1986–), II, 215, figure 26. © Yale University Press. Reprinted by permission.*

with Great Britain or another foreign power. Certainly, the possibility that California could have flourished as a separate nation deserves serious consideration. The historical geographer D. W. Meinig has written, “Was there ever a region better designed by Nature for separate geopolitical existence than Alta California—a land so distinctive and attractive, set apart by the great unbroken wall of the Sierra Nevada backed by desert wastelands, fronting on the world’s greatest ocean, focused on one of the world’s most magnificent harbors?”<sup>28</sup>

Alternatively, under pressure from Democratic expansionists in Congress, a President Clay might have proposed pairing the annexation of Texas and California—a reprise of the Missouri Compromise with its coupling of Missouri and Maine. But that scenario seems less probable than the establishment of an independent California because it presupposes Mexico’s peaceful acquiescence, a most unlikely development. In keeping with past policy, Britain would have supported Mexican objections to American annexation (as distinct from Texan or Californian independence), and Clay would have backed away from a war for territorial expansion. His commitment to diplomacy, rather than force of arms, would almost surely have curtailed the country’s westward growth for the duration of his presidency.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Pletcher, *Diplomacy of Annexation*, 99–100; D. W. Meinig, *The Shaping of America: A Geographical Perspective on Five Hundred Years of History* (4 vols., New Haven, 1986–), II, 216.

<sup>29</sup> On November 13, 1847, Clay declared that a desire for San Francisco Bay “should form no motive in the prosecution of the war, which I would not continue a solitary hour for the sake of that harbor.” He expressed an interest in negotiating the purchase of the bay, however. Henry Clay, “Speech in Lexington, Ky.,” in *Papers of Henry Clay*, ed. Hopkins et al., X, 371.

## The Second Party System under a Clay Presidency

By avoiding war with Mexico, Henry Clay would have freed himself to focus on the economic policies dearest to his vision of an American system: maintaining a protective tariff, promoting internal improvements, and reestablishing a national bank. Undoubtedly Congress would have divided over this program along partisan lines, and the initial result would most likely have been political deadlock since Democrats held majorities in both houses in 1845–1846. Whatever the immediate legislative outcome, however, the conflict over economic issues would have strengthened the second party system and pushed the slavery question into the background of national politics.

In *The Political Crisis of the 1850s*, Michael Holt has astutely explained how the second party system curbed sectionalism and promoted political stability by means of partisan conflict:

As long as the parties fought with each other over national and state matters, voters developed allegiances that often became their preeminent identification. . . . As long as men thought in old party terms, long-standing sectional differences over Negro slavery could not produce sectional disruption. . . .

More important, popular faith in the political system rested on ideology. Inter-party conflict over a broad range of issues at different levels of government increased popular confidence in the ability to achieve goals through the ebb and flow of party competition and thereby increased popular reluctance to adopt drastic apolitical or constitutional remedies for sectional grievances. The party battle itself seemed to insure the protection of republicanism, of liberty and equality, which was the most fundamental goal of Americans in both the South and the North.

In other words, partisan identities counterbalanced sectional identities, and partisan conflict reassured Americans that republican government was functioning responsibly and responsibly.<sup>30</sup>

By Holt's account, even under Polk's presidency partisan loyalties trumped sectional identities. He cited party-line votes on the Independent Treasury bill and the Walker tariff as key evidence. But although he claimed that "its impact on the party system . . . has been exaggerated," he conceded that the Wilmot Proviso opened a "deep chasm . . . between North and South over slavery in the territories." He observed, "Even though the problem it addressed—what to do with slavery in Mexican territory—was strictly hypothetical until the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was ratified and the country actually received land from Mexico in 1848, the conflicting passions aroused by the Proviso most definitely proved a threat to the national parties and to the nation itself."<sup>31</sup>

Now imagine what would have happened under a Clay administration. Instead of the Independent Treasury bill, Clay would have sought a new national bank—or at least a national "fiscal corporation" along the lines proposed by congressional Whigs in the summer of 1841. Instead of the Walker tariff, Clay would have upheld protec-

<sup>30</sup> Holt, *Political Crisis of the 1850s*, 37–38.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 49, 50.

tionism, a position with growing appeal in parts of the South and continuing support in the Northeast. He also would have endorsed federal aid for improvements of harbors and rivers. Prominent Democrats would have continued to argue the case for territorial expansion, but the issue would not have exploded as it did under Polk. Without the Mexican-American War, there would have been no Wilmot Proviso. Without the Wilmot Proviso, there would have been no debate in the late 1840s over the status of slavery in federal territories. The Missouri Compromise had settled that question for the territory within the Louisiana Purchase. Without the acquisition of new western land, it would not have been raised again during Clay's presidency.<sup>32</sup>

Charles Ramsdell long ago argued from a revisionist perspective that the debate over slavery extension in federal territories was a red herring. Likewise, the Beards argued from a fundamentalist perspective that the debate over federal power in the territories was a smoke screen for more essential economic motives. Yet by transforming long-standing differences over slavery into an issue of national policy with constitutional dimensions, the Wilmot Proviso was essential to the exacerbation of sectional tensions that culminated in the Civil War. As Arthur Bestor has explained, "Territorial expansion drastically changed the character of the dispute over slavery by entangling it with the constitutional problem of devising forms of government for the rapidly settling West. Slavery at last became, in the most direct and immediate sense, a constitutional question, and thus a question capable of disrupting the Union. It did so by assuming the form of a question about the power of Congress to legislate for the territories." Peter B. Knupfer has elaborated the argument: "The danger from the emergence of rival sectional constitutionalisms was that their implementation would be decided not in a Congress elected by a fraction of the adult male population but in a political system encompassing Congress, an activist and emotional party press, and mass political parties that extended their reach into the remotest corners of the country." Under a Clay presidency, the debate over slavery would have persisted and probably intensified, but without territorial expansion, it would not have been framed in terms of irreconcilable constitutional interpretations, each with passionate popular support.<sup>33</sup>

### The Future of Slavery

According to early-twentieth-century revisionists, the Civil War was unnecessary not only in that it could have been avoided but also in that its foremost positive accomplishment—the abolition of slavery—would have occurred soon regardless of the fighting. Because fundamentalists find the first part of the revisionists' case unpersuasive, they rarely address the second part. Yet our thought experiment demands that we revisit the "natural limits" thesis and other arguments for the impending doom of slavery. Although Clay's election in 1844 would not have resolved the sectional con-

<sup>32</sup> Remini, *Henry Clay*, 586–96; Holt, *Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party*, 233–36.

