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Howell Cobb of Georgia, a Biography.

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HOWELL COBB OF GEORGIA
A BIOGRAPHY

VOLUME I

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For my parents who made it possible

and for Laura who made it happen

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Abstract

Throughout his political career in the middle decades of the nineteenth century, Howell Cobb of Georgia (1815-1868) struggled to reconcile southern rights -- particularly regarding slavery -- with the continued existence of a national Union. As a member of the House of Representatives during the 1840s, as Speaker of the House in 1850-1851, as governor of Georgia from 1851-1853, and as secretary of the treasury from 1857-1860, he consistently advocated a pro-Union policy of compromise in times of sectional controversy. In pursuit of his moderate policy, Cobb never hesitated to confront extreme southern state-rights men with the same vigor that he directed toward northern antislavery forces. As a consequence of his battles with southern-rights extremists, he found his path to higher offices such as the Senate or the presidency effectively stifled by his opponents with the Georgia Democratic party.

Prior to 1860, Cobb never wavered in his conviction that true sectional security lay within a federal Union of equal partners based upon adherence to the Constitution. Equally unwavering had been his belief that the best means of securing such a Union lay within the national Democratic party. The growing sectional divisions over slavery in the territories during the 1850s, however, placed an unbearable strain on the Democratic structure. With the collapse of the

national Democracy in 1860 and the election of Republican candidate Abraham Lincoln to the presidency, Cobb abandoned his faith in the viability of the Union as a safe haven for southern interests.

Assuming a position of leadership in the secession movement, Cobb served as president of the Confederate Provisional Congress. He then entered the Confederate army and rose to the rank of Major General. He saw service during the Peninsula Campaign, the Seven Days battles, and the Antietam Campaign. Following the Antietam Campaign, Cobb was transferred to the District of Middle Florida and then to command of Georgia state troops. He surrendered his command to Union forces at Macon, Georgia in April, 1865. He died while vacationing in New York in October, 1868.

Prologue

December, 1860

In the gloom of winter twilight, Howell Cobb wandered the half-deserted streets of Washington City. A rotund man of medium height with curly chestnut hair and hazel eyes, his usual expression of good cheer had been replaced by one of worry and despair. On the morrow an open letter from himself to the citizens of Georgia would be published. In it, he warned the people of his home state that secession represented their only honorable response to Abraham Lincoln's presidential victory.

On the surface, this call for secession seemed a repudiation of all he had stood for in the past. For over twenty years he had advocated a pro-Union policy of conciliation and compromise in times of sectional controversy. Yet Cobb's dedication to the Union always had been tempered by a similar dedication to the South and its institutions. Prior to 1860, he never had wavered in his conviction that true sectional security lay within a federal Union of equal partners based upon a rigid adherence to the Constitution. Equally unwavering had been his belief that the best means of securing such a Union lay within the Democratic party. Now that party had been disrupted by the slavery issue and defeated in the presidential election. Worse still, control of the federal government would soon pass into the hands of

a purely sectional party united primarily by its hostility to slavery -- a party which made no secret of its determination to deny the southern states their view of their constitutional rights as equals in the Union.

By means of his open letter, Cobb sought to alert his fellow Georgians to the danger of "Black Republican" rule and to warn that they must either act before Lincoln took office or accept the shame of permanent inferiority in the Union. Like the men who had responded to the threat of British oppression by leading thirteen colonies into a revolution some eighty-four years earlier, Cobb perceived no need to await an overt act of aggression by the Republicans. His reading of history and his knowledge of the antislavery sentiment in the North provided him clear indications of the path Republican tyranny would follow. The time for compromise had passed: the time for revolution was at hand.[1]

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[1] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, December 7, 1860, Howell Cobb Papers, Felix Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia (Hereafter: Cobb Papers); Howell Cobb, "Letter of Hon. Howell Cobb to the People of Georgia on the Present Condition of the Country" (Washington: M'Gill and Witherow, 1860), pp. 3-16; Gordon S. Wood, The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787 (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press for the Institute of Early American History, Williamsburg, Virginia, 1969), pp. 3-10.

Chapter One

"Fatty"

The origin of the dilemma that Howell Cobb faced in the winter of 1860 lay in the distant past, back almost to the beginning of British settlement in the New World. Although a distant relative had arrived in Virginia as early as 1613, Cobb's most direct ancestor, Ambrose Cobbs, came to the colony in the 1630s. Accompanied by his family and servants, Cobbs patented a 350 acre headright on the Appomattox River in 1639. His descendants thrived in Virginia and established the family's twin traditions of landed wealth and public service.[1]

By the 1760s, diminishing opportunities in Virginia prompted some family members to seek brighter prospects elsewhere. John Cobbs joined this movement. He settled first in Granville County, North Carolina, where, in 1769, he married Mildred Lewis. After serving with patriot forces during the American Revolution, Cobbs joined with a group of

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[1] The family name was changed from Cobbs to Cobb early in the nineteenth century -- probably a result of the flexibility of spelling of the time; "Cobb or Cobbs Family," William and Mary Quarterly, XIX (July, 1910), 51-55; Anonymous, unpublished typescript, Howell Cobb Papers, Felix Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia (Hereafter: Howell Cobb Papers).

Virginians seeking a reserve of 200,000 acres on the Georgia frontier.[2]

Initially the group's chances for success appeared promising. In February, 1783, the Georgia legislature voted to create the reserve, but this arrangement fell apart the following year when the state land court rejected its claim. The land court ruled that the law entitled the applicants only to reserves equalling their headrights. Cobbs' disappointment notwithstanding, he decided to accept the 1,000 acres offered and relocate to Georgia. There, near the town of Louisville, he established a plantation. His involvement in speculative ventures continued and eventually he controlled thousands of acres in Georgia, the Carolinas, Tennessee, and Kentucky.[3]

Despite the demands of his landed interests, Cobbs took an active part in public affairs. Shortly after his arrival in Georgia, he won election to the state legislature. After

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[2] "Cobb or Cobbs Family," pp. 51-55; Anonymous, unpublished typescript, Howell Cobb Papers; Collier Cobb to Andrew J. Cobb, February 4, 1906, Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collection, Felix Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia (Hereafter: Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collection); Allen D. Candler, Compiler, The Revolutionary Records of the State of Georgia, 3 vols. (Atlanta: Franklin-Turner Co., 1908), II, 791-793; III, 281; William B. McCash, Thomas R. R. Cobb, 1823-1862, The Making of a Southern Nationalist (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1985), pp. 3-4.

[3] Anonymous, unpublished typescript, Howell Cobb Papers; Collier Cobb to Andrew J. Cobb, February 4, 1906, Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collection; Candler, The Revolutionary Records of the State of Georgia, II, 791-793; III, 281; McCash, Thomas R. R. Cobb, pp. 3-4.

taking his seat in January, 1787, the House elected him to the Executive Council. That group selected him as its president. The voters returned him to the legislature the next year, and in the decade that followed he served several terms.[4]

Cobbs did not restrict his public service to the legislature. He received appointment as justice of the peace for Richmond County in 1789, and served on the board of commissioners that established the Louisville Academy in 1796. Five years later he joined a commission charged with selecting a site for the county seat of newly created Clarke County. When the commission selected land belonging to him, he donated the land for public use.[5]

Unfortunately, Cobbs suffered political defeat and financial disaster in his later years. He stood for election to the legislature in 1799 and 1800, but lost both times. His financial woes proved far worse. Although their exact

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[4] Mrs. J. P. Wilhoit, Sr., et al., History of Warren County, Georgia, 1793-1974 (Wilkes Publishing Company, 1976), p. 78; Georgia General Assembly Journal, January 2, 1787-November 13, 1788 (typescript), pp. 2, 5, 259, W.P.A. Georgia Writers Project, Felix Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia (Hereafter: W.P.A. Writers Project); Georgia Executive Council Minutes, 1785-1789 (typescript), pp. 32-33, 131, W.P.A. Writers Project.

[5] Georgia House Journal, November 2, 1789-June 11, 1790 (typescript), W.P.A. Writers Project; Marion Little Durden, A History of St. George Parish, Colony of Georgia, Jefferson County, State of Georgia (Swainsboro: Magnolia Press, 1983), pp. 17-18; Ernest C. Hynds, Antebellum Athens and Clarke County, Georgia (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1974), p. 5.

source remains murky, by 1804 he found himself so pressed financially that he complained of being "harassed perhaps more than any other man ever was or will be again in this country." By 1807, his ruin complete, he suffered the humiliation of being jailed for debt. His incarceration extended over several months, and his family could not secure his release until the old man convinced a judge that he no longer owned any property.[6]

Despite his personal difficulties, Cobbs' children thrived in Georgia. His union with Mildred had produced three sons and three daughters. All three daughters married, with two, Mary Willis and Mildred, tying the Cobbs to the locally prominent Flournoy and Jackson families. His sons -- Howell, Henry Willis, and John Addison -- acquired plantations and slaves. Howell, the eldest, served three consecutive terms in Congress before retiring in 1812.[7]

II

John Addison Cobb was born in Granville County, North Carolina on January 5, 1783. He grew to be a large man,

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[6] Louisville Gazette, October 8, 1799, October 7, 1800; McCash, Thomas R. R. Cobb, p. 4; John Cobbs to Seaborn Jones, July 5, 1803, Seaborn Jones Papers, Special Collections Library, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina, cited in McCash, Thomas R. R. Cobb, p. 4; Extract from the Minutes of the Inferior Court of Jefferson County, Schedule of Property, 1807, Carr Collection, Felix Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia (Hereafter: Carr Collection).

[7] McCash, Thomas R. R. Cobb, pp. 4-5; "Cobbs or Cobb Family," p. 55.

standing over six feet tall and, in later life, weighing over 300 pounds. Because he looked older than his years, from an early age friends and associates referred to him as "the old colonel." Often noted for his generosity, John Addison could not bear suffering of any kind. The illness of any member of his family, "white or black," caused him great distress and he insisted that a physician be summoned for ailments as mild as a "fingerache." Whenever a member of his household had to have a tooth pulled, the appearance of the doctor coincided with "the old colonel's" immediate retreat to the garden. There he weathered the ordeal, relying upon a string of carefully posted servants to inform him when the operation had been completed. Thereupon, "he would come in and congratulate the whole concern."[8]

John Addison acquired sizable land holdings from his father. His Cherry Hill plantation in Jefferson County encompassed 6,000 acres and employed 150 slaves. In 1819, he inherited the bulk of his oldest brother's estate when his sister-in-law chose to remarry and -- under the terms of her deceased husband's will -- relinquish her claim to the property. He also owned land outside Jefferson County, including a large tract west of Athens in Clarke County.[9]

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[8] Henry Hull, Sketches from the Early History of Athens, Georgia, 1801-1825 (Athens, 1884), pp. 27-28.

[9] McCash, Thomas R. R. Cobb, p. 5; Will of Howell Cobb, April 15, 1817, Howell Cobb Papers; Hynds, Antebellum Athens, p. 32.

In 1810, John Addison's oldest brother married Martha Jacqueline Rootes of Fredricksburg, Virginia. Shortly thereafter, John Addison began courting her younger sister, Sarah. Born on September 20, 1792, Sarah Robinson Rootes was short with a tendency towards plumpness which became more pronounced over the years. Her father, Thomas Reade Rootes, labored as a lawyer, planter, and politician. He owned two plantations and a townhouse in Fredricksburg. Like John Addison's father -- indeed, like John Addison himself -- Rootes ultimately fell victim to financial ruin.[10]

Because John Addison's business interests required his presence in Georgia much of the time, he and Sarah carried on a long-distance courtship. Despite this obstacle, by the spring of 1811 he wrote of his anticipation of "the time when our fate will be one." He also expressed satisfaction when he learned that Sarah had enjoyed a visit to one of the family plantations because "my occupation will require our living in the country, in truth it is a life I am so much pleased with ... that nothing short of my dear Sarah's disapproving of it, could induce me to relinquish it." For her part, Sarah kept him informed of social life in

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[10] McCash, Thomas R. R. Cobb, pp. 6-7; Will of Thomas R. Rootes, July 25, 1822; Thomas Rootes to Martha Rootes Cobb, March 23, 1817; August 20, 1819; June 2, 1820; J. Rootes to Martha Rootes Cobb, July 19, 1823; January 10, 1824; February 24, 1824; March 17, 1827, Jackson-Prince Papers, Southern Historical Collection, Library of the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, North Carolina (Hereafter:Jackson-Prince Papers).

Fredricksburg and complained of gaining weight. In the spring of 1812, John Addison returned to Virginia and, on April 11, he and Sarah married.[11]

The newlyweds established their home at Cherry Hill where their first son was born on September 7, 1815. The proud parents dubbed their large, healthy "little visitor" Howell in honor of his uncle. During the course of the next sixteen years Sarah gave birth to six more children, Laura (1818), Mildred (1820), Thomas Reade Rootes (1823), John Boswell (1826), Mary Willis (1828), and Sarah Martha (1831). Around 1824, John and Sarah, prompted by the absence of educational opportunities in Jefferson County, left overseers in charge of their plantations and moved their growing family to Athens, about eighty miles away.[12]

Athens, located on the Oconee River in Clarke County, reputedly possessed one of the most salubrious climates in the state. The life of the town revolved around the University of Georgia. Generally referred to as Franklin College, the University had begun operations at Athens in 1801. In addition to the University, Athens possessed a number of academies and grammar schools where the local

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[11] John Addison Cobb to Sarah Rootes, May 7, 1811; June 26, 1811; Sarah Rootes to John Addison Cobb, August 7, 1811; October 9, 1811, Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collection.

[12] McCash, Thomas R. R. Cobb, pp. 7-8.

gentry could educate their daughters and have their sons prepared for admission to the University.[13]

Athens, however, had more to recommend it than just educational facilities and a healthy climate. Although agriculture dominated the local economy, by the late 1820s Clarke County could also count a variety of small scale manufacturing enterprises. The high tariff of 1828, encouraged larger manufacturing endeavors. Between 1829 and 1833, local entrepreneurs built three cotton factories on the Oconee River to provide cloth for the local market. By 1840 these mills employed a mix of free and slave labor totaling 220 persons. Two dyeing and printing operations soon were established to compliment the cotton mills.[14]

These increases in manufacturing provided impetus for the expansion of transportation and banking facilities. The Georgia Railroad Company, established in 1833, planned to construct a line linking Athens and Augusta. The following year the company opened a bank in Athens. A branch office of the state bank soon joined it. In addition to these developments, several general merchandise stores, drugstores, barber shops, bookstores, a gun shop, and a jewelry store served the population of the town.[15]

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[13] Hynds, Antebellum Athens, pp. 4-11, 22.

[14] Ibid., pp. 22-32.

[15] Ibid.

The Cobb family proved a valuable addition to the community. John Addison constructed an impressive mansion on his land west of town. He then sparked a minor real estate boom by dividing the remainder of the tract into eighty lots and offering them for sale. Local residents soon began calling the suburb which subsequently developed Cobbham. He also figured prominently in the establishment of the Georgia Railroad Company and served on its first board of directors. When, in 1834, the state bank opened its Athens branch, he also served as one of its directors. In 1838, his fellow Athenians elected him as a delegate to a convention in Augusta that sought to promote direct trade between the southern states and Europe.[16]

While still residing in Jefferson County, John Addison had demonstrated that he shared his family's interest in public affairs. He held the rank of captain in the state militia until 1811 when Governor David B. Mitchell appointed him aide-de-camp with the rank of lieutenant-colonel. In addition to his militia duties, he filled a number of local government posts including road commissioner and justice of the peace. In 1813, he served a term in the state legislature. After moving to Athens, he served as town commissioner for three terms from 1838 through 1840. Eventually, the upheavals in Georgia state politics that

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[16] Ibid.; Athens Southern Banner, September 15, 1838.

resulted from the nullification controversy of 1832 led John Addison to seek higher office.[17]

Sarah's life focused on her home and her involvement with the Baptist church. The responsibilities attendant with these interests served to keep her busy. The Cobb house, one of the largest in Athens, represented a social center of the community. This status meant that in addition to taking care of her growing brood of children and directing the activities of a number of servants, she constantly played hostess to visiting relatives, friends, and dignitaries. The family's arrival in Athens coincided with one of the major events in Sarah's life. She experienced a profound religious conversion and accepted baptism on July 4, 1825. Thereafter, religion dominated much of her thinking and the salvation of family members proved her central concern.[18]

III

In keeping with the family's purpose in moving to Athens, young Howell's parents enrolled him in one of the local grammar schools. There, he underwent the usual course of preparation for admission to the University. On August 31, 1829, at the age of thirteen, he and twenty-four of his classmates stood their entrance exams. The University

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[17] Militia Commission to John A. Cobb, November 12, 1811, Carr Collection; McCash, Thomas R. R. Cobb, p. 5; John Addison Cobb to Howell Cobb, November 3, 1813, Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collection; Milledgeville Georgia Journal, October 13, 1813; Hynds, Antebellum Athens, p. 163.

[18] Baptismal Record, Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collection.

faculty voted to accept twenty applicants, including Cobb, although it described many of them as being "very deficient."[19]

The University did not conceive of its mission as being merely to provide students with "a substantial and liberal education." Rather, it also aimed at producing men of the "best moral character" who would be an asset to both state and church. To fulfill this dual mission the faculty employed a number of strategies. Students received indoctrination with a curriculum of mathematics, classical and modern languages, natural philosophy, natural history, logic, composition, speaking, and evidences of Christianity. The curriculum held student options to a minimum. As one University historian noted, "knowledge was held to be a definite fixed quantity, and students must learn what was set before them."[20]

As with most universities of the time, the faculty attempted to supplement the lessons of the classroom with regulations governing the movements and moral behavior of students. The school urged parents to refrain from calling

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[19] Anonymous, undated typescript, Howell Cobb Papers; Minutes of the Faculty of the Franklin College, 1822-1836, August 31, 1829, University Archives, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia (Hereafter: Faculty Minutes).

[20] University of Georgia Circular, April 5, 1830, November 6, 1832, Howell Cobb Papers; Thomas G. Dyer, The University of Georgia: A Bicentennial History, 1785-1985 (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1985), pp. 71-82; E. Merton Coulter, College Life in the Old South (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1951), pp. 47-48.

their sons away from college and admonished that -- as most student misconduct stemmed from the misuse of money -- their access to funds should be limited to necessary expenses. Thus the student's character would be secure against "useless extravagance, self-sufficiency and vice." The faculty expected most students to live "in the college" where they attended prayers twice daily and church every Sunday. Regulations restricted access to firearms, limited the distance students might travel from campus without permission, and prohibited participation in many common amusements. Even in their rooms, students had little privacy. Faculty members made frequent room checks and could enter without knocking.[21]

Despite their high aspirations, the members of the faculty frequently found themselves able to do little more than maintain a tenuous grasp on campus discipline. To a great extent this situation resulted from the nature of the student body and from the society that produced it. Concepts of independence, dignity, and honor lay at the core of the southern identity. The possession of these attributes largely determined the individual's place in society. To lose them meant to lose one's place and to be relegated down the social hierarchy towards the only class in the South which could assert no claim to independence, dignity, or

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[21] University of Georgia Circular, April 5, 1830, Howell Cobb Papers; Dyer, University of Georgia, pp. 46-59; Coulter, College Life, pp. 59-89.

honor -- black slaves. Not surprisingly, few white southerners would allow another to trample on their rights and thus suffer a sullied personal reputation with its attendant loss of status in the community. The number of duels and brawls resulting from real or imagined insults illustrates the depth of the southern commitment to this concept of honor.[22]

As products of such an environment, students bitterly resented the arbitrary restrictions placed on them by the rules and regulations of the University. Time and again, they demonstrated a determination to resist such encroachments by means of pranks, minor infractions of the rules, and open rebellion. Consequently, relations between faculty and students tended to be strained. Often they degenerated into open hostility and, on occasion, open violence.[23]

Not surprisingly, students quickly responded to incursions upon their rights by other students. Such confrontations usually involved nothing more than a fist-fight in front of the chapel where, in addition to defending honor, the participants could show off their combative skills before their classmates. At times, however, matters escalated beyond a simple fist-fight. Such instances

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[22] William J. Cooper, Jr., The South and the Politics of Slavery, 1828-1856 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978), pp. 69-72.

[23] Coulter, College Life, pp. 65-73.

resulted in assaults with deadly weapons and occasional fatalities.[24]

The rigors of college discipline must have represented quite a change from Cobb's previous life. Both John Addison and Sarah doted on their children. John Addison flatly rejected any idea of physically punishing his sons. He argued that "a father should never whip his son. His mother might whip him or his schoolmaster might ... but his father never! never! it would break his spirit and make him cowardly." Firmly convinced that boys acquired all their bad habits when permitted "to roam the streets at night," he allowed his sons to go where they liked by day, but made sure to keep them at home after dark.[25]

John Addison realized, however, that he must do more than protect his children from acquiring bad habits, he must also instill in them the fundamental characteristics required for success. His limited correspondence with his oldest son reveals his concept of these requirements. His faith in a good education is clear, but he believed Howell ought to learn more than the lessons taught in the classroom. He urged the boy to pit himself against his classmates and begin defining his standing in society by equaling or excelling them in academic endeavors. Convinced that his son had a

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[24] Faculty Minutes, August 31, 1827; Coulter, College Life, pp. 74-77.

[25] Hull, Sketches, p. 28.

better than average mind, John Addison warned the boy to blame no one but himself if he failed to win distinction at the University.[26]

John Addison also urged Howell to learn the virtues of frugality. To a great extent the need for frugality resulted from John Addison's own financial situation. Despite his wealth in land and slaves he suffered from a chronic shortage of cash. Thus he admonished Howell "to be as economical as possible ... your wants are few, and very little should be sufficient to answer your purposes." He further instructed the boy to keep a record of his expenditures as "it will be very satisfactory to me, to know that [you] have not been extravagant in any way."[27]

Above all, the proud father sought to instill in his son a sensibility for the feelings of others. The key to success lay in being "circumspect in your conduct generally towards all mankind .... I will tell you in truth, which I beg you to remember, it is that man is more amply paid for his civility and politeness than anything else." Over the years, he returned to this theme on numerous occasions. He reminded his son of "what I have numberless times told you before ...

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[26] John Addison Cobb to Howell Cobb, April 24, 1832; February 1, 1833; December 11, 1833, Howell Cobb Papers.

[27] Ibid.

try never to make an enemy, but treat all mankind with the respect which is due a human."[28]

For her part, Sarah may have been a bit more restrictive, but a family friend later recalled that she mainly relied upon "tender care and watchfulness, the sweet influence of a mother's love and unceasing prayer" in the governance of her children. While she shared her husband's interest in their success, she concentrated on spiritual rather than worldly lessons. She longed to see them obtain religious salvation and labored to instill in them a knowledge that the true measure of success lay not in this world but the next -- that "our Heavenly Father deals with us, not as we would have him do, but as in his good pleasure, is best for us."[29]

IV

Surviving records indicate that young Cobb made the transition from home to University with relative ease. Not quite fourteen when he enrolled at the University, he was approximately two years younger than the average freshman. While not physically unattractive, his corpulence led his fellow students to nickname him "Fatty." Although the nickname may have inflicted some pain on his youthful ego,

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[28] Ibid.

[29] Hull, Sketches, p. 28; Howell Cobb to Sarah Rootes Cobb, January 16, 1863, Henry Rootes Jackson Scrapbook, Georgia Department of Archives and History, Atlanta, Georgia (Hereafter: Jackson Scrapbook).

he followed his father's advice of seeking never to make an enemy and apparently demonstrated no resentment.[30]

Like most students, he preferred some courses to others. He confided to his cousin that he enjoyed Homer's "beauty and elegance" and Euclid's "force of imagination pathos and sublimity of conception," but found Livy "so dull ... that it takes away all the pleasure and benefit from my other studies." Despite such preferences, his grade reports reveal him a good student who earned high marks in his courses. Upon completion of his sophomore year, however, he informed the faculty that, due to his youth, he felt unqualified to undertake the more difficult coursework of the junior year. After consultation, the faculty agreed that he could repeat the courses of the second year.[31]

During Cobb's first two years at Franklin College, his disciplinary record rivaled his academic performance. While repeating his sophomore year, however, he became involved in an incident which resulted in his expulsion from the University. On March 13, 1832, the faculty voted to fine Cobb and Joseph White a dollar each for attending a show in town during study hours without permission. Bitterly

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[30] Dyer, University of Georgia, pp. 48-49; William H. Conelly to Howell Cobb, June 17, 1831, Thomas Graves to Howell Cobb, March 24, 1832, Howell Cobb Papers.

[31] Howell Cobb to E. B. Cobb, January 26, 1831; University of Georgia Circular, November 5, 1829, April 5, 1830, November 6, 1832, April 1, 1832, Howell Cobb Papers; Faculty Minutes, August 20, 1831.

resentful that the faculty thus should restrict their liberties, the two participated in one of the "most dangerous, determined, and best organized riots in antebellum times."[32]

Beginning at 10:30 on the evening of March 14, a group of fourteen students rampaged through the college for more than three hours. Disguised with handkerchiefs worn "Indian style" and shirts put on over their clothes, the rioters stamped their feet, hurled brick bats, broke down doors, knocked out windows, and carried off the steps of the University chapel. They also attacked the quarters of some faculty members with such "noise and violence" that the inhabitants feared they might be physically assaulted.[33]

The faculty launched an immediate investigation. It began by interrogating a number of students. White confessed his involvement. He refused to name his associates, however, as all were "bound by oath not to tell upon one another." While some witnesses implicated other students, no one could positively identify any of the rioters -- even though the moon had "shone with peculiar lustre, being nearly full."[34]

Dissatisfied with the results of their initial inquiries, faculty members increased the pressure.

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[32] Faculty Minutes, March 13, 1832; Coulter, College Life, p. 70.

[33] Faculty Minutes, March 15, 1832.

[34] Ibid.

Consequently, they had a warrant issued for White's arrest. White, on the point of being apprehended by the sheriff, agreed to turn informant provided the faculty called off the law. He subsequently named thirteen of his fellows -- including Cobb -- as participants. Before passing sentence, the faculty agreed that all the culprits should be permitted to offer a defense. Cobb, like the other seven students who chose to exercise this option, "alleged that he was along but did nothing." Unmoved, the faculty expelled all those involved.[35]

Cobb and his family found his expulsion deeply distressing. Somewhat at loose ends, he considered pursuing his studies privately. John Addison encouraged him to do so. Noting that "you have now arrived at that age, when the importance of a liberal education is as plainly visible to you as it is to your parents," John Addison gave vent to his frustration. Repeating his conviction that nature had endowed his son with a good mind, he demanded, "Shall a want of ambition to improve it lay waste the hopes of your father and friends? Shall idleness & the society of empty headed associates destroy all your prospects of future usefulness to yourself relations and country?" Yet with an optimism that also typified his son's character, John Addison voiced

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[35] Ibid., March 15, 1832; March 16, 1832.

hope that Howell's "late misguided conduct" would produce a beneficial result "if you have seen its awful deformity."[36]

Cobb felt mortified over causing his parents such pain. So much so in fact, that a cousin, Henry Lea, felt compelled to advise "against suffering so much anxiety about what is past except only so far as it may serve to ... prevent us from engaging in similar acts." Lea maintained that Cobb's purpose in attending college had been to improve his mind and acquire the knowledge to make him a useful man. These objects could be pursued outside the University, and if Cobb adopted a regular course of private study, he would soon show his family and friends that they had no cause for "permanent regret." Simultaneously, he would demonstrate "that a little change in your circumstances will produce no change in the fixed purpose you have in view."[37]

In July, however, the faculty relented. It declared that those members of the freshman and sophomore classes expelled for participation in the March disturbance might apply for readmission. The faculty required that the applicant provide "satisfactory evidence of reformed habits & good conduct since expulsion." In addition, it intended

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[36] John Addison Cobb to Howell Cobb, April 24, 1832, Howell Cobb Papers.

[37] Henry Lea to Howell Cobb, April 26, 1832, ibid.

to subject each applicant to a rigorous academic examination before allowing him to rejoin his class.[38]

Cobb quickly took advantage of this opportunity. Because he had already completed the sophomore year before his expulsion, he sought admission as a junior. His initial exam won him readmission to the University, but the faculty found him too deficient in Greek and geography to enter the junior class. He soon repeated the examination, and succeeded in gaining his desired placement. Thereafter, he compiled exemplary academic and disciplinary records. Upon completion of his senior year in June, 1834, he graduated with honors, standing fourth in a class of twenty.[39]

V

Whatever the limitations of its restrictive curriculum, the University provided Cobb with the best formal education available in antebellum Georgia. He did not limit his education, however, to the rote memorization and recitation of the classroom. The faculty endorsed student involvement in some extracurricular activities, but students carried on many such activities despite all faculty efforts to prevent them.

A number of these activities involved the assumption of adult male habits by the teenage students. For the students

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[38] Faculty Minutes, July 28, 1832.

[39] Ibid., August 20, 1832; June 27, 1834; Athens Southern Banner, August 9, 1834.

the acquisition of these habits embodied vital steps in the establishment of their masculinity and claims to manhood. The use of alcohol and tobacco represented the most visible of these habits. Students proved more circumspect about satisfying their carnal desires, but the braggadocio with which they treated their sexual activities -- or fantasies -- indicates that they pursued fornication at least as much as they smoked and drank. Yet the students did not single-mindedly pursue "bad girls." They also expended considerable energy seeking suitable marriage partners.[40]

Cobb took an active role in this socialization process. He developed a taste for "segars" which persisted for the rest of his life. His favorite alcoholic beverage, "gin & water with a little sugar therein," utterly disgusted his close friend and classmate Henry L. Benning. If his correspondence with Benning provides a reasonably accurate picture, Cobb may well have been more sexually active than many of his fellows. On one occasion Benning expressed his intention to "poke out my feelers a little amongst the fair as well as our 'colored friends'" and, on another, reminisced "I presume a little town whore could not attract your notice though time was when a crabby nigger could not escape you un-Cobbed." Later, when Cobb began to give serious

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[40] Coulter, College Life, pp. 93-96; Dyer, University of Georgia, pp. 53-54; Bertram Wyatt-Brown, Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), pp. 163-166, 295-296.

consideration to marriage, Benning urged him to do so "if only as a means of giving rest to that scabbard of ten thousand p___ks, harlot Adams."[41]

Like most parents, John Addison and Sarah never openly acknowledged their son's activities and probably shielded themselves from such knowledge. By and large, southern parents recognized such behavior as a necessary facet of the maturation process. Just as resistance to encroachments on one's honor by school officials and fellow students prepared teenagers to take their place as leaders and masters in a slave society, early access to alcohol, tobacco, and slave women taught them the discretion necessary to protect their womenfolk from "the grossness of manhood."[42]

Cobb pursued romantic interests of a loftier, albeit more frustrating sort, as well. In early 1832, a "Miss G_____" arrived in Athens and immediately began receiving "the notice of a great many young gallants." Describing himself as "always ... somewhat backward and diffident in ladys company," Cobb proved among the last of the young men in town to visit her. A single belated visit, however, proved enough. One look and he professed himself "completely thunderstruck" for "she surpasses any thing I ... ever beheld." Thoroughly smitten, he spent several weeks in a

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[41] W. H. McBride to Howell Cobb, March 15, 1835; Henry L. Benning to Howell Cobb, September 5, 1834; January 15, 1835; March 11, 1835; December 9, 1835, Howell Cobb Papers.

[42] Wyatt-Brown, Southern Honor, pp. 163-166.

"melancholy mood" as he sought the courage to tell her of his feelings. Finally he resolved to speak to her at the first opportunity but "at the very time almost the very moment that everything was arranged ... the ill fated unhappy never to be forgotten 14 of March rolled on ... all was lost."[43]

Expelled from school and mortified by shame, Cobb left Athens in hopes of weaning his affections from "Miss G_____." Distance, however, produced the opposite effect. He soon returned home and renewed his visits to the young lady. After a few days he told her of his feelings "but it was all in vain ... the accursed sound No fell upon my ears with a shock that ... almost [overcame] me." To make matters worse he learned that she had given her affections to a rival. He reported a year later that "since that time I have been quite a stranger to the company of ladies, and am fast coming to the conclusion that they were placed on Earth [to] disturb the happiness of man ... and their company to be hell on Earth." He predicted that in the near future married men "will be considered destitute of common sense."[44]

Cobb's involvement with the Phi Kappa literary society played an equally important role in his development. Such literary societies represented a common feature on antebellum campuses. Student-organized and student-run, they dominated

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[43] Howell Cobb to "Sam," February, 1833, Howell Cobb Papers.

[44] Ibid.

extracurricular life at most colleges. The University of Georgia had two such societies -- the Demosthenians, founded in 1803, and the Phi Kappas, founded in 1820. Both declared a desire for self-improvement by their members as their primary reason for being, but the maintenance of secrecy concerning society rituals and rivalry with the other organization rapidly emerged as secondary objectives.[45]

The pursuit of their goals caused these societies to resemble universities within the University. Virtually every student belonged to one of the two societies. The faculty encouraged this involvement by restricting non-members to their rooms during the societies' Saturday meetings. Each society promulgated its own constitution and adopted complex rules, which it enforced by means of verbal rebukes and monetary fines. Moreover, both the Demosthenians and Phi Kappas maintained private libraries that served to supplement the rather limited holdings of the University.[46]

Cobb's membership in the Phi Kappas represented the most valuable experience of his college career. He thrived in the environment provided by the society, while gaining practical

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[45] James McLachlan, "The Choice of Hercules: American Student Societies in the Early 19th Century," in Lawrence Stone, ed., Europe, Scotland and the United States from the Sixteenth to the Twentieth Century (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), p. 472; Dyer, University of Georgia, pp. 59-66; Coulter, College Life, pp. 111-112.

[46] McLachlan, "The Choice of Hercules: American Student Societies in the Early 19th Century," p. 472; Dyer, University of Georgia, pp. 59-66; Coulter, College Life, pp. 111-112.

experience in the art of speaking, composition, and extemporaneous debate. In addition, through the competition for society offices, he got a taste of the satisfaction he derived from political preferment and the pursuit of power. During his tenure with the Phi Kappas, Cobb held most of the society's offices, serving in successive terms as first censor, clerk, council member, and president.[47]

Cobb's efforts in Phi Kappa functions revealed much about his emerging world view. To a great extent, his views reflected the environment in which he had grown up. John Addison represented the central figure in that environment. Like his father, young Cobb demonstrated a strong empathy for the suffering of others. During Phi Kappa debates he flatly rejected the idea that the federal government should place restrictions on immigration and argued in favor of providing women greater opportunities.[48]

On the issue of immigration, he held that immigrants brought two main benefits to the United States. First, they increased the country's population and thereby enhanced its ability to defend itself. Second, many of those who chose to make their home in America represented the best and

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[47] Minutes of the Phi Kappa Society, 1831-1833, June 4, 1831; June 10, 1831; September 3, 1831; February 4, 1832; August 25, 1832; February 17, 1833; April 20, 1833; June 22, 1833, University Archives, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia (Hereafter: Phi Kappa Minutes).

[48] Howell Cobb, "Effects of Emigration," undated speech, Howell Cobb Papers.

brightest of Europe. Their presence improved the intellectual quality of American life. Yet above all he argued against immigration restrictions on the grounds that no nation had been more deeply blessed with liberty than the United States -- a nation composed entirely of immigrants or their descendants. Many of these people had been forced to leave Europe to escape the tyranny of oppressive governments. He did not believe a nation thus populated and thus blessed could deny a home to similarly oppressed peoples without falling under "a dark and portentous cloud."[49]

He took a surprisingly liberal view for his time concerning opportunities for women. He noted that while much had been said regarding the inferiority of women, he knew of no proof that any innate differences in abilities really existed. Rather, he suggested, any differences which did exist arose from "the superior advantages and inducements held out to the male population." Most significant among these being access to higher education and responsibility for "the affairs of government [and] the interest and happiness of the whole nation." Denied access to the paths of glory, how could women appear anything but inferior? By altering the existing society to provide for equality of opportunity, he maintained, the differences in the accomplishments of the sexes might disappear. Although Cobb never retreated from

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[49] Ibid.

his faith in the benefits of open immigration, he abandoned the feminist views of his youth as an adult.[50]

John Addison also encouraged his son to pursue his political ambitions and helped shape the ideology which ran as a continuous thread throughout his career. The nature of this ideology derived from the nature of antebellum Georgia politics. Until the 1830s, two factions dominated state politics. William H. Crawford and George Troup headed one, while John and Elijah Clarke led the other. Some economic basis for the division existed, with substantial planters tending to align with the Crawford-Troup faction and non-slaveholding small farmers generally adhering to the Clarke group. Nevertheless, the fundamental source of the split had more to do with personalities and the pursuit of local power than with economics or specific policies.[51]

Both factions favored the rapid removal of Indians from the state and vigorously opposed protective tariffs, federally sponsored internal improvements, federal interference with slavery, and to a lesser extent, both opposed a national bank. The only significant public policy difference between the two occurred during the presidential contest of 1824 when the Crawford-Troup faction supported

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[50] Howell Cobb, "The Human Mind," undated speech, ibid.

[51] Ulrich Bonnell Phillips, Georgia and State Rights, A Study of the Political History of Georgia from the Revolution to the Civil War, With Particular Regard to Federal Relations (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1902), pp. 105-138.

their own leader, William H. Crawford, for the presidency and the Clarke men threw their support to Andrew Jackson. By 1828, even this difference had evaporated, and both parties produced overwhelming majorities for Jackson.[52]

Upheavals on the national political scene produced a partial party realignment in Georgia during the 1830s. These upheavals involved the issues of a protective tariff and state rights. While the growing manufacturing interests in the North favored a protective tariff for their products, most people in the agricultural South objected to such tariffs as legislation designed to benefit the North at their expense. When Congress adopted a high protective tariff in 1828, southerners denounced it as the "Tariff of Abominations."[53]

Southern hostility to the Tariff of 1828 proved most pronounced in South Carolina. John C. Calhoun, that state's most prominent political leader, responded to the tariff by enunciating the theory of nullification. Calhoun derived much of his concept from the state compact theory outlined by Thomas Jefferson and James Madison in the Kentucky and Virginia Resolves of 1798 and 1799. Jefferson, speaking far more explicitly than Madison, declared the Constitution a contract drafted by the states. He defined the federal

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[52] Ibid.

[53] William W. Freehling, The Road to Disunion: Secessionists at Bay (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 211-286.

government as a mere agent created to enforce that contract. Whenever the federal government exceeded its legitimate authority, it became the duty of state governments to interpose themselves between their citizens and an abusive federal authority. Each state, he avowed, possessed "an equal right to judge for itself, as well of the infractions as of the mode and measure of redress." By Jefferson's reasoning, a state might resort to nullification of federal law -- or even secession -- on its own volition.[54]

Despite their outrage over the "Tariff of Abominations," South Carolinians refrained from immediate radical action. Motivated primarily by a belief that the incoming presidential administration of Andrew Jackson, himself a southern planter, would prove more friendly to their interests, Calhoun's position as Jackson's vice-president further encouraged their restraint. By 1832, however, relations between Calhoun and Jackson had soured. When Congress enacted the Tariff of 1832, Calhoun and his state took action. Although the new tariff reduced the rates adopted in 1828, the protectionist elements remained strong. Employing Calhoun's theory, a special state convention declared the new tariff null and void within the borders of South Carolina.[55]

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[54] William J. Cooper, Jr., Liberty and Slavery, Southern Politics to 1860 (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983), pp. 89-90.

[55] Freehling, The Road to Disunion, pp. 253-286.

Jackson replied to this threat to national authority by issuing a Nullification Proclamation through which he warned South Carolinians to avoid treasonous acts. He also secured authority from Congress to compel South Carolina's obedience to the law. Although congressional adoption of a compromise tariff helped produce a peaceful end to the nullification crisis, the aftermath of this conflict between state and federal authority shaped American politics for several decades.[56]

Confronted with these developments, politically active Georgians rallied under new banners. Most of the Crawford-Troup men, advocates of nullification, and a few bolters from the Clarke ranks coalesced into the State Rights party. Meanwhile, the Clarke organization and 5,000 dissidents from the Crawford-Troup faction combined to form the Union party.[57]

Although both organizations adhered to doctrines of state rights and state sovereignty, doctrinal differences did exist. The State Rights party accepted the theories of Jefferson and Calhoun. Not surprisingly, it opposed Jackson's response to nullification. The Union party, on the other hand, endorsed only Madison's less explicit Virginia Resolves. These resolutions acknowledged the existence of inviolable state rights, but stopped short of embracing

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[56] Ibid.

[57] Phillips, Georgia and State Rights, pp. 128-139.

nullification. The Unionists rejected nullification as "opposed to the theory of the constitution" and "incompatible with the existence of the Federal Union." While the party endorsed Jackson's response to events in South Carolina, it simultaneously expressed strong opposition to "all legislation intended for the exclusive benefit of any particular class of our citizens."[58]

John Addison stood with the 5,000 men of the Crawford-Troup organization who abandoned past political associations and cast their lot with the Union party. Although he left no record of his reasons, he probably shared the motives voiced by Albon Chase, editor of the Athens Southern Banner. Chase noted that until recently neither of Georgia's parties had "embraced Mr. Calhoun's heresy." Although he professed a lingering attachment to the old Crawford-Troup alignment, the editor declared his determination to adhere to the stars and stripes "as long as our glorious Union should be worth preserving."[59]

In 1834, John Addison demonstrated his commitment to the new Union party when he accepted its nomination for a seat in the state senate from Clarke County. The Clarke County Union men adopted a more explicit platform than had their state party. Proclaiming devotion to the "Union of the

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[58] Ibid.; Milledgeville Georgia Journal, November 16, 1833; Milledgeville Federal Union, May 16, 1833.

[59] Athens Southern Banner, June 14, 1834.

States" and the perpetuity of its federal government, they denied State Rights' charges that the general government had embarked on a policy of consolidation. Rather, they asserted, "there never was a time when the constitutional rights of the States were maintained by the Federal Government with more fairness and liberality than the present." They avowed that the Constitution had created, not simply an agent of the states, but a government -- a government which possessed the authority to enforce the Constitution and all constitutional laws.[50]

Interestingly, the party simultaneously asserted "that a State may secede." Yet it denied that this power stemmed from any constitutional right. Rather, secession embodied the natural right to revolution possessed by all people in the face of an oppressive or abusive government. They hastened to add "that present circumstances do not justify a resort to this great natural right, for there is no unconstitutional or oppressive law of the General Government, now to be resisted or nullified."[51]

Although John Addison lost the election, his political stance had a profound influence on shaping the attitudes of his oldest son. Howell accepted his father's political views without qualification. To a friend he reported, "all the brave patriotic ... intelligent students ... have espoused

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[50] Ibid., April 12, 1834.

[51] Ibid.

the cause of S.C., but I must confess for myself I have not joined the ranks." Still bitter over being disappointed by "Miss G_____," he could think of no greater epithet for the nullifiers than to put them "on a footing with women."[62]

In the Phi Kappa hall, however, he voiced his opinions in more positive terms. In an oration entitled "Our Country," he compared the history of the American republic with that of the ancient Greek and Roman republics. He conceded that like the United States these past republics had "once existed free and happy." Had their populations been warned that their freedom and national glory would soon fall victims at the feet of "unhallowed ... selfish ambition," he felt certain they would have taken arms against the prophet. Yet, such had been the fate of all past republics and so might be the fate of the American experiment.[63]

Still, Cobb urged his audience not to "admit, for a moment, such unworthy apprehensions -- but, believe that Heaven had given us a better and more permanent destiny." While sectional differences undoubtedly would arise, he expressed confidence that "the good sense of the majority of our fellow citizens will preserve our Country, by ... putting down this impious ambition of those, who seek to break the

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[62] Henry L. Benning to Howell Cobb, November 20, 1834; Howell Cobb to "Sam," February, 1833, Howell Cobb Papers.

[63] Howell Cobb, "Our Country," undated speech, ibid.

sacred tie that binds, in hopes that the division would afford them the means of self elevation."[64]

Young Cobb also denied the existence of any fundamental conflicts between the northern and southern economies. Growing up amid Athens' thriving mixed economy and having witnessed his father's active role in it, probably did much to shape his view. In a speech entitled "Political Economy," he observed that each branch of the American economy -- agriculture, manufacturing, and commerce -- worked to the benefit of the entire nation. Moreover, he believed the health of southern agriculture actually depended upon the health of manufacturing in the North. "Should our manufactures ... sink into ruin," he warned, "then farewell Agriculture & Commerce." In that event, he predicted, "the Eagle of liberty which has been so long ... protecting us will seek some moore [sic] hospitable post ... whilst the croaking raven of despair will prey upon the vitals of our country ... and the other nations of the Earth looking upon us ... to direct them on to happiness will point at us ... and sigh farewell Republican liberty."[65]

Cobb received much political advice and encouragement from other family members as well. Few proved as consistent in this regard as his cousin and close friend, Edmond B.

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[64] Ibid.

[65] Howell Cobb, "Political Economy," undated speech, ibid.

Cobb. Cousin Edmond warned his young cousin of the frustrations attendant with having the "sphere of mediocrity" as an "abiding place." He urged him never to "be content with present attainments" but to be "always looking forward to those high stations the possession of which alone can add dignity to the human character."[66]

Howell's uncle, Henry Jackson, also offered advice. Jackson advised his nephew, "as one who is inclined hereafter to make a figure on the political arena ... to examine sentence by sentence -- all the public documents intimately connected with the nature of our General Government and the Constitution on which it is founded." He especially pressed young Cobb to develop an intimate knowledge of the Kentucky and Virginia Resolves and "the security they give for the continued preservation of our happy Union." He believed such efforts necessary, because "it may be your duty, some time hence, to defend this Union against the assaults of ambitious, disappointed demagogues -- who would rather be first in a village than second in an empire."[67]

Sarah also exerted a profound influence on her son's character. Although Howell refrained from making a permanent commitment to religion as she wished, she did succeed in arousing his interest in religious matters. In the summer

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[66] Edmond B. Cobb to Howell Cobb, January 26, 1831, ibid.

[67] Henry Jackson to Howell Cobb, September 10, 1833, ibid.

of 1831, he apparently made some public expression of repentance. This expression, however, drew a jovial rebuke from a classmate who expressed his pleasure "that discovering you were hastening (at a h__l of a rate) down the broad road, which, (the bible doth, and the preachers do, say) leads to everlasting damnation, you made a resolve ... to become religious .... Oh; that every person in Georgia (myself excepted) would follow the example which you have set." Perhaps as a result of such ribbing, Cobb quickly retreated from his public profession of faith. Nevertheless, his mother's religious teachings did much to shape his attitudes on human nature and man's role in society.[68]

Here again, the Phi Kappa society provided him with an opportunity to give voice to his emerging views. In a speech on atheism he denounced the denial of God's existence as an absurdity inconsistent with observable fact. Similarly, he accepted Sarah's oft repeated assertion that all worldly struggle for success represented nothing but "vanity." In a speech he titled "Inadequacy of this World to Render Man Happy," he argued that all men engaged in a constant struggle to improve their lot in life by pursuing earthly goals. Ironically, their attainment seldom provided satisfaction or fulfillment because man's innate ambition immediately led to fixation on some new objective. Thus, he reasoned, all men mirrored the grammar school student who exclaims "would to

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[68] Richard M. Adams to Howell Cobb, June 10, 1831, ibid.

God I were in College and then I would be happy," only to find upon entering the freshman class that true fulfillment must lie in being a member of the sophomore class "and so on until he graduates."[69]

Yet his mother's influence raised a dilemma for the boy. If all worldly endeavors represented nothing but "vanity," and if all ambition embodied no more than an exercise in frustration, then how could he justify his own growing desire for political fame? Essentially, he solved this problem by integrating the lessons taught him by his parents with those he learned at the University regarding the role of republicanism in American development. He accepted without reservation that the quest for liberty constituted the central theme in American history. From the very beginnings of colonization, he believed, settlers had left Europe seeking freedom from tyranny and oppression. Even in America, however, they did not enjoy the rights they sought. Ultimately, they found it necessary to fight a long and bloody war to escape the corrupt and abusive regime of Great Britain.[70]

Having successfully established its republic, Cobb declared, America quickly became the hope of mankind. Freed of the trappings of the Old World -- kings, aristocracies,

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[69] Howell Cobb, "On the Absurdity of Atheism;" "Inadequacy of this World to Render Man Happy," undated speeches, ibid.

[70] Howell Cobb, "Our Country," undated speech, ibid.

and standing armies -- Americans had developed a new society. At the heart of that society, he asserted, lay a political system "founded on principles unknown to every other government that preceded it." He maintained that no people had ever enjoyed freedom "in the true and strict sense in which WE AMERICANS both understand and feel the correct meaning of the term." The most vital aspect of American freedom, he contended, sprang from "the principle of our elections." He proudly noted that "all public offices ... from the lofty presidential chair to the humble village trust are fairly ... decided, by the just competition alone, of acknowledged individual merit." This single deterrent, he believed, prevented artificial advantages of wealth or hereditary succession from threatening American liberty. All that remained was to provide ample public access to education. "In this happy land, which knows no Sovereign, but the people -- and sees no candidate for power, but one of the people," he concluded, "the stream of political knowledge cannot flow too freely -- All should be taught, where, all in turn may rule."[71]

Young Cobb warned that the most serious threat to a country so endowed with liberty arose from the human "desire for Renown." Ambition, common to all men in all societies, he observed, could take one of two forms. In its worst

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[71] Howell Cobb, "The Mind of Man;" "The Policy of the United States Supporting a Standing Army," undated speeches, ibid.

manifestation, it would lead a man to subordinate all thoughts of public good to "some scheme by which he can effect his self aggrandizement." In its best form, an individual -- inspired by "the flame of patriotism" -- would dedicate himself to "some plan by which he can confer a lasting benefit on his country and hand down to posterity a name untarnished with impure ambitious designs." This individual, he contended, would be freed from the frustrations of success without satisfaction that plagued less noble men. He would also be elevated above the "vanity" that characterized all worldly endeavors. The man who dedicated himself to preserving liberty, therefore, engaged in the work of God. Howell Cobb meant to be such a man.[72]

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[72] Ibid.

Chapter Two

Mary Ann

Graduation opened a host of possibilities for Cobb. His parents rewarded his success at the University with a trip to Philadelphia and New York. Although he enjoyed himself, he reported to Henry L. Benning that "the natural curiosities of the north ... are not what they are cracked up to be."[1]

Upon his return to Athens, he faced the more serious task of choosing a career. Either planting or the law represented his most likely choices. The former, however, held few attractions for Cobb. While he probably believed himself too young and inexperienced to undertake the management of a slave work force, he almost certainly balked at the idea of life on an isolated rural plantation. In future years, after he came into possession of several plantations, he only resided on them for brief periods, and then only when events made his presence absolutely essential.[2]

The legal profession held greater appeal. As an attorney he could continue to live in Athens with all of its social and cultural attractions. True, a legal career would

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[1] Henry L. Benning to Howell Cobb, September 5, 1834, Howell Cobb Papers, Felix Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia (Hereafter: Howell Cobb Papers).

[2] Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, April, 1836; November 21, 1865, ibid.

require him to make the tedious circuit of county courts several times a year, but it would also enable him to attend the political debates and public discussions that frequently accompanied these courts. Even better, the legal profession represented a means of quickly winning a public name for himself. With all these considerations in mind, Cobb resolved to become an attorney and, in the fall of 1834, he arranged to read law in the office of General Edward Harden, a prominent local lawyer and a firm advocate of Jacksonian Democracy. Although his friend and advisor, Edmond B. Cobb, who had been burdened by a "wasting affliction and disappointed hopes," encouraged him to "attack the law" with "uncommon zeal," another friend reported that Cobb "did not read more than half a page a day" in his law books. Nevertheless, Cobb completed his studies in about eighteen months, winning admission to the bar in February, 1836.[3]

II

Courtship and marriage significantly slowed the progress of Cobb's legal studies. Shortly after making his arrangement with General Harden, Cobb visited Milledgeville. While there, he met and began to court Mary Ann Lamar. Mary Ann was the only daughter of Zachariah and Mary Ann Robinson Lamar. Of French Huguenot extraction, Zachariah's family had

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[3] William J. Northen, ed., Men of Mark in Georgia, seven vols. (Atlanta: A. B. Caldwell, 1907-1912), III, 567-568; William Connelly to Howell Cobb, April 26, 1835; Edmond B. Cobb to Howell Cobb, October 21, 1834; Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, April, 1836, Howell Cobb Papers.

been residents of Maryland for more than a century when, just before the American Revolution, his father, Thomas Lamar III, moved to South Carolina, where Zachariah was born in 1769. In 1801, Zachariah married Mary Ann Robinson, daughter of Walter and Jane Robinson. The Robinson's had left their home in Belfast, Ireland and like the Lamars sought their fortunes on the South Carolina frontier.[4]

Zachariah and his bride joined in the same migration that had previously brought the Cobb family to Georgia. From his home in Milledgeville, Zachariah engaged in a variety of financial ventures -- merchant, ferry owner, investor, planter, and land speculator. In the process, he amassed a fortune and acquired thousands of acres. He avoided any deep personal involvement in politics, though at one time he held Napoleon in high esteem. He became so enthralled with the French leader that he purchased a commission in the French army with the intention of joining his unit in France. On the eve of his departure, however, he learned that his hero had declared himself emperor. Outraged, Lamar promptly burned his commission and turned his portrait of Napoleon to face the wall. Sometime thereafter he adopted Andrew Jackson

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[4] William H. Merriwether to Howell Cobb, January 13, 1835; William Connelly to Howell Cobb, April 26, 1835, Howell Cobb Papers; Elizabeth Mays, "The Making of an Antebellum Lady -- Mrs. Howell Cobb," The Georgia Historical Quarterly, XXIV (March, 1940), 1-2.

as his political idol and remained a loyal adherent of the Jacksonian camp for the rest of his life.[5]

Zachariah's union with Mary Ann Robinson produced three children, with Mary Ann the only daughter. Born in 1818, she was barely five when mother died in 1823. As with the Cobbs, Zachariah placed great emphasis on his children's education. Like most Americans of the time, Lamar felt that the proper focus of female education lay in the preparation of young ladies to fill their appropriate sphere as wives and mothers. In keeping with these objectives, he enrolled Mary Ann in Brown's Boarding School in Scottsboro, Georgia. The boarding school, like the University, stressed the importance of religion and the daily schedule began with prayer and Bible reading. In addition to courses in sewing, painting, drawing, music, and making wax flowers, the Brown School also provided training in higher mathematics, the classics, and science. Mary Ann, reflecting her father's interests, especially excelled at her French lessons.[6]

Although Mary Ann's attendance at boarding school removed her from Zachariah's direct supervision for extended periods, he still attempted to exert a strong parental influence, particularly in teaching her a proper sense of frugality and self-restraint. When he believed that she had been negligent in caring for her shoes, he wrote demanding

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[5] Mays, "The Making of an Antebellum Lady," p. 3.

[6] Ibid., pp.4-7.

an explanation. He admonished her that "you are twelve years old and should be considerate and careful and know what you have and take care of them." He expressed surprise that she had worn out so many pairs of shoes and reasoned that "if you were employed sitting at your studies instead of running and romping from morning until night, you would not have worn out so many."[7]

Besides her father, Mary Ann relied most on her older brother, John Basil Lamar. Born in 1812, he received his education first at Mount Zion Academy in Hancock County and then at the University of Georgia. As with Mary Ann, Zachariah labored to impose a rigorous discipline on his son. The old man even attempted to regulate his son's behavior from beyond the grave by including a stipulation in his will that John not come into full possession of his inheritance until reaching his twenty-fifth birthday. Even after that time, he ordered that should his son "contrary to my earnest hope and expectation and in violation of his solemn promise and sacred duty ... addict himself to the destructive vice of gambling, then the trustees shall again take the property into their hands ... to prevent waste and destruction."[8]

John Lamar took his role as elder brother and advisor seriously -- especially after Zachariah's death in 1834 --

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[7] Zachariah Lamar to Mary Ann Lamar, April 20, 1832, Howell Cobb Papers.

[8] Mays, "The Making of an Antebellum Lady," pp. 7-8; Will of Zachariah Lamar, May 22, 1832, Howell Cobb Papers.

and throughout his life he attempted to guide Mary Ann safely through times of trouble or crisis. During the years prior to her marriage, his chief concerns focused on her proper deportment in society. He urged her to "be sociable & talk more. Do for Gods sake & your brothers sake talk more. Talk -- if you have to talk nonsense!" He assured her "it is high time ... to lay aside that sheep faced bashfulness. Sheepishness is not modesty. And a modest assurance in company is not forwardness." He pleaded with her to give serious consideration to his advice and develop "an ambition to make for yourself a character and name for something besides wealth." Otherwise, he noted, she might as well be "an insignificant 'wax-figure' (whose only value is its gilded trappings) to forward the vanity and interests of [others]."[9]

Yet even as he pushed her to be more social and develop "an easy yet dignified manner," he warned of potential snares. Some, he suggested, would seek to mislead her and detract from her accomplishments because they envied her wealth. Others, would seek to be her confidants and then betray her secrets. He conceded that "your good opinion of human nature & inexperience will perhaps lead you to think this a 'hard saying' -- But such is the case."[10]

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[9] John B. Lamar to Mary Ann Cobb, undated manuscript, Howell Cobb Papers.

[10] Ibid.

Most importantly, Lamar sought to put Mary Ann on guard regarding the designs of young men. When an impertinent suitor wrote to her using the pseudonym "William Devereaux," Lamar could scarcely contain his outrage. He growled that "it must be the work of some ... tight-knee'd, sap-headed, presumptuous clerk" or "from the pen of some presuming scoundrel who without caring for the effect it would have, meant to excite your curiosity & trifle with your feelings." He vowed that if he could learn the true identity of her anonymous correspondent, "I would come down ... and give him a piece of information -- To wit -- That Miss Mary Ann Lamar has a brother."[11]

Still, Lamar noted, this experience served as a good example of the type of misbehavior his sister must guard against. Speaking bluntly, he observed that "every young lady, just grown up to womanhood, has her attractions .... I say you have many, more than young ladies generally have." In addition to beauty, she possessed "intelligence and cultivation, adorned with an amiable, sweet disposition, and last (though not least according to the mercenary views of the world) you have wealth." Thus, the certainty existed that she would be wooed by many, "old & young," who cared for nothing but her money.[12]

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[11] John B. Lamar to Mary Ann Cobb, March 29, 1834, ibid.

[12] Ibid.

By the time of Zachariah's death, the chief attributes of Mary Ann's character had been fixed. At sixteen years of age she possessed, by all accounts, both beauty and grace. Although shy -- at times painfully so -- she also manifested a determination which at times bordered on obstinacy. This trait emerged early in life and John Lamar enjoyed recalling an illustrative incident from her childhood. She and John fell into dispute over ownership of several cats. The dispute "waxed warm" until their mother intervened and decided that the cats belonged to John. Determined not to be denied, Mary Ann responded "maliciously & with evil intent" by seizing every cat in sight and biting its ears. She persisted in this behavior until "to settle the famous affair, one half interest was bought by mother & regularly transferred" to her.[13]

This hardheadedness remained prominent as she grew older. Only months before she met Cobb, Mary Ann became romantically involved with a young man. Despite the opposition of both her father and brother, she determined to marry him. Apparently, only the urgent intercession of her aunt, Eliza Milton, deterred her. Milton pleaded with the girl to act with caution. "You are very young" the older woman wrote, "and of course have but little experience ... I do not think that you ought to suffer the attraction of any

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[13] Mays, "The Making of an Antebellum Lady," pp. 6-10; John B. Lamar to Mary Ann Cobb, November 20, 1838, Howell Cobb Papers.

young man without consulting [your father and brother], of course they are your best friends."[14]

Yet, her occasional displays of stubbornness derived more from feelings of isolation and vulnerability than malicious intent. Even after nine years of marriage she confided to Cobb that "ere I knew the tenderness of a mothers love, that heavenly boon was snatched from me." Thus deprived, she confessed, her "finest emotions ... were checked in their early growth, or thrown back on my desolate heart." Under such circumstances, she asked, is it "nothing strange if [my heart] should be ever seeking an object wherein to centre these rejected offerings of love." Howell Cobb became the object of that love and during their thirty-three years of marriage, the long absences required by his legal practice and political career proved especially painful.[15]

Mary Ann frequently gave vent to such feelings in her letters to Cobb. She assured him "it is not to grieve you that I write thus, but only to relieve me of feelings which have long been pent up." Such feelings, she added, gained intensity from "the scenes which daily meet my eyes." On every side, she saw mothers with children and wives with husbands, "all ... bound to one another ... as a living chain

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[14] Eliza Milton to Mary Ann Cobb, June 7, 1834, Howell Cobb Papers.

[15] Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, December 14, 1843, ibid.

connected link by link ... and I ... a lone isolated being ... cannot tell you how much I miss you."[16]

Despite the unhappiness and difficulties these feelings sometimes caused, the Cobb marriage was a good one. In the years that followed their wedding, Mary Ann served as one of Cobb's principle advisors and frequently filled the role of secretary. In the latter capacity she often made important decisions as to which letters should be forwarded to her husband for his personal attention, answered herself, or handed over to a male member of the family to be answered. To better fill her role as advisor and secretary, Mary Ann read widely from the political publications of the day, with a reading list that included the Congressional Globe, the Athens Southern Banner, the Macon Telegraph, and the Washington Union.[17]

Moreover, Cobb's frequent absences required that she assume chief responsibility for directing the upbringing and education of their children as well as running the family household, which at times meant caring for dozens of guests. In addition to these accomplishments, she overcame her

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[16] Ibid.

[17] Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, February 1, 1837; April 13, 1846; January 14, 1847; January 22, 1847; September 15, 1848; December 9, 1850, ibid.; Mays, "The Making of an Antebellum Lady," pp. 18-19; Elizabeth Mays, "'The Celebrated Mrs. Cobb,' Mrs. Howell Cobb," The Georgia Historical Quarterly, XXIV (June, 1940), 108; Virginia Clopton Clay, A Belle of the Fifties: Memoirs of Mrs. Clay of Alabama, Covering Political and Social Life in Washington and the South, 1853-1866 (London, 1905), p. 30.

shyness to such an extent that a contemporary described her as "highly cultured, modest as a wood violet, inclined moreover to reserve, nevertheless capable of engrossing the best minds ... and a conversation with her, a thing to be remembered."[18]

III

The course of the couple's courtship probably received a boost from John Lamar's infatuation with Cobb's younger sister. Lamar met Laura Cobb while visiting Athens to attend the University's commencement exercises in the summer of 1834. During the course of his visit, the twenty-two year old Lamar agreed to join a party of young people planning a tour of the Currihee Mountains of northeast Georgia. Even before the trip began, he reported to Mary Ann "O sis' -- Miss Laura Cobb .... I feel rather nervous this evening! I feel completely 'fluttered'.... Yes I am in love. This said Miss Laura, has my heart .... I can think of nothing but flutter! flutter! flutter!" Unfortunately for Lamar, the path of romance proved as rough as Georgia's mountain roads and he soon wrote to his sister that he and Laura had quarrelled and "a little coolness ensued, -- this was at Tallulla falls. We however made friends at Clarksville and had another falling out before we left the place." Later,

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[18] Mays, "The Making of an Antebellum Lady," pp. 18-19; Mays, "'The Celebrated Mrs. Cobb,'" p. 108; Clay, A Belle of the Fifties, p. 30.

"we got extremely friendly at Gainesville & fell out again at Jefferson."[19]

Although he vigorously complained that Laura had mistaken him for "some smoothfaced fellow she could lead by the nose and marry at pleasure" and vowed that there were too many women in the world "to make myself a slave or fool for any," he could not forget the "little urchin." When he saw Laura again at Cobb and Mary Ann's wedding he found his infatuation renewed and confessed to his sister that Laura "gave me a soft glance or two ... which has set me as crazy as a bedlamite." He warned that if Laura did not reciprocate his feelings he would "be found dead leaning against one of my shady sycamores, with Lord Byron in my hand, & my finger on those lines 'Maid of Athens ere we part, Give o give me back my heart.'" Laura, however, never responded to Lamar's ardor, and though he lived, he never married.[20]

IV

The opening round of Cobb's courtship proceeded smoothly and its prospects for success improved considerably when, shortly after his return home from Milledgeville, Mary Ann decided to move to Athens. Besides being closer to Cobb, she would be able to reside in the home of her uncle, Jesse Robinson, while keeping a watchful eye on her younger

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[19] John B. Lamar to Mary Ann Cobb, August 9, 1834; August 18, 1834, Howell Cobb Papers.

[20] John B. Lamar to Mary Ann Cobb, August 18, 1834; June 11, 1835, ibid.

brother, Andrew Jackson Lamar, a freshman at the University. Mary Ann found life in Athens very pleasant and with brother John's blessing she took an active role in the town's continuous round of teas, parties and weddings. She reported that the young ladies of Athens had proven "considerably more sociable" than those of Milledgeville and expressed her enjoyment of the "frequent visits of the Athenian gentlemen." Lamar expressed relief that she was comfortably settled in a home, for since Zachariah's death he felt she had "floated" too long and "without having a home you have had too many."[21]

The high point of the social season came when a snowstorm made a long sleigh ride possible. Mary Ann, with Cobb as her escort, joined the group undertaking the expedition. In describing the occasion she noted, "we had fine sport .... We rode about a quarter of a mile above Col. Cobb's, around town twice, and then '<u>crossed</u>' the bridge and rode out to Griers." The excursion was rendered even more exciting when the sled broke down forcing the entire party "to get out ... and stand in the snow." Mary Ann retained pleasurable memories of this outing for many years and soon she and Cobb agreed to marry.[22]

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[21] Mary Ann Cobb to John B. Lamar, January 18, 1835; John B. Lamar to Mary Ann Cobb, January 27, 1835; Andrew J. Lamar to John B. Lamar, March 28, 1835; Henry L. Benning to Howell Cobb, January 15, 1835, <u>ibid</u>.

[22] Mary Ann Cobb to John B. Lamar, January 18, 1835; Henry L. Benning to Howell Cobb, January 15, 1835, <u>ibid</u>.

News of Cobb's impending nuptials drew much good natured ribbing from his friends. Always eager to have a laugh at Cobb's expense, Henry Benning recalled his friend's despair over "Miss G." He chided that "one Miss Lamar is about to put to flight ... all your vows of celibacy and sarcasms on the sex and the blessed state." Later, commenting on the number of weddings being planned in Athens, Benning observed, "you must all be possessed .... Wedding after wedding ... in quick and abiding succession. 'Why are things so?' Is C__ so dear that it is to be purchased by chains and slavery? Who would have thought it ... having heard your oathy resolves."[23]

Virtually all of Cobb's correspondents commented on Mary Ann's wealth. Benning again led the way, describing Mary Ann as "a young lady of worth and accomplishment not to mention other properties of a highly attractive character." In a similar vein, William H. Merriwether enviously noted, "she has charms besides those of her face, 100,000 dollars, Think of that. I do not doubt your word in the least when you say it is impossible to give me an idea of her attractions, $100,000 ... ! It would take a fellow almost 100,000 years to make that much ... by honest means."[24]

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[23] Henry L. Benning to Howell Cobb, January 15, 1835; February 3, 1835, ibid.

[24] Henry L. Benning to Howell Cobb, February 3, 1835; William H. Merriwether to Howell Cobb, March 10, 1835, ibid.

Although intended as jests, the remarks on Mary Ann's wealth contained a great deal of truth. When Zachariah Lamar died in October, 1834, he left behind a huge estate to be divided among his three children. Mary Ann's share of the estate included his Baldwin County plantation -- the Hurricane -- plus all his adjoining lands. This amounted to some 2,436 acres. In addition, her share included all of Zachariah's unencumbered lands in Houston, Dooly, Irwin, and Early Counties, as well as several lots and buildings in Milledgeville. Over and above the land, she received eighty-eight slaves, eighteen mules, a good stock of cattle and hogs, blacksmith tools, and other implements essential to operating a large plantation.[25]

Zachariah's will stated that Mary Ann should come into possession of this property when she married. It is clear, however, that the family elected to alter this arrangement as the original trustees, Jesse Robinson and L. Q. C. Lamar, continued to administer her property for several years after the wedding. When, in 1842, they officially relinquished control, John B. Lamar replaced them and served as trustee until his death in 1862. At that time Cobb became trustee for the property of both his wife and brother-in-law.[26]

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[25] Will of Zachariah Lamar, May 22, 1832; Statement Replacing Jesse Robinson as Trustee of Mary Ann Cobb's Estate with John B. Lamar, November 14, 1842, ibid.

[26] Will of Zachariah Lamar, May 22, 1832; Statement Replacing Jesse Robinson as Trustee of Mary Ann Cobb's Estate with John B. Lamar, November 14, 1842, ibid.

While it is unclear why the family chose to alter this aspect of Zachariah's will, it may have originated from concerns over the youth of the newlyweds and from a desire to insulate Mary Ann's extensive property from potential disasters stemming from Cobb's inexperienced management. By the time brother John assumed control of Mary Ann's property in 1842, the Panic of 1837 had catapulted Cobb into the midst of a titanic financial disaster and the wisdom of the family's cautious course was revealed. Neither Cobb nor Mary Ann ever manifested any sign of resentment that family members had thus restricted their independence.

Cobb undoubtedly realized the financial benefits that would accrue to him -- even if indirectly -- as a result of the marriage. Yet, he also unquestionably loved Mary Ann deeply. When apart, he poured out his feelings in long letters and gratefully acknowledged the receipt of her answers. He eagerly assured her that since receiving one of her letters "not one single day has elapsed since it came to hand that I have not read it over and over again. It is the last duty I perform before I retire ... and the first when I awake in the morning." He pleaded that she "let not one moment elapse after the reception of this before you commence your reply," but took care to add, however, "I do not wish to dictate. I only express my wish." Throughout their long marriage, Cobb seldom if ever resorted to dictatorial

decrees, and generally allowed Mary Ann to handle matters in whatever manner she thought best.[27]

The couple set May 26, 1835, as the date for their wedding, and in mid-April Mary Ann wrote to her brother that "with my present pleasant feelings and prospects, it is immaterial to me whether the weather is good, bad or indifferent as I enjoy myself equally as well with either." Yet her bliss did not survive the month. Shortly after she reported her happiness to John Lamar, someone informed her of gossip concerning Cobb that nearly ended the engagement. Although Mary Ann agreed to proceed with the wedding, she refused to tell her fiancee who had told her of his transgression and extracted from him a vow not to mention the matter again.[28]

Mary Ann soon left Athens to visit Augusta. The issue, however, continued to worry Cobb and, despite his promise, he raised the matter again. Although he expressed hope that she would not consider his queries a violation of his vow, he confessed that the incident "has seized much upon [my] mind, and I hope, you will not consider the expression of so much anxiety about it as mere curiosity." He also pleaded with her to return to Athens as quickly as possible, but Mary Ann responded with cold formality. She advised him "do not

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[27] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, April 29, 1835; May 6, 1835; January 14, 1847, ibid.

[28] John B. Lamar to Mary Ann Cobb, April 15, 1835; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, April 29, 1835, ibid.

forget your promise" and added the admission "I must ... apologize for not answering your first epistle. I had not really sufficient time to write but I must here make the acknowledgement that procrastination aided not a little in causing my entire silence."[29]

The exact nature of the gossip that produced this crisis remains unclear. No one in the family ever openly discussed the matter in their correspondence, but it seems likely that it involved Cobb's paternity of an illegitimate daughter. Such a supposition must be based on circumstantial evidence. In the fall of 1842, Cobb and Mary Ann took in an eight year old orphan known only to history as Paulina. They did so at a time when they already had three children of their own and were in the midst of a financial disaster that resulted, in a matter of months, in the loss of much of their property and the increasing dependence of Cobb's parents and siblings on him for support.[30]

From the beginning, Mary Ann demonstrated a profound ambivalence towards the child that was marked by both revulsion and a genuine concern for her well-being. She believed that Paulina possessed questionable moral virtue and would misbehave sexually if left in the presence of "colored

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[29] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, April 29, 1835; Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, April 20, 1835; May 11, 1835, ibid.

[30] Sarah Rootes Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, March 22, 1842; Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, December 14, 1843; December 21, 1843, ibid.

people, for these we have to fear." Yet Mary Ann also felt a deep sense of responsibility for the "orphan." She confided to Cobb, "I do feel interested in the child and I cannot think it was mere accident by which she was thrown upon my care." Consequently, she added, "it is as much our duty to consult her welfare as one of our own."[31]

Because of her fears regarding Paulina's association with blacks, Mary Ann recommended that they send her north to be educated or at least trained in a vocation. She urged her husband to obtain information about placing the girl "in some respectable family" until she was old enough to earn her own way either working in a factory or as a servant. She suggested that if he found this idea unsatisfactory, he should place Paulina in a New England boarding school -- "in some retired place" -- where she could be trained as a teacher. She assured him of her willingness "to deny myself at home" in order to cover Paulina's expenses and pleaded with Cobb to give the matter much serious thought as "this is a yoke which I deem too heavy for my years .... If I could be assured of her doing creditably, cheerfully would I bear it ... but here is the difficulty and the thought ... of her being corrupted and debased, it is agony."[32]

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[31] Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, December 14, 1843; December 21, 1843, ibid.

[32] Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, December 14, 1843, ibid.

Paulina remained a source of frequent concern for nearly eight years. After living with Cobb and Mary Ann for several months, they sent her to live with John Addison and Sarah at their Cowpens Plantation in Walton County. "Aunt" Mary Ann, however, soon concluded that the child could not be raised safely "in such a family as your father's." Moreover, she believed that some arrangement needed to be made "where [Paulina] will not burden those who had no part ... in taking her, that is your mother and father."[33]

Still, her primary concern focused on the safety and discipline of the child, and she reinforced her pleas with warnings that if Cobb failed to take positive steps within the coming year, "we may regret it," because "in a few more years she will refuse to be curbed." She felt sure that she could raise the girl herself, and even voiced hope that in future years Paulina might fill the role of a daughter that Mary Ann feared she would never have. On more than one occasion, however, she acknowledged with some bitterness that Cobb's political life rendered it difficult for her to raise her own children as she thought best, and made it impossible for her to directly supervise Paulina's upbringing.

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[33] Sarah Rootes Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, January 22, 1843; Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, December 14, 1843; December 21, 1843, ibid.

Consequently, she pressed her husband continuously to arrange a suitable situation for the "orphan."[34]

Although Cobb never demonstrated the emotional attachment to Paulina that Mary Ann, his parents, and even John Lamar expressed, he did agree with his wife's assertion that they must place Paulina's interests on a footing equal to those of their own children. He also acknowledged the wisdom of Mary Ann's desire to place the child somewhere in the North and promised that before returning home from his first term in Congress they would make "some permanent arrangement for her future course." He added assurances that this could be accomplished "without difficulty or expense."[35]

Unfortunately, Cobb's assessment proved overly optimistic and every effort to find Paulina a northern situation failed. When, in 1844, Cobb sought to place her in a Boston factory, the management rejected her because she was not yet fourteen years old. His efforts to place her in a northern school produced equally frustrating results. In some instances, no doubt, the schools simply proved too expensive for the financially hardpressed family, but in other instances their inability to enroll her had more to do with her mysterious background. In the fall of 1848, Mary Ann made one final effort to get the child into a school

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[34] Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, December 14, 1843; December 21, 1843, ibid.

[35] Mary Ann Lamar to Mary Ann Cobb, undated manuscript; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, December 21, 1843, ibid.

outside Georgia. She appealed to the directoress of the Academy of the Visitation, a convent school in Georgetown, D.C., to accept the fourteen year old girl as a student. The directoress expressed regret, but replied that "the circumstances you mentioned in regard to her habits, disposition, & the manner in which she had been living, oblige us to decline taking her."[36]

Despite these setbacks, the entire family persisted in attempts to provide the child with an education and useful skills. John Lamar, who viewed the girl's plight with "kindness of heart" and "much interest," reported after one visit, "Paulina seemed as glad to see 'Uncle John' as your boys." He advised Mary Ann to "educate her well & qualify her for a teacher. It will be a more eligible situation for a girl in her condition than that of a milliner or any manual occupation."[37]

Both Mary Ann and Sarah attempted to teach Paulina to read with limited success, though she seemed "fond of reading as little as she knows of it." Cobb's brother-in-law, Williams Rutherford, Jr., the husband of John Lamar's beloved

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[36] J. R. Ingersoll to Howell Cobb, August 14, 1844; Robert Winthrop to Howell Cobb, August 19, 1844; The Directoress of the Academy of the Visitation to Mary Ann Cobb, September 13, 1848, ibid.

[37] Sarah Rootes Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, February 6, 1843; February 18, 1844; Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, December 14, 1843; December 14, 1846; John B. Lamar to Mary Ann Cobb, September 5, 1843; Williams Rutherford, Jr. to Howell Cobb, May 8, 1844; Mary Ann Lamar to Mary Ann Cobb, undated manuscript, ibid.

Laura, undertook to provide her with religious instruction, but soon confessed that he viewed the child as a "forlorn hope." Mary Ann supplemented these efforts by enrolling Paulina in a local grammar school. This decision, however, raised a new set of problems. She soon sought Cobb's advice, "you know ... my objection to sending the boys to the same school with her .... Do you think it will be disadvantageous to keep them at home and teach them myself?"[38]

Unable to find Paulina a suitable place in the North and realizing the impossibility of Mary Ann raising the child herself, the Cobbs resorted to placing her in other households, while they continued to pay for her support and education. They generally preferred the homes of widows or families with few young children in hope that the woman of the house would be able to devote her full attention to supervising and training Paulina. Although all agreed that Paulina was intelligent, her behavior kept her in constant trouble and the family in continuous turmoil.[39]

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[38] Sarah Rootes Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, February 6, 1843; February 18, 1844; Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, December 14, 1843; December 14, 1846; Williams Rutherford, Jr. to Howell Cobb, May 8, 1844; Mary Ann Lamar to Mary Ann Cobb, undated manuscript, ibid.

[39] Sarah Rootes Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, January 29, 1843; February 18, 1844; April 4, 1845; Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, December 14, 1843; December 21, 1843; April 20, 1845; April 13, 1846; Williams Rutherford, Jr. to Howell Cobb, May 8, 1844; A. B. King to Mary Ann Cobb, October 28, 1844; The Directoress of the Academy of the Visitation to Mary Ann Cobb, September 13, 1848; Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, January 18, 1849, ibid.; Sarah Rootes Cobb to Martha Jackson, November 19, 1848, Jackson-Prince Papers, Southern Historical

They first sent the child to live with Cobb's parents, but within a matter of months Mary Ann realized that the arrangement placed an excessive burden on her in-laws and provided Paulina with too much access to the slave quarters. Sarah Cobb, whose concern for the child rivaled that of Mary Ann, admitted her inability to instill Paulina with "steadiness or industry." She confessed "I am [at] a loss what plan to pursue. I have found out that she eats dirt whenever she can do it unobserved."[40]

They next placed her in the home of Betsy Thurmond, "a very straight forward Old Maid living by herself ... a good seamstress who could teach the girl to sew." In less than a year, however, Thurmond expressed her determination to be rid of Paulina. She only agreed to keep her under the pressure of Mary Ann's personal entreaties.[41]

Sometime in 1847 or early 1848, the Cobbs prevailed on Manuel and Mary Jane Hendricks, a childless couple, to

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Collection, Library of the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, North Carolina (Hereafter: Jackson-Prince Papers); Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, February 28, 1849, Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collection, Felix Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia (Hereafter: Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collection).

[40] Sarah Rootes Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, January 22, 1843; January 29, 1843; April 4, 1844; Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, December 14, 1843; December 21, 1843, Howell Cobb Papers.

[41] A. B. King to Mary Ann Cobb, October 28, 1844; Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, April 20, 1845, Howell Cobb Papers; Sarah Rootes Cobb to Martha Jackson, November 19, 1848, Jackson-Prince Papers.

provide Paulina with a home. For a time all went smoothly and Mary Jane Hendricks pronounced her complete satisfaction. She ventured the opinion that Paulina only needed "proper management" and that her only fault arose from talking too much. During this period of relative calm, the orphan pleased everyone when she professed religion and joined the Methodist church. All believed her happy in her new home and the Hendricks voiced their willingness to keep her until she married.[42]

This happy beginning soon came to grief, but, like so many incidents in Paulina's life, the precise source of the problem remains obscure. In late February, 1849, Mary Ann frantically wrote to her husband "I am in trouble again; Mrs. Hendrick[s] insists upon giving up Paulina." To make matters worse, the Hendricks had warned off a "widow lady" who had offered to take in the girl. With much bitterness she complained that "between ... these kind friends and some others with whom Paulina has lived ... she is acquiring such a character for licentiousness that it seems the poor child will find no home in Athens."[43]

Mary Ann relayed John Lamar's advice that they get the girl out of the state as quickly as possible and put her in a factory. She noted the existence of a factory in North

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[42] Sarah Rootes Cobb to Martha Jackson, November 19, 1848, Jackson-Prince Papers.

[43] Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, February 28, 1848, Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collections.

Carolina "where female operatives alone are employed." Expressing the hope that other such factories might exist in the middle or northern states, she pleaded with Cobb to consult with his associates in Congress about the possibility of placing Paulina in an all-female factory. She warned that, as the girl was now fifteen, they must act at once "to secure her from temptation." Desperately she urged Cobb to act: "Do my dear husband, don't let any ... matter of conscience or delicacy interfere with your attending to this matter at once." She assured him that the success of his efforts was "intimately connected with my present and future peace of mind."[44]

More was now at stake than Paulina's well-being. The success or failure of this effort had become profoundly intertwined with Mary Ann's personal honor, and she observed "it matters not how much pain and anxiety I may have felt and taken with her, if she should be ruined, I will be blamed." Thus, in order to protect both her reputation and Paulina's from the "false and scandalizing minds" of Athens, she instructed her husband to locate a haven for the girl, because "I propose to take her myself ... and ... I feel nerved up to go any distance to secure her a good home."[45]

Cobb took Mary Ann's pleas to heart and enlisted the aid of William E. Dearing of Athens in finding a factory where

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[44] Ibid.

[45] Ibid.

they could put Paulina. In the meantime, the "orphan" moved into the home of a Mrs. Brown. Dearing's efforts became even more important after September, 1849, when Mrs. Brown declared that she must be rid of the child -- even if it meant turning her into the streets. Eventually Dearing succeeded in convincing a factory in Augusta to take her on as an operative. This arrangement, like all the others, apparently fell through. Census records indicate that by the following summer Paulina no longer resided in either Augusta or surrounding Richmond County. At this point, Paulina disappeared from the family correspondence and her fate remains a mystery.[46]

V

Despite the crisis, Cobb and Mary Ann's wedding took place as planned. The ceremony was held in Athens at the home of Mary Ann's uncle, Jesse Robinson. The bride wore a satin gown with short sleeves and "a frill of exquisite lace," along with a lace veil that she fastened with a silver ornament, and white kid gloves. She highlighted her finery with a "triple looped" silver necklace and "long silver filigree earrings." The groom, clad in his best suit and

[46] William E. Dearing to Howell Cobb, September 1, 1849, Howell Cobb Papers. Despite considerable effort, I have been unable to locate any additional information regarding Paulina's fate.

attended by John Lamar, no doubt breathed a sigh of relief that the ceremony had taken place at all.[47]

The couple honeymooned in New York. When they returned to Athens, they moved in with Cobb's parents. The newlyweds originally had planned to take lodgings in a local boarding house, but acquiesced to brother John's vigorous protests that they were too young and too inexperienced to "board out." Mary Ann found life within the tumult of a large family to her liking. She wrote, "I am now living with a large family where I feel perfectly at home, where there are children who keep up such a continuous noise that it is impossible for a person to live amongst them and feel altogether solitary."[48]

As usual, Henry Benning could not resist the opportunity for a joke at Cobb's expense. Delivering a mock lecture on fidelity, he reminded his friend of the responsibilities a man assumed upon taking his wedding vows: "Let him but pronounce these words and adieu to the jolly delights of a bachelor, adieu to bragging, adieu [to adventure] by night, adieu to all others but her alone." Yet Cobb put aside the "jolly delights of a bachelor" willingly, and both he and

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[47] May, "The Making of an Antebellum Lady," pp. 10-11.

[48] John B. Lamar to Mary Ann Cobb, April 15, 1835; Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, April, 1836; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, April 22, 1836, Howell Cobb Papers.

Mary Ann expressed perfect contentment with their new status.[49]

Nevertheless, Cobb must have felt a little awkward. He now had all the responsibilities of marriage, but as yet possessed no means of supporting his wife. True, Mary Ann's inheritance would provide a tidy income and equally true, Cobb himself stood heir to one of the largest estates in Georgia; still, at the moment, he could contribute nothing to either his or her support. This situation prompted a new round of soul searching. Cobb seriously considered giving up the study of law and taking up residence on Mary Ann's Hurricane Plantation.[50]

Mary Ann, recognizing his inclinations, steered him away from life as a gentleman farmer and encouraged him to push ahead with his legal studies. She did so despite realizing the price her husband's desire for a public reputation would cost her. When speaking of this price, her reasoning became clear: "One reason I bear it so well is that I know if I had objected to it you never would have studied the law, but it was from the bent of your own inclinations ... and my strong desire to see you not only a <u>good husband</u> but a great man."

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[49] Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, April, 1836; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, April 22, 1836; Henry L. Benning to Howell Cobb, May 27, 1835, Howell Cobb Papers.

[50] Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, April, 1836; October, 1836, <u>ibid</u>.

Besides, she observed, "nothing great can be accomplished without a few sacrifices."[51]

Having made up his mind at last, Cobb diligently applied himself to his studies and in less than a year won admission to the bar. He formed a partnership with Junius Hillyer, a friend from college and a fellow Athenian, and the two opened an office in Athens. The new firm's prospects probably received a boost from Hillyer's selection by the state legislature as the Solicitor General of the Western Judicial Circuit, a post which made him responsible for the state's legal affairs in the eight counties that comprised the circuit.[52]

Although Cobb now had a profession, he, like Mary Ann, felt its burdens. First as a legal apprentice and then as a practicing attorney, he regular travel over the Western Circuit became an integral part of his life. Riding the circuit necessitated long absences from home about which both he and Mary Ann complained repeatedly. Other than homesickness, Cobb also battled the constant tedium which came from spending so much time "within the four walls of the Court House ... [or] confined to my room" preparing cases.

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[51] Ibid.

[52] Athens Southern Banner, November 15, 1834; March 10, 1836.

Nonetheless, he resolutely expressed his determination "to succeed in my profession if my ability will permit it."[53]

Cobb never shared in the predilection for legal theory that later characterized his younger brother Thomas R. R. Cobb's career as an attorney. Yet an essay he wrote while still a student reveals that he viewed the operations of the judicial system with the same inclination towards compromise and practicality that he soon demonstrated as a politician. In the essay, which focused on jury selection, he conceded the desirability of every jury being composed of "minds as pure as the unspoiled snow." He asked, however, if the "experience of the world" offered any hope that such a jury could be empaneled? Offering his own belief that perfection existed only in Heaven, he cited a variety of historical cases to demonstrate that juries traditionally had been composed of flawed materials. Although the quest for perfection might be suited to philosophers, he advised those who resided in the world of "human passion" to make the system work despite its imperfections.[54]

Initially, Cobb's desire for success and reputation led him to attack his cases with uncharacteristic bloodthirstiness. One of his earliest cases involved "a Lady or rather a woman [who] had cut off the ear of a poor fellow

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[53] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, April 22, 1836; October 17, 1836; March 17, 1837, Howell Cobb Papers.

[54] Howell Cobb, untitled essay, 1830, ibid.

for saying something about her." The accused had lured the victim to his undoing by telling him "there was a big tick on the back of his ear." Cobb, who was assisting the prosecution, noted a certain macabre humor in the situation. The victim, he observed, "allowed her to take it off, but making a mistake she cut off the Ear." He expressed regret that the prosecution had decided not to pursue the case as he was "cut out of a speech" which "would have sent the young Lady to the Penitentiary for a visit."[55]

Within a matter of months, however, Cobb's sympathetic nature reasserted itself. Before he had been practicing for a year, he began to complain regularly about the working of the law. He noted in one instance, "I have just withdrawn from the tedium of a filthy and tiresome Court House .... Sending poor fellows to the Penitentiary seems to be the order of the day." In another, he sadly reported the case of a man convicted of murder: "poor Fellow his wife sat by him during the whole trial and at the same time one of her children was like to die .... I believe myself he ought to have been acquitted but unfortunate man! the jury thought differently." He extended this sense of compassion to fellow members of the bar. When Edward R. Harden, the son of his former legal mentor fell ill, Cobb proved the only attorney on the circuit willing to remain behind and care for the sick man. Explaining his delay in returning home to Mary Ann, he

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[55] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, April 22, 1836, ibid.

assured her "I cannot reconcile it to my feelings to leave him."[56]

Cobb's youth and inexperience only served to heighten his dissatisfaction with the legal profession. As one of the younger members of the circuit, he sometimes found himself pitted against older and more experienced attorneys. Not surprisingly, this caused him some anxious moments. He confided to Mary Ann his fear of making "a shuck" of his first cases. Even worse, prospective clients recognized his lack of experience and referred their cases to lawyers with more established reputations. Frustrated, he warned his colleagues "very candidly" that unless his cases improved both in quantity and quality he planned to "quit them (sine die)." Nevertheless, he retained his sense of humor -- a gift that seldom deserted him -- and laughingly reported that "as my company is a great object with them, they are getting a little scared."[57]

Although the legal profession had proven less satisfying than Cobb had hoped, he still possessed every reason to view the future with a sense of optimism. He could not foresee the storm clouds that lay just beyond the horizon.

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[56] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, March 16, 1836; October 17, 1836; March 17, 1837, ibid.

[57] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, March 21, 1836; October 23, 1836, ibid.

Chapter Three

"Weak Is the Strength That Fails In Adversity"

Having secured a good education, a rich and loving wife, and a profession, Cobb appeared to stand at the threshold of personal and public success. In keeping with these bright expectations, he and Mary Ann began construction of an elegant home on a twenty-acre town lot provided by John Addison. "Classic in architecture" and built on a "grand scale," the mansion consisted of wide halls, rooms twenty-four feet square, and brick walls some two feet thick. Impressive grounds surrounded the house. All of the out-buildings -- servants' quarters, cooling house, and stables -- shared the "same heavy brick construction as the 'big house,'" and the mansion's white pillared portico overlooked a pleasant grove of trees. An ivy-covered wall fronted the property, and cedar trees accented by yellow jasmine bordered the driveway to the house. Large flower gardens and ornamental boxwoods completed the landscape. Not surprisingly, such a massive undertaking required nearly three years to complete, and the couple did not move in until 1839.[1]

Good fortune further smiled on the couple when, on December 31, 1836, Mary Ann gave birth to a healthy baby boy.

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[1] Elizabeth Mays, "The Making of an Antebellum Lady -- Mrs. Howell Cobb," The Georgia Historical Quarterly, XXIV (March, 1940), 12.

Named Zachariah Lamar Cobb after his maternal grandfather, the infant immediately became the focus of family life. During Cobb's frequent absences from home, Mary Ann carefully kept him informed of the progress made by their "dear little charge." She proudly described little Zack as the "prodigy of prodigies." Setting aside "all maternal feelings," she maintained that "he is without exception the smartest child I have ever seen .... He observes a great deal and remembers everything. Oh! he is obliged to be celebrated in his day." Cobb eagerly received these reports and hungered for more. "How does he stand Paps absence? and how does he look?" he inquired, "Bless his soul I am very anxious to see him and his mother."[2]

The years between his marriage and 1843 proved busy ones for Cobb. Beyond his responsibilities as a family man and attorney, he took charge of Mary Ann's estate -- even though he did not legally control it. He also purchased a Walton County plantation called the Cowpens. Moreover, John Addison often entrusted his son with the management of his business affairs. During this same period, he also steadily expanded his political activities, and enjoyed his first tastes of

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[2] Baptismal Record, Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collection, Felix Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia (Hereafter: Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collection); Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, March 16, 1838; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, February 2, 1837, Howell Cobb Papers, Felix Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia (Hereafter: Howell Cobb Papers).

political success. Yet it was a taste embittered by financial ruin and the death of "little Zack."[3]

II

Cobb's interest in politics had not abated since his graduation from the University, but prior to reaching his twenty-first birthday in September, 1836, he had been unable even to vote. His early commitment to the Georgia Union party with its almost absolute faith in Andrew Jackson, remained firm. A friend observed that "nothing in this world could induce you to become a nullifier now." This observation proved true, and as Jackson prepared to depart the presidency, Cobb shifted his loyalty to Old Hickory's hand-picked successor, Martin Van Buren of New York.[4]

Unfortunately for Van Buren, he did not find an easy path to the White House. Jackson's policies -- particularly the removal of deposits from the second national bank and the nullification crisis of 1832 -- had produced enemies. In Georgia, Jackson's strong response to South Carolina's experiment with John C. Calhoun's nullification theory

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[3] Overseer Contract, Howell Cobb and David Gibbon, November 24, 1837; Andrew J. Lamar to John B. Lamar, May 4, 1840; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, November 9, 1842; Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, undated manuscript; John Addison Cobb to Howell Cobb, January 24, 1837, Howell Cobb Papers; Sarah Rootes Cobb to Martha J. Jackson, February 13, 1842, Jackson-Prince Papers, Southern Historical Collection, Library of the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, North Carolina (Hereafter: Jackson-Prince Papers).