<sup>33</sup> Arthur Bestor, "The American Civil War as a Constitutional Crisis," *American Historical Review*, 69 (Jan. 1964), 338; Peter B. Knupfer, *The Union As It Is: Constitutional Unionism and Sectional Compromise, 1787–1861* (Chapel Hill, 1991), 167.

flict, it almost certainly would have delayed the outbreak of open warfare well beyond April 1861. If peace had prevailed in the early 1860s, would slavery have gone into rapid decline over the next generation, making moot the core issue of sectional controversy?

Some fundamentalist historians have agreed with revisionists that slavery as an economic system was in trouble by the 1850s. In *The Political Economy of Slavery*, Eugene D. Genovese wrote, "Without the acquisition of fresh lands there could be no general reform of Southern agriculture. The Southern economy was moving steadily into an insoluble crisis." Genovese and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese reiterated that position in *Fruits of Merchant Capital*. Slaveholders in the upper South might sell their slaves south to help make ends meet, but by weakening the institution's hold on the upper South, that process undermined the slaveholders' political position nationwide.<sup>34</sup>

In *Slavery, Capitalism, and Politics in the Antebellum Republic*, John Ashworth offered a similarly glum assessment of the structural constraints on southern economic development. "On the eve of the Civil War three-quarters of US cotton was exported and the nation supplied no less than 70 percent of Britain's need," he observed.

But this success concealed structural weaknesses in the southern economy. For the British textile industry was, it has been argued, on the brink of a major downturn in 1860 and never again would demand increase at the pace of the antebellum years. The consequences for the South, even without war and emancipation in the 1860s, would have been extremely painful.<sup>35</sup>

Both the Genoveses and Ashworth analyzed the Old South from a Marxist perspective, emphasizing the noncapitalist features of an economy based on slave rather than wage labor. Starting from neoclassical premises, Robert William Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman have arrived at dramatically different conclusions. "Far from being cavalier fops," Fogel and Engerman wrote in *Time on the Cross*, "the leading planters were, on the whole, a highly self-conscious class of entrepreneurs." Slavery allowed them to achieve greater economic efficiency than northern farmers, and southern planters had good reason to anticipate continued prosperity over the long term. They were not overly dependent on cotton, nor was cotton cultivation reaching its natural limits in the antebellum era. "The assumption that the quantity of additional land available for use in cotton was almost exhausted by 1860 is false," Fogel and Engerman stated bluntly. "The land devoted to cotton nearly doubled between 1860 and 1890; it more than doubled between 1890 and 1925."<sup>36</sup>

The fire storm of criticism that greeted *Time on the Cross* prompted Fogel to review and extend his research, but it did not change his mind about the capitalist character and long-term prospects of the Old South. In *Without Consent or Contract*,

<sup>34</sup> Genovese, *Political Economy of Slavery*, 28; Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene D. Genovese, *Fruits of Merchant Capital: Slavery and Bourgeois Property in the Rise and Expansion of Capitalism* (New York, 1983), 47.

<sup>35</sup> John Ashworth, *Slavery, Capitalism, and Politics in the Antebellum Republic: Commerce and Compromise, 1820–1850* (Cambridge, Eng., 1995), 89–90.

<sup>36</sup> Robert William Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman, *Time on the Cross* (2 vols., Boston, 1974), I, 201, 96–97.

published fifteen years after *Time on the Cross*, he characterized the antebellum southern economy as “a flexible, highly developed form of capitalism” with plenty of capacity for growth. He explicitly disputed the hypothesis that the southern economy stood on the verge of crisis in 1860 because global demand for cotton was destined to weaken as the British textile industry reached maturity. Not only did demand for cotton remain high until the 1870s, he wrote, but slaveholders were also better able—and more willing—to reallocate resources away from cotton than the hypothesis assumes. Although he acknowledged that the antebellum South lagged behind the North in the development of manufacturing, he denied that slavery and industrialization were incompatible. According to Fogel, the southern economy was structurally sound in 1860, and—but for the Civil War—it would probably have grown at a healthy pace for decades to come.<sup>37</sup>

Not all cliometricians have endorsed Fogel and Engerman’s optimistic assessment of southern prospects in 1860. In *The Political Economy of the Cotton South*, Gavin Wright argued “that the slave South . . . would have faced difficulties after 1860. The continuing political friction between slaveowners and free white workers served notice that a drastic reallocation of slave labor would not have gone uncontested.” Wright offered his own speculations about what might have happened in the absence of the Civil War. “Perhaps a variant of a South African compromise would have been developed, where free white workers were given sufficient guarantees and privileges to secure their political loyalty to slavery.”<sup>38</sup>

For all their analytical differences, recent historians of the political economy of the Old South have agreed on one crucial point: southern slavery was not nearing a peaceful conversion to free labor when the Civil War broke out. As Wright explained, “The notion that slavery would have faded away peacefully in the late nineteenth century has always been a wishful chapter in historical fiction, not part of a plausible counterfactual history.”<sup>39</sup> Thus we may safely postulate that had Henry Clay been elected president in 1844 and had civil war been avoided in 1861, slavery would have persisted in the United States well past 1865. The fate of the South’s peculiar institution rested less on its intrinsic weaknesses as a system of economics than on the relative strength of proslavery and antislavery forces in American politics.

### The Future of Antislavery

In his memorial tribute to Henry Clay, delivered on July 6, 1852, Abraham Lincoln discussed Clay’s seemingly contradictory stance on slavery. “He ever was, on principle and in feeling, opposed to slavery,” Lincoln observed. “And yet Mr. Clay was the owner of slaves.” Throughout his political career, Clay supported the gradual aboli-

<sup>37</sup> Robert William Fogel, *Without Consent or Contract: The Rise and Fall of American Slavery* (New York, 1989), 64, 84–113.

<sup>38</sup> Gavin Wright, *The Political Economy of the Cotton South: Households, Markets, and Wealth in the Nineteenth Century* (New York, 1978), 127.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 157. On convergence among scholars of the Old South, see Mark M. Smith, *Debating Slavery: Economy and Society in the Antebellum American South* (Cambridge, Eng., 1998), 87–94.

tion of slavery, but “he did not perceive . . . how it could be at *once* eradicated, without producing a greater evil, even to the cause of human liberty itself.” Lincoln sympathized with Clay, whom he praised for opposing “both extremes of opinion on the subject” of slavery’s future in the United States.

Those who would shiver into fragments the Union of these States; tear to tatters its now venerated constitution; and even burn the last copy of the Bible, rather than slavery should continue a single hour, together with all their more halting sympathisers, have received, and are receiving their just execration; and the name, and opinions, and influence of Mr. Clay, are fully, and, as I trust, effectually and enduringly, arrayed against them. But I would also, if I could, array his name, opinions, and influence against the opposite extreme—against a few, but an increasing number of men, who, for the sake of perpetuating slavery, are beginning to assail and to ridicule the white-man’s charter of freedom—the declaration that “all men are created free and equal.”<sup>40</sup>

For Clay, the wise alternative to both immediate abolition and permanent enslavement was gradual emancipation combined with African colonization. Lincoln concurred, and he celebrated Clay’s role as president of the American Colonization Society. “If as the friends of colonization hope, the present and coming generations of our countrymen shall by any means, succeed in freeing our land from the dangerous presence of slavery; and, at the same time, in restoring a captive people to their long-lost father-land, with bright prospects for the future; and this too, so gradually, that neither races nor individuals shall have suffered by the change,” Lincoln declared, “it will be indeed a glorious consummation. And if, to such a consummation, the efforts of Mr. Clay shall have contributed, it will be what he most ardently wished, and none of his labors will have been more valuable to his country.”<sup>41</sup>

In light of Lincoln’s eulogy, it is tempting to propose that had Henry Clay been elected president in 1844, he would have used the office’s executive powers to promote a program of gradual emancipation and colonization. Yet Clay’s attempt to distance himself from Cassius Marcellus Clay during the 1844 campaign suggests otherwise. Cassius Clay, Kentucky’s foremost abolitionist, sought to persuade antislavery northerners to support his distant cousin instead of James G. Birney, the Liberty party candidate. In a letter published by the *New-York Daily Tribune* on August 13, Cassius Clay claimed that, while Henry Clay opposed immediate emancipation, “his feelings are with the cause.” But Henry Clay promptly issued a strongly worded public denial. “Mr. C. M. Clay’s letter was written without my knowledge, without any consultation with me, and without any authority from me,” he wrote. “So far as he ventures to interpret my feelings, he has entirely misconceived them.” Citing his own previous statements, Clay argued further “that Congress has no power or authority over the institution of Slavery” and “that the existence, maintenance and continuance of that Institution depend, exclusively, upon the power and authority of the respective States, within which it is situated.” Whatever his moral reservations about sla-

<sup>40</sup> Abraham Lincoln, “Eulogy on Henry Clay at Springfield, Illinois, July 6, 1852,” in *Abraham Lincoln: Speeches and Writings, 1832–1865*, ed. Don E. Fehrenbacher (2 vols., New York, 1989), I, 268–69.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 271.

very, Clay by 1844 was unwilling to expend his own political capital on or to sacrifice national unity for black emancipation.<sup>42</sup>

If Clay as president would not have acted to end slavery, neither would he have acted to expand it. Instead, he would have sought to keep the slavery question out of national politics. By championing legislation to implement his American system, he might have succeeded to a considerable extent. Like his nemesis, Andrew Jackson, before him, he might even have become sufficiently controversial in and of himself to serve as the focus of partisan struggles. Yet northern abolitionists would not have been silenced, and southern ultras would not have been satisfied. Even without the expansion issue, sectional friction over slavery would have intensified.

By the mid-1840s most abolitionists had forsaken any hope of converting large numbers of slaveholders to their cause by moral suasion alone. Yet abolitionists were sharply divided over what alternative strategies to pursue. Supporters of the Liberty party argued that slavery could be ended only through government action. It was therefore necessary to engage in partisan politics and to elect abolitionist candidates to public office. William Lloyd Garrison and his allies objected on both moral and pragmatic grounds. Political participation would corrupt the cause, and it was bound to fail. The end result would be a compromise with sin, not its eradication. As religious perfectionists, the Garrisonians tended toward anarchism and sought the comprehensive social and spiritual reformation of American values. While Liberty men were struggling with little success to win support among northern voters, Garrison was busy denouncing the Constitution as “a covenant with death” and the “political-ballot box [as] of Satanic origin, and inherently wicked and murderous.”<sup>43</sup>

In addition to the ideological differences between Garrisonians and anti-Garrisonians, there existed a widening cleavage between black and white abolitionists. By the early 1840s, many African American activists had grown tired of white abolitionists who preached racial equality in principle yet exhibited a patronizing attitude toward blacks in practice. Black leaders argued for greater African American autonomy and separate black organizations. Over time the hopeful, crusading spirit of the early phase of the abolitionist movement gave way to anger, frustration, and internal disension.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>42</sup> *New-York Daily Tribune*, Aug. 13, 1844, quoted in *Papers of Henry Clay*, ed. Hopkins et al., X, 109n; Clay to Daniel C. Wickliffe, Sept. 2, 1844, *ibid.*, 108. On Clay's advocacy of compensated emancipation earlier in his career, see Betty L. Fladeland, “Compensated Emancipation: A Rejected Alternative,” *Journal of Southern History*, 42 (May 1976), 181–83. In 1849 Clay unsuccessfully urged the Kentucky constitutional convention to adopt a plan for gradual emancipation in the state to begin in the 1880s. See Thomas Brown, *Politics and Statesmanship: Essays on the American Whig Party* (New York, 1985), 148–49.

<sup>43</sup> James Brewer Stewart, *Holy Warriors: The Abolitionists and American Slavery* (New York, 1996), 75–96; John L. Thomas, *The Liberator: William Lloyd Garrison, A Biography* (Boston, 1963), esp. 330 and 331. On the discouragement felt by Liberty party leaders in the mid-1840s, see Richard H. Sewell, *Ballots for Freedom: Antislavery Politics in the United States, 1837–1860* (New York, 1976), 110–30.

<sup>44</sup> Jane H. Pease and William H. Pease, *They Who Would Be Free: Blacks' Search for Freedom, 1830–1861* (New York, 1974), 68–123; James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, *In Hope of Liberty: Culture, Commerce, and Protest among Northern Free Blacks, 1700–1860* (New York, 1997), 203–52; Patrick Rael, *Black Identity and Black Protest in the Antebellum North* (Chapel Hill, 2002), 49–53, 157–208. On the earlier, more optimistic phase of the abolitionist movement, see Paul Goodman, *Of One Blood: Abolitionism and the Origins of Racial Equality* (Berkeley, 1998).