[4] John Milledge to Howell Cobb, April 19, 1835; (?) to John B. Lamar, May 25, 1843, Howell Cobb Papers.

resulted in the emergence of an anti-Jackson movement which coalesced under the banner of the State Rights party. This group soon began to cooperate with the national Whig coalition. United primarily by hatred of Jackson, the Whigs adopted a strategy for the presidential campaign of 1836 which consisted of issuing no party platform, and running three "favorite son" candidates instead of a single standard bearer.[5]

A simple logic underlay the Whig strategy. Bound together only by its hostility to Jackson and Van Buren, the Whig coalition included men who favored a national bank, federally funded internal improvements, and protective tariffs, as well as men who opposed all three positions. The Whig refusal to produce a national platform allowed them to avoid confronting the political and ideological differences that divided the factions within their coalition. The Whigs also realized that they lacked a candidate capable of uniting their constituent factions and mustering the strength to defeat Van Buren. Thus they adopted the strategy of multiple national candidates in hopes of keeping Van Buren from winning a majority in the electoral college. By throwing the election into the House of Representatives, the Whigs

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[5] Ulrich Bonnell Phillips, Georgia and State Rights, A Study of the Political History of Georgia from the Revolution to the Civil War, With Particular Regard to Federal Relations (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1902), pp. 143-144; William J. Cooper, Jr., The South and the Politics of Slavery, 1828-1856 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1978), pp. 43-58, 76-79, 90-94.

believed they could force the Jacksonians to accept a compromise president more compatible with anti-Jacksonian tastes.[6]

Hugh Lawson White, a Tennessean and former Jacksonian Democrat, emerged as the "southern Whig" candidate. Both Cobb and Henry Benning sputtered in helpless outrage at these Whig shenanigans, and Cobb no doubt echoed his friend's assertion: "Curse White .... The old dotard permits himself to be made a catspaw. [Daniel] Webster is too far downeast for me. I stick to Martin. He was the chief bruiser of nullification and thereby helped certain folks in Georgia." Despite the efforts of Georgia's Union party, hostility towards Jacksonian policies and distrust of Van Buren's northern background enabled White to carry the state's electoral votes, even though Van Buren won the national contest. Happily for the Union party, Whig success in Georgia did not extend beyond the top of the ticket, and the Jacksonians retained a majority in both the congressional delegation and the state legislature.[7]

As a newly qualified voter in 1836, Cobb's played only a minor role in the political process. He attended party

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[6] Phillips, Georgia and State Rights, pp. 143-144; Cooper, The South and the Politics of Slavery, pp. 43-58, 76-79, 90-94.

[7] Phillips, Georgia and State Rights, pp. 143-144; Cooper, The South and the Politics of Slavery, pp. 43-58, 76-79, 90-94; Henry L. Benning to Howell Cobb, April 27, 1835, Howell Cobb Papers; Milledgeville Federal Union, November 1, 1836.

functions whenever possible, and took some satisfaction that despite losing the state and Clarke County, Van Buren carried Athens by fifty-seven votes. Yet Cobb's political activities during late 1836 and much of 1837 remained secondary to building a legal practice and managing family business interests. His primary political efforts focused on courting the good will of prominent members of the Union party.[8]

Cobb succeeded in these efforts. In the fall of 1837, his friend from college days, John Milledge, wrote to request that he go to Milledgeville and exert his "influence" with Union legislators to secure the post of state attorney general for a mutual friend. Within a matter of months, Georgia Congressman Thomas Glascock requested that Cobb intercede in a party dispute between the representative and Albon Chase, editor of the Athens Southern Banner. Chase doubted Glascock's loyalty to Union-Democratic principles, and threatened to withhold his paper's support for Glascock's renomination. Declaring his adherence to party principles, Glascock insisted that the good of the party required Chase to support him until the end of his term. At that time, he vowed to step down voluntarily. Soon, Glascock wrote to

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[8] Athens Southern Banner, November 12, 1836; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, November 14, 1836, Howell Cobb Papers.

express his gratitude and satisfaction with Cobb's judicious handling of the delicate matter.[9]

Cobb's success at courting the support of party leaders became clear in November, 1837, when the state legislature elected him to his first political office -- Solicitor General for the Western Circuit. Cobb's new post did not reduce the burdens of riding the circuit or ease the loneliness generated by long absences from home. Yet, his position as the state's chief legal agent in the Western District enhanced his role in the public eye, and provided him an opportunity to demonstrate his worthiness to hold the public trust. As solicitor general, Cobb worked closely with county grand juries. These bodies not only indicted lawbreakers, but also acted as agencies of local government in matters of taxation and road maintenance. Cobb's association with these juries thus gave him practical experience with government affairs.[10]

Spurred by a commitment to public service and a desire to move up the political ladder, Cobb diligently applied himself to his duties. His efforts later prompted Junius Hillyer to recall the young solicitor general as a "terror

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[9] John Milledge to Howell Cobb, October 27, 1837; Thomas Glascock to Howell Cobb, March 6, 1838; April 7, 1838, Howell Cobb Papers.

[10] Athens Southern Banner, February 24, 1838; March 10, 1838; Samuel Boykin, ed., A Memorial Volume of the Honorable Howell Cobb of Georgia (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott & Co., 1870), p. 94.

to evil-doers." Grand juries duly noted his efforts and publicly recognized them through votes of commendation. Although his post did not thrust Cobb into the forefront of party leadership, it did allow him to move into the middle of party affairs. By 1838, he began to play a more noticeable role in party councils.[11]

III

The presidential contest of 1836 witnessed the merger of Georgia's distinctive Union and State Rights parties into national organizations. During the election struggle, the Georgia Union party made its commitment to the policies of the national Democratic organization so clear as to render any further distinction between the two meaningless. The disappearance of the State Rights party into the national Whig structure proved more complicated because of the polarity which characterized the views of its factions, and hence took longer.[12]

Between the presidential elections of 1836 and 1840, northern Whigs came to favor a program which called for reduced presidential power, increased congressional power, and the creation of an economic system based upon a new United States Bank, internal improvements, and a protective tariff. Nearly every aspect of this program caused the State

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[11] Athens Southern Banner, February 24, 1838; March 10, 1838; Boykin, Memorial Volume, p. 94.

[12] Phillips, Georgia and State Rights, pp. 144-145.

Rights men difficulties. They certainly possessed no objection to limiting the executive branch of the government, but, as their real goal lay in restricting the overall power of the national government, they could not enthusiastically welcome a plan to enhance the power of Congress. Acceptance of the Whig economic program proved equally difficult. The State Rights party long had insisted that it represented true Jeffersonian principles of limited government and abhorrence of federal intervention in the economy -- principles they accused Jackson of abandoning as president.[13]

By 1841, however, the State Rights men confronted a awkward choice. They must either accept isolation from the sphere of national politics, acknowledge that their local opponents had been correct in joining the national Democrats, or adjust their political principles to suit the new political reality. While some State Rights adherents adopted the first or second choices, the overwhelming majority of party members resolved to follow the latter course.[14]

Certain national developments eased this transition. Georgians resented Jackson's use of executive power to hasten the national bank's demise by withholding government deposits nearly as much as they hated the bank itself. For most, fears of a "monarchial" power in the White House proved just as troubling as fear of government created monopolies. A

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[13] Ibid., pp. 145-146.

[14] Ibid.

similar situation prevailed on the issues of internal improvements and the protective tariff. The 1830s had witnessed a boom in railroad construction which most people hoped would continue. Many, including some members of the State Rights party, wanted to subordinate constitutional scruples against federally funded internal improvements to sustain the boom. This widespread ambivalence at least smoothed the State Rights' shift to the Whig position. On the tariff issue the State Rights men faced a straightforward choice between the Democrats, who formally opposed protective tariffs but enacted them in 1828 and 1832, and the Whigs who openly embraced protectionism.[15]

Even as the State Rights party transformed itself into a loyal branch of Whiggery, Cobb labored with increasing intensity to assume a leadership role within Democratic ranks and to prove himself a worthy member of society. In part, these efforts involved doing good works within his home community. When the Phi Kappa Society needed funds for the completion of its new meeting hall, Cobb joined with a small group of Phi Kappa alumni and provided several hundred dollars to eliminate the debt. He further strengthened his ties to the University by serving on its board of trustees

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[15] Ibid.

from 1838 to 1839 and by his service with a committee on education created by the Phi Kappas.[16]

Cobb, however, did not restrict his "non-political" public service to his alma mater. Concern over the plight of the poor in Athens prompted a citizens group to appoint a committee charged with determining the town's need for a benevolent aid society. Cobb agreed to chair the committee, and subsequently reported that a society to assist the poor should be established for "the duty of affording that assistance according to our ability is universally acknowledged and is in accordance with the noblest feelings of nature."[17]

Cobb certainly recognized the political benefits which his efforts might produce, but mercenary motives had little to do with his local community service. In the years to come -- long after his political reputation had been firmly established -- he continued to play an active role in community life. His activities included a renewed tenure on the University's board of trustees, work with a committee authorized to erect a monument honoring former University of Georgia president Moses Waddell, and service on the board which oversaw the establishment and maintenance of Oconee

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[16] Athens Southern Banner, March 24, 1838; August 9, 1839; E. Merton Coulter, College Life in the Old South (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1951), p. 105.

[17] Athens Southern Banner, June 2, 1838.

Hill Cemetery. He had learned the lessons of his childhood well.[18]

Moreover, Cobb's charitable activities reflected his own natural proclivities. Throughout his life, he consistently demonstrated a profound sympathy for the suffering of others. On one occasion, while residing in Washington D.C., a small girl clad in tattered clothing approached him to request a handout. Moved by the child's pitiful appearance, Cobb asked about the youngster's situation at home. The girl replied that she had no father, and a mother too ill to work. Because the family could afford neither a doctor nor food, the child had turned to begging in the street. Cobb convinced the girl to lead him to her home. There he found her mother too sick to rise from her bed. He immediately emptied his purse and sent the child after both a doctor and food.[19]

Cobb took an equally active part in Georgia's political arena. In February, 1838, Clarke County Democrats named him a delegate to the party's state convention. The county organization recognized that both the national and state party faced serious difficulties arising from the Panic of 1837, which had accompanied the new Van Buren administration into office. Although the economic difficulties that plagued

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[18] Athens Southern Banner, June 24, 1842; July 8, 1842; J. Camak to Howell Cobb, December 3, 1853; Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, August 1, 1854, Howell Cobb Papers.

[19] Boykin, Memorial Volume, p. 129.

the United States during the late 1830s and early 1840s originated in the international marketplace, many blamed Jackson's destruction of the national bank and government monetary policies for the economic breakdown. Those who suffered from the financial disruption could take little comfort from Van Buren's determination to preserve the government's credit, while leaving individuals to catch as catch can. Realizing that the party's only hope lay in strict unity, the Clarke County meeting resolved to send an uninstructed delegation to the state convention. By leaving the delegation unfettered, it hoped to enhance the delegates' ability to forge policies designed to maximize party unity.[20]

The state convention assembled in Milledgeville three months later. After nominating a congressional slate for the upcoming October elections, the delegates felt compelled to do more. Acknowledging that "important changes" had taken place in the "situation" of the country, "it became a matter of some importance, in the judgement of the Convention, to state distinctly the leading principles of the party, as authorized landmarks for its guidance in maintaining the ascendancy of the Constitution and laws." By doing so, the

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[20] Peter Temin, The Jacksonian Economy (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1969), pp. 113-140; Michael F. Holt, "The Election of 1840, Voter Mobilization, and the Emergence of the Second American Party System," in William J. Cooper, Jr., Michael F. Holt, and John McCardell, eds., A Master's Due: Essays in Honor of David Herbert Donald (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985), pp. 16-18; Athens Southern Banner, February 17, 1838.

party hoped to steal a march on their Whig opponents, and "to silence the mouth of slander, and, if possible, deprive misrepresentation of its power."[21]

The series of resolutions subsequently adopted by the convention fell into two main categories. Georgia Democrats declared their unflinching support for the fiscal policies of the Jackson-Van Buren administrations. They praised the "propriety and necessity of separating the Government from the Banks," and advised continuation of the policy of carrying out most government business with specie. They also urged the federal government to adopt a revenue raising policy designed to insure "that the amount raised should be barely sufficient to defray the expenses of an economical administration of the Government, and should be kept to be applied to that object and no other."[22]

In a shot clearly aimed at their Whig opponents, the Democrats insisted "that the General Government have no right to use the money of the people for Banking purposes," and vowed to resist with "unceasing hostility" any congressional attempt to charter a new national bank. Similarly, they argued that government monies should never be "lent out ... to speculators or any other class of citizens whatsoever." The party, in keeping with its faith in negative government, offered no program for alleviating the effects of financial

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[21] Athens Southern Banner, May 19, 1838.

[22] Ibid.

panic, save encouraging banks to resume specie payments, "in justice to the community."[23]

Sectional language framed the second category of resolutions, but still aimed primarily at embarrassing Georgia Whigs. The reality of antebellum southern politics required all parties and politicians to make frequent public protestations of an over-riding commitment to the preservation of slavery. Failure to do so meant destruction at the polls. Slavery represented a political issue of immense proportions in the South for slaveholders and nonslaveholders alike, because southern concepts of dignity, honor, and liberty were inextricably bound to the peculiar institution. A reluctance to defend slavery represented a reluctance to defend the South. Such cowardice could but render the culprits unfit for political office.[24]

In part, both Whigs and Democrats fulfilled this prerequisite for electoral success by boldly proclaiming their own dedication to slavery. Georgia Democrats met this obligation when they resolved "that the Democratic Party of the South can hold no friendly communication on any subject with those who are making a systematic assault upon rights guaranteed by the Constitution to the South." Yet neither the "Democratic Party of South," nor its Whig opponents,

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[23] Ibid.

[24] Cooper, The South and the Politics of Slavery, pp. xi-xv, 58-69.

existed in sectional isolation. Both cooperated with the northern wings of their national organizations. As the price of this cooperation, southern politicians of both parties insisted that their northern counterparts acquiesce to southern views regarding slavery. Northerners need not like slavery, but they must never touch it with hostile hands.[25]

Not surprisingly, both southern Whigs and southern Democrats attempted to exploit this situation for political advantage. They did so by forcefully questioning the loyalty of their northern opposition to this bargain, and consequently the commitment of their southern opponents to slavery. They each shared a common goal: to brand their sectional rivals as men willing to betray the South for mere political success. Simultaneously, each party labored assiduously to convince voters of the adherence of its own northern wing to southern interests.[26]

The statement of principle framed by Georgia Democrats illustrated the politics of slavery. Having already proclaimed their own determination to defend slavery, they hastened to praise Martin Van Buren and the northern wing of the party for "promoting the interests of the South," and guarding against "fanatical efforts now made to interfere with local interests." Northern Democrats, they declared,

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[25] Ibid.; Athens Southern Banner, May 19, 1838.

[26] Cooper, The South and the Politics of Slavery, pp. 69-74.

had proven themselves "the natural allies of the South" through their "resolute opposition to the abolition fanatics." They thus had earned the South's support and "warmest thanks."[27]

Unfortunately, the Democrats warned, the real enemies of the South had found a home amongst the northern Whigs. Even worse, they charged, southern Whigs now plotted to win power for men "who are adverse to the rights and interests of the South." In the face of this regrettable situation, all true Democrats -- and hence all true sons of the South -- must "rally ... like a band of brothers ... and ... bind our fate, by a bond stronger than links of steel, to the destiny of our glorious Union."[28]

IV

Cobb returned home from Milledgeville determined to do everything possible to ensure Democratic success in the fall elections. His role in the convention had been small, but satisfying. The delegates had named him to a committee charged with selecting replacements for any congressional nominee unable to make the race. Even better than this public recognition, he wholeheartedly embraced the resolutions adopted by the convention. They embodied both the ideology which prompted John Addison first to cast his lot with the Union party and the beliefs that Cobb had

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[27] Athens Southern Banner, May 19, 1838.

[28] Ibid.

expressed since his student days. They also constituted the basic principles he would espouse for the rest of his political career. If he needed further incentive to labor in the Democratic vineyard, the party provided it by nominating his law partner, Junius Hillyer, for Congress.[29]

Yet the efforts of party regulars proved insufficient to counter the impact of the Panic of 1837. When the dust of the campaign settled, the Whigs had seized control of the state senate and swept their entire congressional slate into office. The Democrats proved lucky to maintain a bare majority in the state house of representatives. Despite the Democratic defeat, Cobb believed the party must adhere to its principles, and to its northern allies.[30]

Only a few weeks after the election, Clarke County Democrats again assembled. This time they met to pick delegates to another state convention responsible for nominating a gubernatorial candidate. Perhaps fearful that the party might abandon its principles in the shadow of its recent defeat, Cobb took the forefront in guiding the actions of the county meeting. He proposed a resolution designed to commit the county's delegation to "oppose any recommendation to the Legislature to increase the Banking Capital of the State." His resolution provoked "some discussion," and when

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[29] Ibid.

[30] Holt, "The Election of 1840," pp. 31-36; Athens Southern Banner, October 27, 1838; November 3, 1838.

the meeting deadlocked, the delegates voted to adjourn until the next day.[31]

When the meeting reconvened, the debate continued. It quickly became apparent that the division mainly followed generational lines. Older party members -- some of whom had banking interests -- resisted the resolution, while younger members pressed for its adoption. General Edward Harden, Cobb's former legal teacher, promptly moved to table the motion, but his attempt failed. John Addison, a member of the state bank's local board of directors, then attempted to dilute the resolution by means of amendment. Cobb, assisted by Junius Hillyer and Philip Clayton, blocked this maneuver as well, and finally carried the day. Before adjourning, the meeting selected Cobb and his cousin, Howell Flournoy, to serve as Clarke County's delegates to the state convention.[32]

The state convention met on December 17, and nominated Charles J. McDonald for governor. Again, Cobb played a limited role in the state meeting. Nonetheless, he welcomed the convention's reaffirmation of faith in "Republican" principles, and its vote of support for the Van Buren administration. As had been the case at the May meeting, the

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[31] Athens Southern Banner, October 27, 1838; November 3, 1838.

[32] Ibid.

convention elected Cobb to the committee empowered to name a new candidate should McDonald decline to run.[33]

Happily for the Democrats, a temporary period of economic recovery had begun in the fall of 1838. By the time of the gubernatorial election a year later, it had progressed sufficiently to ease the political pressure on the Democrats, thus contributing to McDonald's victory over his Whig opponent. By the time the votes had been counted, however, Cobb was in no position to savor fully the taste of victory.[34]

V

The same spurt of financial recovery which smoothed the way for McDonald's success collapsed into renewed economic hard times in November, 1839. This downturn, and the subsequent depression which lingered well into the 1840s, caught Cobb dangerously overextended. Interestingly, the years 1836 to 1842 represented one of only two periods during his life where Cobb personally administered the bulk of his financial affairs. Following Cobb's election to Congress in 1842, John Lamar assumed responsibility for administering the Cobb family's estate. Lamar's death in 1862 forced Cobb again to shoulder the burden of financial management.

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[33] Ibid., December 29, 1838.

[34] Holt, "The Election of 1840," p. 37.

Unfortunately for him, this second period suffered even greater economic dislocations than the first.[35]

Cobb's personal spending habits and financial practices surely exacerbated his monetary woes. Although some details are obscure, the general outline of Cobb's path to financial ruin is clear. The first signs of the impending crisis came in the summer and fall of 1838. With their mansion finally nearing completion, Cobb and Mary Ann looked to the task of furnishing their new home. John Lamar, who planned a vacation in New York, offered to make their purchases for them. The couple eagerly accepted the offer, and sent Lamar on his way with vague instructions and no hint of a spending limit. Overestimating the couple's financial resources, Lamar embarked on a spending binge. His purchases included fine carpets, French beds with curtains and canopies, imported china, and an eleven foot dining table.[36]

Lamar acknowledged that his expenditures had far exceeded his expectations, and warned his brother-in-law that the bill "will make you open your eyes I expect." Still, he justified his purchases with the observation, "everything is purchased that you will ever need in furnishing. It is a business that will have to be done but once in a life time .... I think you will be satisfied. Everything I have bought

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[35] Temin, The Jacksonian Economy, p. 175; Mays, "The Making of an Antebellum Lady," p. 16.

[36] John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, July 24, 1838; November 4, 1838, Howell Cobb Papers.

is good & ... [in] good taste." Despite this explanation, Lamar still felt uneasy. He confided to Mary Ann his fear that Cobb might balk at the cost, even though he felt certain that they could bear the expense without going into debt. He then estimated that the total cost of the furnishings would exceed the $2,500 which Cobb already had forwarded by about $6,000. To ease the shock, he added, if "I got him into a scrape, he can use anything I have to get out."[37]

These assurances notwithstanding, the situation was far worse than Lamar imagined. Rather than being free of debt with a surplus of cash, as Lamar supposed, Cobb was deep in debt and short of money. Consequently, when his New York creditors presented a draft for nearly $4,000, his bank rejected it for insufficient funds. Seeking to stave off legal action, Cobb had no choice but to exert pressure on those who owed him money. With Lamar's assistance, he succeeded -- "by sheer dint of kicking and spurring" -- in extracting sufficient funds from his debtors to cover the initial New York drafts. It soon became clear, however, that this would not be a viable response in the future. Those who owed Cobb money were as hardpressed as himself.[38]

Brother John hastened to apologize for his role in Cobb's financial embarrassment. Conceding that his

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[37] John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, July 24, 1838; John B. Lamar to Mary Ann Cobb, September, 1838, ibid.

[38] John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, November 4, 1838; November 7, 1838; November 22, 1838; January 9, 1839, ibid.

assumptions regarding Cobb's finances represented an "unwarrantable liberty," Lamar confessed, "I rushed in like a fool, where furniture was purchas[ed] for millionaires ... & stupidly determined to fit out your parlour in equal style. After doing this the balance of the house would look odd & in bad-keeping if it did not receive furniture commensurate in style and quality, so from one mis-step I proceeded to another until I had expended a sum sufficient to have furnished [a] palace."[39]

Regrettably, brother John added, a drought had devastated his own cotton crop, and severely reduced his capacity to assist Cobb. Nevertheless, he did authorize his hard pressed brother-in-law to draft against him for two furniture bills falling due in December, 1838. Beyond that, he could do little except urge Cobb to adopt a policy of frugality, and hope that the year's cotton crop might pay him out of debt.[40]

Cobb and Mary Ann possessed few options save to eliminate their debts and start over. Lamar welcomed their resolution "to wipe off all your debts & commence afresh, on a scale of economy & attention to your incomings & outgoings." He noted that "I am more than ever satisfied of its being indispensably necessary to your welfare and happiness & -- mine to." For nearly a year it appeared that

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[39] Ibid.

[40] Ibid.

Cobb might survive his financial difficulties without much loss. Both the Hurricane and Cowpens Plantations yielded good cotton crops and the price of cotton held relatively high. If these conditions continued for a year or two, the entire family believed he could free himself from debt.[41]

Yet the certainty of tight money, forced Cobb to spend a fair amount of time dodging his creditors. Gazaway Bugg Lamar, another relative, held a "furniture" draft in the amount of $3,500. A self-educated entrepreneur with extensive business interests, he tenaciously pursued Cobb for the money owed him. Complaining that he had written previously, "to which I have no reply -- why I have not, you can best tell," he accused Cobb of willfully holding back money he could pay. As John Lamar had done when purchasing the furniture, Gazaway mistakenly believed Cobb solvent, and suggested "the Birds that can sing ought to sing -- for most others who owe me cannot sing at this time." Stung by the tone of his kinsman's epistle, Cobb finally offered him a payment arrangement which he found less than perfect, but adequate. Other creditors proved less fortunate, and had no choice but to sue for their money.[42]

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[41] John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, November 7, 1838; November 22, 1838; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, November, 1838, ibid.

[42] Gazaway Bugg Lamar to Howell Cobb, January 30, 1839; March, 1839; March 14, 1839; R. W. Habersham to Howell Cobb, March 14, 1840; William Daniells to Howell Cobb, November 24, 1840; William Hansell to Howell Cobb, June 10, 1839; (?) to Howell Cobb, June 30, 1840, ibid.; Kenneth Coleman and

Cobb's chances of escaping unscathed evaporated with the renewal of the downward economic plunge in the fall of 1839. A bumper cotton crop, working in tandem with the panic, undermined prices for the South's main staple crop. By winter, the virtual certainty of financial ruin was becoming increasingly clear. Unable to pay his own debts, the return of hard times also left him responsible for loans on which he had co-signed. One such loan originated in July, 1838, when Reuben Thornton sought the use of Cobb's name as security for a loan desired by Colonel Warren Jourdan. Jourdan needed to borrow $10,000 for ninety days. In exchange for Cobb's security, he offered a mortgage on fifty slaves and several thousand acres of land. Thornton acknowledged that some bank officers opposed the loan, but vowed that Jourdan would pay the note on schedule. Cobb agreed to Thornton's request. A few days later the bank made the loan.[43]

Almost from the beginning, the arrangement failed to follow the original agreement. Four days after co-signing the loan, Cobb received Jourdan's mortgage from Thornton. It included a list of fifty-five slaves, but mentioned none of the promised acreage. Thornton explained that he did not

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Charles Stephen Gurr, eds., Dictionary of Georgia Biography (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1983), p. 593.

[43] Temin, The Jacksonian Economy, p. 175; John B. Lamar to (?), July 13, 1857; Reuben Thornton to Howell Cobb, July 8, 1838; Warren Jourdan to Howell Cobb, July 9, 1838, Howell Cobb Papers.

possess sufficient knowledge of the property to include it. Moreover, he reported, since Jourdan did not anticipate renewing the note, he had not bothered to have the mortgage "proved" by a magistrate. Nevertheless, he felt certain that Cobb would find the document satisfactory. His supposition proved correct. Cobb offered no protest.[44]

Despite Thornton's promises, Jourdan admitted his inability to repay the loan as scheduled shortly before the note fell due. He therefore requested Cobb's permission to seek a sixty day extension. He offered his own assurance that after sixty days "I have every reason to hope & believe you will be released." Cobb again gave his consent. Within a month, however, Jourdan informed him that he could not pay on the new date either. He then sought the use of Cobb's name as security for an additional loan. While no record of the resolution of the matter survives, it is probable that Jourdan's inability to settle the loan contributed to Cobb's financial distress in 1838 and 1839.[45]

It is unclear just how often the generous Cobb allowed the use of his name to secure such loans. He did so, however, a sufficient number of times to draw criticism from John Lamar, who complained, "I have long thought that you

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[44] Mortgage of Warren Jourdan to Howell Cobb, July 14, 1838; Reuben Thornton to Howell Cobb, July 19, 1838, Howell Cobb Papers.

[45] Warren Jourdan to Howell Cobb, October 4, 1838; November, 1838, ibid.

wanted system, and did not see sufficiently to your expenditures. Did not appreciate the eminent risk of involving yourself in the liabilities of 'people about town.'" Later, Lamar recalled that during these years Cobb "was very much pressed by liabilities of his own & endorsements for others."[46]

Yet, in one regard, Cobb's practice of endorsing notes for friends and associates represented a moot point because he also had co-signed virtually all of his father's loans. John Addison's financial situation proved even more precarious than that of his son. The elder Cobb had invested heavily in land, railroads, banks, and a north Georgia gold mine. The economic instability of the late 1830s sharply reduced the value of his holdings and increased the burden of his debts -- debts totalling nearly $75,000 by the spring of 1840. Although the "Old Colonel" still owned property with an estimated value of $140,000, in the post-1839 tight credit economy he found it impossible either to renew his loans or raise the capital to retire them. Consequently, during the winter of 1839-1840, Cobb began to receive notices from John Addison's many creditors stating that he now stood

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[46] John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, May 5, 1840; John B. Lamar to (?), July 13, 1857, ibid.

in default. Unless payment arrived promptly, they intended to sue.[47]

In the midst of these upheavals, the family suffered two sledgehammer blows. In late January, 1840, little Zack died. He had been a healthy infant, but his health deteriorated as he grew older. Sickness plagued him for "many, many long months" in 1838. When he rallied, Mary Ann rejoiced that "Heaven" had not "called home" her child as it did so many of his age. The reprieve, however, proved temporary. In January, the toddler fell fatally ill with "the croup." Brother John, seeking to console the devastated parents, did not yet comprehend the desperate financial plight of Cobb and his father. With unintended irony, he observed, "an all wise providence, saw you ..., with every earthly blessing around you ... in short every thing that was calculated to insure earthly happiness and to withdraw the attention from dependance & reliance on Heaven, and sent this painful visitation, as a monitor of your dependence, and as a warning."[48]

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[47] Ernest C. Hynds, Antebellum Athens and Clarke County Georgia (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1974), pp. 22-32; Williams Rutherford, Jr. to Howell Cobb, July 25, 1842; Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, May 21, 1840; H. W. Harris to Howell Cobb, November 4, 1839; Debt Notice from Georgia State Bank, Augusta Branch to Howell Cobb, January 9, 1840; Robert Habersham to Howell Cobb, May 28, 1840, Howell Cobb Papers.

[48] Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, September 14, 1838; Mary Ann Cobb to John B. Lamar, November, 1840; John B. Lamar to Mary Ann Cobb, April 4, 1840, Howell Cobb Papers.

The second blow fell hard on the heels of the first. John Addison, unable to cope with the prospects of certain bankruptcy, suffered a complete physical and mental collapse. Although he gradually made a partial recovery, the elder Cobb could offer his son neither guidance nor assistance during the worst years of crisis. Now, in addition to coping with the crushing burden of his own and his father's debts, Cobb also faced the necessity of providing for John Addison and his family. This responsibility included scraping together funds to pay his brother Tom's tuition at the University. Tom's suspension from school represented the only alternative. Although the faculty offered the consolation that many students faced the same predicament, Cobb found this prospect unbearable. His efforts in his brother's behalf led Tom to describe their relationship as more like that of a father and son than brothers.[49]

By the spring of 1840, John Lamar began to realize the seriousness of Cobb's money problems. He worried that in an ill-conceived bid to free himself from debt, Cobb might encumber Mary Ann's inheritance or misuse the blank bank drafts which Lamar had given him to cover "renewal of your notes in the R. R. Bank & State Bank." Spurred by these concerns, Lamar quietly inquired of his brother Andrew, who

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[49] Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, March 10, 1840; April 18, 1840; September 17, 1840; Sarah Rootes Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, November 2, 1840; Charles F. McCay to Howell Cobb, October 30, 1840, ibid.

was still a student at the University. Andrew reported that "Col. Cobb has fallen into embarrassments but it is believed that Howell can extricate himself from them & come clear without much loss." His impressions, he admitted, derived from a popular perception that "the Cobb creditors will not be unjust." He had not discussed the situation with Cobb. "These facts are all that I can get hold of," he added, "if they are not satisfactory to you -- Why you will have to come up ... and demand a full account of his stewardship."[50]

Although Lamar recognized the sensitive nature of these inquiries, he reluctantly took his brother's advice to confront Cobb directly. He wrote from his home in Macon asking Cobb about rumors he had heard regarding family finances. To Lamar's relief, his brother-in-law exhibited no resentment over his questions. Instead, he expressed regret that Lamar had been bothered by rumors, and offered a candid appraisal of his problems. He did so, he explained, because of their marital connection and because of Lamar's good advice in the past. He assured brother John that he had done nothing to involve Mary Ann's estate in his troubles.[51]

Cobb expressed complete satisfaction that "my wife's property or the great mass of it was settled on her & beyond my control." This arrangement meant that no matter what

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[50] Andrew J. Lamar to John B. Lamar, May 4, 1840, ibid.

[51] Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, May 21, 1840; undated manuscript, ibid.

misfortune befell him, "she & our children could never be in a worse condition, even if they were never in a better one, than I found [them]." He went further. Had Mary Ann's extensive estate become his upon marriage, he asserted, then he would have "settled" it upon her himself. Otherwise, he wrote, he might have felt compelled to deny his father the use of his name on loans. This he could never do, for "I am always ready to sacrifice my individual self for a father and mother who have as strong a hold upon my affections as ever parents had upon a child."[52]

Cobb welcomed this opportunity to unburden himself. He recognized the obstacles ahead, and confided to Lamar his fear that economic necessity might force him to abandon dreams of a political career. Although he hoped to avoid this measure of last resort, he philosophically observed, "I am called upon to suffer much in feeling & ... more than ordinary firmness and energy is necessary to bear up under the difficulties which I am required to pass through in the next few years." Under the circumstances, he admitted that he "looked forward to the future with very few of those bright hopes & prospects which fall to young men of my age." Still, if fortune required the sacrifice of his dreams, he stood ready to accept the loss. He proudly stated, "it will be a pleasure to me to know that I have been providentially retained in my profession to discharge the highest duty which

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[52] Ibid.

can fall to the lot of man (viz) the support of aged parents."[53]

Following the initial shocks of 1839 and 1840, the Cobbs' financial prospects maintained a steady decline until about 1844. Cobb attempted to eliminate the family's debts by disposing of assets. John Addison empowered him to put all of the land, slaves, and livestock that constituted his Cherry Hill Plantation as well as his property in Watkinsville on the market.[54]

John Lamar wholeheartedly endorsed this plan. He wrote to Mary Ann, "tell Howell to bear up under his load of afflictions; despondence will only make the matter worse. He has it to go through with -- there is no way of avoiding or evading it -- & calmness & resolution are necessary to do so properly." He warned Cobb against becoming "fevered & demented from excited feelings." If Cobb gave way to anxiety, brother John predicted, "he ... will do his father's business wrong & involve himself so as to be unable to aid his parents, his brothers & sisters hereafter."[55]

The key to successfully navigating through this storm, Lamar suggested, lay in Cobb's protection of his own

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[53] Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, undated manuscript, ibid.

[54] Power of Attorney from John Addison Cobb to Howell Cobb, December 17, 1840, ibid.

[55] John B. Lamar to Mary Ann Cobb, February 3, 1841, ibid.

property. He must "be careful & take up all demands against his father, on which he (Howell) is liable first & foremost. Let the first consideration be, in settling the debts, to extricate himself. This is the most important matter." Lamar's advice derived from a simple logic -- Cobb must protect himself to insure that he could protect his family.[56]

Cobb, beginning to buckle under the pressure, responded that "I am so bothered, so distressed & deranged, I scarcely know what I am about, & have no sense to do anything." Lamar denounced these sentiments as "unworthy," and of no use since they could cost the family Cobb's estate as well as his father's. He repeated his advice that Cobb first settle those debts on which he stood as security, and then elaborated on it: "be honorable, but take up no false ideas of honor, toward those who are grasping at your vitals. If it takes all & more property than your father has to pay his debts -- let it go, or let them go unpaid. But save yourself ... if you wish to serve your own & your father's family effectually."[57]

With obvious reluctance, Lamar again warned Cobb against using the blank endorsements he had given him. He felt confident that his brother-in-law would not use them in bad faith, but did fear that "in a moment of unthoughtfulness you

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[56] Ibid.

[57] John B. Lamar to Mary Ann Cobb, February 3, 1841; John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, February 18, 1841, ibid.

might give your note for some large amount in order to procure an extension of time & temporary relief -- & thereby involve yourself & me for life." Later, fearing that his warning about the blank endorsements had offended Cobb, he apologized. He promised Cobb that his warnings stemmed from his "thorough belief in the falability [sic] of our whole species" rather than any specific lack of faith in him.[58]

Cobb's efforts to dispose of John Addison's plantations, "corn -- stock -- lots -- and negroes in a mass," met with total failure. The chief obstacle arose from rumors that the "Old Colonel" could not give clear title to his land. By early 1841, the elder Cobb's creditors would wait no longer. They began to secure civil judgements against him which required the public auction of his slaves. Mary Ann reported that "the sale in Jefferson exceeded Howell's expectations. The negroes sold for ... twenty-six thousand & three hundred dollars." Unfortunately, she noted, "those in Watkinsville were not sold so well, but when the scarcity of money and this part of the county being a poor cotton growing country are taken into consideration, it is as good as can be expected. The amount they brought was 21,400$."[59]

Cobb felt very pleased with the outcome of the auctions. He had never believed the slaves could bring more than

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[58] Ibid.

[59] Sarah Rootes Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, November 2, 1840; Mary Ann Cobb to John B. Lamar, February 8, 1841, ibid.

$48,000, and, as Mary Ann noted, "it wants only $300 of bringing it to that amount." Cobb gave great credit to his wife's uncle, Jesse Robinson, who personally supervised the Watkinsville auction. Writing to his banker, he observed that Robinson "boldly and magnanimously determined to make ... [the property] bring its value & he did it." Cobb now planned to put his own Cowpens plantation and forty slaves on the market, in hope that the money thus raised, combined with the proceeds of the slave auction, would be sufficient to eliminate "all the executions on which his name stands." To brother John's relief, Mary Ann relayed a message from Cobb that "after he gets himself disenthralled he will then bid defiance to all the creditors. After they have taken all his father's property they can go no farther -- and he will have the means secured for supporting both families."[60]

John Addison's Cherry Hill Plantation represented a major portion of that means of support. Unable to dispose of the property on the open market, the old man signed it over to his son in consideration of the notes Cobb had endorsed for him that now stood in default. Cherry Hill encompassed about 6,000 acres, and, according to Mary Ann, was "very valuable." It had "produced 230 bales of cotton last year & more corn than can be consumed during the present year." Cobb transferred twenty-four of his own slaves to

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[60] Mary Ann Cobb to John B. Lamar, February 8, 1841; Howell Cobb to (?), February 3, 1841, ibid.

Cherry Hill, and raised additional funds by mortgaging the property to uncle Jesse Robinson. Mary Ann informed Lamar that the proceeds from the auction and from the mortgage "will cover all the standing expectations and with some remainder -- but judgments will be obtained at this court for upwards of $20,000."[61]

With the funds thus raised, Cobb approached the state bank with the request that it await payment of its claim. His offered a simple argument. If the bank insisted on a prorated division of the money between the many Cobb creditors, then there would be "several thousand dollars" of unpaid debts, and he feared he would never escape the harassment of his creditors. But, if the bank granted the desired concession, he could wait for a period of economic recovery -- provided it did not prove over-long in coming -- and then "throw the balance of the property into the market at the best time." In exchange for this chance "to save myself harmless," he, John Addison, and Jesse Robinson offered mortgages on their property.[62]

By the spring of 1842, with economic recovery nowhere in sight, it became clear that more of John Addison's property must be sacrificed -- namely his Cobbham mansion in Athens. Cobb had already moved his father's family to the

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[61] Deed from John Addison Cobb to Howell Cobb, February 6, 1841; Mary Ann Cobb to John B. Lamar, February 8, 1841, ibid.

[62] Howell Cobb to (?), February 3, 1841, ibid.

Cowpens which he had taken off the market. He hoped that the removal of his father from the center of the storm might hasten his recovery. Sarah endorsed this plan. When the courts ordered the sale of their mansion and furniture, she wrote to Mary Ann, "in the papers ... I do not see any advertisement about the house and furniture, do let me know when the sale will be as I do not think Mr Cobb [ought] to go back till that is over."[63]

For her own part, however, Sarah wanted to be kept informed of events in Athens. She pleaded with her sister, Martha Jacqueline Jackson (widow of John Addison's brother, Howell), to write regularly. "Oh my dear Sister you don't know how much I suffer about my dear Howell & Mary Ann," she lamented, "[Do] write me how they bear up under thier [sic] troubles." She hastened to instruct Martha to put her news "at the end of your note so I need not read it to Mr Cobb for he is greatly distressed about it, so much so it makes me uneasy about him ... do write me all the particulars ... I want to know everything."[64]

Following the sale of his house and furniture in Athens, John Addison basically stood beyond the reach of even his most relentless creditors. Unfortunately, the same could not

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[63] Sarah Rootes Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, April 26, 1842, ibid.; Sarah Rootes Cobb to Martha J. Jackson, undated manuscript; February 13, 1842, Jackson-Prince Papers.

[64] Sarah Rootes Cobb to Martha J. Jackson, undated manuscript; February 13, 1842, Jackson-Prince Papers.

be said of his son. By late summer, 1842, Cobb's own creditors had become relentless. He began to receive notices from the Clarke County sheriff informing him of judgments being rendered against him, and authorizing the seizure of property to satisfy them. Because all of his Athens property had been mortgaged to the bank, the sheriff duly noted that because the defendant "owned" no property in Clarke, the judgments could not be executed.[65]

Lamar offered some assistance, but Jesse Robinson, who had done so much to help earlier, now could do nothing. He too had fallen victim to the depression. By November, he found himself as destitute as Cobb's father. Bankrupt, he left the state, thus forcing Lamar to supplant him as trustee of Mary Ann's property.[66]

At this point, Cobb's primary problem arose from his inability to find a buyer for his own mansion and property in Athens. With a fair price he could pay all his debts and settle his future, but he received no offers. He held on for more than a year, but by the fall of 1843, the state bank refused to delay the collection of its money any longer. It sued, and the court ordered "the house and lot in Cobbham, adjoining the town of Athens ... all the household and

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[65] State of Georgia, Clarke County to Howell Cobb, August 18, 1842, ibid.

[66] Statement Replacing Jesse Robinson as Trustee for Mary Ann Cobb's Estate with John B. Lamar, November 14, 1842, ibid.

kitchen furniture, and also five negroes" to be sold in favor of the bank's claim.[67]

Fearing that this final blow might break Howell and Mary Ann's spirits, brother John hastened to offer verbal consolation. "You must not cherish any feelings of despondence," he argued, "Be patient and resigned, and look for brighter days, they will surely come!!" Moreover, he assured his sister, "your property -- which is ample, beyond the wants of any one family -- is secured to you and your children. So that you have a sure reliance, that you and your family ... can indulge themselves." Besides, he added, even if she lost her property "I have enough for all of us."[68]

Cobb's extended absences on the circuit left Mary Ann responsible for sale preparations. She prepared a complete inventory of the items to be sold and sent the things the court allowed them to keep on to the Cowpens, where they intended to settle after the sale. She vowed to resist any inclination towards despair. "With God for my helper I fear not what men can do," she avowed, "never may it be said that

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[67] Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, May 12, 1842; Sheriff, Clarke County, to Howell Cobb, August 30, 1843, ibid.; Athens Southern Banner, September 21, 1843.

[68] John B. Lamar to Mary Ann Cobb, September 7, 1843; September 20, 1843, Howell Cobb Papers.

I shrunk from the cross that was laid before me, for weak is the strength that fails in adversity."[69]

It is more difficult to describe Cobb's feelings. The past four years had clearly taken their toll. He found the demands of his legal practice increasingly onerous, but his need for funds forced him to remain on the circuit at a time when he desperately wanted "to be in the bosom of my family." By the fall of 1842, his mother described him as looking "jaded & tired." She relayed to Mary Ann his complaints of hardly having time "to see you and the children." Sarah also ventured an opinion that "if he could consult his own inclination he would quit the life of a Lawyer for I do not think he likes it any better than you do."[70]

On occasion despair swallowed up Cobb's usual optimism. Then, he poured out his frustrations to Mary Ann. His feelings reached their nadir in April, 1842, when he wrote, "ours is a peculiar lot, misfortune after misfortune have followed each other in such rapid succession that we almost feel alarmed in feeling relieved from the one for fear that the next may be more severe & trying to the feelings. Where are these things to end?" His depression became so severe that he pronounced his eagerness to withdraw from all worldly concerns, because "save for the interest I feel in you & the

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[69] Mary Ann Cobb to John B. Lamar, September 21, 1843, ibid.

[70] Sarah Rootes Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, September 27, 1842, ibid.

rest of my dear family ... I have lost all interest in this world's affairs ... in the midst of friends we are surrounded by enemies in the enjoyment of earth's richest blessings [while] we are but dragging out a miserable existence."[71]

Gradually, Cobb's mood improved. By the time his mansion and furnishings went on the block, Lamar commented on his "disposition to take things easier than he used to, and to look ahead to brighter days." Like Mary Ann, Cobb appeared to accept the inevitability of their losses, and determined to make the best of a bad situation.[72]

The sale of Cobb and Mary Ann's home took place in early October, 1843. Although reconciled to the loss of the property, the entire family grieved over the likely loss of Mary Ann's personal servant, Aggy. Only a teenager, Aggy had been bequeathed to her by Zachariah Lamar. Both slave and mistress manifested a particular attachment to each other, and Sarah summarized the feelings of all, saying "I felt for all the negroes but for her I did keenly feel as I could never reconcile it to myself for her or her brothers or sisters to be sold if it could by any lawful means be prevented." Happily, brother John came to the rescue by purchasing the girl for $400, and deeding her back to his sister. Aggy's brothers and sisters proved less lucky and

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[71] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, March 18, 1842; April 16, 1842, ibid.

[72] John B. Lamar to Mary Ann Cobb, September 5, 1843, ibid.

departed with new owners. The family expressed hope that they might be bought back "at some future day, if the Lord sees fit to order it so," but there is no evidence this ever occurred. Lamar also bought other items cherished by Mary Ann, including a silver service purchased during his New York spending spree.[73]

In the aftermath of the auction, Cobb reported to Lamar that the house and lot brought $5,000, and the furniture $3,070. While this sum fell short of the total owed the bank by about $2,000, the sale of slaves had raised a further $2,400. This success meant that he now had only one major creditor, a Mrs. Thomas, to whom he owed $1,500, but with three slaves to be sold, he saw no reason for concern. His property had not "brought half of what it cost," but, with some satisfaction, he realized that the worst of his family's financial crisis had passed.[74]

VI

Although John Addison bore the most visible scars, Cobb, Mary Ann, and Sarah had all been marked by their experiences during this time of troubles. As a family, they clearly drew closer together under the pressure of events, and each did all possible to ease the burdens of the others. Of

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[73] Sarah Rootes Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, undated manuscript; Bill of Sale from Sheriff, Clarke County to John B. Lamar, October 21, 1843; Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, ibid.; Mays, "The Making of an Antebellum Lady," p. 14.

[74] Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, October 5, 1843, Howell Cobb Papers.

necessity, John Addison and Sarah's capacity in this regard proved limited. After moving to the Cowpens, they assumed direction of the slave force living there, and worked diligently to produce both cotton and food crops.[75]

They forwarded a portion of the food they raised to Athens, thus enabling Howell and Mary Ann to reduce their expenditures. When John Addison heard that his son anticipated having "to buy meat" for his remaining plantations, he devised a plan to "get some by taking in the hog drivers and letting them have corn for their hogs." His plan worked even better than anticipated, and within days he advised that "Howell had better not buy much till he sees how much we will be able to get."[76]

The elder Cobbs manifested this same spirit of consideration as Howell and Mary Ann prepared for their own exile to the Cowpens. "I want to do what will be for your comfort and keep you from having any more trouble," Sarah insisted, "Would to God I could do more for you both ... my poor heart has bled at every pore, and few are the moments when you all are absent from my thoughts."[77]

Besides assuming responsibility for the direction of John Addison's affairs, Cobb and Mary Ann dedicated

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[75] Sarah Rootes Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, undated manuscript; November 16, 1842; Sarah Rootes Cobb to Howell Cobb, January 24, 1844, Howell Cobb Papers.

[76] Ibid.

[77] Ibid.

themselves to easing their "papa's" guilt over having drawn his son into a web of ruin. Mary Ann stayed in close contact with Sarah, and through her monitored John Addison's mental state. After she informed Cobb that his father "needs your presence to revive his spirits," he made it a point to visit his parents as often as possible -- even though these visits further reduced his cherished time with Mary Ann and his children.[78]

Occasionally, his duty to his parents and his desire to be with his wife came into conflict. In one instance, he arrived at the Cowpens in time for supper, and then departed for home immediately after eating. Commenting on his twenty-plus mile buggy ride through the Georgia darkness, Sarah observed, "Howell I expect took you all on surprise when he returned. I never did hate anything more than to see him start in the night, but go he would. I hope ... he got home ... safely." Despite the widespread gossip regarding John Addison's role in his son's financial problems, Cobb attempted to handle the difficulties "so that no man should say that he had been injured by his father."[79]

The hardships and tragedies of these years pushed Cobb and Mary Ann closer to each other, and closer to their

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[78] Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, April 18, 1840; Sarah Rootes Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, November 2, 1840; April 26, 1842; September 27, 1842; October 1, 1842, ibid.

[79] Sarah Rootes Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, October 1, 1842, ibid.; Augustus Longstreet Hull, Annals of Athens Georgia, 1801-1901 (Athens: Banner Job Office, 1906), p. 206.

remaining children. By 1843 they had three sons: John Addison, born in 1838 and nicknamed John A.; Lamar, born in 1840; and Howell, Jr., born in 1842. Mary Ann spoke for both parents when, a year after little Zachariah's death, she declared, "through all my moments of happiness there is a lurking fear that my brightest and best gifts may be snatched from me unawares. And at night, since the weather has grown so cold, the croup haunts me like a midnight demon." She confided to her brother that "I often say that if I were single and knew all the evils attendant on Hymeneal bonds, I never would marry, still I only say so for the benefit of young damsels and spinsters For with all the trouble incumbent upon the duty of a mother -- I would not resign my little pledges (to say nothing of a good husband)."[80]

And there can be no doubt that she gained an enhanced appreciation of her "good husband" during these troubled times. After Cobb had poured forth his soul in a letter written while travelling the circuit, she responded that his aching loneliness had made her "eyes gush with tears and [her] heart bleed." Still, having read his letter "over and over again," she confessed that it had given her pleasure with each reading because its assurances that she was loved "will lighten every tort, and sweeten every bitter draught." She further assured him that in the years of prosperity

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[80] Mary Ann Cobb to John B. Lamar, November, 1840, Howell Cobb Papers.

following their marriage, she had often congratulated herself for finding such a good partner. Yet, "now that the scene has changed and clouds of adversity are lowering over us, I find that now and not until now, have I known your value .... I consider you as the brightest and best blessing that God ever bestowed upon me, and the consciousness of possessing your heart will nerve me for every trial."[81]

Even as the family drew closer together, its members shared a common need for individual spiritual regeneration. For Sarah and John Addison this process proved relatively straightforward. Sarah, who had long been a committed member of the Baptist Church, retreated further behind her religious shield. After moving out to the Cowpens, she spent long hours reading her Bible and other religious texts. She struggled to "bow in submission to [God's] divine will for the 'Lord of all earth must do right.'" Yet her exile from friends and relatives in Athens, as well as her family's financial ruin, distressed her deeply. She confessed to Mary Ann, "Oh my rebellious heart rises up continually and sometimes makes me fear I am not a child of God."[82]

John Addison, apparently, had not demonstrated any previous interest in religion. Beset with problems on all

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[81] Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, April 17, 1842, ibid.

[82] Sarah Rootes Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, March 22, 1842; undated manuscript; Mary W. Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, January 24, 1842, ibid.; Sarah Rootes Cobb to Martha J. Jackson, undated manuscript, Jackson-Prince Papers; Baptismal Record, Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collection; Boykin, Memorial Volume, p. 143.

sides, however, he sought solace in hopes that a better world lay beyond this one. After making a public profession of faith, he became a member of the Baptist denomination on June 13, 1841. He never turned back from this decision, and the example he set for the remainder of his life -- especially the calm assurance with which he faced death -- sparked Howell's own twenty year quest for religious salvation.[83]

Like her father-in-law, Mary Ann appeared to possess little interest in religious matters before 1840. Little Zack's death proved the catalyst for her conversion experience. In the midst of her grief, John Lamar had suggested that this "painful visitation" might represent a "warning" from God, and Andrew Lamar soon reported that "the grief caused by the death of Zachariah seems to have given place to ... [a] newborn love of her god."[84]

Yet in the midst of personal tragedy and financial devastation, even a simple profession of faith seemed blocked with obstacles. Perhaps influenced by Sarah, Mary Ann favored the Baptist Church. Her parents, however, had been Methodists. She feared that local busybodies might construe

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[83] Sarah Rootes Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, March 22, 1842; undated manuscript; Mary W. Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, January 24, 1842, Howell Cobb Papers; Sarah Rootes Cobb to Martha J. Jackson, undated manuscript, Jackson-Prince Papers; Baptismal Record, Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collection; Boykin, Memorial Volume, p. 143.

[84] John B. Lamar to Mary Ann Cobb, April 4, 1840; June 21, 1841; Andrew J. Lamar to John B. Lamar, May 4, 1840; Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, September 17, 1840, Howell Cobb Papers; Baptismal Record, Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collection.

her association with the Baptists as a repudiation of her mother and father. Grieving over Zack and plagued by religious doubts, she confided to Cobb, "I have an aching heart that will allow me ... [no] rest unless my mind or body is kept in constant exercise -- I feel sometimes as if some evil spirit is in constant pursuit of me." Her anguish continued for several months, but she finally succeeded in relieving her doubts. Both she and John Addison joined the Baptist Church on the same day.[85]

Mary Ann's experiences during these months exerted a profound influence on the religious beliefs she held for the rest of her life. Her struggle of conscience led her to develop a deep sense of religious toleration. When the editor of the Christian Index, a Baptist journal, published a series of editorials gloating over the conversion of several Methodists to the Baptist faith, Mary Ann voiced outrage at his "triumphant air." She protested to a friend that "according to my conception of the Bible -- there is more joy in Heaven over one sinner that repenteth and forsaketh his sins -- than over ninety & nine [Methodists] converted to Baptism .... I cannot sympathize with those Baptist editors who are so illiberal as to ridicule and hold

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[85] Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, September 17, 1840, Howell Cobb Papers; Baptismal Record, Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collection.

up to the derision of their readers, pious men of opposite faith."[86]

Mary Ann went further as her own children began to express curiosity about religion. She told her son Lamar, "my desire is to see my children Christians irrespective of denominational names. Never will I throw an obstacle in the way of their convictions of right." Should any of her children be led to select a different church, she said, "I will still receive it as a blessing from God -- teaching me universal love and charity."[87]

Her most elaborate statement of religious toleration, however, came in 1859, when describing interdenominational prayer meetings being held in Athens. Such occasions placed her under the conviction "that when Christ reigns on earth permanent -- his kingdom will be a spiritual kingdom. The same distinctions -- the same difference of names -- but one Jesus." She added that "it is possible for all to be Christians .... The longer I live the less -- the Church -- binds my conscience and opinions. My spirit seems to soar above these material barriers and desires communion with all in whom the spirit of Christ dwells let the names be as they may." Nevertheless, she remained a faithful adherent of the Baptist Church. She explained this loyalty by saying "I feel

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[86] Mary Ann Cobb to "Dear Brother Landrum," November 17, 1857, Howell Cobb Papers.

[87] Mary Ann Cobb to Lamar Cobb, April 11, 1858, ibid.

that the spirit of God directed me towards the Baptist Church .... And I believe consciously that it is nearest the Truth of any other and suits my impulsive -- ardent temperament .... Still I never allow myself to cherish bigotry or sectarianism."[88]

Cobb did not experience the same attraction to religion as his wife and parents. Although he occasionally spoke of accepting God's will, his religious expressions went no further. Yet he did experience some desire for spiritual regeneration which he satisfied through involvement with the temperance movement that swept Georgia in the early 1840s. Usually one to relish earthly pleasures, Cobb apparently ignored the movement when it first arrived in Athens in April, 1842. By the end of October, however, both he and Junius Hillyer had succumbed to the movement's revivalistic fervor, and taken a pledge of "total abstinence." The two men immediately began making speeches seeking to win new converts to the cause. Along with other speakers, they generated considerable excitement. In one night forty-seven people took the pledge. A convert to the cause herself, Mary Ann reported that there was "nothing else talked of but temprance [sic]."[89]

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[88] Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, June 27, 1859, ibid.

[89] Athens Southern Banner, April 12, 1842; November 4, 1842; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, April 16, 1842; F. Thomas, President, Abbeville District Temperance Society, to Howell Cobb, March 10, 1843, Howell Cobb Papers; Mary Cobb to Sarah M. R. Jackson, October 29, 1842; Mary Ann Cobb to

Sarah rejoiced over her son's activities and expressed "hope that it is the forerunner of better things and that I shall have the unspeakable happiness of having all my sons ... humble followers of the meek and lowly Jesus." Within a matter of months, however, Cobb's enthusiasm for the temperance movement faded. He soon abandoned his abstinence pledge. Although religion later became a major concern for him, at the moment he felt the call of a force stronger than religion or reform -- the lure of politics.[90]

Sarah M. R. Jackson, November 8, 1842, Jackson-Prince Papers.

[90] W. R. Barnham to Mary Ann Cobb, October 14, 1868; Sarah Rootes Cobb to Howell Cobb, December 25, 1842, Howell Cobb Papers.

Chapter Four

"So Little Known to Fame"

Despite Cobb's fears that his family's financial embarrassments might force him from the political arena, his involvement in politics steadily increased between 1839 and 1843. Shortly after the close of the Georgia gubernatorial election in October, 1839, the presidential campaign of 1840 opened. In December, the Whig national convention assembled in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. The delegates abandoned the party's multiple candidate strategy of 1836 in favor of a single candidate. Seeking a Whig version of Andrew Jackson, the delegates rejected their most visible party leader, Henry Clay, in favor of William Henry Harrison from Ohio.[1]

Born in Virginia in 1773, Harrison, like Jackson, represented a genuine frontier hero. The victor at the battle of Tippecanoe, Harrison also possessed government experience, having served as governor of the Indiana territory, and as congressman and senator from Ohio. Unlike Clay, he had few political enemies, and even fewer men knew his political views. These last two points greatly enhanced Harrison's appeal to the convention, because the party still lacked the cohesion needed to promulgate a successful platform. As a concession to the state-rights wing of the

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[1] William J. Cooper, Jr., Liberty and Slavery, Southern Politics to 1860 (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983), pp. 192-195.

party -- and to Henry Clay -- the convention named Clay's close friend John Tyler to the vice-presidential spot. Although Van Buren did not officially receive his party's nod until the Democrats met at Baltimore in May, 1840, his nomination already seemed a virtual certainty.[2]

With the Whig candidate already in the field, Georgia Democrats wasted no time in moving to the attack. In early February, following a congressional vote on the so-called "gag rule" which automatically tabled abolitionist petitions presented to Congress, the Southern Banner published the role call of the vote. In an accompanying editorial, editor Albon Chase declared that he published this vote so "our readers may see to whom we are indebted for this decisive action." Noting that "all the Northern Whigs with a single exception voted against the resolution," he proudly proclaimed that the vital interests of the South had been sustained only because "the great body of Northern Democrats" had voted for the "gag rule." In the light of such evidence, Chase asked, "can there be found a Southern Whig so recreant to truth and honesty, as to assert that Mr. Van Buren and his friends favor abolition?"[3]

Having fired this first shot, Chase quickly moved to a more specific critique of Harrison as "the abolitionist candidate." As proof, he cited "the extracts we see

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[2] Ibid.

[3] Athens Southern Banner, February 8, 1840.

constantly published from the abolitionist papers, hailing Harrison's nomination as a triumph of their principles." In Chase's mind, the crowing of the abolitionist press, combined with vehement abolitionist attacks on Martin Van Buren, eliminated all possible doubt. He warned that southerners must focus on these matters because "it will soon become a question ... whether the supporters of ... Northern Whiggery, are not esteemed traitors to the peace and welfare of the South, and whether any course tending to weaken the influence of those who sustain us throughout the Union is not criminal and base."[4]

The bulk of north Georgia Democrats did not lag far behind the Banner in denouncing the Whig candidate. Cobb assumed a leading role in directing their activities. In mid-February, Walton County Democrats, meeting in Monroe, named Cobb, Chase, and Hillyer as a committee authorized to consult with other county organizations regarding the selection of a delegate to the Democratic National Convention from the Western Judicial Circuit. A few weeks later, Cobb chaired a similar meeting in Clarke County. The party members in attendance resolved to follow Walton County's lead and named the same committee to represent them in the delegate selection process.[5]

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[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid.

In addition to this business, the local party felt it necessary to comment on a minor crisis in the national organization. Most southern Democrats demanded that Van Buren's vice-president, Richard M. Johnson of Kentucky, be dropped from the ticket. They found the vice-president's open residence with a mulatto mistress intolerable. Consequently, the Clarke County meeting adopted a resolution favoring "the claims of Hon. John Forsyth to the office of Vice President." Forsyth, a Georgian, was Van Buren's secretary of state. Fearing the appearance of disloyalty, however, Clarke County Democrats added a vow to support the national ticket regardless of the nominees.[6]

When the Democrats met at Baltimore in May, Van Buren won renomination as expected. The southern wing of the party succeeded in blocking every attempt to renominate Vice-president Johnson. When they proved incapable of uniting behind a replacement candidate, however, the convention left the choice for vice-president to the individual states. Satisfied with events in Baltimore, Georgia Democrats now joined the contest in earnest.[7]

Eager to do his part, Cobb's highly visible role in the campaign illustrated his growing stature in the state organization. Shortly after the national convention, Thomas

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[6] Ibid., February 22, 1840; March 13, 1840.

[7] William J. Cooper, Jr., The South and the Politics of Slavery (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978), pp. 130-131.

Glascock wrote to him urging the necessity of actively recruiting Democrats in Madison, Jackson, Habersham, and Rabun Counties to participate at a large Fourth of July meeting. Glascock assured his young friend, "our prospects were never better and the fate of Harrison is now sealed in Georgia." One reason for Glascock's optimistic assessment derived from the defection of many State Rights men to Democratic ranks.[8]

For a time, Glascock's optimism seemed justified. In July, a convention composed of the rump of the State Rights party assembled in Milledgeville. They denounced their former allies' decision to join the Whigs and endorse Harrison as an ill-considered repudiation of "every principle by which the State Rights Party was peculiarly known." Just as troubling, they lamented, the newly converted Whigs had blindly thrown "themselves into the arms of the Northern Federalists." The convention then reaffirmed the principles of limited federal authority, denied that Harrison represented them, and endorsed the candidacy of Van Buren.[9]

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[8] Thomas Glascock to Howell Cobb, June 5, 1840, Howell Cobb Papers, Felix Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia (Hereafter: Howell Cobb Papers); Ulrich Bonnell Phillips, Georgia and State Rights, A Study of the Political History of Georgia from the Revolution to the Civil War, With Particular Regard to Federal Relations (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1902), p. 146.

[9] Athens Southern Banner, July 17, 1840.

Even as these events unfolded, Cobb worked diligently to motivate both regular Democrats and State Rights converts. He actively encouraged voters throughout the Western Judicial Circuit to subscribe to an Augusta paper, The Southerner, which aimed to be "more exclusively devoted to the purpose of showing the Southern people that they ought not to support Harrison." He also helped organize the July convention of the State Rights party that repudiated Harrison and endorsed Van Buren. This effort proved doubly rewarding because it allowed him to cooperate with his old friend Henry Benning, who shared in these efforts to let Van Buren "states rights men ... see a nucleus to rally around & thus preserve them from falling into the Harrison mass."[10]

In addition to his behind-the-scenes activities, Cobb took a conspicuous public role as well. He proved a popular speaker at Democratic rallies throughout north Georgia. Following one such meeting at Jefferson, the Banner proudly noted: "We learn that the impression made ... was very favorable to our cause .... To Mr. Cobb, also, our friends are much indebted. To talents of a superior order, he adds a zeal and energy in the cause, worthy of the occasion." Despite his growing financial problems, Cobb took real pleasure in his political activities and oratorical skills. Following one speech, he reported to brother John that "I was

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[10] James Jackson to Howell Cobb, June 7, 1840; Henry L. Benning to Howell Cobb, June 10, 1840, Howell Cobb Papers.

content to harangue the loco focos ... to the great annoyance of a few nonspeech making Whigs who were present."[11]

Young Cobb also took a highly visible role in a meeting of Clarke County Democrats held on June 20, 1840. After explaining the anti-Harrison purpose of the assembly, he called for the creation of a "Committee of Five" to prepare resolutions aimed at furthering this cause. Those in attendance voted to create the committee and appointed Cobb one of its members. After a brief consultation, the committee reported a series of resolutions for the approval of the meeting.[12]

The proposed resolutions echoed the standard Democratic line outlined by Chase in the Banner. They pledged the local party to support the candidacy of Martin Van Buren, and condemned a Harrison victory as "the means of fixing upon the country a United States Bank, a system of internal improvement by the General Government, ... [and a] destruction of State Rights." Even worse, the committee warned, a Harrison victory "will give countenance and encouragement to those incendiary fanatics the northern abolitionists." The Banner reported that the resolutions "were ably advocated by Messrs. Cobb and [Edward] Harden, in

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[11] Administration Party of Newton County to Howell Cobb, June 17, 1840; Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, July 6, 1840, ibid.; Athens Southern Banner, September 4, 1840.

[12] Athens Southern Banner, June 26, 1840.

clear, forcible, and spirit stirring addresses, after which they were unanimously adopted."[13]

Despite the strenuous efforts of Cobb and other party activists, Democratic prospects did not appear bright. Former State Rights leaders -- men such as John M. Berrien, William C. Dawson, and Robert Toombs -- manifested a determination to lead the bulk of their party into a permanent and complete association with the national Whig organization. These men realized that their only hope of acquiring national stature in the political arena lay in alliance with a national party. Besides, they suffered no doubts that the Whig ticket felt "politically friendly to the South," and would behave in a fashion consistent with the politics of slavery. They found Harrison-Tyler an easy sell in Georgia.[14]

This situation stemmed from a variety of causes. The Harrisburg convention's decision not to write a party platform proved a great assistance. It enabled newly converted Georgia Whigs to stress Harrison's southern roots, while sparing them the need to defend specific and potentially controversial platform planks. John Tyler's nomination for the vice presidency further enhanced the prospects of Georgia Whigs. A native southerner with strong

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[13] Ibid.

[14] Cooper, The South and the Politics of Slavery, p. 127.

state-rights credentials, Tyler's friendship with Henry Clay made him attractive to virtually every faction in the party.[15]

Van Buren's unpopularity in Georgia worked to magnify these Whig strengths. Given Van Buren's stature as Jackson's handpicked successor and his repeated public attempts to appease southern fears concerning the security of slavery, he should have been immensely popular with southern voters. Yet his northern roots and his reputation as a shifty politician rendered him suspect.[16]

The Whig press hammered away on these themes. It charged that Van Buren's highly publicized defense of southern rights represented nothing more than a convenient cover for a corrupt politician whose heart lay in the abolition camp. As proof, they accused Van Buren of favoring slavery restriction during the Missouri crisis, of advocating Negro suffrage in New York, and of believing that Congress possessed the authority to abolish slavery in the District of Columbia. Whig editors warned that when northern and southern interests came into conflict, political reality would force the Democratic candidate to stand with his own geographic section. The Milledgeville Southern Recorder

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[15] Ibid., pp. 125-128.

[16] Ibid., pp. 135-136.

maintained that Georgia had rejected Van Buren in 1836, and would do so again in 1840.[17]

The lingering economic depression further compounded the Democrats' difficulties. This is not to say that Georgia Whigs waged a campaign openly based on economic issues. They did not. Leery of the South's tradition of hostility to a national bank, protective tariffs, and federally sponsored internal improvements, Whigs studiously avoided embracing any aspect of Clay's American System. Rather, they opted to clothe their candidate in the guise of a strict constructionist defender of state rights who fundamentally opposed government intervention in the economy.[18]

Nonetheless, the economy worked to Harrison's benefit. The presidential election of 1824 marked the beginning of what is known as the second American party system. Between 1824 and 1836, this party system experienced a fluctuating phase in which voter allegiances had not yet crystallized. Between 1840 and 1852, the system experienced a stable phase characterized by intense voter commitments to either the Democratic or Whig parties. The years 1836 to 1840, represented a vital transition period between these two

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[17] Ibid.

[18] Ibid., p. 133; Michael F. Holt, "The Election of 1840, Voter Mobilization, and the Emergence of the Second American Party System," in William J. Cooper, Jr., Michael F. Holt, and John McCardell, eds., A Master's Due: Essays In Honor of David Herbert Donald (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985), pp. 30-31.

phases. The response of the two parties to the economic depression that followed the Panic of 1837 significantly shaped the voter alignments which emerged from this transitional period.[19]

Van Buren and the Democrats -- both in Georgia and across the country -- insisted that the nation's economic distress should be blamed "on bankers, paper money, and excessive credit." They denied the government held any obligation to intervene in the economy to aid individuals, and declared that an interventionist government program would tend to threaten equality and personal liberty throughout the country. Thus the government's only moral course lay in maintaining the solvency of the United States. Van Buren sought to secure this goal by means of his Independent Treasury plan, which Congress finally adopted in 1840.[20]

Not surprisingly, the emerging Whig party blamed the Democrats for causing the depression, and for failing to take effective steps to end it. They called for positive government action designed to ease the country's economic plight. Although Whig leaders in Georgia specifically soft-pedalled economic issues, the Whig party had established a record on the economy by virtue of votes in Congress and state legislatures. With voter allegiances still highly flexible, and with massive numbers of new voters entering the

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[19] Holt, "The Election of 1840," pp. 30-31.

[20] Ibid., pp. 30-33.

system, much of the electorate -- suffering from the depression -- turned out to sweep the Whigs to victory at every level of government.[21]

Finally, the Whigs benefitted from their adoption and expansion of Jacksonian electoral techniques. These, by and large, centered on hoopla. The Whigs sallied forth from their Harrisburg convention prepared to do political battle with the slogan, "Tippecanoe and Tyler too." Soon, a Democratic newspaper in Baltimore provided the Whigs with a campaign theme as well when it claimed that for "$2,000 and a barrel of cider, General Harrison would ... consent to withdraw his pretensions, and spend his days in a log cabin." Quickly taking up the theme of the "log cabin and hard cider," Whigs used it to present Harrison as a man of the people and accused Van Buren of living in the lap of luxury. Considering the financial distress of much of the country, this proved a powerful theme for the Whigs, and they used it without restraint in parades, rallies, and campaign songs.[22]

By late summer it became clear that the Van Buren ticket faced insurmountable odds in Georgia and in much of the South. One Cobb correspondent wrote from Alabama that Harrison seemed assured of victory there. He complained that all the women in his neighborhood -- regardless of their husband's party affiliation -- favored Harrison, while

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[21] Ibid.

[22] Ibid., p. 32.

Tyler's presence on the ticket swayed many men. John Lamar, again vacationing in the North, wrote from New York that he expected Van Buren to win the election, but could only hope that his home state would not betray its own interests by supporting "'Granny Harrison.'"[23]

The Whigs also sensed certain victory. William Parker White, a friend from Cobb's college days, could not resist gloating over the discomfiture of the Democrats. Warning that the Harrisonians were getting "rapidly upon the strong side," White advised Cobb to "Skip! mon ami, Skip! You know you 'abominate minority parties' -- desert a falling house before it crushes you." After giving Cobb such good advice, White jovially concluded, "I expect the next time we meet to see you one of the finest, fattest, weightiest, warmest Harrison men ... I know of."[24]

Georgia's legislative and congressional elections took place in early October, a month before the balloting for presidential electors. The results of these early elections indicated the magnitude of the Whig victory in 1840. The editor of the Milledgeville Federal Union bemoaned the Democratic situation in blunt terms: "We are beaten. The Harrison party will have a decided majority [in the]

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[23] Henry C. Sell to Howell Cobb, August 6, 1840; John B. Lamar to Mary Ann Cobb, September 5, 1840, Howell Cobb Papers.

[24] William Parker White to Howell Cobb, September 19, 1840, ibid.

Legislature .... Our entire ticket for Congress will also be beaten."[25]

Despondently, the newspaper expressed faint hope that the state's voters might yet see the error of their ways, and cast Democratic ballots in the presidential contest. It acknowledged that such a fortuitous event required the voters to see through the Whig orgy of "pageantry and show." Returning to earlier themes, it insisted that "the responsibilities brought to bear on Mr. Van Buren's administration in this election, are either the offspring of whiggish policy, or justifiable in themselves." It concluded with a warning: "We trust ... that the ... log cabins, outlandish flags, ... and intoxicated orators will all be cleared away, and that the naked truth will ... be revealed ... that the contest is not between Mr. Van Buren and Gen. Harrison." Rather, it maintained, the voters faced a choice between "a government riveted on the people by Northern Federalism, Abolitionism, United States Bankism, [and] the tariff ... on the one side, and the ... long cherished democratic doctrines of Thomas Jefferson on the other." Such efforts did no good. The following month Harrison easily carried the state.[26]

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[25] Milledgeville Federal Union, October 13, 1840.

[26] Ibid.

II

In the aftermath of the election, the plight of Georgia Democrats seemed truly desperate. Not only had the majority of new voters supported the Whigs, so had many members of the Democratic rank and file. Mary Ann summarized the situation in a letter to Cobb. "Things look very blue for you Democrats," she observed, "You have had all your trouble for nothing." Still, she tendered the consolation "that you did your best, and none could do more." Nevertheless, she advised her husband, "if I were you I would quit the field," because "the Whigs will crow over your defeat," and "the Log Cabin & Cider Barrel will be all the go."[27]

Yet neither Cobb nor the rest of the Democratic leadership manifested any inclination to take White's advice to "skip" or Mary Ann's to "quit the field." For his own part, Cobb put the best public face on the defeat by charging the Whigs with stealing the election through "base chicanery and brazen effrontery." The Democratic party, he said, need only expose "the course pursued by our Southern Whigs ... to reclaim many of our Democratic friends who have been cajoled into an indirect support of [Whig] principles."[28]

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[27] Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, undated manuscript, Howell Cobb Papers.

[28] Howell Cobb to Athens Southern Banner, undated manuscript, Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collection, Felix Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia (Hereafter: Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collection); Letter of the Democratic Young Men of Georgia, Executive Committee, December, 1840, Howell Cobb Papers.

In a similar vein, Democrats in Milledgeville drew up resolutions declaring that "the Democratic Republican Party of Georgia, undismayed by the results of the past year's elections, ... are determined to open the new political campaign with a close adherence to those principles." Going further, the Milledgeville meeting issued a call for a Democratic Young Men's Convention, to meet in the spring of 1841. It appointed a seven-member executive committee to plan the convention. Cobb and John Lamar, both rising lights of the party, received appointments to the committee.[29]

The executive committee began making plans almost immediately for the May meeting. In addition to his duties with the seven-man group, Cobb also served on the committee preparing the convention's agenda. With arrangements for the statewide meeting well underway, Cobb turned his attention to grass roots organization in Clarke County. His efforts focused on a March 20 meeting of the Democratic Young Men of Clarke County. Cobb dominated this assembly. He opened the gathering with a brief statement of purpose, and then served on the resolutions committee. When that committee reported,

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[29] Letter of the Democratic Young Men of Georgia, Executive Committee, April, 1841, Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collection; Letter of the Democratic Young Men of Georgia, Executive Committee, December, 1840, Howell Cobb Papers.

Cobb presented its work and delivered a vigorous speech urging a favorable response by those in attendance.[30]

This presentation proved an easy task for Cobb, because the resolutions embodied his own political and personal convictions. Seldom in his long political career did these political and personal convictions ever conflict. His appreciation of the importance of a successful May meeting lent additional energy to his effort. He privately vowed that "this thing will -- it must, by Heavens it shall succeed ... [and] 'Antean like we will rise from our fall and [show] that our party is but endeared to us by adversity [,] that touchstone of the faithful and true.'"[31]

In keeping with this private determination, Cobb publicly declared it far better "when warring for ... our free government ... to suffer the calamity of defeat ... than to triumph without principle." He spoke in favor of the Democratic economic program, and denounced Whig policies as a plot to rob the South for the North's benefit. Still, he asserted, the Democrats possessed reasons for optimism. "The false hopes of relief and prosperity which were held forth by the Federal Whigs to delude the people," he avowed, "must dissolve and leave them without a rallying point." The Whigs

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[30] Athens Southern Banner, March 12, 1841; March 26, 1841; Herschel V. Johnson to Howell Cobb, March 5, 1841; Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, April, 1841, Howell Cobb Papers.

[31] Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, April, 1841, Howell Cobb Papers.

only hope for continued success, he declared, required them to make "equally false and unavailing" promises. The Democrats he proclaimed must not allow them to dupe the voters again.[32]

An unexpected event in April forced a momentary lull in partisan activities. The sixty-eight year old Harrison caught cold while delivering his inaugural address on a raw March day. The cold developed into pneumonia, and the president died only thirty-two days after taking the oath of office. With a proper sense of decorum, Cobb served on a committee which drew up resolutions honoring the man he had so recently castigated. Cobb's willingness to participate on this committee illustrated a significant facet of his character. Whatever a man's political views, Cobb almost invariably strove not to let them color his personal feelings. Time after time, observers commented on the nonpartisan nature of his friendships. Speaking of these very years, William Hope Hull recalled "political excitement was running high, and he was a warm partisan, but it made no difference in his social intercourse. Whigs sought [him out] as constantly as Democrats, and enjoyed his cordial good humor as heartily."[33]

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[32] Athens Southern Banner, March 26, 1841.

[33] Athens Southern Banner, April 16, 1841; Samuel Boykin, ed., Memorial Volume of the Honorable Howell Cobb of Georgia (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott & Co., 1870), p. 255.

The Democratic Young Men's Convention met as planned, and, despite the disparaging comments of the Whig press, proved a rousing success. Democratic papers reported that several hundred of "the most talented and efficient Young Men of the state" attended, and heard speeches praised as "appropriate, eloquent and patriotic." Whig papers did not dispute the numbers in attendance, but sourly described many of the attending delegates as too old to rightly claim the title "young." Several members of the executive committee played a major role in its operations. John Lamar, for instance, won election as the presiding officer of the convention. He also served with three other members of the executive group on convention's resolutions committee.[34]

Interestingly, Cobb played no public role in the convention's activities. There are indications that he did not attend. The Clarke County meeting had named him to its delegation, but newspaper accounts did not list him as a member of the Clarke delegation which actually participated. His burgeoning financial woes probably caused his absence.[35]

While the resolutions adopted by the convention generally repeated previous Democratic platforms, they also contained an especially strong defense of southern slavery.

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[34] Milledgeville Federal Union, May 11, 1841; Athens Southern Banner, March 26, 1841; May 14, 1841; Athens Southern Whig, May 14, 1841.

[35] Milledgeville Federal Union, May 11, 1841; Athens Southern Banner, March 26, 1841.

Perhaps fearful that Georgia's repudiation of Van Buren and the Democratic party would prompt questions regarding the soundness of local Democrats on this vital issue, the young men's convention stated unequivocally: "The delicate relation in which we stand as slaveholders to the world, bids us be no longer idle spectators in the great drama in which we must, sooner or later, play an important part .... Upon this subject we must throw around us a triple-wall of brass. We must yield no point -- make no terms; concession is surrender -- moderate resistance is death."[36]

The delegates also extended an olive branch to the new Whig president, John Tyler of Virginia. Although Tyler had not yet revealed the specific nature of his policies, his past record of rigid Old Republican principles gave the Democrats cause for hope. Thus the delegates adopted a resolution which held "that the Democratic Party of Georgia feel no political hostility to the principles of John Tyler ... expressed on the subject of the United States Bank, Internal Improvement, and the Protective Policy; and if his Administration shall be conducted upon his principles expressed upon those subjects in 1832, while a Senator ... we will cheerfully support his administration." Yet they simultaneously issued a stern warning. If the new president, like so many of his Whig associates, now considered the

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[36] Milledgeville Federal Union, May 11, 1841; Cooper, The South and the Politics of Slavery, pp. 143-145.

sacred "State Rights doctrines of Jefferson and the patriots ... of '98 as 'Virginia abstractions,'" and adopted the program of "Clay, Webster & Co," they vowed, "then we shall hold him as ... enemy."[37]

The Democrats had little to fear from John Tyler. With Harrison's sudden death, Henry Clay determined to assert his leadership of the Whig party. He aimed to demonstrate his dominance by forcing Whigs to kneel before the altar of economic nationalism as embodied in his American System. Any Whig who declined conversion to the Clay gospel -- including President Tyler -- would be expelled from Whig ranks. Clay moved to institute his plan during a special session of Congress which assembled in May, 1841.[38]

In his opening gambit, Clay secured repeal of Van Buren's Independent Treasury program. He then pushed legislation through Congress creating a new national bank. Tyler, however, had never abandoned his old Republican principles of strict construction, and vetoed the bill. Attempts to negotiate a compromise between the president and the senator failed, and Tyler subsequently vetoed a second bill to create a national bank. The internecine struggle

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[37] Milledgeville Federal Union, May 11, 1841.

[38] Cooper, The South and the Politics of Slavery, pp. 150-157.

threatened to rob the Whigs of the fruits of their recent victory.[39]

Whigs in Georgia and throughout the South faced an acute dilemma. The Clay-Tyler feud threatened to destroy their party, and they could not long avoid taking sides. Almost as a body they opted to back Clay, even though Tyler's beliefs coincided more closely with their traditional political philosophy. The reasons for their choice were complex, but reflected their understanding that support for Clay meant the survival of their party and continued access to the fruits of victory. Adherence to Tyler meant short term isolation and probably long term political oblivion.[40]

In Georgia, the Democrats welcomed the Whig schism. The Athens' Southern Banner responded to Tyler's first bank veto by declaring its pleasure over the president's unexpected act of "honest independence." Editor Albon Chase tendered "the thanks of the country ... to the President, for strangling the monster in its birth. He has acted nobly." Chase similarly welcomed Tyler's second veto, and asserted that "the country has yet something to hope for, even from John Tyler." Regrettably, the editor added, "the feelings and sympathies of the President are still with the party which elected him." The Banner correctly reasoned that "at present [Tyler] occupies a position between the great parties ...

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[39] Ibid.

[40] Ibid.

'the observed of all the observers' ... but belonging to neither. This position cannot be long sustained -- to one or the other side he must look for friends and supporters."[41]

Not surprisingly, the local Whig press did not share the Banner's enthusiasm for Tyler's course. The Southern Whig conceded that Tyler's veto of the first bank legislation "has been the occasion of great disappointment to the Whigs, and of great exultation to the opposition," but reassured its readers that "there is more disappointment than discouragement in the Whig party; and even if compelled to carry the dead weight of a Virginia abstraction on their shoulders ... it is believed there is vigor enough to sustain the burden." What the Democrats interpreted as "honest independence," the Whig paper denounced as a "monarchial" action.[42]

When Tyler persisted, and vetoed the second bank measure, the Whig grew more strident. Outraged by Democratic gloating over the Whig schism, the paper poured out its bile. "We have [the Democrats] down now, and we shall keep them so in spite of all their boasting," it threatened, "they will be killed as dead as loco-focoism was killed last November ... they will sleep the sleep that knows no waking."[43]

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[41] Athens Southern Banner, August 27, 1841; September 17, 1841.

[42] Athens Southern Whig, September 3, 1841; September 25, 1841.

[43] Ibid.

III

Whatever Clarke County Democrats might think of the split within Whig ranks, they could not ignore the reality of their local minority status. As the time for the state elections for 1841 approached, the Whigs fielded a full slate of candidates while the Democrats held back in the knowledge that their candidates would be little more than sacrificial lambs. Just three weeks before the election, however, Cobb declared his candidacy for a seat in the state legislature. The Democrats clearly sought to exploit the local popularity which Cobb's congeniality and participation in charitable causes had engendered. In the county's at-large election, they hoped to draw enough Whig votes to win one of the county's three legislative seats for the Democracy.[44]

The Whig, easily perceiving the Democratic strategy, confidently stated "we do not for one moment harbor the least expectation that he will be elected." Nonetheless, the editor felt compelled to "caution our friends not to permit private feelings of respect to interfere with their political duties." With the exception of "30 or 40 liberal minded Whigs in Athens & 8 or 10 in Watkinsville," the bulk of the party followed the Whig's advice, and Cobb finished fourth in a field of four candidates.[45]

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[44] Athens Southern Banner, September 24, 1841; October 8, 1841; Athens Southern Whig, October 1, 1841.

[45] Athens Southern Whig, October 1, 1841; Athens Southern Banner, October 8, 1841.

Despite their defeat in Clarke County, the Democrats still could take heart from the statewide election results. Democrat Charles McDonald easily won reelection in the governor's race, and the Democrats regained control of both houses of the legislature. Cobb travelled to Milledgeville when the legislature convened in November. John Lamar urged him to seek a legislative appointment to a judgeship, but he held back because his friend, Junius Hillyer, desired the same spot. While at the state capital, Cobb apparently sought no office for himself, but assisted friends and relatives in their quest for political preferment. He succeeded in securing a clerkship for his younger brother Tom, but the appointment did not work out. Governor McDonald soon dismissed the young man. "Tom does not suit us," the governor explained, "especially as his thoughts turn upon that spouse of his [at] Athens." On a happier note, Cobb reported to Mary Ann, "I have been strongly urged to run for Congress, but have positively refused. Your Brother John will be nominated I expect."[46]

Despite the seeming firmness with which Cobb rejected a possible congressional bid, within seven months he reversed himself. Both his refusal and reversal resulted from a variety of causes. His family's financial woes played a

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[46] Phillips, Georgia and State Rights, p. 147; John B. Lamar to Mary Ann Cobb, October 9, 1841; Alexander Speer to Howell Cobb, October 9, 1841; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, November 4, 1841; Charles McDonald to Howell Cobb, December 17, 1841, Howell Cobb Papers.

major role. After returning home from Milledgeville, economic necessity forced Cobb to immerse himself in his law practice for several months. His legal responsibilities had been increasing. In late 1839, he and Hillyer had amicably dissolved their partnership. Cobb and his cousin, James Jackson, soon established the firm of "Cobb and Jackson," with offices in Athens and Madison. In November, 1841, the state senate elected Jackson secretary of the senate, which left Cobb to direct the firm's business much of the time.[47]

The size of Cobb's practice received an additional boost in late 1840 when he won certification to plead cases before the United States' Circuit Court, District of Georgia. While he welcomed the chance to earn extra fees, the day-to-day grind of the legal profession often proved unbearable. This experience, combined with the continued downward spiral of the family fortunes left him desperate and dispirited. By the early summer of 1842, Cobb almost certainly viewed the excitement and potential success of an active political campaign as medicine for his burdened soul.[48]

Yet other considerations shaped his decision as well. When, in November, he declined "positively" to run, the memory of his embarrassing October defeat remained fresh.

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[47] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, November 4, 1841, Howell Cobb Papers.

[48] George Glen, Clerk of U.S. Circuit Court, District of Georgia, to Howell Cobb, November 5, 1840; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, November 4, 1841, Howell Cobb Papers.

Cobb loved politics. He instinctively understood that the key to long term success lay in establishing a winning political record. Consequently, he adopted a policy of never openly seeking any office unless certain of victory. As a result, the legislative race of October, 1841, proved his first and last electoral defeat.

One other concern also figured in Cobb's actions. In keeping with the general usage of the time, and with his own views of proper decorum for a republican statesman, he believed the office should seek the man -- or at least appear to. Thus now, and in the future, Cobb usually professed almost total disdain for his own personal success. Whenever he ran for office, he did so, he said, for the good of his party, his state, or his country. While such pronouncements ring false in a more cynical modern age, Cobb's early orientation towards public service, and his long-held desire to be a statesman of the first rank tended to make it impossible for him to view his own actions in any other way.

The Georgia Democratic convention assembled in Milledgeville on June 20, 1842. Informed in advance that his name would be placed in nomination for a congressional seat, Cobb opted not to attend the convention in person. Instead, he remained in Athens helping to plan a Masonic celebration for "the Anniversary of St John the Baptist," and sitting on the board of visitors at the University's examinations.[49]

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[49] Athens Southern Banner, June 17, 1842; June 24, 1842.

While Cobb remained in Athens, his party reiterated its oft-repeated opposition to any form of national bank or protective tariff. The Democrats denounced the Whigs as tools of "the money power" and "dupes of the Shylocks of Wall Street," who proclaimed their adherence to the interests of common people, only to betray them upon gaining political power. The Whigs, they charged, had swept to triumph in 1840, after mounting a campaign based on evasion, half-truths, and outright lies. In essence, the Democrats accused the Whigs of engaging in a massive conspiracy to subvert the Constitution and destroy liberty in America.[50]

Harkening back to the language and lessons of the Revolutionary era, the Democrats reminded voters that "all history teaches that sooner or later governments fall into the hands of particular classes of men, by whom they are prevented from the only legitimate object of their institution, the happiness of the people." The Democrats warned that continued Whig success "must infallibly lead to the overthrow of all constitutional checks and limitations of power ... and in the establishment, first of a monied oligarchy, and finally of a monarchy." Should that occur, the government would quickly assume "the power to direct the private pursuits of the citizen, and under the abused name of protection, [destroy] the freedom of labor, which should

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[50] Ibid., July 8, 1842.

be held as sacred as the freedom of speech, or of the press."[51]

On the second day of the convention, the Georgia Democrats nominated a full slate of candidates. Both Cobb and John B. Lamar received the party's nod for congressional bids.[52]

Even before learning of his nomination, Cobb fell victim to doubts about the wisdom of making the congressional race. He certainly felt no difficulties with the party's platform, nor did he fear the likely Whig strategy "of deceit (to dupe voters) and adoption of 'new principles' (to increase appeal to voters)." Rather, recent events in Washington and Georgia had raised the specter that the state's congressional delegation might be denied its seats in the next Congress. The previous Whig-dominated Congress had enacted legislation requiring all the states still electing their congressmen by means of a statewide general ticket to convert to the district method of election. Georgia was one of six states effected by the act. In Georgia, a vigorous constitutional debate erupted.[53]

The major points in this debate focused on the constitutional provision which stated that "the times, places

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[51] Ibid.

[52] Ibid.

[53] John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, May 17, 1842; Howell Cobb to the Democratic Committee on Nominations, July, 1842, Howell Cobb Papers.

and manner of holding elections for ... representatives, shall be prescribed in each state by the Legislature thereof, but the congress may at any time by law make or alter such regulations." Those opposed to the districting act claimed that it violated both the letter and the spirit of the Constitution. They accused the Congress of promulgating an imperfect law which required state legislation to perfect it. Even if the constitutional provision in question authorized Congress to dictate the means of electing congressmen, it did not grant the Congress the authority to compel states to enact legislation. Because Congress had failed to draw up the required districts, the law amounted to little more than a suggestion that the states establish the desired districts.[54]

Opponents of the law went further. Citing the constitutional provision that representatives shall be chosen by "the people of the several States," they contended that "all the people of a State are entitled to vote for all its representatives." By logical extension, any state which used any electoral method other than the general ticket was violating the spirit of the Constitution.[55]

Those who urged compliance with the law accused their opponents of paranoia. Chase of the Banner argued for the constitutionality of the districting law. Failure to obey

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[54] Athens Southern Banner, July 8, 1842.

[55] Ibid.

its terms, he warned, must result in the sacrifice of Georgia's right to representation in Congress. He observed that "we have long been taught to look with a jealous eye upon every act of Congress affecting the rights ... of the States; and especially when the constitutional authority to make any such enactments is questioned, we are prone, whether Union men or Nullifiers, to talk about resistance." While he conceded that such wariness served to prevent abuses of power, it also contributed to the "danger that it may lead to a spirit of needless cavilling, which will end in our believing that only what we happen to approve is constitutional."[56]

When Cobb first agreed that his name be placed before the state Democratic convention, the districting act had been only a bill before Congress. It appeared certain of either defeat or a presidential veto. By the time his nomination had been confirmed by the convention, however, the bill had passed both houses of Congress and received President Tyler's signature. This development placed Cobb firmly on the horns of a dilemma. He desperately wanted to be a congressman, but appreciated the likelihood of being denied his seat if Georgia failed to comply with the districting law.[57]

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[56] Ibid.

[57] Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, June 27, 1842; Howell Cobb to the Democratic Committee on Nominations, July, 1842, Howell Cobb Papers.

Compliance seemed unlikely. The state legislature's session did not even commence until after the congressional election. Uncertain of his best course, Cobb wasted no time in consulting with Lamar. Stating that "some important questions will be presented for our action in a few days & I should like to act if we can in concert with each other," he confessed, "I am opposed to the ... doctrine of resisting the Genl. Gov." He informed his brother-in-law that "I have a long argument to offer in favor of complying with the law of Congress," but promised to await Lamar's response before taking any definite action.[58]

While awaiting Lamar's response, Cobb outlined his views in a draft letter to the party's committee on nominations. After briefly relating the history of the districting act, he assured the committee that he only permitted his nomination because he had believed the legislation would never become law. He then offered a measured analysis favoring acquiesce to the will of Congress. Believing it of vital importance that the issue "be well understood and definitely settled before any election is held in order to avoid future difficulties," he flatly denied that Congress had exceeded its legitimate constitutional authority. On the contrary, he insisted, the constitutional provision which gave Congress authority over the "place and manner" of choosing congressmen presented "the strongest argument ...

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[58] Ibid.

that such power as is now exercised was intended by the ... Constitution." This power, he maintained, has been vested in the central government because the framers had intended that the "Federal Government in the exercise of its delegated powers [be] supreme and sovereign above the ... state legislatures."[59]

Georgia, Cobb reasoned, possessed only two alternatives. The state must either go unrepresented in Congress or comply with the law. Because the legislature could not enact the legislation before the October election, he believed the congressional election ultimately must be declared invalid. Therefore, he concluded, "the election in October promises to be productive of much harm and no good." Hence, he requested that his name be dropped from the ticket.[60]

The ideas Cobb outlined in his letter recalled those expressed by John Addison and the Union party of Clarke County in the aftermath of the South Carolina nullification crisis nearly ten years before. At that time, they had proclaimed their conviction that the Constitution had created a government -- not just an agent for the states -- with the authority to enforce all constitutional laws. Cobb now contended that the federal government must be the final arbiter in determining its own organization. Otherwise, it

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[59] Howell Cobb to the Democratic Committee on Nominations, July, 1842, ibid.

[60] Ibid.

depended "for ... existence upon the pleasure of the several states, and not upon the sovereign exercise of its delegated powers." In that event, he objected, the constitution embodied "a mere contract."[61]

Cobb went further. If the Constitution represented nothing but a contract, then the federal government constituted "a mere creature at will," capable of commanding nothing more than the "voluntary submission of the states," and that only "so long as such submission [is] congenial to the feelings and wishes of each state." He suggested that the acceptance of such a doctrine "would be a reflection on the wisdom, foresight, and ability of the Convention of '87, which every citizen of the Union should resist with indignation." In the long run, he stood convinced that the only guard against tyranny lay in a strict adherence to the Constitution, even when constitutional laws proved offensive. Thus, he asserted, "if the law is constitutional, submit to it, if it is inexpedient, repeal it at the proper time and in the proper way."[62]

Brother John's reply to Cobb apparently dissuaded him from mailing his letter to the nomination's committee. From the beginning of the controversy, Lamar had leaned towards the more extreme state-rights position. His motives derived

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[61] Ibid.; Athens Southern Banner, April 12, 1834.

[62] Howell Cobb to the Democratic Committee in Nominations, July, 1842, Howell Cobb Papers.

from both constitutional interpretation and party loyalty. A month before the state Democratic convention met in June, he wrote to Cobb, "the Whigs have a fancy to force the district system upon us .... I should like the district plan well enough, but as to having it forced on us contrary to the meaning of the constitution & of the state conventions that accepted the constitution, I think it rather high handed." Later, he assured his brother-in-law, "I shall contest my seat & have it if it can be had, and hope no false delicacy will restrain you from pursuing a similar course."[63]

In all probability, Lamar also warned Cobb that any sign of reluctance to resist the will of the central government at any hint of encroachment on Georgia's sacred rights would leave him vulnerable to attacks from both within and without his party. Such vulnerability might well end his promising political career. Besides, as Cobb's course once in Congress indicated, the issues were not necessarily as clear as the young politician might think. At any rate, Cobb finally resolved to keep the letter, and accept the nomination.