Notwithstanding their fierce disagreements on other matters, however, abolitionists of all persuasions and complexions increasingly agreed on the morality and efficacy of direct action undertaken by slaves themselves. When they began mobilizing in the early 1830s, white abolitionists preached pacifism and tried to distance themselves from the specter of slave uprisings. But as early as 1829 the black abolitionist David Walker had raised the possibility of violent resistance in his *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*. By the mid-1840s most abolitionists affirmed that slaves were entitled to pursue liberty by all feasible means. Although only a few abolitionists advocated concerted rebellion, many endorsed running away as a legitimate mode of resistance to illegitimate authority. As advances in communication and transportation networks allowed an unknown but growing number of slaves to escape to the North, abolitionists sought to uphold their rights to freedom and to obstruct their capture and re-enslavement.<sup>45</sup>

In lieu of the Wilmot Proviso, the legal obligations of northern states and the federal government to return fugitive slaves would probably have emerged as the most visible point of sectional conflict under a Clay presidency. As it was, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, and other northern states strengthened their “personal liberty laws” in the wake of the Supreme Court’s ambiguous decision on the subject in *Prigg v. Pennsylvania* (1842), and the future of interstate comity seemed increasingly in doubt. Had Clay been president, he might well have intervened in the controversy. The result would probably have been a new federal fugitive slave law, though one less extreme than the version actually adopted in 1850, which, according to Don E. Fehrenbacher, “would surely have failed if it had been considered as an independent measure at any other time,” rather than as part of a compromise that included counterbalancing antislavery features. Despite his abstract opposition to slavery and his sincere desire to reduce sectional tensions, Clay believed strongly in upholding the legal claims of slaveholders. He was a slaveholder himself, and he knew that his bondsmen were valuable property. When on October 1, 1842, an abolitionist in Richmond, Indiana, presented him with a petition asking him to free his slaves, Clay responded with scorn. “You and those who think with you, controvert the legitimacy of slavery, and deny the right of property in slaves,” he declared. “But the law of my State and other States has otherwise ordained. . . . Until the law is repealed, we must be excused for asserting the rights—aye, the property in slaves—which it sanctions, authorizes, and vindicates.” As president, Clay, notwithstanding his nationalist principles, would surely have affirmed this conception of both states’ and slaveholders’ rights.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>45</sup> Merton L. Dillon, *Slavery Attacked: Southern Slaves and Their Allies, 1619–1865* (Baton Rouge, 1990), 185–89, 204–16; David Walker, *David Walker’s Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*, ed. Peter P. Hinks (University Park, 2000). On running away as a form of resistance, see John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves: Rebels on the Plantation* (New York, 1999). On running away as a factor in the sectional crisis, see James Oakes, *Slavery and Freedom: An Interpretation of the Old South* (New York, 1990), 169–81. On William Lloyd Garrison’s support for running away, see Henry Mayer, *All on Fire: William Lloyd Garrison and the Abolition of Slavery* (New York, 1998), 320.

<sup>46</sup> Thomas D. Morris, *Free Men All: The Personal Liberty Laws of the North, 1780–1861* (Baltimore, 1974), 107–29, 219–22; Paul Finkelman, *An Imperfect Union: Slavery, Federalism, and Comity* (Chapel Hill, 1981), 101–80; Harold M. Hyman and William M. Wiecek, *Equal Justice under Law: Constitutional Development, 1835–1875*

Yet by itself federal legislation aimed at capturing and returning fugitive slaves would not have created an irresolvable constitutional crisis or fatally undermined the foundations of the second party system. Absent other evidence of southern aggression, most northern whites would probably have accepted a moderately strengthened fugitive slave law as a reasonable concession to southern interests fully in keeping with the Founders' Constitution. Such a law would not have directly threatened the political or the property rights of northern whites, limited their economic opportunities, or circumscribed their social options. Except for abolitionists, few northern whites cared deeply about fair treatment of blacks, slave or free. Recent scholarship on racial attitudes in the North indicates that antiblack sentiment grew more pervasive and more intense during the second quarter of the nineteenth century as Irish immigrants and other marginalized groups embraced "whiteness" as a cultural weapon in their struggle for social respectability. It seems probable, then, that under a Clay administration the political system would have successfully contained sectional differences over justice for fugitive slaves.<sup>47</sup>

### The Future of the Second Party System

We cannot know whether or not Clay would have stood for reelection as president. As a good and aged Whig, he might have abided by party principle and stepped aside voluntarily. Alternatively, he might have sought to affirm his greatness by serving as long as his heroes Thomas Jefferson and James Madison—and his adversary Jackson. Either way, the election of 1848 would not have turned on the question of the status of slavery in the territories. The larger issue is whether the second party system could have endured beyond the early 1850s and precluded the emergence of the Republican party as an exclusively northern-based, yet nationally competitive, political force.

Modern-day revisionists have argued that the collapse of the second party system cannot be explained solely, perhaps even primarily, by the sectional conflict over slavery. In *The Political Crisis of the 1850s* Holt maintained, "What destroyed the Second Party System was consensus, not conflict. The growing congruence between the

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(New York, 1982), 105–11; *Prigg v. Pennsylvania*, 41 U.S. 539 (1842); Henry Clay, "Speech in Richmond, Indiana, Oct. 1, 1842," in *Papers of Henry Clay*, ed. Hopkins et al., IX, 778; Don E. Fehrenbacher, *The Slaveholding Republic: An Account of the United States Government's Relations to Slavery*, ed. Ward M. McAfee (New York, 2000), 227. William W. Freehling noted that in 1850 Clay advocated "jury trials in the South for fugitives extradited from the North," a provision absent from the final legislation. Freehling, *Road to Disunion*, 497.