IV

Once committed to his election bid, Cobb faced other problems. A political associate warned of an editor named Cobb in one of the "lower counties" who was busily espousing doctrines unacceptable to Democrats in the area. Local

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[63] John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, May 17, 1842; October 26, 1842, Howell Cobb Papers; Athens Southern Banner, August 26, 1842.

people, unfamiliar with candidate Cobb, believed congressional candidate and editor to be one and the same. Cobb wasted no time in clarifying the matter.[64]

Whig strategy proved a greater concern. The Whig schism and the Whig party's failure significantly to improve the economy fueled Democratic expectations of victory. The Democrats' main fears derived from memories of 1840. They worried that the Whigs might succeed in repeating the "Harrison excitement" whereby voters would be duped by deceit and the Whig habit of adopting "new principles" to increase electoral appeal. Georgia Democrats, believing that the Whig press would be the chief tool of political duplicity, made active plans to bolster their own newspapers by buying out lukewarm or indifferent editors.[65]

Both local papers treated Cobb with relative kindness. Despite Albon Chase's repeated assertions in the Banner that Georgia should comply with the districting law, the newspaper heralded Cobb's candidacy as a great benefit for the Democracy of north Georgia. As it had in previous elections, the Democratic party in Clarke declined to field a slate of candidates for the state legislature. Chase conceded that this decision had prompted some discontent in party ranks. He defended the decision, however, by pointing out that "the

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[64] (?) to Howell Cobb, July 19, 1842, Howell Cobb Papers.

[65] Holt, "The Election of 1840," p. 56; J. W. Sanford to John B. Lamar, June 24, 1842, Howell Cobb Papers.

object heretofore in running legislative candidates, has not been with any view to immediate success, but merely to furnish a rallying point for the friends of equal rights, and bring to the polls our full strength for the Democratic candidates for Congress or Governor." With Cobb in the field for Congress, the editor asked, where was the need for a slate of candidates with no hope of victory? Cobb, he contended, would rally the Democrats of Clarke, and "of the whole upcountry .... And our friends ... will need no other motive to bring them out on the day of the election, than that of testifying their appreciation of his talents, and their approbation of his principles and political course."[66]

The Whig proved less enthusiastic, but -- in deference to his social popularity among members of both parties -- refrained from any vigorous attacks on Cobb. When reporting on the Democratic convention and its nominees it said "we are ... delighted that our townsman Howell Cobb, Esq. was honored with a nomination, for though we differ, as widely as the poles, upon political questions, we are not insensible to the many noble qualities that adorn his private character." Even at the height of the campaign, the opposition press handled Cobb gently. "Our friend Howell Cobb," the Whig ventured, "is ... a young man of promise and at some future day, might reflect credit upon his State in the position his friends are

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[66] Athens Southern Banner, September 16, 1842.

seeking to place him, but for the present he is wanting in ... solid experience and mature judgement."[67]

For the most part, Cobb ran a quiet campaign. He attended a few party dinners and wrote letters to Democratic organizations in the northern part of the state. His friend and fellow candidate, John H. Lumpkin of Cherokee County, wrote to express his gratitude to Cobb for one of these letters. Lumpkin offered assurances that Cobb's friendly salutations to local Democrats had been well received, but urged that an appearance would be even more welcome. Although confident of victory, he urged the necessity of a vigorous campaign. He suggested, "your friends wish you up in this country, they think that to breathe the pure mountain air and sip the waters from the pure blue limestone founts would add much to your health and political prospects."[68]

Cobb, however, apparently ignored Lumpkin's advice and continued along his chosen course. His hopes of success received a boost in early September, when news reached Georgia that a move in the House of Representatives to require the clerk to deny the certificates of election of any members not elected by the district system had been blocked

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[67] Athens Southern Whig, September 16, 1842.

[68] Democratic Committee of Carroll County to Howell Cobb, August 15, 1842; John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, September 12, 1842, Howell Cobb Papers.

in the Senate. This action indicated that Georgia's congressmen might be seated after all.[69]

The election exceeded all Democratic expectations. The Banner proudly reported that, for the first time since 1834, the Democracy of Georgia had elected their entire congressional slate. Cobb received 35,267 votes, a total exceeded only by Mark A. Cooper and John Lamar. Both Cobb and Mary Ann rejoiced. After learning the results, Cobb expressed satisfaction that his older and more experienced brother-in-law had finished one spot ahead of him. Half jokingly, he said he would have preferred the first and second spots, but added that second and third had proved "gratifying to all parties, not in the State but in the family."[70]

V

Cobb soon found his satisfaction with the election results tempered by both his personal and political situation. Only a day or two after the election, he left Athens on a business trip. He had been gone barely a day when his youngest son, Howell, Jr. fell dangerously ill from teething and a "bowel complaint." Desperately frightened by memories of Zachariah's death, Mary Ann sent a frantic appeal for her husband to return home. Happily, the child

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[69] Athens Southern Banner, September 2, 1842.

[70] Ibid., October 14, 1842; Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, October 22, 1842, Howell Cobb Papers.

recovered, but his sudden dangerous illness reminded both parents of their tenuous grasp on the joys of this life.[71]

On the political front, events followed an erratic course. Despite feeling encouraged when Congress rejected the effort to deny seats to representatives not elected by districts, Cobb optimism had begun to fade by late October. Convinced that the Georgia legislature would not conform with the districting law, he pursued his usual course of consulting with Lamar. As Cobb saw it, they possessed two choices. They must either "wait patiently for the moving of the waters" or take action. He assured Lamar that he would await his advice before making any decisions.[72]

Lamar responded promptly. He echoed Cobb's earlier expressions of satisfaction with the election results, and assured his brother-in-law of his intention to fight resolutely for his seat. He urged Cobb to do the same. Yet, for all his assurances to Cobb, Lamar already entertained doubts about his own future as a congressman. He expressed confidence in Cobb's "promise ... of a long life of political fame," and vowed "to aid in sustaining you in your career hereafter." For his own part, however, he maintained "I

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[71] (?) to John B. Lamar, October 10, 1842, Howell Cobb Papers.

[72] Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, October 22, 1842, ibid.

shall never be able to acquire that prominence to which you are destined."[73]

Lamar did not resent this situation. Rather, he denied possessing any great desire for fame. "One term -- if we are admitted to our seats," he avowed, "will satisfy all my ambition." He confessed that he expected to gain little reputation in the nation's capital, and added "it would be hard for me to tell exactly my motives in permitting myself to be sent there --it perhaps originated in a vanity, not to pass through the world as a perfectly obscure individual." Then, in a lighter vein, he observed, "although my uncertain health, bad voice, weak lungs & want of practice in public speaking, does not promise that I shall emerge far from the horizon of obscurity, I know of no surer method of attaining notoriety, than for me to whip Wise ... & challenge somebody else -- it makes no difference who so he is a Whig."[74]

Lamar's doubts continued to grow and the following summer -- shortly before time to depart for Washington -- the Banner announced with regret that Lamar had resigned his seat. On the surface, Lamar's decision appeared surprising. His political record indicated greater actual promise than the relatively inexperienced Cobb. Only three years older

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[73] John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, October 26, 1842, ibid.

[74] Ibid.

than his brother-in-law, Lamar already had served as a state legislator and as an aide to Governor McDonald.[75]

Yet other motives shaped his decision. Restless by nature, he valued his independence. He enjoyed travelling, and took frequent extended tours of the United States and Europe. It seems unlikely that he welcomed the restrictions on his movements which even a single term in Congress entailed. Family tradition, however, attributed his decision to financial concerns. Despite the losses sustained by Cobb, Mary Ann's large estate remained intact. Lamar's own estate encompassed even more property, and both required careful management. With the economy still unstable, Lamar did not believe both men should be so far from Georgia at the same time. Because Cobb had already proven himself unlucky, if not actually inept, at financial matters, Lamar was the natural choice to remain. Consequently, he insisted that Cobb, the natural politician, seek success in Washington, while he stayed in Georgia and managed the family's business.[76]

At about the same time that Lamar turned his back on a congressional seat, he also rejected a possible literary

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[75] Kenneth Coleman and Stephen Gurr, eds., Dictionary of Georgia Biography (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1983), pp. 594-595; Elizabeth Mays, "The Making of an Antebellum Lady -- Mrs. Howell Cobb," The Georgia Historical Quarterly, XXIV (March, 1940), 16.

[76] Coleman and Gurr, Dictionary of Georgia Biography, pp. 594-595; Mays, "The Making of an Antebellum Lady, p. 16.

career. Beginning in the fall of 1842, a Macon magazine, The Family Companion, published a series of four humorous literary sketches written by Lamar. Collectively entitled "Homespun Yarns," the sketches proved very popular. Newspapers throughout the state began to print them. Cobb proudly reported, "your 'Homespun Yarns' are attracting very general attention and receiving complimentary notices." Despite this promising start, Lamar abandoned his literary pursuits after 1843. There are no clear indications why Lamar abandoned his literary pursuits, but it seems entirely possible that the demands of managing two large and widely separated estates stifled his artistic drive. At any rate, when Cobb departed for Washington he travelled alone.[77]

During the thirteen month interim between Cobb's election in October and his departure for Washington the following November, he took an active role in state politics. When the state legislature met in Milledgeville, Cobb was on the scene lobbying for patronage jobs for brother Tom and other family members, and probably encouraging legislators to enact the disputed districting legislation. Initially, he scored successes on both fronts. He helped secure a post for Tom, and no doubt felt a surge of optimism when the legislature voted to divide the state into congressional districts. Governor McDonald quickly dashed the hopes of

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[77] Coleman and Gurr, Dictionary of Georgia Biography, p. 595; Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, October 22, 1842, Howell Cobb Papers.

Georgia's congressmen-elect, however, when he exercised his personal state-rights views and vetoed the bill. The legislature did not act on the subject again until the following year. At that time, a Whig controlled assembly passed a new districting bill which the governor did sign. Thereafter, Cobb represented the strongly Democratic Sixth District.[78]

Even while the districting issue continued to stir debate, the Democrats fell victim to a far more serious dispute. This controversy involved the party's potential presidential nominee in 1844. In late December, 1842, Cobb received notice from the Democratic state committee that, in keeping with his status as representative, he had been named one of Georgia's delegates to the party's national convention in 1844. In June, 1843, he attended the party's state convention in Milledgeville. There, to his chagrin, he encountered a well organized move by the state-rights elements of the party to commit the state organization to support a presidential bid by John C. Calhoun.[79]

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[78] Sarah Rootes Cobb to Martha Jackson, November 10, 1842, Jackson-Prince Papers, Southern Historical Collection, Library of the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, North Carolina (Hereafter: Jackson-Prince Papers); Athens Southern Banner, January 13, 1843; Albon Chase to Howell Cobb, December 15, 1843, Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collection.

[79] Democratic Committee to Howell Cobb, December 29, 1842, Howell Cobb Papers; Athens Southern Banner, June 9, 1843; June 16, 1843.

Cobb, whom a friend had recently described as "the most violent Van Buren man I have seen," helped rally the opposition. He took part in "an animated discussion" and denied the propriety of making any presidential nomination more than a year before the election. He further sought an indirect endorsement of Van Buren by the convention when he proposed a resolution praising Van Buren's course as president and absolving him of blame for the loss of the White House in 1840. Delegates, sensing the explosive nature of the debate, created a special committee to deal with the nomination issue.[80]

Although appointed to the committee, Cobb and the anti-Calhounite members found themselves outnumbered and unable to deter Calhoun's supporters. The committee returned a report which declared the Democratic party in "crisis," thus making an early nomination desirable. The report then endorsed Calhoun as the best nominee. The anti-Calhoun forces won only a minor concession in a pledge that Georgia Democrats would support the eventual nominee, whoever he might be.[81]

Calhoun's supporters found it easier to control the convention than they did the reaction of their opponents throughout the state. Many denounced the Calhounite tactics as unethical because the state convention had assembled to

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[80] Athens Southern Banner, June 9, 1843; June 16, 1843.

[81] Ibid.

nominate a gubernatorial candidate, not a president. They vowed unceasing opposition to the convention's actions.[82]

The Southern Banner assumed a leading role in opposing Calhoun's nomination by the convention. The focus of the opposition argument held that a majority of Georgia Democrats believed they had been pledged to support Calhoun without their consent. Anti-Calhoun men charged that the convention had been called without sufficient notice, which left several counties unrepresented. Even worse, they complained, the Calhoun faction had played the part of usurpers, "inasmuch as that convention was called for another and a special purpose, and had no authority to agitate the Presidential question at all." Under these circumstances, the Banner concluded "that the State Convention transcended its authority in the nomination which it made for President ... and that its action is not binding upon the Democracy of the State."[83]

The Banner offered a solution. It called for another convention with the proper authority to resolve the issue and give voice to the popular will. Then, if Calhoun should be the nominee, the entire Democracy could wholeheartedly support him. If Georgia Democrats preferred Martin Van

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[82] Ibid., July 6, 1843; Athens Southern Banner, cited in Milledgeville Federal Union, October 17, 1843.

[83] Athens Southern Banner, July 6, 1843; Athens Southern Banner, cited in Milledgeville Federal Union, October 17, 1843.

Buren, however, then another convention would insure that the popular will had not been frustrated by political tricks.[84]

As the controversy raged through the summer and fall of 1843, Cobb took an active role in the anti-Calhoun movement. His personal antipathy for Calhoun dated back to his college days. The lessons he had learned from John Addison and other Union men remained as firm convictions, and he was determined that the Democratic party not become a tool for what he considered Calhoun's narrow sectional interests. In public speeches he denounced the action taken by the state convention. He hinted that he would resign as a delegate to the national convention rather than go pledged to Calhoun.[85]

Cobb also ignored pleas that he urge anti-Calhoun forces to soften their attacks for the sake of party unity. One Calhounite complained that if Calhoun's Georgia opponents believed Van Buren certain to win the nomination at the national convention, then it made no sense to antagonize Calhoun's supporters. Their course, he commented, only "sows the seeds of dissension, discord and defeat to an extent which cannot be immediately forseen [sic] but which must

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[84] Athens Southern Banner, July 6, 1843; Athens Southern Banner, cited in Milledgeville Federal Union, October 17, 1843.

[85] Howell Cobb to "Sam," February, 1833; James Armstrong to Howell Cobb, December 22, 1843, Howell Cobb Papers.

result in ... ruin." Nevertheless, Cobb refused to act as a moderating influence.[86]

The split in the Democratic ranks took its toll in the 1843 elections. The Whigs triumphed in both the legislative and gubernatorial races. When the new legislature assembled in November, Cobb again journeyed to the state capital to consult with other party leaders and play the patronage game. He soon reported that with the exception of "getting Tom into a little office," he had experienced no success in the patronage arena. With tongue in cheek, he observed "the truth is our family can only succeed with the Democrats. When they rule the roost then we are in town and can shape the spoils, but these Whigs have no regard for us or our concerns."[87]

Sobered by political defeat, Georgia Democrats belatedly moved to mend fences. In late November, Democrats in the legislature called for a new state convention to meet the following month. This convention withdrew Calhoun's name, and voted to send an uninstructed delegation to the national convention. The arrangement left each delegate free to vote for candidates most likely to further party principles. Cobb did not attend this meeting as he had already departed for

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[86] William C. Daniell to Howell Cobb, July 7, 1843, Howell Cobb Papers.

[87] Phillips, Georgia and State Rights, pp. 147-148; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, November 11, 1843, Howell Cobb Papers.

Washington, but he certainly rejoiced when he heard the outcome. The moderate elements of the Georgia Democracy momentarily had blocked the state-rights faction. Cobb had taken a leading role in the effort, and had drawn a line between himself and the Calhounites. This line dominated his political future.[88]

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[88] Athens Southern Banner, November 30, 1843; December 21, 1843; James Armstrong to Howell Cobb, December 22, 1843, Howell Cobb Papers.

Chapter Five

"I Shall ... Modify My Opinions About the Stars of the Land"

In November, 1843, some thirteen months after his election, Cobb finally departed for Washington. Following the auction of their Athens home in early October, he, Mary Ann, and the children had joined John Addison and Sarah in temporary exile at the Cowpens Plantation in Walton County. John Addison and Sarah worked hard to ease the transition. They converted a dining room into a bedroom for Cobb and Mary Ann, and despite crowded conditions the Cowpens proved reasonably comfortable. Yet Mary Ann found it difficult to conceal her feelings of dissatisfaction. "Having once known the comforts of a quiet home, my heart will always yearn for it, as an exile for her native land," she lamented to her brother.[1]

Cobb and brother John agreed that Cobb should travel to Washington first. Once there, he would make living arrangements for himself, Mary Ann, and little Howell, as well as the servants who would accompany them. Reluctantly, he had given his consent for the two oldest boys, John A. and Lamar, to remain with their grandparents at the Cowpens. Confident that Cobb could secure a suitable place by January,

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[1] Mary Ann Cobb to John B. Lamar, December 3, 1843, Howell Cobb Papers, Felix Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia (Hereafter: Howell Cobb Papers).

1844, John Lamar promised to escort Mary Ann and her party to the capital at that time. Besides having time to secure quarters for his family, Cobb's early arrival in Washington would allow him to appraise the likelihood that Congress still might deny him his seat. Considering the family's strained finances, it made little sense to undertake a major move until he had a better idea of his congressional status. Cobb accepted this plan, but with reluctance. He assured Mary Ann, "I cannot stay there satisfied even that long without you, & later than that I cannot possibly think of."[2]

Although the chance to serve in Congress fulfilled one of Cobb's childhood dreams, Mary Ann reported that her husband "hated leaving home terribly." Recognizing his close attachment to family -- an attachment enhanced by recent hard times -- she worried that "he will write to me to bring [the two older boys] with me." She considered any such plan foolhardy because of the expense involved in taking another servant and because by all accounts "Washington ... is the bleakest place in the winter, and there is seldom any weather fit for children to be carried out." Whatever Cobb's inclination, he bowed to Mary Ann's wishes and the boys remained in Georgia.[3]

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[2] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, November 11, 1843, ibid.

[3] Mary Ann Cobb to John B. Lamar, December 3, 1843, ibid.

Cobb's trip north proved "very fatiguing," but the presence of Senator Dixon Lewis, a Calhoun Democrat from Alabama, served to lighten the discomforts of travel. Cobb reported to Mary Ann that he and the immensely fat Lewis "became as thick as two in a bed, though it would take a pretty large bed to hold both of us." Cobb's arrival in the capital offered little improvement over the difficulties of the trip. He took lodging at Mrs. Hewit's boarding house on Third Street, between Pennsylvania Avenue and C Street. He agreed to pay her eleven dollars per week for himself, and twenty-three dollars per week after Mary Ann and her party arrived.[4]

Despite the relative ease with which he had made living arrangements, he complained to Mary Ann, "I feel lonesome, extremely so, strangers strangers nothing but strangers, and these are to be my associates for the next seven or eight months. The thought would be excruciating but for your anticipated arrival in January." His mood had not improved more than a week later when he wrote, "I have no particular friend to associate with ... the weather here is extremely unpleasant."[5]

Cobb initially encountered little in Washington that he liked. He visited the White House where he paid his respects

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[4] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, November 29, 1843; December 3, 1843, ibid.

[5] Ibid.

to President Tyler. He found the chief executive "quite agreeable & friendly but by no means a very able man according to my conception of intellectual greatness." He confided to his wife that "if all other great men should fall with the same ease to the ordinary standard I shall very much modify my opinions about the stars of the land." The House of Representatives hardly impressed him more. He observed that most of the time in the House is filled with "long tedious & tiresome speeches" -- speeches made even more tedious by the excessive heating of the chamber. He did concede that he saw much honor to be won in Congress, but very little pleasure. All things considered, he believed he would rather be in Georgia.[6]

Even Cobb's attempts at socializing proved more frustrating than satisfying. He attended a party given by Frank Blair, editor of the Congressional Globe, but -- remembering his temperance pledge -- did not participate in the extensive wine and toddy drinking. Perhaps out of deference to his mother's frequent warnings about the spiritual snares of the big city, he also declined to join any of the many card games.[7]

Back in Georgia, Mary Ann felt as frustrated as her husband. Cobb's early activities on the legal circuit and

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[6] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, December 7, 1843; December 12, 1843, ibid.

[7] Ibid.

as a budding politician had given her a sense of her future life, but his departure for Washington gave her the full flavor. She never fully reconciled herself to this lifestyle. With her husband away, she faced the burdens of caring for their children, while making the arrangements for her own trip north. She encountered obstacles and uncertainties at every turn. Uncertain that Cobb would keep his seat in Congress, she also feared that the trip to the capital might endanger brother John's recently "fragile" health.[8]

Moreover, Mary Ann, pregnant again with the baby due in May, dreaded the impact of the journey on her own health. In the face of these difficulties she wrote bitterly to Cobb, "there are so many disagreeable things connected with my going that I am almost inclined to write you that I can not come ... you can have some faint conception of my feelings, but at this time I am hemmed in, I am continuously harassed and depressed in mind, I have no enjoyment and it is only when I am asleep that I forget my troubles."[9]

Yet Mary Ann worried about more than the immediate perils of travelling north. She feared the impact which her husband's public career might have on her family, especially the raising of their children. She took an intense pride in

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[8] Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, December 21, 1843; January 25, 1844; Sarah Rootes Cobb to Howell Cobb, January 24, 1844, ibid.

[9] Ibid.

her boys. She assured Cobb, "we can exhibit three of the healthiest little fellows as you would wish to see ... and it would do your heart good to behold the brotherly love which exists among the Trio." Her love for them was so great, she confessed, "that as our children grow older ... it becomes a greater cross to me to deny them their little petitions ... and ... I suspect I shall prove in the end like some of my more noble predecessors a mother swayed by her children." Up to the point of her departure, she continued to debate the wisdom of leaving John A. and Lamar in Georgia, or risking their exposure to northern cold. In the end she could only exclaim, "what a predicament it be for a sensitive inexperienced woman."[10]

II

While waiting for Mary Ann to join him, Cobb began orienting himself to the life of a congressman. In one important regard, his introduction to Congress proved unfriendly. Even before the House of Representatives had been organized, Whig congressmen moved to prevent representatives not elected by congressional districts from taking part in the organization process.[11]

John Campbell of South Carolina opened the dispute when he interrupted the initial roll call of the session. He

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[10] Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, November 9, 1842; December 17, 1842; January 25, 1844, ibid.

[11] Congressional Globe, Twenty-Eighth Congress, First Session, pp. 2-3.

attempted to introduce a resolution designed to put the Whig plan into effect. The Democratic majority shouted down this maneuver, and the roll call continued. Upon its conclusion, Matthew St. Clair Clarke, Clerk of the House, instructed the representatives to prepare their ballots for the election of the speaker. Daniel Barnard of New York rose at his desk in protest. He claimed the right to read a paper representing the views of many members. George C. Dromgoole of Virginia and Charles J. Ingersoll of Pennsylvania objected that Barnard was out of order, and that his paper could only be presented after the House had organized. Before giving up the fight, Barnard managed to get the gist of his paper before the House. It constituted, he declared, "a solemn declaration ... of the utter illegality and unconstitutionality of proceeding to the election of the Speaker with the aid of certain persons ... from the States of New Hampshire, Georgia, Mississippi, and Missouri."[12]

The next day, Barnard returned to the attack. He complained that the House journal made no mention of his attempt to read his paper. He now proposed that the journal be amended to incorporate the protest of himself and forty-nine other members against the participation of members with questionable credentials in the election of the speaker. He maintained that the House's actions on the previous day had

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[12] Ibid.

established an important constitutional precedent. He only desired that a complete record of events be preserved.[13]

Dromgoole of Virginia again rose in opposition. He argued that Barnard's actions had been out of order the day before and hence should not be incorporated into the official record. When Speaker J. W. Jones overruled Dromgoole's point of order, Thomas W. Gilmer of Virginia rose in opposition to Barnard. He accused the representative from New York of acting outside established House procedures. Gilmer argued that the House possessed long-standing practices for handling election disputes and advised that the issue be referred to the appropriate committee.[14]

Gilmer's suggestion opened a wider debate, which provided the members in question an opportunity to get their views on the record. Cobb took the chance to speak. He insisted "that every opportunity should be presented -- every means given, for a fair, full, and deliberate discussion of the question." He did not believe, however, that the present moment represented an appropriate time for a constitutional debate, and he flatly denied the propriety of Barnard's efforts.[15]

Where many speakers accused Barnard of seeking to "prejudge the case by arguments which could not be replied

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[13] Ibid., pp. 9-11.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Ibid., pp. 11-13.

to," Cobb took a different tack. Should a document of which the members had no acquaintance, he asked, be "spread upon the journal?" Although possessing no official knowledge of Barnard's document, he observed that "if the information which I have through means of the public journals be correct ... I ... have a decided objection against putting it upon the journals of this House, on account of the terms in which it is couched." "Are we to be told here," he demanded, that "there is no means by which a majority of this House may protect their own feelings ... that your journals are to be encumbered with anything and everything whatever, respectful ... or not?" While confessing that he did not possess adequate knowledge of the House rules to answer his own query, he forcefully asserted "that if this House is powerless in affording protection to a majority here, the time has arrived when that power should be legitimately provided, and legitimately exercised."[16]

Despite the Whig efforts to shame the Democratic majority into expelling members not in compliance with the districting legislation, the Democrats avoided an immediate resolution by referring the issue to the Committee of Elections. During the interim, disputed members retained the rights and privileges of their seats. In February, 1844, the

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[16] Ibid.

Committee of Elections returned a report favoring the claims of the members in question, and the debate resumed.[17]

Cobb again took the floor to argue the case of the Georgia delegation. He began by rejecting claims that those members with an interest in the outcome of the dispute should not be allowed to vote on the committee's report. He based his argument on the wording of the resolution which initially had referred the matter to the committee. The resolution had instructed the committee "not to inquire whether he and those other members of that House who had been elected under the general-ticket system, were entitled to their seats; but to make the general inquiry whether the members of this House now occupying seats here, were entitled to hold those seats." Thus, he concluded, no member on the floor felt disinterested in the acceptance of the committee report.[18]

Cobb then refuted Whig accusations that the Democrats hoped to stifle debate before the minority could gain sufficient information to cast informed votes. With mock amazement, Cobb inquired, "if any of these gentlemen, whose minds were thus running after light and knowledge, were among those who signed a celebrated protest against the rights of the members elected by general tickets to their seats here?" Under the circumstances, he found it "strange indeed that gentlemen who had ... pronounced a solemn decision on this

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[17] Ibid., pp. 247-250.

[18] Ibid.

question, should express the apprehension that there would not be a full and ample discussion of it."[19]

Having made these initial remarks, Cobb now turned to the focus of his argument. He conceded that his first reaction to the districting law, after a "superficial examination," had been to acknowledge its constitutionality and recommend its enforcement. Further reflection, however (probably inspired by John Lamar), had prompted him to reverse that view. He now stood before the House firm in the conviction that "so far as the State of Georgia was concerned, the law was a dead letter ... unconstitutional, and therefore utterly null and void."[20]

In effect, Cobb argued that the districting requirement had been flawed both in timing and in construction. He did not dispute the constitutional authority of Congress to define the process by which the states elected their representatives. He vigorously denied, however, the authority of Congress to nullify a state's electoral process, if it did not provide for a new method that explicitly possessed force of law.[21]

The act in question, the congressman avowed, failed to meet this standard. The districting legislation required action by state legislatures before it could be activated.

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[19] Ibid.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Ibid.

In Georgia the election of representatives occurred before the legislature met. He agreed that, upon assembling, the legislature had a legal and moral obligation to comply with the decree of Congress. Yet the districting requirement, as written, could not in justice be applied to representatives elected before the state legislature had an opportunity to act. Otherwise, he said, Congress had simply acted "to annul and destroy State laws, and deprive the people of Georgia of any representation on this floor."[22]

Although the Whigs possessed almost no hope of blocking a favorable vote on the committee's report, they continued to maneuver against it. Finally, on February 14, the House overrode parliamentary obstructions and voted to accept the report. Cobb had weathered his first storm on Capitol Hill.[23]

III

Even as the Whig minority contested Cobb's claim to his congressional seat, he began the process of learning his new job. In keeping with his freshman status, he received appointments to the relatively minor committees dealing with claims and mileage. Although minor, Cobb described them as "the two most laborious committees in Congress," and

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[22] Ibid.

[23] Ibid., pp. 278.

attributed his appointment to "some kind friend having informed our speaker that I was a labor loving man."[24]

Almost as soon as he arrived in Washington, he found himself deluged with mail. This flow increased following his committee assignments -- so much so that he found it necessary to change his usual bedtime from 8 to 12 o'clock. "If you want to have me before you," he wrote Mary Ann, "picture ... a room twenty feet square, carpeted and finely furnished with your humble servant sitting by his table, covered Yes, literally covered with letters to be read and answered, and papers to be examined and reported upon involving every conceivable question of right, policy, expediency, constitution and any & everything else that was ever thought of, heard of, or ever dreamt of."[25]

Yet Cobb's political activities were not restricted to his committee duties. He also worked diligently to build an unshakable political base in Georgia's newly created Sixth District. His efforts here focused on constituent services and patronage. In practical terms, he worked for the establishment of local mail routes and to convince Congress to honor Georgians' claims against the government. He helped more prominent constituents, such as Edward Harden, obtain

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[24] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, December 21, 1843; December 29, 1843, Howell Cobb Papers; Athens Southern Banner, December 21, 1843.

[25] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, December 21, 1843; December 29, 1843, Howell Cobb Papers.

federal posts. Cobb learned just how far patronage claims could go when he received a letter recommending an individual to be overseer on the Hurricane plantation. The writer observed that the man in question not only possessed the vital qualifications, but also voted Democratic. Such men, the writer concluded, should receive preference over Whigs. As a public relations strategy, Cobb secured lists of his constituents' names and sent them copies of speeches and government documents. The easy-going Cobb forwarded documents to Whig papers in his district just as he did to the local Democratic press. For this consideration he received the public gratitude of the Southern Whig.[26]

On one political front, however, he maintained absolute secrecy, and urged Mary Ann to do the same. Shortly after arriving in Washington, he wrote to her "I must put you upon your guard upon one point and that is in all your conversations to claim Athens as your residence and speak of your present absence as temporary. This is necessary to prevent any difficulty from arising about my residence in the District in which our legislature has placed Clarke County." While his place of residence did not matter under the general ticket system and would not contradict the arguments he

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[26] Robert McComb to Howell Cobb, October 11, 1842; James Jackson to Howell Cobb, April 11, 1844, Howell Cobb Papers; Howell Cobb to Edward Harden, June 15, 1844; December 14, 1844, Edward Harden Papers, Special Collections Library, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina; Athens Southern Whig, January 20, 1844; April 20, 1844; June 8, 1844.

offered to justify his claim to his seat, he recognized the issue as a potential embarrassment and desperately hoped to avoid it.[27]

Following his initial bout of homesickness, Cobb slowly adjusted to life in the capital. He established contact with his mother's relatives in Virginia and made plans to spend Christmas with "Cousin Tom Rootes" in Fredricksburg. When the press of business became too onerous, he sought solace by attending the theater or opera, but confided to his wife "both ... have become extremely dull & uninspired so that I need your company to smooth the rugged road duty & ambition has summoned me to travel."[28]

As he became more active in the city's social life, Cobb began to attract notice from the popular press. One Mrs. Royal, publisher of a journal entitled The Huntress, provided a highly favorable notice of him, but mentioned that the freshman Congressman was "a little too heavy." This latter remark delighted Cobb's friends and relatives who saw an opportunity for some bawdy humor at his expense. Daniel Lambert wrote to inquire "how Mrs. Royal found out you were rather heavy." Even Cobb's usually austere brother-in-law, Williams Rutherford, Jr., could not refrain from making a joke. He observed that the description of Cobb in The

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[27] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, December 21, 1843, Howell Cobb Papers.

[28] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, December 15, 1843; December 21, 1843; December 29, 1843, ibid.

Huntress seemed too favorable to have been written by anyone but Cobb himself. He further observed that "your friends who were deeply interested in your good moral character at Washington were anxious to know how Mrs. Royal knew you were a 'little too heavy.'"[29]

Sarah Cobb viewed all favorable comments regarding her oldest son as being "nothing but the truth." Nevertheless, she felt deep concern over his attendance at plays, and relayed a warning to "tell my dear Howell I am truly sorry to hear he is such a reader of plays and so constant an attendant at the Theatre, I had hoped better things of him, and beg him ... to quit it, for it is of the devil." Sarah was not immune, however, to the humor in her son's activities. She informed him that "it caused a general laugh at [your] expense when we read of [your] visit to the barber's shop to curl [your] hair for [you] to appear at the president's."[30]

Cobb's mood received an additional boost from his association with other members of the Georgia delegation. He spent much of his time in the company of John H. Lumpkin and Alexander H. Stephens. Lumpkin, a freshman Democratic congressman from Rome, and Stephens, a freshman Whig

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[29] Daniel Lambert to Howell Cobb, January 15, 1844; Williams Rutherford, Jr. to Howell Cobb, January 20, 1844; Sarah Rootes Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, February 18, 1844; March 6, 1844; undated manuscript, ibid.

[30] Sarah Rootes Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, February 18, 1844; March 6, 1844; undated manuscript, ibid.

congressman from Crawfordville, took lodgings in the same boarding house as Cobb. Lumpkin and Cobb remained close friends and associates until Lumpkin's death in the 1850s. Their friendship was facilitated by common political beliefs, and because Lumpkin's ambition for political advancement never burned as brightly as did Cobb's.[31]

Such would never be the case with Stephens. Besides their obvious political differences, the two men were each too eager to dominate the political stage to ever be more than friendly rivals. On occasion, they would be only rivals. Nevertheless, Stephens' initial reactions to his plump colleague proved favorable. When commenting on his own assignment to the committee on claims, Stephens wrote that "our committee are composed of the grandest set of blockheads -- (saving and excepting Cobb and old Gov. Vance the chairman) that ever were associated in a similar character."[32]

The three men went horseback riding, took long walks, and enjoyed talking late into the evening while they smoked cigars and munched on fruit. These activities provided Cobb with an outlet for his natural high spirits and penchant for practical jokes. Stephens, himself given to deep melancholy and grieving over the death of a brother, seemed to derive

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[31] Alexander H. Stephens to George W. Crawford, January 19, 1844, Alexander H. Stephens Papers, Robert W. Woodruff Library, Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia.

[32] Ibid.

a vicarious pleasure from Cobb's antics. He described them in some detail to his younger brother and confidante, Linton.[33]

When relating the details of one of their excursions, Stephens recalled, "our conversation was agreeable -- and Cobb was not [above] some of his tricks for amusement -- Passing a door he saw a servant stepping out -- and assuming a serious air he asked in an earnest tone 'If Mr. McFadden was at home?' The servant looked a little strange and said 'Mr McFadden' don't live here Sir. -- Cobb seemed utterly astonished at the news and we walked on -- the servant looking anxiously after us." Only moments after confusing the servant with inquiries about the fictional Mr. McFadden, Cobb struck again. As the trio passed a row of hacks waiting for fares in front of the train depot, Cobb declared to the unsuspecting Lumpkin, "'Here Lumpkin you can get a hack here' loud enough for all the hackmen in the row to hear him -- and in a moment ... there were about twenty all around Lumpkin crying want a hack sir? Hack Sir? ... Have a hack Sir? ... while our Cobb walked [on] as if he had done no mischief ... leaving Lumpkin to explain himself out of the difficulty."[34]

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[33] Alexander H. Stephens to Linton Stephens, March 1, 1844; March 3, 1844; December 22, 1844; January 1, 1845, Alexander H. Stephens Papers, Manhattanville College of the Sacred Heart, Purchase, New York (Hereafter: Stephens Papers, MC).

[34] Alexander H. Stephens to Linton Stephens, March 1, 1844; March 3, 1844, ibid.

Nearly a year later, Stephens continued to report on Cobb's pranks during their outings saying, "nothing much occurred ... excepting that Cobb called one or two men we met Mr. McFadden -- that is saluted them with 'good evening Mr. McFadden' which caused some surprise to them and no little humour to Lumpkin and myself."[35]

With these improvements in his situation, only Mary Ann's absence hindered his enjoyment of life in Washington. Her arrival had been delayed by a variety of causes, including the illness of John Lamar and her own reluctance to undertake the trip. From Washington, Cobb only could seek to hurry her along with gentle encouragement. Finally, in February, 1844, she, brother John, Howell Jr., and a servant arrived in the capital. Stress and the rigors of the trip exhausted Mary Ann, and it took several days for her to recover. Barely two months after her arrival, she gave birth to another son. The proud parents dubbed the child Henry Jackson. Whatever concerns Mary Ann felt about the two boys left in Georgia probably were eased by Sarah's assurances that both were well, and by Sarah's observation that "in all human probability your being there saved your husband's life."[36]

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[35] Alexander H. Stephens to Linton Stephens, December 22, 1844; January 1, 1845, ibid.

[36] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, December 7, 1843; December 21, 1843; Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, January 14, 1844; January 25, 1844; Sarah Rootes Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, March 6, 1844; John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, May 20, 1844,

However much Cobb enjoyed the diversions provided by his friends and family, politics remained the focus of his activities. The political arena offered much to keep him occupied. Despite his freshman status, Cobb took the floor of the House to voice opinions on several of the major issues of the day. Even while his right to a seat in Congress remained in dispute, he rose to speak on the so-called "gag rule." This rule, dating back to 1836, required the House to receive abolitionist petitions but table them without discussion.[37]

The adoption of the "gag rule" had not worked to the South's benefit. It proved a focus for antislavery agitators who accused southerners of treating northern whites like they treated their slaves. It also inspired John Quincy Adams, former president and congressman from Massachusetts, to launch a single-handed crusade for the rule's repeal. This struggle continued until 1844 when the rules committee proposed a revision which would bar all antislavery memorials from Congress. A vigorous debate regarding the proposed twenty-first rule ensued. Antislavery representatives denounced the new rule as a further attempt to protect slavery by denying northern citizens their constitutional

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Howell Cobb Papers.

[37] Zachary Taylor Johnson, The Political Policies of Howell Cobb (Nashville: George Peabody College for Teachers, 1929), pp. 14-15; Drew Gilpen Faust, James Henry Hammond and the Old South: A Design For Mastery (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), pp. 169-180.

rights. Some of these representatives suggested that the power to amend the Constitution carried with it an inherent power to abolish slavery without destroying the Union. At the very least, they threatened, Congress might abolish slavery in the District of Columbia at will.[38]

Southern representatives could not allow such challenges to go unanswered, and took the floor to defend their section's vital interests. The ultimate goal of abolitionists in forwarding petitions to Congress, they charged, lay in the incitement of domestic violence against the South. They wanted the free states' representatives to make no mistake: if Congress ever attempted to abolish slavery in the District of Columbia, or in the South at large, then the Union must be destroyed. The South could entertain no alternative, "when that time arrived, the Southern man who stood by and saw it done, would have a mark put on his forehead as indelible as that put on Cain."[39]

Cobb scarcely could allow to pass such an opportunity to establish his credentials as a defender of southern rights. Simultaneously, he desired to remain true to his longstanding faith in a perpetual Union where each section guaranteed the rights of all the rest. On January 14, he

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[38] Johnson, The Political Policies of Howell Cobb, pp. 14-15; Congressional Globe, Twenty-Eighth Congress, First Session, pp. 141-142.

[39] Congressional Globe, Twenty-Eighth Congress, First Session, p. 141.

began a two-part speech which he concluded four days later. He prefaced his remarks with a strong statement of his own and Georgia's commitment to the Union. He expressed regret that Robert Barnwell Rhett of South Carolina had ascribed to the South "an increasing disaffection to the Union." On the contrary, Cobb argued, among Georgians "attachment and devotion to the Union of their fathers 'grows with their growth, and strengthens with their strength.'" Yet he felt compelled to add a mild warning. Georgia's Unionism, he asserted, derived from "a conviction ... that the whole of this Union ... will continue to guaranty to them those rights and privileges which they have so long enjoyed under the Constitution and its compromises; and I sincerely trust that there never may be any just cause to ... weaken their confidence."[40]

Cobb then turned to the more immediate issue of receiving antislavery petitions. He took a strong stance in support of the revised rule. He did not seek to degrade or unduly inhibit citizens in the exercise of their rights. Rather, he maintained, he desired to re-elevate the right of petition to its former honored place. This valued right of all American citizens, he recalled, had emerged from the revolutionary struggle with Great Britain. It had been designed by the Founding Fathers to insure that the people

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[40] Appendix to the Congressional Globe, Twenty-Eighth Congress, First Session, pp. 69-71.

might assemble to discuss their concerns without fear of government persecution.[41]

The vital issue before the House involved the question of what should happen to petitions once prepared. Cobb found the idea of receiving and automatically tabling any petition denigrating to a precious right, and denounced the practice as "beneath the regard of freemen." Once citizens had assembled, prepared petitions, and submitted them to Congress, however, their rights ended. Responsibility then shifted to the House. In short, he argued, citizens might submit any petition they desired, but it fell to Congress to determine which of these should be received. He professed to see no alternative to his analysis. If, as some argued, Congress possessed no constitutional recourse short of accepting every petition, then "there would be no mode of avoiding the reception of any and all petitions, no matter how disrespectful or uncourteous in language, or condemnatory in the object proposed to be accomplished."[42]

Having outlined his constitutional views on the petition issue, Cobb now directed his attention to the future political dangers which might arise from a bad decision at the present. He accused those who sought to avoid difficulty by maintaining the status quo of practicing self-deception. He warned that persistence in this error would prove so

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[41] Ibid.

[42] Ibid.

entangling that its adherents could "only retrieve themselves by a formal surrender of the entire ground heretofore occupied by the friends of the South."[43]

Cobb's analysis of the situation recognized the active nature of the antislavery cause. He assured northern advocates of the existing "gag rule" that they would not return home to "that approving welcome which they are now so fondly anticipating for themselves." Instead, they would encounter only scorn and derision from constituents who would say, "it is true you have granted us the form of our rights, but at the same time denied us the substance." According to Cobb, representatives trapped in such a dilemma "must necessarily be placed at the mercy of these men, to be driven by them to whatever point they may think proper to require you to go."[44]

He also predicted that the continuation of the status quo would do nothing to quiet the present excitement of the public mind. The same fanatics who had so bitterly denounced the old "gag rule," now would be inspired by its continuation. They would declare this sign of congressional weakness a great victory, and use it to gain a public legitimacy which most representatives hoped to deny them.[45]

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[43] Ibid.

[44] Ibid.

[45] Ibid.

Even worse, Cobb warned, the abolitionist forces would not be satisfied with a limited victory. Rather, they would utilize their false legitimacy to revive the struggle in the next Congress. They would insist that the House at least read antislavery petitions before tabling them. Having already declared the necessity of receiving all petitions, Congress could hardly deny such a "reasonable" request. The inevitable consequence must be a process in which concession would follow concession. Within a few years, he predicted, abolitionist petitions would receive the same treatment as petitions of "the most respectable and honorable character." Under the circumstances, he declared, "the South considers ... that the time has now arrived when a choice must be made between these two extremes: the entire rejection of all such petitions ... [or] not merely their formal reception, but also their reference, consideration, and final action thereon." He insisted that "there is no neutral ground, no half-way house, that can be long occupied with either credit or safety to the parties interested."[46]

Cobb then shifted the focus of his remarks to party politics, and especially the politics of slavery. He conceded the futility of appealing to "those who have always opposed ... every ... rule adopted by Congress for the protection of southern feelings and southern interest." Instead, he appealed to those northern representatives "who

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[46] Ibid., p. 70-71.

have heretofore cooperated with us, and those whose devotion to our interest I feel confident yet remains unimpaired." He wasted no time in identifying those friends as northern Democrats. Northern Whigs and their southern allies, he insisted, represented the chief threat to southern interests.[47]

Cobb illustrated this threat through references to remarks made by Thomas Clingman, a Whig congressman from North Carolina. Clingman had accused advocates of the twenty-first rule of placing the South's northern friends in a false position. He had then added that "it was the duty of a wise general, when he found his men falling, one by one, under the fire of the enemy, to withdraw them from their exposed location to a place of greater security." Cobb professed to be confused by Clingman's argument. If Clingman "referred to his [Whig] political friends," he mocked, "I have only to say to him that he will meet with some difficulty in finding any of them in the list of killed and wounded. The devotion of northern Whigs to southern interest has never yet induced them to occupy this dangerous and exposed position."[48]

The honor of defending southern rights against every base assault, Cobb declared, went to the national Democratic organization. Yet as a result of the wavering by southern

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[47] Ibid.

[48] Ibid.

Whigs, brave northern Democrats had begun to hold back. They saw no need to risk themselves at home if southerners failed to present a united front. Cobb urged southern Whigs to take care. The fate of the twenty-first rule rested on their shoulders. If they failed to stand as a solid phalanx with southern Democrats, then northern Democrats would protect themselves, and the rule would be lost. The southern people, he said, would know upon whom to "place the seal of condemnation."[49]

Despite the efforts of Cobb and his associates, or perhaps because of them, the House ultimately rejected both the twenty-first rule and the old "gag rule." Thereafter, abolitionist petitions could both be received and discussed on the floor. Nevertheless, Cobb's speech received widespread support for his "manly effort" from many in Georgia. Brother Tom reported that the speech "has been generally commended ... & several have remarked [on] your 'vigilance for [southern] Interests.'"[50]

The Democratic press of Georgia also welcomed Cobb's speech. The Milledgeville Federal Union praised Cobb for demonstrating the hostility of Van Buren supporters to abolitionism. The defense of the South, it said, did not rest totally on the "friends" of John C. Calhoun. The

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[49] Ibid.

[50] Thomas Reade Rootes Cobb to Howell Cobb, February 1, 1844; John W. H. Underwood, February 2, 1844, Howell Cobb Papers; Athens Southern Banner, March 14, 1844.

Southern Banner proved more effusive in its commentary. In a single sentence, it described the speech as "manly ... elevated ... temperate ... chaste ... flowing ... graceful," and predicted that "the strength and soundness of its argument is calculated to produce a good effects in and out of Congress."[51]

Somewhat surprisingly, the local Whig press gave Cobb's speech no notice. That is not to say the speech went without criticism. A South Carolinian visiting Philadelphia reported that "your speech ... has had a due share of abuse as well as yourself, from a portion of the citizens of this city of Dutchmen, ... millerites & abolitionists. One of the daily papers said it was a 'pathetic speech.'"[52]

Closer to home, a Cobb relative, J. J. Flournoy, insisted that the right of petition offered vital protection for minority rights. "What is the validity of petitioning," he demanded, "if after all, reception is the finale?" If Congress failed to read and act upon each petition, then the right to petition meant nothing. The consequence, he argued, would be increasingly bitter political strife as various factions vied for dominance. He predicted that "before half a century these party contests will from acrimonious become bloody." He bitterly concluded that Cobb and the other

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[51] Milledgeville Federal Union, February 13, 1844; Athens Southern Banner, February 15, 1844.

[52] (?) to Howell Cobb, February 13, 1844, Howell Cobb Papers.

members of the Georgia delegation knew "just next to nothing about what you are saying when you attempt to treat with contempt ... the perogative! [sic] of the unofficial people to memorialize men in Power and trust!"[53]

Cobb felt satisfied with his effort for the twenty-first rule, even though the House failed to enact it. Shortly after the House rejected the rule, he wrote to Mary Ann, "for the last three days the business in Congress has been so intimately connected with the slavery question that we could not with safety be absent a single moment from our seats." He groused that the House's failure to act had left "the subject unadjusted, and the country is to be agitated for another year by fanatics and sectionalists for the worst of purposes." Nevertheless, he declared, "my skirts ... are clean. I have honestly and faithfully labored to settle it & I return home to my people conscious of having done the best I could."[54]

Debate over the tariff provided Cobb with the opportunity to deliver another major speech in May. Democratic advocates of free trade introduced a bill to reduce the protectionist tariff adopted by the Whig-controlled Congress in 1842. As with his speech on the reception of abolitionist petitions, Cobb expressed the views

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[53] J. J. Flournoy to Howell Cobb, February 4, 1852, ibid.

[54] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, March 4, 1844, ibid.

of a committed southern Unionist and intensely partisan Democrat -- views he had first formulated while still a schoolboy in Georgia.[55]

Rising to speak, Cobb acknowledged that his southern heritage contributed much to his ideas regarding proper tariff policy, and that his responsibilities to his constituents required him to explain his ideas. Yet, he believed himself motivated by more than sectional interests: he believed his views embodied vital issues of fairness and the long term interests of the majority of the American people.[56]

Continuing the strategy he had utilized in his speech on petitions, Cobb directed his remarks primarily to southern Whigs. Northern and eastern advocates of protective tariffs, he maintained, had focused on winning the support of western representatives with promises of improved domestic markets for American grains. When proclaiming the benefits of their program, however, protectionists had either "entirely forgotten or utterly disregarded" southern interests. He recalled how in times past when such attempts to trample southern interests "under foot with the most perfect impunity ... would excite one universal outbreak of honest indignation

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[55] Appendix to the Congressional Globe, Twenty-Eighth Congress, First Session, pp. 594-598; Howell Cobb, "Political Economy," undated speech, Howell Cobb Papers.

[56] Appendix to the Congressional Globe, Twenty-Eighth Congress, First Session, pp. 594-596.

from every southern bosom upon this floor." Now, regrettably, such was not the case, and it seemed likely that the southern people must "witness the humiliating spectacle of southern [Whig] representatives yielding a cheerful acquiescence in the unholy warfare which is waging against the best and dearest interests of their constituents."[57]

This shift in Whig values, Cobb observed, represented a recent development in the political environment. Using Georgia's Whig organization as an example, he illustrated the vigor with which southerners historically had united to resist misguided attempts to incorporate protectionist doctrines into public policy. He demonstrated that Georgia Whigs and Democrats previously had always presented a solid front for "FREE TRADE AND EQUAL RIGHTS" by citing speeches of Georgia Whig congressmen made as recently as 1842. The present Whig betrayal of southern interests, he charged, sprang from the worst form of unprincipled partisan politics. Although he made no direct reference to slavery, his remarks on the tariff carried an implicit message for southern voters. If southern Whigs would betray their constituents on the tariff for political preferment, could they be trusted to defend slavery?[58]

Even as Cobb maneuvered to place southern Whigs in a quandary, he sought to do much more. He desired to refute

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[57] Ibid.

[58] Ibid.

charges leveled at advocates of free trade by protectionists. He simultaneously sought to present free trade doctrine as the most beneficial program for both workers and consumers. Early in the speech, he denied that free trade carried any inherent hostility to manufacturing. On the contrary, free traders took pride in the growth of American industry -- "apart from the special favor which it has ever sought at the hands of the government." Feelings of good will, however, did not obligate advocates of free trade to accede to the "unreasonable request that, whilst the manufacturer of the North is luxuriating in the smiles and caresses of the government, the planter and farmer of the South shall be doomed to lingering death under her continual frowns."[59]

He next moved to answer protectionist claims that high duties tended to produce lower prices for American consumers. Protectionists, he argued, based this assertion on two assumptions: both false. The first held that a high tariff would force foreign merchants to reduce their prices in order to compete with protected domestic goods. The second contended that a protective tariff would serve effectively to exclude many imports. This exclusion, they claimed, would result in greater demand for American manufactures, and allow domestic producers to rely on volume rather than high prices for their profits.[60]

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[59] Ibid., p. 595.

[60] Ibid.

Cobb denounced this entire concept as a "doctrine ... utterly at war with every principle of common sense and sound reasoning," with the sole objective of deluding "the hard-working consuming people of the South into a submission to the ... protective policy." How, he inquired, could a foreign merchant reduce prices when government actions forced the costs of doing business upwards? He further argued that it required the total exclusion of foreign goods to improve the domestic market so thoroughly as to reduce consumer prices significantly.[61]

Yet, if by some miracle, the protectionist plan fulfilled every favorable prophecy, hidden costs remained. Cobb noted that the tariff's primary function lay in providing revenues for government operations. A direct tax on the people represented the only viable alternative to a revenue-oriented tariff. Each time a protective tariff succeeded in excluding some foreign product, government revenue declined and the country moved closer to direct federal taxation. Thus, even if consumer prices dropped, the corresponding increase in taxes insured that standards of living must remain basically unimproved. He also perceived an additional cost. Tariffs designed exclusively to raise revenue worked "to relieve ... the poor of the country from inordinate taxation, and to throw upon the shoulders of the rich, (who are more able to bear it,) ... the more onerous

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[61] Ibid.

burdens of the government." The direct taxes necessitated by protectionism would have the effect of reversing this wise policy.[62]

Cobb also sought to neutralize protectionist claims that free traders demonstrated an inclination "to indulge in a British feeling at the expense of our own people." He insisted that such charges held no basis in fact. Instead of acting on pro-British sentiments, he and other free-trade men looked beyond "narrow limits of sectional and personal interest," with the goal of enhancing the lives of the mass of the American people. If a "British feeling" existed in Congress, he said, it rested upon the Whigs who repeatedly painted "the most glowing and captivating pictures ... of the great benefits of the protective policy to the British government." He complained, however, that when Whigs praised Britain's accumulated wealth and commercial importance, they painted but half the picture. While "contemplating the scene presented by her wealthy nabobs, luxuriating in all the pleasures and extravagances of life," they utterly ignored "the miserable condition of her half-clad oppressed working people, verging on starvation." Whigs, he observed, might "sigh for similar scenes in our beloved country ... [but] I confess the picture has no charms for me."[63]

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[62] Ibid., p. 595.

[63] Ibid., pp. 595, 597-598.

In concluding his lengthy speech, Cobb returned to his twin themes of Unionism and the need for a united South on critical issues. He conceded that legislation to eliminate protectionism from the tariff seemed certain to fail. He placed responsibility for this failure at the feet of the southern Whigs who had abandoned long held principles in the slavish support of northern Whigs. If these southern apostates would but stand upon their ancient beliefs, protectionism could be overthrown. More importantly, an act of courage by southern Whigs might "calm the agitators of the public mind, and strengthen the bonds which cement our blessed Union."[64]

IV

When Cobb rose to deliver his speeches of January and May, he did so in part because he keenly desired to begin the process of building a national reputation. Yet other motives influenced him as well -- especially presidential politics. Cobb had begun to plan for the presidential campaign of 1844 almost as soon as the campaign of 1840 ended. His adherence to Van Buren's cause remained unshaken by defeat and well known throughout Georgia. The New Yorker's control over most of the Democratic state organizations made him the clear front-runner for the party's presidential nomination.[65]

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[64] Ibid., p. 598.

[65] John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, April 16, 1844; James Jackson to Howell Cobb, May 7, 1844; W. C. Daniell to Howell Cobb, May 11, 1844, Howell Cobb Papers; William J. Cooper,

Yet, storm clouds threatened. Many southern Democrats had doubted Van Buren's capacity to carry the South in 1840. That defeat now served to heighten their anxieties about his viability as a candidate. Most of these men felt satisfied that the Democrats again faced certain defeat unless the party abandoned Van Buren for a southerner.[66]

John C. Calhoun proved the chief beneficiary of these sentiments. Although aware that he faced an uphill struggle, Calhoun perceived southern ambivalence towards his northern rival as a cause for optimism. Consequently, he began to organize a concerted presidential bid. These efforts produced some successes. To Cobb's chagrin, the most significant Calhoun victory came in Georgia. There, in June, 1843, a Calhounite majority gained control of the state convention and endorsed Calhoun for the presidency.[67]

Despite bright hopes, Calhoun's presidential plans had collapsed by the end of 1843. Party leaders in the critical states of Virginia, Tennessee, and Alabama held their state organizations in the Van Buren camp. Only South Carolina joined Georgia in openly supporting his campaign, and then, in December, Georgia Democrats withdrew their endorsement.

Jr., The South and the Politics of Slavery, 1828-1856 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978), pp. 166-170.

[66] Cooper, The South and the Politics of Slavery, pp. 166-170.

[67] Cooper, The South and the Politics of Slavery, pp. 169-171.

Georgia's Van Buren supporters, led in part by Cobb, had howled in bitter protest against the June convention. In a move to restore party harmony, a new convention met and agreed to endorse no specific Democratic candidate.[68]

Outraged by his failure, Calhoun's initial reactions pointed directly towards a Democratic schism. Advising his friends that "the object now is, not victory, but to preserve our position and principles," he pronounced Van Buren a "doomed man," and reminded his friends "there is no obligation on us to share his fate." He prepared an address announcing his withdrawal from the race. He intended it to serve as a rallying point for those still determined to resist Van Buren. Yet, the proposed address raised as serious a dilemma for his friends as his enemies. Most Calhounites feared his course would result in their banishment from the Democratic party. Under pressure from his supporters, Calhoun agreed to moderate its defiant tone.[69]

Van Buren Democrats proved eager to accommodate the Calhoun wing of the party. Thomas Ritchie, editor of the

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[68] Ibid., pp. 171-172; Milledgeville Federal Union, December 19, 1843; James Armstrong to Howell Cobb, December 22, 1843, Howell Cobb Papers.

[69] Cooper, The South and the Politics of Slavery, pp. 171-175; John C. Calhoun to George McDuffie, December 4, 1843; John C. Calhoun to Robert M. T. Hunter, December 22, 1843; John C. Calhoun to Armistead Burt, December 23, 1843, in J. Franklin Jameson, ed., Correspondence of John C. Calhoun (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1900), pp 552-557.

Richmond Enquirer, had been instrumental in holding the Virginia organization for Van Buren, but actively sought party unity. As he previously had done in Georgia, Cobb now cultivated the good will of older and more prominent national party leaders such as Ritchie. He opened a correspondence with the editor. The primary theme of their letters focused on party unity. Ritchie reported to the young Georgian of a successful "reunion ... between the friends of Calhoun and Van Buren in Virginia." He urged Cobb to develop a strategy whereby a similar reconciliation might be effected in Georgia.[70]

Cobb, however, had already begun to take steps in that direction. His vigorous support for the twenty-first rule had aimed in part at easing fears of Georgia Calhounites regarding the loyalty of Van Buren supporters to the most vital of southern interests. Lest the lesson be lost on Georgia voters, the Democratic organ in Milledgeville applauded the speech for demonstrating the equal dedication of the friends of Van Buren and Calhoun to the defense of slavery.[71]

Cobb's tariff speech illustrated the movement to appease Calhoun and his adherents even more clearly. In his

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[70] Cooper, The South and the Politics of Slavery, pp. 168; 173-174; Thomas Ritchie to Howell Cobb, February 8, 1844, in Ulrich Bonnell Phillips, ed., The Correspondence of Robert Toombs, Alexander H. Stephens, and Howell Cobb (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1913), pp. 55-56.

[71] Milledgeville Federal Union, February 13, 1844.

correspondence, Calhoun bluntly blamed Van Buren and his chief lieutenant, Silas Wright, for the Tariff of Abominations of 1828. By the spring of 1844, John B. Lamar reported that these charges threatened to overwhelm their efforts to win Georgia for the New Yorker. He warned Cobb that some satisfactory explanation of Van Buren's vote on the tariff must be forthcoming. Cobb promptly consulted Wright, who in turn consulted Van Buren. Although Van Buren actually had figured prominently in shaping the tariff as a ploy to win northern support for Andrew Jackson's presidential campaign, he replied that his vote had been compelled by instructions from his constituents.[72]

Back in Georgia, Lamar moved to publicize Van Buren's response. He soon wrote to Cobb of new accusations that Van Buren had "engineered" these instructions in a sly strategy to win credit for the vote while retaining the option of disowning it. Lamar confessed reluctance to demand proof from the accusers for fear he could not refute their "pretended" evidence. Clearly, the situation required a more vigorous response.[73]

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[72] John C. Calhoun to George McDuffie, December 4, 1843, in Jameson, Correspondence of John C. Calhoun, pp. 552-555; Silas Wright to Martin Van Buren, April 3, 1844, Martin Van Buren Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.; John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, April 10, 1844; April 16, 1844, Howell Cobb Papers.

[73] John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, April 10, 1844; April 16, 1844, Howell Cobb Papers.

A reduction in the Whig tariff of 1842 represented the best possible solution. Calhoun, himself, had suggested that such an act of good faith constituted the only way for Van Buren to earn the unqualified support of the Calhounites. "We ought to be done with promises," Calhoun declared, "nothing ought to be taken but performance." He observed that Van Buren's friends possessed "ample time" to redeem themselves before the national convention, and reasoned "if they do not, we have a right to conclude that they do not intend to do so." Thus, when Cobb gave voice to his very real commitment to free trade and proclaimed that "upon this issue we are prepared go before the people," he directed his remarks to Calhounites as much as to Whigs. Yet, even as Van Buren loyalists struggled to unite the Democratic party behind their candidate, the New Yorker had reached a strategic decision which frustrated all their efforts and shattered his presidential chances. Ultimately, the engine of Van Buren's destruction proved to be neither Calhoun, abolitionism, nor the tariff. Rather, the issue of Texas caused his political overthrow.[74]

Texas, or rather the question of Texas annexation, was not a new issue in the spring of 1844. It dated back to 1836 when, following a successful revolution against Mexico, Texas

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[74] John C. Calhoun to Robert M. T. Hunter, February 1, 1844, in Jameson, Correspondence of John C. Calhoun, pp. 562-564; Appendix to the Congressional Globe, Twenty-Eighth Congress, First Session, p. 595; Cooper, The South and the Politics of Slavery, pp. 203-205.

had sought admission to the Union. Although friendly to the idea, President Andrew Jackson had declined. He feared that the issue might spark a debate over slavery expansion which could split the sectional wings of the Democratic party and damage Van Buren's chances to succeed him. As president, Van Buren maintained Jackson's hands-off attitude towards Texas, despite considerable southern pressure for annexation early in his administration.[75]

The Panic of 1837 momentarily displaced Texas from the political scene, but it reappeared shortly after William Henry Harrison's death elevated John Tyler to the presidency. Tyler's old republican proclivities soon led to a split between the president and his Whig associates over Henry Clay's economic program. Deprived of a party, Tyler nevertheless determined to win election to the presidency in his own right in 1844. The issue of Texas annexation offered him a chance either to win a berth with the Democrats or build a third party.[76]

Texas appealed to Tyler for several reasons. Thoroughly southern in outlook, Tyler's strict constructionist, state-rights views made southerners his most likely source of recruits. He recognized that a call to defend slavery represented the surest way to attract volunteers to his

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[75] Cooper, The South and the Politics of Slavery, pp. 176-184.

[76] Ibid.

standard. As long as Texas remained an independent republic, the danger existed that it might fall into the orbit of abolitionist Great Britain. Tyler and his closest associates believed that abolition in Texas would spell disaster for the South. Only annexation provided a permanent end to this threat.[77]

Tyler, however, did not view the case for annexation in purely sectional terms. The North would benefit as well. Texas represented expansion, and expansion meant new supplies of raw materials and new markets for northern business. Moreover, he portrayed the acquisition of Texas as a critical link in a process of gradual abolition. Slaves would flow into Texas from the eastern states. As slavery yielded to economic change, freed slaves would be channeled into Mexico and out of the United States. He reasoned that with careful planning, Texas might generate nearly as many northern votes as southern.[78]

Like many southern Democratic leaders, Cobb gave Texas little thought before the spring of 1844. That is not to say he was unaware of the issue. In January, William L. Mitchell wrote from Georgia that "if the present session adjourns without annexing Texas, a feeling of indignation and excitement will blaze out, which has not been felt since the last war." Then, in mid-April, John Lamar demanded "the

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[77] Ibid., pp. 183-188.

[78] Ibid.

annexation of Texas & no postponement." He hoped Van Buren would take that view because "it is a vital question to us, & is getting to be looked on & spoken of as such here." Should party leaders hesitate, the people would fall into "luke warmness again" and "it will be useless to make any exertion in the election."[79]

Cobb's views on Texas prior to May are a mystery because he made no comment. In part, his silence probably stemmed from the diligence with which he labored to ensure that Van Buren led a united Democratic party into the campaign of 1844. James Jackson commented on the young Georgian's "Van Buren enthusiasm," and suggested that "if Van Buren is elected, he ought to give you any office you ask ... you are the best friend he has." Jackson warned, however, that Texas was fast replacing all other issues, and assured Cobb that Van Buren need only endorse annexation to be elected president.[80]

Cobb almost certainly appreciated the potency of Texas, but believed it an issue generated by desperate politicians in a bid to damage his candidate. As such he preferred to avoid confronting annexation during the campaign, and shared Thomas Ritchie's conviction that the upheavals of an election offered a poor environment for a "free discussion and calm

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[79] William L. Mitchell to Howell Cobb, January 11, 1844; John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, April 16, 1844, Howell Cobb Papers.

[80] James Jackson to Howell Cobb, April 11, 1844, ibid.

consideration of so vital a subject." Nevertheless, Cobb probably worried more about how Texas would harm Van Buren in the North than he did about any southern reaction. The tie which bound the sectional wings of the party into a national unit derived from the understanding that southern Democrats dictated party policy on all slavery issues. Van Buren had helped create this arrangement, and had never failed to toe the southern line on slavery. Texas clearly involved slavery. Despite rumors of negotiations between Whig candidate Henry Clay and Van Buren on this question, Cobb did not expect the New Yorker to deviate from established precedents -- even if it cost him votes in the North.[81]

Yet less than two weeks after James Jackson warned of the growing demand for Texas, Van Buren resolved to break with his past performance and publicly oppose immediate annexation. He had valid political reasons for his decision. His previous acquiescence to southern demands now worked against him in the North. Under this pressure, he felt compelled to preserve his northern political base. The most obvious step required him to deny southern demands for Texas. Besides, Van Buren believed his previous services to the South adequate to establish his reliability among southern

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[81] Richmond Enquirer, October 10, 1843; Charles Henry Ambler, Thomas Ritchie, A Study in Virginia Politics (Richmond: Bell Book & Stationary Co., 1913), pp. 226-237; Cooper, The South and the Politics of Slavery, pp. 203-205.

voters, and resented the relative lack of support his efforts had won him. This resentment may have contributed to his willingness to oppose immediate annexation.[82]

The news of Van Buren's decision struck southern Democrats like a thunderbolt. On the morning of April 27, Henry Clay formally announced his opposition to Texas in a public letter issued from Raleigh, North Carolina. That afternoon Van Buren released his own anti-Texas letter. Having a head start of several hours, word of Clay's "Raleigh Letter" reached most southern communities first. Local Democrats exulted. They fully expected Van Buren to take pro-Texas ground. Once that occurred, they believed their victory certain. With the arrival of Van Buren's letter, however, exultation caught in their throats. Almost immediately, in wholesale lots, southern Democrats abandoned the "Little Magician."[83]

In Washington, Cobb must have sensed the shockwave certain to follow Van Buren's bombshell, but he maintained his composure and moved with caution. Shortly after Van Buren's letter went to press, he wrote to Ritchie urging continued efforts to preserve party unity. He also sought the editor's advice. While awaiting Ritchie's response, as well as reports from Georgia, he proceeded to deliver his

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[82] Cooper, The South and the Politics of Slavery, pp. 204-205.

[83] Ibid., pp. 199-200.

carefully prepared speech against protectionism. No record of Cobb's immediate feelings regarding Van Buren's announcement survives. He had supported the New Yorker too long simply to reverse himself without hesitation. He did not join in the bitter denunciations being heaped on Van Buren, and for several days he probably hoped against hope for a compromise that would save both his candidate and his party. Nevertheless, it soon became clear that Van Buren could not win the nomination of a united Democratic party, and hence could not be elected. It also became clear that, however reluctantly, he must place some political distance between himself and the New Yorker.[84]

Ritchie reported from Richmond in near despair. He wrote that in forty years as an editor "never have I seen the [Democratic] party in so much danger. We are breaking into factions." He held out no hope of preserving party unity. Virginia and the South, he said, demanded immediate annexation and would accept no candidate who failed to conform to their wishes. By way of illustration, he informed Cobb of moves by Virginia Democrats to withdraw previous endorsements of Van Buren's candidacy. Now, local county meetings merely instructed their delegates to the national

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[84] Thomas Ritchie to Howell Cobb, May 6, 1844, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, pp. 56-57; Albon Chase to Howell Cobb, May 4, 1844; James Jackson to Howell Cobb, May 7, 1844; W. C. Daniell to Howell Cobb, May 11, 1844; Thomas Reade Rootes Cobb to Howell Cobb, May 11, 1844, Howell Cobb Papers.

convention in Baltimore to nominate a candidate favorable to annexation.[85]

Reports from Georgia echoed Ritchie's analysis. Albon Chase attempted to portray the situation in the most favorable light. Van Buren, he suggested, really favored annexation, but had adopted his present course through the necessity of holding the party's northern votes. If southern Democrats just stood firm behind Van Buren, they could have both victory and Texas. Chase did admit, however, that he felt more kindly towards the "Little Magician" than did Cobb's other friends, and conceded that "this Texas question is obliged to injure us." James Jackson wrote that Van Buren's anti-Texas letter had shattered Democratic hopes. The New Yorker, he said, could carry neither Georgia nor the South. Increasingly there came demands for a new candidate. Jackson warned his cousin to exercise great care in choosing a course at the Baltimore convention. Should Cobb continue to support Van Buren, he must be certain to issue a strong personal statement favoring immediate annexation.[86]

W. C. Daniell was more blunt. He denounced the anti-Texas letter as a sop to abolitionists which had destroyed Van Buren's presidential chances. Democrats could but choose

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[85] Thomas Ritchie to Howell Cobb, May 6, 1844, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, pp. 56-57.

[86] Albon Chase to Howell Cobb, May 4, 1844; James Jackson to Howell Cobb, May 7, 1844; Thomas Reade Rootes Cobb, May 11, 1844, Howell Cobb Papers.

between Texas and victory or Van Buren and defeat. He expressed concern regarding the tone of the Banner on the issue of Van Buren's continued candidacy. Many, he warned, attributed Chase's continued support for the New Yorker to instructions from Cobb. Such perceptions threatened Cobb's political future. Daniell assured him, however, that a movement into the ranks of the open and unqualified supporters of Texas would make everything right, and the local party would then dedicate itself to his reelection. Cobb's younger brother Tom also advised a new course, saying, "His [Van Buren's] letter has killed him here -- almost entirely -- A terribly bad step -- & I don't see how it can be retraced."[87]

By mid-May, Cobb recognized the futility of continued support for Van Buren, and resolved to avoid the needless risk of adhering to a hopeless cause. He moved promptly to inform his friends and advisors in Georgia. William L. Mitchell and Junius Hillyer assured Cobb of their concurrence with his view that Van Buren could not carry a single southern state. Conditions, they insisted, clearly required a different candidate. As if to emphasize his new position, he wrote a strong letter of rebuke to Daniell for implying that he was involved in an underhanded plot to maintain support for Van Buren. Daniell hastened to apologize for any

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[87] W. C. Daniell to Howell Cobb, May 11, 1844; Thomas Reade Rootes Cobb, May 11, 1844, Howell Cobb Papers.

misunderstanding, but again warned that Cobb must explicitly endorse Texas or risk losing renomination for Congress. Only Chase disagreed with Cobb's reluctant assessment that it constituted "madness to run Mr. Van Buren ... in the South against Mr. Clay."[88]

The decision to withdraw from Van Buren's camp only partially solved Cobb's problems. Like many other southern Democrats, he had no particular candidate in mind as a replacement. Political reality required the candidate to favor unequivocally immediate annexation, but no dominant rival emerged around whom ex-Van Burenites might enthusiastically rally. Still focused on the necessity of maintaining party unity, Cobb believed that southern Democrats must throw their support to some other "Northern man with Southern principles."[89]

He almost certainly welcomed attempts to woo Silas Wright into the race. Wright, a New Yorker and Van Buren lieutenant, had taken no public position on Texas. He appeared to offer Democrats a way out of their dilemma, but flatly refused to allow the use of his name before the convention. Motivated by loyalty to Van Buren and resentment over the treatment accorded his friend, Wright informed a confidante that he fully endorsed Van Buren's Texas stance.

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[88] Albon Chase to Howell Cobb, May 20, 1844; William L. Mitchell to Howell Cobb, May 21, 1844; W. C. Daniell to Howell Cobb, May 24, 1844, ibid.

[89] Ambler, Thomas Ritchie, pp. 240-241.

Lewis Cass of Michigan also seemed a possible alternative. Seeing the opening created by Van Buren's letter, Cass issued his own letter in favor of immediate annexation.[90]

Cobb, however, refrained from making any commitment to Cass or any other candidate. He was confused as to his best course. He again consulted with Ritchie, but received little help "towards seeing [his] way out of the fog." The Richmond editor confessed that "if you had asked me to square the circle or solve the longitude I should as soon have undertaken it as to have advised you on the problem .... If you will give us a strong available candidate on whom our party will rally, tu eris mihi magnus Apollo."[91]

The Democratic national convention convened in Baltimore on May 27. Despite his ambivalence, Cobb joined the rest of the Georgia delegation in casting straight anti-Van Buren, pro-Cass votes. The first test of strength came when the convention voted on the retention of the rule requiring a two-thirds majority to win nomination. Van Buren forces controlled a majority of the delegates, but not two thirds. If they could carry a vote to waive the two-thirds rule, Van Buren might yet be the nominee. When the critical vote came, the entire Georgia delegation voted with the majority to keep

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[90] R. H. Gillet, The Life and Times of Silas Wright, two vols. (Albany: The Argus Company, Printers and Publishers, 1874), II, 1534-1537.

[91] Thomas Ritchie to Howell Cobb, May 23, 1844, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, p. 59.

the two-thirds requirement. It then voted for Cass with near unanimity through eight ballots. Only after the eighth ballot revealed that back room maneuvering had resulted in a general movement to dark horse James K. Polk of Tennessee, did the Georgians abandon Cass and join the stampede to Polk.[92]

Polk, a pro-Texas man and Van Buren supporter, had seemed a fading political star prior to his nomination. He had served in a variety of public offices, but two consecutive defeats for the governorship of his home state appeared to signal the end of his public life. Prior to the publication of Van Buren's anti-Texas letter, Polk had been actively seeking the vice-presidential nomination by loyally holding Tennessee in Van Buren's camp. After publication of the New Yorker's letter, Polk began to hope for better things. He astutely perceived that his chances for either the presidential or vice-presidential nomination relied upon the good will of Van Buren and his delegates. By treading a fine line between various Democratic factions, he kept himself acceptable to virtually everyone. As it became increasingly obvious that none of the party's best known leaders could win the nomination without splitting the party, Polk emerged as the "new man" whom all could support.[93]

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[92] Charles Sellers, James K. Polk, Continentalist, 1843-1846 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), pp. 76-107; Niles National Register, June 1, 1844.

[93] Sellers, James K. Polk, Continentalist, pp. 70-74,

Following Polk's nomination, the convention proceeded to complete its business. After an abortive attempt to name Silas Wright to the vice-presidential spot, the convention nominated George M. Dallas of Pennsylvania. Like Polk, Dallas' chief virtue lay in his general acceptability. The convention also adopted a platform which incorporated the party's new theme of territorial expansion with established themes of negative government. Not only did the Democrats demand Texas, they now called for all of Oregon as well.[94]

As the delegates departed for home and news of the convention's actions spread across the nation, Democrats heaved a collective sigh of relief. Fears of a deadlocked convention and party dissolution evaporated to be replaced by general satisfaction and optimism. The Milledgeville Federal Union spoke for many Democrats and certainly for Cobb when it declared, "the result of those proceedings ... has lifted from our shoulders the weight with which we felt oppressed."[95]

V

Even as Cobb labored to chart a safe course through the perilous waters of national politics, he also launched his own campaign for reelection. In January, 1844, he learned

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[94] Ibid., pp. 98-100.

[95] Ibid., pp. 98, 103; Milledgeville Federal Union, June 4, 1844.

that John H. Underwood represented his most likely Whig opponent. He began making plans to spend the summer "stumping" his district. His Athens advisors, however, urged him to pursue an indirect strategy -- at least early in the campaign. They feared potential Democratic rivals more than they feared the Whigs. They informed Cobb that rather than mounting an open campaign prior to the party's district convention, they intended to behave as if he was already renominated. Cobb men would attend local meetings throughout the district and quietly secure endorsements for his continued service in Congress. By the time the district convention met, every county organization should be firmly committed to his cause.[96]

The most serious threat to Cobb's reelection bid did, in fact, arise from Democratic ranks. In early March, Chase warned Cobb that General R. M. Echols might be planning to challenge his right to the party's nomination. Echols believed that Cobb had mistreated him regarding the 1842 nomination. According to Chase, Echols complained that the nomination had been offered to him and he planned to accept it unless Cobb desired it. After consulting with Cobb and receiving positive assurances that he held no intention of seeking the nomination, Echols decided to run. When the convention met, however, despite his "positive declaration,"

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[96] William L. Mitchell to Howell Cobb, January 11, 1844; Albon Chase to Howell Cobb, February 8, 1844; Howell Cobb Papers.

Cobb permitted his name to go before the convention. Echols, Chase reported, did not so much resent losing the nomination as he did Cobb's failure to inform him of his change of mind prior to the convention. Now the General believed "you ought to give way." Chase hastened to add that "this would by no means be acceptable to our friends."[97]

Echols continued to maneuver against Cobb for over a month, but by the middle of April, James Jackson expressed confidence that the older man would not risk a head-to-head confrontation before the convention. Three weeks later, Junius Hillyer reported that all Democratic opposition had abandoned the field. Even better, he exulted, with Underwood leading the Whig effort, "you cannot be defeated."[98]

Hillyer's analysis proved accurate. Underwood insisted on running a campaign focused on the Whig program. He flatly refused to engage in any political attacks against his opponent. The Southern Whig, however, did not share Underwood's restraint. With an air approaching desperation, Whig editor, Philip Clayton, seized upon Cobb's free trade views as the basis for attack after attack. Rather than debate the merits of protectionism versus free trade, Clayton concentrated on an insignificant congressional vote. The vote involved a move by Whig congressmen to require the Clerk

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[97] Albon Chase to Howell Cobb, March 1, 1844, ibid.

[98] James Jackson to Howell Cobb, April 11, 1844; Junius Hillyer to Howell Cobb, May 2, 1844, ibid.

of the House to buy only American-made desk supplies for House members. In keeping with his free trade views, Cobb voted against the legislation. The Whig now dubbed this a "British vote." Throughout the campaign it denounced Cobb as an unpatriotic youth who had betrayed the honest American "farmers and mechanics" he represented in Congress. He was, the Whig trumpeted, "British in feeling, British in principle, British in aristocracy, and British in every sense of the word, in preference to the plain American style of living and acting." Eventually, the Whig even hinted that Cobb's "British vote" had been purchased by "British gold."[99]

The Southern Banner insisted that the Whig's accusations lacked force. It denounced the original congressional resolution as "one of the humbugs of the day." House officers already knew their duty to purchase the best quality supplies at the lowest possible price. As good Americans these officers were sure to purchase American-made products when available. Thus the vote held no significance. Besides, queried the Banner, which of Cobb's constituents had suffered as a consequence of his "British vote?" The Banner answered its own question: no resident of the Sixth District had been harmed in the least. As to charges that Cobb acted through "British feeling" or aristocratic pretensions, the

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[99] Athens Southern Whig, June 15, 1844; June 22, 1844; June 29, 1844; July 6, 1844; July 27, 1844; August 3, 1844; August 31, 1844; October 5, 1844; October 12, 1844; Athens Southern Banner, July 25, 1844.

Banner countered that nothing could be further from the truth. He was "plain, simple and unaffected in his manners; warm and generous in his feelings; and soundly Democratic in his principles, he is not a proper subject out of which to manufacture a modern aristocrat."[100]

Despite editor Chase's efforts, Cobb found it necessary to respond to the Whig charges at virtually every stop as he canvassed his district. He later wrote that, although he had repudiated the charges as "'false and calumnious,' in every county in the district, in the presence of my competition and other distinguished members of the Whig party, I have not yet found the first honourable member of that party, who would condescend either to sanction or justify it."[101]

Still, late in the campaign, Cobb felt compelled to issue a public letter restating the reasons for his vote. In it, he assured the electorate that prior to voting he had consulted the assistant clerk of the House and learned that for years past American-made desk supplies had been purchased whenever practicable. Yet, at the heart of his decision lay a far more important principle. The resolution represented a cheap attempt by "the northern manufacturing interest, to commit southern representatives of the Democratic party, to the doctrines of the protective system." He concluded with

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[100] Athens Southern Banner, June 20, 1844; June 27, 1844; July 11, 1844; August 8, 1844.

[101] Ibid., October 3, 1844.

a forceful denial of any antipathy towards "the honest, hard-working laborers in our factories." Rather, it was in their true interest that he fought. Laborers, he warned, must not be deceived by petty Whig tricks. They must realize that "their interest never enters into the calculation of those who are seeking to establish this rotten system .... It is the wealthy nabob and capitalist who presents to the eye of the federalist, a meritorious object for national sympathy."[102]

Ultimately, the Whig's constant harping on this subject may have worked to Cobb's benefit. One disgusted Whig confided to him that the Whigs were making too much "noisy clamour [sic] about your 'British vote' .... With me this vote had no influence."[103]

Nevertheless, at the Whig, Clayton did not restrict his negative campaign to the "British vote." He also attempted to make an issue of Cobb's personal affairs. "We have no doubt [that we] will, together with a few scraps of history taken from his private life," the editor crowed, "defeat him." This reference probably targeted Cobb's ongoing financial difficulties, but might have alluded to Paulina as well. At any rate, Clayton's editorials helped to start a whisper campaign of rumors about the freshman congressman's

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[102] Ibid.

[103] J. J. Flournoy to Howell Cobb, September 14, 1844, Howell Cobb Papers.

finances. Cobb was outraged. In the columns of the Banner, he challenged Clayton to print any information in his possession "which if told, 'his best friends would be ashamed of him.'" Not yet satisfied, Cobb declared his intention "to give Clayton a thrashing" after the election. His friends, however, prevailed on him to forego his vengeance by arguing that "your triumph will be complete without it, & by so doing you add to his importance."[104]

The campaign did touch on some substantive issues. Like other southern Democrats, Cobb came out of the Baltimore convention relieved and optimistic. As he campaigned in the Sixth District, he eagerly carried the Democratic message of "Polk and Dallas: Oregon and Texas" to his constituents. To this basic formula he added liberal quantities of free trade ideology and anti-national bank rhetoric. Fearing the impact of annexation on both the congressional and presidential contests, the Whigs imported party leaders from around the state to denounce Texas as a political scam and to praise the benefits of a protective tariff. At various times, Senator John M. Berrien and congressmen Robert Toombs and Alexander H. Stephens visited the Sixth District, but to no avail.[105]

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[104] Athens Southern Whig, July 6, 1844; Athens Southern Banner, July 18, 1844; W. C. Daniell to Howell Cobb, October 8, 1844, Howell Cobb Papers.

[105] Athens Southern Banner, July 25, 1844; August 8, 1844; September 19, 1844; October 17, 1844.

On election day Cobb carried his district with a majority of 1,944 votes. Although he failed to carry his Whig-dominated home county of Clarke, Mary Ann saw much to praise in the behavior of many Athens Whigs. She reported to her husband "nothing has pleased me so much as the conduct of some of your old friends in Athens." The men to whom she referred had declined to vote because in voting they must either betray their friend or their party. She wrote, "their votes in your favor would not have exalted them in my esteem as their late conduct has."[106]

With his own election secure, Cobb now focused his efforts on winning Georgia for Polk. When voters went to the polls in November -- a month after the congressional elections -- the Democrats carried the state by a narrow margin. Of over 86,000 votes cast, Polk won with a majority of less than 2,000. Cobb received much credit for this result -- so much so that some in Georgia believed Polk should reward the young man with a cabinet position.[107]

The election of 1844 marked a baptism of fire for Cobb. The pressure of events and issues truly had forced him to "modify" his "opinions about the stars of the land." Yet, through luck and solid political instincts he had managed the required transition without damage. Moreover, he had secured

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[106] Ibid., October 17, 1844; Mary Ann to Howell Cobb, October 14, 1844, Howell Cobb Papers.

[107] Johnson, The Political Policies of Howell Cobb, p. 24.

to himself a dominant position in the Sixth District which no future political rival ever successfully challenged. With the Democrats soon to be in control of both the White House and the national legislature, Cobb's personal future, and the nation's, appeared to be bright and brightening.

Chapter Six

"Open Enemies and Pretended Friends"

Following the presidential voting, Cobb lingered in Athens for nearly a month. He did so, in part, to take care of family business, but also because he needed to recover from the strain of rigorous campaigning. He wrote to John Lamar that the election effort had required him to labor "literally day & night," and that he had lost between fifteen and twenty pounds as a consequence of constant riding and speaking. Yet family finances as well as politics conspired to deny him rest. Creditors continued to press for the repayment of old debts. He informed Lamar that he had been living off his income as an attorney and congressman, and hence possessed no immediate pressing need for money from the cotton crop produced on Mary Ann's plantations. He urged Lamar to use the proceeds from the crop to retire debts, especially those on which his brother-in-law stood as security. With luck, he said, "I can [in two years] relieve myself from that incubus (debt) which has been so long bearing down my energies."[1]

At this same time, Cobb also relinquished any active role in administering Mary Ann's still extensive holdings.

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[1] Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, November 17, 1844, Howell Cobb Papers, Felix Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia (Hereafter: Howell Cobb Papers).

He explained to Lamar that he had avoided visiting the plantations all summer. Political demands on his time had rendered regular visits impossible, and he feared that with his irregular presence, "the overseers feeling a divided responsibility between you and myself might seek to cloak their own improper management under conflicting directions, and creditors might seek advantages." He therefore concluded "to leave the whole matter to your judgement & management." Lamar, however, did not feel entirely comfortable with Cobb's decision. He worried that his friend and relative might be motivated by a reluctance to question his decisions. He insisted, "now Howell just consider me as your agent subject entirely to your direction." Nevertheless, Cobb persisted in his course. While he probably recognized Lamar's superior managerial skills, he certainly welcomed the chance to rid himself of a task he found onerous. Prior to Lamar's death during the Civil War, Cobb restricted his plantation management to instructions on the distribution of crop proceeds.[2]

Politics too worked against a real vacation for Cobb. In early November, Clarke County Democrats organized a barbecue in Watkinsville with Cobb as a featured speaker. Although brief in his remarks, he took the opportunity to lambast Philip Clayton and the Whig for "the lying handbills and malicious slanders put forth to defeat our candidates and

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[2] John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, February 7, 1845, ibid.

our cause." Only days before his scheduled departure for Washington, a multi-county Democratic "jubilee" assembled in the Athens town hall. Despite inclement weather, a large number of Democrats attended. The meeting's organizers again called upon Cobb to speak.[3]

On November 26, Cobb, Mary Ann, the two youngest boys, and the requisite servants departed for Washington and the second session of the Twenty-Eighth Congress. Shortly after settling his family into their boarding house, Cobb resumed his congressional duties. It quickly became apparent that President Tyler intended to make Texas annexation the critical issue of the session. Encouraged by Polk's victory, Tyler desperately wanted to see annexation effected during his administration. His attempt to join Texas to the Union by means of a treaty had failed to win the required two-thirds majority in the Senate the previous June. Realizing that success required a new strategy, he settled on the device of a joint resolution by both houses of Congress because he had a more realistic chance to obtain a simple majority in both the House and Senate than he did a two-thirds Senate majority.[4]

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[3] Athens Southern Banner, November 7, 1844; November 21, 1844.

[4] Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, November 17, 1844, Howell Cobb Papers; William J. Cooper, Jr., The South and the Politics of Slavery, 1828-1856 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978), pp. 219-220.

Cobb's pro-Texas constituents pressed their congressman to join in Tyler's crusade. William H. Jackson assured him that annexation fever grew stronger in Georgia every day and represented "the great subject" for the entire South. Denouncing the Mexican government as a tyranny and the Mexican people as a "mongrel race," he advised Cobb not to allow the American government to tolerate their insults.[5]

Most of Cobb's correspondents, however, did not share Jackson's aggressive tone. They feared that Texas was slipping through American fingers to be irretrievably lost. J. W. Burney wrote "push the annexation of Texas ... now is the time; it may be too late hereafter." Two men with more immediate Texas experience added urgency to the other pleas. Leroy Patillo of Monroe, Georgia, had a brother serving in the Texas Senate. Based on his brother's letters, he warned Cobb, "I am confident this is the last opportunity we will ever have to regain that valuable country ... they are still willing and desirous of being admitted into our Union, but if the present Congress rejects them, they will form a commercial alliance with Great Britain." George Phillips, who had just returned from a tour of Texas, echoed Patillo.

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[5] William H. Jackson to Howell Cobb, January 2, 1845, Howell Cobb Papers.

"If Texas is not now annexed," he frantically predicted, "it never can be with their consent."[6]

Cobb hastened to get his support for Texas on record. In mid-January he entered the annexation debate then raging in the House. Noting the elaborate arguments offered by those on both sides of the issue, he suggested the existence of but two critical questions: "First: if Congress was satisfied that it was the will of the people that this object should be consummated, and at this time; and next, if they had the constitutional power to carry out the clearly-expressed will of the people." He believed the answers to both questions a simple yes. As to the will of the people, the late presidential election provided clear evidence of the popular desire for Texas. The constitutional issue seemed only slightly more complicated. No one, he contended, denied the right of the United States to acquire Texas in order to protect the national security interests of the country. Nor, he observed, did anyone question the right of the United States to effect annexation through military force should national security require it. Thus, he concluded, if Congress could protect the national security by military

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[6] J. W. Burney to Howell Cobb, January 3, 1845; Leroy Patillo to Howell Cobb, January 20, 1845, ibid.; George D. Phillips to Howell Cobb, February 25, 1845, in Ulrich Bonnell Phillips, ed., The Correspondence of Robert Toombs, Alexander H. Stephens, and Howell Cobb (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1913), pp. 66-68.

means, it must also possess the power to achieve the same goals by peaceful means.[7]

Yet there remained many who opposed annexation, and Cobb suggested that the true source of their opposition involved neither constitutional scruples nor doubts about the popular will. Rather, they sought to block the expansion of slavery. As proof, he cited the compromises proposed by northern representatives which would allow annexation provided portions of Texas be reserved as free territory. He denounced all such offers as unconstitutional, unenforceable, and unjust. The Constitution, he noted, provided only that Congress should require each state to maintain a republican form of government. Beyond that single stipulation every state exercised independent control over its domestic institutions. By no definition of constitutional propriety, he argued, could Congress "admit States into the Union destitute of those rights and privileges which now belonged to the existing States."[8]

Cobb went further. Any attempt by Congress to limit slavery in Texas lacked enforceability. He illustrated this point by means of a theoretical situation. What if Congress voted to admit Texas as a state half slave and half free, and then, after admission, the people of Texas voted to extend

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[7] Congressional Globe, Twenty-Eighth Congress, Second Session, pp. 176-177.

[8] Ibid.

slavery throughout the state? Congress, he observed, could hardly intervene because the Constitution only permitted such action to preserve a state's republican form of government. Did anyone, he inquired, contend that the establishment of slavery constituted the destruction of republican government? If so, he noted, "they must cast out of our Union Georgia, and every State where slavery [is] recognized."[9]

Yet, even if Congress possessed the right to make such restrictions and the power to enforce them, Cobb insisted that it should refrain from doing so. Since the adoption of the Constitution, the country had been divided into slaveholding and non-slaveholding regions. From the beginning, he observed, "the preponderance in our government was in favor of the non-slaveholding territories, and it always must be because the extent of it [is] greater." Now, the possible acquisition of Texas offered the South an opportunity to redress partially the imbalance of sectional power. He carefully pointed out that even with Texas "the power of this government ... could never fall into the hands of the South." At best "all that [the South] would ever be able to do was to be a check upon those whose interests would lead them to trample on her rights." Under such circumstances, he concluded, only the most petty of men could insist upon a sectional division of Texas.[10]

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[9] Ibid.

[10] Ibid.

As he had done with his speeches in the previous session, Cobb sought to communicate on more than one level. On the surface, he embodied an appeal for the enactment of a policy he truly believed essential for the entire country. He also conveyed more subtle messages. Northern Democrats received assurances that they could support annexation without serious risk because northern domination of the government would remain secure. More important, however, were the messages for home consumption regarding the nature of the threat to annexation. Cobb attributed the bulk of Texas opposition to northern Whigs hostile to slavery expansion. Without direct accusations -- as he had done in his tariff speech -- he hoped to raise doubts among southern voters regarding the dedication of southern Whigs to slavery. Already badly divided by the Texas "explosion," southern Whigs could hardly ignore the potential danger of these implicit charges.[11]

Alexander H. Stephens, who had long denounced the Texas issue as a "humbug" devised by the Democrats to split the Whig ranks, disparaged Cobb's speech. Writing to his brother Linton while Cobb spoke, he commented that "Cobb is not speaking as well as usual -- halts and stammers -- is evidently confused ... I shall quit listening to him." Nonetheless, Stephens could not escape the implications of

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[11] Ibid.; Cooper, The South and the Politics of Slavery, p. 211; James Jackson to Howell Cobb, February 6, 1845, Howell Cobb Papers.

Cobb's remarks, and when the annexation resolution came to a vote in the House on January 25, he and half the southern Whig members broke ranks with their party to vote in favor of Texas.[12]

Cobb's constituents welcomed the House vote, and gloated over Stephen's reversal. James Jackson gleefully reported that "the Whigs here don't know what to make of it ... the very man who abused & vilified & humbugged the project of annexation has cast his vote in its favour!" Jackson chortled that "deluded" local Whigs suspected their hero of accepting a bribe to join the "Philistines." Democratic satisfaction was made complete when a month later the Senate followed the House's lead and authorized the president to complete the annexation process.[13]

Although Texas dominated the session, it did not occupy all of Cobb's time. Mary Ann, momentarily freed from the concerns of impending childbirth, enjoyed Washington much more than she had during her first visit. She wrote to a cousin back in Georgia of her intention to "persevere until I see all that is worth seeing in this city of magnificent distances." She and Cobb maintained active social schedules, both as a couple and individuals. By early January, they had

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[12] Alexander H. Stephens to Linton Stephens, January 22, 1845, Alexander H. Stephens Papers, Manhattanville College of the Sacred Heart, Purchase, New York (Hereafter: Stephens Papers, MC).

[13] James Jackson to Howell Cobb, February 6, 1845, Howell Cobb Papers.

already visited the White House twice, called upon Dolly Madison "at her own home," and attended a "grand party at Mr. [Frank] Blair's." She did not deny that the formal parties were "splendid affairs," but pointed out that they were also "a perfect squeeze." In addition to these activities, Mary Ann also joined in the usual round of visits to other wives of government members. For his part, Cobb slipped away early in the session for a trip to Richmond, where he consulted with Thomas Ritchie regarding politics. He also took a short holiday with his congressional chums Stephens and Lumpkin.[14]

Nor did Texas absorb all of Cobb's political energies. He continued an active program of constituent services, but more importantly he demonstrated a growing familiarity with the intricacies of parliamentary procedures and House rules. One indication of his growing skill came when the Committee on Mileage gave him responsibility for maneuvering a bill "to regulate the mileage of members of Congress" through the House. The proposed legislation consisted of a single section requiring members to compute their mileage claims according to the most direct mail route. The chief objection to the bill came from members who protested that it failed to eliminate all abuses within the system. These opponents pushed for amendments designed to make the proposed law more rigorous, but Cobb fended off most of the more extreme

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[14] Mary Ann Cobb to Cousin Sarah, January 11, 1845, Howell Cobb Papers; Alexander H. Stephens to Linton Stephens, December 8, 1844, Stephens Papers, MC.

amendments by arguing that their acceptance would doom the legislation to defeat. He conceded the bill's imperfections, but insisted that the legislation represented a marked improvement over the existing system. He further argued that the Committee on Mileage had acted to the limits of its jurisdiction. If certain members desired more comprehensive legislation, he suggested, then let them push for the creation of a special committee empowered to provide it. Ultimately, he succeeded in steering the bill past its critics to a favorable vote by the House.[15]

During the balance of the session, Cobb took a major role in only one other debate -- a move to reduce the postage rates and otherwise "reform" the postal system. He disapproved of every aspect of the proposed changes. The reduction of rates, he complained, virtually guaranteed that the postal service, already unable to cover its expenses, must become a charge upon the national treasury. Furthermore, the proposal to establish a single uniform rate for all packages weighing no more than a half ounce seemed certain to encourage the purchase of thin French paper at the expense of heavier American-made products. While always opposed to protectionism, Cobb never believed the government should needlessly harm American manufacturers. He especially

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[15] Congressional Globe, Twenty-Eighth Congress, Second Session, pp. 63, 229-230; Journal of the House of Representatives of the United States, Twenty-Eighth Congress, Second Session, pp. 446-447.

objected to the retention of the franking privilege for members of Congress because they used it to an "extravagant extent." He and other opponents of the bill offered a series of amendments designed to correct these flaws, but without success.[16]

The second session of Cobb's first Congress ended in March with the inauguration of James K. Polk as president. As Cobb prepared to take his family back to Georgia, he could contemplate his first term with satisfaction. His fellow Democratic members already acknowledged that he "possessed more of the elements of a successful parliamentary leader than any other of our political friends." Some even suggested that this potential for House leadership -- combined with his youth and lack of party seniority -- explained Polk's decision not to include him in the new cabinet. More importantly, he had begun to lay the foundations of a national reputation as an "emphatically ... Union Democrat ... who had been the faithful and efficient advocate and defender of the rights and interests of his own section of the confederacy." He could hardly ask for more from his freshman term.[17]

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[16] Congressional Globe, Twenty-Eighth Congress, Second Session, pp. 347-349.

[17] United States Magazine, September, 1849, pp. 268, 273; Lucian Lamar Knight, Reminiscences of Famous Georgians, two vols. (Atlanta, 1907), I, 205.

II

Shortly after returning home, Cobb resumed his legal practice. While travelling the Western Circuit, he combined the practice of law with politics, and happily recounted to Mary Ann "the gratification I have received from the universal good feeling ... manifested towards me by the people of my Dis[trict] in the upper counties. Never was a man more welcomed into the bosom of his family." Despite the warm welcome, he worried about the possibility of a disruptive move by Calhounites that could split the Democracy both in Georgia and the nation. Calhoun, already considering a presidential bid in 1848, made no secret of his differences with the new president's demand for all of Oregon up to the 54°-40' line. Widespread sentiment among Calhounites that Polk had wronged their leader by not offering to extend his tenure in the state department exacerbated the danger.[18]

When Cobb attempted to gauge the potential Calhoun threat in Georgia, his advisors offered assurances that "you need give yourself no uneasiness about any 'fancy Calhoun resolutions.'" They attributed the overall depth of party unity to "the high-toned, generous spirit which pervaded the northern Democracy both in the convention that nominated a slaveholder for the presidential chair, & afterward in the

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[18] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, April 22, 1845, Howell Cobb Papers; John Niven, John C. Calhoun and the Price of Union (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), pp. 286-292.

struggle which elected him." Such nobility of behavior, they said, "has silenced all bickering upon that subject here."[19]

For the moment, at least, this optimistic assessment appeared correct. Cobb represented the Democracy of Clarke County as a delegate to the state party convention which assembled at Milledgeville in mid-June. There he had the rare pleasure of witnessing a harmonious Democratic meeting. The delegates nominated Matthew H. McAllister of Savannah to serve as the party's standard bearer in the upcoming governor's race.[20]

The Democrats planned an active campaign. Cobb correspondent, W. C. Daniell, outlined a strategy which stressed the popular issues of Texas and anti-protectionism. Declaring that "we must lay out the Whigs this year, " he pressed for a massive celebration of Texas annexation prior to the election as the best means of reminding the voters of this Democratic cause. He also vowed to expose the protective tariffs as "the most fraudulent system of injustice & oppression ever tolerated by men claiming [r]epublicanism." Cobb's personal efforts for McAllister reflected the ideas endorsed by Daniell. Unfortunately for Democratic hopes, the Whigs renominated their popular

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[19] Henry Jackson to Howell Cobb, May 6, 1845, Howell Cobb Papers; Niven, John C. Calhoun and the Price of Union, pp. 286-292.

[20] Henry R. Jackson to Howell Cobb, May 6, 1845; Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, June 11, 1845; W. C. Daniell to Howell Cobb, August 4, 1845, Howell Cobb Papers.

incumbent governor, George W. Crawford. In a campaign which emphasized personalities more than issues, Crawford's popularity proved more than Texas, tariffs, and McAllister could overcome. The Democratic candidate went down to defeat.[21]

Although McAllister lost the gubernatorial race and the Whigs retained their grip on the state legislature, when that body assembled in November, Cobb again made the now familiar trip to Milledgeville. There he consulted with other party leaders, and -- hoping to pick up a few scraps for friends and family despite the Whig victory -- joined in the patronage scramble.[22]

Cobb held straightforward and, apparently, conventional views on patronage. He believed the winning party should fill open government jobs, and those jobs should go to the men who contributed most to the party's success. By means of careful patronage distribution, both the individual politician and the party might weld their loyal supporters into an effective engine for securing the continued triumph of the party and its principles. Yet, as Cobb had already begun to learn, this fairly straightforward philosophy could be confused and complicated by a variety of issues. Perhaps the most common of these occurred when two or more party loyalists with equally valid claims sought the same office.

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[21] W. C. Daniell to Howell Cobb, August 4, 1845, ibid.

[22] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, November 4, 1845, ibid.

Such circumstances required great caution by politicians who recognized all too clearly the ease with which political friends could become political enemies.[23]

Cobb's experiences with General Edward Harden of Savannah provided the young congressman with a thorough education in the intricacies and political hazards of patronage struggles. During his first session in Congress, Cobb helped secure an appointment for Harden as collector of customs at Savannah over the applications of one Mr. Bullock. Disgruntled, Bullock and his supporters launched a campaign to force Harden's removal. Cobb soon found himself "called upon to discharge an unpleasant duty, that of discriminating between the conflicting claims & wishes of friends." Sensing the hazards ahead, he declared his intention to avoid all "personal feelings & bickerings," and "to pursue a course which will at least meet with the approval of my own conscience." He then offered assurances that if the two rivals were seeking an open position his decision might well favor Bullock. Because the dispute involved the actual removal of Harden from an office he already held, however,

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[23] Ibid.; Howell Cobb to Edward Harden, April 24, 1845, Edward Harden Papers, Special Collections Library, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina (Hereafter: Harden Papers).

Cobb decided against Bullock in the absence of "sustained charges against [Harden] for official misconduct."[24]

Nevertheless, Cobb confided to Harden that he expected Bullock to continue the struggle. He instructed the older man to prepare his defenses carefully, but Harden failed to act on Cobb's advice. Consequently, he lost his position to Bullock shortly after Polk took office. In the aftermath of Harden's removal, Cobb did two things. He exchanged mutual assurances of good will with Bullock, offering the explanation that old family friendships and previous commitments had compelled his support for Harden. He also moved to convince Polk that Harden's removal was unjust, and to secure him a new post. He succeeded in swaying the president, and soon won Harden a bureaucratic job in Washington.[25]

Distribution of federal patronage closer to home also caused Cobb difficulty. When the Polk administration removed the Whig postmaster in Athens, a vigorous competition for the post among several prominent local Democrats erupted. Acting on advice from brother Tom, Cobb secured the position for William L. Mitchell. Mitchell rewarded Tom with appointment as his deputy. Mitchell's disappointed rivals demonstrated great bitterness towards the new postmaster and the Cobb

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[24] Howell Cobb to Edward Harden, December 14, 1844; January 8, 1845; January 28, 1845; January 6, 1846, Harden Papers.

[25] Ibid.

brothers. One angry Democrat denounced the older Cobb as a "monarch" determined to control all patronage in the Sixth District. Mitchell resigned his post after only five months. When he suggested that young Tom seek the job, Cobb apparently vetoed the idea. Alarmed by the strong reaction to Mitchell's original selection, he now insisted on a compromise candidate acceptable to everyone.[26]

Patronage at the state level proved just as treacherous. When Cobb arrived in Milledgeville, he encountered a host of relatives and friends seeking his assistance in securing jobs. Among those eagerly "hunkering" after office were his brother Tom and his brothers-in-law Judson Glenn and Williams Rutherford, Jr. A conflict emerged almost immediately. M. H. Gathright expressed "regret" to learn that he and Tom both sought the same appointment as secretary of the Georgia senate. Speaking bluntly, Gathright insisted "you must tell Tom that he is too much my junior to interfere in this matter." Besides, Gathright believed himself entitled to preference. "I am an old veteran in the ways of politics & have never yet received the first crown," he complained. Gathright's years of service notwithstanding, Cobb refused

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[26] Thomas Reade Rootes Cobb to Howell Cobb, December 2, 1844(?); December 18, 1844; June 5, 1845(?); Andrew Lamar to Howell Cobb, January 11, 1845; William L. Mitchell and Thomas Reade Rootes to Howell Cobb, December 14, 1844, Howell Cobb Papers; Athens Southern Banner, July 10, 1845; William B. McCash, Thomas R. R. Cobb (1823-1862) The Making of a Southern Nationalist (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1983), pp. 25-26.

to intervene in his favor. He loyally pressed Tom's cause with the legislature, and bought-off Gathright with a promise of assistance in securing a federal post. Tom won his prize without further opposition from Gathright.[27]

Mary Ann, fully cognizant of the nature of patronage politics, reacted strongly to the situation. She warned her husband that "since your family have become so aspiring I fear that you will have some difficulty in reconciling all constituents and making all believe that you are equally interested in furthering their desires and schemes." Two days later she returned to this theme with the observation that if all his relatives seeking positions secured them, there would be few family members "who will not feed upon the Treasury of the state or U.S." Asking "how will this sound among the people?", she shrewdly concluded, "you will have to manage your cards well, ere another congressional election rolls around."[28]

While in the state capital, Cobb did more than pursue political prizes for friends and relatives. He also began formulating plans for his own political future. Cobb and his closest supporters believed that advancement to the United States Senate represented the next logical step in his

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[27] M. H. Gathright to Howell Cobb, October 26, 1845; Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, November 3, 1845; November 6, 1845; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, November 4, 1845, Howell Cobb Papers.

[28] Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, November 3, 1845; November 6, 1845, ibid.

career. The state legislature bore responsibility for selecting Georgia's two senators, and as long as Whigs controlled state government, Cobb possessed no chance of success. Cobb men, looking to the elections of 1847, planned to push for the gubernatorial nomination of Cobb's close friend, John H. Lumpkin. Viewing the Fifth District congressman as a strong political candidate, they believed him capable of helping the Democrats regain control of the legislature. As Cobb's friend, they hoped he might sway the needed legislative votes to send Cobb to the Senate. In late November, after floating some trial balloons, James Jackson reported that "the idea of making Lumpkin Governor takes remarkably well." He reminded Cobb to make certain "Lumpkin reciprocates ... by exerting himself in your behalf for the advancement of your Senatorial aspirations." Regrettably for both Cobb and Lumpkin, there were a host of players in the political game. Each player possessed aspirations and allies, and each played to win. Neither Cobb nor Lumpkin ever won the plums for which they now planned.[29]

III

No matter how much Cobb desired to focus his attentions entirely on politics, he found it impossible to ignore pressing personal matters. Finances, especially, continued to plague him. In December, 1844, the family fortunes

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[29] James Jackson to Howell Cobb, November 29, 1845, ibid.

momentarily seemed to brighten. A relative, William H. Robinson of Jackson County, Florida, had died intestate. By law, Mary Ann and her brothers received a quarter of Robinson's estate.[30]

Initial reports indicated the property was extensive. Andrew Lamar assured Sarah Cobb it would pay every debt Cobb owed and make him "wealthy again." John Lamar visited the property and echoed his brother's appraisal. He estimated the Cobb-Lamar share at forty slaves, 500 acres of "good land," $2,500 of "good notes," and 250 head of cattle, hogs, and sheep. Dreams that this windfall might lift Cobb "out of bondage," however, soon evaporated. By February, 1845 Lamar -- for unexplained reasons -- reduced his estimate to thirty-five slaves, notes of questionable value, seven mules, one horse, 500 acres, and some cattle. After an additional visit to Florida, Lamar decided to use their newly acquired slaves to put in a crop on the inherited land. He explained that he had no need for the slaves in Georgia and "could not bear the idea of ... selling them to be separated from each other." Consequently, he hoped to sell the entire establishment at one time. Although the Robinson estate failed to free Cobb from his debts, Mary Ann's share did

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[30] John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, December 10, 1844; December 23, 1844; Sarah Rootes Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, December 11, 1845; Andrew Lamar to Howell Cobb, December 27, 1844, ibid.

become the cornerstone of a Lamar negotiated deal which eliminated a $7,380 Cobb debt.[31]

In one regard, at least, inheritance of the Robinson estate produced mixed blessings. As news of Cobb's good fortune spread, his creditors increased efforts to collect the money owed them. Some simply inquired if they could have any expectation of payment. Others, such as the state bank, pursued their money with greater persistence.[32]

Confronted with the state bank's attempts to recover an old debt now in judgement against him, Cobb responded with a candid appraisal of his finances and intentions. He conceded that his debts continued to be a major problem, but insisted "I have devoted my energies to the payment of my liabilities & have in ... the last few years paid off ... a very large amount of those debts." This success, he noted, had been accomplished partially by the sale of all his property "of any considerable value," but also by the regular appropriation of his income. This appropriation continued, he pointed out, even though "I have not been for several years in a situation where these debts could be collected by the process of law." Thus, he said, "I [have] continued &

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[31] John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, December 10, 1844; December 23, 1844; February 7, 1845; February 17, 1845; June 7, 1845; April 17, 1846; Sarah Rootes Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, December 11, 1845; Andrew Lamar to Howell Cobb, December 27, 1844, ibid.

[32] Ebenezer Newton to Howell Cobb, June 9, 1845; Howell Cobb to J. S. Thomas, October 20, 1846; J. S. Thomas to Howell Cobb, November 4, 1846, ibid.

still continue to pay these debts as rapidly as my means will permit." He assured the bank it would be paid at the earliest possible date, and observed that the elimination of his debts represented "an object more sincerely and anxiously sought for by myself than any creditor I have." The bank, acknowledging the sincerity of Cobb's efforts, suspended all collection efforts "for the present."[33]

Cobb's actions in private generally conformed to the picture he painted for the bank. In February, 1845, he repeated earlier instructions to use Mary Ann's plantation profits for the payment of debts. He expressed a desire to get $500 from the crop to defray family expenses, but insisted that Lamar ignore the request if it threatened to interfere with debt retirement. In a moment of depression, he confided to Mary Ann his profound desire for relief from his "onerous burden ... which has been pressing me to the ground and which ... costs me many bitter moments known only to myself and God."[34]

John Lamar labored as hard as Cobb to eliminate these debts. He devised a plan that would use scattered holdings belonging to Cobb and Mary Ann as the basis for deals to pay off creditors holding legal judgements. Lamar believed that

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[33] Howell Cobb to J. S. Thomas, October 20, 1846; J. S. Thomas to Howell Cobb, November 4, 1846, ibid.

[34] Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, November 17, 1845; February 12, 1845; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, May 13, 1845, ibid.

the tender of a "piece of land to each one with the addition of a small amount of ready money [would] ... make the offer palatable -- like putting a thin coating of butter over a dry piece of bread to make it go down easier." By such means, he predicted, "we can manage to make the scattered lands and houses help you out of 'the slough' ... or so nearly out, that you can wade out with a few crops." It is impossible to measure the extent to which Lamar's plan worked, but the arrangement based on the inherited Florida property which retired the $7,380 debt also included a lot in Athens and a note Cobb held worth $1,400. One thing is certain, however, Lamar's plan did not come close to wiping out Cobb's debts. By late 1846, he still owed $5,321 in unsatisfied judgements and nearly $8,000 in outstanding notes.[35]

Lamar believed the best solution to Cobb's indebtedness lay in expanding cotton production by buying more land. Pursuing this policy, he purchased a 900 acre plantation adjoining the Hurricane for $1,800. Additionally, he became particularly interested in buying land in southwest Georgia. During the mid-1840s, he purchased several thousand acres in Sumter County for himself, and urged Cobb to make similar purchases in Mary Ann's name. When describing a soon to be available Sumter County plantation, Lamar assured him that "if we could only raise the wind to buy it ... you would soon

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[35] John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, February 5, 1846; April 17, 1846; Digest of Debts, November 1, 1846, ibid.

be out of debt & able to live like a prince." Although Cobb's financial limitations delayed the purchase of acreage in Sumter County, the area around Americus eventually became the focus of extensive Cobb-Lamar holdings.[36]

On but one point did Cobb stand determined to breathe defiance at his creditors. Mary Ann made no secret of the distress which the loss of her home had caused. Cobb was determined to remove this sore point, and brother John fully endorsed the plan. Vowing that his sister "shall have [a house] certain," he advised Cobb to begin pricing lots of at least four acres. Lamar himself drew up plans for a new house and received construction estimates of around $2,000, not including plastering. While in the process of seeking a lot on which to build, Cobb negotiated the purchase of "a neat cottage house with six rooms ... & the necessary outbuildings all in very neat Yankee order." The agreement included a four acre lot. In exchange, Cobb agreed to pay $650 plus a house and lot belonging to Andrew Lamar. Andrew valued his property at $1,300, but agreed to accept as payment Cobb's share of some slaves owned jointly by Cobb and the Lamar brothers. It fell to John Lamar to raise the $650 in cash. Cobb and Mary Ann both expressed hope that Lamar would agree to the arrangement, but Cobb added that should

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[36] John B. Lamar to Mary Ann Cobb, March 17, 1845; John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, June 21, 1846; Contract Between John B. Lamar and the Estate of Ezekiel Harris, June 16, 1845, ibid.

Lamar decline to accept the arrangement, he intended to close the deal "myself & run the risque of encountering my creditors." He need not have worried. Lamar eagerly accepted the plan. Mary Ann could rest assured that when she next returned from Washington, it would be to a home of her own.[37]

IV

In late November, 1845, Cobb, Mary Ann, and their youngest boys, again headed north to Washington. As before, John A. and Lamar remained under the care of Cobb's parents. Upon arriving, Cobb promptly resumed his congressional duties. One thing quickly became apparent -- he now felt very much at ease with the rhythm of House activities and eagerly sought an ever increasing role in shaping the flow of congressional business. He manifested his determination in the opening days of the first session of the Twenty-Ninth Congress by introducing and successfully defending a resolution to alter the established procedure of selecting members' seats on the floor. Throughout this and subsequent sessions, Cobb frequently made precise use of House rules and parliamentary procedures to shape the nature of debates. Besides his "never-failing good temper [and] intuitive

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[37] John B. Lamar to Mary Ann Cobb, May 11, 1845; June 7, 1845; June 17, 1845; Contract Between Watkins Baynor and Howell Cobb, August 16, 1845; Howell Cobb to John Lamar, August 23, 1845; Mary Ann Cobb to John B. Lamar, September 2, 1845; John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, September 5, 1845, ibid.

knowledge of men and things," a Democratic observer attributed his increasing importance to "an acquaintance with previous decisions upon mooted parliamentary rules and regulations, far superior to those of any gentleman who has been a member of the House in the last four years." The commentator viewed Cobb's rise as all the more impressive because he "is the first, who, without previous service in a state legislature, or long experience in [Congress], has suddenly ... been elevated to the leadership of a party in the House." Even more remarkable, he exclaimed, Cobb's knowledge of the intricacies of parliamentary procedures "has been acquired from books rather than experience."[38]

A clear sign of Cobb's increasing status in the House came when the Speaker issued committee assignments. He relieved Cobb of burdensome duties with the Committees of Mileage and Claims, and appointed him to the more prestigious Committee on Foreign Affairs. In light of President Polk's first message to Congress this committee was destined to be one of the most important in the House. The annexation of Texas had been the focus of the Democratic national convention in 1844. Having secured a pro-Texas candidate with the nomination of James K. Polk, the party sought sectional balance by combining their demand for Texas with a call for the occupation of all of Oregon. Although John

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[38] Congressional Globe, Twenty-Eighth Congress, Second Session, pp. 22-23; United States Magazine, September, 1849, p. 268.

Tyler had stolen Polk's thunder by acquiring Texas before leaving office, Polk wasted no time in moving to establish American control over Oregon and thus redeem party pledges to the North and Northwest. Since 1818 the United States had extended offers to divide the territory along the 49° line, but without success. Polk made a similar offer to the British. When they refused, he reverted to demands for all of Oregon and requested congressional authority to notify Britain of American intentions to end joint occupation. It fell to the Committee on Foreign Affairs to prepare the notification resolution.[39]

Even as the committee worked to hammer out the requested resolution, opposition to Polk's Oregon policy began to coalesce. Composed mainly of Whigs and Calhounites, the opponents feared that notification might result in a war with Great Britain. Polk, however, had no intention of starting a war with Britain. He merely intended his request for notification and talk of occupying all of Oregon as negotiating ploys to force British acquiescence to his earlier offer. Unfortunately, the president chose to keep his strategy secret from both friend and foe in Congress. Consequently, he unnecessarily frightened his opponents and, more embarrassingly, left his friends advocating false

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[39] John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, January 5, 1846, Howell Cobb Papers; Charles Sellers, James K. Polk, Continentalist, 1843-1846 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), pp. 98-100, 244, 249-250, 359.

positions. An indication of this came when Illinois Democrat Stephen A. Douglas, an ardent supporter of the "54°-40' or fight!" position, proclaimed on the floor of the House that the Democratic party stood "solemnly pledged, at the Baltimore convention, by a unanimous resolution ... to stand by 54°40', never yield one inch." Should Polk retreat from this position, Douglas declared, he would be guilty of a "treasonable ... violation of the pledges given by the Democratic party to the American people."[40]

Like Douglas, Cobb believed Polk truly intended to take all Oregon even if it meant war, and he warmly endorsed this position. He did so despite the reception of mixed signals from Georgia. George D. Phillips assured him of the firm support of the people in the mountain counties of the Sixth District. Noting that "the President's Message has set all our mountain folks to thinking and talking," he reported, "I heard a crowd on Christmas, not one of whom knew on which side of the Rocky Mountains Oregon was, swear they would support and fight for Polk all over the world." Yet Phillips felt strong personal reservations. Expressing regret that Oregon "is not under instead of on the Pacific," he voiced doubt that either the United States or Britain had pursued

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[40] Sellers, James K. Polk, Continentalist, pp. 244, 249-250, 359; John C. Calhoun to Thomas G. Clemson, December 13, 1845, in J. Franklin Jameson, ed., Correspondence of John C. Calhoun (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1900), p. 64; Congressional Globe, Twenty-Ninth Congress, First Session, p. 497.

"the most politic course." He felt certain that if negotiations could be reopened a compromise along the 49° line would result. Still, believing neither country willing to make the first move, he advised Cobb to push for increases in American military forces.[41]

Brother John shared similar doubts. While conceding that his feelings might be "selfish & sectional," Lamar preferred to see Oregon become the territory of "his Satanic majesty" rather than see it precipitate the country into a war. He assured his brother-in-law that the annexation of Texas had never been intended as a signal that everyone wanted to take the entire continent. Such a policy, he warned, would quickly pervert the United States into "what nature never designed us for -- a warlike republic." Lamar believed expansion should be a natural process whereby Americans filled up adjacent territories, established democratic institutions, and then sought admission to the Union. If territory could only be acquired by war, he urged, then leave it alone.[42]

Despite such admonitions, Cobb remained firm in his determination to back what he believed to be the president's policy -- a policy he viewed as correct both for the country

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[41] George D. Phillips to Howell Cobb, December 30, 1845, Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, pp. 69-71.

[42] John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, January 5, 1846, Howell Cobb Papers.

and the Democrats. In early January, he explained his position in a speech before the House. Perhaps as a nod to Lamar's sensibilities, Cobb opened with expressions of regret that he differed "with many of my political friends from the section of the country from which I [come], and ... with a distinguished Southern statesman [John C. Calhoun] -- a man whose voice is generally considered expressive of the feelings of the southern portion of the country." Nevertheless, he did not owe his first loyalty to the statesman and patriot from South Carolina. Rather, he owed first loyalty "to myself and my constituents." This loyalty, he asserted, required him "to disregard every consideration save that of the honor and the interest of the country." Ultimately, he must answer for his actions to his constituents; never to John C. Calhoun.[43]

Following these preliminary remarks, Cobb turned to the major themes of his address. American claims "to the whole of the Oregon Territory," he asserted, were "clear and unquestionable." Moreover, no one doubted "the importance of this territory to our Government and our people -- whether it is considered in reference to agriculture, to manufactures, or to commerce." In light of these two facts, he maintained, those who attempted to define Oregon as a "western question" fundamentally misunderstood the issues.

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[43] Congressional Globe, Twenty-Ninth Congress, First Session, p. 164.

Oregon represented "a national question, side by side with that important national question, the annexation of Texas, which has already received the sanction of this Government." For many years the United States had sought a boundary definition in Oregon. In pursuit of that goal, the Americans had repeatedly offered a compromise settlement, but to no avail. Now, as a result of British intransigence, the Oregon question had reached the point of "crisis." If Congress failed to sustain the president, then Britain and the rest of the world must conclude that Americans secretly doubted the validity of their claims.[44]

With this outline of his general position, Cobb next directed his remarks to a point-by-point rebuttal of the arguments for not giving Britain notice. Most opponents of immediate action, he explained, believed the issue might be more favorably settled at some indefinite point in the future. They warned against "rash action." For years, he observed, proponents of delay had avoided congressional action by arguing that ongoing negotiations over Oregon would be harmed by intrusive legislation. They had suggested, he noted, that Britain's primary interest in the region derived from the fur trade. Once the territory had been trapped out, they reasoned, Britain would be more willing to relinquish its claims. Those who urged continued delay maintained that government inaction would strengthen American claims. By

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[44] Ibid.

delaying notice, he explained, they held that "our emigration will go there, and, by that means ... the country will be taken possession of, and our title ... quietly settled." Opponents of notification reinforced their position by warning that the country was militarily unprepared for war.[45]

Cobb lamented that opponents of giving notice had surrendered to "the disposition of our nature to postpone 'the evil day.'" Forceful assertions of American claims to Oregon had been delayed since 1818. What, he demanded, had been gained by restraint? In ongoing negotiations, American presidents had repeatedly offered compromise settlements only to meet firm British rejections. As to the fur trade, all concerned acknowledged the decline of trapping in Oregon. Yet, he reminded the House, the British still refused all compromise offers. The executive branch had now conceded the futility of pressing further negotiations, and requested the public support of Congress for more strenuous efforts. How, he inquired, could anyone fairly accuse the president or Congress of acting "rashly?"[46]

Even more important, Cobb reasoned, the American government owed a moral obligation to its citizens living in Oregon. He depicted these brave settlers as risking everything in pursuit of new and permanent homes. They had undertaken this arduous endeavor because of an implied

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[45] Ibid., pp. 164-165.

[46] Ibid., pp. 165-166.

government promise to assert quickly its authority over the territory. The fulfillment of this promise, he insisted, represented the only way they could secure effective titles to their homes and the protection of American laws. Let Congress defer the fulfillment of this promise until the indefinite future, he warned, and the flow of settlers would cease. Cobb maintained that for emigration to continue, settlers must carry with them the "confidence that they are on ground consecrated to American freedom, and which shall never cease to be made prosperous and happy by the prevalence of republican principles."[47]

In his speech, Cobb made no attempt to discount the risks inherent in giving notice. He admitted that war with Britain might result, but he did not believe war inevitable. In honesty, however, he could not "go with those who fearlessly assert that there is no danger." Nevertheless, he saw no honorable alternative to notification. "The course ... I propose is the one called for by the national faith and honor of my country," he declared. "If peace be the result, I shall gladly welcome it. If war be the consequence we must meet it. It is a crisis not to be avoided ... but ... met with boldness, firmness, and decision."[48]

Moreover, Cobb denied that inadequate military preparations provided a valid basis for congressional

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[47] Ibid.

[48] Ibid., pp. 166-167.

inaction. Americans traditionally rejected the maintenance of "a standing army for the protection of the rights of the people." Instead, they relied upon "citizen-soldiers" who turned out for service when needed and then went home. Never before, he observed, had the nation created a large standing army "as preparatory to some future emergency." Unless the present Congress stood ready to override long established traditions, he asserted, anticipatory military preparations represented an impossibility, and hence a permanent excuse for avoiding responsibility.[49]

Prepared or not, Cobb admitted no doubts as to the outcome of any potential war with Britain. He proclaimed that "whenever this Government shall be engaged in a conflict of this kind ... peace will never be declared upon terms leaving one foot of territory which has ever been consecrated to American freedom ... to be profaned by monarchial or despotic principles."[50]

In concluding, Cobb pleaded with his colleagues to face their obligations without flinching. He called on them to act with courage and either vote the notice resolution up or down. Such action embodied nothing less than their duty. He warned against attempts to shirk this responsibility. "Let us have no evading of this question," he challenged, "If

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[49] Ibid.

[50] Ibid.

we believe the notice ought to be given, let us so declare by our actions."[51]

Having clearly enunciated his own position regarding the Oregon question, Cobb continued to monitor the debate as it developed both in Washington and Georgia. Although the House passed a bill embodying the resolution the 54°-40' men desired, the Senate version included a call for renewed negotiations and left the notification decision to the president's discretion. Cobb immediately denounced the Senate's resolution for being "in a most objectionable form," and accused the upper house of "evad[ing] the responsibility which I believe Congress ought to assume." He bitterly predicted that the House would yield to the will of the Senate and enact the offensive version of the legislation. Nevertheless, he defiantly vowed to "vote against [it] to the end of the chapter." Cobb held true to his vow. When the resolution came to a vote, he was the only Georgia delegate voting in opposition. This effort proved futile and the "cowardly" act passed by overwhelming majorities in both Houses.[52]

Cobb's efforts in the 54°-40' cause drew mixed reviews from his constituents. Initial reactions to his speech generally proved positive. Chase admitted that prior to

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[51] Ibid., p. 167.

[52] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, April 3, 1846; April 18, 1846; James Jackson to Howell Cobb, May 7, 1846, Howell Cobb Papers.

reading Cobb's remarks he had doubted the validity of American claims. The speech, however, inspired him to do more research, and he now believed American demands justified. Besides, the editor reasoned, if war must come, better it come with Polk in office. Who could predict the quality of his successor? James Jackson approved the speech heartily "from beginning to end," while W. H. Jackson assured the representative that the people "are always in favor of bold measures and bold men." Brother Tom described the speech as "decidedly the best you have delivered in Congress." Even Henry L. Benning, an increasingly strident advocate of extreme southern rights, offered encouragement. He wrote, "I have just finished your speech upon the '<u>notice</u>.' It is good. Fear not, go ahead."[53]

Yet beneath these reassuring words flowed obvious currents of doubt. At first, James Jackson had confidently asserted that "the Democracy of this part of Georgia will go heart & hand for the notice ... & the occupation of Oregon." He had attributed all opposition to Cobb's position as the work of a "batch of Calhounite sectional Democrats." Within a matter of weeks, however, he reported a change in the popular view. While still offering assurances of unflinching public support, he confessed that "the news has been ... so

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[53] Albon Chase to Howell Cobb, January 17, 1846; James Jackson to Howell Cobb, January 19, 1846; W. H. Jackson to Howell Cobb, January 26, 1846; Thomas Reade Rootes Cobb to Howell Cobb, January 29, 1846; Henry L. Benning to Howell Cobb, January 15, 1846, <u>ibid</u>.

pacific from England, that very little interest has been manifested on the subject of late -- the general opinion being that the whole matter will be amicably adjusted upon the line of 49°." Tom Cobb echoed Jackson's analysis. He warned his brother that "the decided wish of the people ... is for peace." Expressing doubt that the people fully understood the problem, his younger brother observed, "the hope is on everyone's lips that war may not be the final issue." Even Sarah Cobb voiced an opinion. She urged Mary Ann to inform Cobb that "I was much pleased with his speech. All I object to is I fear ... if the notice is given war will follow & perhaps he and my other son may be called upon to go, and it would be the hardest trial to me that ever I was yet called upon to suffer."[54]

Others spoke more bluntly. With heavy sarcasm, J. R. Stanford pronounced the speech a good one which "danced 'the populorum jig.'" Stanford, however, doubted that the "Pop. jig" really favored war. Implying that Cobb had based his position on a false perception of public will, Stanford claimed the moral high ground by insisting that the diplomatic correspondence regarding Oregon did not support American claims. Without elaborating, he warned that should the United States obtain and settle Oregon, "<u>you may set it down that just Eleven years & 8 months from that time, the</u>

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[54] James Jackson to Howell Cobb, January 19, 1846; March 22, 1846; Thomas Reade Rootes Cobb, January 29, 1846; Sarah Rootes Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, January 22, 1846, <u>ibid</u>.

Potomac will be the dividing line between two great Republics!!!" Brother John stood in direct opposition to Cobb's position. He credited Cobb with a directness and honesty "not common among public men," but declared, "the gentleman is too ultra for my notions, in this as in many other political ideas. He belongs to the 'progressive Democracy,' I can't say I do."[55]

Despite his personal opposition, Lamar did not believe Cobb's Oregon stance posed any serious treat to his brother-in-law's political future. Men, he said, "can bear a difference of opinion, when it is urged by a conviction of the speakers mind, and with an honesty that disdains evasion." Some Cobb supporters doubted Lamar's confident claim. William H. Hull warned his congressman that most voters in the Sixth District favored a compromise at 49°-40', and would be positively hostile to anyone who opposed such a settlement. James Jackson also voiced concern. He conceded that Cobb's vote against the Oregon resolution marked the only way he could be consistent with his publicly held views, but grimly predicted that the vote would provide a rallying point for his opponents.[56]

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[55] J. R. Stanford to Howell Cobb, January 28, 1846; John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, April 26, 1846, ibid.

[56] John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, April 26, 1846; William H. Hull to Howell Cobb, May 1, 1846; James Jackson to Howell Cobb, May 7, 1846, ibid.

Seeing the division within Democratic ranks, local Whigs wasted no time in attempting to make Jackson's prediction a reality. The Southern Whig spearheaded the opposition effort. A correspondent for the Whig, writing under the pseudonym "Pax" and claiming to be a friend of Cobb's, criticized the representative as a thoughtless warmonger. Referring to Cobb's January speech and to supplemental remarks he had made on April 11, "Pax" charged that by demanding all of Oregon "clear up to the Russian domain" Cobb had urged the country to pursue a course certain to "render war inevitable." This irresponsible position, "Pax" observed, forced everyone to ask "does Mr. Cobb care nothing about it? Is he willing to see thousands slain and much treasure expended about a region which it is the province of negotiation to settle?" If this were so -- and such was clearly the case according to "Pax" -- "he must be very unfitted to act the part of a statesman; and must characteristically belong rather to the age of Rome ... than to Christian America."[57]

In the Whig's editorial columns, Philip Clayton attempted to move the Oregon issue into the arena of the politics of slavery. The true issue, Clayton trumpeted, involved nothing less that the long-term security of the South and slavery. The addition of Oregon to the United States could but serve the interests and enhance the strength

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[57] Athens Southern Whig, April 30, 1846.

of abolitionism. Fortunately, he rejoiced, southern Whigs and some southern Democrats manfully had refused "to sell the South to the Abolitionists." Cobb and other Georgia Democrats who persisted in Polk's reckless policy, however, had, as far as they could do it, "sold their state to make SILAS WRIGHT, a Northern Anti-Slavery man, President." These traitors, Clayton declared, must remember that "they were elected by the people, and to the people they must answer." For the moment, Clayton contented himself by noting that "we record their action upon the question, by which it will be seen that COBB, ... [John Quincy] ADAMS and the rest of the Abolitionists are 'hail-fellows, well met,' upon the question in which the rights of the Southern slaveholders are deeply involved."[58]

That he should be attacked in the columns of the Whig did not surprise Cobb, but he found the ambivalence and open opposition of relatives and supporters extremely frustrating. Like many Democrats from the North and Northwest, he believed the Democratic platform of 1844 included a solemn pact -- Texas for the South, Oregon for the North. Because northern Democrats had accepted the political risks of supporting the South's desire for Texas, Cobb now stood firmly committed that southern Democrats must reciprocate on Oregon, whatever the risks of war or unpopularity. Otherwise, the bonds of the national party structure would be weakened and might

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[58] Ibid., February 19, 1846.

suffer permanent damage. For Cobb, this prospect represented far more than a purely political concern. He entertained no doubt that the preservation of the Democratic party embodied the best hope for maintaining the Union. Thus, while a southern Whig leader such as Robert Toombs might declare with impunity that "I don't want a foot of Oregon ... especially without 'niggers,'" Cobb could but cringe when southern Democrats voiced similar sentiments.[59]

Cobb made no effort to conceal his disgust. Writing to brother Tom, he declared, "if I cannot be sustained before the people, when in every issue with them, I am found on the side of my country, then I am willing to be sacrificed." Bitterly noting that "western men & northern democrats have been deeply censured in the South in common with myself about Oregon, & they were charged with being influenced by selfish motives in their course about that western measure," he reminded Tom of the gallant course of northern Democrats regarding the Texas issue. When viewed in that light, he said, "let every man who has indulged in this feeling of censure blush with shame & ... let southern democrats who would have sacrificed Oregon consider with self-mortification the example of these western men about Texas & for the future

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[59] Howell Cobb to Thomas Reade Rootes Cobb, May 12, 1846, Howell Cobb Papers; Robert Toombs to George W. Crawford, February 6, 1846, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, pp. 72-75.

emulate this example rather than censure their devotion to the rights, the whole rights of their whole country."[60]

Cobb vented his disappointment in more candid terms to Mary Ann. He credited her with providing better political information about the situation at home than any of his other correspondents. Moreover, he offered assurances that he placed greater reliance on her efforts to protect his interests than those of his more opportunistic friends. He lamented that while his enemies took sufficient interest in him to make attacks in the newspapers, his supposed friends did not feel enough concern to refute Whig charges and innuendos. Vowing to give the entire matter the attention it deserved when he returned to Athens, he concluded, "I defy the combined efforts of open enemies and pretended friends."[61]

Cobb's complaints did succeed in drawing a response from his friends. Albon Chase attempted to soothe Cobb's anger. Noting that "you are in no very amiable humor with some of us ... for want of zeal and interest in ... things ... you have much at heart," Chase urged Cobb to recall that while he stood at the center of the storm in Washington, "we are but lookers on, and keep quite cool." Declaring himself in agreement with Cobb on virtually every political issue, he

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[60] Howell Cobb to Thomas Reade Rootes Cobb, May 12, 1846, Howell Cobb Papers.

[61] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, May 6, 1846, ibid.

simply asserted that in nearly every instance he preferred compromise over territorial disputes to war. Speaking specifically to Cobb's complaints, Chase wrote, "you seem to think I have not defended you as I ought. I certainly have not condemned your course, and I have defended all the positions you have taken in Congress. This no other editor in Georgia has done. I really have no fault to find with any of your votes, though I think I should have given mine for the notice as it finally passed .... That I have not defended you, is simply because you have not been attacked." Cobb justifiably might have suggested that the Banner editor read the columns of the Whig more closely.[62]

Mary Ann echoed her husband's frustration. While she welcomed Cobb's "free candid expression of feeling and sentiment" for making her "feel the reality that we are one bone and one flesh," she could but wish "that I had the judgement and utility -- together with an intimate knowledge of the politics of the day, to qualify me for a correspondent of a newspaper." Were such the case, "I dare say their [sic] would not be many days elapse ere you should stand vindicated before your country, but alas I am the weaker vessel -- and can only see what could or should be done -- and content myself with wishing."[63]

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[62] Albon Chase to Howell Cobb, May 20, 1846, ibid.

[63] Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, May 12, 1846; May 18, 1846, ibid.

She shared Cobb's resentment towards his political associates. Recalling the times he had risked his own political interests for theirs, she grumbled, "and now when it is necessary for one or two to take a bold stance for you -- [they] are mute as Egyptian mummies." Under the circumstances, she suggested that his best response might be "to grow as selfish as your pretended friends." Nevertheless, she sought to soothe Cobb's ire on one point. Mary Ann realized that her husband and her brother differed markedly on the Oregon issue. Fearful that a permanent split between the two might result, she worked to avoid this by assuring Cobb that "I am certain ... if brother John was one of your constituents you could scarcely ever say that you were unvindicated."[64]

One group, however, endorsed Cobb's stance without reservation. Northern Democrats welcomed the young Georgian's principled stance upon the sectional agreements which made the national Democratic structure possible. One Pennsylvania newspaper described his activities as the "able, energetic, ... eloquent and patriotic" efforts of "a sound statesman and a warm-hearted American." Cobb received requests for copies of his Oregon speech from Democrats in several northern states. Luke Baker, a correspondent from New Hampshire, wrote that Cobb's Oregon speech met "the entire approbation of the people of the North." Baker complained

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[64] Ibid.

that northern Democrats had "willingly ... submitted to the two thirds rule; [and] swallowed the black pill of Texas, hoping to get an healthy action on Oregon," only to find that "some of your southern brethren are not willing to abide by the golden rule." He urged Cobb not to relent in his efforts to correct this injustice. Yet even as the Oregon debate continued, events on the nation's border with Mexico conspired to push Oregon into a secondary role.[65]

V

Even as Cobb defended his Oregon stance and labored to convert his chief lieutenants to the cause, he also informed them of the outbreak of war with Mexico. That conflict, arising from President Polk's determination to press American expansion on to the Pacific and Mexico's stubborn refusal to accept the annexation of Texas, hastened the United States along its path to civil war. Although Cobb did not anticipate the consequences of the Mexican War, he nevertheless viewed its early stages with considerable ambivalence.[66]

Cobb's ambivalence stemmed in part from political concerns. Remembering the widespread support expressed in Georgia for John C. Calhoun's opposition to Polk's demand for

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[65] York Gazette, cited in Athens Southern Banner, January 27, 1846; Luke Baker to Howell Cobb, February 19, 1846, Howell Cobb Papers.

[66] Howell Cobb to Thomas Reade Rootes Cobb, May 12, 1846, Howell Cobb Papers.

Oregon notification, Cobb realized that his vote for the declaration of war again placed him at odds with the South Carolinian. He noted that on both issues Calhoun had openly thrown his weight to the Whigs and thus enhanced the strength of opposition to administration policies. He could only wonder if "I [am] doomed to be censured, unvindicated, for my course now, as was my lot about Oregon. Will the blind and infatuated followers of Mr Calhoun again condemn a representative because ... he has been compelled to array himself in opposition to the great southern statesman[?]" On one point, however, Cobb entertained no doubt: either Calhoun's Democratic admirers must abandon their hero or follow him into a traitorous alliance with the Whigs. Should Calhoun Democrats and Whigs forge such an unholy combination within his district, he vowed that they "shall meet with no quarter at my hands. I will fight them to the death."[67]

The congressman's mixed emotions about the war also included moral qualms. When writing to Mary Ann, he confided, "I confess I do not feel so warlike myself .... The reflection that we are so eager to avenge ourselves upon this poor, imbecile, self distracted province and at the same time sacrifice rights more clear and unquestionable, to appease the threatened anger of her Britannic Majesty is to me humiliating in the extreme." Yet his belief that the United States could not long escape war with Great Britain tempered

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[67] Ibid.

his shame. He reported a growing impression "upon the public mind" in Washington that "this war with Mexico will render our negotiations with England ... more doubtful of a peaceful termination, as it is thought that English policy will be found to write its interest with Mexican arms." Thus, he concluded with a certain grim satisfaction, "we may, after all the miserable pandering of American legislation to British arrogance, find ourselves engaged in war with England before the twelve months of notice has expired."[68]

Cobb confessed that he did not view the prospect of war with Britain as being entirely negative. He did not believe Britain would refrain from meddling in American interests. Consequently, he concluded, "we shall be compelled to give them a thrashing ... before many years." Cobb held more than a strategic interest in this issue. He noted that "as all my children are likely to be boys & of course have the fighting of the country, I prefer to do the fighting myself & leave them a more peaceful legacy."[69]

In keeping with his expression of willingness "to do the fighting myself," Cobb seriously considered leaving Congress to take a post in the field. He delegated the responsibility for securing him a suitable position to Mary Ann and brother Tom. Reporting that a nine hundred man volunteer regiment

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[68] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, May 16, 1846; May 18, 1846, ibid.

[69] Ibid.

was to be raised in Georgia for service in Mexico, he avowed "I should be extremely delighted to go with it." He viewed his situation as being somewhat awkward, and urged that Tom manage the "delicate duty ... so as to induce the volunteers to tender me with some command." He observed that "it would not answer for me to seek it, but if it could be voluntarily tendered to me [it] would give me more than sincere pleasure to accept it ... [but] I must impress ... the importance of keeping this suggestion profoundly secret."[70]

Cobb explained his willingness to abandon the halls of government for the field of battle in terms very similar to those used in the Phi Kappa debates of his college days. He wrote to Mary Ann that he felt "bound in conscience" to fight because of an honest conviction that "we are passing through a great crisis in our country." This crisis, he declared, imposed "an imperative duty resting upon me ... to be at my post, to render that country the most valuable service in my power." He perceived the struggle with Mexico -- and the anticipated conflict with Britain -- as part of America's mission to enlighten the entire world to the beauties and responsibilities of liberty. Hence he saw a "great necessity ... [in] so conducting it, that a moral effect may be produced upon the whole civilized world evidencing to them that the American people from the highest to the lowest, are

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[70] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, May 16, 1846, ibid.

at all times ready and willing to do their country's bidding in the hour of her trial & dangers."[71]

Ultimately, Cobb's hopes for a military career failed to bear fruit. Tom informed his brother that the organization of an infantry company in Clarke County appeared unlikely because the governor had requested that the existing county cavalry unit volunteer for service. Should that company comply, its present officers would go with it. Still, Tom held out hope that he might be able to secure Cobb a lieutenancy in the cavalry or a similar rank in a proposed volunteer brigade.[72]

While offering this discouraging analysis, Tom urged his brother to forsake his military aspirations and remain in Congress. Convinced that Cobb's anger over his friends' reaction to the Oregon issue underlay his plans, Tom assured him that "your position in your district was never more firm." He acknowledged that Cobb's Oregon position had aroused some opposition, but added that the congressman had wronged his friends when he accused them of leaving him "unvindicated." Instead, Tom argued, "the feeling here would not authorize the denouncing of those who differed from you -- & had such a course been pursued by your friends the inevitable consequence would have been an organized

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[71] Ibid.

[72] Thomas Reade Rootes Cobb to Howell Cobb, May 21, 1846, ibid.

opposition to you." As a result of the Cobbites' subtle strategy, he suggested, "with the mass -- your course never raised a suspicion -- & any attempt at democratic opposition would have been a perfect failure."[73]

Others echoed Tom's pleas that Cobb give up plans for military service. John Lamar denounced the entire idea as irresponsible regarding both his family and his constituency. Cobb, he warned, must abandon his "Quixotic" concept of honor and duty. No one expected him to seek out the hazards of the battlefield. Mary Ann also appealed to her husband. She informed him that his plans had made her very nervous. She acknowledged that "it is my duty to submit my private feelings and comfort to the dictates of your better judgement," but quickly added, "still nature will overcome the strongest resolutions -- and I can but feel ... that of all the trials that have fallen to my married lot, this will be the severest."[74]

Cobb welcomed Tom's analysis of his great popularity at home, and admitted that perhaps he had overreacted in his complaints that his friends had failed to defend his course. He also sincerely regretted the distress that his proposed course had caused Mary Ann. He offered assurances that "the motive which has induced my conduct in the matter is not a

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[73] Ibid.

[74] John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, June 8, 1846; Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, May 21, 1846, ibid.

mere desire ... to go to war for popular effect, as you & Tom both seen to think. It was not apprehension that my popularity would suffer from the want of such a prop." Instead, he declared, "the motives which actuated me were of a higher & purer character." His votes and actions as a congressman had helped bring on the war. He now believed it wrong to leave the fighting, "which I was instrumental in getting up," to his constituents.[75]

Despite the firmness with which Cobb defended his plans, he simultaneously conceded that they seemed unlikely to succeed. He doubted that the government would request any volunteer units from Georgia for the foreseeable future. Moreover, he believed a mere lieutenancy too insignificant a post for a man of his social and political prominence. He maintained that "unless I can get the command of a company, I would prefer to go in the ranks." Yet the early progress of the war apparently rendered even this choice doubtful. Within weeks of reporting the outbreak of war, Cobb predicted a speedy conclusion to the contest, and observed that those units not already in the field would probably see no action. Obviously uneasy over his role in the war effort, he took some consolation from the suggestion that "those who volunteered but had [seen] no action deserved the same credit as those who fought, for all had been prepared to do their

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[75] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, May 24, 1846; May, 1846, ibid.

duty." Although the war dragged on for another two years, Cobb made no further mention of seeking a military position.[76]

VI

Having decided not to join the army, Cobb again focused on the political arena. His immediate task involved chairing the House during debates over new tariff legislation. President Polk had entered the White House determined to secure a reduction in tariff rates. Polk selected Cobb to supervise the administration effort. The president probably hoped to soothe any ill-feelings that Cobb might harbor over the impending compromise with Great Britain on the Oregon question. He might also have desired to reward the young Georgian for his vigorous -- if misguided -- defense of the administration's publicly stated policy. One thing, however, is certain. The tariff represented an issue of great importance to Polk. He would not have turned responsibility for directing the debate to anyone lacking a thorough knowledge of House rules and the skill to implement them in the administration's favor. Besides the prerequisite parliamentary skills, Cobb also possessed two other attributes which made him a logical political choice to chair the tariff reduction debate. He firmly opposed protective tariffs, but his unconcealed sensitivity to the concerns of

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[76] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, May, 1846; May 30, 1846, ibid.

northern Democrats could enable the administration to hold votes it might otherwise lose.[77]

Cobb undertook this task without apparent relish. While he welcomed the president's recognition, he doubted the chances for success. He had accepted the certainty of compromise in Oregon at the 49° line with "much ... disappointment," but with hope that "we shall be benefitted by the result so far as popularity & public confidence is concerned." Nevertheless, he feared the impact of Oregon on the tariff issue. Noting that "many indulge a strong hope ... that we shall be able to pass such a bill as will give satisfaction to the country," he reluctantly confessed "I am not so sanguine myself." He laid responsibility for this unfortunate situation at the feet of southern Democrats. Their actions on Oregon, he said, "[have] had the effect of alienating the good feelings of many of our northern and western democrats and thereby rendering the harmonious and united action of the party more difficult than it would have been had all the South stood square up upon that great question as some of us did."[78]

Although Cobb feared the long term consequences of the emerging sectional divisions within Democratic ranks, he

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[77] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, June 14, 1846, ibid.; Robert W. Johannsen, Stephen A. Douglas (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), pp. 181-183.

[78] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, June 4, 1846; June 14, 1846, Howell Cobb Papers.

accepted the challenge of guiding the important legislation through the House. He did so out of loyalty to the president and the Democratic party, but also because of his sincere ideological opposition to the protective aspects of the existing tariff. Only weeks before the tariff debate began, Cobb had written a description of a "great [commercial] fair" being held in Washington. Observing that the event promised to be "a most brilliant affair," he declared that the best result of the exposition would be that "the truth will now be manifested ... that these 'Lords of the loom' no longer need the protective care of the government to foster their interest by unjust exactions from the laboring millions. One thing is certain [,] our poor farmers have not the surplus capitol [sic] to invest in such displays."[79]

Cobb found little pleasure in his responsibilities as chairman. He quickly discovered that his expanded role in the House completely disrupted his usual schedule. He reported to Mary Ann that "I have just come down from the chair in the Hall where I have been presiding for nine consecutive hours, with a few moments respite ... 'to take a hasty plate of soup.'" He added that he must suffer through several more equally gruelling days before surrendering "my present honors, which I am now wearing at the heavy sacrifice of my comfort & feelings." Worse than the long hours in the House, he grumbled, was the "annoyance"

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[79] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, May 18, 1846, ibid.

arising from the press of visitors now arriving at his room nightly. Unable to meet with Cobb during the day, anyone with routine business had no alternative but to seek him out after hours. As if intentionally designed to add to his burden, the volume of his mail had sharply increased. These letters, he lamented, "have to be attended to at night, after my kind friends have returned to their rooms, & indeed to their beds I expect."[80]

Despite Cobb's initial doubts, the tariff reduction effort proved successful, and the young Georgian received considerable credit for the victory. "Father Ritchie" declared the entire exercise a thorough Democratic triumph, and vigorously praised Cobb's role. When commenting on Cobb's performance in the columns of the Washington Union, the old editor stated that the House "had the services of a gentleman ... who, uniting a competent knowledge of the rules of order, with the firmness requisite to enforce them, has exercised the almost omnipotent authority with which he was invested in a manner that has elicited the good will of every unprejudiced observer." Noting that "on no occasion within our recollection has the floor been awarded with a more liberal and comprehensive impartiality," Ritchie concluded, "this gentleman has deserved well of the House and of his

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[80] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, June 29, 1846, Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collection, Felix Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia.

constituents for the fidelity and fairness with which he has discharged the responsible trust reposed in him."[81]

Private correspondents echoed Ritchie's effusive plaudits, and suggested that Cobb's performance had earned him the inside track in the next election for Speaker of the House. W. S. Wallace, a New York publisher, wrote to request a biographical sketch of Cobb. Impressed by his overall performance in Congress, Wallace desired "to bring properly before the Democracy of the whole Union such individuals as have fairly earned position as the great living defenders of the faith of Thomas Jefferson ... without ultraisms northern & southern."[82]

After the tariff vote and his Texas speech, Cobb anticipated that the balance of the session would pass in relative calm. He eagerly looked forward to the earliest possible return home. The combination of oppressive summer heat, heavy correspondence, and the press of visitors from outside the city demanding to be entertained he found almost unbearable. He longed to be reunited with his family. Mary Ann had returned to Athens some months earlier to set up housekeeping in her new home, and give birth to another child, a boy named Basil. Cobb had not yet seen this newest

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[81] Washington Union, July 3, 1846, cited in Milledgeville Federal Union, July 14, 1846.

[82] Thomas P. Safford to Howell Cobb, July 9, 1846; Irwin A. Wingfield to Howell Cobb, July 30, 1846; Sarah Rootes Cobb to Howell Cobb, July 13, 1846; W. S. Wallace to Howell Cobb, June 20, 1846, Howell Cobb Papers.

addition to the household. Moreover, he felt intense pressure from his mother and other relatives to return home immediately. Sarah hungered after a teaching post at Franklin College for her son-in-law, Williams Rutherford, Jr. Convinced that her son's presence was essential to sway the University's board of trustees, Sarah launched a vigorous campaign designed to call him home. While Cobb acknowledged the strong pull of his mother's entreaties, he felt compelled to place his public duties above his personal desires. He remained in Washington until the end of the session. Rutherford did not win the desired position.[83]

The rest of the session, however, did not conform to Cobb's expectation. The Mexican War continued to rage. Cobb knew of a rising tide of opposition to the war among the Whigs. John Lamar reported that Georgia Whigs, after manifesting an early "patriotic spirit ... to sustain the country in the war," now had turned "perfectly rabid" in their opposition to it. William Hope Hull offered a similar analysis from Clarke County. He informed Cobb that the county lay "too much under the influence of Whiggery" to supply a unit for service in Mexico.[84]

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[83] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, April 3, 1846; July 9, 1846; July 20, 1846; Sarah Rootes Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, January 25, 1846; August 8, 1846; Williams Rutherford, Jr. to Howell Cobb, February 7, 1846, ibid.

[84] William H. Hull to Howell Cobb, May 22, 1846, ibid.; John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, June 24, 1846, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, pp. 82-84.

Cobb personally observed anti-war sentiment among Whigs in Washington. In mid-July, he responded to attacks on the Polk administration by Alexander H. Stephens and others. These Whigs accused Polk of maneuvering Mexico into war, and thus placed sole responsibility for the conflict on the president's shoulders. Cobb refuted these claims. He argued that events of the previous decade had proved beyond any reasonable doubt that Mexico desired war with the United States. The Mexicans, he charged, had rejected every peaceful overture and overthrown their own government because they believed it too friendly with the American government. President Polk, he contended, bore responsibility for nothing save discharging "his duty" to maintain the rights of the country. Despite Whig hostility, the Democratic majority in Congress precluded any serious Whig hinderance to the war effort. Consequently, few expected significant difficulty when, on August 8, 1846, Polk forwarded a last minute request for $2 million to speed up peace negotiations.[85]

Yet problems did arise, and from a surprising source. David Wilmot, a first-term Democratic congressman from Pennsylvania, proposed an amendment to Polk's request which would ban slavery from any territories taken from Mexico. The underlying motives for Wilmot's maneuver remain disputed.

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[85] Appendix to the Congressional Globe, Twenty-Ninth Congress, First Session, pp. 1101-1103; Thomas E. Schott, Alexander H. Stephens of Georgia, A Biography (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), pp. 71-72.

The Wilmot Proviso might have been an aggressive act mounted by Van Burenites disgruntled over events in 1844, with the purpose of building a North-West alliance designed to reduce the influence of the southern wing of the party. On the other hand, it might have represented a defensive move. Van Burenites, hard-pressed by growing antislavery sentiment among their own constituents, may have hoped that by restricting future slavery expansion they could eliminate slavery as a mainstream political issue. Whatever its purpose, the Wilmot Proviso planted seeds of discord within Democratic ranks. When these seeds matured they would produce bitter fruit for both the party and the nation.[86]

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[86] Cooper, The South and the Politics of Slavery, pp. 232-233.

Chapter Seven

"We Have Been Stabbed In the Dark"

Despite vigorous protests from southern congressmen, the House incorporated the Wilmot Proviso into President Polk's proposed revenue bill. Although the offensive legislation seemed unlikely to pass the Senate, the upper house did not get an opportunity to vote on the measure. On the last day of the session, the speaker of the house declared the Congress adjourned even as the Senate debated the proviso. By pre-arrangement, the House had agreed to adjourn promptly at noon for the convenience of members hastening to catch trains running out of Baltimore. Amid the chaos that often characterizes the closing moments of any legislature, the speaker declined to deviate from the established schedule.[1]

Cobb's initial reaction to the Wilmot Proviso indicates that he considered it a minor difficulty. A difficulty requiring opposition to be sure, but nothing likely to produce lasting harm either to the Union or the Democratic

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[1] William J. Cooper, The South and the Politics of Slavery, 1828-1856 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978), pp. 232-234; Richard Harrison Shryock, Georgia and the Union in 1850 (Durham: Duke University Press, 1926), pp. 132-134; John Quincy Adams, Memoirs of John Quincy Adams, Comprising Portions of His Diary from 1795 to 1848, twelve vols., edited by Charles Francis Adams (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1877), XII, 270.

party. Throughout the balance of the year, his correspondence reflected no anxiety over the issue.[2]

After returning home to Georgia, Cobb spent considerable effort catching up on his legal practice and dealing with ongoing problems arising from his indebtedness. Yet, as always, politics dominated his thoughts and his time. For some weeks prior to the adjournment of Congress, he had received warnings from his supporters of insidious efforts by Sixth District Whigs to convince some local Democrat to oppose him in the fall elections. While his correspondents also provided assurances that these Whig efforts had no hope of success, Cobb moved quickly to counter the opposition. He spent an entire week in Lumpkin County, and reported to Mary Ann the existence there of "a regular and systematic effort by leading Whigs ... to induce Genl. [William] Wofford to oppose me." He charged that this effort had its origins among the "Athens whig gentry," and complained that these men "would take more pleasure in defeating me than in effecting the salvation of their depraved souls." Happily, he added, his diligent labors had frustrated all Whig "machinations." He now felt certain that the path to reelection lay open, but

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[2] John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, November 13, 1846, in Ulrich Bonnell Phillips, ed., The Correspondence of Robert Toombs, Alexander H. Stephens, and Howell Cobb (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1913), pp. 86-87; Zachary Taylor Johnson, The Political Policies of Howell Cobb (Nashville: George Peabody College for Teachers, 1929), p. 39.

confidently predicted that "some Whig will be offered up for sacrifice."[3]

As Cobb anticipated, the Whigs convinced General Benjamin Cleveland, a minor military figure from the War of 1812, to accept their nomination. Unable to challenge Cobb effectively on any substantive issue, his opponents launched a whisper campaign charging that his vote during the previous congressional session against a military pay raise reflected insensitivity to the needs of volunteers serving in Mexico. When these accusations failed to make headway, the Southern Whig attempted to create an issue by asking who Cobb would support in a presidential contest between Silas Wright, a New York Democrat with protectionist tendencies, and John C. Calhoun.[4]

Cobb and his supporters refuted Whig charges about military pay as a false issue on par with the "British gold humbug" raised during his last campaign. They declined to respond to the Whig's inquiries about a possible Wright-Calhoun presidential contest. This strategy proved sound.

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[3] Howell Cobb to J. S. Thomas, October 20, 1846; List of Howell Cobb's Economic Liabilities, November 1, 1846; J. S. Thomas to Howell Cobb, November 4, 1846; Albon Chase to Howell Cobb May 20, 1846; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, September 13, 1846, Howell Cobb Papers, Felix Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia (Hereafter: Howell Cobb Papers); James F. Cooper to Howell Cobb, July 8, 1846, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, pp. 85-86.

[4] Athens Southern Banner, August 25, 1846; September 1, 1846; Athens Southern Whig, September 3, 1846.

Cobb won reelection easily, but with a smaller majority than expected. John B. Lamar attributed this outcome to the activities "of that military man -- General Apathy."[5]

Yet growing concern for national Democratic unity tempered Cobb's satisfaction over his personal success. This concern did not directly involve the Wilmot Proviso. Rather, it focused on wounds created by the Oregon issue. In a private letter to his old friend and political associate, John H. Lumpkin, Cobb laid responsibility for intra-party tensions at the door of southern Democrats. He accused them of failure to redeem the pledges they had made to the northern wing of the party at the national convention in 1844. By presenting a united front, he asserted, Democrats had "contended for and obtained the whole of Texas." Southern Democrats had failed to toe the line on American ownership of Oregon, however, and thereby yielded claims to half the territory. He grieved that this failure had resulted in political defeats for many Democratic candidates in northern states.[6]

Cobb's concern for Democratic well being involved more than festering past disputes. He also felt some anxiety

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[5] Athens Southern Banner, August 25, 1846; September 1, 1846; Athens Southern Whig, September 3, 1846; September 24, 1846; October 15, 1846; John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, October 21, 1846, Howell Cobb Papers.

[6] Howell Cobb to John H. Lumpkin, cited in John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, November 13, 1846, Howell Cobb Papers.

about issues likely to emerge in the coming session of Congress. The financial costs of the war with Mexico continued to rise. To provide needed revenue, the Polk administration had begun movements to raise tariff rates on coffee and tea. As early as June, 1846, brother John had warned that Georgia Whigs anticipated the tariff increase "with the eagerness of hyenas and jackals ... waiting to rush on to the work of mutilation." Already, he noted, Whig leaders had launched a "loathsome" campaign to undermine popular support for the war effort. They operated on the assumption, he charged, that the people would refuse to support taxes for a war they disliked.[7]

Nevertheless, Lamar urged his brother-in-law to sustain the president's policies. Demonstrating an astute appreciation of human nature, Lamar explained that all but the most debased American took pride in the nation's military victories. Men, he observed, "have a very ingenious way of appropriating a share in such things to themselves, altho' they have had no hand in the matter .... No talk about coffee can compete with a fanfaronade about roaring cannon and charging squadrons." All Cobb need do to block Whig maneuvers, Lamar concluded, was "to charge yourself with a

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[7] John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, June 24, 1846, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, pp. 82-84.

full load of Mexican cruelty and perfidy and of American chivalry, [and] you will find few people proof against it."[8]

Not all Cobb's advisors, however, shared Lamar's confidence. Both James Jackson and Hopkins Holsey urged opposition to the proposed tax. Whigs, they predicted, intended to make the war the primary issue of the coming political campaign. The tax on coffee and tea offered them a useful auxiliary issue, because it would fall most heavily upon the "poorer classes." Jackson offered dire predictions that the tax issue "will ruin the party & every body connected with it." Rather than sustaining the war with new taxes, they pressed Cobb to advocate reliance on loans to pay for the military effort.[9]

As he had already done on the Oregon issue, Cobb demonstrated a determination to do more than reflect the will of his constituents. He meant to lead them along the path marked out by the Polk administration and the national Democracy. Thus, he resolved to risk once more the ire of the voters and support the tax. Although Cobb's explicit instructions to his Georgia lieutenants are not known, their response indicates that he ordered them to change the minds of the Democratic rank and file regarding the tax issue. Perhaps mindful of his previous outrage at their performance

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[8] Ibid.

[9] Hopkins Holsey to Howell Cobb, December 23, 1846; James Jackson to Howell Cobb, December 28, 1846, Howell Cobb Papers.

on Oregon, they moved quickly to their task. Within days of predicting a disaster, Holsey offered guarantees that leading Athenian Democrats had met to confirm their support of the coffee and tea tax. They did so, he declared, because it represented an administration measure designed to maintain the national honor. By the time Cobb had actually voted on the measure in February, 1847, James Jackson wrote to praise his courage and complain that the failure of other Democratic members of the Georgia delegation to record similar votes had weakened "the moral force of ... those who voted for the tax." Nonetheless, he voiced certainty that the people would sustain Cobb when the facts had been laid before them.[10]

II

When Cobb departed for Washington that winter, he travelled alone. Mary Ann had experienced uncertain health for most of the year. During the previous winter, she had suffered through a bout of scarlet fever. In March, she had left Cobb in Washington to return to Athens and set up housekeeping in the new family home. Despite her recent illness, by the time she left the capital she was pregnant again.[11]

Shortly after her arrival in Athens, she reported being afflicted by severe pain in her "face and teeth." This pain

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[10] Hopkins Holsey to Howell Cobb, January 10, 1847; James Jackson to Howell Cobb, February 16,1847, ibid.

[11] L. G. Dobbins to Mary Ann Cobb, February, 1846; Sarah Rootes Cobb to Howell Cobb, March 30, 1846, ibid.

lasted for five days, only to be followed by a "sore mouth." She complained that "the roof of my mouth and gums have been covered with white sores and all so inflamed ... that I have had to lay aside my false teeth -- and live on mush and milk." Still retaining a sense of humor, she wryly commented to her husband that "you must know I look beautiful." After a brief period of good health in May, she fell victim to a series of colds in June and July that increasingly drained her strength. Constant severe headaches and "weakness" in her eyes only served to exacerbate other symptoms. Fearing the impact of a long trip on her health, Mary Ann and Cobb concluded that she should remain in Athens during the coming congressional session.[12]

Concern for their boys' futures also contributed to this decision. Both parents felt an intense pride in their "noble and handsome fellows." Yet, some problems had begun to surface. Since Cobb's first election to Congress, John A. and Lamar, the two oldest boys, had spent relatively little time with either of their parents -- and even less time with their father. Lamar accepted this situation and offered few if any disciplinary problems. John A. proved more difficult. Perhaps harboring some unrealized resentment toward his parents for ignoring him, John A. demonstrated a persistent

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[12] Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, April 13; July 17, 1846; Sarah Rootes Cobb to Howell Cobb, May 26, 1846, ibid.

tendency towards rebellion throughout his childhood and youth.[13]

Mary Ann first recognized this tendency. Although she still insisted that "Johnny ... is a good boy as ever," she expressed concern about his frequent refusals to attend school. She reported his complaint that school attendance cost him valuable play time, as well as his objection "that he has to make a bow every evening when leaving school." He felt such distaste for the entire enterprise, she noted, that "he has been threatening me all this week that he intended to quit school."[14]

The resistance John A. offered his teachers far exceeded that offered his parents. One of his early schoolmasters complained directly to Cobb that he found it impossible to control the boy's "passion & impudence & profanity." His classroom behavior had deteriorated to the point, the instructor added, that he threatened the discipline of the entire school. With some regret, he advised Cobb that he must make other arrangements for his son's education.[15]

While Mary Ann's presence added some needed guidance for her eldest son, she made no secret of her belief that his future success hinged primarily on a more direct parental

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[13] Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, April 13; July 17, 1846, ibid.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Francis Gage to Howell Cobb, June 13, 1846(?), ibid.

role by his father. Speaking of both John A. and Lamar, she asserted, "I think we have two promising boys -- if we can manage them properly -- But there must be discipline and system with it -- and when you return -- we must be cooperative -- if we desire success." For the most part, however, Cobb declined any active role in the childrearing process. During his almost constant absences, he restricted his efforts to occasional advice and admonitions to behave properly. His parental activities when actually present with the family cannot be fully gaged, but the surviving evidence indicates that he largely allowed his sons to do as they pleased. He would prove much more conservative with his daughters.[16]

Unfortunately, the decision to leave Mary Ann behind carried its own hazards. Loneliness combined with ill health to produce depression and occasional hysteria. Shortly after Cobb's departure, Mary Ann grieved that "you cannot imagine the desolation of feeling which has pervaded my heart since your departure." She compared her feelings to those of one who had committed some unpardonable sin, and confessed her fear that "I have had the hysterics, for I felt as if I could cry from morning to night." Later, after growing fearful that her complaints might offend her husband, she pleaded with Cobb to "make all due allowances for a mind that is not

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[16] Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, December 11, 1846, ibid.

always well balanced." With some desperation, she voiced hope that this might be their last separation. "All I want," she declared, "is to be with you or have you with me -- and the place I choose is home."[17]

Mary Ann also voiced serious doubts about Cobb's behavior. He had hardly arrived in Washington when she warned him against his proposed living arrangements, saying, "I do not fancy your boarding at Mrs. Ballards[.] Her character is notorious, and birds of a feather will flock together." Mary Ann added the additional complaint that Ballard "has a pretty daughter [and] pretty girls should not be exposed to the attention of handsome men." Her feelings on this point took some time to abate. Much later in the session, when Cobb gleefully reported that his friend Lumpkin had been charged with escorting a young woman on his return to Georgia, Mary Ann launched an immediate attack. "Why," she demanded, "will men be so deceitful?" She observed that if men would but resolve to live with their own families, they could easily avoid being "bothered with ... strange ladies." Although much of Mary Ann's anxiety about her husband's activities probably reflected little more than a normal reaction to separation and the strains of childbirth,

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[17] Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, December 11, 1846; February 1, 1847, ibid.

with the presence of Paulina she had a constant reminder of a less than desirable side of her husband's past.[18]

Cobb responded to all Mary Ann's anxieties with patient assurances of love and fidelity. He described himself as one "not in the habit of indulging in the sickly sensibilities of some," but voiced a desire to "[unbosom] to you the evidence of that affection which has entwined itself around every fibre of my heart." Even when her complaints continued throughout the session, Cobb did not deviate from his patient approach. Late in February, he commiserated with her that "I fear from your last letter that you have not been so well of late in body or so content in mind as you have been." He urged her to "not permit your spirits to flag nor suffer." With their separation now drawing to a close, he advised that "we should be prepared to make our reunion a source of renewed pleasure and increased happiness."[19]

III

Whatever Cobb's concerns about Mary Ann and the boys, a rapidly emerging sectional chasm between North and South over the issue of slavery in the territories prompted him to focus his attention on political developments in Washington. The situation now appeared far more dangerous than it had the

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[18] Mary Ann to Howell Cobb, December 14, 1846; February 20, 1847, ibid.

[19] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, December 14, 1846; December 16, 1846; February 14, 1847; February 21, 1847, ibid.

previous fall. Early in the session, President Polk again requested passage of a war appropriation measure. On January 3, 1847, Preston King, a Van Burenite Democrat from New York, introduced the desired bill with the Wilmot Proviso attached. King's action received widespread support in the northern states, but also produced alarm in the South. It was fast becoming clear that the Wilmot Proviso represented far more than a minor problem.[20]

The reintroduction of the Wilmot Proviso created a treacherous dilemma for members of both the Whig and Democratic parties. If adherents of either failed to devise a workable solution, they faced the certain collapse of their national organization. Although northern Democrats had introduced the proviso, the issues it raised seemed most threatening to the Whigs. In relative terms, antislavery sentiment figured more prominently among northern Whigs than northern Democrats. Unable to forget the damage done to party harmony by the Texas issue, Whigs urged the country to renounce all claims to Mexican territory. This "no territory" proposal had much to recommend it to the Whigs. On the one hand, it would allow them to avoid a destructive internal debate over the issue of slavery expansion. On the other, it would permit northern and southern wings of the party to adopt the same policy for different reasons --

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[20] Shryock, Georgia and the Union in 1850, p. 134; John Niven, John C. Calhoun and the Price of Union (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), p. 306.

northern Whigs because they did not wish to see slavery expand, southern Whigs because they feared it would not be allowed to.[21]

Despite its apparent political appeal, the "no territory" proposal had virtually no chance of winning acceptance. Ongoing American military victories over Mexican forces rendered it unlikely that the war would end without the acquisition of vast new territories. Moreover, the Democrats already had embraced expansion as one of their central tenets. Their party had employed the Texas issue as a vehicle for electoral success. They had wholeheartedly thrown their support behind the Mexican War, and fully expected additional territories to accompany victory. Most felt no inclination to abandon a position which thus far had produced so many political benefits. They condemned the "no territory" position as a cowardly maneuver designed to rob the nation of its just rewards in order to protect the partisan interests of the Whig party.[22]

Nevertheless, the emergence of the territorial question held many dangers for Democrats. Southern participation in the national Democratic organization always had hinged on the

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[21] Shryock, Georgia and the Union in 1850, pp. 134-136; Cooper, The South and the Politics of Slavery, pp. 227-228; William W. Freehling, The Road to Disunion, Secessionists at Bay, 1776-1854 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 456-458.

[22] Cooper, The South and the Politics of Slavery, pp. 231-232; Freehling, The Road to Disunion, pp. 456-458.

understanding that southern Democrats must dictate party policy regarding slavery. The introduction of the proviso by a faction of the northern Democratic organization indicated that this arrangement had begun to crumble.[23]

Southern Democrats also worried that the connection between the proviso and some northern Democrats had left them vulnerable to Whig attacks for associating with a party that harbored men so hostile to southern interests. While not forgetting his own party's difficulties on the issue, Alexander Stephens could describe the Democratic dilemma with a certain ironic satisfaction. He smirked that the Democrats found themselves locked in a struggle over the "contemplated spoils of victory." Mocking the claims of southern Democrats that the northern wing of their party represented "our natural allies," he accused northern Democrats of delivering "some of the most violently denunciatory speeches ever made against Slavery in the House."[24]

The presence of an extreme state-rights element within their own ranks further exacerbated the dilemma faced by southern Democrats. Led by John C. Calhoun, this group favored a policy of confrontation with the North and the creation of a purely southern political party. Calhoun

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[23] Cooper, The South and the Politics of Slavery, pp. 232-234.

[24] Ibid; Alexander H. Stephens to John L. Stephens, January 18, 1847, Alexander H. Stephens Papers, Robert W. Woodruff Library, Emory University, Atlanta.

warned that the pursuit of compromise by southern adherents of the national parties represented a critical weakness in the South's defense of slavery. In his "Southern Platform," he argued that the South must repeatedly force the free states to guarantee the rights of slaveholders or risk disunion. He denounced those who resisted his program because of party loyalty as corrupt slaves to "the system of plunder."[25]

Cobb could not doubt the perilous nature of the crisis facing both the Union and his party. Besides his own observations of developments in the capital, his constituents began to register powerful protests against the proviso. Nathan Hutchins, writing in late January, accused both southern Whigs and Democrats of "doing a very poor business" in Congress. The North, Hutchins charged, appeared united in its determination to prevent the admission of any additional slave states. He vowed that the South stood equally determined to defend its rights. Although hopeful that the Union might be preserved, Hutchins warned that if the price of preservation was "penning up the slaves within their present limits ... now is as good time as any to begin to shift for ourselves & the sooner we act the better." He

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[25] Cooper, The South and the Politics of Slavery, pp. 234-236; John C. Calhoun to Wilson Lumpkin, April 6, 1847, E. Merton Coulter Collection, Felix Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia (Hereafter: Coulter Collection).

concluded by urging Cobb to make "one of your ... rough, unrestrained, speeches defining our position."[26]

While Cobb's commitment to his country and his party rendered him reluctant to endorse the extreme position being urged by men such as Hutchins, he knew that the South must never consent to be "manacled" by the proviso. Seeking to emulate the founders of the republic and the men who had forged the Missouri Compromise, Cobb sought a solution that at once might preserve the Union, the honor of the South, and the national integrity of the Democratic party.[27]

In a speech before the House on February 9, Cobb outlined his basic position on the territorial issue. He observed that certain representatives from the northern states insisted that all lands acquired from Mexico must be preserved as "what gentlemen are pleased to term 'free territory.'" These representatives had maintained in their speeches before the House that "the North occupied the right ... and the South the wrong." They had voiced certainty that the South would soon acknowledge its error and accede to the justice of northern demands.[28]

Cobb maintained that these northern arguments lacked fairness. The current struggle with Mexico, he contended,

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[26] Nathan Hutchins to Howell Cobb, January 24, 1847, Howell Cobb Papers.

[27] Congressional Globe, Twenty-Ninth Congress, Second Session, pp. 360-363.

[28] Ibid.

represented more than the efforts of a single section of the country. Rather, he declared, "the whole people of the Union are involved ... and the result of their united efforts ... will be the acquisition of valuable territory on the part of the United States." Now, despite the sacrifices of the South's "brave and gallant sons," the North stepped forward "and claim[ed] for itself the whole benefit resulting from the combined efforts of all sections of the country." Some congressional free-soilers had even declared their goal of drawing around the South "a cordon of free States, where they 'would light up the fires of liberty, to burn the shackles which now bind our slaves in servitude.'" Could any "unprejudiced mind," he asked, believe such assertions embodied "the right?"[29]

Cobb went further. Not only did northern claims lack fairness, they also defied logic. Supporters of the proviso expressed their willingness to unite with southerners on "the sacred compromises of the Constitution." Yet their position, he charged, when stripped "of all the sophistry," amounted to this: "you of the North extend your territory, your government, your power, strength, and influence ... but here stands the South, her limits fixed, bound hand and foot, subject to your mercy, and to such legislation as you may think proper upon the subject of her institutions." No one, he argued, could possibly believe the South would have ever

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[29] Ibid.

entered the Union under such conditions. He insisted that throughout the history of the United States -- "from the very ... origin of our Government down to the present time" -- slavery had sparked "sectional jealousies." The South had only been induced to join the Union by guarantees of "such power and such influence as would enable her to be a check upon the North." Now the North demanded additional power, and offered as its only inducement "the disposition, already manifested by a portion of your country, to disregard the clearly written provisions and guarantees of the Constitution in favor of the South."[30]

Besides unfairness and illogic, Cobb also accused advocates of the proviso of dissembling. In a recent speech, David Wilmot had contended that advocates of the proviso sought nothing save government neutrality on the critical issue of slavery in the territories. Cobb scoffed at this claim. True neutrality, he countered, meant allowing "the people ... to settle this territory, and then to determine for themselves the form of its government [and] the character of its institutions." The provisoists, however, feared this type of government neutrality. Cobb challenged his opponents to "throw open this territory and let the weak, enervated South (as you call her) come forward and meet you in all your strength; and the palm shall be yielded to the victor

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[30] Ibid.

cheerfully." Otherwise, he demanded, "we are not again to hear of 'neutrality' upon this question from the North."[31]

Cobb acknowledged that the provisoists viewed their present stance as one based upon principle which rendered compromise difficult. Yet, he believed these assertions represented little more than pompous claims to a superior morality. "Are we better," he queried, "than our fathers?" The founders of the republic, he noted, had resolved seemingly irreconcilable disputes on the slavery issue through compromises of principle not because they lacked moral conviction, but because their love of Union outweighed all personal considerations.[32]

In light of this historical example, Cobb pleaded that "the spirit of our fathers may continue to pervade our councils." He warned that the North had but two choices on this issue. It must either meet the South "in the spirit of liberality and justice," or resolve to adopt a permanent version of the Whig "no territory" proposal. There could be no other alternative, he warned, because the South would never yield to the Wilmot Proviso.[33]

While the responsibility for choosing rested with the North, Cobb suggested that the Missouri Compromise line of 36°-30' provided the formula for an equitable resolution of

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[31] Ibid.

[32] Ibid.

[33] Ibid.

the crisis. If Congress agreed to settle the territorial issue "by the extension of this compromise line to the Pacific," then no other question "can ever disturb, to any considerable extent, the harmony of this Union." How, he inquired, could the North demand more? Once the extended compromise line had settled the limits of slavery "from ocean to ocean," a huge territory north of the line would have been reserved exclusively for the expansion of the "free states." For its part, the South demanded no guarantees that slavery spread into new territories. Instead, it merely requested that those lands south of the line might be open to slavery if southerners chose to go there.[34]

As had been true on so many previous issues, Cobb's support for a settlement based on the Missouri Compromise reflected an endorsement of the solution favored by the Polk administration. Yet, neither Cobb nor Polk operated in a political vacuum, and Cobb certainly knew that any public perception of undue willingness to make concessions to the provisoists would be followed by shrill denunciations from both southern Whigs and Calhounites. If he had any doubts on this point, the press in his own state quickly relieved them.[35]

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[34] Ibid.

[35] Cooper, The South and the Politics of Slavery, pp. 237-238.

Oregon again proved the source of contention. When resolutions were introduced calling for the creation of a territorial government which excluded slavery, Calhounites moved to base the exclusion on Oregon's location north of the Missouri Compromise line. The Calhounites expected the amendment to be defeated, but believed defeat might serve as a warning to the South about the futility of compromise. The House did reject the amendment. Cobb cast his vote in favor of the resolutions any way. Although he offered no immediate justification for his decision, it seems likely that he based his vote on a combination of principle and political strategy. Whatever the nature of dispute between North and South, he believed that American settlers in Oregon could not enjoy their rights as American citizens until a government had been established there. Moreover, many northern Democrats still felt betrayed by their southern allies on the Oregon boundary settlement. Cobb probably viewed the establishment of a free-soil government in Oregon -- territory no one expected to become a slave state -- as an acceptable concession to restore good relations with disgruntled northern Democrats.[36]

The Southern Whig of Athens moved quickly to exploit the vote. No other issue, it proclaimed, so clearly illustrated Cobb's subservience to party interests. The Whig charged

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[36] Congressional Globe, Thirtieth Congress, First Session, pp. 1013-1015.

that northern Democrats meant to use slavery exclusion in Oregon as a precedent for keeping slavery out of territories won from Mexico. Nevertheless, Cobb and half of the southern Democrats in Congress, "unmindful of the interests of those who sent them there," had voted for the "restriction of Slavery in Oregon." Southern Whigs, the paper carefully pointed out, had voted overwhelmingly against the Oregon resolutions.[37]

The Calhounite press of Georgia echoed the Whig's criticisms of Cobb. The Macon Telegraph expressed dismay that any southern man could vote for a bill that so clearly illustrated the North's aggressive intentions on the territorial question. Ominously, it warned the South "to take warning in time." Southerners must consider their constitutional rights as being "above all party ties." The Telegraph further warned that "every time [the South] abandons these to preserve a hollow party identity, confidence in her ability to maintain them will give way to mistrust ... among her enemies, which will prove fatal to us in the end."[38]

Despite the opposition's vigorous denunciations, Cobb received praise as well. An Illinois newspaper felt such appreciation for his open commitment to the national

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[37] Athens Southern Whig, February 11, 1847.

[38] Macon Telegraph, cited in Athens Southern Whig, February 25, 1847.

Democracy that it urged his nomination for the vice-presidency in 1848. A Georgia supporter assured him that "your course is sustained by every man whose opinion is worth asking .... Demagogey [sic] may raise a hue & cry against you for a while, but you have a hold on the affections of this District that will not easily be disturbed." Nor did the Banner hold back in its defense of Cobb's actions. Editor Chase found his task easier after the House voted on Polk's spending request with the proviso attached. Although the measure passed the House, seventeen northern Democrats united with southern members in voting against it. Every northern Whig voted in favor of the proviso. The public, Chase gloated, "may now see without the least particle of doubt, which party at the North remains truest to the compromises of the constitution."[39]

IV

Cobb returned home at the end of the session to a difficult political situation. The Mexican War remained a major source of contention, but the Wilmot Proviso was fast supplanting the war as the dominant issue. Cobb's personal feelings about the proviso shared much with those expressed by Calhoun. He privately declared to a member of the Polk administration that "the Union can not last if the Wilmot

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[39] W. H. Hull to Howell Cobb, February 2, 1847; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, February 10, 1847; Sarah Rootes Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, March 18, 1847, Howell Cobb Papers; Athens Southern Banner, February 23, 1847.

Proviso is enforced and in [my] opinion ought not." Nevertheless, he suspected that the current dispute revealed the determination of Calhoun to break down the established political parties and further his presidential ambitions. Thus, while determined that the proviso threat be suppressed, he remained equally determined that the solution derive from traditional party structures.[40]

The emergence of a presidential boom among southern Democrats for Mexican War hero General Zachary Taylor heightened Cobb's worries about the survival of the national Democracy. Taylor had no political record. Even worse, many southern Whigs, led by Stephens and a band of "Young Indians," had begun a campaign in the fall of 1846 to win the Whig nomination for the general.[41]

A Taylor candidacy held out great promise for the southern Whigs. His lack of a political record freed him from the burden of past disputes regarding tariffs, internal improvements, Texas, and slavery expansion. As a southerner and a slaveholder, few could doubt that the South's most vital interests would be safe in his hands. As a national war hero, few could doubt his loyalty to the Union, nor that

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[40] Howell Cobb to Cave Johnson, cited in Cave Johnson to Howell Cobb, July 19, 1847, Howell Cobb Papers.

[41] Milledgeville Federal Union, April 27, 1847; Edward Harden to Howell Cobb, May 3, 1847, in Phillips, Correspondence Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, pp. 87-88; James Smith to Howell Cobb, June 14, 1847; John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, June 18, 1847, Howell Cobb Papers; Cooper, The South and the Politics of Slavery, pp. 244-246.

of the party which nominated him. Moreover, as a popular hero who preferred to present himself as a nonpartisan "man of the people," he offered the chance of sparking widespread defections from Democratic ranks.[42]

Many southern Democrats believed that the attributes making Taylor so attractive to southern Whigs could be employed with equal effectiveness by their own party. Why, they demanded, should the Whigs be allowed to usurp the hero of a war they so bitterly opposed -- especially when his nonexistent political record might be painted in Democratic as easily as Whig colors? The Milledgeville Federal Union signaled the beginning of the pro-Taylor Democratic boom in Georgia in April, 1847, when it called for the party to consider its claims to the general. The movement spread quickly. A few days after the Federal Union's editorial, Edward Harden reported to Cobb that "nothing but death can prevent Taylor from being the next President," and urged that the Democrats "ought to be the first to nominate him, so as not to let the Whigs have the forestalling of his opinions and actions."[43]

The Taylor bandwagon quickly gained momentum among Georgia Democrats. John Lumpkin wrote that party members,

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[42] Cooper, The South and the Politics of Slavery, pp. 246-248.

[43] Milledgeville Federal Union, April 27, 1847; Edward Harden to Howell Cobb, May 3, 1847, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, pp. 87-88.

including delegates to the upcoming state convention, had been expressing widespread support for the general. James Smith of Macon actively sought to win Cobb's endorsement of efforts to co-opt Taylor from the Whigs. Besides being "a Southern man & a slave holder," Smith confided reports that the general had "voted for Jackson, opposed [the] Bank of U.S., ... favor[ed] ... Texas annexation, ... the Mexican War, and ... the present ... Tariff." Taking a calculating view of the political environment, Smith suggested that while neither party might actually want Taylor in 1848, either might use him in 1847. "We ought to choke the Whigs with his name," he declared, "we have as much right to nominate him as they."[44]

Cobb rejected all pro-Taylor arguments, but initially did not take a vocal public position opposing the Taylor boom. Both he and Lumpkin, however, worked behind the scenes to deflate the movement. They denounced the possible Democratic nomination of the general as "a shameless desertion of principles for the sake of a temporary triumph," and warned that "testimony received ... in Washington from intelligent men of all parties was that he was a Whig in principle, feeling and in his associations." Lumpkin expressed the opinion of both when he declared that if Democrats had as good a claim to Taylor as the Whigs, then

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[44] James Smith to Howell Cobb, June 14, 1847; John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, June 18, 1847, Howell Cobb Papers.

"we had as much right to nominate Henry Clay or Daniel Webster as Genl Taylor." Their shared suspicion that the Calhounites lay behind the move to foist Taylor on the South as a southern slaveholder who transcended partisanship did nothing to soften their opposition.[45]

Despite these quiet efforts, Cobb and Lumpkin realized that the crucial test would come at the Democratic state convention in June. Lumpkin pressed Cobb to attend the meeting, warning, "I am afraid mischief may be done -- you can prevent it." Cobb had no intention of being absent. He assured a relative that "I am going to our convention in Milledgeville to make an effort to save our party from the disgrace of nominating a Whig for the Presidency .... I love victory but I love my principles more."[46]

At the convention, Cobb abandoned his behind-the-scenes role, and assumed open leadership of the anti-Taylor delegates. He deflected moves to nominate the general by vigorously asserting Taylor's Whiggish tendencies, and urged the state party to refrain from making any nomination prior to the national convention. Georgia Democrats, he insisted, could rely on the national meeting to select a candidate "to whom the South could not take exception." His efforts

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[45] John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, June 18, 1847, ibid.

[46] John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, June 18, 1847; Howell Cobb to Martha Jackson, June 23, 1847, ibid.

carried the day. The meeting voted to send uninstructed delegates to the national convention.[47]

Having won this critical point, Cobb next sought an expression of confidence in the northern wing of the party. Despite the actions of some renegades, he maintained that most northern Democrats remained sound on slavery. He introduced resolutions reflecting this sentiment, but the bitter opposition of Calhounite delegates prompted the Cobb forces to back down. Encouraged by this success, the Calhounites pushed resolutions embodying their leader's "Southern Platform." This effort took too advanced ground for most delegates, however, and the Calhounite bid collapsed. Instead, the convention adopted resolutions declaring firm opposition to both the proviso and any presidential candidate who endorsed it. But in what represented a clear-cut victory for Cobb, the delegates also declared their eagerness to accept the extension of the 36°-30' line as "a compromise of fact rather than of principle."[48]

The extent of Cobb's success at the state convention can be gaged by the Whig's editorials following the meeting. The newspaper demanded to know "what has become of Gen. Taylor's nomination?" The Democratic leadership, it charged, had

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[47] Athens Southern Whig, July 8, 1847; July 15, 1847; July 22, 1847.

[48] Ibid.; Shryock, Georgia and the Union in 1850, pp. 140-142.

promised to respect the popular desire for a Taylor candidacy. Yet a small cadre of party leaders, directed by "the Hon. Howell Cobb," had decided to ignore the will of the people. Cobb, it noted, had gone to Milledgeville "purposely to defeat Gen. Taylor's nomination." The Whig accused him of favoring the election of a northern Democrat. This "Ajax of Democracy," it maintained, feared that Taylor's popularity would kill all hope of inducing state Democrats to vote for "a northern ally." Thus, it concluded, the man who had voted to ban slavery in Oregon had now duped Georgia Democrats into unwitting support for the proviso. Georgia had not witnessed a Democratic meeting, it declared, but rather a "Cobb Convention."[49]

Yet developments within Democratic ranks soon cast a shadow over Cobb's recent success. The party had nominated George W. Towns of Talbot County for governor. Although Cobb and his allies knew that Towns possessed Calhounite tendencies, they expected him to endorse the resolutions adopted by the convention. Towns bluntly asserted, however, that regarding the proviso "'we now have nothing to concede, nothing to compromise.'" Troubled by Towns' statement, Cobb convinced John Lumpkin to investigate. Both Cobb and Lumpkin soon received assurances from Towns and his lieutenants that the nominee only meant to say that the Missouri Compromise

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[49] Athens Southern Whig, July 8, 1847; July 15, 1847; July 22, 1847.

had already settled the issue of slavery in the territories. Despite these assurances, Lumpkin still believed that Towns opposed the Missouri Compromise line. He warned that Towns was too much tainted by Calhounism to make "a good union governor."[50]

Personal affairs intervened to spare Cobb the necessity of either challenging Towns or campaigning for him. Following the birth of the couple's fifth son, Basil, in the winter of 1847, Mary Ann's physical and mental condition continued to deteriorate. That summer she experienced a health crisis. Although the exact nature of the crisis remains unclear, it appeared to be a physical manifestation of psychological turmoil. For a time, the family doubted her recovery. By August, however, she had improved sufficiently to be considered "out of danger," and Cobb resolved on a vacation in New York where she could be placed under the care of the best doctors in the country.[51]

Cobb's decision proved a wise one. He soon reported an improvement in Mary Ann's health to brother John. Yet she

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[50] Hopkins Holsey to Howell Cobb, July 21, 1847; John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, August 1, 1847; George Towns to Howell Cobb August 3, 1847, Howell Cobb Papers.