<sup>47</sup> On property rights as a bone of contention between northerners and southerners, see James L. Huston, "Property Rights in Slavery and the Coming of the Civil War," *Journal of Southern History*, 65 (May 1999), 249–86. For recent studies of "whiteness" as a nineteenth-century cultural phenomenon, see Alexander Saxton, *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic: Class Politics and Mass Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York, 1990); David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York, 1991); Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York, 1995); and Michael A. Morrison and James Brewer Stewart, eds., *Race and the Early Republic: Racial Consciousness and Nation-Building in the Early Republic* (Lanham, 2002). For older studies of racism and ideas about race in the North (and elsewhere), see Leon F. Litwack, *North of Slavery: The Negro in the Free States, 1790–1860* (Chicago, 1961); Eugene H. Berwanger, *The Frontier against Slavery: Western Anti-Negro Prejudice and the Slavery Extension Controversy* (Urbana, 1967); George M. Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817–1914* (New York, 1971); and Reginald Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny: The Origins of American Racial Anglo-Saxonism* (Cambridge, Mass., 1981).

parties on almost all issues by the early 1850s dulled the sense of party difference and thereby eroded voters' loyalty to the old parties." He focused on changes at the state level—including the revision of state constitutions and the decline of partisan debate over government intervention in the economy—in making his case that the erosion of support for the Whigs had little to do with national politics and the controversy over slavery. In *The Origins of the Republican Party, 1852–1856*, Gienapp also minimized national issues. "In reality," he observed, "events at the state and local level rather than national questions caused the breakup of the Jacksonian party system."<sup>48</sup>

Yet in *The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party*, Holt acknowledged a strong connection between the debate over the Compromise of 1850 and the displacement of the Whigs by the Union party movement in the lower South. "The formation of new parties in Georgia—and later in Alabama and Mississippi," he wrote, "stemmed from changes in the competitive relationship between Whigs and Democrats, from rancorous feuds within both parties, and especially from ambitious politicians' attempts to exploit the sectional controversy to score a knockout blow against factional rivals or to save threatened political careers." The Unionists stood for election on the Georgia Platform, which focused on the need to implement the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850. In 1851 they scored victories over Southern Rights candidates by attracting support from both former Whigs and former Democrats, especially non-slaveholders from upcountry areas. Without the debate over the Compromise of 1850 (itself a result of the Mexican cession), party realignment would have been unlikely in the lower South in the early 1850s.<sup>49</sup>

What about the North? Might party realignment have been avoided there in the wake of a Clay presidency? Revisionists cite a myriad of factors that undermined the appeal of northern Whigs well before the Kansas-Nebraska crisis, including the declining relevance of old economic issues, the growing controversy over temperance, the rising tensions associated with the upsurge of European—especially Irish Catholic—immigration, and internal divisions over party strategy and policy. "More than any other factor," Gienapp asserted, "the rise of ethnocultural issues destroyed the second party system. In this regard, no issue had a greater impact than temperance. By detaching a significant number of voters from their customary party moorings and by causing additional cross-pressured party members to refrain from voting, the anti-liquor crusade fragmented party lines."<sup>50</sup>

Revisionists point to the electoral successes of the Know-Nothings in 1854–1855 as evidence for their interpretation. Know-Nothing candidates swept the gubernatorial, state legislative, and congressional elections in Massachusetts in 1854, and they also made impressive showings that year in New York and Pennsylvania. "By 1855," Holt observed, "[Know Nothings] controlled all the New England states except Vermont and Maine, and . . . were the major anti-Democratic party in the Middle Atlantic states and California."<sup>51</sup>

<sup>48</sup> Holt, *Political Crisis of the 1850s*, 13; Gienapp, *Origins of the Republican Party*, 38.

<sup>49</sup> Holt, *Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party*, 607–16, esp. 608.

<sup>50</sup> Gienapp, *Origins of the Republican Party*, 66.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 129–66; Holt, *Political Crisis of the 1850s*, 158.

Fundamentalists give less weight to ethnocultural issues and the short-lived upsurge of Know-Nothingism in explaining the political realignment of the 1850s. They note that nativism held less appeal in the Midwest than in the East and that it lacked the staying power of antislavery as a political cause in the North as a whole. According to fundamentalists, the division of the Know-Nothings into separate northern and southern American party organizations in 1856 reflected not only the political ineptitude of the Know-Nothing leadership but also the saliency of the slavery issue.<sup>52</sup>

Even revisionists concede that ethnocultural concerns and local issues were not the only factors in the demise of the Whig party in the North. In *The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party*, Holt wrote that the Whig party's "collapse had two separate aspects": "On the one hand, the sectional chasm dividing northern from southern Whigs widened. . . . Within the North, on the other hand, the Whig party suffered crippling internal erosion as former supporters decamped for new political homes rather than using the Whig party itself to punish offending Democrats." Had the southern wing of the Whig party remained strong, northern Whig politicians and voters would have had more incentive to stick with the party during the turmoil of 1854–1855, and it would have stood a much better chance of survival. After a couple of years of trial and error, northern Whigs would most likely have succeeded in co-opting the Know-Nothings—as the Republicans, in fact, did.<sup>53</sup>

The Republicans' stunning vote totals in the North in 1856 contrasted sharply with the meager support for Liberty party candidates in the early 1840s and also far exceeded Martin Van Buren's and John P. Hale's showings as Free-Soil/Free Democratic presidential candidates in 1848 and 1852, respectively. Fundamentalists and revisionists agree that the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act and the concomitant voiding of the Missouri Compromise were critical in mobilizing northerners to vote for a party defined by opposition to the expansion of slavery. The question for our counterfactual thought experiment is what difference a Clay presidency would have made to this important link in the chain of events leading to the Civil War.

I posit that had Clay been elected president in 1844 and the Mexican-American War thus avoided, the Nebraska Territory would have been organized on the basis of the Missouri Compromise with little congressional debate. Until the uproar regarding the Wilmot Proviso, nobody in national politics had proposed popular sovereignty as an alternative to congressional control of the status of slavery in federal territories. The initial reaction of the proviso's opponents (including James K. Polk, James Buchanan, and Stephen Douglas) was to push for an extension of the Missouri Compromise line through the anticipated Mexican cession. Only after the proviso's supporters rejected that option did opponents develop popular sovereignty as a democratic—and Democratic party—alternative in anticipation of the 1848 presidential campaign. Without the crisis posed by the Wilmot Proviso, it seems highly unlikely

<sup>52</sup> McPherson, *Ordeal by Fire*, 90–108. See also Tyler Anbinder, *Nativism and Slavery: The Northern Know Nothings and the Politics of the 1850s* (New York, 1992).