[51] Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, December 11, 1846; December 14, 1846; Mary Ann Cobb to John B. Lamar, February 9, 1847; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, February 14, 1847; February 21, 1847; John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, August 1, 1847; John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, August 24, 1847; Sarah Rootes Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, September 8, 1847; September 28, 1847; October 8, 1847; John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, November 29, 1847, ibid.

did suffer setbacks. When she again fell ill in September, Cobb's mother consoled her with the reminder that "nervous afflictions are never cured so quick ... but [you] must try and keep [your] spirits up and adopt my motto 'Live in hope.'" After recovering from her September relapse, Mary Ann showed steady improvement throughout October and November. By year's end, her New York doctor declared that "the return of her monthly period I regard as a most favorable circumstance in her case; and with a little determination on her part, I hope yet to hear of her restoration to health."[52]

During his time in New York, Cobb kept abreast of political developments in Georgia. The news was bad. In the fall elections, the Whigs won small majorities in both houses of the legislature. The Whig-controlled state senate promptly adopted resolutions critical of the war. It also adopted a measure favoring Stephens' "no territory" proposal, after blocking a Democratic attempt to win endorsement of the Missouri Compromise extension. Towns won the governor's race, but his Calhounite views probably tempered Cobb's satisfaction at his success. Even worse, the election results indicated that the Whig victory in the legislative contests owed as much to internal divisions within Democratic

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[52] John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, August 24, 1847; November 29, 1847; Sarah Rootes Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, September 28, 1847; G. L. Radford to Howell Cobb, December 26, 1847, ibid.

ranks as it did to Whig popularity. Both the Democratic press and Cobb's Georgia advisors attributed the outcome to the inability of several county organizations to unite on their candidates.[53]

Cobb also utilized his time in New York attempting to influence national political developments. Hopkins Holsey, who had replaced Albon Chase as editor of the Southern Banner in 1846, urged Cobb to explain the southern position on the proviso to northern Democrats. Holsey defined it as one that emphasized Democratic party harmony and a mutually acceptable compromise -- preferably one based on the old Missouri line. Cobb, who shared Holsey's viewpoint, almost certainly took this advice.[54]

Yet neither man believed that the ideas outlined by the editor represented the definitive southern position. Beyond a broad based opposition to the proviso, no such position existed. Cobb's personal correspondence indicated the existence of at least three major viewpoints among southern Democrats. Extreme state-rights southerners adhered to the Calhoun doctrine of confrontation with the North by a united southern party. Isaac Holmes of South Carolina pressed this

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[53] Thomas D. Harris to Howell Cobb, October 12, 1847; Luther Glenn to Howell Cobb, October 14, 1847; December 1, 1847, James Jackson to Howell Cobb November 2, 1847, ibid; Milledgeville Federal Union, November 9, 1847; Shryock, Georgia and the Union in 1850, pp. 150-152.

[54] Hopkins Holsey to Howell Cobb, September 1, 1847, Howell Cobb Papers.

position on Cobb in August when he pleaded, "I wish the Southern Representatives would consent to act together without regard to Whig or Democrat. The Wilmot Proviso is paramount to all Party ... The North is resolved to crush slavery -- are we in the South resolved at all hazards to defend it?"[55]

Nationalist southern Democrats, led by men such as Thomas Hart Benton of Missouri, stood diametrically opposed to the Calhounite view. Cave Johnson of Tennessee reflected this position when commenting on the Georgia Democratic convention. Insisting that "you all have too much feeling about the Wilmot Proviso," Johnson described it as a meaningless "presidential hobby." No rational individual, he asserted, would ever carry slaves into the disputed territory, "with [its] abolition Yankees on the north & ... free colored population on the south." Johnson also challenged the fundamental assumptions of the Calhounites. Even if state-rights extremists succeeded in uniting the South -- which he doubted could be done -- "the North would be united [against] us & we should be in a hopeless minority." Expressing a desire that Cobb revise his own view that the Union ought not survive enactment of the proviso,

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[55] Isaac E. Holmes to Howell Cobb, August 21, 1847, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, p. 88.

Johnson declared, "I shall go for the maintenance of the Union whatever may be done with negroes or tariffs."[56]

Between these extremes lay the position occupied by most southern Democrats, including Cobb. These men espoused a balanced commitment to both the Union and southern rights. They overwhelmingly believed that these two interests could best be secured by the preservation of the national Democratic party. They placed a resolute confidence in the nation's tradition of compromise on sectional disputes, and echoed the Jacksonian admonition: "Our Federal Union, it must be preserved!" Hiram Warren of Gainesville, Georgia, outlined this position in a letter to Cobb. Warren denounced those southern Democrats who insisted on a presidential candidate from the slave states. Slavery, he warned, could only be "maintained by the spirit of compromise which ... formed the Constitution." That same spirit, he declared, "must pervade our national legislature, and should pervade the democratic party throughout the Union: for it is ... that party alone ... which will protect Southern rights." While declaring himself "as firm as any man in maintaining the constitutional rights of the Southern people," Warren also noted that those rights could "never be promoted by threats, intimidations, or exclusive sectional selfishness."[57]

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[56] Cave Johnson to Howell Cobb, July 19, 1847, Howell Cobb Papers.

[57] Hiram Warren to Howell Cobb, July 17, 1847, ibid.

That Cobb adhered to this middle position represents no surprise. As a leader of the Democratic party and an astute politician, he recognized the threat to party survival embodied in both the Calhounite and nationalist positions. The Calhounite threat was obvious. But Cobb also knew that few southerners would support an organization which adopted Cave Johnson's declaration of unconditional Unionism, "whatever may be done with negroes or tariffs." No southern wing of any national party could endorse such a position of dishonorable inferiority for the South and survive.[58]

Yet Cobb's stance on the middle ground reflected far more than political calculation. It also represented an expression of solidarity with the founders of the republic and the southern Jacksonians who had united to preserve the Union during the nullification crisis of the 1830s. As such, it represented an act of solidarity with his own father. John Addison Cobb took the most important step of his political life when he broke with his former political associates to join the new Union party in Georgia. Although the Union party espoused the doctrines of state sovereignty and state rights, it rejected the Calhounite endorsement of nullification and secession as legal constitutional doctrines. Rather, the Union men denounced these doctrines as "opposed to the theory of the constitution," and

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[58] Cave Johnson to Howell Cobb, July 19, 1847, ibid; Cooper, The South and the Politics of Slavery, pp. 234-240.

"incompatible with the existence of the Federal Union." The southern states possessed rights, they declared, which the federal government must respect and defend. If the government failed to fulfill its obligations, the people of the South needed no legal theory to protect their liberty. They possessed the same inherent right to revolution exercised by their fathers. Like John Addison and his allies, Cobb meant to adhere to the stars and stripes "as long as our glorious Union should be worth preserving."[59]

V

In December, the Cobbs returned to Washington. During the previous session friends had predicted that Cobb had a "fair road to the Speakership" if the Democrats controlled the Thirtieth Congress. The Whigs enjoyed a slight majority in the House, however, and his advancement had to wait. Almost immediately, the Whigs launched a vigorous barrage of criticism aimed at the president's war policies. Anti-war Democrats, led by John C. Calhoun, joined in the attack. This anti-administration sentiment soon coalesced into resolutions that denounced President Polk for provoking an

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[59] Ulrich Bonnell Phillips, Georgia and State Rights, A Study of the Political History of Georgia from the Revolution to the Civil War, With Particular Regard to Federal Relations (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1902), pp. 105-138; Milledgeville Georgia Journal, November 16, 1833; Milledgeville Federal Union, May 16, 1833; Athens Southern Banner, April 12, 1834; June 14, 1834.

immoral and unconstitutional conflict with a sister republic.[60]

On February 2, 1848, Cobb's loyalty to the president forced him to rise in defense of the administration. In part, the speech represented a rehash of his pro-war effort in the last Congress. The Mexicans, he still insisted, had determined on war with the United States long before Polk assumed the presidency. Moreover, he recalled how, during the Texas annexation debates, the Whigs had declared that annexation made war with Mexico inevitable. Whigs had attempted to burden those who supported the measure with responsibility for "all the blood and all the waste of treasure which would result" from the acquisition of Texas.[61]

On what basis, Cobb demanded, did Whigs now cleanse the supporters of annexation of that responsibility? On what basis did they now place total responsibility on the president "for having ... involved us in a war which was 'unnecessary,' ... if proper prudence, discretion, and foresight had been exercised by him?" He suggested that the Whigs had either lied to the country then, or were lying now. He noted with outrage that many of those Whigs most violent in denouncing Polk as a warmonger had themselves voted for

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[60] Thomas D. Harris to Howell Cobb, April 28, 1847, Howell Cobb Papers; Allan Nevins, Ordeal of the Union: Fruits of Manifest Destiny, 1847-1852, two vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1947), I, 15-16.

[61] Congressional Globe, Thirtieth Congress, First Session, pp. 286-289.

annexation. He concluded that the Whig reversal on war guilt had arisen from the need "to relieve [these] gentlemen of the responsibility ... of involving the country in war."[62]

Mindful of the growing Whig support for a Taylor presidential nomination, Cobb attempted to create a dilemma for the opposition. The chief Whig charge against Polk, he maintained, involved the presidential decision to order troops into the disputed territory along the Rio Grande. This order, the Whigs now claimed, had been intended to provoke war. While prepared to defend Polk's actions on the basis of national security, Cobb chose to refute Whig accusations by citing correspondence from General Taylor to the president urging this advance as an essential part of United States' efforts to secure its territory. Lest anyone miss the irony of the situation, he bluntly observed: "it is said that the President, in issuing this order ... commenced an unnecessary and unconstitutional war, for which the most bitter denunciations are heaped upon him by gentlemen who, at the same time, shout hosannahs to the general who ... perhaps had more influence on the mind of the President in issuing that order than any other man!"[63]

Even as Cobb defended President Polk in the House, the cause for the rancorous war debate ended as American and Mexican representatives signed the Treaty of Guadalupe

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[62] Ibid.

[63] Ibid.

Hidalgo. Seventeen days later, a messenger from Mexico bearing news of the treaty reached Washington. The agreement secured both peace and a huge cession of Mexican territory.[64]

The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo ended most practical debate about responsibility for the war, but it did nothing to ease the ongoing territorial dispute. Nevertheless, throughout the winter of 1847-1848, Cobb's Georgia correspondents voiced increasing confidence in compromise. They had some cause for optimism. The two leading candidates for the Democratic presidential nomination, Secretary of State James Buchanan of Pennsylvania and Senator Lewis Cass of Michigan, had declared publicly their support for compromise. Like Cobb and Polk, Buchanan favored the extension of the Missouri Compromise line. Cass preferred a solution derived from the doctrine of popular sovereignty, which held that citizens in the territories should determine their own domestic institutions -- including slavery. Besides reflecting the American faith in self-government, popular sovereignty held great appeal for many Democrats because of its ambiguity as to when slavery might be barred from a territory. This vagueness meant that northern and

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[64] David M. Potter, The Impending Crisis, 1848-1861 (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1976), pp. 1-5.

southern Democrats could interpret the doctrine in ways that best met their needs.[65]

The emergence of two possible Democratic compromise solutions posed a minor dilemma for Cobb. Already on the record as an advocate of the Missouri Compromise extension, he now reconsidered his stance. Which option would best serve the cause of Union and Democratic harmony? Impressed by Cass' efforts during the struggle for all of Oregon, and convinced that northern Democrats favored the doctrine of popular sovereignty, Cobb felt inclined to support Cass. He sought the advice of several southern Democrats.[66]

Hopkins Holsey enthusiastically embraced the activities of the northern Democracy. He believed that developments in Washington were fast undermining the southern Whig position. Already, northern antislavery Whigs had introduced resolutions seeking a ban on slavery in Washington D.C., and House Speaker Robert C. Winthrop, a Massachusetts Whig, had issued procedural rulings harmful to southern interests. Holsey described these developments as "peculiarly unfortunate for the Southern Whigs." With considerable relish, he added that "it is also an unlucky omen for them

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[65] Hopkins Holsey to Howell Cobb, December 31, 1847; Joseph Henry Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, January 21, 1848, Howell Cobb Papers; Potter, The Impending Crisis, pp. 69-72; Cooper, The South and the Politics of Slavery, pp. 254-256.

[66] Hopkins Holsey to Howell Cobb, December 31, 1847, Howell Cobb Papers; Henry R. Jackson to Howell Cobb, June 21, 1848, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, pp. 110-111.

that Northern Democrats were the only members from the non-slaveholding states, voting against the agitation of the question." In light of "this conclusive demonstration by ... Northern Democrats," the editor advised that they be allowed to choose between the Missouri Compromise or popular sovereignty. "If our friends," he maintained, "are of the opinion that they can stand better upon one of these propositions than the other, of course we should let them have their own way." Southern Democrats, he asserted, "will be satisfied with either position."[67]

Cobb's other advisors proved less enthusiastic than Holsey, but voiced a willingness at least to consider popular sovereignty as a starting point for compromise. A North Carolina Democrat predicted that either Buchanan or Cass could carry the Democracy of his state, but without "burst[s] of very enthusiastic admiration or affection for either of them." Cobb's old college chum, Henry L. Benning, described popular sovereignty as a step in the right direction, but "not precisely the thing ... the exigency requires." The ambiguity which gave the doctrine such appeal to Democratic politicians caused Benning the most concern. He complained that popular sovereignty did not clearly repudiate "the principle of the Wilmot Proviso," and urged Cobb to press for

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[67] Hopkins Holsey to Howell Cobb, December 31, 1847, Howell Cobb Papers.

a clear statement that under the Cass plan slavery would be permitted in all territories prior to statehood.[68]

Based on these reports, Cobb concluded that he and the Democratic party could safely endorse either compromise position or either leading candidate for the presidential campaign of 1848. With this worry resolved, he began making preparations for an active role in the national campaign. In April, he joined Thomas Ritchie and "some of the ablest men of our party" in launching The Campaign, a Democratic organ for the upcoming presidential contest. Although not a delegate to the national convention in Baltimore, he also had the pleasure of seeing press reports urging his name for president of the convention. The New Orleans Courier suggested that Georgia Democrats substitute Cobb for a member of their delegation. If Georgia Democrats took this step, the Courier declared, "chances are that he will be the man; as while he is personally and politically acceptable to every democrat, he is [in Washington, D.C.] considered the best presiding officer in Congress."[69]

The Democratic national convention met in May. Despite the Courier's suggestion, Cobb did not serve as a member of

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[68] James C. Dobbin to Howell Cobb, January 10, 1848, ibid; Henry L. Benning to Howell Cobb, February 23, 1848, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, pp. 97-103.

[69] Howell Cobb to James Cooper, April 26, 1848, Howell Cobb Papers; New Orleans Courier, cited in Athens Southern Banner, June 15, 1848.

the Georgia delegation. On the fourth ballot, the convention nominated Cass for the presidency. In a subsequent vote, it selected William O. Butler of Kentucky for the vice-presidential spot. Although they had nominated the leading exponent of popular sovereignty, the Democrats declined to embrace his doctrine in their platform. Instead, the party took an amorphous stance of opposition to abolitionism and support for the "compromises of the Constitution." The Whigs nominated Taylor in June. They avoided the entire territorial issue by declining to write a party platform. The political picture grew more complex in August with the emergence of the Free Soil party. Composed of an uneasy coalition by Martin Van Buren's Barnburner faction of the New York Democracy, proviso Democrats, antislavery Whigs, and abolitionists from the Liberty party, the new party nominated Van Buren for the presidency. It also adopted a platform vowing to resist slavery extension and demanding the abolition of slavery by the federal government when such action became constitutional.[70]

While Cobb planned to mount a strong effort for the Cass-Butler ticket, his lieutenants reflected mixed feelings about the nominees. Tom Cobb greeted news from the convention with the declaration that "I am 'reconciled' not very much 'delighted.'" Describing himself as no "great

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[70] Milledgeville Federal Union, May 16, 1848; June 6, 1848; Potter, The Impending Crisis, pp. 77-81.

admirer of Cass," brother Tom did praise the Democratic decision to nominate two anti-proviso candidates as a "generous act." Most loyal Democrats blamed the Calhounites for raising doubts about Cass among southern voters. A. P. Powers complained that Calhoun and his "miserable idolaters" sought "nothing but the ruin of the country or the democratic party which is nearly the same." Henry R. Jackson concluded that "my views always have coincided with yours upon this subject .... Gen. Cass is right throughout. He has suggested the only ground upon which a southern man can stand."[71]

VI

In the midst of these events, another devastating family crisis threatened Cobb's political career. Shortly after the family returned to Washington, Basil, their infant son, fell seriously ill. He died in early January. Barely two months later, their toddler son Henry also succumbed to disease. Two months after that, letters arrived from Alabama bearing news of the death of Mary Ann's younger brother Andrew from an overdose of paregoric taken to alleviate pain from a toothache.[72]

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[71] Thomas Reade Rootes Cobb to Howell Cobb, May 31, 1848; A. P. Powers to Howell Cobb, May 30, 1848, Howell Cobb Papers; Henry R. Jackson to Howell Cobb, June 21, 1848, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, pp. 110-111.

[72] Laura Rutherford to Howell and Mary Ann Cobb, January 2, 1848; Robert Clarke to Howell Cobb, Bill for Funeral Expenses, March 5, 1848; John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, May 16, 1848, Howell Cobb Papers; Sarah Rootes Cobb to Martha Jackson, May 22, 1848, Jackson-Prince Papers, Southern

These deaths hit Cobb hard. Stephens wrote that "he seems to be a good deal affected by the bereavement." Yet, as had been the case in the past and would be the case in the future, Cobb found distraction from his own grief in the need to console Mary Ann. When Basil first fell ill, she suffered a relapse in her recovery. Her doctors immediately warned that ongoing improvement required her to "brace herself against any contingency." No amount of psychological preparation, however, could have steeled her for the sledgehammer blows that followed. Already weakened by her other ailments, she lapsed into a deep depression. She ceased communicating with people back in Georgia. Sarah Cobb grieved that her daughter-in-law refused to write to her, or even respond to inquiries through letters written by others. She concluded that Mary Ann "cant [sic] be herself or she would not act so."[73]

Cobb's concern for his wife and surviving children preyed upon his mind. Even before these recent losses, both Mary Ann and Sarah had hoped that he might give up his congressional seat. Now, Mary Ann refused to expose any more

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Historical Collection, Library of the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, North Carolina (Hereafter: Jackson-Prince Papers).

[73] Alexander H. Stephens to Linton Stephens, March 5, 1848, Alexander H. Stephens Papers, Manhattanville College of the Sacred Heart, Purchase, New York, (Hereafter: Stephens Papers, MC); G. L. Radford to Howell Cobb, December 26, 1847, Howell Cobb Papers; Sarah Rootes Cobb to Martha Jackson, June 19, 1848, Jackson-Prince Papers.

of her children to the hazards of life in Washington. Moreover, Cobb dreaded the potential impact on her mental health of extended separations should she remain in Athens while he continued his political career. In the past, he had taken a philosophical view of his congressional service. When comparing the comfort his wife derived from her religious faith with his own worldly struggles, he had mused: "How vain and fruitless are all the pursuits of life that end in the grave, I feel it & know it & yet, oh blind fatal inconsistency, here I am struggling up the rugged steps of earthly fame at the cost and sacrifice of comfort and happiness."[74]

Previously, these pronouncements had always borne the imprint of a man seeking to appease his wife, but the loss of his sons convinced Cobb to abandon his congressional career. He privately informed his closest advisors that he did not intend to seek reelection. They responded with powerful appeals that he reconsider. Albon Chase conceded the validity of Cobb's family concerns, but suggested that when the next Congress assembled in two years, "the children you have left will then be old enough to be separated from you temporarily, or if you choose to take them with you they would be better able to stand the climate." At the present,

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[74] Sarah Rootes Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, March 12, 1846; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, January 14, 1847; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, January 25, 1847; Albon Chase to Howell Cobb, (?), 1848, Howell Cobb Papers.

Chase warned, "we cannot well afford ... to have a scramble for your place -- there is too much at stake." In two years, if Cobb chose to resign rather than take his seat, "it might do us less injury." James Jackson echoed Chase's arguments and pleaded that "you have got a position which you ought to hold -- you never were stronger ... in the district or the state as you are today .... The speakership is fair before you & it is an honour too great to be lost sight of."[75]

Ironically, an anti-Cobb movement launched by a Sixth District Democratic editor, reinforced these arguments. William Martin, editor of the Dahlonega Watchman, felt that Cobb had been less attentive to him than other district editors. In February, even before Cobb had hinted that he might not seek reelection, the editor issued a call for a district convention to nominate "a suitable man to be run for the next Congress." Martin had hoped his call might provide a rallying point for any anti-Cobb feeling in the district. Instead, it prompted an outpouring of support for Cobb by Sixth District Democrats. One supporter assured Cobb that the people "would be loath to give you up & ... are perfectly furious on the subject." Another reported that even before Lumpkin County Democrats met to select delegates for the district convention, "I ascertained that you were too strong in the confidence of our democracy to entertain any fear of

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[75] Albon Chase to Howell Cobb, March, 1848; James Jackson to Howell Cobb, April 13, 1848, ibid.

the result. Every man I consulted was for you against the field." In the face of this unanimity, Martin withdrew all opposition to Cobb's renomination. When the Sixth District nominating convention assembled in Danielsville on June 6, the enthusiasm expressed by Cobb's supporters resulted in his renomination by acclamation.[76]

By the time Cobb received news of his nomination, his determination to leave Congress had evaporated. His surviving correspondence provides no explanation for his reversal. It seems likely that the demonstration of overwhelming support by his constituents, as well as the arguments of his advisors, figured in his decision. It also seems certain that politics had become such a vital part of his life that he simply could not give up his chosen profession. Yet, beyond these considerations lingered the dreams of his youth. He had embarked on a public career nearly a decade before with the determination to become a republican statesman -- a man dedicated to the preservation of the liberty bequeathed by the founders of the Union regardless of the personal cost. Now that Union and that liberty faced its greatest peril since the darkest days of the American Revolution. Cobb could not turn his back on this crisis and remain the man he envisioned himself to be.

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[76] James Cooper to Howell Cobb, February 19, 1848; March 9, 1848; (?) to Howell Cobb, March 7, 1848, ibid; Athens Southern Banner, June 10, 1848.

VII

Cobb signalled the importance he placed on the current political contest in the opening sentence of his letter accepting the Sixth District nomination. "Within my recollection," he began, "there has been no Presidential election involving so many and such important issues as the present." Slavery in the territories represented the critical focus of the campaign. Long the subject of discussion "upon mere speculative theories," the end of the Mexican War had given the issue "a practical shape" which required prompt and decisive action. He warned that southerners must guard against a northern antislavery coalition composed of "the whole of the whig and abolition parties." This evil combination meant "to strike ... our peculiar institution a deadly blow." Unable to deny that some northern Democrats had also joined this antislavery group, he described Democratic participation as "inconsiderable."[77]

Cobb forcefully urged his constituents to beware the trap so carefully prepared by the Whigs. He insisted that their claims on behalf of General Taylor required close scrutiny. Southern Whigs trumpeted assurances that because Taylor resided in the South and owned slaves, "no bill

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[77] Howell Cobb to Hopkins Holsey, et al., June 27, 1848, Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collection, Felix Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia (Hereafter: Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collection).

involving the principles of the 'Wilmot Proviso' would receive his executive sanction." Yet northern Whigs promised their supporters with equal confidence -- and "upon more explicit assurances" -- that Taylor "will never ... interfere with the action of Congress, when it shall forbid the existence of slavery in our newly acquired territory." No unbiased observer, he concluded, could doubt that "an attempt is being made to practice a fraud and deception upon the one or the other section of the Union." Only the absence of a Whig party platform, he charged, made this duplicitous strategy possible. Nevertheless, Cobb maintained that Taylor owed it to the country to make his true position known. If the General failed to do so, "he will show himself utterly unworthy of our esteem and respect."[78]

Cobb closed his letter with a ringing affirmation of the soundness and integrity of the national Democracy and its nominees. The "safety of the South," he argued, rested "not in the men who are to fill the offices of President and Vice-President, but ... in knowing what these men will do in the event of their election." Neither Cass nor Butler nor the Democratic party, he declared, had any need "to practice concealment or deception." All stood united upon clearly enunciated and long established principles. Cobb reminded his constituents that Cass -- unlike Taylor -- had courageously revealed his views on the territorial issue.

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[78] Ibid.

Cass thus deserved credit for "the very great change produced in the public mind at the North, on the subject of the Wilmot Proviso, which at one time threatened to sweep everything before it." Still fearful that southern Democrats might be swayed by Whig chicanery, Cobb pleaded "let not our Northern friends, who are true to us on this question, be stricken down by our own suicidal hands."[79]

Cobb's assessment of Whig campaign strategy proved basically accurate. His claims for the Democratic party, however, included considerable overstatement. Even as his letter accepting renomination made its way from Washington to Georgia, Whig Senator Willie P. Mangum of North Carolina slammed the Democrats for issuing different campaign biographies of Cass for consumption in the North and South. Moreover, many southern Democrats voiced the same anxiety about the vagueness of Cass' popular sovereignty stance that Henry Benning had expressed during the winter. Despite these discrepancies, Cobb did not deviate from his initial position. His faith in the fundamental soundness of the national Democracy rendered him certain that -- Cass' vagueness notwithstanding -- a Democratic triumph would enhance southern security.[80]

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[79] Ibid.

[80] Potter, The Impending Crisis, p. 77; J. C. Dobbin to Howell Cobb, June 15, 1848, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, pp. 107-109.

Fulfilling his role as a leader of the national Democracy, Cobb carried the party's message to audiences outside Georgia. In June, at a Tammany Hall rally in New York, he castigated the Whigs as an organization devoid of scruples. They had only nominated Taylor, he warned, because the Whig candidate -- like the Whig party -- lacked all principle. A few weeks later, he repeated his charges at a large Democratic rally in Baltimore. A correspondent for a Pennsylvania newspaper reported that Cobb had "exhibited, killed, [and] dissected" the many falsehoods of "Taylorism."[81]

Cobb felt especially frustrated by Whig efforts to present themselves and their candidate in non-partisan terms. On July 1, in a speech before the House entitled "The Necessity for Party Organization," Cobb damned the current Whig renunciation of political parties as a cheap ploy "with direct reference to mere party purposes." How strange, he marvelled, that "the cry of '<u>no partyism</u>' is the rallying cry <u>of a party</u>."[82]

What evidence, Cobb demanded -- "beyond their empty and unmeaning professions" -- could Whigs offer of their sincerity? The entire history of the Whig organization, he

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[81] <u>New York True Sun</u>, cited in Athens <u>Southern Banner</u>, June (?), 1848; <u>York Gazette</u>, cited in Athens <u>Southern Banner</u>, September 7, 1848.

[82] <u>Appendix to the Congressional Globe</u>, Thirtieth Congress, First Session, pp. 775-779.

charged, provided little basis for confidence. He recalled that in the presidential election of 1840, Whigs had nominated another hero and "professed to be horrified at the very word party." Yet upon winning the national election, they had perpetrated an aggressive campaign of proscription against Democratic officeholders. In 1844, the Whigs proudly had promulgated a distinctive party platform and nominated Henry Clay -- "the man who was the imbodiment of their principles" -- for the presidency. The repudiation of their man and their principles by the voters had created a dilemma for the Whig party. The emergence of Whig internal disputes over the territorial issue, Cobb claimed, had further complicated this dilemma, and motivated the new cries of "no partyism."[83]

Not satisfied simply to undermine the sincerity of Whig calls for a nonpartisan election, Cobb also offered a positive defense of party organizations. Since "the best and purest days of the Republic," he argued, political parties had served as the "very corner-stone of our whole political system." Party, he insisted, represented far more than a "mere catchword, used to delude and deceive ... the honest people." Rather, it represented "an association of men acting in concert with each other to carry out great fundamental principles in the administration of government." Within party ranks, he maintained, "men of the same political

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[83] Ibid.

faith agree to unite their efforts for the purpose of placing in ... the Government those of their fellow citizens whose opinions and principles accord with their own."[84]

More importantly, Cobb declared, the existence of great political parties provided a practical means by which the mass of citizens could give effective voice to their values and needs. This benefit, he proclaimed, "is the work of party. It enables the people to declare their will in a practical form, and compels a compliance with it ... [by] their agents. It carries the beautiful theory of our system into practical operation, and makes our Government ... what our fathers intended it should be -- a Government of the people." Whig efforts to break down party organizations for temporary political advantage, he warned, threatened "the fundamental principle of self-government, and seeks to paralyze the arm of the people by relieving their ... representatives from all responsibility to them as the source from which all power emanates."[85]

Cobb could not focus his primary efforts on the presidential race, however. The territorial issue continued to cast a pall over congressional activities. Both congressmen and the public felt a profound desire to put this crisis behind them. Reflecting this anxiety, John Lamar wrote, "I hope to God Congress will not adjourn before the

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[84] Ibid.

[85] Ibid.

nigger question is settled." He believed Congress must act before the presidential election, while both parties felt inclined to be conciliatory. Lamar predicted that if the national legislature delayed action until after the election, the winners would be indisposed to compromise, and the losers too exasperated to yield anything. He warned Cobb, "if you love your country better than president making, you will use all your influence to have it settled before you adjourn. It is more important than people are aware."[86]

In July, Congress did as Lamar hoped and attempted to resolve the territorial dispute. On July 20, a special Senate committee headed by John M. Clayton, a Delaware Whig, reported a bill that called for the territorial organization of the Mexican Cession -- the territory taken from Mexico as a result of the war -- and Oregon. Under the proposed legislation, Oregon would be organized without slavery, while the Supreme Court would decide the fate of slavery in the lands taken from Mexico. Both President Polk and John C. Calhoun endorsed the measure. Cobb and most of the Georgia delegation to Congress also favored passage. Dubbed the Clayton Compromise, the bill won a close vote in the Senate with bipartisan support. When the bill reached the House, however, it met stiff opposition from Stephens and a group of pro-Taylor southern Whigs who feared that passage of the

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[86] John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, July 12, 1848, Howell Cobb Papers.

compromise might damage Taylor's electoral chances among northern Whigs. Denouncing the proposal as a surrender of southern rights, the Stephens group joined with antislavery congressmen to kill the compromise.[87]

The failure of the Clayton Compromise meant that the territorial issue remained a sore point. It soon became clear that the national legislature intended to leave the establishment of governments in the Mexican Cession to the future. Congress did pass legislation creating a government for Oregon that incorporated the language of the Wilmot Proviso. President Polk reluctantly signed the legislation, but insisted that he based his signature on Oregon's location above the 36°-30' line.[88]

These developments created a serious quandary for Cobb. Since the very inception of the Oregon issue, he had favored the creation of a territorial government regardless of slavery's fate in the region. While convinced that Congress lacked the constitutional authority to exclude slavery from the territories, he favored southern concessions regarding Oregon as an important element in the preservation of harmony within the Democratic party. He also hoped that southern concessions on Oregon might lay the groundwork for northern

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[87] Cooper, The South and the Politics of Slavery, pp. 264-265; Shryock, Georgia and the Union in 1850, pp. 157-159; Congressional Globe, Thirtieth Congress, First Session, pp. 1013-1015.

[88] Potter, The Impending Crisis, pp. 72-76.

concessions in the territory taken from Mexico. The decision to establish a government in Oregon while leaving the Mexican Cession in limbo, however, severely damaged his hopes. Although Cobb retained his faith in an eventual compromise, he feared that he could not sustain his previous Oregon position in an election year when the politics of slavery provided the focal point of the campaign. Without fanfare, he cast his vote against the Oregon bill.[89]

VIII

When Congress adjourned in mid-August, Cobb raced home to take part in the political campaign. Even before his arrival, he knew that Georgia Democrats faced a difficult situation in the presidential race. On June 20, W. C. Daniell predicted that by nominating Taylor the Whigs had imposed on Democrats "the duties of a laborious and arduous campaign." While hopeful that Cass might hold the votes of loyal Georgia Democrats, Daniell felt less confident that the Democratic ticket could carry the state. Eleven days later, he expressed greater optimism about Democratic support for Cass and predicted that only an insignificant number of "malcontent Democrats" would desert the party.[90]

Thomas W. Thomas, writing from Elberton, echoed much that Daniell had reported. Although fairly certain of local

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[89] Athens Southern Banner, August 17, 1848.

[90] W. C. Daniell to Howell Cobb, June 20, 1848; July 1, 1848, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, pp. 109-110, 113-114.

Democratic support for Cass, he voiced concern that efforts by the Whig press to paint Taylor as a nonpartisan "second Washington" threatened to turn many "weak heads." He bitterly attributed this Whig success to Georgia's Democratic editors, who "have a sort of reverence for Taylor ... and [refuse] to lay hands on him." With sharp political insight, he lamented that "we are now reaping the fruits of having indulged in the weakness of admiring military prowess."[91]

Cobb's own reelection appeared certain. The Whigs acknowledged this certainty by nominating a political unknown, James Harris of Clarke County, as their "sacrifice" in the congressional race. Nevertheless, Harris and the Whig press, hoping to exploit Democratic ambivalence toward the Cass-Butler ticket, launched a vigorous campaign in the Sixth District. They attacked on a broad front, but made the territorial issue the focus of their efforts.

The Whigs launched their campaign as soon as Cobb's letter accepting the Democratic nomination became public. Editorials in the Southern Whig specifically sought to refute the charges contained in that letter. Cobb, the Whig complained, professed a "love for fair-dealing," but manifested none of it in his claims for northern Democrats. The Whig challenged Cobb's assertion that only "an inconsiderable portion of the Democratic party," had united

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[91] Thomas W. Thomas to Howell Cobb, July 7, 1848, ibid., pp. 114-115.

with other free-soil elements to exclude slavery from the western territories. In a backhanded defense of its own northern allies, the Whig maintained that any fair-minded observer must admit that "Democrats of the North are just as bitterly opposed to slavery extension ... as are the Whigs or any body else." Even now, it warned, "large masses of the Democracy of the free States are ... marshaling their forces under the standard of Mr. Martin Van Buren, an openly avowed advocate of the Wilmot Proviso."[92]

The newspaper also rejected Cobb's insistence that the Democrats represented the party of principle. Although the Whig offered no excuse for its party's "no platform" stance, it denounced Cass' popular sovereignty plan as a sham designed to dupe the voters. Cass and his minions, the paper declared, merely sought "to dodge the question by leaving it to be decided by the free negroes, Indians and mulattoes of California and New Mexico."[93]

The Democratic party embodied no true principle, the Whig insisted, and Cobb knew it. Yet he was such a "rabid partizan" that he could not rise above "partyism" for either the good of his district or the Union. As proof of its accusation, the paper cited Cobb's part in blocking a congressional investigation of Whig charges that Cass had defrauded the government during previous service. The

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[92] Athens Southern Whig, July 20, 1848.

[93] Ibid.

people, concluded the Whig, "have had enough of party; it has already too much disturbed the peace and harmony of community." Voters should demonstrate their resolve by voting the Whig ticket.[94]

Other Whig newspapers joined in these attacks. The Milledgeville Southern Recorder and the Augusta Chronicle & Sentinel each published editorials condemning Cobb's votes on the Oregon issue. In debates on the floor of the House, they proclaimed, he had stated his willingness to vote for the exclusion of slavery from the Oregon territory despite believing that Congress lacked the authority to exercise this power. No man capable of such "recklessness of principle" could ever be fit to hold high office.[95]

From the stump, Harris closely followed the line laid out by the Whig press. He hammered away at the themes of Democratic duplicity on the critical issues of Oregon and the Mexican Cession. Over and over, he repeated Whig warnings that northern Democrats could not be trusted to defend vital southern interests. He focused his criticisms of Cobb on regular denunciations of his "inconsistency" in voting for slavery exclusion in Oregon during the previous congressional session, but against it during the current one.[96]

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[94] Ibid., July 27, 1848; September 28, 1848.

[95] Milledgeville Southern Recorder and Augusta Chronicle & Sentinel, cited in Athens Southern Banner, August 17, 1848.

[96] Ibid., September 14, 1848.

Confident of his own reelection, Cobb largely ignored the Whig charges against himself. He relied on the Democratic press and his own record to provide his defense. When he met Harris in public debate at a "free barbecue" in Madison County, the Whig candidate read from the congressional record to prove his charges of "inconsistency" on the Oregon issue. Rather than rising to refute Harris directly, Cobb simply challenged him "to read further" from the record. The Banner happily reported that as Harris read the basis of his charge evaporated. The record clearly revealed, it gloated, that Cobb's vote in the Twenty-Ninth Congress for slavery exclusion in Oregon had been motivated by the conviction that "the Proviso was not then a practical question," because Oregon stood alone in a region totally unsuited to slave labor. Consequently, he had been prepared to act on the basis of the Missouri Compromise, and thus set "a proper example to our Northern brethren, when the issue should arise upon New Mexico and California." In a previous editorial, the Banner had already explained that the end of the war, combined with Whig refusals to effect a fair compromise in the Mexican Cession, had made slavery in Oregon a "practical" question that required Cobb to reverse his earlier vote.[97]

Nor did the Banner allow charges in the Whig newspapers to go unanswered. It responded to the accusations in the

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[97] Ibid., August 17, 1848; September 14, 1848.

Southern Recorder and Chronicle & Sentinel that Cobb had displayed "recklessness of principle" in his Oregon votes with indignation. How, editor Holsey thundered, could a party that refused to declare publicly any principles criticize another for "recklessness of principle?" Damning the "contracted souls" of Cobb's accusers, the Banner reminded its readers that "the higher a public man rises in estimation and influence, the more violent and groundless the assaults upon him." Later, the Banner proudly reported that Cobb's constituents had sustained his course by adopting resolutions that endorsed his Oregon votes.[98]

Freed from any serious concern about his own reelection, Cobb concentrated on winning the Sixth District for Cass. He spent much of September and October stumping the district for the national Democratic ticket. He worked mainly to convince the voters that calls for "no partyism" really represented a shield behind which northern and southern Whigs concealed irreconcilable differences on the slavery issue. If the voters allowed this farce to succeed, he warned, then "the one or the other section, the North or the South, must be cheated." He reinforced this warning with reminders that "not one single Northern Whig had ever opposed the Proviso -- they were all -- ALL in its favor." General Cass, on the other hand, had boldly proclaimed his support for a fair

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[98] Ibid.

settlement of the proviso dispute, and most northern Democrats had rallied to his proposed compromise.[99]

Cobb's contacts with the voters served to override any doubts raised by Daniell and Thomas. He soon could declare that "the prospects for the democratic party were never brighter ... & I feel more ... encouraged the more I mingle with the people." He reported to his friend Thomas DeKalb Harris that in touring the district he had not discovered "the slightest defection from our ranks."[100]

Cobb's participation in a two day mass meeting of Sixth District Democrats only strengthened his optimism. The meeting was held eighteen miles from any town, and arranged with only two weeks notice. Nevertheless, between two and four thousand people attended. Speeches began on the afternoon of the first day and "continued unceasingly ... until after midnight the second day." Cobb personally made "no less than four speeches," including an impromptu address at two o'clock in the morning when roused from bed by his enthusiastic supporters. With great satisfaction, he informed Harris, "I have attended and addressed many meetings during our various campaigns, but I never before witnessed such enthusiasm as pervaded this vast assemblage." These

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[99] Ibid., September 14, 1848.

[100] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, September 15, 1848, Howell Cobb Papers; Howell Cobb to Thomas D. Harris, September 29, 1848, Thomas Dekalb Harris Family Papers, Georgia Department of Archives and History, Atlanta, Georgia.

campaign experiences, as well as information received from other parts of the state, convinced Cobb that the Democrats could carry Georgia. He confided to Harris that "if we do not give a good account of ourselves ... I shall be the worst disappointed man that ever went through a canvass."[101]

Cobb's strenuous efforts within his own district made it impossible for him to campaign elsewhere. Nonetheless, he did employ his pen as a tool for carrying the Democratic message to voters outside the Sixth. In an editorial entitled "Duplicity Unmasked" and a letter to the "Democratic Taylor Party" in Charleston, South Carolina, he delivered the same declarations of Whig duplicity and northern Democratic reliability that he carried to his own constituents.[102]

Cobb also maintained active contacts with Democrats throughout the country in a bid to remain current with developments in the presidential race. Most of his correspondents provided optimistic assurances of victory. The more astute observers, however, expressed grave anxiety about the recent course of events.[103]

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[101] Ibid.

[102] Howell Cobb, "Duplicity Unmasked," November, 1848; Howell Cobb to Charleston, South Carolina, Citizens Committee, November, 1848, Howell Cobb Papers.

[103] Thomas Smith to Howell Cobb, June 27, 1848; George Fries to Howell Cobb, September 4, 1848; (?) to Howell Cobb, September 6, 1848; Andrew Birdsall to Howell Cobb, September 7, 1848; September 8, 1848; Richard French to Howell Cobb, September 10, 1848; W. J. Brown to Howell Cobb, September 15,

Thomas Smith, an Indiana congressman, best reflected this concern. He pleaded with Cobb to hold southern Democrats to their principles. Smith warned that a "momentous political crisis [is] ... developing that is destined to shake our political fabrick." The Democracy had long stood as the bulwark of the Union, he maintained, and within the Union it had always fallen to the Democrats "to concilliate [sic] and compromise sectional interests and feelings." The principle of non-interference with slavery by the federal government had been adopted by the national Democracy as a means to that end. Non-interference represented the only position that northern Democrats could successfully hold and defend. Now the Whigs and abolitionists, he charged, had undertaken a contemptible campaign to shatter this critical bulwark of the Union by nominating Taylor. Smith bluntly warned that "the fear amongst the democratic party [in the north] is that the south may so far unite on the nominal whig candidate as to give him all." Should that occur, he predicted, it would produce "a falling off amongst your friends in these parts that time can never cure."[104]

While Cobb could not ignore entirely the possibility that Georgia might go for Taylor, he and his closest advisors sincerely believed that Cass would carry the state. The

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1848, ibid.

[104] Thomas Smith to Howell Cobb, June 27, 1848, ibid.

outcome of the congressional races in October, increased his optimism. Although the Democrats and Whigs each won four congressional seats, the Democrats narrowly edged their opponents in the total number of votes cast. Easily reelected himself, Cobb felt certain that the ongoing efforts to motivate the electorate would result in an additional 5,000 votes being cast in November. Asserting that "we are better organized than we ever have been before in Georgia," he described himself as "confident of carrying the state." Despite his optimistic expressions, however, Cobb did not slacken his labors for Cass. "If Ga. goes for Taylor," he vowed, "the fault shall not lie at my door."[105]

In light of these expectations, the outcome of the presidential election came as a shock to Cobb and the Democrats. Taylor won the election and carried Georgia with a majority of nearly three thousand votes. As Cobb had predicted, the voter turnout increased dramatically between October and November, but with unexpected results. James F. Cooper, writing from Dahlonega, described the situation as "extraordinary and disasterous [sic]." He noted that Democratic voters who had not cast ballots in October had turned out in November "only to vote against us." The

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[105] Howell Cobb to Thomas D. Harris, October 21, 1848, Alexander H. Stephens - Howell Cobb Letters, Felix Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia; Shryock, Georgia and the Union in 1850, pp. 173-177.

party's rank and file, he complained, "have rebelled by regiments .... We have been stabbed in the dark."[106]

In defeat, Cobb could take some consolation from Cass' success in the Sixth District, one of the two Georgia congressional districts that produced a Democratic majority. Yet the realization that even here the outcome had been much closer than Cobb anticipated tempered his satisfaction. Like most of the Georgia Democrats who had remained loyal to their party, he persisted in his belief that the Whigs had employed base tricks to deceive voters throughout the country. And he wondered if, as the Banner mournfully predicted, the northern Democrats had fought their last battle for southern rights.[107]

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[106] Macon Georgia Telegraph, November 21, 1848; November 28, 1848; James F. Cooper to Howell Cobb, November 11, 1848, Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collection.

[107] Athens Southern Banner, November 30, 1848.

Chapter Eight

"I Am Immovable"

With the presidential election over, Cobb made immediate plans to return to Washington. He departed before the end of November. His trip proved an anxious one. Mary Ann, whose own health remained in question, adhered to her previous determination not to expose their children to the hazards of winter in the capital. While Cobb acquiesced to his wife's decision, he worried "about the dear ones I have left behind." He could take some solace, however, from the large number of House members who had also left their families at home. It seemed, he wrote Mary Ann, "we shall have a Congress of 'grass Widowers.'"[1]

Yet Cobb's political anxieties could not be so easily relieved. The presidential race had left a bitter taste in the mouths of Georgia Democrats. Convinced that Whigs had stolen their victory, disappointed Democrats -- Cobb among them -- warned one another that their rivals would not defend the South's most vital interests. Efforts by Whig leaders to ease popular excitement about the proviso only heightened Democratic certainty of betrayal. John Forsyth, editor of the Columbus Times, reported with frantic rancor that "the

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[1] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, December 1, 1848; Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, December 2, 1848, Howell Cobb Papers, Felix Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia (Hereafter: Howell Cobb Papers).

Whigs in our streets are even now preparing excuses for Gen. Taylor, in the event he 'holds his hand' when 'the Proviso' is presented to him." Nor did Georgia Democrats restrict these dire predictions to private communications. The state Democratic press began to trumpet a more rigorous anti-proviso line, and even moderate organs like the Southern Banner and Federal Union began to espouse a Calhounite-style demonstration of southern unity. Cobb had no intention, however, of travelling that road.[2]

Upon arriving in Washington, Cobb made arrangements to share quarters with John Lumpkin. The two men shunned the usual boarding house arrangement, and secured rooms in a hotel at the corner of Tenth and E Streets. Cobb praised this "retired" residence because it provided "more opportunity for business and study." Despite his expressions of satisfaction, Mary Ann strongly disapproved his decision. She urged him to move into a private boarding house because its atmosphere would be "more like home on a larger scale." Residence in a hotel, she insisted, must lead to a "scrambling way of living" which might produce boredom when

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[2] Richard Harrison Shryock, Georgia and the Union in 1850 (Durham: Duke University Press, 1926), pp. 178-181; John Forsyth to Howell Cobb, November 10, 1848, in Ulrich Bonnell Phillips, ed., The Correspondence of Robert Toombs, Alexander H. Stephens, and Howell Cobb (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1913), pp. 136-137; William Hope Hull to Howell Cobb, January 26, 1849; February 7, 1849; Hopkins Holsey to Howell Cobb, January 27, 1849; February 13, 1849; Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, January 24, 1849, Howell Cobb Papers; Milledgeville Federal Union, December 19, 1848.

he returned home. With some satisfaction, she added, "I have read you quite a lecture ... much more than you would have listened to verbally -- but ... you have to read it as your dear wife wrote it." Cobb read her lecture, responded that the hotel really seemed like a large boarding house, and remained in his quarters.[3]

The issue of Cobb's residence proved but a minor diversion. Politics dominated the scene. At a personal level, he reported a widespread feeling that the outcome of the recent presidential contest had eliminated his chance to win the speakership of the next Congress. He conceded the probable accuracy of these conclusions, but declared himself flattered that his friends deemed him worthy of the post.[4]

Cobb also spent some time on patronage politics. With the Whigs controlling the House, and a Whig president about to take office, he had few chances of exerting significant influence. He learned, however, that the president-elect did not intend to pursue a proscriptive policy towards Democrats already holding federal posts. Armed with this information, Cobb began urging political associates not to resign their positions in anticipation of dismissal. He reasoned that Taylor's patronage policy seemed certain to irritate

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[3] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, December 9, 1848; December 12, 1848; December 17, 1848; Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, December 12, 1848, Howell Cobb Papers.

[4] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, December 9, 1848, ibid.

expectant Whigs. Democrats, he advised, should do nothing to discourage this development.[5]

Yet slavery overshadowed all other issues. John C. Calhoun perceived in this situation an opportunity to bring his long-held dream of a united South to fruition. Antislavery efforts within Congress lent impetus to the Calhoun movement. Besides attempting to impose the proviso on the Mexican Cession, antislavery congressmen launched a concerted attack on the slave trade within the District of Columbia. Spurred by this manifestation of northern hostility, southern congressmen of both parties agreed to an emergency caucus.[6]

The southern caucus met in the Senate chamber on the evening of December 22. Unable to reach a consensus, it held two additional meetings on January 15 and 22. Calhoun and his allies hoped these meetings might signal the first steps toward creation of a Southern party. They pushed hard for the adoption of a southern address, authored by Calhoun, which presented the current crisis as part of an ongoing and pervasive northern abolitionist conspiracy. They called on

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[5] Howell Cobb to James Cooper, December 19, 1848, Howell Cobb Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

[6] David M. Potter, The Impending Crisis, 1848-1861 (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1976), pp. 82-84.

the South to unite in resistance or prepare for subjugation by emancipated blacks and northern abolitionists.[7]

Although southern Whigs agreed to attend the caucus, they did not embrace the Calhounite agenda. Rather, they viewed the entire exercise as a Calhoun-inspired Democratic plot to disrupt the Whig party and cripple the Taylor administration before it took office. The Whigs thus entered Calhoun's movement intending "to control and crush it." Yet despite this commonality of purpose, southern Whigs did not present a completely united front. A small group, led by Senator John M. Berrien of Georgia, favored a national address with a more moderate tone than that proposed by Calhoun. The majority of southern Whigs, however, led by Alexander Stephens and Robert Toombs, opposed the issuance of any address. They meant to frustrate both Calhoun and Berrien.[8]

These partisan concerns quickly became apparent. Calhoun had labored to insure that his Southern Movement transcended party considerations, but in a series of test votes on the "Southern Address" the caucus divided along

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[7] John Niven, John C. Calhoun and the Price of Union (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), pp. 323-324.

[8] William J. Cooper, Jr., The South and the Politics of Slavery, 1828-1856 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978), pp. 269-271; Alexander H. Stephens to George W. Crawford, December 27, 1848; Robert Toombs to John J. Crittenden, January 3, 1849; January 22, 1849, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, pp. 138-142.

mainly Whig-Democratic lines. By January 22, when the caucus finally rejected Berrien's alternative and adopted Calhoun's address, most Whig congressmen had already bolted the meeting.[9]

From the inception of the Southern Movement, Cobb had demonstrated a hostility and skepticism rivaling that of the Whigs. He too realized that Calhoun's success must result in the destruction of national parties. Moreover, he felt profound doubts about the South Carolinian's motives. The old nullifier, he asserted, had no desire "to get clear" of the current controversy "on any reasonable terms." He charged that this sectional crisis constituted Calhoun's "last hope of organizing a southern party of which he shall be the head & soul." Cobb drew the distinction between the Carolinian and himself in clear and unmistakable terms. Calhoun, he charged, "looks to the dissolution of the democratic party, whether the union is preserved or not." He, on the other hand, sought the survival of both the Union and the Democracy. Convinced that a satisfactory compromise could be pieced together, he prayed that "God grant ... we

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[9] Milledgeville Federal Union, January 23, 1849; Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, January 16, 1849, Howell Cobb Papers; Arthur Charles Cole, The Whig Party in the South (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1914), pp. 140-141; Thomas E. Schott, Alexander H. Stephens of Georgia, A Biography (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), p. 98; Robert Toombs to John J. Crittenden, January 22, 1849, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, pp. 140-141.

may be able to floor the old reprobate & thereby preserve the honor of the south & secure the permanency of the Union."[10]

Yet, on one essential point, Cobb differed from his Whig rivals. Rather than expecting to control or crush this new Calhounite plot, he suspected that it might leave him politically isolated. Much of the southern Democratic leadership in Washington looked on the Calhoun movement with favor. Embittered by defeat in the presidential election and doubtful of Taylor's determination to resist the proviso, these men found the language of confrontation and resistance very appealing.[11]

News from Georgia also indicated that Democrats at home now doubted the feasibility of a truly moderate settlement to the crisis. Even brother John began to waver. "All may pass off peaceably," he conceded, "but how it can do so honorably to us I am at a loss to see." He complained that southerners appeared so inclined to "bravado" that he doubted if the North took their threats seriously any longer. It must seem to them, he thought, that "we will brag & be trod on at the same time." The South, he asserted, "must act decidedly and spiritedly or be the scorn of the Union." If the North refused to respect southern rights, then the South

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[10] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, December 21, 1849; February 8, 1849; Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, January 24, 1849, Howell Cobb Papers.

[11] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, December 21, 1848; Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, January 16, 1849, ibid.; Cooper, The South and the Politics of Slavery, pp. 287-289.

must sever its ties to the Union -- "peaceably if we can, forcibly if we must .... Let 'death before dishonor' be our motto."[12]

Faced with this glaring lack of public support at home, as well as the split of the caucus along party lines, Cobb predicted that he would soon find himself in the awkward position of standing "neither with the House of York or Lancaster." "My position," he lamented, "is ... a peculiar one as I sympathize with neither Mr. Calhoun or the Whigs." But, he insisted, "being well convinced that my own course ... is best for both the South & the Union ... I shall stand by it though I stand alone ... and am sacrificed in the effort to do my country & party justice." He did offer Mary Ann the consoling thought that his stance might well "hasten the time of my retiring from public life."[13]

Cobb sought advice from President Polk. The president advised the Georgian to block the issuance of any address by the caucus if possible. Failing that, he should refuse to sign any document that the meeting might promulgate.[14]

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[12] John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, January 3, 1849; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, February 15, 1849; William H. Hull to Howell Cobb, January 26, 1849; Hopkins Holsey to Howell Cobb, January 29, 1849, Howell Cobb Papers; Milledgeville Federal Union, January 2, 1849.

[13] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, January 15, 1849; Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, January 16, 1849; January 24, 1849, Howell Cobb Papers.

[14] M. M. Quaife, ed., The Diary of James K. Polk, four vols., (Chicago, 1910), IV, 280-281.

Inside the caucus, Cobb took an active, albeit limited, role. He lent vocal support to Berrien's proposal, describing it to Lamar as an effort to make the address "unacceptable to a larger number of southern members." When the final votes came at the meeting on January 22, however, he voted for neither the Berrien nor the Calhoun versions of the address. He justified his abstentions, saying, "I did not intend to sign either of them & therefore would not favor the one over the other."[15]

Cobb's refusal to sign Calhoun's address made his opposition to the Carolinian public. Aware that he now stood open to assault by embittered Calhoun Democrats, he also worried that southern Whigs might use his refusal to sign as a justification for their own opposition to the Southern Movement. Determined to frustrate those who hoped to use him either as a target or a shield, Cobb resorted to both a partisan attack on the Whigs as well as a vigorous critique of the Calhounite position. In both private letters and in a published address to his constituents, he warned that southern Whigs and Calhounites had adopted courses likely to tear the Union apart and bring ruin upon the South. Although Calhoun already had secured the signatures of most southern Democratic congressmen on his "Southern Address," Cobb found three dissidents willing to sign his public document. These

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[15] Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, January 16, 1849; January 24, 1849, Howell Cobb Papers.

included his Georgia colleague John Lumpkin of the Fifth District, as well as Linn Boyd and Beverly Clark of Kentucky.[16]

No honest observer, Cobb complained, could doubt that the Whig party had led the American people into error. No one, he insisted, should be allowed to forget that "the alliance of northern & southern Whigs is the true source of most of our grievances." Yet Calhoun, in his mania for a Southern party, had sought to absolve southern Whigs of culpability by avoiding "all party considerations" in his address. Cobb charged that the old nullifier's desire to expunge the southern Whig record represented nothing less than an "act of gross injustice" towards "our democratic friends at the north ... [who] have been stricken down whilst patriotically battling for ... our ... rights." The Georgian vowed never to endorse a document that placed loyal northern Democrats on equal footing with northern Whigs and abolitionists.[17]

Whatever Calhoun's motives, Cobb saw little basis for optimism regarding the reliability of southern Whigs.

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[16] Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, January 16, 1849; January 24, 1849; January 27, 1849; Howell Cobb to Hopkins Holsey, January 29, 1849, ibid.; Howell Cobb, John H. Lumpkin, Linn Boyd, and Beverly Clark, "To Our Constituents," February 26, 1849, Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collection, Felix Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia (Hereafter: Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collection).

[17] Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, January 16, 1849; January 24, 1849; January 27, 1849, Howell Cobb Papers.

Despite a history of antislavery agitation by northern Whiggery, southern Whigs had persisted in their adherence to the national party. This Whig perfidy, he reasoned, meant that Calhoun's dream of a nonpartisan Southern party had been fatally flawed from its inception. Cobb reasoned that those southerners still clinging to the Whig party must be "beyond the point where their minds can be reached by any argument." The southern Whig's faith in Zachary Taylor, he concluded, "was not more deep and fatal" than Calhoun's "hope of their sudden conversion."[18]

Nevertheless, Calhounites appeared determined to proceed with the creation of a sectional party. Cobb found neither logic nor wisdom in this plan. Regardless of what Calhoun called his new organization, southern Democrats would provide the overwhelming majority of its members. Their affiliation with this sectional party must result in the destruction of the national Democracy. How, he demanded, could such an arrangement enhance southern security? Southern Democrats, acting alone, did not possess nearly enough strength to "throw ample barriers around the peculiar interests of the South." Severing their bonds to the northern Democracy would simply reduce their power further. Cobb professed himself

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[18] Howell Cobb, et al., "To Our Constituents," February 26, 1849, Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collection.

unable to follow the logic which suggested that "our strength was to be increased by diminishing our numbers."[19]

Declaring that Calhoun's flawed strategy "possessed no charms to lure us from the old association which we had formed in the days of our earliest political recollection," Cobb offered an alternative approach to the crisis. All southerners who sincerely looked to the defense of their sectional interests should indeed unite. As a united people they should openly acknowledge their debt to northern Democrats and proclaim their loyalty to the national Democratic party. Therein, he insisted, lay the keys to both southern security and the survival of the Union. "So long as we look to the continuance of the Union," he observed, "so long will we look to the preservation of the ... Democratic party ... as an element of our greatest ... security."[20]

Yet Cobb appreciated that however forceful his arguments, southern extremists would denounce him as a petty politician who placed party above all other considerations. Nothing, he argued, could be further from the truth. He maintained that "I do not belong to that class of politicians at the south who would recommend ... a submission to those aggressive measures which are threatened by the north." On the contrary, he asserted to Lamar, "if my voice could prevail it should respond with all my heart to the sentiment

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[19] Ibid.

[20] Ibid.

you have so aptly expressed ... 'death before dishonor.'" Nonetheless, he did not believe the situation required such desperate choices. Let the Whig party be cast down and the Democratic party lifted up to its proper place. Then, if northerners continued to attack southern rights, "I am prepared to go with him that go the farthest." Otherwise, he proclaimed, "I am immovable."[21]

On one point only did Cobb profess concern. He feared that his stance might cost him "the confidence of ... personal friends whose good opinion I would not exchange for the loudest shout of the multitude." He had good reason for concern. Many of his oldest associates -- men such as Lamar and Holsey -- showed no inclination to support him. Lamar moved steadily toward the Calhounite position during the winter and spring. On January 3, he suggested that Cobb take ground between Calhoun and the Whigs. The Calhounites, he complained, tended to "'kick before they are spurred,'" while the Whigs would hesitate until resistance became impossible. But by mid-January, brother John tersely advised him to "think now of the interests of the South and less on the defense of the democratic party." When Cobb made his opposition to the Calhoun movement public later that month, Lamar lamented that "it is now obvious to the North & worse than all to <u>ourselves</u> that we at the South are a divided

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[21] Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, January 24, 1849; January 27, 1849, Howell Cobb Papers.

people .... I shall consider it a calamitous event to the South if the majority follow you."[22]

Lamar's hostility persisted for several months. In April, Cobb sought information on popular feeling regarding his course. Lamar offered little guidance. He replied that "I never speak of the matter to others, as I have nothing in extenuation to say of the aforesaid [representative]." Ultimately, it took Mary Ann's intervention to reconcile the two. In late April, she confronted her brother about the dispute. Unwilling to distress his sister further, Lamar offered assurances that "I shall always travel his road I expect, but if I lag behind ... or growl a little when he ... leads me over stumps and logs ... you must not scold me to hard."[23]

Hopkins Holsey proved as adamant in his opposition as Lamar. While willing to acknowledge the justice of Cobb's defense of northern Democrats, the editor struggled to convince his friend that the issue lacked meaning. Northern Democrats had fought their last battle for the South. Both Martin Van Buren and Lewis Cass had "fallen victims to their Southern alliance," he argued, and now "neither party ... will court the South." Only an unflinching show of unity by

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[22] Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, January 19, 1849; John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, January 3, 1849; February 7, 1849; February 9, 1849, ibid.

[23] John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, April 9, 1849; John B. Lamar to Mary Ann Cobb, April 29, 1849, ibid.

the South might yet "induce our friends North to hold on." If northern Democrats could but see "the South acting as one man," he hypothesized, "they will be with us."[24]

Under such distressing circumstances, the unity of southern Democrats took precedence over all other concerns. Calhoun's address, Holsey argued, only sought "to prepare the South for counteraction to the Wilmot Proviso in case Gen. Taylor should sign it." While acknowledging the South Carolinian's role "in producing this crisis," Holsey still pleaded with Cobb to support him, suggesting that "we will not follow Calhoun, but must cooperate with him in resisting the encroachment." Holsey warned "that an intermediate course will be impracticable," and predicted that "between Toombs and Stephens on the one hand and your South Carolina friends on the other you will occupy a position which ... will be regretted by ... your most devoted friends."[25]

II

Cobb regretted the defection of his friends, but refused to heed their objections. He certainly realized that a quick congressional compromise of the slavery issue offered the best avenue of escape from his awkward position. The possibility of such a compromise did exist during the second session of the Thirtieth Congress. The basic plan called for

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[24] Hopkins Holsey to Howell Cobb, January 29, 1849; February 13, 1849; February 24, 1849, ibid.

[25] Hopkins Holsey to Howell Cobb, January 29, 1849; February 13, 1849; February 24, 1849, ibid.

the immediate organization of the Mexican Cession into one or two states without passage through a territorial stage. Because no one questioned the right of a state to determine its own domestic institutions, responsibility for deciding the issue would be shifted from Congress to the local level. First introduced in the Senate by Illinois Democrat, Stephen A. Douglas, the compromise quickly won the endorsement of President Polk.[26]

Despite White House support, the Douglas measure languished in the Senate. Opponents raised a variety of objections, but the most serious challenge came from extremists on both sides of the slavery issue. Antislavery Whigs and Calhounites perceived opportunities to use the crisis for the advancement of their own agendas. Neither stood ready to accept half-way measures that might hinder the fulfillment of their larger goals.[27]

Ironically, the greatest support for the Douglas compromise came from southern Whigs. They had viewed Zachary Taylor's election as a triumph peculiarly their own -- a victory laden with unlimited potential benefits for the future. Yet they faced two distinct threats to these bright

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[26] William J. Cooper, Jr., "'The Only Door,' The Territorial Issue, the Preston Bill, and the Southern Whigs," in William J. Cooper, Jr., Michael F. Holt, and John McCardell, eds., A Master's Due: Essays In Honor of David Herbert Donald (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985), pp. 67-76.

[27] Ibid.

prospects. The first, embodied in the Southern Movement, had been blocked by their refusal to endorse the Calhoun address. But, having frustrated their southern foes, the southern Whigs also found it necessary to guard against embarrassment by their northern allies. If the territorial issue remained unresolved when Taylor took office, antislavery agitation well might destroy Taylor and the hopes of southern Whigs. The Douglas proposal offered the best chance for an immediate resolution of the crisis, and southern Whigs adopted it as their own. On February 7, William B. Preston, a first term Whig congressman from Virginia, introduced a measure to the House that substantially incorporated the Douglas plan.[28]

Cobb, too, viewed the compromise proposal as an opportunity to end the ongoing crisis. He predicted that "the question will be settled at the present session on the basis of Douglas[']s bill." Still, he appreciated the extremists' determination to block all efforts at compromise, and lamented that "I would entertain no doubt of it, but for the violent opposition it has encountered from John C. Calhoun."[29]

Cobb urged passage of the Preston bill in his address to his constituents. He argued that it provided the opportunity for an immediate and honorable settlement of the

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[28] Ibid.

[29] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, February 8, 1849, Howell Cobb Papers.

territorial crisis, because "it looked to the will of the people, upon whom the laws were to operate, as the best indication of what those laws should be." No one, he contended, who based his political faith "upon the spirit of our revolutionary struggles" -- no matter how "fastidious and violent on the one or the other side of the question" -- could seriously object to the "great and glorious principle of self-government."[30]

The hopes that Cobb and southern Whigs invested in the Preston bill, however, went unfulfilled. Late in the session, antislavery zealots succeeded in attaching the proviso to the compromise legislation. This move effectively killed the proposal. The Calhounites in the Senate followed up defeat of the compromise with a last-minute bid to open the entire Mexican Cession to slavery. This effort also failed, but only after a bitter all night session in both Houses that greatly exacerbated sectional animosities. With the failure of this last attempt to settle the fate of California and New Mexico, the Thirtieth Congress expired.[31]

III

Cobb returned home to an uncertain situation. The negative reaction of Lamar and Holsey to his course had

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[30] Ibid.

[31] Ibid.; Cooper, "The Only Door," pp. 83-85; Allan Nevins, Ordeal of the Union: Fruits of Manifest Destiny, 1847-1852, two vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1947), I, 223-229.

strengthened his anticipation of impending political isolation. Mary Ann's analysis of developments further reinforced this perception. In mid-February, she warned that his present stance had left him in a worse "predicament than the Oregon vote." Still, she encouraged him with the reminder that "every one of your friends ... opposed ... [that] vote, but in the end you were right." He should "save the Union," she advised, "it would be a pity if not a shame to see it [dissolved]."[32]

Other correspondents painted a less gloomy picture -- at least regarding the situation in the Sixth District. James Cooper of Dahlonega praised Cobb's stance as "excellent," and assured him that local voters would respond "cordially" to it. William Hope Hull reported from Athens that "I never in my life saw as great a fuss got up by Congressmen and Editors with so little corresponding excitement among the people." He urged Cobb not to be misled by pronouncements in the Banner. Holsey, he conceded, continued "on the resistance string," but had swayed few readers.[33]

Reactions to Cobb's anti-Calhoun posture by Georgia's press further confused matters. In February, Cobb complained

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[32] Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, February 15, 1849, Howell Cobb Papers.

[33] James Cooper to Howell Cobb, February 15, 1849; William Hope Hull to Howell Cobb, January 26, 1849; February 7, 1849, ibid.

to Mary Ann that "the whig papers have commenced their war upon me [and] I suppose that the democratic press will soon follow suit." Yet, contrary to Cobb's expectations, most Georgia newspapers responded in relatively muted terms. Whig editors found it especially difficult to devise a coherent response. On the one hand, they welcomed all signs of Democratic fragmentation and sought to encourage the process. On the other, Cobb had lashed the Whig party without mercy in his published answer to Calhoun's address. Thus, they hesitated to attack him with their usual vigor, but felt no inclination to praise him.[34]

Democratic editors faced a similar dilemma. Some openly rejected the Southern Movement and endorsed Cobb regardless of the consequences. Others took a diametrically opposite view. Most Democratic editors, however, hoped to avoid the fragmentation of their state organization. State elections lay just over the horizon, and they wanted to retain Democratic control of the governorship while regaining a majority in the legislature. They had no desire to see the "Southern Address" become the source of a bloodbath in the upcoming state convention. These editors sought a middle ground, whereby they proclaimed support for Calhoun's

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[34] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, February 1, 1849, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, p. 145; Shryock, Georgia and the Union in 1850, p. 192; Augusta Chronicle and Sentinel, June 22, 1849; Athens Southern Banner, June 14, 1849.

efforts, while generally refraining from overly explicit criticism of Democrats who had refused to sign the address.[35]

Confronted with this diversity of opinion, Cobb assumed an air of quiet determination. While still in Washington, he had repeatedly emphasized his resolve to adhere to his ideals regardless of the consequences. He conceded that "for the present I shall be driven to the wall." Nonetheless, he declared, "I never felt less solicitude about a personal result in my life." Musing that "the public man who basks all his life in the sunshine of popular favor goes ... to his grave in ignorance of his own powers," he insisted that "I have not courted the difficulties by which my path has been beset." Nor, he added, had he sought to avoid them. Rather, "I have met them with an honest desire to do what was right, and ... I am prepared for any consequences that may follow."[36]

There is evidence, however, that Cobb worried more about his political future than he admitted. During the spring, he began suffering from severe chest pains. While it cannot

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[35] John W. Burke to Howell Cobb, March 22, 1849, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, pp. 157-158; Savannah Daily Georgian, cited in Milledgeville Federal Union, April 17, 1849; John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, April 9, 1849, Howell Cobb Papers; Milledgeville Federal Union, February 13, 1849; March 20, 1849; June 5, 1849; Shryock, Georgia and the Union in 1850, pp. 188-189.

[36] Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, January 24, 1849; January 27, 1849; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, February 8, 1849; February 22, 1848, Howell Cobb Papers; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, February 1, 1849, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, p. 145.

be determined if these pains merely reflected anxiety, indigestion, or early signs of the heart disease that eventually killed him, their appearance at this time indicates that the stress generated by his political struggles took a physical toll.[37]

Cobb began mapping out a comprehensive damage control strategy even before he returned to Athens. He worked closely with his Fifth District ally, John Lumpkin. Lumpkin had not sought reelection during the previous congressional race, but still harbored political ambitions. He fully comprehended that failure to repel Calhounite attacks now might weaken him in the future.[38]

The two men found that Cobb's expectations of total political isolation had been exaggerated. For the most part, Democrats in north Georgia supported their representatives. Pockets of pro-Calhoun sentiment did exist in the Fifth and Sixth Districts, however, and the Calhounites appeared eager to raise a vocal opposition to Cobb and Lumpkin. John W. Burke, editor of the Cassville Standard, reported that his support for the two had "brought down a shower of curses upon my head from the old Calhoun democrats about here." Despite intense pressure to "not say anything more in favor of Cobb

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[37] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, April 15, 1849, ibid.

[38] John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, April 13, 1849; May 22, 1849; October 8, 1849, ibid.

and Lumpkin," Burke vowed to "stand up for you as long as I live."[39]

Yet, Burke occupied an unusual position. Most Democratic editors in north Georgia had united with the Calhounites to wage political war against Cobb and Lumpkin. Clearly, the two must move immediately to counter this insidious assault on their primary base of political support. A direct approach seemed the best response. Although still complaining of "pain in my breast," Cobb embarked on a speaking tour of his district. In speeches lasting two hours or more, he defended his refusal to sign the "Southern Address" and warned against the dangers created by Calhoun's sectional ambitions.[40]

These efforts produced positive results. When Sixth District Democrats assembled in county meetings to select delegates to the state convention, they overwhelmingly adopted resolutions praising Cobb's record. Lumpkin rejoiced over these demonstrations of support, and added his own assessment that within the Fifth, "there are but few who claim to belong to the democratic party who are opposed to

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[39] John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, April 13, 1849, ibid; John W. Burke to Howell Cobb, March 22, 1849, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, pp. 157-158; Athens Southern Banner, September 6, 1849.

[40] John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, April 13, 1849; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, April 15, 1849, ibid; John W. Burke to Howell Cobb, March 22, 1849, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, pp. 157-158; Athens Southern Banner, September 6, 1849.

us." By June, Cobb could confidently assure James Buchanan that "I have no difficulties to encounter in my own district .... I have the gratification of knowing that my course on the slavery and all other questions meet with the entire approval of my democratic constituents."[41]

Countering Calhounite sentiment in other sections of the state proved more problematic. In central and south Georgia, support for Calhoun moved on a broader front than it did in the northern portion of the state. When the Macon Telegraph printed editorials hostile to Cobb, brother John reported that the paper expressed "pretty nearly the sentiments of the entire Democracy here and hereabouts." He also reported that "a young man" who had travelled through several central Georgia counties had informed him that "wherever he went [he heard] people abusing Mr Cobb."[42]

Henry Benning, writing from his home in Columbus, reinforced Lamar's information. He advised Cobb that among Democrats he had found "but one who justified your course." Although he had heard a few who "bitterly denounced it," most seemed inclined -- "barely" -- to excuse it. This mild

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[41] Thomas W. Thomas to Howell Cobb, May 8, 1849; John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, May 3, 1849; W. Woods to Howell Cobb, June 10, 1849; James Stoneman (?) to Howell Cobb, June 16, 1849, Howell Cobb Papers; Howell Cobb to James Buchanan, June 17, 1849, James Buchanan Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (Hereafter: Buchanan Papers).

[42] John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, April 9, 1849, Howell Cobb Papers.

dispensation, he noted, had less to do with the explanation offered by Cobb's address than it did with his long service to the party and his "undoubted fidelity" to the South. Nevertheless, Benning urged his old friend not to impose too heavily upon this benevolence. He pleaded with Cobb to avoid a "situation where though innocent everybody will believe you guilty." Better, he concluded, to take extreme ground now -- "voluntarily" -- than be driven to it as the inevitable sectional crisis unfolded.[43]

The Democratic press in central and south Georgia worked to encourage this type of thinking. Led by the Federal Union, they ran editorials increasingly critical of "those who regard party as paramount to all other considerations." Although declining to attack Cobb and Lumpkin by name, the Union noted that any perceptive citizen could easily "lay his finger on the very men who occupy this position"[44]

Despite the apparent popularity of Calhounism among Democrats in central and south Georgia, Whig newspapers insisted that it represented nothing but a movement of politicians and editors. The masses, they claimed, felt little interest in the tempest thus created. Even ardent Calhounites privately doubted the depth of their public

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[43] Henry L. Benning to Howell Cobb, July 1, 1849, ibid.

[44] Shryock, Georgia and the Union in 1850, p. 189-190; Milledgeville Federal Union, January 23, 1849; Columbus Times, February 6, 1849; Milledgeville Federal Union, May 15, 1849, cited in John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, May 18, 1849, Howell Cobb Papers.

support. Herschel V. Johnson, retiring Senator and signer of the "Southern Address", confessed to Calhoun that "I entertain gloomy forebodings," because the southern people "are not properly awake to the danger, -- not thoroughly nerved to united resistance."[45]

Cobb had no way to gage accurately the depth of popular support for Calhounism. Despite reports from Lamar and others, he sensed that the Whig assessments reflected the true situation. Still, he could not deny the commitment of much of the Democratic leadership to Calhoun, and he feared the impact of agitation by prominent Calhoun Democrats on the party's future success. He reported to James Buchanan that the Calhoun movement represented a serious threat to Democratic prospects in Georgia. Calhoun, he maintained, "is our evil genius & ... if his friends continue to force upon the people the issue of a southern party ... we must look for certain defeat."[46]

Questions about the reliability of popular support for the Calhounites, combined with mutual desires by both Democratic factions to preserve party harmony, provided the Cobb-Lumpkin forces with chances to counter their opponents.

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[45] Shryock, Georgia and the Union in 1850, p. 190, 206-207; Augusta Chronicle and Sentinel, March 27, 1849; May 14, 1849; Herschel V. Johnson to John C. Calhoun, July 20, 1849, in J. Franklin Jameson, ed., Correspondence of John C. Calhoun (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1900), pp. 1197-1199.

[46] Howell Cobb to James Buchanan, June 17, 1849, Buchanan Papers.

Early on, the two men resolved to "show them that we will meet every blow that they deal out to us." They responded to attacks in the Calhounite press through editorials in the few papers still friendly to them. Cobb and Lumpkin personally penned several of these columns. Not satisfied to wage a purely editorial war, Lumpkin also launched a campaign in the Fifth District to convince all Democrats there to cancel their subscriptions to the Federal Union. He urged Cobb to start a similar boycott in the Sixth.[47]

While these efforts did not produce an end to criticism in the Calhounite press, they did arouse fears about the preservation of party unity. Such concerns prompted the Federal Union to acknowledge its faith in the loyalty of Cobb, Lumpkin, and their supporters to the larger issues of southern rights. It admitted that "in principle, we know they are with us," and insisted "we shall not fall out ... because [we differ] on a single point."[48]

Cobb also sought letters of support -- suitable for publication -- from national party leaders. The "Calhoun clique," he explained, meant to drive all opposition from the field, but he meant to resist their efforts. He emphasized the importance of this struggle, and warned that failure to sustain his efforts "must be the disruption of the democratic

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[47] John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, April 13, 1849; May 22, 1849, Howell Cobb Papers.

[48] Milledgeville Federal Union, June 5, 1849.

party as a national party, which would be the accomplishment of Calhoun's schemes, ever since I have been in public life." Both Lewis Cass and James Buchanan responded to this appeal. Former President Polk died at his home in Tennessee before he could reply.[49]

Yet, clashes in the newspapers and solicitation of testimonials represented little more than skirmishes. Calhounites and Cobb supporters alike, knew that the real confrontation would come at the state convention. Despite being outnumbered within the state party leadership, Cobb and Lumpkin held the upper hand in this struggle. As long as they retained a firm grip on the fidelity of their congressional districts, the Calhounites could not make support for the "Southern Address" a test of party loyalty without shattering the Georgia Democracy.

Throughout the spring, Cobb and Lumpkin labored to insure that their control over the Fifth and Sixth Districts did not slip. They worked behind the scenes to make sure that every county in their respective districts sent full slates of loyal delegates to the state convention. These efforts proved largely successful. During May and June, the two men received a steady flow of endorsements from county meetings. Pledges of delegate support accompanied these

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[49] Howell Cobb to James K. Polk, June 2, 1849, James K. Polk Papers, Library of Congress, Washington D.C.; James Buchanan to Howell Cobb, June 12, 1849; Lewis Cass to Howell Cobb, June 19, 1849, Howell Cobb Papers; Howell Cobb to James Buchanan, June 2, 1849; June 17, 1849, Buchanan Papers.

endorsements. One delegate, representative of the majority, vowed to "bring with me a set of resolutions expressive of the views of the Democracy of this section ... advocating the course taken by yourself and Lumpkin."[50]

In the midst of these activities, Cobb and Lumpkin benefitted from talk that disgruntled Union Democrats of north Georgia might challenge the renomination of Calhounite governor, George Towns. Some dissidents mentioned Lumpkin as a possible challenger, but most rumors focused on James Cooper, a Cobb loyalist. Although the factual basis of the rumors cannot be gaged, their very existence had to trouble Towns and other Calhounite leaders. It is even possible that Cobb or Lumpkin -- or both -- initiated the rumors as a further indication of their determination "to meet every blow." Lumpkin did warn Towns directly that the strident hostility manifested by the Federal Union revealed "but little care whether the fall elections were successful or not." Otherwise, he suggested, the editor would not behave with such reckless disregard for the "harmony of the democratic party."[51]

The governor responded promptly with assurances that the dissidents had misread the situation. He expressed certainty

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[50] John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, May 3, 1849; June 6, 1849; Thomas W. Thomas to Howell Cobb, May 8, 1849; W. Woods to Howell Cobb, June 10, 1849, Howell Cobb Papers.

[51] Thomas W. Thomas to Howell Cobb, May 8, 1849; Thomas DeKalb Harris to Howell Cobb, June 28, 1849; John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, June 13, 1849, ibid.

that the editor of the Federal Union "is not unfriendly to either of you." Incredibly, Towns asserted that "I can hardly believe that it was the intention of the articles to reflect upon you or Mr Cobb, altho' they will admit of that construction." More realistically, he attempted to soothe the ruffled feelings of the north Georgia Democracy with guarantees that "it is the settled purpose of the party in the center of the State to have no further agitation of the southern address, [and] to avoid censure of any of the [congressional] delegation as regards this notion." As if to reinforce the governor's promises, the Federal Union pledged not to raise the Calhoun address as an "apple of discord" at the state convention.[52]

Towns' response, combined with the editorial concessions made by the Federal Union, signalled a strategic retreat by the Calhounites. Towns bluntly conceded that "if the convention should not act in harmony the party in this State will be defeated both in the Legislature and for Governor." Whatever the depth of their commitment to the Southern Movement, this prospect of defeat proved too much for Calhounites to bear. Calhounite leaders pressed for a face-saving compromise. They would abandon hopes of the convention adopting the "Southern Address," if the Cobb men supported resolutions similar to ones recently passed by the

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[52] George W. Towns to John H. Lumpkin, cited in John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, June 13, 1849, ibid; Milledgeville Federal Union, June 5, 1849.

Virginia legislature. These resolutions vowed opposition to the Wilmot Proviso, and urged the governor to summon a special legislative session should Congress enact the proviso or other antislavery legislation. Because Cobb had already declared in the House that the South could never accept the proviso, this proposal represented a viable compromise.[53]

When the state convention assembled in Milledgeville on July 11, its proceedings followed this prearranged script. Cobb attended as a delegate from Clarke County, better to insure that the opposition employed no unexpected stratagems. Extreme Calhounites mounted an unsuccessful attempt to win an endorsement of the "Southern Address" by the convention. The majority of delegates clearly preferred party harmony and electoral victory to internecine conflict and defeat. Having made this point clear, the convention easily adopted the Virginia Resolutions and renominated Governor Towns.[54]

Whigs greeted the outcome of the Democratic state convention with howls of outrage. The Athens Southern Whig gave voice to this reaction. Where, it demanded, "is the Southern Address?" For months, the Democrats had ranted

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[53] John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, June 6, 1849; Thomas Dekalb Harris to Howell Cobb, June 28, 1849; Henry L. Benning to Howell Cobb, July 1, 1849, Howell Cobb Papers; Congressional Globe, Twenty-Ninth Congress, Second Session, pp. 360-363; Shryock, Georgia and the Union in 1850, pp. 185-186.

[54] John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, May 18, 1849, Howell Cobb Papers; Shryock, Georgia and the Union in 1850, pp. 197-198.

about the importance of the Calhoun document and lambasted Whigs for withholding their signatures. Yet, it mocked, when the Democratic party met to define itself before the people, "it forgot to say one word about the great Democratic touchstone of political faith in Georgia."[55]

In part, the Whig attributed Democratic silence to political chicanery. The paper insisted that the "Southern Address" never had been anything other than a ploy "used by designing men for the purpose of making Democratic capital in the Southern States." But the Whig also understood that internal party politics figured in the convention's reticence. The newspapers placed entire responsibility for these internal maneuvers on Cobb's shoulders. Cobb had "refused to sign [the Calhoun address]. HOWELL COBB was at the Democratic Convention! Now need we say another word to solve the mystery? He was too shrewd to suffer his party publicly to condemn the course of himself and those who acted with him."[56]

Following his show of strength at the state convention, Cobb took no significant role in the campaign. He used the weeks between the convention and the election catching up on his legal practice and consulting with Democratic leaders in his district. In truth, Cobb manifested far more concern

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[55] Shryock, Georgia and the Union in 1850, pp. 198-199; Athens Southern Whig, July 26, 1849.

[56] Athens Southern Whig, July 26, 1849.

about his political discussions than his legal cases. In mid-September, he arrived at Gainesville "in time to witness the closing scenes of court & to meet two of my clients on their way to jail." Nevertheless, he consoled himself with the thought that "I shall accomplish one of the principle objects of coming here & that is seeing the leading democrats of the county." Happily, he reported, "I never enjoyed the confidence of my constituents to a greater extent." For the first time since the previous winter, he could forecast that "politically the skies are bright."[57]

In some regards, events justified Cobb's renewed optimism. In the October elections, Georgia Democrats managed to retain the governorship and win control of the legislature. Moreover, Cobb had returned home from the Thirtieth Congress fully anticipating his own political immolation. He had faced a tough political fight, but the loyalty of his district enabled him to survive with little visible damage. Even better, the fall elections had witnessed a Democratic surge throughout much of the South. Largely as a result of this upswing in their fortunes, it appeared that the Democrats might control both houses of the new Congress. This meant that Cobb's chances to win the

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[57] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, September 18, 1849; September (?), 1849; October 13, 1849, Howell Cobb Papers.

speakership had improved dramatically since the past winter when it seemed he had no chance at all.[58]

Yet serious threats remained. For all their show of forced unity at the state convention, deep divisions remained within the Georgia Democracy. The Calhounites had cooperated with Cobb out of political necessity. They had not forgiven his heresy. For the moment, they bowed to his political power, but looked forward to the day when they might rid the party of his influence.[59]

Cobb could hardly fail to recognize the existence of Calhounite hostility. He gave no indication, however, that he considered this animosity as any more significant than the dissatisfaction manifested by state-rights extremists over previous sectional issues. Given a balanced compromise of the territorial dispute, he believed this animosity would fade as traditional issues of banks and tariffs reasserted their dominance within the political arena.[60]

John Lamar demonstrated a far better comprehension of the dangers besetting his brother-in-law. He acknowledged that much of the criticism currently directed at Cobb

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[58] George Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, October 10, 1849, ibid; Cooper, The South and the Politics of Slavery, pp. 276-278; Nevins, Ordeal of the Union, I, 241-242.

[59] Shryock, Georgia and the Union in 1850, pp. 198-199; 208-209; Athens Southern Banner, September 6, 1849.

[60] Athens Southern Banner, September 6, 1849; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, September 18, 1849; October 13, 1849; November 11, 1849; November 13, 1849, Howell Cobb Papers.

represented "one of the nine day wonders that will pass off in due time." The real threat, he warned, derived from public perceptions that "Mr Cobb ... disregards the opinions of the whole state because he has a district that swears by him -- ... who spurns a Georgia reputation & seeks only a [United States] reputation -- who leans more on the [Northwest] states of the Union than the middle and southern counties of [Georgia]." Such an impression could seriously impair Cobb's aspirations for future national office. One congressional district, Lamar observed, "however devoted to a man, is rather a small fulcrum for a politician's lever, if he expects to move a hemisphere."[61]

Even the Democratic success in the fall elections rested in part on an ominous foundation. Contrary to promises made by southern Whigs, the Taylor administration demonstrated distinct free-soil proclivities early on. Despite the new president's status as a slaveholder, he viewed the territorial crisis from a nationalist perspective. If the South's peculiar interests clashed with national needs, then the South must give way. While prepared to guarantee every constitutional protection for slavery where it already existed, he opposed further expansion of the institution. Still, the president hoped to avoid a confrontation. With that in mind, he resurrected the Douglas-Preston plan of

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[61] John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, April 9, 1849, Howell Cobb Papers.

immediate statehood for the Mexican Cession. Although he anticipated the creation of two states -- California and New Mexico -- Taylor focused on California where the discovery of gold had sparked a population explosion. Shortly after taking office, he publicly encouraged Californians to draft a constitution and apply for statehood.[62]

Whatever President Taylor's good intentions, he failed to account for an evolving political crisis. While the level support by southern Democrats for the original Preston bill cannot be measured accurately, in the aftermath of its defeat they had moved into the forefront of vigorous opposition to the immediate statehood solution. As details of the Taylor plan unfolded, southern Democrats fiercely assailed it as an "Executive Proviso" -- as nothing but an underhanded Whig trick for implementing Wilmot's despised measure. The president did his own cause irreparable damage when, in August, he assured a northern audience that slavery would not expand beyond its present limits.[63]

Cobb hardly could view these developments without grim satisfaction. The accusations levelled by southern Democrats during the presidential contest of 1848 regarding the unreliability of Taylor and the treachery of southern Whigs now appeared justified. This lesson in Whig betrayal, he

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[62] Cooper, The South and the Politics of Slavery, pp. 274-278.

[63] Ibid.

observed, was not going unnoticed by southern voters. When James Buchanan reported on declining Whig prospects in Pennsylvania, Cobb replied that "the same feelings exist in Georgia toward Taylor and his administration, indeed his name has almost become a ... reproach." Yet, if the actions of the Taylor administration improved the electoral prospects of southern Democrats, they also hardened the lines of sectional division. The compromise that Cobb believed so essential to the survival of the Union and the national Democratic party would now be even harder to achieve.[64]

Before departing for Washington in November, Cobb made his usual trek to Milledgeville to insure that his family and friends received their fair share of the patronage spoils. On this occasion, his success at the patronage game created more than the usual interest. A fair distribution of posts between Cobb Democrats and Calhounites would symbolize that the alliance forged prior to the state convention still held. Some Calhounites at Milledgeville did seek to "proscribe the Cobb & Lumpkin men," but the effort proved "a perfect failure." Cobb gleefully reported that "our friends are all elected." Among those "friends," he numbered his brother Tom, his brother-in-law Luther Glenn, and his cousins James and Henry R. Jackson. In disgust, the Whig press complained that Cobb had hoarded the "lion's share" of the spoils and

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[64] Howell Cobb to James Buchanan, June 17, 1849, Buchanan Papers; Cooper, The South and the Politics of Slavery, pp. 276-277, 283-284.

provided "most bountifully" for his own family. Dismissing all such complaints, Cobb declared with complete satisfaction that "everything has worked out just as I wished."[65]

IV

Cobb's journey northward that November seemed less oppressive than his trip of the previous year. These brightened prospects stemmed in part from Mary Ann's improving health. Although she continued to complain of headaches, nervousness, and easily addled wits, she had grown stronger during past months. There had been setbacks. The worst came during the spring when the bodies of Basil and Henry were exhumed from their graves in Washington and returned to Athens for reburial. The stress of reburying her little boys produced a "renewal of ... grief," along with a severe physical and psychological relapse. Nevertheless, by the fall she had recovered sufficiently that Cobb hoped she might join him at the capital later in the session.[66]

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[65] Shryock, Georgia and the Union in 1850, pp. 208-209; John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, October 8, 1849; George Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, October 10, 1849; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, November 11, 1849; November 13, 1849, Howell Cobb Papers; Augusta Chronicle and Sentinel, cited in William B. McCash, Thomas R. R. Cobb (1823-1862) The Making of a Southern Nationalist, (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1983), p. 44.

[66] Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, December 5, 1848; December 8, 1848; January 15, 1849; Howell Cobb to Dr. R. D. Moore, April, 1849; September 19, 1849; October 14, 1849, Howell Cobb Papers; Sarah Rootes Cobb to Sarah Jackson, April 3, 1849, Jackson-Prince Papers, Southern Historical Collection, Library of the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, North Carolina (Hereafter: Jackson-Prince Papers).

The planned construction of a new home for his family further brightened Cobb's outlook. For four years, the Cobbs had resided in the six room cottage purchased with brother John's assistance in 1845. Lamar played a critical role in the new house plans as well. Despite all efforts to retire Cobb's old debts, numerous creditors still held judgements against him. Any attempt to place the home in his name might lead to renewed lawsuits and loss of the property. Consequently, Lamar made the formal arrangements for construction through his capacity as trustee for Mary Ann's estate. On September 24, he finalized an agreement with W. G. Yoakim to build a substantial two story, eight room house in the Greek revival style on a large lot next to the existing cottage. Cobb observed that "the prospect of getting into ... a new house certainly rubs the rough edges off a retired life." With equal satisfaction, he rejoiced that his recent political trials did not require such a retirement.[67]

During his trip to Washington, Cobb played a constant mental game of political numbers as he tried to ascertain the combination of votes that would elect him speaker of the new Congress. In truth, he and his friends had regularly engaged in this exercise for more than a year. Zachary Taylor's

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[67] Contract Between John B. Lamar and W. G. Yoakim, September 24, 1849; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, September, 1849, Howell Cobb Papers; Elizabeth Mays, "'The Celebrated Mrs. Cobb,' Mrs. Howell Cobb," The Georgia Historical Quarterly, XXIV (June, 1940), 101.

election, combined with apparent Whig unity, had led the Cobb men to conclude in the winter of 1848-1849 that the post lay beyond reach. Dissatisfaction in the South over Taylor's California policy however, led to a revival of Cobb's chances for the speakership by spring.[68]

Despite this revival of hope, serious obstacles lay between Cobb and the speaker's chair. Early in May, Thomas DeKalb Harris predicted that a clear-cut Democratic majority in the Thirty-First Congress would make Cobb's elevation "unquestionable." Yet Harris did not anticipate a "sound working majority" for the Democrats. It appeared more likely that they would hold a bare majority at best. He warned that Cobb would find it virtually impossible "to concentrate every democratic vote upon you" should this occur.[69]

Throughout the summer and fall, Cobb's prospects remained uncertain. John Robinson, writing from Indiana in August, believed that the Democrats would probably be able to control the organization of the House if they faced political reality and made concessions to different factions. Cobb's record of loyalty to the national party meant, Robinson maintained, that "the Northern or free State Democracy will ... prefer you to any other man."

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[68] Howell Cobb to Thomas D. Harris, May 17, 1847, Thomas DeKalb Harris Family Papers, Georgia Department of Archives and History, Atlanta, Georgia; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, December 9, 1848, Howell Cobb Papers.

[69] Thomas D. Harris to Howell Cobb, May 8, 1849, Howell Cobb Papers.

Nevertheless, he warned, the hostility of Calhounites and the need to appease free-soil Democrats might eliminate Cobb from contention.[70]

Harris reluctantly echoed this assessment a few days later. It now appeared that neither the Whigs nor the Democrats would seat a majority in Congress. While the Democrats held a plurality, a small band of determined Free Soilers would hold the balance of power between the two parties. He felt certain that Free Soil members would use their position in a bid to control the organization of the House. Should they succeed, he warned, then no man "who owns niggers" could hope to win the contest. With high accuracy, he prophesied that under these circumstances it could take days or even weeks to elect a speaker. Two months later, Harris expressed only slightly more optimism. He conceded that "I cannot imagine whose chances are better or even so good [as yours]," but urged his friend to remember that "the race is not always to the swift or the battle to the strong."[71]

Cobb recognized the validity of these warnings. He offered assurances that while desirous of winning the speakership, he had not allowed his "heart to become too much wedded to it." Nonetheless, he could not resist computing

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[70] John L. Robinson to Howell Cobb, August 24, 1849, ibid.

[71] Thomas D. Harris to Howell Cobb, August 27, 1849; October 20, 1849, ibid.

the odds of victory. Despite the gloomy prognosis of his friends, Cobb commanded considerable support. Much of the national press -- both Democratic and Whig -- fully expected him to be a leading contender for the post. Party leaders also looked favorably on his candidacy. James Buchanan, for instance, offered a ringing endorsement, declaring that "if I had 100 votes you should have them all for speaker. Your time has come."[72]

Upon arriving in the capital, Cobb attempted to gain more precise information about his chances. Only a few other congressmen had reached the city, however, and he learned little. The small amount of information that he garnered did not give much cause for hope, and he grimly reported to Mary Ann that "I now believe I shall be beaten."[73]

Although his friend Harris had voiced greatest concern about the probable opposition of Free Soil members, Cobb had always considered this a secondary threat. His primary worry consistently had been the desire of Calhounites to exact revenge for his opposition to the Southern Movement. His initial inquiries indicated that the Calhoun men meant to have their vengeance. He complained that "the very game ... I anticipated is being played off upon me. The report is

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[72] Howell Cobb to Thomas D. Harris, cited in Thomas D. Harris to Howell Cobb, October 20, 1849; James Buchanan to Howell Cobb, November 10, 1849, ibid; United States Magazine, September, 1849, p. 276.

[73] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, November 27, 1849, Howell Cobb Papers.

busily being circulated that I cannot get the Calhoun men and therefore cannot be elected, which is inducing the party to look to others who can command their support." He thought it likely that the Democracy would throw its support to Linn Boyd of Kentucky.[74]

Declaring himself "prepared for the worst," Cobb promptly reverted to his old defense of self-proclaimed disinterestedness. He asserted that "I ... really feel less anxious than I supposed I should," and insisted that he had declined to "raise a finger" in the matter. Rather, he had "quietly ... waited the result, allowing the thing to manage itself." Most importantly, he maintained, "I declined to make terms with any interests or to conciliate any opposition." Clearly, if he won the sought after honor, it must come unsullied and unencumbered. Otherwise, it would not be worth having.[75]

On the evening of December 1, a gray and gloomy Saturday, Whig and Democratic congressmen met in their respective caucuses to select candidates for speaker and clerk. In the Democratic meeting, developments favored Cobb's aspirations. Despite strong Calhounite opposition, he received the nomination on the first ballot. Having given

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[74] Ibid.

[75] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, November 27, 1849; Howell Cobb to Thomas Reade Rootes Cobb, December 10, 1849, ibid.

the top spot to a southerner, the Democrats then nominated John W. Forney of Pennsylvania for the clerkship.[76]

In the Whig caucus, it rapidly became apparent that the stresses generated by the slavery issue had deeply divided the party. A group of six southern Whigs, led by Stephens and Toombs, demanded that their northern brethren promise not to push for enactment of either the proviso or abolition in the District of Columbia. When the caucus rejected their demand, the dissidents -- more than one-third of the southern Whigs present -- stalked out of the meeting. Following their departure, the party nominated Robert Winthrop, Massachusetts man and speaker of the previous Congress, as their candidate. The northern majority then declined to balance their ticket by selecting a southern Whig for the clerkship. Instead, they resolved to leave the spot open. Stephens bitterly reported that his northern allies seemed "bent upon mischief."[77]

Having selected their candidates, House members still had to wait through an anxious Sunday before they assembled on Monday. Outside their boarding house residences, a winter storm buffeted the capital. Inside, rumors and gossip swirled. Cobb's concerns continued to focus on his own

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[76] Alexander H. Stephens to Linton Stephens, December 2, 1849, Alexander H. Stephens Papers, Manhattanville College of the Sacred Heart, Purchase, New York, (Hereafter: Stephens Papers, MC).

[77] Ibid.; Cooper, The South and the Politics of Slavery, pp. 282-283.

election. His prospects looked bleak. "The Carolina delegation are understood to be against me irrecoverably," he lamented, "and unless they come into my support together with some southern whigs I must be defeated." He consoled himself with the thought that "in getting the nomination over the strong opposition made against me I have gained a sufficient triumph for the present." He took further consolation from news that "the whigs are in as bad a stew as ourselves."[78]

V

When the Thirty-First Congress met in its first session at noon the following day, the extent of party disorganization rapidly became apparent. Officially, the partisan composition of the House consisted of 112 Democrats, 105 Whigs, and 13 Free Soilers. These numbers, however, reflected only superficial lines. While Democratic ranks suffered from internal divisions that included both free-soil elements and Calhounites, the Whigs would sorely miss the votes of their own six dissidents. Thus, neither Cobb nor Winthrop could count on the full official strength of their party in the approaching contest.[79]

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[78] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, December 2, 1849, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, p. 177; Alexander H. Stephens to Linton Stephens, December 2, 1849, Stephens Papers, MC.

[79] Congressional Globe, Thirty-First Congress, First Session, pp. 1-2.

After being called to order by Thomas J. Campbell, clerk of the previous House, the members proceeded to the election of speaker. The first ballot provided a clear signal of how the voting would go. Seven members had not yet arrived in the capital -- four Whigs, two Democrats, and one Free Soiler -- and neither Cobb nor Winthrop voted for themselves. This left 221 possible votes, with 111 required for a majority and election. On the first ballot Cobb received 103 votes; Winthrop 96. Eight Free Soilers voted for former Democrat David Wilmot, while the six dissident Whigs voted as a bloc for Meredith P. Gentry of Tennessee. The eight remaining members, six of whom were free-soil Democrats and Calhounites, scattered their votes on various individuals.[80]

Because neither candidate had received a majority, the House proceeded to take additional ballots. For two days and ten ballots Cobb's strength held relatively stable, although he did lose the support of an additional Calhounite and a few northern Democrats who feared the reaction of free-soil voters in their home districts. On the third day and the thirteenth ballot, however, Cobb's prospects suffered a severe blow when he slipped into second place with 93 votes as several Democrats from both the north and the Deep South

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[80] Ibid.

deserted him. Yet, despite the decline in Cobb's support, Winthrop only picked up two additional votes.[81]

It appeared likely that neither major candidate could win the requisite majority -- barring some backroom deal or an open bipartisan compromise. Hoping to end the stalemate, Andrew Johnson, Tennessee Democrat, proposed that if no candidate received a majority on the fourteenth ballot, then the individual receiving a plurality would be declared speaker. After a brief debate, the House rejected Johnson's resolution by an overwhelming majority. The stalemate continued.[82]

As the roll-call voting dragged on with no sign of resolution, increasing numbers of mainstream Democrats became convinced that Cobb could not win the speakership. Fearful that continued support for him might cost the Democracy an opportunity to control the organization of the House, they grew "very anxious to try their hands on different persons." After two days of voting, Cobb could hardly deny that the predictions he had made before Congress assembled now appeared highly accurate. Acknowledging that "my election is impossible," he blamed his defeat on "Northern free-soil Democrats who would vote for no southern man." Among this

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[81] Ibid., pp. 2-6; Howell Cobb to Thomas Reade Rootes Cobb, December 10, 1849, Howell Cobb Papers; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, December 20, 1849, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, p. 179.

[82] Congressional Globe, Thirty-First Congress, First Session, pp. 5-6.

number, he included former northern Democrats -- such as David Wilmot -- who now affiliated with the Free Soil party, as well as those who remained within the Democratic party but held free-soil principles.[83]

With some surprise, Cobb admitted that "I am satisfied Mr. Calhoun and his friends have treated me well." Despite their vigorous opposition to his nomination, with few exceptions "they gave me their support with as much cordiality as I had any right to expect." Even the few Calhounite holdouts, he noted, had promised to vote for him if their support would make his victory certain. Yet Cobb could not conceal entirely the frustrations generated by his inability to garner all the Democratic votes. He privately denounced both Calhounites and free-soil Democrats who had denied him their support, describing one as "an old ass," another as the "prince of idiots," and the rest as cowards. Nevertheless, he maintained, "I have been sustained in the most flattering manner by my party ... and feel ... triumphant but not elected."[84]

Despite Cobb's professed satisfaction, he did worry about rumors touching on his nomination by the Democratic caucus. Hearing of reports in some Georgia newspapers that

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[83] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, December 4, 1849; Howell Cobb to Thomas Reade Rootes Cobb, December 10, 1849, Howell Cobb Papers.

[84] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, December 4, 1849; Howell Cobb to Thomas Reade Rootes Cobb, December 10, 1849, ibid.

Linn Boyd had been the Democrats' first choice for the speakership, he demanded that these false reports be squelched. They represented an injustice, he complained, because they wrongly implied that "I was only second choice."[85]

Whatever his feelings of personal triumph, Cobb reluctantly bowed to political realities. He informally told friends that "my personal feelings are fully gratified, and that I desire them for the future to regard alone the interests of the party & the country." He also called for a caucus on the evening of December 7, at which he formally announced his decision to withdraw. His fellow Democrats opted not to make another nomination, but to leave "every man to his own judgement."[86]

Cobb quickly lost support as word of his informal statement spread. By the end of the House session on December 7, he remained in second place, but had dropped to 65 votes. The next day -- after his official announcement to the caucus -- he fell to a mere handful of votes.[87]

His evaporating strength and personal statements notwithstanding, Cobb still clung to a chance that he might yet snatch victory from defeat. Early on, he recognized that

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[85] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, December 8, 1849, ibid.

[86] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, December 6, 1849; December 8, 1849, ibid.

[87] Congressional Globe, Thirty-First Congress, First Session, pp. 7-12.

the dissident southern Whigs offered his best hope. If he could win their support, he believed it likely that both free-soil Democrats and Calhounites would rally to his standard in sufficient numbers to secure the speakership. Cobb's hopes did not lack a realistic foundation. Both Stephens and Toombs had voiced a willingness to support him under certain undefined circumstances. Moreover, he doubted that any other Democrat could make a stronger showing than himself. He suggested to Mary Ann that "you may yet see the democratic votes returning to me."[88]

Cobb's withdrawal failed to move the House closer to a resolution of its organizational crisis. Initially, the Democrats scattered their votes, but over the course of several ballots coalesced around Emory D. Potter of Ohio. Potter peaked with 78 votes on the thirty-first roll-call. Apparently sensing that his support would rise no higher, he urged that his name be withdrawn from further consideration.[89]

The Democrats now focused their hopes on William J. Brown of Indiana. Generally recognized as a "doughface" and

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[88] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, December 2, 1849; December 20, 1849, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, pp. 177-179; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, December 4, 1849; December 8, 1849; Howell Cobb to Thomas Reade Rootes Cobb, December 10, 1849, Howell Cobb Papers; Alexander H. Stephens to Linton Stephens, December 2, 1849, Stephens Papers, MC.

[89] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, December 8, 1849, Howell Cobb Papers; Congressional Globe, Thirty-First Congress, First Session, pp. 10-15.

loyal party man, Brown gained strength rapidly among both northern and southern Democrats. On the thirty-second ballot, he received 56 votes. Six ballots later, he had risen to 109. For eight days and thirty-nine ballots, Winthrop had held steady with around 100 votes. Faced with Brown's rapid rise, he suddenly announced on the floor of the House his decision to withdraw. Winthrop's announcement took his fellow Whigs by surprise. It produced a scene of considerable confusion as Whigs demanded an adjournment, and Democrats, sensing victory, pushed for an immediate roll-call. As confusion spread throughout the House, both sides finally agreed to an adjournment.[90]

The adjournment did little to help the Whigs. They proved unable to settle on a replacement for Winthrop. When voting resumed with the fortieth ballot on the December 13, they scattered their votes. Meanwhile, Brown climbed to 112 votes, only two short of election -- absent congressmen reaching the capital had increased the number required for victory to 114. Only two votes away from the speakership, Brown seemed certain of success. Yet his latest increase reflected a sudden demonstration of support by prominent Free Soil congressmen. Suspicious of this development, several

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[90] Congressional Globe, Thirty-First Congress, First Session, pp. 16-18; John E. Simpson, "Prelude to Compromise: Howell Cobb and the House Speakership Battle of 1849," The Georgia Historical Quarterly, LVIII (Spring, 1974), 396.

southern congressmen withheld the votes necessary to Brown's election.[91]

They did not have to wait long for verification of their suspicions. Almost as soon as the fortieth ballot had been completed, Edward Stanley, a North Carolina Whig, introduced a resolution calling for a conference by Whig and Democratic leaders. Declaring that he sensed something wrong -- "'something rotten in Denmark'" -- he hinted that the Democrats had resorted to double-dealing in their pursuit of the speakership. When Democrats rose in denial, George Ashmun, a Massachusetts Whig, bluntly accused Brown of carrying on a secret correspondence with the Free Soilers. Under the intense scrutiny of his peers, the Democratic candidate acknowledged that such correspondence had taken place. Although Brown insisted that he had made no pledges, when pressured to read his letter before the House, it became clear that he had in fact declared his opposition to slavery and promised to organize critical committees to the satisfaction of the Free Soilers.[92]

The revelations about Brown and the Free Soilers reduced the House to a confused -- almost chaotic -- state as congressmen who had voted for Brown now hastened to denounce him. These conditions prevailed for nearly two days. The

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[91] Congressional Globe, Thirty-First Congress, First Session, p. 18; Macon Georgia Telegraph, December 25, 1849.

[92] Congressional Globe, Thirty-First Congress, First Session, pp. 18-22.

sectional tensions so prevalent throughout the session flared into scenes of near violence as charges of disunionism and abolitionism reverberated throughout the chamber.[93]

In the aftermath of the Brown fiasco, both Cobb and Winthrop experienced a temporary resurgence in the voting. Cobb, feeling a bitter mixture of frustration and disgust, strongly resisted this trend. He complained to Mary Ann about "the constant and perplexing application of my friends to return to me, believing as they profess that it presents the best chance for the success of the democratic party." Ignoring all such entreaties, he made "a constant invariable and urgent appeal that my name should be lost sight of in ... efforts to organize the House."[94]

For the first time, Cobb's declarations of disinterestedness rang true. He believed that the current House had proven itself so unfit to govern that "every member should resign his seat and ... give the people a chance of electing representatives ... who can organize and go on with the public business." He circulated his idea informally, and reported that it received generally favorable reactions. He doubted that the plan would be enacted, however, because it required a unanimous vote by the members.[95]

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[93] Ibid., pp. 18-31.

[94] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, December 15, 1849, Howell Cobb Papers.

[95] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, December 17, 1849, ibid.

The tedious balloting process continued for another nine days. During this time, the Democrats turned to Boyd of Kentucky, while the Whigs concentrated on Stanly of North Carolina. Neither man rose higher than 87 votes. On the forty-eighth ballot, the Whigs again focused on Winthrop who quickly returned to his original strength. Cobb saw nothing but confusion and uncertainty in these efforts. He reported that many northern Democrats had voiced their preference for his election, but added warnings that current sectional animosity had made it impossible for them to vote for him. Others demanded his renomination. Some Whigs had even professed a willingness to see him victorious, provided he made prior concessions on committee assignments. Cobb flatly rejected all such suggestions. He would accept the office only if it came unencumbered. He predicted that the House would be organized only after adoption of the plurality rule. When that occurred, he expected Winthrop to be elected.[96]

Throughout the long days of stalemate, different members had proposed a variety of procedures under which the House might organize. These proposals ranged from variations on the simple plurality rule suggested by Andrew Johnson to suggestions that the speaker be selected by lottery or by a bipartisan select committee. The House rejected all such

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[96] Congressional Globe, Thirty-First Congress, First Session, pp. 34-67; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, December 20, 1849, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, p. 179.

plans as each faction sought to avoid making concessions that it might regret later. The members had even rejected an effort to effect a temporary organization from fear that it would become permanent by default. Finally, after fifty-nine ballots and eighteen days of deadlock, the House adopted the plurality rule by a narrow margin. Under the procedure introduced by Tennessee Democrat, Frederick P. Stanton, the House would vote three more times. If no candidate received a majority from one of these roll-calls, the House would then take a fourth ballot. The candidate with the greatest number of votes would be speaker. Cobb, perhaps anticipating that his name would again be in contention, voted against the proposal. His victory -- if victory he was to have -- must be untainted by self-aggrandizement.[97]

Having adopted a procedure for electing by plurality, the House promptly implemented it. On the sixtieth ballot, Cobb returned to the top of the field with 95 votes. Winthrop stood second with 90. On the next ballot Cobb's lead slipped to four. On the next, he found himself tied with Winthrop at 97 votes each. With the completion of this roll-call, the House had completed the three preliminary votes required by Stanton's plan. On the sixty-third ballot,

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[97] Congressional Globe, Thirty-First Congress, First Session, pp. 5-65.

Cobb polled 102 votes to Winthrop's 99, and thus won the speakership.[98]

Cobb's success resulted from a complex interplay of voting patterns shaped by the slavery issue. On the final roll call, Cobb picked up five votes, while Winthrop gained two. One of the dissident southern Whigs and a member of the Free Soil bloc accounted for Winthrop's gain. Cobb's three vote margin of victory came from five Democrats -- four from the Old Northwest and one from Alabama. All seven of these votes had previously been withheld from the caucus nominees because of slavery concerns. Twenty members persisted in withholding their votes from either candidate even on the final ballot. Consisting of nine Free Soilers, five dissident southern Whigs, four antislavery Democrats, and two Calhounites, the members of this group could have easily altered the outcome of the speaker's contest had they put their votes into play. For these members, however, the politics of slavery now took precedence over the politics of party.[99]

The announcement of the election results produced "a murmur of approbation," followed by an outburst of applause in the gallery. Yet even as the gallery burst into applause, chaos again erupted in the House chambers. Edward Stanly of North Carolina introduced a resolution declaring Cobb the

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[98] Ibid., pp. 65-66.

[99] Ibid.

"duly elected Speaker of the House of the Thirty-first Congress." Democrats leaped up to protest that Cobb had already been elected and that this motion served no necessary purpose. Opponents of the plurality rule loudly insisted that the resolution be put to a vote. At length, the clerk called the roll and Stanly's resolution passed easily. Acting clerk Campbell then asked Winthrop and James McDowell of Virginia to escort the new speaker to the chair.[100]

After collecting himself for a moment, Cobb addressed the House. He confessed himself "deeply embarrassed in taking this chair under the circumstances attending my election," and predicted that those circumstances indicated much about the difficulties ahead. He earnestly sought the patriotic support of every member in overcoming these difficulties. Guided by such a spirit, he concluded, "our action will result in the continued prosperity of our common country." The House had at last elected a speaker. It remained to be seen if that body could assist in preserving the Union.[101]

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[100] Ibid.

[101] Ibid., pp. 66-67.

Chapter Nine

"A Southern Man With Southern Feelings"

Cobb won the speakership on December 22. Although he immediately wrote to inform Mary Ann of his victory, his letter did not reach Athens for several days. Having accepted her husband's predictions of defeat, Mary Ann had turned her main focus from politics to preparations for Christmas. With unintended irony, she confessed that "I do not look forward to the holidays with as bright anticipation as the servants do ... For every moment that they spend in their owners house, they count as so much time stolen from themselves."[1]

The first rumors of Cobb's election did not reach Athens until December 25. Occupied by the festivities of the day, the family did not hear of these reports until the twenty-sixth. Family members learned the news in a variety of ways. Lamar Cobb had gone to the post office for his mother. While there, a neighbor informed him that a stranger passing through on the stage had just confirmed Cobb's election. Lamar raced home "in double quick time," shouting, "'my Papa's Speaker.'" Mary Ann doubted the accuracy of the

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[1] Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, December 20, 1849, Howell Cobb Papers, Felix Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia (Hereafter: Howell Cobb Papers); Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, December 22, 1849, Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collection, Felix Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia (Hereafter: Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collection).

report, but declined to send the boy out to inquire further lest she be accused of "showing too much anxiety." Thus she waited in uncertainty throughout the day until John B. Cobb stopped by with newspapers that proclaimed "'the long agony is over.'"[2]

Cobb's father received the news while visiting a neighbor. John Addison hastened home to share the joyous information with Sarah. The "old Colonel" started out at a brisk walk, but broke into a "half run" before reaching the house. When he arrived, he found John A. there, and immediately dispatched him to inform Mary Ann. Eager to deliver the news of his father's success, the boy lashed his horse through the streets, exclaiming, "get up old fellow - your Master is Speaker and I want to get home quick to tell your mistress."[3]

Local Democrats manifested only slightly less enthusiasm than Cobb's own family. They promptly made plans to celebrate with a torchlight procession. Holsey, who had finally bowed to Cobb's anti-Calhoun stance during the previous summer, led the celebration. He removed the shutters from his house and illuminated the windows with a transparency announcing Cobb's election. The procession, complete with a marching band, began at the offices of the

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[2] Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, December 29, 1849, Howell Cobb Papers.

[3] Ibid.

Banner and made its way to the Cobb home. There, Mary Ann entertained the crowd with "cake, oranges, pecan nuts, almonds, & raisins." Although Cobb could not be present to enjoy the festivities, his image dominated the scene from a gilt frame hung by a blue cord.[4]

Nor did the national press ignore Cobb's election. As might be expected, Democratic newspapers applauded the outcome of the speaker's race. The Richmond Examiner praised him as the only man who could have won the post "with so small a quantity of ill will ... and so little envy." The Baltimore Sun echoed this praise, proclaiming, "Mr. Cobb is a Southern man with Southern feelings: but he is attached to the Union, and is, on that account, the man for the crisis." Even some of the leading Whig journals felt compelled to acknowledge the Georgian's qualifications for the position. When the National Intelligencer did so, the Washington correspondent of the Macon Georgia Telegraph could not help gloating that "old Joe is politically honest when he cannot help it."[5]

Back in Washington, Cobb too received numerous expressions of praise and support. James Buchanan found it especially promising that the nation should have a "Southern

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[4] Ibid.

[5] Richmond Examiner, cited in Athens Southern Banner, January 10, 1850; Baltimore Sun, cited in Macon Georgia Telegraph, January 8, 1850; Macon Georgia Telegraph, January 1, 1850.

Speaker ... elected by Northern Democratic votes." Yet the new speaker voiced little of the joy and satisfaction so prevalent among his friends and family. In part this stemmed from genuine embarrassment about the events surrounding his election. He took great pains to stress in letters home that although elected by the plurality rule, "I voted against the rule throughout .... Indeed all my personal efforts have been directed to my defeat for the last two weeks."[6]

Cobb's muted reaction also reflected an appreciation of the difficulties before him. He confided to Mary Ann that he faced a "herculean task ... [of] a delicate and arduous" nature. Within only days of undertaking his added responsibilities, he reported that "I have been for several days hard at work, from ten to twelve hours a day without stopping for my dinner." Moreover, he added, "my anxiety of mind has caused me loss of sleep which with the physical & mental labor makes me feel quite haggard."[7]

Events did not fail to fulfill his expectations. Almost as soon as he assumed the speaker's chair, he found himself embroiled in the usual scramble for spoils that followed every election. In this instance, however, the sectional

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[6] Joseph L. Wright to Howell Cobb, December 22, 1849; John Kettlewell to Howell Cobb, December 23, 1849; A. Birdsall to Howell Cobb, December 24, 1849; James Buchanan to Howell Cobb, December 29, 1849, Howell Cobb Papers; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, December 22, 1849, Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collection.

[7] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, December 22, 1849; December 30, 1849, Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collection.

division over slavery heightened the bitterness of the competition. It took the House twenty ballots to elect a clerk. Even then, John Forney of Pennsylvania, the Democratic nominee met defeat when several southern Democrats broke ranks and voted for Thomas Campbell, the Whig candidate and a southern man. It proved almost as difficult to fill other House posts. This protracted process of organizing the House lasted until late January. When the organization had been resolved at last, a frustrated Cobb complained that "we have at length fairly got to work, that is to say, we are through the elections. After some two or three months of talking we will spend a month or two on business & go home."[8]

The speaker profoundly regretted these difficulties in organizing the House as they "added ... to the bad sectional feeling which already existed among the members." To make matters worse, the division between northern and southern Democrats threatened to widen even further. Northern Democrats bitterly complained that their southern allies failed to appreciate the political risks they took in the defense of southern rights. As the clerk's election had

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[8] Congressional Globe, Thirty-First Congress, First Session, pp. 95, 106-107, 117, 124-126, 138, 140, 156-157, 161-162, 174-175, 186-194, 223-224, 274-275, 277-278; Holman Hamilton, Prologue to Conflict, The Crisis and Compromise of 1850, (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1964), p. 49; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, January 11, 1850; January 22, 1850, Howell Cobb Papers.

shown, far too many southern Democrats now viewed all northern men with suspicion.[9]

Cobb faced other difficulties as well. As speaker, he bore responsibility for organizing the standing House committees. While fully determined to play the part of the traditional partisan leader who reserved the choicest political plums for members of his own party, he also hoped to ease sectional tensions by giving all factions representation on the committees. As everyone expected, he placed Democratic majorities on most committees. Nevertheless, he balanced this partisan display by providing both Whigs and Free Soilers with substantial committee representation -- including seats on the critical committees dealing with territories, the judiciary, and the District of Columbia. In an effort to heal the division between northern and southern Democrats, he allotted northern Democrats critical seats on the judiciary and territorial committees. He took care to insure, however, that these northern Democrats were men with proven records of support for southern positions.[10]

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[9] Daniel Sturgeon to James Buchanan, December 22, 1849, James Buchanan Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (Hereafter: Buchanan Papers); Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, January 11, 1850, Howell Cobb Papers.

[10] Athens Southern Banner, January 24, 1850; Congressional Globe, Thirty-First Congress, First Session, pp. 88-89.

Cobb understood from the beginning that his course would not be entirely popular. Even as he labored through twelve hour days in the speaker's room to organize the committees, he warned Mary Ann that having read "the flattering notices which the papers have taken of the new speaker she must prepare her mind to read the strictures & criticism which will soon begin to be published." He assured her, however, that while he might be "roasted" in the papers, "[I shall] bear it all philosophically & survive ... I trust."[11]

As anticipated, Cobb's committee arrangements did draw criticism, but mainly from the Whig press. For the most part, Democratic newspapers praised his efforts. Southern Democratic editors took pains to assure their readers that the new speaker had adequately protected the South's most vital interests. The Georgia Telegraph chuckled that "the Provisoists winced terribly as the committees ... were announced." Cobb's own Southern Banner labored to justify those appointments which might be questioned as overly favorable to the free states. It dismissed the inclusion of Free Soilers on the committees dealing with slavery as nothing more than a move "to admit representation of the various opinions of the body, ... [and] to avoid the

[11] Howell Cobb to Lamar Cobb, December 29, 1849, Howell Cobb Papers; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, December 30, 1849, Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collection.

imputation of a design to suppress investigation, of which much capital against the South might be made."[12]

The Whig press reacted to Cobb's committee appointments with feigned dismay. The Augusta Chronicle and Sentinel voiced disgust at the hypocrisy of its Democratic counterparts. The southern Democratic speaker, it noted, had appointed "notorious abolitionists" to committees essential in decisions regarding slavery. It further complained that "if a Whig had been guilty of the same act, the thunders of [Democratic] denunciations would reverberate through the country for months."[13]

Private expressions of dissatisfaction regarding committee assignments proved less partisan. Congressman James MacLanahan, a Pennsylvania Democrat, complained that "there has been a want of impartiality, skill & judgement displayed by Mr. Cobb." The speaker, he charged, had shown more concern for appeasing "doubtful" northern Democrats than for rewarding loyal members of the party. Even worse, Cobb had given preference to some Whigs over Democrats. Alexander Stephens had fared much better in his committee assignment than the Pennsylvanian. Perhaps Stephens deserved a higher

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[12] Macon Georgia Telegraph, January 8, 1850; Athens Southern Banner, January 24, 1850.

[13] Augusta Chronicle and Sentinel, cited in Athens Southern Banner, January 24, 1850.

place, MacLanahan concluded, "but surely not at the hands of a Demo[cratic] speaker."[14]

Ironically, Stephens expressed very similar complaints. He deemed his assignment to the Committee on Rules as beneath his abilities and voiced an inclination to reject it. He denounced Cobb's appointment of prominent abolitionists to important committees as an "outrage," and charged that the speaker had given the Free Soilers "all that Wilmot bargained with Brown for." Like the Whig press, he viewed the committee assignments as proof that southern Democrats meant to exploit the slavery issue for political gain, and little more.[15]

Despite the long hours in the "speaker's room," Cobb still found time for considerable activities outside the House. Following the example of "other dignataries [sic]," he kept "open doors" on New Year's day, "receiving the kind wishes of friends and offering in return a bowl of eggnog and cake." A few days later, he attended a formal dinner with a guest list that included Vice President Fillmore and the British minister, Sir Henry Bulwer. Cobb insisted that he attended this function only "in the line of duty," as he found the formality of such occasions disagreeable and

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[14] James MacLanahan to James Buchanan, January 8, 1850, Buchanan Papers.

[15] Alexander H. Stephens to Linton Stephens, December 31, 1849, Alexander H. Stephens Papers, Manhattanville College of the Sacred Heart, Purchase, New York (Hereafter: Stephens Papers, MC).

"insipid." Nevertheless, within three weeks he had launched plans to host "a real Washington city squeeze." With the assistance of his friend Thomas Harris, he planned a party for some 400 guests. As word of the party spread through the city, he found himself swamped with requests for invitations. In two days, the guest list swelled to 500, and a frustrated Cobb threatened to drop everything in Harris' lap while he fled the city. These difficulties not withstanding, Harris described the actual party as "an easy going time" which "went off most gracefully." Cobb took a more jaundiced view. The women, he recalled, "danced themselves pale, and the men drank themselves drunk and I paid the fiddler."[16]

There were other distractions as well. Whatever his standing as a "Washington dignatary [sic]," Cobb's generous and compassionate nature had not changed. When he learned that John Flournoy, a relative and frustrated office-seeker, had been stranded in the capital by lack of funds, he provided the unfortunate man with money to cover his expenses. A few weeks later, T. C. Hackett, John Lumpkin's successor as Fifth District representative, fell seriously ill. The speaker assumed responsibility for directing Hackett's medical care. He hired both nurses and doctors to attend the patient. In addition, he personally spent several

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[16] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, January 1, 1850; January 11, 1850; February 14, 1850; February 16, 1850; March 4, 1850; Thomas D. Harris to (?), February 20, 1850, Howell Cobb Papers.

nights sitting up with the sick man. Although these efforts left him feeling "rather worsted," he voiced a determination that Hackett "shall not suffer for want of proper attention."[17]

Nor could Cobb ignore completely his business interests in Georgia. James Jackson, his law partner, had been elected to a judgeship by the state legislature. Unable to continue in private practice, Jackson dissolved the partnership. By January, the speaker had established a new practice with his old friend, Hope Hull.[18]

In addition to these activities, Cobb also launched an immediate search for different housing. He did so in part because numerous friends and associates insisted that rooms in a boarding house would be inadequate for the holder of the "third office in the Republic." Moreover, he had determined that Mary Ann and the family should join him at the earliest possible date. By renting a house in a healthy part of the city, he hoped to alleviate any concerns she might have about returning to live in the capital.[19]

A variety of motives prompted Cobb's determination to have his family join him. His election as speaker precluded any visits to Georgia during the session. He missed both

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[17] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, December 25, 1849; January 25, 1850; January 27, 1850; January 28, 1850, ibid.

[18] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, January 15, 1850, ibid.

[19] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, December 25, 1849; January 8, 1850, ibid.

Mary Ann and the children already, and longed "for a cheerful fireside communion with those dear ones who cluster around our hearthstone." He became sufficiently focused on this subject that he dedicated several letters to fatherly advice for his sons. Echoing his own father from so many years before, he issued a "strict injunction" that they come straight home from school, as staying out late led to bad habits.[20]

Deeper feelings, however, fueled Cobb's determination. His election to the speakership left him feeling strangely depressed and isolated. He confided to Mary Ann that "I miss you now more than ever as I need your advice and counsel on many points." He further confessed that "I have never felt more sick at heart with Washington than I now do, and half so determined to retire from public life." Insisting that his feelings had undergone "quite a revolution," he described his pursuit of political glory in bleak terms. "We see in the distance an object, [and] attracted by its glare we press on to gain a prize. Intoxicated with the process of success we never stop to calculate its true value[.] Finally it is ours, and mortified ... we find that we have grasped a shadow. 'Vanity of Vanities, all is vanity.'" Although Cobb

[20] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, December 25, 1849; January 3, 1850; January 8, 1850; January 25, 1850; January 28, 1850, ibid.

often expressed such sentiments during his political career, the attraction of the political arena always overcame them.[21]

Within days of launching his search for new quarters, Cobb had selected a three-story house on Third Street which boasted "large & well furnished" rooms, as well as a private and healthy location. He agreed to pay $100 a month in rent, but admonished Mary Ann to say nothing about this in Athens because it might "make some of my creditors complain that I am lavishly spending my money." The accusation would be untrue, he added, but "people never stop to inquire into the justice ... of such charges."[22]

Mary Ann viewed her husband's plans with mixed emotions. She questioned the necessity for him to live differently than other members, noting that the two previous speakers whom she had known had not done so. Nor had her fears about the impact of life in Washington on the health of herself and the children completely disappeared. Pregnant again, the impending birth of a child due in February gave her further cause for concern. More than anything else, however, she dreaded the social requirements of running a household in the capital. Upon learning of Cobb's open house on New Year's Day, she acknowledged that this information "has confirmed all my fears of my future life -- if it has not increased

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[21] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, December 25, 1849; January 1, 1850, ibid.

[22] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, January 3, 1850; January 8, 1850, ibid.

them tenfold ... I [would] much prefer continuing my occupation as your secretary, than to sit at the head of your table -- There is the rub."[23]

Still, both her doctor and family members agreed that Mary Ann's health had at last been restored. This improvement, combined with her own dread of a long separation and Cobb's assurances about the healthy location of his house, helped win her agreement to his plans. Ongoing difficulties in controlling John A. might have contributed further to her decision. Following yet another clash between their oldest son and his teacher, an exasperated Mary Ann exploded that "this boy needs the eye of a father. He is getting restive under petticoat government."[24]

On one point only did Mary Ann seriously dispute Cobb's assertions. She found his "discourse ... upon the subject of the vanities of earthly ambition and fame" unconvincing. Declaring that "in twelve months it will be forgotten," she maintained that his current musings represented nothing more than "periodical" feelings. She offered to prove her contention by "reference to your letters, each time we have been separated." Cobb responded that however incredulous she might be at the moment, "you shall not remain so as the time

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[23] Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, January 1, 1850; January 9, 1850; Thomas R. R. Cobb to Howell Cobb, January 9, 1850, ibid.

[24] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, January 8, 1850; Thomas R. R. Cobb to Howell Cobb, January 9, 1850; Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, January 29, 1850, ibid.

for the next election will show ... [If] the ever varying scenes of political strife ... have heretofore had irresistible charms -- and I do not deny it -- it is not so now."[25]

To demonstrate his sincerity, Cobb privately informed some of his lieutenants that he would not seek another term. They pleaded with him to reconsider. James Jackson, Cobb's friend, relative, and -- until January -- law partner, appealed to the speaker's political ambition as well as his sense of history. "You must give out [this] notion," he insisted, "it never will do ... You ought to be speaker at least one more Congress, by all means." He avowed that by doing so "you will ... identify your name with the party & the country, & be looked to even more than you are now." Both James K. Polk and Henry Clay, he added, had held the speakership for years. They had both "left lasting reputations." Those who had held the post but a single session, he noted, "are already unknown & forgotten." Jackson's arguments possessed force, but the speaker had made up his mind.[26]

II

Regardless of Cobb's future plans, his current position required all the skill and patience he could muster. The

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[25] Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, January 9, 1850; Sarah Rootes Cobb to Howell Cobb, February 27, 1850; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, March 4, 1850, ibid.

[26] James Jackson to Howell Cobb, June 14, 1850, ibid.

issue of slavery in the territories continued to dominate the political scene. The failure of previous congresses to resolve this persistent and dangerous issue had heightened the sense of national crisis. The prospects for a compromise during the Thirty-First Congress did not appear promising. Sectional animosity ran high both within the national government and the country at large. President Taylor manifested no inclination to back away from his announced free-soil policy regarding the Mexican Cession. Although his stance won wide support among northern antislavery men, it created alarm throughout the South and drove extreme state-rights advocates into a frenzy. Stephens despaired to his brother that "the general signs of the times augur no good .... Men's minds are unsettled .... The centrifugal tendency in our system is now decidedly in the ascendant."[27]

This "centrifugal tendency" made itself most apparent in the activities of the Calhounites. Despite Calhoun's failure to forge a united southern party nearly a year earlier, the Carolinian perceived in Taylor's policy another opportunity to fulfill his cherished dream. Acting through lieutenants, he convinced a bipartisan Mississippi state convention to issue a call for a southern meeting at Nashville in June, 1850. If all went as planned, this

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[27] Alexander H. Stephens to Linton Stephens, January 15, 1850, Stephens Papers, MC.

Nashville Convention would issue an ultimatum from a united South to the antislavery North.[28]

The Calhounite appeal did not fall on deaf ears. Several southern states made provisions to send delegates to the proposed convention. In Cobb's own home state, Governor Towns and the legislature revealed increasingly radical tendencies. During the winter of 1849-1850, the state government adopted resolutions expressing southern dissatisfaction with the North. It enacted legislation requiring the governor to summon a state convention should California be admitted as a free state or Congress take other actions hostile to slavery. It also authorized elections for delegates to the Nashville Convention.[29]

Ominously, stresses generated by the sectional controversy now began to break down the old party affiliations in Georgia. The majority in the legislature that passed the radical measures consisted of a coalition of state-rights Whigs and Democrats. This majority had been opposed by a vocal coalition of Union Whigs and Democrats. Although the parties still tended to divide along traditional lines in the daily activities of the legislature, the

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[28] William J. Cooper, Jr., Liberty and Slavery: Southern Politics to 1860 (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983), pp. 229-232; John Niven, John C. Calhoun and the Price of Union (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), pp. 337-339.

[29] Richard Harrison Shryock, Georgia and the Union in 1850 (Durham: Duke University Press, 1926), pp. 218-234.

realignment of voting patterns on sectional issues foreshadowed the cataclysm soon to descend on Georgia's political organizations.[30]

Cobb appreciated the dangers besetting the nation. Several weeks into the session, he privately acknowledged to Mary Ann that "the best and coolest men of the country begin to look to the future with fear and trepidation." For himself, he asserted, "I feel conscious that we are upon evil times." But even if the future did present a "gloomy picture," he still believed it possible that the "hand above that has led us in safety through many hard and dangerous trials ... will ... save our glorious Union and continue to our children the blessings that we have inherited from our fathers .... I look upon this Union as the last hope of freedom on Earth."[31]

Whatever Cobb's expectations of divine assistance, he did not passively wait for it. Hoping to gain time for Congress to effect a workable compromise, he labored to restrain the activities of the Ultras at home. Even while the state legislature debated its program, he wrote to both Whigs and Democrats pleading that everyone avoid actions which might make a peaceful resolution of the crisis more difficult. In pursuit of this goal, he did not hesitate to

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[30] Ibid.

[31] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, February 11, 1850, Howell Cobb Papers.

stretch the truth. He assured one Whig that Stephens and Toombs had enlightened President Taylor, and professed to "believe for the first time that he will veto the Wilmot Proviso." Loathe to go too far, however, Cobb admitted that the president "as yet ... preserves an ominous silence on the subject." Nonetheless, he insisted to all his correspondents that "the danger to be guarded against at the south is ... making false issues." Southerners must adhere to the principle of congressional non-interference in the territories. "Let them stand upon the ground now occupied & all will be well," he vowed, "but if they seek to resist the admission of California on the ground that her constitution excludes slavery, it ... will be found indefensible."[32]

For the moment, Cobb's efforts to still the storms at home had little impact. Those who shared his views echoed them, those who opposed him ignored them -- as the measures passed by the legislature illustrated. Yet even his closest advisors warned that little time remained for Congress to implement a compromise. After a trip through parts of Alabama and Georgia, brother John reported that he had heard "no South Carolina bravado" from the people. Rather, he had heard everywhere "the calm, determined language of men who

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[32] Ibid.; Howell Cobb to Joseph Henry Lumpkin, January 11, 1850, Joseph Henry Lumpkin Papers, Felix Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia; John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, January 19, 1850, Howell Cobb Papers.

have made up their minds that the time for argument is gone. They are now to submit their necks finally & forever or brave all hazards in maintaining their equality." If Congress failed to settle the crisis during its current session, he warned, "all hope is gone for the Union."[33]

The planned Nashville Convention especially worried Georgia Unionists. While the Ultras only feared its failure, Unionists feared both its success and failure. Fully cognizant that many Ultras actually sought secession, the Unionists dreaded the consequences of a well-attended and united southern convention. What, they demanded, if the convention -- acting under the guise of compromise -- should "resolve to take such ultra ground for a settlement of the difficulty as the people of the nonslaveholding states cannot sanction"? Would it not leave the South with no choice save "revolution" or humiliation?[34]

Yet, as it became clear that several slave states had no intention of participating in the convention, and that most southerners viewed it with distinct ambivalence, the Unionists developed new concerns. "That convention may not be unanimous," Hiram Warner lamented, and "the South will present a divided front, and weaken its moral force." In

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[33] John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, January 19, 1850; February 7, 1850, Howell Cobb Papers.

[34] John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, February 27, 1850; William Hope Hull to Howell Cobb, March 7, 1850; March 16, 1850; Hiram Warner to Howell Cobb, March 17, 1850, ibid.

that event, another Unionist added, "I dread to hear the effect which it may produce at the North .... If the North shall take up the idea that there is no feeling on the slavery question ... I fear the consequences."[35]

John Lamar took the most gloomy view of all. The hesitance of the South to present a united front in the current crisis, combined with the advanced ground taken by some southern legislatures and congressmen, placed southerners in a disastrous position. "The first mentioned occurrence makes our doom certain," he grieved, "& the last makes it excruciating." He viewed the future mournfully, "our complaints hereafter will be laughed at and scorned ... and those who represent the Southern states ... will feel like the tolerated representatives of conquered provinces." Then the South would occupy the same relation to the North "that the negroes do to us."[36]

Back in Washington, the situation appeared just as grim. On January 21, President Taylor sent his first annual message to Congress. The president continued to press for the prompt admission of California and New Mexico as free states. His proposal completely ignored issues that shared an intimate connection with the territorial crisis. Texas, for instance, claimed a substantial portion of New Mexico as its own

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[35] Hiram Warner to Howell Cobb, March 17, 1850; William Hope Hull to Howell Cobb, April 22, 1850, ibid.

[36] John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, February 27, 1850, ibid.

territory. The president's message also made no mention of longstanding sectional concerns such as the status of slavery in Washington D.C. or the return of fugitive slaves who escaped to the free states.[37]

Although Taylor clearly envisioned his policy as patriotic and reasonable, it really represented nothing more than a program already rejected by both the Thirtieth Congress and the South. Rather than resolving the crisis, Taylor offered little but a formula for further firebrand debate and potential national disaster. If the presidential plan became reality, the South would find itself effectively shut out of all the territories won from Mexico. Moreover, Taylor's program raised the specter that the area already open to slavery might be reduced should Congress admit New Mexico without making provisions for the claims of Texas. Southerners could never accept this scenario without substantial compensation. Yet when they introduced legislation for a stronger fugitive slave law, antislavery men responded with demands for the abolition of slavery and the slave trade in the national capital. The "centrifugal tendencies" that Stephens had observed certainly appeared to hold sway.[38]

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[37] Hamilton, Prologue to Conflict, pp. 46-48; Robert V. Remini, Henry Clay, Statesman for the Union (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1991), pp. 727-728.

[38] Hamilton, Prologue to Conflict, pp. 47-48; Remini, Henry Clay, pp. 728-729.

The first real glimmer of hope that disaster might be averted did not come until eight days after Taylor sent his message to Congress. On January 29, Henry Clay took the floor in the Senate to introduce a "comprehensive scheme" intended to resolve all issues in dispute between the free and slave states. At seventy-two, Clay long had held a leadership position in the Whig Party. More importantly, his moderating influence during the Missouri Crisis of 1819-1821 and the Nullification Crisis of 1832-1833 had won him the sobriquet of the "Great Compromiser." If any member of the national government held the public prestige needed to piece together a sectional understanding, this aged Kentuckian seemed the man.[39]

Clay outlined his plan in eight resolutions. He called for the admission of California as a free state, while the remainder of the Mexican Cession was organized into territories without congressional restrictions on slavery. He suggested that the federal government assume a portion of the Texas state debt, in exchange for the surrender of Texas claims in New Mexico. Although Clay deemed it "inexpedient" to abolish slavery in Washington D.C., he did urge the abolition of the slave trade in the nation's capital -- even as he denied Congress any authority over the interstate slave

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[39] Hamilton, Prologue to Conflict, pp. 52-53; Remini, Henry Clay, pp. 730-733.

trade. He also pressed for a more vigorous fugitive slave law.[40]

Clay's "comprehensive scheme" drew mixed reactions. While moderates seemed inclined at least to examine its possibilities, extremists in both the North and the South snorted that the Great Compromiser had given far too much to their opponents and nothing of substance to themselves. Even more threatening to the prospects for compromise, President Taylor refused to deviate from his pre-established course. The full power of the administration would be arrayed against the Clay plan.[41]

Cobb viewed this confusing situation with uncertainty. From the beginning of his political life he had bitterly opposed the extremist policies of Calhoun and his followers. Their plans for the Nashville Convention struck him as no different from nullification or the "Southern Address." He found Taylor's "miserable free soil policy" equally repugnant. Yet he hesitated to embrace Clay's compromise proposal. He confided to Mary Ann that "Mr. Clay has made his great speech ... and I fear that no good is to result from it." He voiced the particular fear that Clay's efforts might have "a bad effect on the public mind of the north, as

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[40] Hamilton, Prologue to Conflict, p. 54; Remini, Henry Clay, pp. 732-733; Congressional Globe, Thirty-First Congress, First Session, pp. 244-252.

[41] Hamilton, Prologue to Conflict, pp. 60-61, 70.

it will induce them with the opinion that he expresses southern sentiment, which is very far from the fact."[42]

Cobb offered no elaboration on his cool reaction to the Clay plan. In light of his own oft-voiced faith in compromise it appears strange that he did not respond in a more favorable fashion. It is possible, however, to suggest reasons for Cobb's initial reaction. Stephen A. Douglas, the Democratic senator from Illinois, had been working on a separate compromise proposal. While less comprehensive than the Clay package, "the Douglas Compromise" dealt with the territorial issue in a manner similar to that proposed by the Kentuckian. As speaker and an advocate of compromise, Cobb worked in close conjunction with Douglas' lieutenants in the House, William A. Richardson and John A. McClernand. This association, combined with Cobb's natural partisan instincts, might well have led him to prefer the proposal of a northern Democrat to that of southern Whig.[43]

Still, it proved difficult to read the political signs. Even as Clay launched his compromise effort in the Senate, it appeared that a mood favoring compromise had also taken hold in the House. On February 4, a resolution to apply the Wilmot Proviso to all the Mexican Cession came to a vote.

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[42] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, February 9, 1850, in Ulrich Bonnell Phillips, ed., The Correspondence of Robert Toombs, Alexander H. Stephens, and Howell Cobb (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1913), pp. 183-184.

[43] Robert W. Johannsen, Stephen A. Douglas (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), pp. 271-273.

Somewhat surprisingly, eighteen northern Democrats and fourteen northern Whigs united with southern representatives to table the resolution. Cobb believed this vote "augur[ed] well for the country and I trust, may be considered as foreshadowing a favorable and honorable adjustment of this truly vexed ... question." The vote to table the Proviso, however, quickly proved but a lull in an ongoing storm. Five days after the defeat of the resolution, Cobb again noted that "the excitement is unabated here."[44]

President Taylor did nothing to help the advocates of compromise. On February 13, he forwarded California's free state constitution to Congress. On Monday, February 18, James D. Doty, Democrat of Wisconsin, offered a special resolution instructing the Committee on Territories to report legislation for the admission of California. A large majority of the House favored Doty's resolution, but several southerners -- mainly Whigs who favored accepting California -- believed that its admission must be tied to a comprehensive settlement of all sectional questions. Led by Stephens, this group launched a desperate bid to block a vote on Doty's resolution. Relying on parliamentary technique, the obstructionists introduced "dilatory motions" to adjourn or "go into Committee of the Whole." On each of these

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[44] Hamilton, Prologue to Conflict, pp. 65-66; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, February 4, 1850, Howell Cobb Papers; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, February 9, 1850, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, pp. 183-184.

motions, they exercised their privilege of demanding a roll-call vote. By this means, they succeeded in forcing the House to undergo thirty time-consuming ballots. These delaying tactics held up House action on Doty's resolution throughout the day and into the evening. As the hours passed, the vote became almost entirely sectional and tempers grew increasingly short.[45]

In this struggle, the role of the speaker proved critical. Determined to do everything possible to prevent the House from taking some definitive action that might hinder future compromise, Cobb sustained the southerners time after time in rulings from the chair. When the midnight hour arrived, he promptly declared the legislative day at an end. This declaration rendered Doty's resolution out of order because House rules restricted consideration of such measures to Mondays. It took another nine days before Doty got his resolution on the calendar of regular House business.[46]

On the surface, the events of February 18, seemed but another public manifestation of the stalemate prevailing in Congress. Activities behind the scenes, however, seemed to improve the prospects for compromise. Even as the House

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[45] Alexander H. Stephens, A Constitutional View of the Late War Between the States; Its Causes, Character, Conduct and Results, two vols. (Philadelphia: National Publishing Company, 1870), II, 201-202; Hamilton, Prologue to Conflict, p. 67.

[46] Congressional Globe, Thirty-First Congress, First Session, pp. 375-385; Hamilton, Prologue to Conflict, p. 67.

proceeded through the monotonous roll-calls demanded by the southern obstructionists, McClernand quietly approached Stephens and Toombs. What, he asked, did the southerners require to end the dispute? The two Georgians promptly responded with hastily scrawled conditions. The South, they insisted, demanded that the territorial governments carved from the Mexican Cession be "distinctly empowered" to legalize slavery within their boundaries. Moreover, when these territories framed their state constitutions they must be free to act on slavery as they pleased, and admitted to the Union without "any Congressional Restriction upon the subject." Only when these conditions had been met would they acquiesce to the admission of California as a free state.[47]

Convinced that the Georgians' demands represented a reasonable basis for settlement, McClernand promised to seek an adjournment during which the final details could be arranged. Although McClernand proved unable to convince enough representatives to sustain a motion to adjourn, he returned to Toombs and Stephens shortly after Cobb had declared the legislative day at an end. He now proposed that the two Whigs meet with himself and a small group of Democratic representatives at the speaker's home on the following evening. The two men agreed.[48]

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[47] Stephens, A Constitutional View of the Late War Between the States, II, 202-203.

[48] Ibid.

Although no detailed account of the discussions at Cobb's home survives, the basic structure of the subsequent agreement is clear. Besides the speaker, the Democrats in attendance included McClernand and Richardson of Illinois, John Miller of Ohio, and Linn Boyd of Kentucky. Toombs and Stephens appear to have been the only Whigs present. Early in the proceedings, McClernand offered assurances that he had already consulted with Douglas, and that the senator had vowed to cooperate with the representatives in any arrangement they might make. Because McClernand chaired the House Committee on Territories and Douglas held a similar position in the Senate, all in attendance felt confident that the two men had "conferred freely together and understood each other thoroughly."[49]

Following McClernand's opening remarks, the congressmen drew up an agreement that conformed to the terms sketched out the day before by Stephens and Toombs. They agreed to admit California as a free state and organize the New Mexico and Utah territories without restrictions on slavery. They also pledged "that all our joint efforts should be united to effect these results, as well as the defeat of any attempt to abolish Slavery in the District of Columbia." Having worked out this arrangement, the group proceeded to outline the language for legislation designed "to effect our object." As promised, Douglas and McClernand prepared bills based on

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[49] Ibid.

this agreement for their committees. Douglas reported his legislation to the full Senate on March 25. McClernand followed suit in the House on April 3.[50]

Despite the apparently positive outcome of McClernand's initiative, Cobb's personal correspondence revealed a growing sense of despair. His letters contained no references to the meeting at his home. But only days after the meeting, he privately reported to Mary Ann that "Washington is in the most excited state of public feeling that I ever before witnessed." Nothing in his past experience, he added, had "ever approximated the present condition of things ... and I do not see any mode as yet by which the country is to be relieved."[51]

In part, Cobb's grim appraisal grew out of the bitter rancor that divided the various factions on all sides of the slavery issue. It clearly seemed that positions were fast hardening to the point that compromise might be impossible. As if to illustrate, shortly after the meeting at Cobb's house, Stephens and Toombs called on President Taylor to seek his support for their compromise efforts. The president rebuffed every appeal by the Georgians to give some guarantee that southern rights in the territories would be respected. In light of Taylor's refusal, Stephens and Toombs warned that

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[50] Ibid.

[51] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, February 22, 1850, Howell Cobb Papers.

the presidential policy courted secession. Taylor replied sharply that -- if necessary -- he would personally take command of an army, enforce the laws, and hang any traitors that he caught.[52]

The physical and mental toll being exacted by Cobb's new responsibilities also figured in his despondency. He noted in mid-February that he had already lost nineteen pounds since leaving Athens. A month later, he commented that "I am daily parting with a small quantity of my surplus flesh." Although he often assured Mary Ann that his health continued good, he also complained frequently of being worn down and exhausted by his efforts. "The cares and troubles of my office are peculiarly embarrassing in the present state of things," he lamented, "and most cheerfully would I throw them off, if I had a decent excuse to do it."[53]

The bitter sectional animosity that caused Cobb such anxiety soon took a more personal tone. On March 26, Preston King, an antislavery representative from New York, charged that on March 13, the speaker had "mutilated the journals of the House" for political purposes. The charge derived from King's attempts to force Doty's bill for the admission of

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[52] Thomas E. Schott, Alexander H. Stephens of Georgia, A Biography (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), p. 114.

[53] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, December 30, 1849; January 25, 1850; January 27, 1850; February 14, 1850; February 22, 1850; March 17, 1850; March 25, 1850, Howell Cobb Papers.

California to a vote. He maintained that the speaker had altered his resolution with the "intention to smother this California bill in committee and substitute another for it." By doing so, he alleged, Cobb hoped to avoid a direct vote "upon the naked question of the admission of California," and force through Senate measures that linked California's admission with the slavery question in other territories carved from the Mexican cession. King did not stipulate whether he referred to the Clay or the Douglas compromise package. By this point, however, it hardly mattered because the two senators had begun to cooperate in their quest for a compromise. Cobb, too, appeared reconciled to either program, as he abandoned criticism of the Clay proposal and worked for its implementation.[54]

Confronted with King's allegations, Cobb surrendered the speaker's chair and took a seat on the House floor. The subsequent efforts to settle on a response to the charges provoked a vigorous and at times heated debate. Isaac E. Holmes of South Carolina proposed the creation of a committee of investigation. Several members, led by Stephens and McClernand, argued that King's accusations lacked both the

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[54] Congressional Globe, Thirty-First Congress, First Session, pp. 593-596; Stephens, A Constitutional View of the Late War Between the States, II, 201-204; Johannsen, Stephen A. Douglas, p. 281.

specificity and seriousness to warrant investigation by a special committee.[55]

In a bid to clarify the issue, Cobb himself took the floor to offer an explanation of the incident. King's resolution, he maintained, had been out of order. As speaker, he had not realized this because King had offered the motion verbally and declined a request from the chair to submit it in writing. Instead, the New Yorker had instructed the clerk to write it out for him "in the usual form." Then -- "without waiting for the motion to be reduced to writing, or read" -- King moved that his own motion be tabled. The vote to table came immediately and passed. Not until Cobb inspected the House journal for mistakes did he discover the error. Then, acting under his authority as speaker, he had ordered the resolution altered to bring it into conformity with House rules. The change had not altered the fundamental thrust of King's intentions. Moreover, he emphasized, "the journal, as corrected, was read to the House on the morning following," and adopted without objection by the representative from New York.[56]

Cobb's explanation appeared to satisfy most members. Efforts to dispose of the matter with a resolution declaring that Cobb had done nothing wrong fell apart, however, when

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[55] Congressional Globe, Thirty-First Congress, First Session, pp. 594-595.

[56] Ibid., pp. 595-596, 619.

King refused to withdraw his accusation. Cobb privately denounced the New Yorker's charge as "all moonshine, the result of base and malignant feeling on the part of King to all southern men." Yet the speaker also sensed a deeper and more dangerous motive. He observed that King's attack on himself had "created considerable excitement again on the slavery question." This incident, he added, "may have the effect of endangering the settlement of that question -- one object had in view by King, I have no doubt."[57]

For his part, King made little effort to conceal the sectional and political basis of his charge. Frustrated by the success of the southern obstructionists in blocking Doty's resolution and embittered by the assistance given them by a southern speaker, the New Yorker asserted his determination to demonstrate that "the minority of this House had determined that the ... will of the majority should not be met." Cobb's eagerness to assist this minority, he maintained, served to illustrate why he had denied the Georgian his vote in the speakership contest. "I anticipated," he complained, that "the opinions of the State he represents might compel him, upon these questions of order, to vary by fiat his decisions."[58]

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[57] Ibid., pp. 596-597; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, March 26, 1850; March 28, 1850, Howell Cobb Papers.

[58] Congressional Globe, Thirty-First Congress, First Session, pp. 596-597.

King's repetition of his accusation forced a reluctant House to appoint a nine member committee of investigation. This committee spent two days exploring King's charges; Cobb remained with it the entire time. On March 29, it submitted a report which completely exonerated the speaker of any wrongdoing. Many Democrats as well as southern Whig House members had hoped the committee might censure King for pressing the issue after Cobb's explanation from the floor. Others, including some northern Democrats, pleaded that the House avoid making a martyr of the New Yorker. John Wentworth, an Illinois Democrat, warned that "it looked as if there was a design to browbeat and censure a devoted friend of the rights of free labor ... because he, in his zeal for free-soil, had dared question the motives of a southern Speaker." The committee carefully navigated these treacherous extremes. While careful not to attribute King's actions to dishonorable purposes, the committee explicitly attributed the entire incident to his failure to comply with House rules. The House adopted the committee's report "by acclamation ... without a single dissenting voice."[59]

Even as Cobb wrote to inform Mary Ann of "the finale of Preston King's impeachment against me," he learned that his wife faced her own difficulties. While preparing for her trip to join him in Washington, she admitted that "I find

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[59] Ibid., pp. 597-599, 619; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, March 29, 1850, Howell Cobb Papers.

myself often in a maze of doubt & perplexity as to my identity." She compared herself to "the little woman in the story book whose petticoats had been cut off while she was sleeping -- and on waking up she was really distressed to know whether it was really herself or somebody else." Besides doubting her own identity, she added, "I am very doubtful whether I have a husband or ever had one. It seems that I have an excellent friend at a distance ... [who] controls my destiny but really I have lost sight of my husband."[60]

In the midst of these frustrations, the Cobbs did find some distraction in Mary Ann's safe delivery of a baby daughter on February 15. The couple named the infant Mary Ann in honor of her mother, but for the sake of family sanity soon nicknamed the child "Meyon." This first daughter became the focus of considerable attention, and Mary Ann proudly reported to her husband that "she is pronounced by all to be a beauty and <u>the image of her father</u>."[61]

III

Events in the House of February and March attracted little attention in the country. After the obstructionists'

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[60] Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, March 28, 1850, Howell Cobb Papers.

[61] John B. Lamar to Mary Ann Cobb, February 18, 1850; Sarah Rootes Cobb to Howell Cobb, February 20, 1850, Howell Cobb Papers; Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, March 10, 1850, cited in Elizabeth Mays, "The Making of An Antebellum Lady -- Mrs. Howell Cobb," <u>The Georgia Historical Quarterly</u>, XXIV (March, 1940), 19.

success in blocking Doty's California resolution on February 18, the nation focused on the Senate and Clay's compromise. There, the Kentuckian's proposals faced an uncertain future. Clay had introduced his plan in late January. In the weeks that followed, sectional spokesmen in the upper house debated the virtues and flaws of Clay's proposal. Most senators found more flaws than virtues. Prominent southerners such as George M. Berrien and Jefferson Davis, but most especially a dying Calhoun, complained that Clay gave too much to the North. They all warned that secession must follow any settlement that degraded their region. From northern spokesmen came warnings that secession would be resisted with force, and a declaration by William H. Seward that a "higher law than the Constitution" required opposition to slavery. Daniel Webster seemed the only prominent free-soil senator willing to support the compromise. Finally, on April 18, the Senate voted to create a special Committee of Thirteen charged with reporting a bill that incorporated all the points of Clay's proposal.[62]

Although Clay had initially opposed this "omnibus" strategy, he finally accepted it as the one most likely to produce success. He hoped that by lumping all issues into

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[62] Hamilton, Prologue to Conflict, pp. 53-65, 71-74, 76-78, 84-85; Appendix to the Congressional Globe, Thirty-First Congress, First Session, pp. 149-157, 202-211, 233-239, 260-276, 310-318; Niven, John C. Calhoun, pp. 339-341; Remini, Henry Clay, pp. 742-747; David M. Potter, The Impending Crisis, 1848-1861, (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1976), p. 103.

a single piece of legislation, most members would vote for those parts they disliked in order to win passage of the parts they endorsed. Moreover, the omnibus approach ensured that each section would receive its compensation at the same time it made concessions.[63]

Calhoun died on March 31. Cobb did not rejoice at the news, but it is hard to imagine that he failed to view the demise of the "Old Nullifier" as beneficial to the cause of compromise. Only a year before, he had expressed just this opinion. Calhoun's vigorous attack on the Clay compromise had done nothing to change his mind.[64]

Whatever Cobb's feelings about Calhoun's death, he certainly welcomed news that the Southern Convention -- the Carolinian's brainchild -- appeared unlikely to survive its instigator for long. Unionist Democrats and Whigs in Georgia, and much of the South, had put aside their concerns about the impact of a failed meeting in Nashville. They worked to stir up popular feelings against the extremism represented by the Ultras. In north Georgia, public meetings adopted resolutions denouncing both the Southern Convention and talk of secession. In central and south Georgia, the public reaction to the Ultras' agenda indicated the accuracy of earlier Unionist charges that the state-rights' cause

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[63] Remini, Henry Clay, pp. 742-747; Potter, The Impending Crisis, p. 103.

[64] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, February 8, 1849; March 25, 1850, Howell Cobb Papers.

represented nothing but a movement of leaders and editors. Voters there shunned meetings intended to demonstrate opposition to the Clay compromise with apathy and non-attendance.[65]

The election process magnified these initial public reactions. At the April 3 elections, the overwhelming majority of the state's voters stayed home. In several counties, the polls did not open. Voters in Columbus registered their opposition to the convention with write-in votes for "No Convention" that exceeded the number of votes cast for delegates.[66]

Cobb loyalists welcomed these results. One gleefully noted, for instance, that only two men had voted in Athens. He insisted that the Nashville Convention had "been killed so dead it will never kick again in Georgia." Nonetheless, they still felt compelled to emphasize their belief that the low voter turn out reflected a widespread perception that "the question will be settled at this [congressional] session," and "in a manner satisfactory to each section." Despite their success against the Ultras, they continued to "dread" the consequences if the North misread southern forbearance.[67]

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[65] Shryock, Georgia and the Union in 1850, pp. 246-263.

[66] Ibid., pp. 256-260.

[67] John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, April 6, 1850; Howell Flournoy to Howell Cobb, April 7, 1849; William Hope Hull to Howell Cobb, April 22, 1850; Thomas R. R. Cobb to Howell

But, as had been the case so often in recent months, this step towards sectional reconciliation was followed by an apparent leap away from compromise. On May 8, Clay presented the report of the Committee of Thirteen to the full Senate. It mainly embodied an "Omnibus Bill" that incorporated the admission of California, the organization of the Utah and New Mexico territories, and a settlement of the Texas boundary dispute. Separate legislation provided for the abolition of the slave trade in the District of Columbia and a new fugitive slave law. The subsequent debates raged through July, but by late June it appeared that the opponents of the compromise held sway.[68]

Events in New Mexico further complicated the situation. In May, residents of the territory prepared a constitution and requested admission to the Union. Besides threatening to eviscerate Clay's compromise, New Mexico's action prompted an outraged Texas government to begin preparations for an armed response. President Taylor, who remained committed to his own policy, had encouraged New Mexico in its course. He now threatened the use of military force against Texas if the state made any incursions into the disputed territory. Unwavering in his stance, Taylor again brushed aside frantic

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Cobb, May 7, 1850, Howell Cobb Papers.

[68] Hamilton, Prologue to Conflict, pp. 95-101; Potter, The Impending Crisis, pp. 103-107.

warnings from Stephens, Toombs, and other southern Whigs that he risked the destruction of the Union.[69]

Ironically, the best news of June came from the Southern Convention in Nashville. With only five slave states officially participating -- and six not represented at all -- the delegates acknowledged their lack of a popular mandate by refraining from any extreme action. Instead, the convention declared its opposition to the Clay compromise, and pressed for the extension of the Missouri Compromise line to the Pacific. The delegates then adjourned to await the action of Congress.[70]

Throughout May, June, and much of July, Cobb maintained a public silence regarding the compromise proposal. Evidence indicates, however, that he worked to facilitate passage of Clay's program. Three days before the Kentuckian formally introduced the "Omnibus" to the full Senate, Lewis Cass urged Cobb to consult with Clay about the proposal. Cass assured him that "from the way ... [Clay] spoke to me ... yesterday I am sure that he esteems you and that you may safely talk with him upon this subject." Although surviving evidence does not reveal whether the meeting occurred, his letter hints at both the depth of Cobb's commitment to the

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[69] Hamilton, Prologue to Conflict, pp. 102-106.

[70] Ibid., p. 102; Potter, The Impending Crisis, p. 104.

compromise and a wide recognition that his support would be essential when the legislation reached the House.[71]

Cobb also expended considerable effort to insure that Georgians would embrace the compromise. His lieutenants responded with optimistic assessments of the public mood in Georgia throughout May and June. William Hope Hull gloated that "the Nashville Convention has not produced the slightest impression upon the public mind, not one man in fifty knows or cares what they have done." James Jackson asserted that everybody "except a few fanatics ... want the question compromised." Jackson described the Ultra's new found admiration for the Missouri Compromise line as a smokescreen. In years past, these same men had damned Cobb for supporting this very solution. Now, he warned, they merely hoped to use the compromise line as a tool to create dissatisfaction with the Clay plan. Yet, he believed their efforts doomed to failure. "The people of Georgia have no idea of quitting the Union ... they are sick and tired of the fuss & want peace."[72]

While Cobb relished the content of such reports, he worried that his supporters might grow overconfident. When he learned that compromise advocates in Macon planned a

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[71] Lewis Cass to Howell Cobb, May 5, 1850, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, p. 190.

[72] William H. Hull to Howell Cobb, June 24, 1850; James Jackson to Howell Cobb, June 14, 1850; Thomas R. R. Cobb to Howell Cobb, May 7, 1850; John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, June 18, 1850; July 3, 1850, Howell Cobb Papers.

meeting to demonstrate public support for the Clay plan, he immediately pressed John Lamar to participate fully. Cobb explained that "the time has arrived when men should look practical results full in the face and decide deliberately upon the course of policy which we are to adopt." The South must choose between compromise and "a humiliating defeat."[73]

Cobb viewed the current ground swell of Ultra support for extension of the Missouri Compromise line as proof of their calculating disregard of the public interest. "Does it not present a singular spectacle," he demanded, "to see the very men who would have ostracized me for advocating the Missouri Compromise line, now making that their _sine qua non_." Had they "united with me _at the proper time_," he added, "we could have obtained that line as the basis of settlement." Calhoun, however, had declared the South sick of compromises and "demanded the constitutional principle of non-interference." Now, the North offered that principle as the basis of a settlement, and the Ultras sought to reject it in favor of that which had already been turned down. Fuming that "I have no patience with such men," Cobb predicted that if the North offered to settle for the Missouri line, the Ultras "would reject it and demand something else."[74]

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[73] Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, June 26, 1850, _ibid_.

[74] _Ibid_.

Despite their confident assertions of May and June, Georgia Unionists had begun to voice doubts by July. The sources of these doubts were twofold. The muted tone of the Nashville Convention notwithstanding, southern-rights extremists followed the meeting with renewed efforts to stir up popular opposition to the Clay compromise. As they had done previously, most of Georgia's Democratic editors rallied enthusiastically to this endeavor. Events in New Mexico, along with Taylor's threat to employ federal forces against Texas, further contributed to a general uncertainty about the future. The unexpected death of President Taylor on July 9, exerted little impact on the public mind in Georgia. John Cobb explained the popular mood, saying, "Old Zack's death has caused no excitement here, as everyone is convinced that Millard Fillmore cannot be worse than Old Taylor."[75]

John Lamar reported growing Unionist concerns about Ultra activities to Cobb. He complained that Democratic editors in middle Georgia had engaged in a "game ... to browbeat our representatives in Congress, into the belief that the people are opposed ... to the Senate Compromise." Their claims, he insisted, lacked any semblance of truth. The people wanted the dispute settled by compromise. Lamar advised Cobb to "do what is right & pay no attention to what

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[75] Shryock, Georgia and the Union in 1850, pp. 274-287; Hamilton, Prologue to Conflict, pp. 103-106; Schott, Alexander H. Stephens, pp. 119-121; John B. Cobb to Howell Cobb, July 11, 1850, Howell Cobb Papers.

the papers say .... The noise and bluster of a few presses in Georgia is no more the voice of the people than the delegates to the Nashville Convention were their representatives." Still, he worried about renewed Ultra efforts to win popular support. Unable to measure accurately the impact of anti-compromise editorials on the public mind, he expressed fear that "the friends of the Compromise have lain still too long."[76]

In the days that followed, other correspondents lent support to Lamar's analysis. All acknowledged a popular desire for a settlement. Their great anxiety came from fear that the Ultras would dupe the people into supporting the extension scheme. When this "impracticable mode of settlement" failed, the people might be induced to demand disunion. Henry R. Jackson reported that "the friends of the Nashville Convention are actively at work all over the state." Even worse, he added, "meetings are gotten up ... & the people ... are being committed to its action." Absolom Chappell sounded as grim as Jackson. "The state of things is such," he grieved, "as is filling thousands of the best men in Georgia with deep alarm." Both men warned that most of the state's Democratic organization "is rapidly becoming demoralized in reference to the ... preservation of the Union." Chappell observed that in the struggle to come,

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[76] John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, July 3, 1850; July 5, 1850, Howell Cobb Papers.

Georgia Unionists must look to the Whigs and to the Cobb Democrats of north Georgia for success.[77]

Yet rumblings of concern even came from north Georgia. John H. Lumpkin reported from the Fifth District that "the democrats ... are divided; and I fear a majority of [them] now prefer the ... Missouri Compromise line to any mode of settlement." From the Sixth, William Hope Hull echoed these warnings. "The agitators are moving Heaven & Earth," he moaned, "& ... are gaining strength daily." Declaring himself "more alarmed at the prospect than I have ever been," Hull demanded that Cobb "get Congress to do something -- delay is ruining us."[78]

Many Georgia Unionists perceived the need for decisive leadership. They naturally turned to Cobb. Chappell gave voice to these feelings when he pleaded with Cobb for "an Address to your constituents." Insisting that "you should without delay throw yourself fully into the breech," he assured Cobb that such an address "will do incalcable [sic] good ... and ... prevent ... irremediable [sic] evil."[79]

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[77] John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, July 21, 1850, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, pp. 206-208; Henry R. Jackson to Howell Cobb, July 28, 1850; Absolom H. Chappell to Howell Cobb, July 10, 1850, Howell Cobb Papers.

[78] John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, July 21, 1850, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, pp. 206-208; John B. Cobb to Howell Cobb, July 11, 1850; William Hope Hull to Howell Cobb, July 16, 1850, Howell Cobb Papers.

[79] William H. Hull to Howell Cobb, July 16, 1850; Absolom H. Chappell to Howell Cobb, July 10, 1850, Howell

Cobb responded promptly to these appeals. By mid-July, he had drafted an address designed to rally public support for the Clay compromise. Primarily intended to win back Georgia Democrats who had fallen under the sway of the Nashville Convention, he carefully avoided his usual partisan posturing so as not to offend his new Whig allies. He also refrained from charges of disunionism against supporters of the convention. Instead, he relied exclusively on a reasoned effort to demonstrate that the South could accept honorably either the Missouri Compromise extension or the Omnibus plan.[80]

Recalling his own previous support for extending the Missouri Compromise line, Cobb voiced his willingness to give the measure "my vote" should it come up for consideration again. Nevertheless, he repeatedly rejected assertions by its supporters that extension represented "the only satisfactory mode of settlement." Indeed, the proposal suffered from a major flaw. It provided no guarantee that slavery would ever exist in territories south of the compromise line. No one, he argued, "proposes to force the institution of slavery into any ... territory against the wishes of the people who ... inhabit it." Thus, extension of the compromise would apply the principle of congressional

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Cobb Papers.

[80] Howell Cobb to William Hope Hull, July 17, 1850, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, pp. 196-206.

non-intervention only to those lands lying south of the line. North of the line, the "odious doctrine" embodied in the Wilmot Proviso would be in full operation.[81]

The Clay plan for the organization of New Mexico and Utah, on the other hand, offered the South far more. Besides holding out the possibility of slavery extension into the entire Mexican Cession outside of California, its inherent commitment to congressional non-intervention represented "a practical assertion of the constitutional principle for which we have so long and anxiously contended." True, he conceded, the statehood process in California had been attended by "great irregularities," but none so great as required rejection of the Omnibus plan. On one point he was emphatic. "The mere fact that [California's] constitution excludes the institution of slavery constitutes no valid or constitutional objection to her admission as a state."[82]

Cobb offered an extensive defense of the Texas Boundary Bill. While eager to acknowledge the legitimacy of the Texas land claims, he noted that recent events had served to illustrate the desperate need for a prompt settlement of the dispute between Texas and New Mexico. It struck him as both logical and constitutional that Congress should mediate quarrels between a state and a national territory. He took care to emphasize, however, that the bill included no

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[81] Ibid.

[82] Ibid.

provisions for coercing Texas to accept any settlement. Texas would be the final arbiter. Because Texas shared the South's interest in the preservation and extension of slavery, he voiced confidence that the state's decision would enhance southern interests.[83]

The actual impact of Cobb's address on the contest between Ultra and Unionist in Georgia cannot be measured, but evidence indicates that it probably exerted little immediate influence. Not all of his constituents welcomed the subtleties of his arguments. One complained that in the past Cobb had been "one of those square toed chaps who would come out boldly so that [he] could be understood." Now he seemed such a "milk and water fellow" that "for the life of me [I] cant tell which side [he is] on."[84]

For the most part, Cobb's constituents and friends praised the quality of his arguments and offered assurances of their beneficial nature. Nevertheless, subsequent developments appeared to belie these assessments. At a public meeting in Athens on July 28, the pro-compromise men managed to stalemate the supporters of the Nashville Convention, after finding it impossible to overcome them. A month after the publication of the address, Hope Hull reported that he had deferred plans to call meetings seeking

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[83] Ibid.

[84] John Darlin to Howell Cobb, August 2, 1850, Howell Cobb Papers.

public endorsements of Cobb's position. Some Democrats, he noted, "had expressed dissatisfaction with your letter, & if forced to vote on the matter might commit themselves further against you." Additional inquiries revealed that similar conditions prevailed in surrounding counties where support for the "Nashville scheme" outweighed support for the Clay program. The only good news he could offer derived from his perception that "very few are disposed to go to extremes or to denounce those who differ with them." As he had done before, however, Hull pressed for immediate action by Congress. Further delay he predicted would "irretrievably ruin" both the Democratic Party and the Union.[85]

The contest for the support of Georgia's voters climaxed at an Ultra rally in Macon on August 22. Envisioned as the culmination of their summer-long campaign, the extremists eagerly predicted crowds in the tens of thousands from all across the state. Rally organizers arranged for "fire-eater" orators from South Carolina and Alabama to address the assembled masses. By the standards of Ultra expectations, the public demonstration represented a failure. Reasonable

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[85] John B. Cobb to Howell Cobb, July 28, 1850; John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, August 3, 1850; Thomas W. Thomas to Howell Cobb, August 5, 1850; William Hope Hull to Howell Cobb, August 20, 1850, ibid.; John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, July 29, 1850, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, pp. 208-209.

estimates of attendance ranged from 800 to a few thousand, with 1,500 being a likely number.[86]

Not to be deterred, the Ultras still used the occasion to push forward organizational plans for a new Southern Rights party composed of state-rights Democrats and Whigs. They illustrated this determination by elaborating on the bitter denunciations of Cobb that had been common fare in the Ultra press for over a year. Seeking to isolate and destroy their north Georgia nemesis, they read him out of the Democratic Party as a man "clearly proven to be a traitor, an aspirant to the Presidency, & no longer entitled to the confidence of the true & faithful." Just as importantly, some of the speakers at the rally used the Macon venue to reveal that disunion represented their ultimate goal. This confirmation of Unionist warnings prompted many Georgians who had previously embraced the extension scheme to draw back from their support of the Ultra movement. With the close of the Macon meeting, the struggle in Georgia momentarily died down. People again turned their attention to Washington and awaited Governor Towns' call for the state convention that was sure to follow congressional action on the Clay compromise.[87]

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[86] Shryock, Georgia and the Union in 1850, pp. 283-295.

[87] Ibid.; Horace Montgomery, Cracker Parties (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1950), pp. 25-27; James A. Meriwether to Howell Cobb, August 24, 1850, Howell Cobb Papers.

IV

Throughout the sweltering summer months, the fate of the Clay compromise in the Senate proved as uncertain as its level of acceptability to the citizens of Georgia. But on July 31, after six months of debate and parliamentary maneuvers, the opponents of the compromise at last succeeded in wrecking the Omnibus. Of its three provisions, only the measure providing Utah with a territorial government survived. Worn down by his efforts and frustrated by defeat, Clay retreated to Newport, Rhode Island to recover his strength.[88]

At this critical juncture, Stephen Douglas assumed leadership of the compromise cause in the Senate. Convinced early on that the Omnibus strategy could not succeed, Douglas had given the measure quiet support while waiting to pick up the pieces when it failed. Recognizing -- as Clay had not -- that the pro-compromise men did not command a majority in either house of Congress, he offered the basic components of the Clay plan as individual pieces of legislation. Instead of relying on a pro-compromise majority that did not exist, he counted on the hardcore pro-compromise minority uniting with the northern and southern sectional blocs on different measures to create majorities for each bill. By means of this approach, Douglas pushed the five key components of

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[88] Potter, The Impending Crisis, pp. 107-108.

Clay's original proposal through the Senate in a matter of weeks.[89]

Cobb watched these events unfold with a mixture of optimism and despair. Early in August, worried by reports of an approaching cholera contagion and convinced the session would last several more weeks, he sent Mary Ann and the children back to Georgia. No longer needing the large rented house, he took a room at Gadsby's Hotel for the balance of the session. Oppressed by the heat, his family's departure, and the defeat of the Omnibus, he gloomily reported that "there has been no change for the better in the political condition of things."[90]

Just as bad, events in both Washington and Georgia again raised the prospect of political isolation. In particular, he feared that Stephens and Toombs might come out in opposition to the compromise. Although both favored the settlement, both had vented their frustrations over developments in the capital with public outbursts which created a widespread suspicion that they meant to join the extremists. Despite his close cooperation with the two back in February, Cobb clearly fell victim to this misperception. "Toombs and Stephens will join the ultraists," he complained,

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[89] Ibid., pp. 108-112.

[90] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, August 8, 1850, Howell Cobb Papers.

"& I shall be left all alone ... to fight the battle in Ga. for the Union."[91]

Douglas' success at securing Senate passage of the Texas Boundary Bill on August 9 considerably brightened Cobb's outlook. Since May, when President Taylor's policies had so inflamed the dispute between Texas and New Mexico, Cobb had viewed this crisis as the "most imminent cause of danger to the Union." Besides removing an immediate threat, he believed that passage by the House would "greatly expedite the ultimate & rapid settlement of the whole slavery question."[92]

Yet even if concern for the Union did not drive Congress to prompt action, he thought it likely that the "extremely hot & disagreeable" weather might spur them to a conclusion. While optimistic, he cautioned that he could not gage "whether the temper of the House is getting worse or better ... I almost fear to express an opinion upon this Congress as I have in some respects missed the mark heretofore." His previous accuracy notwithstanding, he asserted that "upon the whole I feel encouraged to look for a settlement ... pretty much on the basis of the Clay compromise bill."[93]

Cobb's ambivalence persisted for the remainder of the month. Although increasingly convinced that "in the end we

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[91] Ibid.

[92] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, August 10, 1850, ibid.

[93] Ibid.

shall do what is right and proper," he growled in exasperation at the House's tendency to "hasten slowly." He attributed this foot-dragging to different reasons -- according to his level of frustration. When especially outraged, he blamed the petty greed of members "who make more money here than they can at home & hence they are so reluctant to do the business & adjourn." During cooler moments, he frankly admitted that most members wanted to go home as badly as he did. The real obstacle, he charged, arose from "a determined opposition with some southern men that nothing shall be done, and until we see how far they intend to carry their dilatory movements, it is impossible to say when we are to get through."[94]

At last, on August 28, the House began its formal consideration of the compromise bills. It first took up the Texas boundary legislation. Almost immediately, Linn Boyd of Kentucky moved to amend the measure by attaching the New Mexico Territorial Bill to it. A pro-compromise moderate Democrat, Boyd had cooperated with Cobb in the struggle against Calhoun's Southern Movement and in the February meeting at the speaker's home. He now pressed this "little omnibus" as the most effective means "to test the sense of this House in relation to the establishment of territorial governments upon the non-intervention principle." Sharing Cobb's own conviction that non-intervention embodied both

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[94] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, August 16, 1850, ibid.

"the principle of the Constitution itself" and the only practical basis of settlement, Boyd pleaded with the House to adopt the compromise promptly and thus "save that Constitution."[95]

Prompt movement did occur, but from the opponents of compromise. Thomas L. Clingman, a North Carolina Whig who had been dismayed by Taylor's plan to exclude slavery from the Mexican Cession, demanded creation of a third territory that would include all of California south of 36°-30'. This proposed Colorado Territory would be open to slavery and effectively meet the chief demand of the Nashville Convention. Although Clingman criticized the non-intervention doctrine as Democratic chicanery designed to dupe voters North and South, he urged application of this principle to Colorado. He insisted that it would require no sacrifice of principle by northern men, even while it held out to the South the best possible prospect for a new slave state. Other compromise opponents employed tactics similar to those used by southern obstructionists to defeat Doty's resolution back in February. By repeatedly rising to points of order and making frequent calls for adjournment, they hoped to prevent action on the settlement.[96]

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[95] Congressional Globe, Thirty-First Congress, First Session, pp. 1682-1697; Hamilton, Prologue to Conflict, pp. 155-156.

[96] Ibid., pp. 1682-1687, 1695-1704, 1736-1738, 1746-1750, 1762-1764.

The anti-compromise group consisted of a strange coalition of free-soil extremists and southern Ultras. United only by their hostility to the proposed settlement, the anti-compromise men drew criticism in the House for forging an alliance intended "to force a geographical division of parties." In truth, extremists from both sections made no effort to conceal their objectives. When free-soiler Joseph Root of Ohio attempted to add the Wilmot Proviso to the "little omnibus," he bluntly avowed his desire "'to smoke out the doughfaces on both sides of the line.'" It seems likely that John Daniel of North Carolina shared Root's purpose when he moved an amendment to open both the Louisiana Purchase and the Mexican Cession to slavery extension.[97]

Cobb confronted this situation determined to overcome all opposition to the compromise. Despite experiencing "a most laboring time," the speaker fulfilled his responsibilities with cool efficiency. On point after point, he overruled the anti-compromise men. He supported his rulings with careful explanations. These explanations not only indicated his efforts to anticipate issues that might give rise to points of order, but also proved sufficiently compelling that the House sustained his rulings on virtually every appeal. In most instances, Cobb's arguments even won

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[97] Ibid., pp. 1700, 1736-1737.

him support from members who remained committed to the ultimate defeat of the compromise.[98]

Yet rulings on procedural points probably did not represent the speaker's most important contribution to the cause of compromise. As he had done throughout the session, Cobb continued to work outside the House to put together a settlement, and a coalition willing to support it. Unfortunately, the record of his behind-the-scenes efforts is fragmentary at best. He certainly cooperated closely with Boyd and McClernand in developing a pro-compromise floor strategy. He also lobbied wavering and even hostile representatives on critical votes. Years later, the Washington Evening Express described this vital aspect of Cobb's role with the comment that "'he was indefatigable by argument and persuasion, on private and social occasions, in urging the settlement which was finally adopted.'"[99]

From the beginning of the debate, advocates of compromise attempted to push the House to a quick vote on the Texas Bill and its amendments. Boyd enunciated this purpose early on when he declared "we have talked enough -- in God's

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[98] Ibid., pp. 1682-1687, 1695-1704, 1736-1738, 1746-1750, 1762-1764; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, August 28, 1850, Howell Cobb Papers; Hamilton, Prologue to Conflict, pp. 155-158.

[99] Hamilton, Prologue to Conflict, pp. 155-159, 164-165; Washington Evening Express, October 10, 1868, cited in Zachary Taylor Johnson, The Political Policies of Howell Cobb (Nashville: George Peabody College for Teachers, 1929), p. 86.

name let us act." With this in mind, on August 29, McClernand moved to refer the legislation to a Committee of the Whole. Although Cobb, Boyd, and McClernand realized that referral to such a committee might spell doom for the bill, the motion represented the most effective way to test overall support for the compromise.[100]

Six days later, on September 4, the pro-compromise forces at last managed to bring the motion to a vote. It soon appeared that the pro-compromise leaders had made a serious -- if not fatal -- tactical mistake. By a margin of 101 to 99, the House voted to commit the bill to a Committee of the Whole. Compromise opponents then moved to table a motion to reconsider this decision. The subsequent roll-call resulted in a one vote anti-compromise victory. In this instance, however, Cobb intervened to reverse momentarily the tide running against the settlement. On most measures the speaker did not participate in roll-calls, but he now cast his vote against the motion to table. This action created a 103 to 103 tie, and defeated the motion. Moments later, the House reversed its previous decision to commit by a two vote margin.[101]

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[100] Congressional Globe, Thirty-First Congress, First Session, pp. 1696-1697, 1699-1700; Hamilton, Prologue to Conflict, pp. 155-158.

[101] Congressional Globe, Thirty-First Congress, First Session, pp. 1746-1749.

With these preliminary maneuvers out of the way, the pace of voting increased. In a series of roll-calls, the House rejected first Clingman's amendment, then Boyd's, and finally the Texas Bill itself. Frantically, amid great confusion in the hall and intense competition for the floor, Boyd sought the recognition of the speaker. Not surprisingly, he received it. The Kentuckian moved to reconsider the vote on the Texas Bill. Anti-compromise representative Armistead Burt of South Carolina moved to table this motion. A worried Boyd yielded to a demand for adjournment, and by a substantial majority the House agreed to adjourn.[102]

Prospects for the compromise showed no signs of improvement the next day. Boyd's efforts to salvage the Texas Bill met defeat. Although the House voted to reconsider, it again rejected the legislation. Volney Howard of Texas, who had voted against the bill minus Boyd's amendment on the previous day, promptly renewed the motion to reconsider. For the only time in the debate, Cobb found himself compelled by both rule and precedent to decide against the pro-compromise forces. He declared Howard's motion out of order because the House had already reconsidered its vote once. Howard appealed the decision, but the House adjourned before reaching a decision.[103]

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[102] Ibid., pp. 1749-1750.

[103] Ibid., pp. 1762-1763.

The developments of September 4 and 5 seemed to give compromise supporters little cause for hope. These days had been especially difficult for the speaker. The importance of the legislation had forced him to remain constantly in the chair during the sessions. His after-hours lobbying efforts lasted late into the night. By the early morning of September 6, he complained of being "perfectly worn out and exhausted." Surprisingly, he continued to voice cautious optimism despite the disappointments of the past two days. Describing the sessions as "the most exciting scenes that I have ever witnessed," he reported to Mary Ann that "we have lost the bill twice, but I yet indulge the hope that we shall succeed."[104]

In the hours that followed adjournment on September 5, Cobb made a careful search of House precedents seeking some legitimate basis by which he might reverse his ruling against Howard's motion to reconsider. When he returned to the House the next day, he bluntly conceded that he had been unable to find one. He discretely suggested that a vote to sustain Howard's appeal would not be inappropriate. True to the speaker's wishes, the members voted 83 to 123 to sustain the appeal and override the chair's decision.[105]

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[104] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, September 6, 1850, Howell Cobb Papers.

[105] Congressional Globe, Thirty-First Congress, First Session, pp. 1762-1763.

The vote to override signalled a change in fortunes for the compromise. The source of this change is not entirely clear, although the presence on the floor of pro-compromise senators and spokesmen for the Texas bond lobby probably played a contributing role. Anti-compromise members protested this violation of House rules to the speaker. Cobb expressed his determination to enforce the rule, but apparently recognizing the value of the lobbyists to his cause made only a desultory effort to do so.[106]

The House quickly proceeded to a series of roll-calls regarding the Texas Bill. By a margin of 122 to 84, it agreed to reconsider its previous rejection of the measure. Moments later, the members voted 108 to 98 to order the bill engrossed for its third reading. Throughout the day, a low level of disorder had characterized the hall. When the chair announced the results of this balloting, the disorder became general both on the floor and in the galleries. The reporter for the Globe described the scene: "the announcement of the result was received with manifestations of applause ... the most peculiar and attractive of which was a sort of unpremeditated allegro whistle." It was evident, he added, "that the greater portion of the applause ... was on the floor of the Hall itself." Cobb moved to restore order

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[106] Ibid., pp. 1763-1764; Hamilton, Prologue to Conflict, pp. 118-132, 158.

immediately, but found himself shouted down by relieved members who yelled "let them stamp -- it is all right."[107]

The vote ordering the bill to its third reading cleared the way for final action. Last minute efforts at obstruction by members of the South Carolina delegation proved futile, and the House adopted the measure by a vote of 108 to 97. Sensing that the mood of the majority had at last turned in favor of the compromise, Boyd successfully revived his amendment attaching the New Mexico Territorial Bill to the Texas legislation. Yet these accomplishments barely overshadowed those of the next day. On September 7, by votes of 150-56 and 97-85, the representatives admitted California as a free state and provided a territorial government for Utah based on the non-interference principle.[108]

As news of events in the House on September 6 and 7 spread throughout Washington, the same spirit of celebration that had gripped members of the House took hold of the city's citizens. With an air "of almost universal rejoicing," they turned out to enjoy "bonfires, processions, serenades, speeches, suppers, ... drinking, and guns." Virtually everyone agreed that "it was 'a night on which it was the duty of every patriot to get drunk.'"[109]

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[107] Congressional Globe, Thirty-First Congress, First Session, pp. 1763-1764.

[108] Ibid., pp. 1764-1765, 1768-1776.

[109] Jonathan M. Foltz to James Buchanan, September 8, 1850, Buchanan Papers.

Although Cobb received his full share of attention from the processions and serenaders, his reaction to the adoption of so much of the compromise package proved surprisingly subdued. In part this stemmed from physical exhaustion. On the day of celebration, he confided to Mary Ann that the past week had been "peculiarly onerous," and that "I have never felt more completely prostrated from hard work than I did last night." Indeed, he added, "I ... feel but little better today."[110]

Cobb's subdued reaction, however, did not derive entirely from the after-effects of excessive labor. He also recognized that regardless of what Congress might do, the compromise would not be a reality until a majority of the American people accepted it. While confident of eventual victory, he clearly comprehended that a tough fight to insure this acceptance lay ahead. Moreover, he understood that the fight would be particularly bitter in Georgia. Nevertheless, he insisted that "with the proper efforts on the part of myself & friends, ... we may anticipate a most triumphant vindication of our course from the people." When that happy day arrived at last, he could only hope that the "miserable faction ... who have been warring on me for years will be reduced to their proper level."[111]

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[110] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, September 8, 1850, Howell Cobb Papers.

[111] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, September 8, 1850; September 20, 1850, ibid.

Yet before Cobb could return home to confront the challenge posed by the Ultras, other business remained to be completed in the capital. Both the Fugitive Slave Bill and legislation banning the slave trade in Washington D.C. awaited House action, as did other measures of more routine congressional concern. The two remaining pieces of the compromise package passed easily. The members adopted the Fugitive Slave Bill on September 12 with a vote of 109 to 76. They followed up this action five days later by adopting the slave trade ban with a seventy-seven vote majority.[112]

Following the votes of September 6 and 7, Cobb began to show signs of really enjoying his responsibilities as speaker. Now viewing the adoption of the entire compromise as a certainty, he no longer found it necessary to focus all his efforts on that single subject. Towards the end of the session, he reported that "we have pretty exciting times in the House, but its all of the old fashioned party sort, & therefore not so disagreeable as what we have passed through."[113]

Congress completed its business in late September. After some nine months of false starts, intense maneuvering, and bitter debate, it had hammered together a settlement in the sectional dispute. As Cobb looked homeward that fall,

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[112] Congressional Globe, Thirty-First Congress, First Session, pp. 1806-1807, 1837.

[113] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, September 26, 1850, Howell Cobb Papers.

he knew that Georgia's impending state convention would make it the first state to officially voice acceptance or rejection of the congressional agreement. With grim determination, he vowed to "rescue -- if possible -- my party & state from the ruin and disgrace which certain madcaps would prepare for them."[114]

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[114] Ibid.

HOWELL COBB OF GEORGIA
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Chapter Ten

"Elements of Danger Are Yet in Existence"

With the compromise adopted and the session over, Cobb turned his footsteps and his thoughts towards home. He knew that a tough campaign awaited, but after nine months of unrelenting toil he desperately hoped for an opportunity to rest. He also looked forward to spending time with his family. Contrary to Mary Ann's fears, the months she spent in Washington had assisted rather than hindered her recovery. Shortly after returning home to Athens in August, she happily recalled "that delightful house on Third Street."[1]

More significant, Mary Ann recognized the improvement in her own health. Seeking perhaps to justify her past behavior, she explained that "up to the time that ill health and darkness of mind overtook me, it was my daily duty and pleasure to study your comfort." If "for three years past I have laid aside my duties," she added, "it has not altogether been my fault." Now that her physical health and psychological equilibrium had been restored, she found that "my old nature is returning and I am never so happy as when ... conferring pleasure upon another." Despite pleasant memories of her recent residence in the capital, the

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[1] Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, August 14, 1850; John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, October 5, 1850, Howell Cobb Papers, Felix Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia (Hereafter: Howell Cobb Papers).

knowledge that Cobb would not seek reelection contributed much to her growing contentment.[2]

Cobb's need to spend time with his family, however, involved more than a desire to enjoy his wife's company. John A.'s behavior continued to plague his school-teacher and worry his parents. The teacher, A. M. Scudder, made no secret of his conviction that Cobb's long absences raised dangers for his son's future. He bluntly warned that "few children of public men ever did well." Although Mary Ann complained that "Mr. Scudder could in one month render me a fit subject for a lunatic asylum," her own letters indicated that she shared the teacher's concern.[3]

Yet, Mary Ann believed that something in addition to her husband's frequent absences caused the boy's difficulties. Probably motivated by his own close relationship with his youngest brother Tom, Cobb sought to encourage a similar closeness between his sons by insisting that John A. and Lamar be placed in the same classes at school. Mary Ann believed this a terrible mistake. Arguing that "the elder brother should go before," she warned Cobb against a course which would either push Lamar too hard or retard John A.'s development. Neither boy, she pleaded, should ever be

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[2] Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, August 24, 1850; January 11, 1851; January 30, 1851; February 11, 1851, ibid.