<sup>53</sup> Holt, *Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party*, 838.

that the concept of popular sovereignty would have emerged when it did. Indeed, without further territorial expansion it might never have emerged, and the Missouri Compromise might have endured as a viable solution of the slavery extension question for another generation or more.<sup>54</sup>

Equally important, without the crisis over the Wilmot Proviso and subsequent debates over the Compromise of 1850 and the Kansas-Nebraska Act, the notion of a slave power conspiracy would not have gained widespread acceptance among the northern electorate by the mid-1850s. Both fundamentalists and revisionists agree that the slave power concept was a major component of the Republicans' political appeal. Although Eric Foner characterized the Republican world view as "free labor ideology," he devoted a key chapter of *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men* to the history and effectiveness of the slave power concept. "There were many reasons why the Slave Power was such an effective political symbol," he explained. "For one thing, Americans of the mid-nineteenth century retained the distrust of centralized power which had characterized the revolutionary period. In addition, the idea of a Slave Power emphasized the southern threat to the interests and rights of northern white men, and thus had a far greater appeal than arguments focusing on the wrongs done the slave." He further observed, "The Slave Power idea . . . provided the link between the Republican view of the South as an alien society, and their belief in the necessity of political organization to combat southern influence." On this point Holt and Gienapp have concurred with Foner. According to Holt, "Much more important [than the antislavery pedigree of Republican leaders] was . . . their skill in politicizing the issues at hand in such a way as to convince Northern voters that control of the national government by an exclusive Northern party was necessary to resist Slave Power aggressions." According to Gienapp, "Close inspection of what Republicans said suggests that they were less concerned about slavery than the Slave Power, that it was white slaveholders—not black slaves—whom they hated, and that it was the growing threat to white liberties, not black, that they feared most."<sup>55</sup>

Consider the evolving views of Abraham Lincoln. He earnestly despised slavery, and in the wake of the Kansas-Nebraska Act he bid farewell to Whiggery and joined the fledgling Republican party. But as Lerone Bennett Jr. has sharply reminded us, Lincoln had no use for immediate abolitionism and no interest in promoting a racially egalitarian social order. He believed in the constitutionality of slavery where it already existed, and he was prepared to tolerate its persistence there for the indefinite future. Had it not been for the repeal of the Missouri Compromise, Lincoln would have remained a loyal Whig who viewed southern Whigs as his political allies rather than as representatives of a slave power that endangered basic republican values.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>54</sup> Morrison, *Slavery and the American West*, 84; Knupfer, *Union As It Is*, 172–73; Robert W. Johannsen, *Stephen A. Douglas* (Urbana, 1997), 201–5, 217–25; Don E. Fehrenbacher, *Sectional Crisis and Southern Constitutionalism* (Baton Rouge, 1995), 25–44.

<sup>55</sup> Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men*, 99, 102; Holt, *Political Crisis of the 1850s*, 185; Gienapp, *Origins of the Republican Party*, 357. On the validity of northerners' fears of slaveholders' manipulation of the political system, see Leonard L. Richards, *The Slave Power: The Free North and Southern Domination, 1780–1860* (Baton Rouge, 2000).

<sup>56</sup> Lerone Bennett Jr., *Forced into Glory: Abraham Lincoln's White Dream* (Chicago, 2000), 45–110, 183–230.

Still, the long-term survival of the second party system after a Clay presidency would not have been a sure thing. The expansionist wing of the Democratic party would have pressed for American acquisition of new territory, and had it succeeded, the question of slavery's status in that territory would have stimulated sectional conflict and threatened the second party system. Yet a triumph by the Democrats' expansionist wing was far from assured. Had Polk lost the presidency in 1844, Van Buren Democrats might well have regained control of the national organization and nominated a nonexpansionist candidate for president in 1848. If both Democratic and Whig party candidates that year had opposed expansion, and if settlers in Texas and California had subsequently grown confident they could govern themselves in independent republics, mainstream political debate throughout the 1850s might have ignored the question of slavery in federal territories. With the cotton economy booming, southern ultras' warnings against the encirclement of slavery would have fallen on deaf ears except in South Carolina, which would have stood isolated from the rest of the South in the absence of the sectional crises of 1850 and 1854. As it was, wrote Freehling, "By 1852 [James Henry] Hammond's generation of Carolina ultras, having trained for revolutionary races ever since Professor [Thomas] Cooper pointed out the finish line, looked suspiciously like the nag who had been too often to the post."<sup>57</sup>

Under such circumstances, the second party system would probably have experienced a major revival in the late 1850s. Holt has argued that differences between the Democrats and Whigs grew less distinct in the late 1840s and early 1850s in large measure because a flourishing national economy muted debate over such traditional issues as protectionism and banking. According to Robert Fogel, however, this general trend masked a "hidden" depression among native-born urban workers in the North, which helps explain the upsurge of both nativism and labor radicalism. Moreover, in 1857 the nation's economy as a whole plunged into crisis. Had the second party system survived to that point, it would most likely have gained new vigor from resurgent debate over the proper role of the federal government in protecting and promoting capitalist development in hard times. James L. Huston observed, "As the political battle concerning the Panic [of 1857] heated up, the most obvious trend was the division of the participants into the groups that had fought over the rechartering of the Second Bank of the United States." Disagreements over traditional economic issues had lain dormant but were not dead. They could have become the fuel for party renewal rather than irritants that exacerbated the sectional crisis.<sup>58</sup>

### A Comparative Perspective

The possibility that military carnage could have been avoided in the 1860s leads to another counterfactual question: In the absence of the Civil War, might the abolition

<sup>57</sup> Freehling, *Road to Disunion*, 533. On the pivotal role of Van Buren Democrats, see Richards, *Slave Power*, 134–61.

<sup>58</sup> Fogel, *Without Consent or Contract*, 354–69; James L. Huston, *The Panic of 1857 and the Coming of the Civil War* (Baton Rouge, 1987), 40. On the role of the panic of 1857 in aggravating sectional tensions, see *ibid.*, 111–275.

of slavery in the United States have been achieved by nonviolent political means? The history of abolition in Brazil provides an instructive comparison.<sup>59</sup>

In the mid-1840s, Brazil ranked second only to the United States as a bastion of slavery in the Western Hemisphere. Although Brazil agreed to withdraw from the African slave trade in an 1831 treaty with Great Britain, according to Robert Brent Toplin, thereafter “slaves continued to pour into Brazil in numbers greater than ever before.” It took the threat of a British naval blockade in 1850–1851 to move the Brazilian government to end the slave trade. It took the defeat of the Confederacy in the American Civil War and the social fears generated by the Paraguayan War (1866–1870) to persuade Brazilian lawmakers to address slavery as a national problem. In 1871, the Brazilian legislature passed the Rio Branco Law providing for the emancipation of all children born thenceforth to slave mothers in Brazil. But the Rio Branco Law allowed masters to keep the children under their control until age twenty-one, and antislavery activists quickly grew frustrated with the law’s loopholes and slow schedule for emancipation. In the 1880s, abolitionists finally succeeded in rallying popular support for immediate emancipation. On May 13, 1888, the legislature passed the Golden Law eliminating slavery once and for all throughout Brazil.<sup>60</sup>