[3] Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, August 24, 1850; September 10, 1850; March 2, 1851; July 3, 1851; September 5, 1851, ibid.

sacrificed to his "long cherished idea ... of never separating them."[4]

Although Cobb promised his wife "to leave it to your own judgment," it still took nearly two years to convince him that the boys should be separated. Even then, an accident rather than an actual decision forced the separation. The worried mother did take some consolation from family assurances that her oldest son's "wildness" merely reflected Cobb's own youthful behavior. "If the son does as well as the father," she concluded, "my old age will be covered with glory."[5]

Unfortunately, Cobb's planned time at home never materialized. As expected, Governor Towns responded to passage of the compromise with a call for a state convention. Denouncing the compromise package as "a series of aggressive measures ... all tending to ... the abolition of slavery," the governor ordered the convention to assemble in Milledgeville on December 10. The election of delegates would occur on November 25.[6]

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[4] Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, March 2, 1851; September 11, 1851, ibid.

[5] Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, August 24, 1850; September 10, 1850; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, September 3, 1850; Howell Cobb to John A. Cobb, October 20, 1852, ibid.; Mary Ann Cobb to Martha Jackson, January 16, 1853, Jackson-Prince Papers, Southern Historical Collection, Library of the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, North Carolina (Hereafter: Jackson-Prince Papers).

[6] Proclamation of Governor George W. Towns, September 23, 1850, in Milledgeville Federal Union, September 24, 1850.

While still in Washington, Cobb began to marshal pro-compromise forces in Georgia for the coming election. By the time he returned to Athens in early October, he found himself deluged with requests for speaking engagements. Longtime friend and ally John Lumpkin acknowledged that Cobb had earned "some leisure and repose," but pressed him to "mingle with the people and make speeches."[7]

The reasons for this sense of urgency are not readily apparent. Cobb's pro-compromise allies consistently voiced confident predictions of a sweeping victory in the November vote. Alexander Stephens, writing from the Seventh District, assured Cobb that "we shall have no difficulty in this part of the state." He offered further assurances that conditions in Robert Toombs' Eighth District appeared equally promising. Cobb himself reported that "we shall have a large majority of the convention." As to his own district, he predicted that "I could be re-elected tomorrow, by double the margin I ever received." Even Lumpkin conceded that "the Cherokee country is sound to the core." Rejoicing that the voters of the upcountry had recently rejected the secessionist

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[7] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, September 20, 1850; September 26, 1850; Augustus Reece, et al., to Howell Cobb, October 3, 1850; C. B. Ames, et al., to Howell Cobb, October 3, 1850; A. B. Whitehead, et al., to Howell Cobb, October 7, 1850; David Read, et al., to Howell Cobb, October 10, 1850; W. A. Lewis to Howell Cobb, October 10, 1850; B. W. Thompson to Howell Cobb, October 11, 1850; John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, October 5, 1850, Howell Cobb Papers.

overtures of state-rights leaders, he gloated "we have got these ultras at last."[8]

This last statement of Lumpkin's might well indicate one underlying reason for the urgency felt by voters of the Fifth and Sixth Districts. For some time, the question of how to respond to northern antislavery sentiment had exerted a powerfully divisive influence within the Georgia Democracy. Although traditional party loyalties had provided a counter to this issue, the southern-rights and Union factions of the party increasingly viewed each other with hatred. Now, the compromise crisis had finally ruptured the Democratic machinery in the state. With the restraint of party structure removed, the Union Democratic leaders of north Georgia eagerly anticipated the chance to punish their treacherous allies. They would leave no stone unturned to insure this outcome. The southern-rights leaders of the central and southern counties no doubt shared this anticipation -- but with considerably fewer chances for success.[9]

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[8] Alexander H. Stephens to Howell Cobb, October 2, 1850; John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, October 5, 1850; Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, October 10, 1850, ibid.

[9] Milledgeville Federal Union, January 23, 1849, June 5, 1849; Columbus Times, February 6, 1849; John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, April 13, 1849; May 22, 1849; June 6,1849; June 13, 1849; John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, May 18, 1849; Thomas D. Harris to Howell Cobb, June 28, 1849; Henry L. Benning to Howell Cobb, July 1, 1849; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, September 8, 1850; September 20, 1850; September 26, 1850, Howell Cobb Papers; Athens Southern Whig, July 26, 1849; Athens Southern Banner, September 6, 1849.

Yet the disruption of traditional parties in Georgia gave rise to more than opportunities for settling old scores. It also led to the emergence of new and untried political alliances. Although the Ultra faction attracted a few Whigs, it remained a predominantly Democratic entity. Within the pro-compromise faction, however, the upcountry Democrats found themselves allied with the bulk of their former Whig enemies. In an era when the harness of party loyalty rested heavily on the shoulders of voters, this partisan realignment produced feelings of confusion and anxiety. Men who now stood ready to sever old political ties and bind themselves with new ones wanted to hear the necessity of this course personally justified by their leaders.[10]

Cobb, Stephens, and Toombs -- the Georgia triumvirate -- clearly appreciated the voters' need to be reassured. Thus, within days of returning home, all three took to the stump to insure the election of pro-compromise delegates to the state convention. The trio waged a strenuous campaign. Cobb crossed and recrossed his district. Everywhere, the triumvirate hammered on the same theme. Old party issues no longer mattered, they declared, Georgia must either accept

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[10] Absalom H. Chappell to Howell Cobb, July 10, 1850; John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, July 21, 1850; Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, October 10, 1850; November 13, 1850; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, October 15, 1850; David Read, et al., to Howell Cobb, October 16, 1850; James Simmons to Howell Cobb, October 17, 1850, Howell Cobb Papers.

the compromise and preserve the Union, or reject it and destroy the Union.[11]

It had been clear since summer that the pro-compromise men would paint the issue in the stark colors of Union versus disunion. It had been equally clear that they meant to tar the southern-rights men with the brush of disunionism. While most southern rights adherents probably stopped short of favoring disunion, the intemperate language of many Ultra leaders and editors made this sharp delineation of the issues possible. A variety of southern-rights newspapers in the state openly embraced secession during the summer and fall. On September 12, for instance, the Columbus Sentinel declared that "we are for secession, open unqualified secession ... we are for war upon the government." Later, the Columbus Times joyously greeted Towns' convention proclamation as a virtual dissolution of the Union.[12]

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[11] Ibid.; Alexander H. Stephens to (?), October 24, 1850, Alexander H. Stephens Papers, Special Collections Library, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina (Hereafter: Stephens Papers, DU); Thomas E. Schott, Alexander H. Stephens of Georgia, A Biography (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), pp. 126-129; Athens Southern Banner, October 17, 1850; Macon Georgia Telegraph, December 3, 1850.

[12] James Jackson to Howell Cobb, June 14, 1850; William H. Hull to Howell Cobb, July 16, 1850; Henry R. Jackson to Howell Cobb, July 28, 1850; John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, August 3, 1850; October 5, 1850; James Meriwether to Howell Cobb, August 24, 1850; William Woods to Howell Cobb, August 28, 1850, Howell Cobb Papers; Columbus Sentinel, September 12, 1850, cited in R. P. Brooks, "Howell Cobb and the Crisis of 1850," The Mississippi Valley Historical Review, IV (December, 1917), 289; Columbus Times, September, 1850, cited in Richard Harrison Shryock, Georgia and the Union in 1850 (Durham: Duke University Press, 1926), p. 298; Horace

The Unionists' ability to define the issue proved a great asset. Because the vast majority of Georgians felt a profound loyalty to the Union, Cobb and his allies began the campaign in a position of strength. More important, this ability spared them the necessity of defending the compromise as entirely satisfactory. Indeed, they could acknowledge imperfections in the compromise package, even as they insisted that nothing in the measures so dishonored the South as to require their rejection.[13]

Throughout the fall campaign, the Ultra organization maintained a bold front. Disdainfully labelling the pro-compromise men "Submissionists," the Ultras particularly focused their ire on the triumvirate. The southern-rights press described as insignificant the trio's decision to align with "such friends of the South as Messrs. Cass and Clay." Their attempt "to counsel the people of Georgia ... to submit to aggressions, wrongs and insults," however, was denounced as "humility and submission, heretofore unknown in this state." If Georgians failed to "resent" the compromise, the Ultras warned, "the world will ring with shouts of derision

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Montgomery, Cracker Parties (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1950), pp. 28-30.

[13] Shryock, Georgia and the Union in 1850, p. 309; Howell Cobb to William Hope Hull, July 17, 1850; Howell Cobb to Absalom H. Chappell, et al., February 7, 1851, in Ulrich Bonnell Phillips, ed., The Correspondence of Robert Toombs, Alexander H. Stephens, and Howell Cobb (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1913), pp. 196-206; Alexander H. Stephens to ?, October 24, 1850, Stephens Papers, DU.

and contempt, of a people who have submitted to what they declared ... involved their ruin and disgrace."[14]

Southern-rights newspapers did not restrict their criticisms of the triumvirate to collective denunciations. Cobb, Stephens, and Toombs also found themselves marked for individual attention. Attacks on the two Whigs primarily focused on the extreme anti-compromise remarks made by both men during the crisis, as compared to their current embrace of the settlement. Ultra attacks on Cobb took a different tack.[15]

Pro-compromise papers praised Cobb for his critical role in the adoption of the settlement. The Macon Georgia Citizen declared that "in the darkest hour of all, when it seemed as if the compromise measures were lost beyond redemption, his voice of encouragement was heard in all quarters, and ... it was ... owing to his tact, energy, and perseverance, that they were triumphantly carried through the popular branch of Congress." The Augusta Chronicle and Sentinel maintained that the speaker's heroic efforts on behalf of the compromise had "built up for him a fabric of remembrance that can only be destroyed with the Union itself."[16]

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[14] Macon Georgia Telegraph, October 15, 1850.

[15] Augusta Constitutionalist, October 11, 1850, cited in Southern Banner, October 17, 1850.

[16] Macon Georgia Citizen, November 9, 1850; Augusta Chronicle and Sentinel, cited in Macon Georgia Citizen, October 11, 1850; Athens Southern Banner, October 17, 1850.

The Ultras made no effort to deny Cobb's central role in the adoption of the compromise. Rather, they insisted that the speaker had been motivated by a traitorous proclivity for free-soil positions, sparked by an overweening ambition. Dredging up his votes on the Oregon issue and his refusal to sign the "Southern Address," they charged that Cobb "has never yet ... lifted up his voice in defense of slavery." Dismissing the speaker as an "ambitious man with very moderate abilities," they maintained that his support for the compromise sprang from his desire for the vice-presidential nomination on a ticket with Lewis Cass in 1852. Only by keeping Georgia in the Union, they warned, could Cobb grasp this prize.[17]

Ultra accusations regarding the vice-presidency did not entirely lack foundation. Talk of such a nomination began as early as June, and by September a Michigan newspaper named Cobb a suitable candidate for either the presidency or vice-presidency. During the summer, some members of Tammany Hall in New York attempted to revive memories of the Democratic victory in 1844 by calling for "'CASS AND CANADA, COBB AND CUBA'" in 1852. By October, the Banner launched a similar effort. "There is no man of his age in the Union who is so greatly the favorite of the American people," Holsey thundered, "and his advent to the Presidency is as sure as

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[17] Athens Southern Herald, October 25, 1850; November 14, 1850; Augusta Constitutionalist, October 11, 1850, cited in Athens Southern Banner, October 17, 1850.

the footsteps of time." For the moment, however, the Banner would be content with a Cass-Cobb ticket in the upcoming presidential contest.[18]

Cobb's feelings about these activities remain a mystery. His surviving letters are mute on the subject. Yet such open assertions by the Banner indicate that he endorsed the efforts to promote his nomination. Two points are certain. It would have been totally out of character for Cobb to turn down the vice-presidency. It would have been equally out of character for him to acknowledge that he desired it.

Whatever Cobb's intentions regarding the vice-presidency, the southern-rights press interpreted them in the most perverse terms possible. Not only did the speaker mean to betray Georgia for his own aggrandizement, he also hoped to march into the presidency over the corpse of his friend Lewis Cass. "The scheme," they charged, "is to make Cass President and Cobb Vice President, with the Presidency itself in accidency. That is, Cass is to die soon after his induction into office, and Cobb is to be the accidental Chief Magistrate."[19]

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[18] James Jackson to Howell Cobb, June 14, 1850; H. H. Heath to Howell Cobb, September 28, 1850, Howell Cobb Papers; Augusta Constitutionalist, October 11, 1850, cited in Athens Southern Banner, October 17, 1850; Athens Southern Banner, October 17, 1850; Athens Southern Herald, November 7, 1850.

[19] Athens Southern Herald, November 7, 1850; November 14, 1850.

Despite the attention focused on the vice-presidency, the Ultras also found time to attack Cobb on more substantive issues. The speaker's main stump speech during the campaign incorporated the key points of his July letter comparing extension of the Missouri Compromise line with Clay's proposal. Following a Cobb appearance in Macon, the Telegraph dismissed his efforts as "masterly evasion," and reported that "the acquiescents made nothing by Mr. Cobb's visit here. The Southern Rights party is stronger today than it was before he spoke."[20]

Such confident assertions notwithstanding, southern-rights leaders understood early on that the popular tide was running against them. Besides the strong current of Unionism among the people, economic prosperity arising from high cotton prices inclined most citizens to reject revolutionary solutions. Thus, even as Ultra newspapers demanded secession, Governor Towns secretly warned Governor W. B. Seabrook of South Carolina that the Palmetto state should not expect Georgia to lead the way in radical action. By mid-October, most Ultras had retreated from their openly disunionist positions. Confronted by public indifference to their views, they now insisted that they did not desire secession -- only resistance to the great wrong being perpetrated upon the South. This resistance, they said,

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[20] Macon Georgia Telegraph, November 12, 1850; November 19, 1850.

should take the form of "non-intercourse" with the North, or possibly another southern convention. On one point, they did not equivocate. Politics as usual must be rejected. "The division of the Southern people by the old national organizations of Whig and Democratic parties," they roared, "has worked nothing but evil."[21]

The pro-compromise forces mocked this retreat by their Ultra opponents. Lumpkin joked that "such men will not ... bring about disunion, they are too timid and not intended to lead in a revolution." Nonetheless, the Unionists warned Georgians not to be misled by the Ultra's transformation. The Banner charged that "NON-INTERCOURSE ... is PRACTICAL DISUNION," and urged all citizens "to frown upon everyone who advocates it as an anarchist in truth, whatever he may be by profession."[22]

Yet the Unionists did not pass through the contest unscathed. Even as they waged their campaign to convince the voters that the compromise had effectively ended antislavery aggression, troubling news arrived from the North. Abolitionists had launched a campaign to frustrate enforcement of the new fugitive slave law. Through

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[21] Shryock, Georgia and the Union in 1850, pp. 291; 300-302; 310-311; Montgomery, Cracker Parties, pp. 28-30; Athens Southern Banner, October 17, 1850; Athens Southern Herald, November 7, 1850.

[22] John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, October 13, 1850, Howell Cobb Papers; Athens Southern Banner, October 17, 1850; Alexander H. Stephens to (?), October 24, 1850; Stephens Papers, DU.

intimidation and mob violence, these fanatics sought to deprive the South of the one clear victory it had secured from the compromise.[23]

Not surprisingly, the southern-rights press portrayed this development as proof that the compromise had placed the South on the "brink of a volcano." President Millard Fillmore helped defuse the situation by promptly expressing his determination to enforce the law. Still, the threat raised by northern action forced the pro-compromise men to demonstrate that they were not "Submissionists." Previously, several Unionist organs had insisted that the convention should assemble and then adjourn without taking any action. Now they advised the delegates to make it clear that the survival of the Union hinged upon the good faith enforcement of the compromise.[24]

The clearest statement of the Unionist stance came from a public meeting in Savannah. Through the resolutions of the "Chatham Platform," the Unionists declared that the compromise must be enforced. They further demanded that the settlement be accepted as the final solution of the slavery issue. Thus, while Unionism in Georgia pushed southern-rights men away from open avowals of secession, antislavery

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[23] Athens Southern Herald, October 31, 1850; Montgomery, Cracker Parties, pp. 31-32.

[24] Milledgeville Federal Union, November 12, 1850; Montgomery, Cracker Parties, p. 32; Shryock, Georgia and the Union in 1850, pp. 314-315; Macon Georgia Telegraph, December 3, 1850.

forces in the north forced the state's pro-compromise men towards a more explicit definition of the limits to that Unionism.[25]

The actual election proved somewhat anticlimactic. By the time voters went to the polls neither side doubted the outcome. The Unionists swept to a decisive victory that largely mirrored the results of the election for delegates to the Nashville Convention. They won about 46,000 of the votes cast and carried eighty-three counties. The southern-rights men garnered some 24,000 votes -- about half the voting strength of the old Democratic party -- and carried ten counties. When the convention assembled fifteen days later, the Unionist majority brushed aside protests from the tiny Ultra contingent, and proceeded to convert the "Chatham Platform" into the "Georgia Platform."[26]

The action of the Georgia convention diverted the immediate threat of secession. By means of the "Georgia Platform," the state outlined a position which most southerners could and did accept -- even if reluctantly. The platform consisted of a preamble and five resolutions. It acknowledged the serious flaws within the compromise, but

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[25] Milledgeville Federal Union, November 12, 1850; Macon Georgia Telegraph, December 3, 1850; Montgomery, Cracker Parties, p. 32; Shryock, Georgia and the Union in 1850, pp. 314-315; Luther J. Glenn to Howell Cobb, November 28, 1850, Howell Cobb Papers.

[26] Shryock, Georgia and the Union in 1850, pp. 315; 319-320; Macon Georgia Telegraph, December 17, 1850; December 24, 1850.

professed Georgia's willingness to accept its terms as a final statement on the slavery issue. Yet it also included a distinct warning to the northern states. If they abolished slavery in Washington D.C., refused to admit future slave states, prohibited the introduction of slaves into New Mexico or Utah, or refused to enforce the fugitive slave law, then Georgia would resist even "to a disruption of ... the Union."[27]

No individual played a more prominent role in producing this result than Cobb. Stephens and Toombs made significant contributions, but most Georgia Whigs had already manifested an inclination to accept Clay's proposal at a time when it seemed the two congressmen would oppose it. Cobb, on the other hand, faced a more difficult situation. The compromise crisis had split the Democratic party. Cobb had belonged to this party his entire political life, but he did not hesitate. Convinced that he confronted a choice between preservation of the state party and preservation of the Union, he did as his father had done during the Nullification Crisis of the 1830s. He turned away from old associations to embrace a new Union organization.

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[27] Debates and Proceedings of the Georgia Convention, 1850 (Milledgeville, 1850) pp. 5-9; Macon Georgia Telegraph, December 17, 1850; December 24, 1850; Milledgeville Federal Union, December 17, 1850; December 24, 1850; Shryock, Georgia and the Union in 1850, pp. 325-328; Montgomery, Cracker Parties, pp. 33-35.

By taking this step, Cobb effectively provided a point around which pro-compromise Democrats could rally. The significance of this function should not be underestimated. Pro-compromise Democratic votes provided the margin of victory in the overwhelming triumph enjoyed by Unionists in the November election. At the time, and many years later, Stephens credited Cobb for making the "Georgia Platform" possible.[28]

But, would Georgia have seceded in 1850 without Cobb's efforts? Probably not. The state's voters had already rejected extreme action by refusing to support the Nashville Convention at a time when the prospects for a congressional settlement appeared bleak. While allowing for a certain partisanship, Cobb's friend Hope Hull described the outcome with solid insight. "The ... action of the people of Georgia on the compromise, is attributable," he observed, "to their good sense and reason." With wry humor, Hull concluded, "I am inclined to the opinion that you and I did more than any other two men to set them right on the subject -- you convinced some thousands, and I convinced my overseer."[29]

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[28] Brooks, "Howell Cobb and the Crisis of 1850," pp. 290-291; Alexander H. Stephens, A Constitutional View of the Late War Between the States; Its Causes, Character, Conduct, and Results, two vols. (Philadelphia: National Publishing Company, 1870), II, 332; Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, September (?), 1850, Howell Cobb Papers.

[29] Brooks, "Howell Cobb and the Crisis of 1850," pp. 290-291; Shryock, Georgia and the Union in 1850, p. 307; William H. Hull to Howell Cobb, December 28, 1850, Howell Cobb Papers.

In truth, Cobb did much to "set them right on the subject," but the process did not begin with the crisis of 1850. Rather, he had spent most of the 1840s striving to convince his constituents that all conflicts between the Union and the South could be resolved by compromise and the national Democratic party. He had worked consistently to preserve the Union while protecting southern interests. Events in 1850 illustrated the extent to which he had succeeded in these efforts. Unfortunately, the coming decade revealed that southern rights and the Union could not be simultaneously preserved, as both the ability to compromise and the national Democracy collapsed from the weight of the slavery issue.

II

Cobb could not remain in Georgia to witness the triumph of the pro-compromise cause. Some days before the election, he departed for Washington and the upcoming session of Congress. He travelled by way of New York. His activities there fueled speculations regarding his vice-presidential ambitions. He attended a reception held for Cass and himself at Tammany Hall, and shared a platform with the presidential candidate from which both men made speeches. Reporting that the speeches had been "enthusiastically received," the

speaker spent a few days in the city enjoying the plaudits of his many admirers.[30]

From New York, Cobb went on to Washington. Shortly after arriving in the capital, he received the Georgia election returns. Although he had expected victory, he found the size of the Unionist majority "of the most gratifying character." He viewed the results as a personal triumph. "The wild spirit of Disunion which has been firing on me for many months," he exulted, "is most bitterly rebuked."[31]

Despite the happy news from Georgia, Cobb still felt anxious about the prospects for renewed strife in Congress. Should extremists from either section succeed in renewing the slavery debate, he feared that all the good work of the past months might go for naught. For the most part, these concerns quickly evaporated. Leading Democrats and Whigs publicly urged an end to all agitation. Stephen Douglas voiced the attitude of many. Accept the finality of the compromise, he pleaded, "cease agitating, ... stop the debate, and drop the subject."[32]

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[30] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, November 28, 1850, Howell Cobb Papers.

[31] Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, November 26, 1850; William H. Hull to Howell Cobb, November 29, 1850; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, November 30, 1850, ibid.

[32] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, December 6, 1850, ibid.; David M. Potter, The Impending Crisis, 1848-1861 (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1976), pp. 121-122.

A positive sign that the majority of members meant to pursue just that course came on December 9. Cobb reported that "Mr [Joshua] Giddings made his usual abolition speech, but he wholly failed to produce any excitement." Even better, following Giddings' remarks the House adopted a motion -- "almost unanimously" -- to end all debate on the subject. Cobb relished this vote "as a pretty sure indication" that the members intended "to pound down ... these vile fanatics."[33]

Yet other issues also caused Cobb concern. The creation of the Southern Rights party at the Macon rally in August had signalled the break-down of Georgia's traditional party structure. Union Democrats and Whigs had waged their recent campaign as an ad hoc coalition without formal structure. In the aftermath of their overwhelming victory, members of the coalition used the state convention as a venue for organizing the Constitutional Union party. The Constitutional Unionists immediately initiated plans for expansion into a national organization.[34]

Prospects for a national Union party, however, rapidly soured. Only in Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi had established party organizations collapsed. Democrats and

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[33] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, December 10, 1850, Howell Cobb Papers.

[34] Montgomery, Cracker Parties, pp. 35-36; Shryock, Georgia and the Union in 1850, pp. 334-335; Michael F. Holt, The Political Crisis of the 1850s (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1983), pp. 91-94.

Whigs in states where old party structures yet held, saw no need to hazard current and future prospects on a new party. Moreover, they found it difficult to trust their traditional foes. Many in both camps viewed the national Union movement as a partisan plot aimed at them.[35]

The presidential election of 1852 also figured in the equation. Most national Democratic leaders -- Cass, Douglas, and James Buchanan among them -- explicitly rejected the idea of a new party. They, too, shared Cobb's desire to see peace restored to the country, but several aspired to the presidency as well. None was interested in attempting to mold an awkward coalition into an effective party during a presidential contest. Douglas again spoke for many when he asserted that "the Democratic party is as good a Union party as I want, and I wish to preserve its principles and its organization." Rather than purging the old Democracy of Ultras and free-soilers, these men urged a reconciliation of all Democratic factions based on finality of the compromise. Whig converts would be welcome, but they must labor in the Democratic vineyard -- and under the Democratic name.[36]

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[35] Holt, The Political Crisis of the 1850s, pp. 94-95; Roy F. Nichols, The Democratic Machine, 1850-1854 (New York: Columbia University, 1923), pp. 27-29; John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, January 11, 1850, Howell Cobb Papers.

[36] Holt, The Political Crisis of the 1850s, pp. 94-95; Nichols, The Democratic Machine, 1850-1854, pp. 27-29; Robert W. Johannsen, Stephen A. Douglas (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), pp. 339-341.

Congressional Democrats signalled their determination on this point early in the session. By an overwhelming majority they declined to endorse a bipartisan pledge to withhold support from any candidate who refused to acknowledge the finality of the compromise. Logically, free-soil and southern-rights Democrats declined to sign a document that formalized their recent humiliations. Yet most pro-compromise Democrats also withheld their signatures. Insisting that events in Georgia and elsewhere had made "finality" a practical reality, they argued that a formal pledge would re-open recent wounds and hinder Democratic reconciliation. Of the forty-four members who signed the pledge, only five belonged to the Democratic party. Most of these, including Cobb, were associated with the Union movements in their home states.[37]

Despite these unpromising developments, Cobb labored to win over prominent Democrats. He continued the behind-the-scenes efforts he had used so effectively during the previous session, but without the same success. In private conversations, he sought to press upon Democratic leaders an accurate picture of conditions in Georgia and the South. He maintained that northern Democrats could no longer rely on the support of the state-rights element of the party. State-rights men had embraced Calhoun's faith in a sectional

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[37] Athens Southern Banner, January 30, 1851; Holt, The Political Crisis of the 1850s, 94-95; Nichols, The Democratic Machine, 1850-1854, pp.27-28.

organization and openly proclaimed their conviction that cooperation with national parties constituted treason to the South. Regrettably, much of the Democratic leadership already possessed an accurate grasp of the situation. They simply felt too cautious, too conservative, or too concerned about the implications for their presidential hopes, to risk decisive action.[38]

In light of this reaction, Cobb soon confronted the unpleasant task of informing his followers about the negative reaction to the Constitutional Union party. He reluctantly predicted the failure of all efforts to forge a new national organization. Georgia Unionists greeted Cobb's information with dismay and frustration. Somehow, they fretted, national leaders must be made to understand that "the failure to establish a ... Union party will greatly endanger the safety, if not the very existence of the Union."[39]

Cobb's Union Democrats voiced a special frustration. They insisted that Georgia Whigs -- indeed, Whigs throughout much of the South -- now stood ready to enlist under the

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[38] S. T. Chapman to Howell Cobb, January 15, 1851; January 31, 1851; William H. Hull to Howell Cobb, February 3, 1851; Howell to James Buchanan, June 9, 1851, Howell Cobb Papers; John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, February 16, 1851, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, pp. 229-230; James Buchanan to William L. Marcy, November 21, 1850, William L. Marcy Papers, Library of Congress, Washington D.C. (Hereafter: Marcy Papers); Nichols, The Democratic Machine, 1850-1854, pp. 27-29.

[39] John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, January 11, 1851; S. T. Chapman to Howell Cobb, January 15,1851; January 31, 1851, Howell Cobb Papers.

principles of the national Democracy. In a single "bold stroke," Democrats could rid their party of sectional extremists, even as they dissolved the "old Federal doctrines" of Whiggery. Only a name change was involved. But names, they noted, "are everything in politics, and though Whigs would gladly be called Union men ... they will never consent to be called Democrats." What, they demanded, did "the Eastern, Western & Northern fellows" fear? "There is not now a sufficient difference between Whigs & Democrats to keep them apart."[40]

The refusal of national leaders to embrace the Union crusade created a serious dilemma for Georgia Unionists. Should they maintain their new party as an independent state organization, or should they haul down their banner and retreat into old party establishments? This dilemma derived from two sources: one patriotic, the other purely political.[41]

The Southern Rights party had been badly beaten in the election of convention delegates; it had not been destroyed. Defeat had not led the Ultras to change their objectives. It had only forced a change in tactics. Unionists charged

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[40] John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, January 11, 1851; February 11, 1851; John B. Cobb to Howell Cobb, January 22, 1851; William H. Hull to Howell Cobb, February 3, 1851; John Stanford to Howell Cobb, February 11, 1851, ibid.

[41] John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, January 11, 1851; February 11, 1851; S. T. Chapman to Howell Cobb, January 15, 1851; January 31, 1851, ibid.

that the southern-rights men only pretended to reject secession and embrace the "Georgia Platform." By means of trickery and falsehoods, the disunionists meant to lure Union Democrats back from their Whig allies. If they succeeded, renewed secessionist plots would surely follow. No one should be mistaken, Union men warned, the Ultras "are more than ever filled with hate to the government, & to all who stand in their way." The future safety of the Union, they believed, required that loyal men keep the Ultras in check.[42]

Yet self-interest also played a prominent role in the adherence of both Whigs and Union Democrats to the Constitutional Union party. Although the Whigs remained politically viable in Georgia, they had experienced a series of reverses over the past five years. These setbacks, combined with the open antislavery posture of so many northern Whigs, compelled them to seek both additional strength at home and a new affiliation at the national level. Georgia Whigs saw in the Constitutional Union party a possible solution to both problems. Even after it became clear that the new party would not achieve national status,

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[42] John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, January 11, 1851; February 11, 1851; S. T. Chapman to Howell Cobb, January 15, 1851; January 31, 1851; William H. Hull to Howell Cobb, February 3, 1851, ibid.

the Whigs still recognized it as the answer to their problems within the state.[43]

Cobb and the Union Democrats faced a somewhat different set of difficulties. True, the compromise crisis and the split within the Georgia Democracy had forced them to seek new allies at home. But, unlike the Whigs, they did not doubt the fundamental soundness of the northern wing of their party regarding slavery. They now saw an opportunity to rid their national party of unsound elements -- North and South -- and replace them with Union Whigs. If Union Democrats succeeded in this endeavor, the potential rewards -- both for themselves and the nation -- would be great.[44]

No Georgian stood to benefit more than Howell Cobb. As undisputed leader of the Union Democratic wing of the Georgia Democracy, he had earned the hostility of southern-rights leaders by repeatedly opposing their positions on sectional issues. His refusal to sign Calhoun's "Southern Address" in 1849, had hardened this hostility into hatred. He might serve as Sixth District congressman for as long as he liked,

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[43] William J. Cooper, Jr., The South and the Politics of Slavery, 1828-1856 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978), pp. 305-306; Robert Toombs to Absalom Chappell, et al., February 15, 1851, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, pp. 227-229.

[44] Thomas W. Thomas to Howell Cobb, August 5, 1850; John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, January 11, 1851; February 11, 1851; S. T. Chapman to Howell Cobb, January 15, 1851; January 31, 1851; William H. Hull to Howell Cobb, February 3, 1851; James A. Nisbet to Howell Cobb, February 7, 1851; John Stanford to Howell Cobb, February 11, 1851, Howell Cobb Papers.

but the southern-rights wing of the party could virtually guarantee that he would rise no higher. As Lamar had warned him before, one congressional district, "is a rather small fulcrum for a politician's lever, if he expects to move a hemisphere."[45]

Within a reconstituted Democratic organization, regardless of its name, Cobb probably could parlay his position of faction leader into any number of higher offices -- perhaps even the highest office in the land. To be sure, he never hinted at such calculations. Nor would it be fair to presume that aspirations for higher office rivaled his commitment to the preservation of the Union and southern rights. It must be remembered that this very commitment underlay the limitations that he faced within the old Democracy. Yet Cobb and his supporters clearly harbored ambitions that went beyond the House of Representatives. He and his lieutenants had too much political experience not to recognize the obvious opportunities in such a realignment.[46]

When it became apparent that a national political realignment would not occur, distrust of Ultras still

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[45] Holt, The Political Crisis of the 1850s, p. 95; Shryock, Georgia and the Union in 1850, pp. 198-199; John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, April 9, 1849, Howell Cobb Papers; Athens Southern Banner, September 6, 1849.

[46] John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, April 9, 1849; James Jackson to Howell Cobb, June 14, 1850; H. H. Heath to Howell Cobb, September 28, 1850; J. B. Mower to Howell Cobb, April 28, 1851, Howell Cobb Papers; Athens Southern Banner, October 17, 1850.

provided Union Democrats with adequate reasons to shun their former associates in Georgia. The November elections barely had concluded before southern-rights leaders proposed a return to pre-crisis parties. Cobb's lieutenants warned that he and they could never return to the old organization. John Lamar fumed that "we can never fall back on old Whig & Democratic party lines in [Georgia]. The thing is utterly impossible." He believed this especially true for Union Democrats. "For us to go back among [southern-rights men]," he insisted, "would be to offer ourselves willing victims to their vengeance." S. T. Chapman phrased the issue in even more personal terms. The Ultras, he warned Cobb, "are determined to prostrate you."[47]

Confronted by these circumstances, both Union Democrats and Whigs quickly united on the necessity of maintaining the Constitutional Union organization as an independent state party. They wrote Cobb numerous letters urging the wisdom of this course. Clearly recognizing him as central to their plans, they pleaded for a public expression of his support. Lumpkin summarized the views of many Georgia Unionists. Predicting that "no stone will be left unturned" in the

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[47] Richard D. Arnold to John W. Forney, December 18, 1850, in Richard H. Shryock, ed., Letters of Richard D. Arnold, M.D., 1808-1876 (Durham: The Sherman Press, 1929), pp. 40-50; John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, January 11, 1851; S. T. Chapman to Howell Cobb, January 15, 1851, Howell Cobb Papers; John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, February 16, 1851, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, pp. 229-230.

efforts of southern-rights men to "reorganize the old state parties," he maintained that "something must be done and done quickly." He suggested that hopes for a national Union party be set aside momentarily. Organize the state party first, he said, and allow other states to follow at will. Cobb must act immediately to assist this effort. Lumpkin advised that "thousands are in suspense, not knowing what to do. They are waiting to hear from you. Let national parties and national candidates alone then for the present and strike boldly for Georgia."[48]

Even as Lumpkin penned his plea, Cobb had already undertaken to provide the desired demonstration of support. In early February, he received an invitation to a mass Union celebration planned for Macon on George Washington's birthday. While unable to attend in person, he took the opportunity to address the meeting in writing. He praised his fellow Unionists for their triumphs at the state convention, and pledged to be with them "in spirit and heart" through all the struggles of their "noble cause."[49]

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[48] John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, January 11, 1851; February 11, 1851; S. T. Chapman to Howell Cobb, January 15, 1851; John B. Cobb to Howell Cobb, January 22, 1851; February 3, 1851, Howell Cobb Papers; John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, February 10, 1851, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, p. 227.

[49] Howell Cobb to Absalom Chappell, et al., February 7, 1851, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, pp. 221-227.

After providing a brief history of the recent crisis, Cobb turned to the real purpose of his communication. Noting that "the wisdom and firmness" of Georgia's loyal men had brought the country safely through the crisis thus far, he contended that the Compromise of 1850 "only now needs to be considered final, and then will I grant that the danger is entirely over." But "a large portion of the people," he lamented, "did not consider it so."[50]

Cobb warned that extremists in both the North and the South had not yet abandoned their treasonable plots against the Union. In the North, abolitionists agitated against the compromise as "a base surrender to the demands of the South." He asserted that this "restless and fanatical crew" hated the Union, "because the Union guards and protects the South ... in the undisturbed enjoyment of its peculiar institutions." Unfortunately, he observed, "the spirit of opposition to these adjustment measures is equally violent and determined" in the South.[51]

The Southern Rights party, Cobb charged, represented "a sectional organization based upon sectional feelings." It had been formed out of hostility to the compromise, and from a desire to "repudiate all national alliances as dangerous ... and incompatible with ... Southern rights." Its members did not "hesitate to avow that ... the rights and honor of

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[50] Ibid.

[51] Ibid.

the South have been disregarded and trampled upon" by the compromise measures. He could hardly believe that honest men who expressed such sentiments would ever "yield a faithful acquiescence in measures which they regard as so unjust and dishonorable."[52]

Thus, Cobb warned, "elements of danger are yet in existence to be met and overcome." This objective, he insisted, could only be accomplished through strict adherence to "the true, safe, and judicious policy" adopted by Georgia Unionists. They had accepted the compromise as both a constitutional settlement and "a final disposition of past issues." Cobb praised this stance as "the only policy that will give peace and quiet to the country." The success of their movement, he suggested, "decides ... the fate of the Union."[53]

Cobb concluded his address with an unmistakable signal that the Constitutional Union party could not fulfill its mission by remaining merely a state organization. It must forge a national affiliation. He clearly intended that this affiliation be with the northern Democracy. "Your organization," he declared, "has laid down a sound and patriotic principle -- a faithful adherence to the compromise measures of the last session of Congress. It is your platform -- upon it you stand and extend the right hand of

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[52] Ibid.

[53] Ibid.

fellowship to ... citizens, wherever found, who are willing ... to ... unite with you in its ... support." This meant, he argued, that old party issues and old party names now lacked significance. "It matters not," he avowed, "whether the organization under which this principle triumphs be known as the Union, or the Republican, or the Democratic party ... It is the _success of the principle_, not _the name of the party_, which engages your thoughts and enlists your energies."[54]

Cobb meant for these words to reassure Union Democrats, even as he served notice to Georgia Whigs of his intentions for the new party. It soon became apparent, however, just how difficult it would be to lead Union Whigs into the national Democracy. Eight days after Cobb addressed his letter to the Macon meeting, Toombs forwarded his own address to the planning committee. While agreeing in principle with much that Cobb had written, Toombs pointedly rejected an alliance with northern Democrats -- at least as long as they refused to abandon their name and organization. "The existing political organizations of the North, both Whig and Democrat," he rumbled, "are wholly unequal to the present crisis."[55]

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[54] _Ibid_.

[55] Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, March 2, 1851, Howell Cobb Papers; Robert Toombs to Absalom Chappell, _et al_., February 15, 1851, in Phillips, _Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb_, pp. 227-229.

The contents of the Cobb and Toombs letters revealed much about the structural weakness of the Constitutional Union party. Within the state, Whigs and Union Democrats found it relatively easy to cooperate. Unfortunately, cooperation among Georgia Unionists regarding national affiliations posed nearly insurmountable difficulties.[56]

Union Democrats had always expected that the vast majority of their northern allies -- whether operating under the Union designation or not -- would be drawn from the ranks of the Democracy. Most, Cobb among them, had no intention of surrendering their national political identity. More than a month after publication of the Toombs letter, Cobb still insisted that "the Union organization would ultimately act in concert with the national democratic party." The deep-seated antislavery sentiment of northern Whigs, Union Democrats believed, made this alignment inevitable.[57]

Georgia Whigs did not dispute the Union Democratic assessment of northern Whiggery. Yet, as Toombs had stated in unequivocal terms, they felt a positive aversion to

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[56] Howell Cobb to Absalom Chappell, et al., February 7, 1851; Robert Toombs to Absalom Chappell, et al., February 15, 1851, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, pp. 221-229.

[57] Howell Cobb to Absalom Chappell, et al., February 7, 1851, ibid.; John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, January 11, 1851; William H. Hull to Howell Cobb, February 3, 1851; Howell Cobb to John H. Lumpkin, cited in John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, March 23, 1851; R. W. Flournoy to Howell Cobb, April 9, 1851; James F. Cooper to Howell Cobb, May 5, 1851, Howell Cobb Papers; Athens Southern Banner, April 17, 1851.

entering the ranks of the national Democracy. The Constitutional Union party never resolved this difference. Consequently, it repeated its impressive victory of the past November during the state elections of 1851, only to fall apart under the pressures generated by the presidential contest of the following year.[58]

III

As soon as they completed their organization, leaders of the Constitutional Union party began preparations for the state elections of 1851. These elections assumed greater significance after it became clear that there would be no national Union party. The Constitutional Unionists must win control of the state government or face disaster. Lacking any ties beyond the state's boundaries to sustain them in the face of local defeat, failure would mean the inevitable fragmentation of their party.[59]

The Constitutional Unionists recognized that their best chance for success hinged on their ability to counter southern-rights efforts aimed at pulling their coalition apart. Throughout the recent political upheavals in the

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[58] James A. Nisbet to Howell Cobb, February 7, 1851, Howell Cobb Papers; Robert Toombs to Absalom Chappell, et al., February 15, 1851, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, pp. 227-229.

[59] John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, January 11, 1851; William H. Hull to Howell Cobb, February 3, 1851; James A. Nisbet to Howell Cobb, February 7, 1851; John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, March 23, 1851, Howell Cobb Papers; John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, February 10, 1851, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, p. 227.

state, the southern-rights press had campaigned "to persuade Union Democrats that the late reorganization of parties ... was a Whig trick." Although these charges lacked a factual basis, the stern refusal of northern Democrats to enlist in the national Union movement lent an apparent credence to the accusation. Unless the Constitutional Union party found a way to rebuff the state rights claims, it risked the loss of substantial numbers of Union Democratic voters.[60]

A highly visible demonstration that the Constitutional Union party constituted more than "Whiggery in disguise" provided the best method of countering the southern-rights threat. The most obvious means of effecting this demonstration involved putting a prominent Union Democrat at the head of the party's ticket for the fall elections. As leader of the Union Democrats, Cobb represented the logical first choice for the gubernatorial nomination.[61]

By early January, 1851, several Unionists had launched a concerted effort to win Cobb over to their plan. They

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[60] John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, January 11, 1851; February 11, 1851; S. T. Chapman to Howell Cobb, January 15, 1851; January 31, 1851; William H. Hull to Howell Cobb, February 3, 1851; James A. Nisbet to Howell Cobb, February 7, 1851; John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, March 23, 1851, Howell Cobb Papers; John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, February 10, 1851, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, p. 227; Shryock, Georgia and the Union in 1850, p. 336.

[61] John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, January 11, 1851; James A. Nisbet to Howell Cobb, February 7, 1851; John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, March 23, 1851, Howell Cobb Papers; Shryock, Georgia and the Union in 1850, p. 336.

offered compelling arguments. One insisted that "to keep the Union party strong -- aye to make it overwhelming at the next state elections, these representations of the fire-eaters must be exploded." Another warned of efforts by the Southern Rights party to induce a Union Democrat to accept its gubernatorial nomination. Success of this plot would bleed off Cobb's supporters, and leave the speaker weakened and vulnerable. All agreed that Cobb's "relation ... to the prominent questions which led to the explosion of old Parties in Georgia, point to you, as the man ... we should put at the head of the column." In the event that these arguments failed to arouse Cobb, Constitutional Unionists also held out the tantalizing prospect that his election "would be wormwood & gall" to the southern-rights forces.[62]

Despite pressure to run for governor, Cobb maintained a firm silence regarding the nomination until late February. He had good political reasons for this silence. Although certain that the Constitutional Unionists must act with the national Democratic party, the Toombs letter had shown that he could not guarantee this result. If Georgia Whigs refused to participate in the national Democratic convention in 1852, Cobb understood that Union Democrats would be compelled either to break with their Whig allies or to surrender their national identity. Both courses would be fraught with peril.

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[62] S. T. Chapman to Howell Cobb, January 15, 1851; James A. Nisbet to Howell Cobb, February 7, 1851, Howell Cobb Papers.

The first would leave Union Democrats a splinter group forced either to abandon the political field or seek a humiliating reconciliation with the southern-rights men. The second would leave them part of an isolated state organization with questionable viability and little relevance in national politics. Moreover, the Democrats would hardly reward the leader of an insurgent movement with a spot on their presidential ticket.[63]

Cobb probably had reconciled himself to the risks inherent in the Constitutional Union party by early February. At that time, he tendered his first public commitment to the new state organization through his letter to the Macon committee. Like most other Georgia Unionists, he believed that the Constitutional Union party must first control the state before the difficult issues of 1852 would hold any meaning. Nevertheless, he persisted in his silence about the nomination for the balance of the month.[64]

These additional weeks of delay derived from an overriding personal concern, Mary Ann. She had taken his disillusionment with political ambition during the previous congressional session to heart, and had often rejoiced over his planned retirement from Congress. Barring a release from his promised retirement by her, Cobb's candidacy appeared

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[63] John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, March 23, 1851, ibid.

[64] Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, February 21, 1851; March 2, 1851; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, February 25, 1851, ibid.

highly improbable. Nevertheless, his letters during January and much of February did nothing to disabuse her of the notion that he meant to retire. In one late January flight of rhetoric, he even declared that "the gay busy world ... is fast loosing its hold upon my affections and I now pant with a beating pulse for home. Politics and politicians are too low to gratify my aspiring nature. I seek to rise into a higher ... holier atmosphere ... among the household gods and with my wife and children."[65]

In large measure, Cobb's behavior during the first two months of 1851 represented one of the least attractive incidents in his career. He had convinced Mary Ann -- by his own repeated assertions -- of an eagerness to leave the political arena. Yet his failure to reject entreaties that he make the gubernatorial race, indicated that he at least harbored serious doubts about retirement. Rather than confessing his doubts to Mary Ann, he continued to emphasize his desire for retirement. Yet even as he reassured his wife, his silence regarding the governor's race sparked hope among Constitutional Unionists that he might consent to run.[66]

Virtually everyone knew that family concerns had prompted Cobb's decision not to seek reelection. His silence

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[65] Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, February 11, 1851; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, January 25, 1851; January 26, 1851, ibid.

[66] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, January 26, 1851, ibid.

regarding the governorship prompted Unionist leaders to concentrate on convincing Mary Ann that he must run. By late January, she had begun to waver. Still professing to believe that his vows to retire "are in ernest tho' everyone else doubts," she promised that "if the attempt should fail, I will not break my heart, but will ... reconcile myself ... with the reflected honors ... which ... illumine my path."[67]

Pressure to release Cobb from his promised retirement increased in February. Mary Ann complained that "the ceaseless topic between me and the leaders of the Union Party is your prospects for the Vice Presidency and Governor." Although she continued to advise Unionist leaders that "you wished to retire from public life ... on your children's account, and a thousand other reasons," her resistance finally had collapsed. She demanded that Cobb "write a letter at once to <u>somebody</u> or to the Union Party generally and say plainly and positively whether you will or will not be a candidate for Governor .... <u>Do write to somebody and relieve me</u>."[68]

When Cobb asked her advice, Mary Ann replied "do what you please ... and what you think will contribute most to the interest of yourself and your state." If permitted to choose between the vice-presidency or the governorship, however,

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[67] Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, January 30, 1851, <u>ibid</u>.

[68] Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, February 21, 1850, <u>ibid</u>.

then she preferred "Governor by all means." Doubting that he would be happy with a total withdrawal from politics, she conceded that "retirement at Milledgeville will be sufficient to satisfy me."[69]

With Mary Ann's surrender in hand, and firmly convinced that only his name "at the head of the column" could insure a Constitutional Union victory in the fall, Cobb responded at last. As usual, he claimed to have no interest in the race or the office. "I do not want to run for governor," he insisted, "& hence my silence." Nevertheless, he quickly added, "I have determined to run the race if it is desired by my friends."[70]

IV

Even as these political stratagems unfolded, the second session of the Thirty-First Congress was fast drawing to a close, and with it Cobb's tenure as speaker. Once the members had managed to expel -- however briefly -- the slavery issue from their midst, it had proven "a dull monotonous business session." In truth, this session represented the type of congressional activity that Cobb most enjoyed. Relatively free of the resentment and vituperative exchanges that had characterized his first session as

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[69] Ibid.

[70] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, February 25, 1851, ibid.

speaker, this second session provided ample opportunities for the easy sociability that he so relished.[71]

Cobb took advantage of the situation. He attended plays and concerts, including one by the famed Jenny Lind. When Mary Ann expressed a desire to hear Lind sing, the speaker even ventured into music criticism. "You would have been poorly compensated for your trouble," he declared," the little virago has a fine voice, but I tell you, she cant sing." Beyond these activities, he also attended at least some of the capital city's many "squeezes."[72]

Mary Ann's reaction to Cobb's bachelor lifestyle provides some indication of why she found "retirement at Milledgeville" preferable to his continued residence in Washington. She did not object to his attendance at plays and concerts, but did object vigorously to his opportunities to entertain and be entertained by other women without her supervision. Upon learning that he had danced with one "Mrs. Hall" at a party and then concealed it from her, Mary Ann exploded. He had "sinned against society," she raged, "by demonstrating your extreme awkwardness -- and ignorance." Varina Davis, wife of Senator Jefferson Davis of Mississippi and herself left at home, did nothing to improve Mary Ann's outlook. "Are we not sisters in affliction?," Varina asked,

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[71] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, January 4, 1851, ibid.

[72] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, December 29, 1850; February 13, 1851; Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, February 8, 1851, ibid.

"there is your Husband flirting and mine too, and no kind friend to tell us!"[73]

By early March, the House had completed its business and prepared to adjourn. Before doing so, the members adopted a unanimous resolution manifesting their gratitude "for the able, impartial, and dignified manner" with which Cobb had carried out his duties. The speaker reciprocated with a brief plea for national unity. Regardless of how individuals felt about the compromise, he urged all members to "unite in the patriotic hope that in the future happiness and prosperity of our common country will be illustrated the wisdom of our action." With that, he declared the House adjourned sine die.[74]

V

When Cobb departed Washington, he knew that he would soon be embroiled in his fourth major political campaign in as many years. Happily, he would at least have a chance for some time off before embarking on his new efforts. He took advantage of these weeks to move his family into the new home that had been under construction during the past sixteen months. While not nearly as impressive as the house which had been lost in the financial disasters of the early 1840s, the two story Greek revival structure certainly represented

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[73] Varina Davis to Mary Ann Cobb, January 13, 1851; Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, February 8, 1851, ibid.

[74] Congressional Globe, Thirty-First Congress, Second Session, pp. 792-793.

an improvement over the cottage the family had occupied since 1845. He also managed to turn a business trip to Savannah into a vacation for himself and Mary Ann.[75]

Yet even during the short span of weeks that Cobb had set aside for his family, he could not cut himself off from the political arena. In mid-March, he attended a dinner given in his honor by Constitutional Unionists in Macon. Following the meal, he delivered an hour long speech. He defended the benefits of the compromise and the necessity of maintaining a Union organization. Southern-rights men, he charged, already had launched a new plot to produce disunion. Unable to seduce Georgia into secession directly, they now planned for South Carolina "to make the issue and then rely upon the sympathy of other States to rally them to her rebellious standard." Playing upon Georgia's traditional rivalry with South Carolina, he proclaimed that "Georgia could never consent to be dragged into a conflict by any State -- much less by one that was not her superior in any thing." He followed up this Macon speech with a similar effort in Savannah during his vacation there.[76]

Throughout the spring, Cobb also received a steady stream of letters that demanded his attention. Two topics dominated this correspondence: Cobb's political future and

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[75] Mary Ann Cobb to John B. Lamar, March 31, 1851, Howell Cobb Papers.

[76] Macon Georgia Journal & Messenger, cited in Athens Southern Banner, March 27, 1851.

the nature of the Constitutional Union party. Not all Cobb supporters welcomed the news that he would make the governor's race. Many wanted him to remain on the national scene. They worried that his absence from Washington "would lay us open to attack," and claimed that only Union Whigs wanted him to accept the gubernatorial nomination. The overwhelming majority of Union Democrats, they insisted, far preferred that Cobb continue his congressional service "where you can aid in directing ... the future movements of the grand union army." Cobb owed them this security, because "it is mainly under your lead [that we] have been induced to get on the Union platform."[77]

Several of these same men worried about the potential impact of the governorship on Cobb's future political prospects. Thomas Thomas begged him to avoid this "very small affair." Asserting the right of Union Democrats to be consulted before Whigs on this issue, Thomas maintained that "we don't want your reputation risked ... and you kept out of sight for the next four years by this little matter of being Governor." Other Union Democrats echoed Thomas' sentiments. John Stanford advised that "at Washington you appear to have ... a good prospect ahead which two years absence might very naturally alter. Therefore, if you can

[77] John Stanford to Howell Cobb, March 17, 1851; Thomas W. Thomas to Howell Cobb, April 14, 1851; Luther J. Glenn to Howell Cobb, April 21, 1851, Howell Cobb Papers.

crawl out of the scrape without losing friends I think it would be a good policy."[78]

A growing expectation that the Democratic party might turn to a dark horse candidate for president in 1852 added impetus to concerns about Cobb's future. With so many of the party's leading men in contention, it appeared unlikely that any declared candidate could secure the two-thirds vote needed to win nomination. To break such a stalemate, the party might turn to a "new man." Who could better fill that role than the young congressman from Georgia? Luther Glenn stated the case succinctly: "you would today make a stronger race for the Presidency than any man in the Union." An admirer in Atlanta reinforced Glenn's assessment. "I think if you avail yourself of it," he wrote, "that you have the best card in the pack for the next Presidency."[79]

Union Democratic concerns involved far more, however, than Cobb's future advancement. Many Union Democrats -- and many Union Whigs as well -- expressed a profound unease about the nature of the Constitutional Union party. The coalition composition of the new party contributed much to their worry. United by little more than a commitment to the "Georgia Platform," distrust of the Southern Rights party, and

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[78] John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, January 11, 1851; Thomas W. Thomas to Howell Cobb, April 14, 1851; John Stanford to Howell Cobb, March 17, 1851, ibid.

[79] J. B. Mower to Howell Cobb, April 20, 1851; May 4, 1851; May 12, 1851; Luther Glenn to Howell Cobb, April 21, 1851; Joseph Sturgis to Howell Cobb, April 23, 1851, ibid.

immediate self-interest, a sizeable portion of the Union organization held back from a complete surrender of old party identities. They might view Southern Rights men as their chief rivals now, but they had viewed each other in that light for far longer. John Johnson, a Clarke County resident, offered a clear explanation of the problem in Cobb's home county. "Many of our people," he observed, "do not yet appreciate the truth that Whiggery and Democracy are defunct in Georgia." Moreover, he added, some Clarke County Whigs "have not yet buried their political animosity against you ... and ... they have not been accustomed to voting for Democrats."[80]

The primary manifestation of this distrust involved the distribution of political offices. Each side carefully monitored the division of honors as the best method of gaging the intentions of the other. Throughout the state, the Whig and Democratic wings of the Constitutional Union party usually adopted the relatively simple solution of dividing the available offices as evenly as possible.[81]

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[80] R. W. Flournoy to Howell Cobb, April 9, 1851; Thomas W. Thomas to Howell Cobb, April 14, 1851; Luther J. Glenn to Howell Cobb, April 21, 1851; James F. Cooper to Howell Cobb, May 5, 1851; John Calvin Johnson to Howell Cobb, May 22, 1851, ibid.; Iverson Harris to John M. Berrien, March 12, 1851, John M. Berrien Papers, Southern Historical Collection, Library of the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, North Carolina (Hereafter: Berrien Papers).

[81] Luther J. Glenn to Howell Cobb, April 21, 1851; John Calvin Johnson to Howell Cobb, May 22, 1851, Howell Cobb Papers; Iverson Harris to John M. Berrien, March 12, 1851, Berrien Papers; Joseph H. Lumpkin to Alexander H. Stephens,

Party leaders also signalled their intention to apply this same standard to statewide offices. Whatever their other problems, few Constitutional Unionists doubted that Cobb would lead their organization to control of both the legislative and executive branches of the state government. Both friends and opponents of the Constitutional Unionists fully expected that Cobb's election would be followed by the elevation of either Toombs or Stephens to the Senate when the new legislature met.[82]

Despite Constitutional Union success at dealing with the division of offices, Union Democratic concern about preserving their national Democratic identity increased during the spring. In the aftermath of the state convention of 1850, only the most extreme Southern Rights men persisted in demands for immediate secession. The majority of the Southern Rights faction professed their willingness to abide by the "Georgia Platform." This willingness, they maintained, negated the need for the continued existence of a Union organization. They insisted to northern Democrats that they constituted the true Democratic party in Georgia.[83]

May 13, 1851, Alexander H. Stephens Papers, Library of Congress, Washington D.C. (Hereafter: Stephens Papers, LC).

[82] Luther J. Glenn to Howell Cobb, April 21, 1851; John Calvin Johnson to Howell Cobb, May 22, 1851, Howell Cobb Papers; Iverson Harris to John M. Berrien, March 12, 1851, Berrien Papers; Joseph H. Lumpkin to Alexander H. Stephens, May 13, 1851, Stephens Papers, LC.

[83] Shryock, Georgia and the Union in 1850, pp. 344-348.

The favorable reaction of northern Democrats to Southern Rights overtures, sparked panic among many in the Union Democratic ranks. Some Union Democrats, more spooked than the rest, advised the break-up of the Constitutional Union party. They had participated in the Unionist movement out of loyalty to the Union, the Democracy, and Cobb. They could not now stand idly by as Southern Rights men usurped their place as true Democrats and directed their old organization to "unhallowed purposes."[84]

Most worried Union Democrats, however, advocated less drastic measures. They would adhere to the Constitutional Union structure, but demanded that their new state party make provisions for cooperating with their old national organization. "It is our duty to assume some attitude which will enable Georgia to appear in the Democratic national convention of 1852," they maintained, "we are entitled to a voice in the selection of a presidential candidate and we ought to have it."[85]

Cobb embraced this latter position. He accepted the view of Lamar and others that the restoration of the old Democracy would result in political proscription for Union Democratic leaders. Yet he also shared the Union Democratic distrust of Southern Rights men. He flatly rejected the

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[84] Ibid.; R. W. Flournoy to Howell Cobb, April 9, 1851, Howell Cobb Papers.

[85] Luther J. Glenn to Howell Cobb, April 21, 1851; James F. Cooper to Howell Cobb, May 5, 1851, Howell Cobb Papers.

sincerity of the recent Southern Rights conversion to the "Georgia Platform." Convinced that "open disunionists" still represented the real Southern Rights movement, he contended that all Southern Rights men "entertain a common opinion on the compromise measures .... They ... regard an acquiescence in them as humiliating and dishonoring." The only difference between Ultras and moderate Southern Rights advocates involved means rather than ends. "The one demands an immediate dissolution of the Union, as the only adequate remedy for the wrong inflicted; the other pursues a milder and more politic course, with a consciousness that, in the end, a similar result will be reached."[86]

Under the circumstances, Cobb possessed few alternatives. He would run for governor on the Constitutional Union ticket, even as he worked to guide that organization into the national Democratic fold. It seemed the only way to preserve the Democratic party as the Union party he believed it to be -- and the only way to insulate himself from his enemies in Georgia.[87]

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[86] John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, January 11, 1851; S. T. Chapman to Howell Cobb, January 15, 1851, ibid.; Howell Cobb to Absalom Chappell, et al., February 7, 1851; John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, February 16, 1851, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, pp. 221-227, 229-230.

[87] Howell Cobb to James Buchanan, June 9, 1851, Howell Cobb Papers; Athens Southern Banner, January 16, 1851; February 13, 1851; April 17, 1851.

Nevertheless, Cobb dared not ignore the anxiety within Union Democratic ranks. With the assistance of the Banner, he waged a low-keyed campaign to assuage Union Democratic fears without antagonizing Union Whigs. Hoping to influence both northern Democrats as well as his own followers, he correctly noted that Southern Rights men -- not Unionists -- had initiated moves to break down old party structures. Georgia's Southern Rights party had been formed months before the Constitutional Union party. Southern Rights men had intended their new organization to replace existing political parties and unite all Georgians under the "banner of Southern rights." With considerable justice, he portrayed the Constitutional Union organization as a defensive gesture by loyal men determined to resist secessionist plots.[88]

Cobb further developed this point by persistently depicting all Southern Rights men as disunionists. The continued publication of several Ultra newspapers greatly facilitated this effort. Although moderate Southern Rights organs urged acceptance of the "Georgia Platform," the refusal by Ultra editors "to bow with loyal deference to the expressed will of the people" made Cobb's charges far more believable. Union Democrats who would have eagerly returned to the Georgia Democratic party -- if it could be restored

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[88] Howell Cobb to James Buchanan, June 9, 1851, Howell Cobb Papers; Athens Southern Banner, January 16, 1851; Macon Georgia Journal & Messenger, cited in Athens Southern Banner, March 27, 1851.

along pre-crisis lines -- declined to step into a potential nest of secessionist vipers.[89]

Finally, Cobb worked to remind Union Democrats of his own impeccable Democratic credentials. Here again, he benefitted from outside assistance. When Ultra newspapers in Georgia denounced him as a traitor to the Democracy, John Forney of the Philadelphia Pennsylvanian leaped to his defense. While declining to endorse the creation of a Union organization, the northern editor stressed that Cobb's "position as a prominent member of the National Democracy was never more established or more enviable than at the present moment." Moreover, Forney noted the inconsistency of men who demanded a purely "Southern party" denouncing Cobb as a traitor to the national Democratic organization. The Banner gave these exchanges wide circulation. It insisted "there cannot be the least doubt that [the Pennsylvanian] expresses not only the sentiments of the Democracy of that state, but those also of the same party in every non-slave-holding State in the Union."[90]

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[89] Howell Cobb to James Buchanan, June 9, 1851, Howell Cobb Papers; Macon Georgia Journal & Messenger, cited in Athens Southern Banner, March 27, 1851; Athens Southern Banner, April 17, 1851; Macon Georgia Telegraph, May 27, 1851.

[90] Howell Cobb to James Buchanan, June 9, 1851, Howell Cobb Papers; Philadelphia Pennsylvanian, cited in Athens Southern Banner, February 13, 1851; April 17, 1851; Athens Southern Banner, February 13, 1851.

Having failed to reunite the state Democratic party, the Southern Rights men had no alternative to maintaining their own organization. They met in convention on May 28. The convention adopted a series of state-rights resolutions, including one that asserted the constitutional right of a state to secede. Although this concession to the party's Ultra wing could add weight to Unionist charges of secessionist intentions, it also created a potential for divisions within the Constitutional Union party. During the state elections of 1849, Democrats had used a similar resolution to good effect against Whigs who declined to endorse this position. If the theoretical or abstract right of secession became the focus of the upcoming campaign, the Southern Rights party still might lure a large portion of Union Democrats into its ranks. After adopting its platform, the party nominated Charles J. McDonald for governor. A popular two-term governor, McDonald's service as president of the second session of the Nashville Convention left him vulnerable to charges of disunionism.[91]

The Constitutional Union party met in convention a few days later. Keeping with tradition for likely nominees, Cobb did not attend. Nonetheless, he stood ready to confront the Southern Rights party in a head-to-head debate over the theoretical right of secession. He drafted a letter that

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[91] Shryock, Georgia and the Union in 1850, pp. 350-351; Montgomery, Cracker Parties, pp. 38-39.

explicitly rejected the notion of secession as a constitutional doctrine and submitted it to the committee charged with organizing the convention. Fearful of the divisive potential of this issue, the committee decided not to present the letter to the convention. Toombs, as chairman, explained the decision to Cobb. The convention that adopted the "Georgia Platform," he maintained, "had not made an issue upon [secession], and the party being formed upon the action of that Convention & nothing else, the whole doctrine ... was an open question." Besides, he concluded, "our organization is based upon the idea of preventing the necessity of secession whether rightful or not."[92]

With this decision made, the Constitutional Union party adopted resolutions which incorporated the "Georgia Platform" and declared that a threat to the Union still existed. Not surprisingly, the resolutions also denounced the Southern Rights party as the source of that threat. The delegates then proceeded to their preordained task of nominating Cobb for the governorship.[93]

Cobb received official notice of his nomination by mail in mid-June. He accepted immediately. As was his habit, his acceptance included a review of events leading to the present situation. Praising the state's citizens for their wisdom

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[92] Robert Toombs to Howell Cobb, June 9, 1851, Howell Cobb Papers.

[93] Milledgeville Federal Union, June 10, 1851; Shryock, Georgia and the Union in 1850, p. 351.

in saving the Union thus far, he urged them to continue in their courageous course. He acknowledged that the South possessed legitimate grievances against the North, but insisted that "there is nothing which ... will justify us in dissolving a government formed by Washington and his immortal compeers."[94]

Nor would Cobb admit that the compromise measures imposed any "degradation" or "inequality" on the South. Yet he did vow that "should ... the time ever arrive when the conditions of [Georgia] remaining in the confederacy are degradation and inequality, I shall be prepared with her to 'resist, with all the means which a favoring Providence may place at her disposal.'" Skirting the constitutionality of secession, he further maintained that if this "dark day for liberty" ever arrived, "I [am not] particular by what name this resistance may be characterized -- whether secession, revolution, or anything else." All Americans must remember one vital lesson: "should this fearful collision ever come, the issue will be decided only by arbitrament of the sword. Where constitutions end revolutions begin."[95]

Happily, Cobb concluded, the country did not face this dire situation. The compromise measures and the "Georgia Platform" had spared the nation such a drastic choice. "Let

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[94] Howell Cobb to James A. Meriwether, et al., June 24, 1851, Howell Cobb Papers.

[95] Ibid.

Georgia ... remain firm in the decision she has made" he advised, "and not invite by a vacillating course a renewal of sectional strife and jealousies." He warned that if the citizens of the state declined to make this commitment, "then ... I am not the man to select for their chief magistrate."[96]

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[96] Ibid.

Chapter Eleven

"Bearding the Lion"

The campaign that followed Cobb's nomination proved the most strenuous of his political career. With the blessings and encouragement of Robert Toombs and Alexander H. Stephens, he took to the stump for a canvass of the entire state. He focused his initial efforts on the opposition strongholds in the southern and central counties. Union Democrats in the area warned that he faced a difficult task. In these regions, they noted, "'fire-eating whigs' ... have linked up with leaders of the Democratic Party who are also 'fire-eaters.'" Even worse, they complained, "these leaders have thrown the mantle of deception over the larger portions of the democracy inducing them to believe it is still the same old party ... while they talk ... about Union, Southern Rights, Resistance, fraud, degradation, ruin, abolitionism, or anything else that will best suit the crowd." Whatever other theme the Ultras might be sounding, however, "abuse [of] Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb is rarely forgotten."[1]

By July 2, Cobb reported that "I am now at work in good earnest on my canvass." Travelling by railroad when possible

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[1] Robert Toombs to Howell Cobb, June 19, 1851; Alexander H. Stephens to Howell Cobb, June 23, 1851; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, June 29, 1851; Hamilton W. Sharpe to Howell Cobb, July 4, 1851; John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, July 5, 1851, Howell Cobb Papers, Felix Hargrett Special Collections Library, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia (Hereafter: Howell Cobb Papers).

and buggy more often, he sweated his way through the heat and humidity of a south Georgia summer. Accompanied by Oliver H. Prince, a young friend of the family, he moved from town to town delivering two-and-a-half hour speeches to crowds ranging in size from a few hundred to more than a thousand. Everywhere, he delivered the same pro-Union, pro-compromise message. Everywhere, he warned that the Southern Rights party threatened the political stability and economic prosperity of the state. And everywhere, his presence -- as well as his words -- challenged Southern Rights claims to represent the true Democracy in Georgia.[2]

The grueling schedule took its toll on man, beast, and buggy. Writing from Thomasville after three weeks on the road, Prince described the ordeal. "We arrived here yesterday evening after a very hard day's travel from Bainbridge," he wrote, "it was decidedly the most fatiguing trip we have yet made & both men and horses begin to look & feel very much knocked up." Their buggy, a loan from John Lamar, fared no better. Prince recommended that Lamar order himself another conveyance, "for I doubt whether you will recognize it as the same vehicle by the time it reaches Athens, ... we have given it some hard usage over roads almost impassible." The weather only added to the duo's

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[2] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, July 2, 1851; July 9, 1851; July 28, 1851; Hamilton W. Sharpe to Howell Cobb, July 4, 1851; O. H. Prince to John B. Lamar, July 8, 1851; July 9, 1851; July 19, 1851, ibid.; Macon Georgia Citizen, July 26, 1851; Savannah Republican, July 29, 1851.

discomfort. "The weather is intensely hot," Prince reported, "& the sun is more oppressive than I ever felt it." Despite the stresses of their journey, the young man (now suffering from dysentery) groaned that the two would depart for Newton as soon as Cobb completed his speech in Thomasville. They hoped to cover fifteen of the fifty miles before them by dark. Although surprised at the resilience Cobb demonstrated under the demands of the journey, Prince noted that they had been sustained in their travels by a liberal supply of brandy forwarded from brother John.[3]

Cobb, himself, acknowledged the rigors of the canvass. On July 9, he explained his lack of letters home by saying "it is almost impossible for me to find a leisure moment to write .... As soon as I get to a place my room is crowded and remains so till bed time, except when I am on the stump." He confessed that his two-and-a-half hour speeches "in this warm weather perfectly exhaust me," but hastened to add that he quickly recovered "and soon feel ready for another effort." Although he assured everyone at home that "my own health was never better," he did worry about the strain that constant stump speaking placed on his voice. After only a few days on the road, he began to suffer from a sore throat. He considered reducing the length of his speeches by half, but finally decided to do so only when compelled by the

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[3] O. H. Prince to John B. Lamar, July 19, 1851, Howell Cobb Papers.

inability to deliver his full message. There is no evidence that he ever felt so compelled. Nevertheless, by the end of the month his endurance had nearly reached its limits. He confided to Mary Ann that "I feel very tired and worn out."[4]

Cobb's experiences on his tour of south Georgia proved a different kind of torment for Mary Ann. She made it a rule to avoid that portion of the state before the first killing frost of winter, and now found herself in a near panic over her husband's exposure to the malaria and other diseases endemic to the area. Within days of his departure, she pleaded that "as long as I live, do let this be the last time you risk your life -- even for your country's good. I can bear the thought of leaving you in this world, as you are so well calculated to live in it, but [for me] to be left alone is distraction if not death." Her patience ran out, however, at about the same time as Cobb's strength. In late July, she vented her frustration with bitter recriminations over "this ... miserable business." It would not be so unbearable "if I could believe this would be your last campaign," she fretted, "but you have disappointed my expectations so repeatedly, that I despair of seeing the end of your political career, as long as life lasts."[5]

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[4] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, July 2, 1851; July 9, 1851; July 28, 1851; O. H. Prince to John B. Lamar, July 8, 1851, ibid.

[5] Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, July 6, 1851; July 8, 1851; July 23, 1851, ibid.

For all the discomfort resulting from the opening weeks of the campaign, Cobb's efforts did produce positive results for the Unionist cause. Almost from the beginning of the canvass, he observed that south Georgia audiences had been "attentive" to his message. With each successive day, his confidence grew. By July 9, he contended that "the effect of my speeches ... is very good." Following an address at the Temperance Hall in Columbus -- home of the state's most virulent Southern Rights organs -- he boldly asserted that he had "created quite a sensation" by "bearding the lion in his den." While still expecting a "warm contest," he now felt no doubts of the outcome in south Georgia. "All will be well," he exulted, "this section of the country will do."[6]

Brother John gleefully noted that accounts reaching Macon confirmed his brother-in-law's appraisal. Lamar reported that "Howell has favorably impressed the people," and rejoiced that his speeches "are producing a fine effect in rousing up our friends to action." Even better, he reasoned, Cobb's speeches were creating consternation within the ranks of the Southern Rights party.[7]

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[6] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, July 2, 1851; July 9, 1851; July 28, 1851, ibid.

[7] John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, July 5, 1851; John B. Lamar to Mary Ann Cobb, July 5, 1851, ibid.; E. G. Cabaniss to Howell Cobb, August 1, 1851, in Ulrich Bonnell Phillips, The Correspondence of Robert Toombs, Alexander H. Stephens, and Howell Cobb (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1913), pp. 246-247.

Unionist newspapers echoed Lamar's enthusiasm. The Macon Georgia Citizen declared that "we have the most flattering accounts of the progress of Mr. Cobb through Southwestern Georgia. Every where he has met with the most heart-felt greetings of assembled thousands, who have listened to his able vindication of the Compromise measures and his patriotic appeals in behalf of the ... Union." With a champion like Cobb in the field, the paper confidently predicted a 20,000 vote majority for the Constitutional Union party in the governor's race. Other papers took a similar line. The Savannah Republican followed up its reports on Cobb's triumphant progress with a warning to its Southern Rights readers. "The issue before us is identically the same in principle now as ... last autumn ... and ... our opponents who are not satisfied with the signal rebuke they then received will soon have another equally significant."[8]

The Southern Rights press grudgingly conceded the effectiveness of Cobb's efforts. Southern Rights editors recognized that the only hope of limiting damage to their cause lay in meeting Cobb in open debate. Their own gubernatorial nominee provided them little assistance. McDonald declined to confront his opponent on the campaign trail, because he believed campaigning beneath the dignity of the governorship. Unionist organs mocked McDonald as the

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[8] Macon Georgia Citizen, July 26, 1851; Savannah Republican, July 29, 1851; Rome Courier, cited in Athens Southern Banner, September 11, 1851.

"Mum candidate," and charged that he "has got upon stilts and cannot come down to converse with the rabble!"[9]

Unable to turn to their candidate for solace, Southern Rights editors began urging leaders of their movement to meet Cobb in debate at each stop on his tour. Mindful of warnings that Southern Rights leaders regularly cast their speeches in terms "that will best suit the crowd," Cobb established strict rules for all such meetings. While expressing a desire for "discussion before the people every where," he demanded that "I ... have it upon fair and equal terms." He would meet McDonald or "any one he might ... authorize to speak for him," but he would not engage a series of speakers who independently argued the Southern Rights cause. Cobb offered a blunt explanation for his demand. McDonald, he pointed out, "is represented by his friends in different sections of the state as occupying different ground. In some places he is represented as being favorable to the Georgia Platform, in other places as being opposed to it." Thus, he must debate either McDonald or an authorized surrogate "in order that I may meet the same issues every where. This is the only basis for a fair and equal discussion."[10]

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[9] Macon Georgia Telegraph; Columbus Times, July 11, 1851; Albany Patriot, July 18, 1851, all cited in Athens Southern Banner, July 24, 1851; Macon Georgia Citizen, July 26, 1851.

[10] Macon Georgia Telegraph; Columbus Times, July 11, 1851; Albany Patriot, July 18, all cited in Athens Southern Banner, July 24, 1851; Howell Cobb to Hopkins Holsey, August 13, 1851, cited in Athens Southern Banner, August 14, 1851;

Nelson Tift, fire-eating editor of the Albany Patriot, misrepresented Cobb's debate requirements as signs of arrogance. He scornfully charged that the "Speaker of the House of Representatives of the United States of America, and would be Governor of Georgia" viewed attempts by "plain common citizens" to debate him as "a positive insult to his excellency." Perhaps to punish the editor for his transgression, Cobb agreed to meet him in debates at Newton and Albany. Tift proved a poor match for Cobb, however, and received a verbal thrashing for his efforts.[11]

By the beginning of August, Cobb had completed his swing through southern Georgia. In his wake, he left Southern Rights men feeling bruised and mortified about the future. With this triumph behind him, he turned his attention to the friendlier climes of north Georgia.[12]

Despite Cobb's fundamental strength in this region, he could not afford to take it for granted. Lumpkin and other Unionists voiced some concern about ongoing attempts by Southern Rights men to divide the Constitutional Union

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George Collins, et al., to Howell Cobb, July 21, 1851; George Collins to Howell Cobb, July 21, 1851; Howell Cobb to George Collins, et al., July 21, 1851; Henry Morgan, et al., to Howell Cobb, July 22, 1851; Howell Cobb to Henry Morgan, et al., July 22, 1851, Howell Cobb Papers.

[11] Albany Patriot, July 18, 1851, cited in Athens Southern Banner, July 24, 1851; Savannah Republican, July 29, 1851.

[12] E. G. Cabaniss to Howell Cobb, August 1, 1851, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, pp. 246-247.

coalition. They warned that their opponents "claim to be Union men, and allege that McDonald is the democratic candidate, and that you have joined the Whigs." By means of these "grossest deceptions," they grumbled, "many honest democrats have been induced to go for McDonald because of their old hostility to the Whigs as political opponents."[13]

Campaigning in the mountains of north Georgia offered as many challenges as stumping farther south. Writing to Mary Ann from Ringold, Cobb described a portion of his travels. "My trip to Dade," he reported, "was a tedious one as I had to go by the way of Tennessee to get there & then had to pass over the Lookout mountain, on most wretched roads." By the time he reached Dahlonega two weeks later, he was nearly exhausted. His efforts of July had left him feeling "quite unwell from fatigue & exposure," but after another six weeks of labor he now confessed himself "almost broken down in strength." Moreover, he lamented, "my voice is almost gone ... from daily speaking in the open air." Nonetheless, his sense of humor had not deserted him. In commenting on his condition, he observed that "I have nothing left, but good health, good spirits, and a few dirty clothes.

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[13] Robert E. Martin to Howell Cobb, July 13, 1851; John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, August 1, 1851, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, pp. 242-243, 247-249; Howell Cobb to "Gentlemen," August 12, 1851, Howell Cobb Papers.

I am nearer being a used up man in the way of strength & clean clothes, than you ever saw me."[14]

The grind of constant travel and open air speaking notwithstanding, Cobb indeed did have sound cause for "good spirits." The concerns expressed by Lumpkin had proven unfounded. Early in his tour of the northwest counties, Cobb happily insisted that "the tide is now running in our favor in an overwhelming torrent .... I have never seen anything like it, and unless our friends are egregiously at fault, we shall overwhelm the opposition." As the canvass progressed, his confidence grew. When he reached Dade, the citizens manifested great joy over his presence "& would call me nothing else but 'Governor.'" Everywhere, he declared, "the daily evidences I meet with of the confidence of the people, keeps me in the highest spirits."[15]

Cobb's success on the stump did not go unnoticed. In late August, McDonald at last abandoned his refusal to meet Cobb in debate. The candidates first met in Marietta. Each man delivered two speeches, and Cobb felt "much satisfied at the result." McDonald rejoined him on the road a few weeks later. This time the two engaged in a series of debates. Cobb welcomed his opponent's return. Still anticipating "a

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[14] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, September 4, 1851; September 15, 1851; September 19, 1851, Howell Cobb Papers.

[15] Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, August 19, 1851; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, September 4, 1851; September 15, 1851; September 19, 1851, ibid.

brilliant triumph" in October, he commented to Mary Ann that "Gov. McDonald is with me again. He seems to have forgotten his dignity and takes to his work like a good fellow." Cobb expressed regret that McDonald had not been with him all along. He believed his opponent's presence helped "to arouse me properly to my work." Besides, he confessed, "I am fond of his company -- especially in a discussion"[16]

While Mary Ann approved of Cobb's warm personal relations with McDonald, her feelings about the campaign had not improved. She acknowledged that "the boys are behaving well, and give me less trouble that at first," but remonstrated that "they would do far better if you would stay at home." When Cobb rather foolishly suggested that this would be his last campaign, she would hear none of it. "I do not believe a word," she replied, "I shall die a politician's wife .... I hope you will make it convenient to be at home at that time." Cobb did nothing to help his cause when he scheduled some last minute speaking appearances, but neglected to inform his wife. Left to learn of his new plans "from the public papers just as do your common constituents," she complained that this "is not treating me as the companion of your joy and sorrow."[17]

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[16] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, August 24, 1851; September 19, 1851, ibid.

[17] Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, September 5, 1851; September 16, 1851, ibid.

Even if Cobb escaped unscathed from his opponents on the stump, the Southern Rights press resolved to deny him a clear path to the governor's mansion. Throughout the summer and fall, Southern Rights newspapers waged relentless political warfare against him. They dredged up his financial difficulties of the past decade. They vigorously critiqued his political record, and constantly denounced him as a traitor to the South and defector from the Democracy. They charged that his nomination for the governorship had actually been made in Washington D.C., as part of a plot by himself, Toombs, and Stephens to control the state for their own purposes.[18]

Although Cobb and his supporters generally professed a belief that "these lies do ... harm to those that tell them & work out their own cure," they challenged every Southern Rights accusation. They made no effort to conceal Cobb's

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[18] John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, July 19, 1851; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, July 24, 1851; September 20, 1851; J. J. Baugh to Howell Cobb, August 11, 1851; Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, August 27, 1851; September 16, 1851; September 18, 1851; September 28, 1851; G. W. Jones to Howell Cobb, September 16, 1851; September 23, 1851, ibid.; Macon Georgia Journal & Messenger, cited in Athens Southern Banner, March 27, 1851; Athens Southern Banner, April 3, 1851; April 10, 1851; September 18, 1851; Milledgeville Federal Union, April 23, 1851, cited in Athens Southern Banner, May 1, 1851; Macon Georgia Telegraph, January 8, 1850; May 27, 1851; June 10, 1851; June 24, 1851; July 1, 1851; July 8, 1851; Columbus Times, June 6, 1851, cited in Athens Southern Banner, June 19, 1851; Savannah Republican, July 14, 1851; Macon Georgia Journal & Messenger, cited in Savannah Republican, October 6, 1851; Albany Patriot, June 13, 1851; June 20, 1851, cited in Zachary Taylor Johnson, The Political Policies of Howell Cobb (Nashville: George Peabody College for Teachers, 1929), p. 111.

previous financial difficulties, but painstakingly refuted each fabrication regarding his past and present indebtedness. On the issues of Cobb's political record, the Constitutional Unionists mainly repeated arguments that Cobbites had developed over many years.[19]

But Unionist papers did more than defend Cobb against Southern Rights accusations. Besides raising constant reminders of McDonald's Ultraism, they also retaliated with charges about his past. They accused the former governor of defrauding "clients, widows, and orphans" through "very dark transactions ... during his Presidency of the Darien Bank." He too, it seemed, had found it necessary to pay his creditors less than he owed on occasion. They further charged that gubernatorial mismanagement of the state bank

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[19] Thomas R. R. Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, undated manuscript; John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, July 19, 1851; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, July 24, 1851; September 20, 1851; J. J. Baugh to Howell Cobb, August 11, 1851; Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, August 27, 1851; September 18, 1851; September 28, 1851; G. W. Jones to Howell Cobb, September 16, 1851; September 23, 1851, Howell Cobb Papers; Athens Southern Banner, February 13, 1851; April 3, 1851; April 10, 1851; April 17, 1851; May 1, 1851; June 19, 1851; June 26, 1851; July 10, 1851; July 24, 1851; September 18, 1851; Macon Georgia Journal & Messenger, cited in Macon Georgia Telegraph, July 1, 1851; Rome Courier, cited in Athens Southern Banner, September 11, 1851; Macon Georgia Citizen, July 26, 1851; Macon Georgia Journal & Messenger, cited in Savannah Republican, October 6, 1851; Augusta Chronicle and Sentinel, cited in Savannah Republican, July 14, 1851; Savannah Republican, July 14, 1851.

during McDonald's tenure had cost Georgia taxpayers thousands of dollars.[20]

Yet it became clear early on that these exchanges would serve as little more than skirmishes. Through persistence and good luck, the Southern Rights party succeeded in making the theoretical right of secession the critical issue of the campaign. The combatants first grappled on this issue following the party conventions. In his letter of acceptance, McDonald boldly acknowledged "the right of a State ... to secede from the Union, whenever the people thereof, ... shall determine ... necessary." Cobb's letter of acceptance, on the other hand, conceded the right of all people to resist oppression, but avoided any definitive statement regarding secession.[21]

Union newspapers praised Cobb's circumspection as statesmanlike "in spirit and in doctrine." The Southern Rights press, however, repudiated it as a base political "dodge" intended "to make his approaching political exit as decent ... as possible." Such boasts, notwithstanding, this issue might have proven insignificant had word of Cobb's

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[20] Atlanta Republican, cited in Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, September 18, 1851; Savannah Republican, October 6, 1851.

[21] Charles J. McDonald to William M. Wiggins, et al., June 5, 1851, cited in Athens Southern Banner, June 19, 1851; Howell Cobb to James A. Meriwether, et al., June 24, 1851, Howell Cobb Papers.

letter to the committee planning the Constitutional Union convention not leaked out.[22]

Even before Cobb had been informed of his nomination, reports surfaced in Southern Rights papers that he had written a letter to the convention denying the right of secession. These reports also claimed that he had "maintained the right of the General Government to use force in keeping a refractory State in the Union." Only a dastardly fraud by the "wire workers" of the committee had kept the communication from the convention and the people of the state. Southern Rights organs now demanded its publication. They gloated that "the letter will have to see light ... Mr. Cobb is in a bad dilemma. If he plays mum he will be beat, and if he comes out with his consolidation doctrines he is destined to the same fate."[23]

Initially, Constitutional Unionists manifested an inclination to risk "playing mum." The Southern Banner argued that neither Cobb nor the Constitutional Union party need feel compelled to release the letter. Holsey correctly maintained that, contrary to Southern Rights claims, Cobb had addressed no letter "to the convention." Rather, he had written a private letter to members of the planning committee

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[22] Macon Georgia Telegraph, June 24, 1851; Athens Southern Banner, June 26, 1851; Savannah Georgian, cited in Savannah Republican, July 14, 1851.

[23] Augusta Republic; Augusta Constitutionalist, June 20, 1851, both cited in Macon Georgia Telegraph, June 24, 1851; Macon Georgia Telegraph, June 24, 1851.

and authorized its presentation to any delegate who desired to know his position regarding secession. Many delegates -- Holsey included -- had read the letter prior to Cobb's nomination. Thereafter, the editor insisted, the communication served no further purpose. Besides, he noted, the Constitutional Union convention had not taken a position on the theoretical right of secession. Formed to prevent the necessity of such a disaster, the party had resolved to tolerate divergent opinions on theoretical issues. Nevertheless, Holsey took pains to note that Cobb's letter to the committee "contained not a single word, line, or sentence at variance with his letter accepting the nomination for Governor."[24]

The Southern Rights party, however, would not be denied. If the contents of the "suppressed letter" were as innocuous as Holsey claimed, then why not publish the actual document? Even as the Southern Rights press continued its campaign for publication, Southern Rights voters organized public meetings to exert additional pressure on the Unionist candidate. Participants demanded to know if Cobb believed "that a State, by virtue of her sovereignty, has the right peaceably to secede from the Union, or ... [if] the General Government has

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[24] Athens Southern Banner, July 10, 1851.

the constitutional authority to coerce her to remain in the Union."[25]

Despite Southern Rights pressure, Cobb supporters still encouraged their candidate to say as little on the issue as possible. J. L. Howell observed that those who demanded a clear statement of Cobb's views only meant to do him harm. "Your friends want no more pledges from you," he wrote, "they are satisfied with your past acts." Alexander Stephens doubted that Cobb could avoid making some response to the questions coming out of Southern Rights meetings. That did not mean, however, that Cobb's answers needed to be elaborate. Stephens avowed that "I would give them short explicit and unequivocal answers, with just argument enough to clinch what I had to say. Let what you say be pointed not prolix." Above all, he insisted, Cobb must not allow voters to forget that "the only issue is whether we should go into Revolution or not. S.C. is for it. This is the point to keep prominent."[26] For several weeks Cobb offered no response to either the demands of Southern Rights editors for publication of "that letter," or the interrogatories of

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[25] J. L. Howell to Howell Cobb, June 17, 1851; Alexander H. Stephens to Howell Cobb, June 23, 1851, Howell Cobb Papers; Howell Cobb to John Rutherford, et al., August 12, 1851, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, p.249; Augusta Constitutionalist; Savannah Georgian; Columbus Times; Milledgeville Federal Union, all cited in Athens Southern Banner, September 4, 1851.

[26] J. Howell to Howell Cobb, June 17, 1851; Alexander H. Stephens to Howell Cobb, June 23, 1851, Howell Cobb Papers.

Southern Rights meetings. Apparently convinced by Toombs' admonitions of the divisiveness of his views on secession, Cobb decided to remain silent until he could offer a more comprehensive statement on the complex issue. The rigors of his swing through southern and central Georgia necessarily delayed such a response for more than a month.

On August 12, Cobb finally published his answer to the tumult raised by the Southern Rights men in an open letter to a Macon citizens' committee. Without acknowledging the fact publicly, he built his response around the text of the letter he had submitted to the organizing committee. He began with a defense of the Compromise of 1850. That settlement, while far from perfect, offered neither a "violation of our constitutional rights," nor "anything which forbids ... an honorable acquiescence in these measures." Georgia, he recalled, had voiced a similar opinion during the previous fall, and now appeared inclined to do so again. He sought only to sustain his home state in its "wise, just and patriotic decision."[27]

Having dispensed with these preliminaries, Cobb next examined secession as a constitutional doctrine. Without equivocation he rejected any legal right to secession. When asked to accede to such a right, he contended, "we are called upon to admit that the framers of the constitution did that

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[27] Howell Cobb to John Rutherford, et al., August 12, 1851, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, pp. 249-259.

which was never done by any other people possessed of their good sense and intelligence -- that is to provide in the very organization of the government for its own dissolution." Surely, he reasoned, if the "framers of the constitution" had intended "to subject the perpetuity of the Union to the ... caprice of each State," then it seemed "remarkable ... that a principle of such vast importance ... should have been left an open question to be decided by ... metaphysical deductions of the most complicated character." Drawing on the Articles of Confederation, the Constitution, and the writings of James Madison, he described the concept of legal secession as "inconsistent with the wisdom and sound judgment which marked the deliberations of those ... men who framed our Federal Government." He could only conclude "that no such principle was contemplated in the adoption of our constitution."[28]

Cobb balanced his blunt words regarding secession as a legal doctrine with cautious language about proper federal reactions to any state's attempt to exercise that option. Nevertheless, he did not deny the federal government's authority to resist state action. "I would not attempt by the strong arm of military power to bring her citizens back to their allegiance," he declared, "unless compelled to do so in defense of the rights and interests of the remaining States of the Union." Baring such a necessity, federal

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[28] Ibid.

authorities should leave the seceding state unmolested but "not recognize her separate independence."[29]

While confident that this "kind and indulgent policy" would quickly prompt the absent state "to retrace her wandering steps and return to the embrace of the sisterhood," Cobb insisted that the federal government must never allow a seceded state to forge foreign alliances. "In our desire to inflict no injury upon a wandering sister," he asserted, "we should not forget the duty which the government owes to those who remain firm and true to their allegiance." The claims of loyal states upon federal protection, he warned "should not be lightly regarded."[30]

Yet, Cobb also acknowledged that states must have some recourse whenever the central government became "the instrument of wrong and oppression." Should such a scenario develop, he said, then states might exercise their "reserved sovereignty" and leave the Union. Although he specifically mentioned the "Kentucky and Virginia resolutions of 1798-'99," his justification of such a course reflected none of the extreme state-rights views he so despised. Rather than the compact theories found in Thomas Jefferson's Kentucky Resolutions and Calhoun's writings, Cobb's words harkened back to the natural rights philosophy of Jefferson in the Declaration of Independence. "It is the just right of the

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[29] Ibid.

[30] Ibid.

people," he declared, "to change their government when in their opinion it has become tyrannical." He further declared that this mode of redress was "not provided for in the constitution, and is therefore revolutionary in its character." Its maintenance would not depend on some metaphysical legal construct, but "upon the stout hearts and strong arms of a free people."[31]

Unfortunately, Cobb described this universal right to resist oppression as "the right of a State to secede for just causes." In his previous discussion of the theoretical legal right of secession, he had insisted that no constitutional right to secede existed -- "with or without just cause." Now, he appeared to contradict that vigorous assertion made only paragraphs earlier. The reasons for Cobb's confusing language are easily discernible. He meant to draw a distinct line between the right of withdrawal from the Union as a legal or a revolutionary act. The latter he freely admitted, the former he rigorously denied. Like his father and other members of Georgia's Union party from the 1830s, he sought to give the Union the permanence of constitutional law even as he left the people a means of escape from an oppressive central government.[32]

Most Georgians, however, held at least vague notions of a right to secession. By defining the natural right to

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[31] Ibid.

[32] Ibid.

revolution as a right to secession in a revolutionary context, Cobb hoped to deflect charges of consolidationism and counter the dangerous teachings of state-rights extremists. If he could convince Georgians that revolution by any name must be attended with violence, bloodshed, and destruction, then perhaps he could overthrow the Calhounite heresy and perpetuate the Union. In his letter accepting the gubernatorial nomination, he had maintained that if revolution came, he cared not whether it be labelled "secession, revolution, or anything else." His description of revolution as secession for just causes reflected this practical viewpoint. Despite his good intentions, Cobb's confusing language left him open -- then and later -- to charges of duplicity and blatant political manipulation.[33]

But one question remained. How would Cobb respond to a demand from the federal government for Georgia troops to be used against a state attempting secession? His response followed the logic of his natural rights philosophy. The president, he maintained, lacked the authority under existing statutes to employ force against any state. Congress, however, possessed the power to grant the executive branch this authority -- just as it had done in adopting the Force Bill during the Nullification Crisis of the 1830s. In the event that a state seceded and the president received congressional authorization to use force against it, then

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[33] Ibid.

Cobb lamented, "it would be the most fearful issue that the people of this country have been called upon to decide since the ... revolution." If confronted with such a crisis, he believed it his chief duty "to be the Executive of the will of the people of Georgia."[34]

To ascertain that will, Cobb said he would convene the legislature. He would urge that body to summon a state convention. It would be for "a convention of the people ... to determine whether Georgia would go out of the Union and ally herself and peril her destinies with the seceding state, or whether she would remain in the Union and abide the fortunes of her other sisters." Once Georgia had decided "upon that naked issue," he vowed "to give power and effect to her voice." While he avoided saying so, the future governor also realized that the time required to ascertain the popular will would allow opportunities for negotiations and reflection which might avert calamity.[35]

Nevertheless, Cobb expressed little hope for a positive outcome if the central government ever employed military force against a state. Whatever the people of Georgia decided in convention, he believed that armed conflict between a state and federal authority must sound the death-knell of the Union. "I do not entertain the idea for a moment," he confessed, "that our government can be maintained

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[34] Ibid.