The Brazilian example suggests that peaceful abolition was possible in a politically independent slave society but only under particular circumstances. Exogenous factors pushed Brazilian authorities first to end the slave trade and then to dismantle slavery itself. Weaker than the United States both militarily and economically, Brazil was more dependent on Great Britain and hence more susceptible to British intervention. Meanwhile, the death rate of Brazilian slaves exceeded the birth rate. In the wake of the closing of the slave trade, economic and demographic dynamics prepared the way for abolition. As David Eltis has explained, the termination of slave imports led to a decline in Brazil’s slave population and an increase in the price of slaves, which in turn intensified the concentration of slave labor in coffee production, Brazil’s most profitable economic sector. The result was a major southward shift in the geographic distribution of slaves and slaveholding after 1850. According to Seymour Drescher, “By 1884, fewer than half the provinces of Brazil had populations of more than 10 percent slaves, and more than one-fourth of the provinces (mostly northern and northeastern) were even below 5 percent, the level at which many northern U.S. states had opted for immediate emancipation.” Yet regional differences did not lead to civil war in Brazil. Instead, faced with mass desertion by their slaves in 1887–1888, planters from São Paulo broke ranks with other southern slaveholders and embraced immediate abolition. In the end it was a national, not a sectional, coalition that eliminated slavery in Brazil.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>59</sup> For comparative perspectives on slavery and abolition in the United States and Brazil, see William W. Freehling, *The Reintegration of American History: Slavery and the Civil War* (New York, 1994), 79–87; Carl N. Degler, *Neither Black nor White: Slavery and Race Relations in Brazil and the United States* (New York, 1971); Robert Brent Toplin, “The Specter of Crisis: Slaveholder Reactions to Abolitionism in the United States and Brazil,” *Civil War History*, 18 (June 1972), 129–38; and Celia M. Azevedo, *Abolitionism in the United States and Brazil: A Comparative Perspective* (New York, 1995).

<sup>60</sup> Robert Brent Toplin, *The Abolition of Slavery in Brazil* (New York, 1972), esp. 39.

<sup>61</sup> David Eltis, *Economic Growth and the Ending of the Transatlantic Slave Trade* (New York, 1987), 196–97, 233; Seymour Drescher, “Brazilian Abolition in Comparative Perspective,” in *The Abolition of Slavery and the*

Could events have followed a similar course in the United States had there been no Civil War? According to Freehling, southern ultras were deeply anxious about such a possibility. Unlike Brazilian slaveholders, planters in the lower South had little need to worry about sustaining an adequate labor supply because the American slave population grew rapidly by natural increase. But proslavery extremists did have cause to be concerned about the decline of slavery in the border South. "Were the fifteen slave states to shrink to eleven," Freehling pointed out, "an antislavery constitutional amendment could be enacted against slave states' wishes in a not-so-far-off forty-four-state Union, instead of in an incredibly distant sixty-state . . . Union." From this perspective, the survival of slavery in the lower South depended on the border South's continued commitment to the peculiar institution.<sup>62</sup>

Yet without the Civil War, it seems highly unlikely that the states of the border South would have acted to abolish slavery anytime soon. Antislavery forces were growing weaker, not stronger, in the region at midcentury. In 1851 Cassius Clay, a gradualist, lost his bid for the governorship of Kentucky by an overwhelming margin. "Even in Delaware," Freehling acknowledged, "where over fifteen thousand slaves in 1790 had shrunk to under two thousand in 1860, slaveholders resisted final emancipation"—and they did so successfully until 1865. Perhaps most revealing of all was President Lincoln's failure to persuade border South congressmen to support gradual, compensated emancipation. Had the United States followed the Brazilian path to abolition, the South's peculiar institution would almost surely have persisted beyond 1900. It required a war to end American slavery in the nineteenth century.<sup>63</sup>

### The Two American Revolutions

On the basis of our counterfactual thought experiment, we can conclude that the Mexican-American War was a necessary, if not sufficient, cause of the Civil War that broke out in 1861, and that the Civil War was a necessary, if not sufficient, cause of American abolition in the nineteenth century. But how closely did the origins of the second American Revolution resemble those of the first? Recall John Murrin's clever suggestion that it was the British failure to "think triumphantly," not the French cession of Canada, that triggered the imperial crisis in the aftermath of the French and Indian War. Rather than continue the pragmatic policies that had gained them colonial cooperation in the later years of the war, British officials, still angry about the colonists' earlier transgressions, pursued a more principled yet less productive approach to American affairs. By imposing new taxes and other legislation from on high, Parliament offended provincial elites and raised previously unexplored ques-

*Aftermath of Emancipation in Brazil*, by Rebecca J. Scott et al. (Durham, 1988), 26; Toplin, *Abolition of Slavery in Brazil*, 225–46; David Brion Davis, *Slavery and Human Progress* (New York, 1984), 291–98.

<sup>62</sup> Freehling, *Reintegration of American History*, 195. On the growth of the slave population in the American South, see Fogel, *Without Consent or Contract*, 31–33.

<sup>63</sup> Freehling, *Reintegration of American History*, 183. Freehling agreed that in the absence of the Civil War, slavery would have continued past 1900: "By provoking and losing the Civil War, slaveholders brought on themselves the swiftest way to abolish slavery. Worse, southern provocative defensiveness might have paved the *only* route to emancipation, at least well into the twentieth century." Freehling, *Road to Disunion*, 557.

tions about the structure and logic of the empire. What began as differences over policy quickly escalated into conflicts over rights and obligations. Once framed in constitutional terms, the imperial crisis proved irrepressible. A long tradition of political compromise quickly gave way to “irrational” distrust and conspiratorial thinking on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. As tensions escalated and suspicions deepened, the middle ground eroded. And the war came.<sup>64</sup>

The great train of events from the Mexican-American War to the Civil War followed a similar course. In this case, it was proslavery southerners who failed to “think triumphantly.” Whatever the fate of the Mexican cession, the annexation of Texas in and of itself guaranteed the survival of southern slavery for the foreseeable future. (Indeed, as we have seen, even without annexation, the peculiar institution would probably have remained economically viable for generations to come.) By objecting to the Wilmot Proviso and especially by doing so on constitutional grounds, the South’s political leaders forced the mass of northerners to reconsider their own conceptions of the Union and of republican government. Few individuals on either side of the Missouri controversy in 1819–1821 had questioned the authority of the national government to prohibit slavery in federal territories. Yet that issue emerged as the focus of sectional conflict from 1846 forward. Why? Because southern leaders were not satisfied with the protections afforded slavery by the practical workings of the second party system. In the place of a time-tested *modus vivendi*, they insisted on formal, constitutionally based guarantees. As with the imperial crisis of the 1760s, once the sectional crisis of the 1840s was framed in terms of fixed and rigid principles, it proved irrepressible.

John C. Calhoun played a role in the sectional crisis of the late 1840s comparable to Charles Townshend’s part in the imperial crisis of the late 1760s. Despite professions that he was abiding by the colonists’ distinctions between internal and external taxes, Townshend sought to establish once and forever the principle that Parliament could raise revenues in the colonies without their consent on the basis of its unrestricted sovereignty over the empire. He wanted to achieve constitutional clarity for the long term, whatever the short-term consequences. In the process, he alienated colonial moderates such as John Dickinson and provided patriot radicals with the evidence for their charges of a ministerial conspiracy to subvert American liberties. Townshend then conveniently died eight years before military conflict erupted.<sup>65</sup>

Calhoun, like Townshend, was not satisfied with pragmatic solutions. Although he had supported the Missouri Compromise years before and had opposed war with Mexico, he could not abide the Wilmot Proviso. For Calhoun, securing additional land for slavery’s expansion was not the issue. Once the annexation of Texas was achieved, he displayed little interest in further enlargement of the national domain. Calhoun’s concern was a matter of principle. Under his newly refined interpretation

<sup>64</sup> Murrin, “French and Indian War, the American Revolution, and the Counterfactual Hypothesis,” 313–16; Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 1967); Gary J. Kornblith and John M. Murrin, “The Making and Unmaking of an American Ruling Class,” in *Beyond the American Revolution: Explorations in the History of American Radicalism*, ed. Alfred F. Young (DeKalb, 1993), 45–48.

<sup>65</sup> Peter D. G. Thomas, *The Townshend Duties Crisis: The Second Phase of the American Revolution, 1767–1773* (New York, 1987), 1–35.

of the Framers' compact, southerners had a constitutional *right* to bring slaves into any and all federal territories—whether or not they had a practical reason to do so. Addressing the Senate on February 19, 1847, he declared, “A compromise is but an act of Congress. It may be overruled at any time. It gives us no security. But the Constitution is stable. It is a rock.” “Let us be done with compromises,” he reiterated. “Let us go back and stand upon the Constitution!”<sup>66</sup>

Calhoun's disdain for compromise and political accommodation was rooted in his pessimistic assessment of the South's political power. “Already we are in a minority . . . in the other House, in the electoral college, and I may say, in every department of this government, except at present in the Senate of the United States—there for the present we have an equality,” he explained. “And this equality in this body is one of the most transient character.” He could have taken a much more optimistic view in 1847. Not only had the nation recently annexed Texas, as Calhoun had so ardently desired, it also boasted a southern president and a Supreme Court dominated by southern justices. For a minority section in a republican political system, the South had been doing remarkably well for a long time. Since 1789 southerners had held the presidency for all but twelve years, and they had held the speakership of the House of Representatives twice as often as northerners. Moreover, in 1847 the abolitionist movement was sharply divided, and the Liberty party enjoyed little popular support. Yet by demanding abstract constitutional assurances in the place of concrete compromises, Calhoun and his proslavery allies helped bring about the end of politics as usual under the second party system. Thanks in large part to their sounding of the alarm, the isolation of the slave South became a self-fulfilling prophecy. Recoiling at the prospect of an aggressive and insatiable slave power, northerners in the 1850s rallied to the Republican party. Like Charles Townshend, however, John C. Calhoun did not live to see the military conflict that ensued. Fortunately for themselves and for the cause of human rights, four million African Americans did.<sup>67</sup>

## Coda

Counterfactual method by itself cannot resolve the long-standing debate between fundamentalists and revisionists about Civil War causation. Yet I hope that this exercise has clarified areas of scholarly agreement and disagreement and that, even for those who continue to view the Civil War as essentially inevitable, it has prompted reflection about how different factors interacted to bring war in 1861, rather than at another date.

A half century ago, Arthur Schlesinger Jr. charged that revisionists were morally blind to the evils of American slavery. Yet to emphasize the contingency of events in

<sup>66</sup> John C. Calhoun, “Speech and Resolutions on the Restriction of Slavery from the Territory, February 19, 1847,” in *The Papers of John C. Calhoun*, ed. Robert L. Meriwether et al. (26 vols., Columbia, S.C., 1959–2001), XXIV, 174. Huston has pointed out that Calhoun's “proposals reflected a change in southern ideas about how the Constitution protected slavery. . . . his statements led almost to an insistence for national definition of property rights in slaves.” Huston, “Property Rights in Slavery and the Coming of the Civil War,” 280.

<sup>67</sup> Calhoun, “Speech and Resolutions . . . , February 19, 1847,” 169–70; McPherson, *Abraham Lincoln and the Second American Revolution*, 12–13; Richards, *Slave Power*, 9; Knupfer, *Union As It Is*, 161–67.

the 1840s and 1850s is not to defend the peculiar institution or to oppose the use of violence to suppress it. Indeed, one might conclude that the abolitionists and Republicans were all the more heroic because they succeeded in pushing antislavery principles and policies forward when they could well have failed. Antislavery activists were up against powerful countervailing historical tendencies: the tradition of constitutional unionism and compromise; the importance of both cotton and slavery to the national (not just southern) economy; the growth of white racism in the North; and long-standing loyalties to party and nation.<sup>68</sup>

Most of these tendencies reasserted themselves after the Civil War, which helps explain the rapid demise of Reconstruction and the subsequent triumph of Jim Crow in the late nineteenth century. Yet, like the American Revolution, the Civil War profoundly altered the course of American history. Not only did northern victory save the Union and eliminate chattel slavery; by the Fourteenth and Fifteenth amendments to the Constitution, it also redefined the moral framework of American citizenship. To the nation's enduring disgrace, it took a century for those amendments to become fully operational. But just imagine the dire consequences had they not been proposed and ratified in the wake of the Civil War. Given the obstacles inherent in the amendment process, at what later date, if any, would they have gained approval? Counterfactual analysis can help historians appreciate the full significance of progressive achievements by giving credit to the human agents, individually and collectively, who made them happen when they did.<sup>69</sup>

<sup>68</sup> Arthur Schlesinger Jr., "The Causes of the Civil War: A Note on Historical Sentimentalism," *Partisan Review*, 16 (Oct. 1949), 969–81.

<sup>69</sup> On sectional reconciliation at the expense of racial equality, see especially David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, Mass., 2001).