[35] Ibid.

by the strong arm of military power." He predicted that "if a collision of arms between the States ... should ever come ... the Union would fall beneath the weight of revolution and blood, and fall ... to rise no more."[36]

Cobb concluded with one final appeal to calm reflection and patriotism. The Union, he observed, had first been formed "in the hearts of the American people." It could only be preserved in those same hearts. When the people ceased to revere the Union "as the legacy of Washington and the inheritance of the blood of the revolution," then "its vitality will be gone." Hence the danger posed by extremists in both sections. "They are wise men," he warned, who "understand the workings of the human heart." By denouncing the Union as "a covenant with hell" and an instrument of oppression, they sought to "prepare the hearts of the people to hate the Union of their fathers." Their success must mean the death of that Union. Cobb described all his past and present actions as an effort to prevent this tragedy. "I have used every effort in my power," he proclaimed, "to stay this ceaseless and ruinous agitation ... and keep the constitution and the Union where our fathers erected them -- firmly on the foundation of the people's hearts."[37]

Reactions to Cobb's letter proved predictable. The Unionist press declared it entirely satisfactory and insisted

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[36] Ibid.

[37] Ibid.

that opposition papers accept it as a final explanation. The private reactions of Cobb supporters reflected a similar satisfaction. Shortly after Cobb received the gubernatorial nomination, Francis S. Bartow had warned that Southern Rights men meant to win popular support "by occupying our conservative ground, and at the same time maintaining those States' rights doctrines, which are ... very dear to a majority of the citizens of Georgia." He pleaded with his candidate not to let the people "think that in your hands the State may be made to submit to future outrage." After reading Cobb's August letter, Bartow voiced complete relief. Pronouncing the effort "admirable," he praised Cobb for having done "what I thought you could do, [harmonized] the rights of the states with our duty to the Federal Constitution."[38]

Probably more pleasing to Cobb than expected praise from his own press and supporters were the plaudits awarded him by national Democratic newspapers. The Washington Union, noting the careful distinction he had drawn between secession as a constitutional right and a revolutionary act, praised his "very able" letter. Andrew Jackson Donelson, editor of the Union, echoed this sentiment in his private

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[38] Milledgeville Southern Recorder, cited in Athens Southern Banner, September 4, 1851; Athens Southern Banner, September 4, 1851; Francis S. Bartow to Howell Cobb, June 22, 1851, in R. P. Brooks, ed., "Howell Cobb Papers," The Georgia Historical Quarterly, V (September, 1921), 47-48; Francis S. Bartow to Howell Cobb, August 21, 1851, Howell Cobb Papers.

communications with Cobb. Commending Cobb's efforts "to unfold to the people of your state ... the danger which may follow their support of the absurd doctrine of ... constitutional secession," Donelson suggested that the success of Unionist candidates in Georgia and Mississippi would demonstrate the viability of the Compromise of 1850. The editor made no attempt to conceal his ulterior motive. He hoped that the success of the Constitutional Union party would lead to the "reuniting [of] the Democratic party on the basis of [that] compromise."[39]

Despite encouragement from the Union press in Georgia and the national Democratic press outside the state, Southern Rights men manifested no inclination to accept Cobb's position as adequate. Southern Rights editors variously denounced the letter as weak on the issue of "State sovereignty," supportive of "State coercion," or "non-committal" on critical issues. Yet, above all, they accused the Constitutional Unionists of a conspiracy to deny Cobb's true views to Georgia's voters. The Augusta Constitutionalist spelled out the charge. "Mr. Cobb," it complained, "may write as many ... long letters as his ingenuity may suggest, but as long as that suppressed letter

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[39] Washington Union, cited in Athens Southern Banner, September 4, 1851; Andrew Jackson Donelson to Howell Cobb, August 21, 1851, Howell Cobb Papers.

remains hid, the people will suspect that there is a trick on foot to cheat them out of their votes."[40]

Cobb only allowed the Southern Rights press a few days to push this charge. On August 24, during a campaign stop in Cassville, a Southern Rights man -- "with a kind of triumphant air" -- challenged the candidate to "'tell us what was in that suppressed letter.'" This challenge, reported the Augusta Chronicle and Sentinel, brought joy to the other Southern Rights supporters in the audience. But their joy proved short lived. Cobb calmly asked if his inquisitor had read his recent letter. When the man responded in the affirmative, Cobb replied that "'you have read the suppressed letter without knowing it, for every line, ... every word, and every syllable of the suppressed letter is contained in my letter to the Macon Committee.'" Unionist newspapers mocked the distress caused the Southern Rights party by this disclosure. "You have heard of shocks," they laughed, "but ... no set of poor creatures were ever so surprised, overwhelmed, confused, confounded as the disunionists were by Mr. Cobb's answer."[41]

With the revelation that the "suppressed letter" had been published, whatever chance that the Southern Rights

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[40] Savannah Georgian, Columbus Times, Milledgeville Federal Union, Augusta Constitutionalist, August 29, 1851, all cited in Athens Southern Banner, September 4, 1851.

[41] Augusta Chronicle and Sentinel, cited in Savannah Republican, September 3, 1851.

party had to defeat Cobb evaporated. When Georgia's voters went to the polls in October, they fundamentally reaffirmed their decision of the previous fall. Cobb won the governorship with a majority of 18,573 votes. He carried seven of the state's eight congressional districts, and seventy-four out of ninety-five counties. His Constitutional Union party won a huge majority in the legislature, and elected six congressmen.[42]

These cold figures, however, reflect little of the passion which men on both sides felt about the issues. One Cobb supporter from north Georgia observed that previous elections "ware [sic] bad enough in a civil country but this beet [sic] all. I cant say how many lives ware [sic] lost in this contest. 1 ware [sic] killed in Cartersville one in my neighborhood 2 or 3 in rome and this but a small account."[43]

The Constitutional Union triumph in Georgia, combined with Unionist victories in the Mississippi and Alabama state elections, prompted a feeling of relief throughout the country. The future of the Union it seemed, had at last been secured. Correspondents from as far away as Texas and New

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[42] Macon Georgia Telegraph, October 21, 1851; Athens Southern Banner, November 13, 1851; Richard Harrison Shryock, Georgia and the Union in 1850 (Durham: Duke University Press, 1926) pp. 354-355; Johnson, The Political Policies of Howell Cobb, pp. 118-119.

[43] W. Scott to A. Feimster, November 9, 1851, Feimster Papers, Special Collections Library, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina.

York insisted that the road to the presidency now lay open before the governor-elect. Happy New Yorkers held a public demonstration celebrating Cobb's win, and Tammany Hall hung a transparency in which "Georgia figured with Pennsylvania and Ohio as a state recently [illuminated] by a Democratic victory." Caleb Jones, writing his congratulations from Richmond, reported that "no election has given so much satisfaction to friends of the Union. Joy, heartfelt joy, was upon every face as the returns began to come in -- and the congratulations were from both parties."[44]

Jones did not exaggerate the bipartisan appreciation of Cobb's election. George Ashmun, a Massachusetts Whig, declared that "I hear it with as much satisfaction as I ever heard of ... a Whig triumph." While Ashmun acknowledged that "there are those who charge you with being no longer a Democrat," he observed that "you & I should not agree about tariffs & annexations any better than ever."[45]

The Cobbs had little time to relish congratulatory messages. The election had barely concluded before family members found themselves enmeshed in preparations for their

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[44] Albany Patriot, October 17, 1851, cited in Johnson, The Political Policies of Howell Cobb, p. 119; Richard D. Arnold to Howell Cobb, October 31, 1851, in Richard H. Shryock, ed., Letters of Richard D. Arnold, M.D., 1808-1876 (Durham: The Sherman Press, 1929), pp. 58-59; Caleb Jones to Howell Cobb, October 20, 1851; B. F. Benton to Howell Cobb, October 23, 1851; J. B. Mower to Howell Cobb, October 25, 1851, Howell Cobb Papers.

[45] George Ashmun to Howell Cobb, October 11, 1851; Caleb Jones to Howell Cobb, October 20, 1851, Howell Cobb Papers.

temporary residence in Milledgeville. It fell to brother John Lamar and Mary Ann to handle most of the mundane details. By mid-October, these two had their plans well under way. Although Cobb had requested an inventory of the furnishings in the governor's mansion, Lamar advised Mary Ann that she would need to bring her own silver service and bedclothes. Feeling some concern about security in the mansion, he advised her to keep her silver under lock and key when not in actual use. He also urged her to bring four of her own servants along, and offered advice about hiring a housekeeper for the governor's residence. He suggested that "if you can find one in Athens, ... who comes well recommended, & you think she will not get equal in importance to the Governor and his family the first week & patronize them the next, take her along." He promised to secure a cook who would meet the governor's requirements.[46]

Cobb, too, found much to keep him busy. The governor-elect needed time to compose his inaugural address. While Cobb probably preferred to use this opportunity to praise Georgia for its wisdom in sustaining the compromise and the Union, he once more found the state's Unionists gripped with fear that their recent actions would be misconstrued in the North. Philip Clayton warned from Washington that popular feeling in the northern states was more threatening than a

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[46] John B. Lamar to Mary Ann Cobb, October 15, 1851, ibid.

year before. Both Whigs and Democrats, he complained, actively courted free-soilers "with as much zeal as they ever did." He worried that the North persisted in erroneously reading the triumph of the Constitutional Union party as proof that "the South will stand by the Union under any & all circumstances." Somehow, Clayton and others insisted, the South must make it "the expressed understanding that the compromise is a final settlement of the slavery question & must be executed faithfully and honestly in all its parts." All agreed that "circumstances now require that a dose of this antidote be administered -- that you are the physician to do it -- ... and your inaugural the vehicle."[47]

Cobb did not disappoint his anxious followers. At noon, on November 5, he took the oath of office in the chambers of the state House of Representatives. The members of both houses and visitors so overfilled the hall that additional braces had to be installed to enable the galleries to withstand the extra weight. For the most part, the new governor's inaugural offered little of significance. He congratulated the state for its economic prosperity and the industry of its citizens. He stressed careful management of Georgia's governmental affairs, paying special attention to management of the state-owned railroad and the need for improved public education. On the subject of the compromise

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[47] Philip Clayton to Howell Cobb, October 16, 1851; Charles Jenkins to Howell Cobb, October 17, 1851; A. J. Miller to Howell Cobb, October 17, 1851, Howell Cobb Papers.

and the future of the Union, however, he offered not platitudes, but a hard-edged prescription for survival.[48]

Twice in recent months, Cobb declared, Georgia had acted to save the Union. With "calmness in 1850," the state had accepted the compromise; with "deliberation in 1851," it had reaffirmed that decision. Yet, he noted, when Georgia had thus spoken, "her voice breathed a mingled spirit of ardent devotion to the Union, and of patriotic warning to its Northern friends." Through the "Georgia Platform," the state had accepted the compromise as a final resolution of the dangerous issues that threatened the Union. It had done so because its citizens loved the Union. But in the "Georgia Platform," the citizens of the state also had proclaimed to "the maddened spirit of [northern] fanaticism," that "this far shalt thou go and no further." No one should be mistaken. The survival of the Union depended on the full and final acceptance of all compromise measures.[49]

In closing, Cobb's thoughts turned once more to those ideals he had first enunciated as a boy in the Phi Kappa Hall at the University of Georgia. Both he and his state, he affirmed, sought only "the preservation of the Union and the maintenance of the Constitution as one and inseparable."

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[48] Executive Minutes of the State of Georgia, November 5, 1851, Georgia Department of Archives and History, Atlanta, Georgia (Hereafter: Executive Minutes); Athens Southern Banner, November 13, 1851.

[49] Executive Minutes, November 5, 1851; Athens Southern Banner, November 13, 1851.

Ambition, he thundered, "can seek no higher and nobler object, than the transmission to posterity, of this inestimable legacy -- A UNION OF SOVEREIGN STATES, CEMENTED BY A CONSTITUTION DISPENSING EQUALITY AND JUSTICE TO ALL ITS MEMBERS -- a Constitution consecrated by the wisdom of the great and good men of revolutionary memory." As a youth, Cobb had first dreamed of becoming a republican statesman worthy of the founders of the nation. As a man, in the crisis of 1850, he had made that dream a reality.[50]

II

With his accession to the governorship, Cobb stood at the pinnacle of his power in Georgia politics. As speaker of the House, he had been instrumental in forging the Compromise of 1850. Along with Toombs and Stephens, he had shaped a coalition that produced unprecedented majorities in the two critical state elections which determined Georgia's acceptance of that settlement. Personally, he took special pride in having emulated the men of his father's generation: men who had rallied to the Union cause during the Nullification Crisis of 1832-1833, and in Cobb's mind preserved the legacy of their revolutionary forebears.[51]

Ironically, the governor's political position began to deteriorate even before he took office. In part, this

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[50] Executive Minutes, November 5, 1851; Athens Southern Banner, November 13, 1851.

[51] Athens Southern Banner, November 13, 1851; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, July 28, 1851, Howell Cobb Papers.

deterioration derived from the success of the Constitutional Union party. From its beginning, the party mainly had been united by a commitment to the preservation of the Union. With the state's acceptance of the compromise on the basis of the "Georgia Platform" in 1850, and its ratification of that decision in the 1851 elections, the party faced political irrelevance. The Unionist coalition must either define a new purpose for its existence, or watch its adherents drift away.

A presidential election on the immediate political horizon only served to complicate that task. Union Whigs and Union Democrats had been unable to devise a national strategy after it became clear that plans for a National Union party could not succeed. Cobb and his Union Democrats advocated association with the national Democracy; Stephens, Toombs, and their Union Whigs found this option unpalatable. As long as state issues dominated the political scene in Georgia, the Constitutional Unionists had been able to evade the implications of this disagreement. The resolution of critical state issues, however, rendered further evasion impossible.

Yet Cobb's declining prospects involved more than the irrelevance engendered by success of Constitutional Union principles. Throughout his congressional career, he had been able to act decisively in the political arena. Secure within his district and his party, he had seldom hesitated before

taking potentially unpopular positions when he believed such stances important to the safety of the Union or the Democracy. Now, his alliance with the Union Whigs had robbed him of that initiative. He desperately hoped to lead the entire Unionist coalition into the Democratic fold. Success would reduce his Southern Rights opponents to a harping and helpless minority. But fulfillment of this goal required cautious maneuvering. Rash action or excessive pressure on Union Whigs might wreck the entire strategy. Unfortunately, success demanded time -- time Cobb did not possess. While the new governor courted his allies, his opponents swept past him to a safe harbor within the national Democratic structure.[52]

Portents of these difficulties had been apparent for many months, but the aftermath of the 1851 elections brought the problems into sharper focus. Andrew Jackson Donelson praised Cobb's "great victory," but warned that "you will have great difficulty in keeping the road open to a National convention of the Democratic Party." Although confident that the Democrats would nominate a compromise supporter for president, the editor still predicted that Southern Rights men -- eagerly seeking a return to Democratic ranks -- would "be ... bent on using their political power as a punishment to those who have defeated their designs as <u>secessionists</u>."

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[52] Alexander H. Stephens to Howell Cobb, November 26, 1851, Howell Cobb Papers.

In that event, he added, "your friends distrusting such a party may be unwilling to act with it at all." Everything hinged on Toombs and Stephens. If they failed to follow Cobb into the Democracy, then the governor soon would find himself "prey to the conflict of ancient prejudices."[53]

Indeed, the governor already was doing all in his power to bind his fellow triumvirs to himself. On November 10, the legislature elected Toombs to succeed John M. Berrien in the Senate. Although Berrien's seat would not come open for more than a year, Union Whigs expected Union Democrats to fulfill promptly their implicit agreement regarding the spoils of victory. Cobb and his Union Democrats had no intention of disappointing these expectations.[54]

In his speech accepting the Senate seat, Toombs outlined the triumvirate's basic strategy. He urged the necessity of maintaining the Constitutional Union organization for the time being. The coalition should not participate in either party's national convention. Only after both conventions had nominated their candidates and adopted their platforms, should the Unionists of Georgia join a national party. If both parties occupied unsatisfactory ground, then Constitutional Unionists should resume efforts to create a

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[53] Andrew Jackson Donelson to Howell Cobb, October 22, 1851, ibid.

[54] Thomas E. Schott, Alexander H. Stephens of Georgia, A Biography (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), pp. 140-141.

National Union structure. As a nod to Cobb and the Union Democrats, Toombs voiced the expectation that the Democracy would make the necessary obeisances to win Constitutional Union support.[55]

Stranded in Georgia by the governorship, Cobb struggled to stay abreast of developments in the national capital -- scene of the coming struggle for control of the Democratic party. He understood that his political survival depended on two issues. The first involved a formal embrace of the finality of the compromise by the Democracy at the earliest possible opportunity. The second involved the willingness of Toombs and Stephens to accept such an embrace as adequate justification for a public conversion to the Democratic party.[56]

Although the governor accepted in principle the watch-and-wait strategy spelled out by Toombs, he still hoped that decisive action by the Democratic party might hasten the merger of the Constitutional Unionists into the Democracy before the Baltimore convention. Despite expressions of confidence, he nevertheless felt a profound unease that the Southern Rights men might steal past his own stationary coalition and usurp his position within the Democratic

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[55] Ibid.

[56] Howell Cobb to Alexander H. Stephens, November 22, 1851, Alexander H. Stephens Papers, Special Collections Library, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina (Hereafter: Stephens Papers, DU).

structure. He felt no doubt that the successful restoration of Southern Rights extremists to prominent positions within the Democracy must spell disaster for the party, the Union, and the political future of Howell Cobb.[57]

The governor judged that his best chance for regaining the initiative lay in the Democratic congressional caucus. "If the national democrats do not see and feel the importance of striking boldly for the policy we have indicated," he reasoned, "then they are the worst demented men alive." His confidence in the patriotism, wisdom, and enlightened self-interest of the national Democratic leadership, however, propelled him to the conclusion that "they will do what is right." Just to be certain that national Democrats knew exactly what the circumstances required, he secretly prepared a resolution for submission to the Democratic caucus which he forwarded to Congressman George W. Jones. He also urged Stephens to keep a close watch over the efforts by the Southern Rights party to slip back into the mainstream of the Democracy. "Dont let these southern rights men," he pleaded, "get the start on us there."[58]

Prospects for Cobb's rescue by either his Union Whig allies or his fellow Democrats did not appear promising. While Toombs held out the possibility of a Union Whig

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[57] Ibid.; G. W. Jones to Howell Cobb, January 25, 1852, Howell Cobb Papers.

[58] Howell Cobb to Alexander H. Stephens, November 22, 1851, Stephens Papers, DU.

conversion to the Democracy, Stephens appeared determined to scuttle any substantive movement in that direction. On November 24, shortly after arriving in Washington for the congressional session, he warned Cobb that "there is much to be done here." Ignoring the governor's pleas to guard against a flank march by the Southern Rights men, he insisted that "the mission of the Constitutional Union Party is not fulfilled yet."[59]

Two days later, Stephens elaborated on his initial report. He noted that Southern Rights men seemed ready to "fall into line" with the worst abolitionists in the northern Democracy, "without any inquiry into the past or any assurance for the future." He attributed this reversal to a naked grasp for political power. Members of the Southern Rights party, he complained, mainly wanted "to wreak their vengeance upon all who stood in [the] way in their mad ambition to overthrow the Government."[60]

The willingness of northern Democrats to welcome both Southern Rights men and free-soilers into their ranks caused Stephens additional worry. He conceded that pro-compromise resolutions would be introduced at the upcoming Democratic caucus, but believed that their adoption would exert little positive impact. Too many Democrats, he observed, had proven

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[59] Alexander H. Stephens to Howell Cobb, November 24, 1851, Howell Cobb Papers.

[60] Alexander H. Stephens to Howell Cobb, November 26, 1851, ibid.

themselves unsound on the critical issues of slavery and Union. Thus, passage of the pro-compromise resolutions could only be effected "with a mental reservation on the part of some and with the absence of others who will still profess to belong to the fraternity." Viewing such a compromise endorsement as worse than useless, Stephens argued that defeat of the resolutions by the caucus would be better. Defeat, he believed, would produce a "'flare up' and withdrawal" from the caucus by the true friends of the Union. He clearly believed these men candidates for inclusion in his still hoped for National Union party.[61]

If Cobb's Union Whig allies gave him cause for concern, his fellow Democrats did nothing to ease his growing alarm. The governor had been receiving troubling reports about the likely course of the Democratic party for weeks. The most particular charges focused on James Buchanan and the Pennsylvania Democracy. Donelson warned that Buchanan's actions during the recent struggles had "exposed him to some suspicion." The Union editor referred to Buchanan's failure to support the Compromise of 1850. A long time advocate of the Missouri Compromise line extension, the "Sage of Wheatland" had continued to favor this policy during the stormy days of the recent crisis. Even after the adoption of the compromise, Buchanan had limited his endorsement to

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[61] Alexander H. Stephens to Howell Cobb, November 26, 1851; Thomas D. Harris to Howell Cobb, January 21, 1852, ibid.

demands for an end to antislavery agitation and enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law. This distinctly pro-southern stance won him support among the Southern Rights men. Many of their newspapers responded by pressing the Pennsylvanian's presidential claims.[62]

The governor also received troubling reports about the activities of John Forney, Buchanan's lieutenant and editor of the Pennsylvanian. Forney had been the nominee of the Democratic caucus for the post of clerk of the Thirty-First Congress. He had been defeated when southern-rights Democrats threw their votes to the Whig candidate -- a southerner. Forney hoped to claim the prize denied him by the Thirty-First Congress in the Thirty-Second. He further hoped to enhance his chief's prospects for winning the Democratic nomination. He intended to accomplish both goals by easing the return of Southern Rights men and free-soilers to the mainstream of the party's councils.[63]

Donelson had been pleading with Buchanan to keep the way back into the Democratic party open to Cobb and his Unionists. He argued that the national Democracy "should

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[62] Andrew Jackson Donelson to Howell Cobb, October 22, 1851; October 26, 1851; Alexander H. Stephens to Howell Cobb, November 24, 1851; November 26, 1851, ibid.; Roy F. Nichols, The Democratic Machine, 1850-1854 (New York: Columbia University, 1923), pp. 53-60.

[63] Andrew Jackson Donelson to Howell Cobb, October 22, 1851; October 26, 1851; Alexander H. Stephens to Howell Cobb, November 24, 1851; November 26, 1851, ibid.; Nichols, The Democratic Machine, pp. 53-60.

concede something to them in order to protect the principle which they represented." He insisted that responsibility for the current dislocations within the party rested with the Ultras. Cobb and other Union Democrats had acted properly in aligning with Union Whigs, he added, because "anything was permissible" to keep extremists from taking control of the party. Like Cobb himself, Donelson suggested that "the remedy [will] be found in a declaration ... that a disturbance of the compromise ... will be opposed by the democratic party."[64]

The lack of a positive response from Buchanan prompted Donelson to put Cobb on his guard. A few days after his initial warning to the governor that the Pennsylvanians might not be trustworthy, the Union editor offered a more specific indictment. "The secession body in the South," he warned, "has looked to Buchanan for ultimate support." He thus advised Cobb to keep Union men from "committing themselves for Forney whose whole influence is against the position you occupy."[65]

Only days after arriving in Washington, Stephens began to echo Donelson's warnings. He complained that "the Pennsylvania Democrats have not been acting fairly with us

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[64] Andrew Jackson Donelson to James Buchanan, October 18, 1851; November 2, 1851, James Buchanan Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (Hereafter: Buchanan Papers).

[65] Andrew Jackson Donelson to Howell Cobb, October 26, 1851, Howell Cobb Papers.

.... [I]n the late canvass ... their sympathies were with McDonald." Only after the Constitutional Union triumph, he added, did they shout "huzza for Cobb and Democracy," and then only because "it was in their interest to do so." Cobb would not be wise, he added, "to trust such men far."[66]

The accuracy of these assessments did not remain in doubt for long. The party caucus assembled in late November. As previously agreed, Georgia's Constitutional Unionist representatives did not participate. In the caucus William H. Polk of Tennessee, brother of the former president, introduced a "finality resolution" drafted by George Jones and virtually identical to that suggested by Cobb. After a bitter debate, the friends of Buchanan joined with "the fire-eaters & the free-soilers" to block any action on the issue, including a suggestion that the matter be referred to the party's national convention. Several outraged Union Democrats from both the North and the South bolted the meeting. The rump that remained then nominated Linn Boyd of Kentucky for the speaker's chair and John Forney for the clerkship. When Congress assembled on December 1, both Boyd and Forney won election to the posts they desired.[67]

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[66] Alexander H. Stephens to Howell Cobb, November 26, 1851, ibid.

[67] Thomas D. Harris to Howell Cobb, November 29, 1851, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, pp.267-268; G. W. Jones to Howell Cobb, December 7, 1851, Howell Cobb Papers.

Developments in Washington left Cobb worried and confused. "What," he demanded, "does all this mean?" Without awaiting answers to his query, the governor moved immediately to outline a strategy for friends of the compromise. He suspected that the action of the Democratic caucus had resulted from "dodging and covering up." The solution, he believed, lay in seeking "an early opportunity ... to put the matter right on the congressional record." In advising Stephens and others to pursue this goal, he warned "dont take a test vote on motions to suspend ... Let us have a flat footed vote upon the real issue, so that we may understand each other."[68]

Cobb suggested that conditions in Georgia required such prompt action in the national capital. The state elections had barely concluded before Herschel Johnson assumed command of a renewed campaign by Southern Rights men to establish their credentials as the true Democracy of Georgia. Meeting in convention in late November, they abandoned the idea of an independent state organization. Instead, they declared themselves the Democratic party of Georgia and proclaimed their willingness to abide by the "Georgia Platform" and the finality of the compromise. Men who had previously damned all affiliation with national parties as treason to the

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[68] Howell Cobb to Alexander H. Stephens, December 3, 1851, Alexander H. Stephens Papers, Library of Congress, Washington D.C. (Hereafter: Stephens Papers, LC).

South, now voted to send delegates to the national Democratic convention scheduled for Baltimore in June, 1852.[69]

Although Cobb maintained that the Southern Rights efforts had "as yet produced no effect upon our ranks," he grudgingly acknowledged that "there is more brains in this movement than normally characterize the conduct of that crowd." The governor refrained from elaborating on the "points of difficulty and embarrassment" that could arise from the Johnson campaign, but warned that they must be "counteracted by prompt action." Otherwise, he insisted, support for the Constitutional Union coalition would begin to evaporate. "One idea alone I would present," he added, "no troops were ever so well trained that they could receive constant fires from the enemy without returning them or else be thrown into confusion -- such is now our position -- we are stationary that wont do. This is a progressive age -- & we must progress with it."[70]

The governor pleaded with his allies "to give me all the details," but reports from friends and associates in Washington did little to clarify the situation. Previous national political affiliation largely determined individual

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[69] Ibid.; Milledgeville, Southern Recorder, December 2, 1851; Percy Scott Flippin, Herschel V. Johnson of Georgia, State Rights Unionist (Richmond: Press of the Dietz Printing Company, 1931), pp. 43-47; Schott, Alexander H. Stephens, p. 140.

[70] Howell Cobb to Alexander H. Stephens, December 3, 1851, Stephens Papers, LC.

reactions. Philip Clayton, a former Whig, described widespread disappointment at the Democratic party's refusal "to reaffirm the compromise." He complained that the caucus vote represented "a triumph of the fire-eaters & free soilers over the conservatives." To make matters worse, he lamented, "the conservatives ... are disposed to submit." He attributed this acquiescence to a misguided belief that the extremists from both sections "will come back into the party & behave themselves" -- provided the party did nothing to undermine their position with voters at home. Yet, he complained, by providing extremists with means of sustaining themselves before the voters, the Democracy also had placed "in their hands a weapon to destroy ... men ... who bonafide sustained the compromise."[71]

Clayton's description of the primary Southern Rights strategy proved even more troubling. "I think the secret of Southern men submitting to the dictation of Southern fire-eaters," he wrote, "is the fact that some industrious persons from the south have made them believe that you & Toombs have bargained for your own political preferment." The Southern Rights men knew, he added, that "the only way to counteract your personal influence ... [was] to cast suspicion on your virtue by attributing your action to selfish motives." Clayton concluded that the true Union men most needed a

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[71] Philip Clayton to Howell Cobb, December 2, 1851, Howell Cobb Papers.

leader. "If you were here," he suggested, "I have no doubt you could give matters a different direction."[72]

Stephens and Toombs each repeated the chief components of Clayton's assessment, but went much further in their critique of Democratic motives. Stephens damned the reunion of free-soilers and Ultras under the Democratic banner as "the foulest of all coalitions." "'Bygones' are to be 'bygones,'" he raged, "a man may be a disunionist and a good Democrat, and an abolitionist and still a good Democrat."[73]

Neither Stephens nor Toombs assigned this flawed policy to an honest failure of judgement by the members of the Democratic caucus. Instead, they saw a perverse conspiracy to destroy both the Unionist movement and Cobb's career -- a conspiracy that had enlisted the willing support of leading Democratic presidential aspirants. The governor, Stephens insisted, had "some bitter enemies where he little expected it." He maintained that a significant facet of the conspiracy "is to cut Cobb down -- to get him out of position with the Democracy." He believed that envy inspired this aim. Cobb, he avowed, "is getting too high in the estimation of some of the little jealous souls that he helped to raise [to] that humble position they now occupy. To sack him they

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[72] Ibid.

[73] Alexander H. Stephens to Howell Cobb, December 5, 1851; Robert Toombs to Howell Cobb, December 2, 1851 [letter misdated as January 2, 1851], ibid.

will now unite with men who would have hung him and them with 'a grape vine' ... twelve months ago."[74]

Toombs sustained Stephens' basic accusation by noting that many fire-eaters openly treated the caucus action as "a lick at you." He surmised that Buchanan and the Pennsylvania Democracy had masterminded events in the caucus. "The controlling influence in defeating the [finality] resolution was the clerkship," he asserted, "Forney played this game desperately. He got all the Free-soilers to go for him on the undertaking to apply no tests which would exclude them from the party." He maintained that the aspiring clerk of the House already had control of Southern Rights votes, because those men "have finished their treaty with Buchanan." Toombs charged that the success of Forney's plot hinged on convincing a Union Democrat to stand for the speakership. Although Cobb's old friend Linn Boyd had been induced to accept the nomination, initially Toombs did not think he had "anything at all to do with ulterior objects."[75]

This generous assessment of Boyd's motives did not last long. Shortly after assuming his responsibilities as speaker, Boyd removed Toombs from a choice seat on the Ways and Means Committee. An outraged Toombs promptly began

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[74] Alexander H. Stephens to Linton Stephens, December 10, 1851, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, pp. 271-274; Robert Toombs to Howell Cobb, December 2, 1851, Howell Cobb Papers.

[75] Robert Toombs to Howell Cobb, December 2, 1851, Howell Cobb Papers.

denouncing Boyd as one who had entered the conspiracy "body & soul." Boyd and other Union Democrats, he warned, had fallen too eager prey to Southern Rights lies "representing you as having disorganized the Democratic Party of Georgia." He urged Cobb to exercise great caution "in how you trust him."[76]

Although Union Democrats shared the disappointment of former Whigs over the action of the Democratic caucus, they provided Cobb with a different interpretation of events. George Jones, who had declined further participation in the caucus after it rejected the "finality resolution," nonetheless argued that caucus members had divided more over means than ends. All present, he insisted, accepted the compromise as final, but many feared perpetuating old wounds through a public declaration. Rather than a conspiracy, Jones saw Boyd's election to the speakership as a practical demonstration that extremists within the party accepted the finality of the compromise in deeds if not words. Jones reminded Cobb that he knew Boyd "to be a sound Democrat and a true ... Compromise Union man." He confidently predicted that the Democracy would soon adopt resolutions -- either in

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[76] Robert Toombs to Howell Cobb, December 21. 1851, ibid.; Alexander H. Stephens to Linton Stephens, December 10, 1851, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, pp. 271-275.

Congress or at the national convention -- which would put the party "right before the people."[77]

Junius Hillyer, Cobb's replacement as Sixth District representative, shared Jones' position. "I perceive," he explained to the governor, "that you rather over estimate the importance of the Dem[ocratic] caucus." Hinting that Stephens' reaction might be misleading Cobb, he insisted that the caucus had never intended its stance to "be understood as repudiating the compromise." Instead, the caucus had determined to focus on the organization of the House while properly leaving decisions regarding party policy to the delegates at the national convention. Although Hillyer professed confidence that "the party ... is sound in principle & that ... at the convention they will take ground decidedly," he nevertheless promised to work toward passage of a resolution in Congress that would accomplish the same purpose.[78]

Even better, Hillyer reported that he had consulted directly with Boyd. The new speaker relayed assurances to Cobb that "there is no danger." He vowed that if the Democracy failed or faltered "in its duty," then he would

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[77] G. W. Jones to Howell Cobb, December 7, 1851, Howell Cobb Papers.

[78] Junius Hillyer to Howell Cobb, December 18, 1851, ibid.

"abandon it." He saw no evidence that such a scenario might develop.[79]

On one critical point, at least, Hillyer, Stephens, and Toombs all agreed. Rejecting Cobb's demand for immediate and decisive movement, they insisted that the Constitutional Unionists must hold steady. By maintaining their organization and "wait[ing] for future developments," Hillyer insisted, they would "secure the triumph of our principle whether our separate organization in Georgia may crush us personally or not."[80]

Stephens called for "'a masterly inactivity,'" even as he acknowledged the dilemma facing Georgia Unionists. "To stand still is a dangerous policy," he conceded, but "to move forward may be more dangerous still." He believed that the unholy alliance effected at the Democratic caucus could not last. Convinced that the national Whig structure had collapsed, he doubted that the Whigs would even hold a national convention in 1852. Once the Democratic contenders for the presidency realized that "the outward pressure is removed," he predicted that "the internal rivalship will break asunder those chords that now seem to bind together such discordant materials." After the Democratic "blow up,"

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[79] Ibid.

[80] Alexander H. Stephens to Howell Cobb, December 8, 1851; December 12, 1851; Junius Hillyer to Howell Cobb, December 18, 1851; Robert Toombs to Howell Cobb, December 21, 1851, ibid.

he expected a true Union convention to assemble. Like Hillyer, however, Stephens preferred principled defeat to unprincipled victory. "Better [to] sustain a thousand defeats on our own ground with our own principles and honor untarnished," he reasoned, "than to enjoy the bitter fruits of one victory obtained by any alliance that would involve a sacrifice of either." [81]

While Toombs did not speak of defeat -- principled or otherwise -- he did agree that the current situation required patience. "Our policy at Washington," he suggested, "will be to work steadily to bring the Democratic organization on[to] the Compromise measures." He concluded that if these efforts failed, then "we must unite the compromise men, who undoubtedly are a majority of the people & keep all other issues out of the arena." In the meantime, Cobb should hold the line in Georgia. By spring, Toombs expected the political landscape to be more fully developed. Then the Constitutional Union party convention could meet "to take into consideration the Presidential election."[82]

The governor hardly welcomed this advice. He remained firmly convinced that the only possible future for the Union movement lay within the Democratic structure. He understood all too clearly that the strategy recommended by his allies

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[81] Alexander H. Stephens to Howell Cobb, December 8, 1851; December 12, 1851, ibid.

[82] Robert Toombs to Howell Cobb, December 21, 1851, ibid.

risked squandering the momentum established by the Unionist coalition since 1850. He sensed the potence of arguments being promulgated by Herschel Johnson and his allies in Washington -- a potence derived from the ease with which such arguments fit into the presidential aspirations of so many Democratic leaders. Moreover, he could witness first hand the growing disillusionment within the ranks of Georgia's Union Democrats. If he could not hold these men, then his future prospects appeared especially bleak.

Already, Hopkins Holsey, editor of the Southern Banner and a Cobb confidant, showed signs of rebellion. In the aftermath of the Democratic caucus, the Banner denounced the meeting for pursuing "a shuffling, unwise, and ungenerous policy." Condemning the national party's inclination to pander to extremists from both sections, Holsey threatened that the true Union men might be compelled to abandon all hopes for the Democracy's redemption. Instead, he thundered, they would "have to stand fast to their separate organization and endeavor to rally all good, honest citizens, both South and North, under the banners of a NATIONAL UNION AND COMPROMISE PARTY."[83]

Unfortunately for Cobb, other Union Democrats shared Holsey's bitter outrage. William Hope Hull asked in disgust "have not the C. U. party brought their ducks to a nice market? The Democratic Party absolutely shuts the door in

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[83] Southern Banner, December 25, 1851.

our faces & prefers the company of free soilers & disunionists to ours." That, he insisted, "is the plain English of their proceedings & the excuses made for them are not even plausible." This unhappy situation left the Constitutional Union men with but two options: "will we lower our flag & join them without conditions, or shall we strike for a new party." For himself, Hull preferred the latter course. "If we really believe the welfare of the country depends on putting down agitation North & South, we must stand on that belief. If the Democratic Party cannot give up the free soil vote they must give up ours."[84]

Despite his obvious concern, the governor found himself severely handicapped by the insistence of Stephens, Toombs, and Hillyer on a wait-and-see policy. Unable to move forward with his own strategy, he continued his efforts to prepare the way for a transformation of the Constitutional Union coalition into the Georgia Democracy. In a series of letters to Democratic leaders throughout the country, he once more pressed the case for "'a firm and unyielding adherence to the compromise in all its parts.'" Just as important, Cobb labored to draw Stephens and Toombs towards the Democratic party. He urged both men to consult with Democratic leaders, and specifically recommended that they meet with Donelson and members of the "<u>sound</u> Western democracy." He also made

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[84] William H. Hull to Howell Cobb, December 25, 1851, Howell Cobb Papers.

special -- but futile -- attempts to dissuade the two from their distrust of Boyd.[85]

Yet, for all his efforts, Cobb clearly sensed that the tide had turned against him. Held stationary by the refusal of his allies to move and outflanked by the rapid movement of his enemies, he stood in peril of being repudiated by the very national party he had risked so much to save. A year that had witnessed months of triumph and high hopes was now ending in a baffling swirl of apparent betrayal, assurances of good will, and probable defeat.[86]

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[85] Howell Cobb to B. F. Hallett, cited in B. F. Hallett to Howell Cobb, December 20, 1851, ibid.; Howell Cobb to Alexander H. Stephens, December 22, 1851, Stephens Papers, LC.

[86] Alexander H. Stephens to Howell Cobb, December 23, 1851; Linn Boyd to Howell Cobb, December 23, 1851; Philip Clayton to Howell Cobb, December 30, 1851; Thomas D. Harris to Howell Cobb, December 31, 1851, Howell Cobb Papers.

Chapter Twelve

"The Crisis of Your Life"

However threatening the political developments in Washington and Georgia, Cobb had other responsibilities that demanded his attention. The governorship stood foremost among these. When pondering the decision to run for governor back in the spring, friends had warned that he would find the post unfulfilling. Thomas Thomas had observed that the office required "only the sharpness and closeness of an executor ... to administer with credit and popularity." While Thomas' analysis contained much truth, the governor did possess the capacity to foster significant policy changes -- provided he pushed them through the legislature during its biennial session held at the beginning of his term.[1]

Shortly after assuming his new duties, Cobb moved to dismantle the Central Bank of Georgia. Chartered in 1828, the Central Bank represented Georgia's reaction to the economic dislocations attributed to government-backed private banks in the panic of 1819. If the state must be involved with banks, the reasoning went, then it should operate its own without dependency on private interests. For all practical purposes, the Central Bank served as the state

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[1] Thomas W. Thomas to Howell Cobb, April 14, 1851, Howell Cobb Papers, Felix Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia (Hereafter: Howell Cobb Papers).

treasury, but state monies deposited there could be loaned to individuals.[2]

During its first eight years of operation, the bank attracted little criticism. Rather than competing with commercial banks, it complimented their activities. Where most of the state's commercial banks dealt in short term credit aimed at the production of crops, the Central Bank focused on long term loans directed towards the purchase of land. The Central Bank further assisted the state economy by making the bulk of its loans in the late spring and summer -- a time when limited loans by commercial banks created paper currency shortages.[3]

Serious opposition to the Central Bank did not appear until the late 1830s. In 1839, the state legislature liberalized the Central Bank's policies regarding both the issuance of bank notes and the making of loans. By this action, they rendered the bank a commercial institution in direct competition with other banks. Simultaneously, the legislature drained the bank of its liquid resources to cover a variety of state expenditures. Within a year, well

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[2] E. Merton Coulter, A Short History of Georgia (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1933), pp. 262-263; Thomas Payne Govan, "Banking and the Credit System in Georgia, 1810-1860" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Vanderbilt University, 1936), pp. 119-180 provides a comprehensive analysis of the history of the Central Bank of Georgia and its role in state politics.

[3] Govan, "Banking and the Credit System in Georgia," pp. 123-130.

founded doubts about the bank's soundness emerged. Within three years, these doubts became so pronounced that, in 1843, the legislature sharply curtailed bank operations. It also authorized the governor "to cause the assets of the Central Bank to be deposited in the Treasury of the State" whenever "the public interest shall require it."[4]

On November 14, 1851, Cobb submitted a report to the General Assembly announcing his intention to "exercise [this] discretionary power ... unless restrained by the action of the Legislature." He requested the appointment of a commission to investigate the bank and to oversee the removal of state funds. On December 10, the assembly gave the governor explicit permission to proceed with the removal. Thirteen days later, Cobb issued the removal order and named a three-man commission to supervise the process.[5]

While Cobb's Jacksonian beliefs probably eased his decision, the condition of the bank's operations forced him to take decisive action. The 1843 act of the legislature had effectively signalled the end of the Central Bank, but subsequent governors hesitated to administer the final blow. This hesitation proved costly to the state. In 1843, the bank's assets exceeded its liabilities by more than $424,000.

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[4] Ibid., pp. 130-153; 161-162; Executive Minutes of the State of Georgia, November 14, 1851, Georgia Department of Archives and History, Atlanta, Georgia (Hereafter: Executive Minutes).

[5] Executive Minutes, November 14, 1851; December 23, 1851.

By 1852, this situation had been reversed. Upon investigation, Cobb's commission reported that the bank's obligations now outweighed its assets by some $369,500. Prolonging the Central Bank's existence seemed likely to produce little more than additional losses. Convinced that failure to cover the bank's deficit would harm the state's credit, the governor reluctantly proposed that the state assume responsibility for the bank's outstanding obligations. Although the adoption of Cobb's recommendation meant a significant addition to Georgia's indebtedness, most citizens recognized the necessity of the move and did not complain.[6]

Yet, Cobb also wished to leave a more positive legacy behind. His first opportunity to do so involved the field of public education. He had mentioned this subject as an area of genuine concern in his inaugural. He did not, however, envision a comprehensive system of primary and secondary public schools. Convinced that the state university and other colleges were "never in a more flourishing condition," he praised private institutions for providing solid preparation to those moving on to higher education. The greatest problem confronting the state did not involve those "blessed with the necessary means" to

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[6] Kenneth Coleman, ed., A History of Georgia (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1977), p. 142; Govan, "Banking and the Credit System in Georgia," pp. 153-157; Howell Cobb to the General Assembly of Georgia, November 8, 1853, in R. P. Brooks, ed., "Howell Cobb Papers, " The Georgia Historical Quarterly, VI (March, 1922), 53-54.

provide for their own education. Rather, it rested with those "less favored by Heaven, who are growing up in utter ignorance." Describing the gap between the literate and the illiterate as "far wider and deeper than the one that lies between the humblest scholar and the most learned Professor," he warned that the future safety of republican government rested on an education system that assured basic literacy to all citizens.[7]

The governor's decision to press for "decisive legislation" regarding education came at a fortuitous moment. For some months, a movement to improve education in Georgia had been gaining strength among education advocates and the public at large. This movement culminated in July, 1851, when delegates from across the state assembled in a public school convention held at Marietta. Drawing on the ideas of these school reformers and the report of a special education commission appointed by Governor George W. Towns, Cobb called for a special poll tax to fund education, the appointment of a state school superintendent, and a free college education for teachers. Despite the public mood, the legislators did little more than increase the permanent fund for the education of the poor.[8]

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[7] Howell Cobb to The General Assembly of Georgia, November 8, 1853, in Brooks, "Howell Cobb Papers," pp. 71-74.

[8] Executive Minutes, November 19, 1851; Dorothy Orr, A History of Education in Georgia (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1950), pp. 158-161; Commission on

Even this step proved grossly inadequate. Concern about the state government's overall financial situation prompted the legislators to approve less money than the cause of educating poor children required. The governor recognized this shortcoming and lamented that only $23,000 had been appropriated to educate the state's 38,000 poor children. Noting that this averaged out to about sixty cents per child, he correctly observed that "we have failed to educate the destitute children of the State, because we have failed to appropriate a sufficient sum of money." Still, he acknowledged the legitimacy of the legislature's fiscal concerns and refrained from recommending any immediate "large increase of the appropriation."[9]

Cobb did remind the legislators, however, that by careful management the state's debt could be eliminated in only a few years. He estimated that by the time the debt had been retired, the state railroad should be generating some $250,000 yearly for the treasury. When that happy day arrived, he argued that the current tax rate might be reduced by half and still provide the funds necessary to administer the government. Not one cent of the anticipated railroad

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Public Education to Howell Cobb, cited in Milledgeville Southern Recorder, December 2, 1851; Acts of the General Assembly, 1851-1852 (Milledgeville, 1852) pp. 1-3.

[9] Howell Cobb to the General Assembly of Georgia, November 8, 1853, in Brooks, "Howell Cobb Papers," pp. 71-74.

revenues, he suggested, should be spent until every need of education in the state had been fully funded.[10]

The governor included the state institutions for the deaf, dumb, blind, and insane among those establishments which should be generously endowed from future railroad profits. Like his father, Cobb always manifested a profound sympathy for the suffering of others. Those who enjoyed good health and good fortune, he insisted, "have resting upon us an obligation in reference to our less favored brethren, which we cannot ignore." In keeping with this philosophy, he encouraged the legislature's decision to create a Georgia Academy for the Blind, and helped secure increased appropriations for the Deaf and Dumb Asylum. Despite also securing increased funding for the Lunatic Asylum, he complained that current appropriations remained inadequate. "It is a melancholy and humiliating reflection," he declared, "that applicants for admission are daily rejected for the want of the necessary means to provide for their accommodation. This ought not to be so."[11]

Cobb made a particular appeal for the care of mentally ill slaves. He pointed out that current law made no provision for their reception at the state asylum, and urged that this injustice be amended. Although few in number, he

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[10] Ibid.

[11] Ibid., pp. 68-71; Acts of the General Assembly, 1851-1852, pp. 4-5; Milledgeville Federal Union, October 4, 1853; Coleman, A History of Georgia, p. 142.

believed this unfortunate group deserved the special attention of the legislature. He acknowledged the injustice of taxing non-slaveholders for the care of property belonging to others, but also noted the inability of many small slaveholders to bear the financial burden of maintaining one of their few slaves at a public institution. He unsuccessfully urged the legislature to overcome both difficulties by imposing a small tax on all slave property throughout the state.[12]

As problems with the Central Bank, education, and other state institutions indicate, fiscal issues proved the focus of Cobb's executive concerns. Here too, the governor both initiated and lent support to reform efforts. Early in his administration, he vigorously pressed for major changes in the state's tax structure. The bulk of state revenues before 1852 came from real property taxes which made no distinction between improved and unimproved lands. Besides denying the state reasonable tax revenues from developed properties, as well as stocks and bonds, the existing tax law also placed an undue financial burden on those owning undeveloped property. The governor noted that this "unjust" and "indefensible" arrangement had needed reform for too many years.[13]

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[12] Howell Cobb to the General Assembly of Georgia, November 8, 1853, in Brooks, "Howell Cobb Papers," p. 69.

[13] Ibid, pp. 56-59; Coleman, A History of Georgia, p. 153; Coulter, A Short History of Georgia, p. 264.

With Cobb's backing, the legislature moved in January, 1852, to replace the old system with a new one based on "the ad valorem" principle that tax burdens should be assessed according to the actual value of the property in question. Moreover, the new law imposed taxes "on all real and personal property, both individual and corporate, including slaves." The governor could scarcely contain his enthusiasm for "this radical measure of reform in our tax laws." Confident that the new system would win widespread popular support, he rejoiced that Georgia's tax law "for the first time" rested "upon a sound and just principle."[14]

In marketing state bonds, Cobb moved boldly. On December 4, 1851, the legislature authorized a sale of bonds payable at the state treasury, with the interest payable semi-annually at the Bank of the State of Georgia in Savannah. Confidence in the state's credit proved sufficiently high that these bonds were negotiated for a premium of about two percent. A month later, the legislature authorized the governor to negotiate an additional $525,000 in state bonds.[15]

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[14] Executive Minutes, January 9, 1852; Acts of the General Assembly, 1851-1852, pp. 288-296; Howell Cobb to The General Assembly of Georgia, November 8, 1853, in Brooks, "Howell Cobb Papers," pp. 56-59; Coleman, A History of Georgia, p. 153.

[15] Howell Cobb to the General Assembly of Georgia, November 8, 1853, in Brooks, "Howell Cobb Papers," pp. 51-52; Howell Cobb to Gazaway Bugg Lamar, February 6, 1852, in Governor's Letter Book, 1847-1861, Georgia Department of Archives and History, Atlanta, Georgia (Hereafter: Governor's

While pleased that the first bond negotiations had yielded a two percent premium, Cobb felt confident that his state's bonds should command more. His kinsman, Gazaway Bugg Lamar, president of the Bank of the Republic in New York, encouraged him in this conviction. Lamar advised the governor that Georgia bonds could indeed command a larger premium if made payable in New York, because this would place them within "the reach of foreign capitalists" who lacked agents to purchase bonds outside the city. He coyly suggested that the bonds be made payable at the Bank of the Republic.[16]

Swayed by Lamar's arguments, Cobb agreed to market the new bond issue in New York and make the bonds payable at the Bank of the Republic. Within several weeks, the banker reported that he had negotiated the bonds for a premium of five percent. Upon learning of Lamar's success, Cobb "cheerfully ratified" the arrangement, and confessed that the premium "is better than I had anticipated." The governor proudly announced this accomplishment to the legislature. "It should be gratifying to our State pride to know," he

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Letter Book).

[16] Robert Neil Mathis, "Gazaway Bugg Lamar: A Southern Entrepreneur" (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Georgia, 1968), pp. 33-34; Gazaway Bugg Lamar to Howell Cobb, January 9, 1852, Howell Cobb Papers.

declared, "that the bonds of our State now stand among the first securities of their class."[17]

Cobb noted that his agreement with Lamar required the state to maintain deposits in the Bank of the Republic to cover interest payments on the bonds. He directed the state treasurer to make the needed deposits, but conceded that his legal and moral authority to issue this order might be questioned. In the tradition of his hero, Andrew Jackson, he simply advised the legislature to eliminate all such doubts "by passing a law authorizing such deposits to be made." Rather than questioning the governor's actions, the legislators happily instructed Cobb's successor "to transact all banking business of the state, in the sale of bonds, payment of interest, or otherwise, he may have in New York, with the Bank of the Republic."[18]

Management of the state railway occupied nearly as much of the governor's time as state finances. After years of preliminary efforts, construction of the Western and Atlantic Railroad had begun in 1838. Scheduled for completion in

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[17] Mathis, "Gazaway Bugg Lamar," pp. 33-35; Howell Cobb to Gazaway Bugg Lamar, February 6, 1852; February 7, 1852; April 1, 1852; April 7, 1852; April 13, 1852; April 27, 1852, Governor's Letter Book; Gazaway Bugg Lamar to Howell Cobb, April 2, 1853, Howell Cobb Papers; Executive Minutes, July 13, 1852; Howell Cobb to the General Assembly of Georgia, November 8, 1853, in Brooks, "Howell Cobb Papers," pp. 51-52.

[18] Howell Cobb to the General Assembly of Georgia, November 8, 1853, in Brooks, "Howell Cobb Papers," p. 52; Acts of the General Assembly, 1853-1854 (Milledgeville, 1854), p. 598; Mathis, "Gazaway Bugg Lamar," pp. 35-36.

1841, financial problems caused by the panic of 1837 delayed completion of the line until 1851. Boosters of the project intended to make Georgia's commercial cities the conduit of trade between the middle West and Atlantic seaboard. They planned a line to run from the Chattahoochee River in Dekalb County to Chattanooga, Tennessee. From its northern terminus, the state line would be well situated to tie in with railroads reaching into the Ohio River Valley. The line's southern terminus was to be located at the juncture of extensions from the Georgia Railroad, which ran through Augusta to Charleston, and the Central of Georgia Railroad, which ran through Macon to Savannah. These two lines met at Atlanta. This rural site rapidly developed into a thriving commercial center as branch lines tied the rest of the state and much of the South into this transportation network.[19]

The Western and Atlantic had been completed only months before Cobb took office, but its completion coincided with warnings that the line still confronted serious problems. In June, 1851, a committee of inspection reported that builders of the railway had used poor quality rails over a considerable portion of the line. Moreover, the committee found that the railroad possessed inadequate rolling stock.

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[19] Ulrich Bonnell Phillips, A History of Transportation in the Eastern Cotton Belt to 1860 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1908), pp. 303-322; James Houstoun Johnston, Western and Atlantic Railroad of the State of Georgia (Atlanta, 1931), pp. 5-45; Coulter, A Short History of Georgia, pp. 243-247; Coleman, A History of Georgia, pp. 158-159.

It called for an appropriation of $500,000 to correct these shortcomings.[20]

Cobb relayed this report to the legislature with a request for action. The legislators proved happy to comply. On December 4, they allocated some $200,000 to implement a contract for iron negotiated by the previous administration. A little more than a month later, they supplemented this sum with an additional appropriation of $525,000 for repairing and equipping the railroad.[21]

This legislative action produced a mixed response. The Milledgeville Federal Union, a Southern Rights organ which opposed Cobb politically while supporting his reform efforts, objected to the "unbounded liberality" of the legislature. The newspaper did not doubt the necessity of funds for repair and rolling stock, but questioned the need to exceed the proposal made in June by more than $200,000. It suspected that too many legislators anticipated some personal profit from the expenditure of surplus funds. Meanwhile, the Atlanta Intelligencer objected not to the amount allocated, but rather to the legislature's failure to act more promptly. "While the legislature is wrangling about the matter and

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[20] Phillips, Transportation in the Eastern Cottonbelt, pp. 316-319; Johnston, Western and Atlantic Railroad, p. 44; Milledgeville Federal Union, June 24, 1851; December 30, 1851.

[21] Howell Cobb to the General Assembly of Georgia, November 8, 1853, in Brooks, "Howell Cobb Papers," p. 51.

coming to no definite arrangements," it groused, "the road continues with accelerated velocity in its course to ruin."[22]

Although the Federal Union could do little more than complain about the legislature's allocations for the railroad, it nevertheless raised an important issue. Public dissent over the propriety of the state owning and operating a business venture clouded the Western and Atlantic's future. Many in Georgia feared that the railroad would become an engine of political corruption and economic favoritism. Others doubted the state's capacity to operate such an important venture with proper efficiency. Opponents of government ownership insisted that the line either be leased or sold outright. Regardless of the eventual fate of the railway, both the governor and legislature faced a clear imperative to provide the railroad with an effective and honest system of management.[23]

With the governor's assent, the legislature acted in mid-January to establish the needed management system. A majority of members rejected efforts to make all railroad officers subject to popular election, and declined to enact a moratorium on legislators receiving posts with the Western and Atlantic. Instead, the majority voted to place

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[22] Milledgeville, Federal Union, December 30, 1851; Atlanta Intelligencer, January 15, 1852, cited in Phillips, Transportation in the Eastern Cotton Belt, pp. 320-321.

[23] Coulter, A Short History of Georgia, p. 246; Phillips, Transportation in the Eastern Cottonbelt, pp. 316-319.

responsibility for day to day operations in the hands of a superintendent appointed by the governor. It fell to the superintendent to appoint all subordinate officers -- subject to the governor's approval.[24]

As had been the case with the railroad appropriation, the Federal Union objected to the management plan. It complained that the legislature had authorized too many railroad jobs, set the salaries for those jobs at ridiculously high levels, and invited corruption by placing complete authority for railroad patronage in the hands of the governor. Ominously, it warned, "let the people look to these things. Demagogues rule the country, and corruption stalks abroad at noon day."[25]

Such complaints rapidly evaporated, however, after Cobb announced his selection of William W. Wadley for superintendent. As superintendent of the Central of Georgia Railroad, Wadley had acquired a reputation as an able administrator. Even the Federal Union conceded that "the appointment ... will be hailed with pleasure by the people of Georgia of all parties. A more efficient officer could not be found." With such a man as Wadley running the road's operations, the newspaper predicted that "the great work will prosper and become ... an ornament ... to the state." After providing skillful management for a year critical in the life

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[24] Johnston, Western and Atlantic Railroad, pp. 43-44.

[25] Milledgeville Federal Union, December 30, 1851.

of the Western and Atlantic, Wadley resigned to return to the Central Railroad. The governor replaced him with George Yonge -- a selection which proved nearly as satisfactory.[26]

Cobb wasted no time in building on the positive public reaction to Wadley's appointment. On the same day that he announced his selection for superintendent, he published a circular informing all Western and Atlantic employees of his intention to give Wadley "unlimited power over them." Putting all on notice that their tenure of office depended entirely on the "will of the Superintendent," he vowed that "I shall entertain no appeal from his decision, on questions of removal of subordinates."[27]

As anticipated, Wadley's management gave general satisfaction. Within weeks of his appointment, the Intelligencer happily reported that "the affairs of the road are beginning to go off like clock work." The new superintendent deserved the praise. Under his direction, the replacement of substandard rails proceeded quickly, as did the acquisition of additional rolling stock. Cobb assisted in the latter instance by authorizing that inmates of the state penitentiary be put to work constructing "rail road cars" for the state line. He later reported that "the

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[26] Phillips, Transportation in the Eastern Cottonbelt, p. 319; Milledgeville Federal Union, February 10, 1852; Howell Cobb to the General Assembly of Georgia, November 8, 1853, in Brooks, "Howell Cobb Papers," p. 60.

[27] Executive Minutes, February 2, 1852.

experiment ... has proven eminently successful," and been "the principle source of revenue" for the penitentiary "since its commencement." Indeed, he found it so successful that he endorsed a suggestion by the warden that the inmate construction program be expanded to provide cars for any railway that wished to buy them.[28]

These successes notwithstanding, Cobb and Wadley encountered serious obstacles in their drive to render the Western and Atlantic effective. Financial difficulties became obvious almost immediately. In late February, the Governor travelled to Atlanta to inspect the operations of the railroad personally. Like the public press, he reported that "I have found the business of the railroad under the management of Mr. Wadley going on very satisfactory -- all the present officers of our appointment are steady and faithful -- and I feel confident will come up to public expectation." Unfortunately, he added, "the pecuniary affairs of the road are much worse than I expected." He promptly dispatched Wadley to Savannah to arrange an immediate loan of $25,000, while he proceeded to New York to arrange for more substantial sums.[29]

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[28] Atlanta Intelligencer, February 26, 1852, cited in Milledgeville Southern Recorder, March 2, 1852; Phillips, Transportation in the Eastern Cottonbelt, p. 321; Howell Cobb to the General Assembly of Georgia, November 8, 1853, in Brooks, "Howell Cobb Papers," pp. 67-68.

[29] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, February 26, 1852; William W. Wadley to Howell Cobb, March 3, 1862, Howell Cobb Papers.

Over the next year, Cobb and Wadley found themselves compelled to exhaust most of the $525,000 allocated for the repair and equipment of the railroad in paying off debts of the state line left by previous administrations. Consequently, it took all the revenues generated by the Western and Atlantic to cover the costs of improvements desired by the legislature. While acknowledging disappointment that these necessities had precluded the transfer of any funds from railway profits to the state's coffers, the governor did take consolation from the realization that the railroad had produced profits. Although these had been reinvested in the line, their availability had eliminated any need to call on the treasury for additional aid. The railroad's "own revenue," he noted, "will soon complete the necessary repairs, and equipments, and discharge it remaining liabilities." Further, he rejoiced, "with wise and judicious management, it must for the future be a source of revenue to the state." The governor did not exaggerate the Western and Atlantic's profit potential. Within a year of his leaving office, the line transferred $100,000 to the state's coffers. By 1858-1859, that sum exceeded $400,000 per year.[30]

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[30] Howell Cobb to the General Assembly of Georgia, November 8, 1853, in Brooks, "Howell Cobb Papers," pp. 59-61; Phillips, Transportation in the Eastern Cottonbelt, pp. 320-321.

Cobb voiced great satisfaction on one other point regarding railroad management. Much public concern about state ownership of a railroad focused on fears that efficiency of operations would be sacrificed as railroad jobs became instruments of political reward and political corruption. Hinting that such had been the case with previous administrations, he declared that "under my administration 'this practice has ceased to exist.'" The use of state enterprises like the railroad as agencies for the distribution of traditional political patronage, he warned, "is condemned both by reason and experience, and can never be resorted to without endangering the public interest."[31]

It is difficult to gage with precision the accuracy of Cobb's assertion that he had eliminated political patronage from the state railroad. He certainly did not shrink from the chance to secure posts for friends and family members when presented the opportunity. His appointment of Williams Rutherford, Jr., his brother-in-law, to the post of auditor illustrates this point. For the most part, it appears that the governor sought out Constitutional Unionists to fill railroad jobs created by the legislature or made vacant by the resignation or termination of those already employed. Yet, it also appears that he avoided wholesale removals of

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[31] Howell Cobb to the General Assembly of Georgia, November 8, 1853, in Brooks, "Howell Cobb Papers," p. 65; Milledgeville Southern Recorder, October 23, 1851; John T. Grant to Howell Cobb, January 27, 1852, Howell Cobb Papers.

men appointed by his predecessor. In short, job performance rather than political affiliation largely determined tenure in railroad positions during Cobb's administration.[32]

Ironically, Southern Rights men who retained their posts with the railroad demonstrated no more respect for Cobb's forbearance than he had shown when President Zachary Taylor sought to transcend traditional patronage policies. In 1853, as Cobb departed the governorship, he desperately hoped to sustain his political career with election to the Senate by the state legislature. Railroad employees appointed by Governor Towns but retained by Cobb, vigorously lobbied to deny him the post. His future might have been different had he exercised less restraint.[33]

In other state agencies, Governor Cobb manifested much less inclination to depart from politics as usual. When individuals gave their support to candidates during the nineteenth century -- regardless of the depth of their ideological convictions -- they fully expected that successful campaigns would be followed by a fair distribution

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[32] Howell Cobb to the General Assembly of Georgia, November 8, 1853, in Brooks, "Howell Cobb Papers," p. 65; Milledgeville Federal Union, February 10, 1852; John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, October 7, 1851; November 26, 1851; December 8, 1851, Howell Cobb Papers.

[33] Samuel P. Thurmond to Howell Cobb, November 21, 1853; M. M. Johnson to Howell Cobb, December 11, 1853; John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, December 28, 1853, Howell Cobb Papers; Mark W. Summers, The Plundering Generation: Corruption and the Crisis of the Union, 1849-1861 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 24.

of the spoils of victory. Most viewed the awarding of government offices to political friends and allies as a fundamental tool of party building. Occasionally, the less honorable -- or perhaps the more honest -- bluntly made the promise of rewards a quid pro quo for their support.[34]

Cobb's gubernatorial campaign did not deviate from established norms. Almost before he made the decision to seek the governorship, a stream of patronage requests began to flow in. The majority came from men already committed to the Constitutional Union cause who meant to sustain Cobb whatever his answer. Not all, however, acted out of such pure motives. L. S. Bonner, for instance, wrote from Madison, Georgia seeking the promise of a government job. When Cobb replied that his "'adopted conduct'" forbade any such promise, Bonner exploded in outrage. He warned that he would do little or nothing in the candidate's behalf unless Cobb, "at your earliest convenience, tender to me the promise solicited." While it seems unlikely that Cobb responded favorably to Bonner's demand, the incident provided the candidate with a reminder of the potential dangers of the patronage game. A single misstep easily could produce a destructive storm of party dissension.[35]

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[34] Summers, The Plundering Generation, pp. 23-36.

[35] L. S. Bonner to Howell Cobb, May 1, 1851; June 28, 1851; James F. Cooper to Howell Cobb, May 5, 1851; N. E. Barrett to Howell Cobb, May 13, 1851; James Gholston to Howell Cobb, May 13, 1851, Howell Cobb Papers; Richard D. Arnold to Howell Cobb, October 31, 1851, in Richard H.

The coalition nature of the Constitutional Union organization only served to heighten these dangers. In effect, Cobb's own gubernatorial nomination embodied little more than a patronage arrangement. Constitutional Union leaders had resolved early on to counter Southern Rights charges that they represented "Whiggery in disguise" by nominating a prominent Union Democrat for the governorship. Victory for their ticket would be followed by the election of a leading Union Whig to the Senate. By means of this arrangement, Cobb became governor and Robert Toombs became senator.[36]

The necessity for such arrangements did not disappear following the Constitutional Unionist success in the elections of 1851. It still remained to punish enemies and reward friends through the distribution of offices. The Constitutional Unionists carried out this process by removing appointees from the previous administration and replacing them with their own supporters. They also created more than

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Shryock, ed., Letters of Richard D. Arnold, M.D., 1808-1876 (Durham: The Sherman Press, 1929), pp. 58-59; Summers, The Plundering Generation, p. 26.

[36] Luther J. Glenn to Howell Cobb, April 21, 1851; John Calvin Johnson to Howell Cobb, May 22, 1851, Howell Cobb Papers; Iverson Harris to John M. Berrien, March 12, 1851, John M. Berrien Papers, Southern Historical Collection, Library of the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, North Carolina (Hereafter: Berrien Papers); Joseph H. Lumpkin to Alexander H. Stephens, May 13, 1851, Alexander H. Stephens Papers, Library of Congress, Washington D.C. (Hereafter: Stephens Papers, LC); Richard Harrison Shryock, Georgia and the Union in 1850 (Durham: Duke University Press, 1926), pp. 336-337.

100 new offices. Although many of these positions probably reflected a legitimate response to the needs of a growing state, the governor carefully divided the appointments between Union Whigs and Union Democrats.[37]

While removals were expected and hence excited little comment, the creation of new government jobs drew sharp criticism from Southern Rights newspapers. The Federal Union denied the necessity for creating any new posts, and attributed the activities of their opponents to unadulterated greed. "This legislature was elected to save the Union," it charged, "and the people must not grumble if they are taxed to pay a few hundred new officers; men cannot afford to save the Union for nothing; these patriots want office, they have been promised offices, and they must have them or they will burst up everything."[38]

Cobb's ongoing habit of securing political plums for family members -- particularly for brother Tom -- also excited both criticism and unfounded charges of fiscal corruption. Complaints from political opponents, however, bothered Cobb not at all. He understood that their indignation reflected more of envy than true moral outrage. He offered no apologies for the spoils system, and felt no inclination to attempt any reforms in this area -- apart from management of the state railroad. In truth, his casual

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[37] Milledgeville Federal Union, January 27, 1852.

[38] Ibid.

attitude towards the distribution of government offices had not changed since the beginning of his political career. Nearly a decade earlier, he had explained that "our family can only succeed ... when we ... can shape the spoils." Otherwise, he joked, our opponents have "no regard for us or our concerns."[39]

II

Outside the political arena, Cobb also faced pressing personal concerns. Since the financial disasters of the early 1840s and his father's psychological collapse, he had borne much of the responsibility for the support of his parents and younger siblings. He had settled them at the Cowpens in 1842. Sometime during the next two years, he made an arrangement with his brother-in-law, Williams Rutherford, Jr., to take a part interest in the plantation. The precise nature of their agreement cannot be discerned from family letters. Indeed, the surviving correspondence indicates that neither Cobb nor Rutherford had a clear understanding of their agreement. At any rate, Rutherford and his wife, Laura, established their residence at the Cowpens in 1844, and Rutherford assumed responsibility for managing the plantation. As Cobb's younger brothers came of age and

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[39] William B. McCash, Thomas R. R. Cobb, (1823-1862), The Making of a Southern Nationalist (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1983), pp. 44; 51-52; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, November 11, 1843; J. J. Singleton to Howell Cobb, January 5, 1853, Howell Cobb Papers.

embarked on careers of their own, they, too, contributed to their parents' support.[40]

Despite hard work by the Rutherfords and the elder Cobbs, the Cowpens did not thrive under Rutherford's management. Plagued by bad luck, an inadequate slave force, and probably a lack of farming skill, Rutherford proved incapable of producing good crops even during good seasons. By 1846, he despaired of even producing enough cotton to cover the plantation's expenses. Faced with the prospect of selling off a part of the property just to make ends meet, he began to talk of pulling up stakes and moving away in search of better land. The Cobb family launched an immediate -- but futile -- campaign to avert this drastic step by securing Rutherford's election to a professorship at the University. Following his defeat, Rutherford struggled on at the Cowpens for another year before arranging to trade the plantation with Junius Hillyer for a smaller plantation on the outskirts of Athens. John Addison welcomed the chance to be closer to town, but Sarah confessed a preference to

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[40] Williams Rutherford, Jr., to Howell Cobb, December 14, 1841; December 20, 1851; Sarah Rootes Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, March 30, 1846; April 15, 1846; Sarah Rootes Cobb to Howell Cobb, May 26, 1846, ibid.; Sarah Rootes Cobb to Martha J. Jackson, February 13, 1842, Jackson-Prince Papers, Southern Historical Collection, Library of the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, North Carolina (Hereafter: Jackson-Prince Papers).

remain in Walton County. "It suits poor folk better," she lamented, "than this place."[41]

The move to Athens did not solve the difficulty. Soon, the financial situation again approached crisis proportions. Signs of growing trouble became visible in late 1850, and within a year Rutherford reported that the elder Cobbs had acquired debts of some $1,500. He added that he had used his name to secure these debts and desperately needed help from the Cobb brothers to make ends meet. More ominously, he expected the size of John Addison and Sarah's debt to rise at an accelerated rate in the years ahead.[42]

Six slave women belonging to Sarah appeared to lay at the root of the problem. For reasons left unexplained by family members -- though advancing age might well have been the cause -- these women could not be usefully employed in the fields of the Athens plantation. Sarah's efforts to generate income by hiring out the women produced little save anxiety and frustration for her and the family. John B. Cobb, who attempted to handle this business for his mother, wound up wishing "they were all sold ... [because] they are

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[41] Laura Rutherford to Howell Cobb, July 3, 1846; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, July 20, 1846; Sarah Rootes Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, August 8, 1846; October 11, 1846; Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, December 28, 1850; January 3, 1851; Williams Rutherford, Jr., to Howell Cobb, December 20, 1851; Thomas R. R. Cobb to Howell Cobb, April 23, 1846; January 2, 1852, Howell Cobb Papers.

[42] Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, December 28, 1850; January 3, 1851; Thomas R. R. Cobb to Howell Cobb, January 2, 1852, ibid.

such negroes as nobody wants." While Sarah fretted that the slave women would "have nothing to do for several months, but to visit the corn crib & smoke house," Mary Ann observed that they "take the matter very quietly -- and sit contentedly in their chimney corner." [43]

Since the mid-1840s, Tom Cobb had suspected that Rutherford would never succeed as a plantation manager. In 1846, he had urged Cobb to advise him, "as a brother & one whose opinion he respects," to sell all his slaves and pay himself out of debt. With unusual callousness for a member of the Cobb family, he asserted that Rutherford should "not ... let a false tenderness for his negroes ruin him."[44]

Tom now renewed his efforts to enlist Cobb's support in pressing a similar plan. Already aware that Cobb intended to alleviate his brother-in-law's financial woes by naming him auditor for the Western and Atlantic, he noted that the new post would require Rutherford to move his family to Atlanta. John Addison and Sarah clearly could not manage a plantation on their own. Indeed, he believed that any effort by his parents to maintain a household and a slave force which grew "more & more worthless every year," must inevitably produce a constantly increasing debt and eventual ruin. He assured his older brother of his willingness to

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[43] Ibid.

[44] Thomas R. R. Cobb to Howell Cobb, April 23, 1846, ibid.

"cheerfully join to wipe out ... their past indebtedness (*if it is to be a real relief & not a temporary suspension.*)"[45]

The younger Cobb recommended that Rutherford sell the Athens place. John Addison, Sarah, and Mattie (the only sibling still residing with their parents) could then "make your house or mine their *headquarters* -- & spend their time with the other children when they please." Acknowledging his mother's reluctance to part with her slaves -- a reluctance sustained by most of the family -- Tom proposed that she retain three male slaves who could be hired out for a total of $500 per year, as well as a woman and boy to act as personal servants. The remaining slaves would be divided among her children who would each pay five or ten percent of their value each year as hire. Besides providing John Addison and Sarah with a regular income, this arrangement would allow the slaves to remain with the family.[46]

Cobb immediately gave sanction to Tom's plan by advising Rutherford to implement it. Rutherford, however, strongly dissented. Describing the plan as "injudicious," he insisted that "your mother is so industrious and has such a taste for housekeeping that she would not be happy in any other situation. To have her own negroes around her to control in her own way is an important element in her

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[45] Thomas R. R. Cobb to Howell Cobb, January 2, 1852, *ibid*.

[46] *Ibid*.

happiness." Besides, he added, he had come to view John Addison, Sarah, and Mattie as members of his own family. Although their presence placed additional burdens on him, he confessed that "I feel so much at home with them and they with us that I should part with them very reluctantly." He then proposed that the Cobb brothers each pay one third of their parents' debt and take a mortgage on Sarah's property in exchange. How this would solve the problem of future debts he did not say.[47]

To Cobb's confusion, Rutherford indicated that he alone and not his brother-in-law would determine the fate of the Athens place. He justified this assertion by the surprising claim that "I never looked upon you as owning any part of the Cowpens." Probably in a bid to keep the plantation beyond the reach of Cobb's creditors, the property had been mortgaged in Rutherford's name with his property as security for the loan. Rutherford now insisted that he had always viewed the money paid by Cobb -- some $1050 in cash and the use of two slaves -- as a combination of loans and rent paid for the two years Cobb's own family had resided at the Cowpens. If, as Rutherford asserted, Cobb owned no part of

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[47] Williams Rutherford, Jr., to Howell Cobb, December 20, 1851; Thomas R. R. Cobb to Howell Cobb, January 2, 1852, ibid.

the Cowpens, then he certainly had no say in the disposition of the Athens place.[48]

Whatever Cobb's view of the subject, he had no intention of adding to the financial burdens pressing his brother-in-law's household, and he apparently acquiesced in Rutherford's claim without further complaint. Nor could he bring himself to override his mother's obvious desire to maintain her own household. He and Tom soon agreed to the arrangement proposed by Rutherford.[49]

While Cobb had little choice but to assist in finding a resolution to his parents' financial plight, he continued to leave most family matters to the discretion of Mary Ann and John Lamar. Contrary to Mary Ann's expectations, Cobb's presence in Georgia made little difference in his disinclination to take an active role in the raising of their children. Hardly a month after Cobb took his oath of office, brother John reported from Macon that "there is one of the best teachers in Georgia in this place." The teacher -- one Mr. Meade -- had been entrusted with educating children from several of Macon's elite families. Acting on his own, he decided to enroll Lamar Cobb -- who was visiting Macon --

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[48] Williams Rutherford, Jr., to Howell Cobb December 20, 1851; January 18, 1854, ibid.

[49] Ibid.

with Meade immediately. He urged his brother-in-law to hurry John A. to Macon so that he might be entered as well.[50]

Lamar had long served as something of a surrogate father to his nephews, and Cobb did not question his recommendation. Although John A. had at last begun to show improvement with Mr. Scudder, Cobb promptly dispatched the boy to Macon. Ironically, John A.'s recent improvement with Scudder largely had stemmed from an earlier suggestion by Cobb that the teacher "be more familiar or rather more communicative with [him]." The disruptive influence of the move to Meade's school reversed the progress John A. had been making. Within days of enrolling the two boys, brother John noted that Meade had expressed complete satisfaction with young Lamar, but voiced doubts about the older brother. The uncle advised the teacher that "when he had developed all John A.'s good traits ... he would find him a jewel." Uncle John, however, could not deny that "John A. let people find out his good qualities by degrees, & seems very indifferent if they ever [find] them out at all."[51]

Less than a month after entering Meade's school, John A. revolted. Apparently convinced that he had been mistreated by his teacher, the boy ran away from school and

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[50] John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, December 26, 1851, ibid.

[51] John B. Lamar to Mary Ann Lamar, April 25, 1850; April 28, 1850; April 30, 1850; John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, January 9, 1852, ibid.

returned to his uncle's home in protest. An angry Lamar immediately ordered his nephew back to school. He sent along a letter to Meade insuring him that "John A.'s conduct met no countenance from me." He also assured the teacher that Cobb, too, would disapprove his son's activities. Lamar instructed Meade that whenever John A. disobeyed, he should be "chastised," and vowed "that his parents & myself would sustain the course of the teacher." Before the boy departed, Lamar delivered him a stern but fatherly lecture. He vowed to "indulge him in anything reasonable as long as he got along well at school. But if he was mutinous at school, to expect no smiles from me, that I loved him, but felt no disposition, to let my feelings of affection, be of that unreasoning character as to cause his ruin."[52]

For more than a month after this incident, John A. appeared to have reconciled himself to his academic situation. When Mr. Meade issued the boys' first grade circular at the end of February, both John A. and Lamar received good marks. Lamar, who had already demonstrated a greater interest in scholarly pursuits than his brother, did best. But John A. earned sufficiently high marks to win praise from his father for his improvement.[53]

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[52] John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, January 21, 1852, Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collection, Felix Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia (Hereafter: Cobb-Erwin Lamar Collection).

[53] Howell Cobb to John A. Cobb, February 28, 1852, ibid.

The family's satisfaction with John A.'s performance barely survived another month. In April, Lamar enrolled both boys at N. A. Pratt's "Family Boarding School for Boys" in Roswell, Georgia. Although the reasons for this move are not made clear in family letters, John A.'s past and future behavior probably provided the underlying cause.[54]

As usual, young Lamar settled into his new situation without complaint. John A. found the "Family Boarding School for Boys" no more congenial than Mr. Meade's school. At once homesick and rebellious, the oldest Cobb son immediately embarked on a campaign to secure parental permission to return home. He insisted that he wanted to learn plantation management -- an employment which he believed required little more formal education than he already possessed.[55]

By July, Mary Ann had begun to waver. She complained that John A.'s letters sounded "too much like an idle boy," and pleaded for "a change in [their] tone." The worried mother praised her son's desire to pursue the life of a plantation owner, believing it a "most peaceful, happy and prosperous calling." Yet she assured him that he would "never get there until he [was] a graduate of some eligible institution." Nevertheless, she conceded, if he thought he needed no more formal schooling, then he could learn a trade

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[54] James R. King to John B. Lamar, April 22, 1852, ibid.

[55] Howell Cobb to John A. Cobb, July 18, 1852; Mary Ann Cobb to Lamar Cobb, July 21, 1852, ibid.

-- provided he found "some establishment where only white apprentices are received." Cobb, however, stood firm with his son. "Though it is not so pleasant to be absent from your family," he acknowledged, "you must remember that it is necessary for the prosecution of your studies." For the time being at least, the unhappy boy could not escape his academic prison.[56]

III

Politically, Cobb could ill-afford even the small amount of time that he dedicated to family concerns. Reports from Washington continued to provide conflicting information, but the overall trends appeared ominous. Nevertheless, Alexander Stephens, Robert Toombs, and Junius Hillyer all persisted in their conviction that the Constitutional Unionists must wait for the Democrats to make the first public move towards conciliation.[57]

Until the beginning of 1852, Cobb saw little alternative to acquiescence in this strategy. News arriving from Washington in early January, however, convinced the governor that he could delay no longer. On December 30, Congressman Joseph W. Jackson -- Cobb's friend and relative, and one of his most bitter Southern Rights opponents in Georgia -- won appointment to the Democratic national committee. A few days

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[56] Ibid.

[57] Philip Clayton to Howell Cobb, December 2, 1851; December 30, 1851; Thomas D. Harris, December 31, 1851, ibid.

later, Stephen A. Douglas, in a bid for the continued support of Southern Rights Democrats, publicly repudiated Cobb and the Constitutional Union movement for "decieving [sic] the people with hypocritical professions of devotion to the Union." Clearly, the Southern Rights campaign to win recognition as the real Democratic party of Georgia had gained a dangerous momentum.[58]

Outflanked by his enemies in Washington and unable to rouse his allies there from their self-imposed inertia, Cobb now launched a flanking maneuver of his own. He did not aim directly at his foes. Rather, he attempted to turn his own Constitutional Union party out of its static position and into an open competition with the Southern Rights men for recognition as true Democrats.

In past years, a group centered in Athens -- the "Athens Junto" -- had served as Cobb's main political advisors. During the campaigns of the past two years, however, the "Junto" had been supplanted by a new group concentrated around Macon. To be sure, many of the governor's old advisors now became part of this "Macon Regency." The "Regency" included both Union Democrats and Whigs. James A. Nisbet, a Whig and editor of the Macon Journal and Messenger,

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[58] Athens Southern Banner, January 15, 1852; Horace Montgomery, Cracker Parties (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1950), pp. 52-53; Joseph W. Jackson to Howell Cobb, October 14, 1851; Howell Cobb to Organizing Committee of the Jackson Day Celebration, January 1, 1852; Philip Clayton to Howell Cobb, January 10, 1852, Howell Cobb Papers.

led the group. The governor now turned to him for assistance.[59]

Cobb prevailed on Nisbet to publish an editorial which urged Constitutional Union participation in the Democratic national convention. He then rushed off a copy of this editorial for circulation among Democrats in Washington "before the ink was dry." Nisbet's editorial ran on January 14. Five days later, Constitutional Union leaders in the state legislature met to plan the party's spring convention. They quickly adopted the course of action prescribed by the Journal and Messenger. Almost immediately, both Southern Rights foes and nominal Whig allies began to complain that Cobbites had dominated the meeting and manipulated procedures to produce the results they desired.[60]

No one objected more vigorously than Stephens. He summarized his reaction to the decision of the Union meeting with the simple assertion that "I do not like it at all." By taking this action, he complained, the Constitutional Unionists had yielded the moral high ground. Still wedded to the strategy of "masterly inactivity," Stephens persisted in his belief that the Union party must take no action until the Democrats had nominated their presidential candidate and defined their stand on the compromise. By doing so, he

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[59] Montgomery, Cracker Parties, p. 50.

[60] Ibid, pp. 50-53; Macon Journal and Messenger, January 14, 1852; Milledgeville Federal Union, January 20, 1852; January 27, 1852.

argued, the Constitutional Unionists would force the Democracy to embrace both the compromise and the Georgia Platform.[61]

Stephens' argument fell on deaf ears. Cobb had never placed any confidence in the wait-and-see approach, and his tolerance for it now had evaporated completely. An influx of letters from his former national Democratic associates helped strengthen his resolve to reestablish his position within the Democracy. John Slidell of Louisiana, E. B. Hart of New York, George W. Jones of Tennessee, Willis A. Gorman of Indiana, and Thomas H. Bayly of Virginia all praised Cobb's "manly & patriotic course in the great struggle for the preservation of the Union," but they also insisted that "the time has ... arrived to fall back on the party lines & to reorganize the great national democratic party."[62]

Yet Cobb's Democratic correspondents warned him against expecting too much from the Baltimore Convention. While reasonably certain that the delegates would nominate a pro-compromise ticket, most voiced doubts as to whether the convention would or should adopt a resolution embracing the finality of the compromise. While Cobb's old associates

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[61] Alexander H. Stephens to Howell Cobb, January 26, 1852, Howell Cobb Papers; Milledgeville Southern Recorder, February 24, 1852.

[62] John Slidell to Howell Cobb, January 7, 1852; January 28, 1852; E. B. Hart to Howell Cobb, January 13, 1852; G. W. Jones to Howell Cobb, January 25, 1852; January 26, 1852; Thomas H. Bayly to Howell Cobb, February 3, 1852, Howell Cobb Papers.

professed to share his desire "to purge the party of abolitionists and unqualified disunionists," they dreaded any agitation within the Democracy which might "put a strong card into the hands of Whig Demagogues." Most echoed Slidell's warning that the party "must take care that [the abolitionists and disunionists] do not carry with them the very large body of democrats both North and South who did not approve of the compromise and who are unwilling that its endorsement now shall be made a test of party faith." They insisted that the overwhelming majority of Democrats stood ready to abide by the terms of the compromise -- regardless of their initial feelings towards it. No "mere paper Resolution" they avowed, could strengthen measures already adopted by Congress.[63]

Nor did Cobb's former associates voice any great confidence in his current Whig allies. They urged him to treat the action of the Constitutional Union meeting in Milledgeville as a test of the good faith of Georgia's Union Whigs. If Stephens, Toombs, and their followers agreed to go to Baltimore and "take a place upon our platform of [18] '40, '44 & '48, with such Democratic additions to it as time has made proper," then they should be welcomed into the Democratic fold. If they refused this opportunity, then they

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[63] John Slidell to Howell Cobb, January 7, 1852; January 28, 1852; E. B. Hart to Howell Cobb, January 13, 1852; G. W. Jones to Howell Cobb, January 25, 1852; January 26, 1852; Thomas H. Bayly to Howell Cobb, February 3, 1852, ibid.

would demonstrate that they had acted in bad faith. Some national Democrats, such as Bayly and Slidell, hoped that the Union Whigs would join the Democracy. Others, such as Hart and Gorman, did not believe the Whigs capable of honest actions. All warned Cobb against clinging too long to the Whigs. Otherwise, they observed, "you leave the game in the hands of secessionists, so far at least as Georgia is concerned."[64]

Cobb labored to ease the concerns of his Democratic correspondents. All too aware of their fear that his Union Democrats might be duped into a fatal alliance with national Whiggery, he offered repeated assurances that such fears "were groundless." He also made no attempt to conceal his dissatisfaction with the Constitutional Union strategy of "hold[ing] aloof from the national conventions of the two great parties." It would appear that Cobb spoke so forcefully that at least some of his correspondents believed him a mirror of their own views. Immediately after venting his own distrust of Whigs, for instance, Hart voiced pleasure that "you agree with me in this."[65]

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[64] John Slidell to Howell Cobb, January 7, 1852; January 28, 1852; E. B. Hart to Howell Cobb, January 13, 1852; G. W. Jones to Howell Cobb, January 25, 1852; January 26, 1852; Thomas H. Bayly to Howell Cobb, February 3, 1852, ibid.

[65] John Slidell to Howell Cobb, January 7, 1852; January 28, 1852; E. B. Hart to Howell Cobb, January 13, 1852; G. W. Jones to Howell Cobb, January 25, 1852; January 26, 1852; Thomas H. Bayly to Howell Cobb, February 3, 1852, ibid.

Developments that Cobb could not control probably prompted him to use stronger language than he might have preferred. In early January, Charles W. Denison, a Boston newspaper editor, launched "a new Independent Union Journal" called Our Country. On the masthead of his first issue, the editor declared his devotion to a Union presidential ticket composed of Daniel Webster and Howell Cobb.[66]

Cobb hardly welcomed the linkage of his name with that of a prominent Whig at a time when his Democratic opponents accused him of plotting with Whigs for his own political advancement. Without even taking time to examine Denison's paper, Cobb bluntly informed the editor that he could not permit his name to be used in connection with the vice-presidency. While reiterating his own commitment to the Union and the compromise which he firmly believed had saved it, the governor added an explicit caveat: "My own judgement is well satisfied that [we must look] to the national democratic organization, purged of northern abolitionism and southern disunionism, ... for the successful vindication of those principles."[67]

The governor's refusal to countenance the use of his name on a Union ticket did not mean that he lacked

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[66] Charles W. Denison to Howell Cobb, January 3, 1852, ibid.

[67] E. W. Chastain to Howell Cobb, January 17, 1852; G. W. Jones to Howell Cobb, January 26, 1852; Howell Cobb to Charles W. Denison, January 17, 1852, ibid.

aspirations for a spot on a national ticket. Throughout the winter and spring he received several letters which raised the possibility of a presidential or vice-presidential nomination by the Baltimore convention. Many of those who spoke of Cobb's nomination to the presidency based their expectations on the probable inability of the Baltimore meeting to nominate any one of the Democratic front runners. Stephen Douglas, Lewis Cass, James Buchanan, and others had all launched bids for the nomination. Several commanded substantial support, but none held a commanding position. None appeared likely to. In a deadlocked convention, the probability of the party turning to a "dark horse" candidate would be substantially increased. If such a scenario did indeed develop, who better than Howell Cobb at the head of his Union Democratic legion to carry the party's banner?[68]

In the event that a presidential nomination was not forthcoming, several Cobb admirers vowed to press his name for the vice-presidency. This possibility did receive serious consideration -- even outside the Cobb camp. In March, representatives of the Cass campaign approached the

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[68] Philip Clayton to Howell Cobb, January 10, 1852; J. B. Mower to Howell Cobb, January 25, 1852; E. W. Chastain to Howell Cobb, January 17, 1852; February 8, 1852; W. A. Gorman to Howell Cobb, February 1, 1852; Thomas D. Harris to Howell Cobb, February 2, 1852; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, March 2, 1852; Henry R. Jackson to Howell Cobb, March 24, 1852; A. F. Owen to Howell Cobb, May 9, 1852, ibid.; Roy F. Nichols, The Democratic Machine, 1850-1854 (New York: Columbia University, 1923), pp. 41-118.

governor with a proposal that he accept the vice-presidential spot on a Cass ticket.[69]

Cobb publicly and privately rejected all proposals regarding his nomination to either office. His refusals, however, reflected more of habit and political necessity than a lack of interest. In keeping with his views on the proper behavior of a republican statesman, Cobb never openly acknowledged a desire for any political office. Yet political necessity certainly strengthened his determination to preserve appearances.[70]

The governor's political standing among national Democrats had already suffered as a result of Southern Rights' accusations that the underlying motive for his alignment with Georgia Whigs had been political gain. He could ill-afford to alienate his Whig allies by arousing suspicions -- suspicions that Southern Rights men would be sure to play upon -- that he sought to lead them into the national Democracy as a means for his own political advancement.[71]

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[69] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, March 6, 1852; Joseph Pickett to Howell Cobb, May 7, 1852, Howell Cobb Papers.

[70] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, March 6, 1852; Thomas Ritchie to Howell Cobb, March 17, 1852; Henry R. Jackson to Howell Cobb, March 24, 1852; Joseph Pickett to Howell Cobb, May 7, 1852, ibid.

[71] E. W. Chastain to Howell Cobb, January 17, 1852; George W. Jones to Howell Cobb, January 26, 1852, ibid.

Cobb sincerely believed that the well-being of the Union and the South required a strong and united Democratic party purged of its unsound elements. But even if the unsound elements could not be purged, a Democratic party dominated by men loyal to the Union and committed to the security of the South's vital interests would reduce the extremists to a minority and provide the country with reasonable security. The incorporation of the Constitutional Union party into the Democratic structure would go far towards the achievement of that goal.[72]

Should Cobb's fellow triumvirs fail to perceive the wisdom of this course, then he meant to sever his ties to them and fight his way back into the front ranks of the Democratic party. Cobb's partisan loyalty and love of Union would never allow him to abandon the Democracy to free-soilers and abolitionists. If a grateful Democratic party chose to reward such loyalty with a nomination to high office, he would not be so ungracious as to decline.[73]

Cobb's rejection notwithstanding, Denison refused to be easily dissuaded. He continued to press for a Webster-Cobb

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[72] Howell Cobb to Charles W. Denison, January 17, 1852; February 3, 1852, ibid.

[73] E. B. Hart to Howell Cobb, January 13, 1852; Howell Cobb to Charles W. Denison, January 17, 1852; February 3, 1852; Thomas D. Harris to Howell Cobb, January 21, 1852; John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, January 26, 1852; John Slidell to Howell Cobb, January 28, 1852; E. W. Chastain to Howell Cobb, February 8, 1852; February 29, 1852; John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, February 12, 1852; William H. Hull Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, March 6, 1852; March 9, 1852, ibid.

Union ticket. Within two weeks of his first letter to Denison, Cobb felt compelled to state his refusal in even stronger terms. He could never associate with northern Whigs in any permanent party structure because of an unsurpassable gulf between them on issues such as protective tariffs and internal improvements. Only a "wide difference between the Whigs of Massachusetts and Georgia" on these issues, he maintained, made his current association with Stephens and Toombs possible. While still convinced that "the finality of the compromise and its faithful enforcement are essential elements to any political organization who may desire the confidence and cooperation of the South," he no longer believed that all Unionists could be united into a single political entity. Although the governor directed his remarks towards the idea of a national Union party, his words might just as easily have applied to the rapidly fragmenting Constitutional Union organization in Georgia.[74]

IV

The recommendation that the Constitutional Union party send delegates to the Baltimore convention precipitated a crisis for the party's Whig and Union Democratic elements. Old loyalties and current disgruntlements worked to exacerbate an already difficult situation. The ramifications of the crisis became apparent almost immediately.

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[74] Howell Cobb to Charles W. Denison, February 3, 1852, ibid.

Stephens made no secret of his opposition to the "Milledgeville movement," and many other Union Whigs adhered to his position. They felt a great reluctance to join the Democratic party. One anxious Unionist worried that "we shall have divisions and schisms in all our ... meetings."[75]

Unlike the Whigs, Cobb's Union Democratic followers acknowledged the necessity of sending delegates to Baltimore. They had believed throughout the recent crisis that Georgia Unionists must ultimately cooperate with the national Democracy. Only by attending the Baltimore convention could they insure that the national party nominated a worthy presidential candidate and formally embraced the finality of the compromise. All viewed a finality resolution as the sine qua non for continued Union Democratic affiliation with the national Democratic organization.[76]

Yet, somewhat surprisingly, many Union Democrats greeted news of the "Milledgeville movement" with only a little more enthusiasm than their Whig allies. Now that their leaders had committed them to the course all had advocated, several voiced concern that the movement had been made too hastily.

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[75] John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, January 26, 1852; Luther J. Glenn to Howell Cobb, February 6, 1852, ibid.

[76] Thomas Reade Rootes Cobb to Howell Cobb, January 29, 1852; James Jackson to Howell Cobb, February 7, 1852; John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, February 7, 1852; February 29, 1852; John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, February 12, 1852; February 29, 1852; William H. Hull to Howell Cobb, February 14, 1852; Luther J. Glenn to Howell Cobb, February 28, 1852; Henry R. Jackson and John E. Ward to Howell Cobb, February 28, 1852, ibid.

John Lumpkin privately confided to Stephens that "I am not altogether satisfied ... this was the true policy."[77]

In part, the lackluster response of Union Democrats reflected a fear that the decision to send delegates to Baltimore would cost them the support of Union Whigs. The actions of the national Democrats in Washington, however, did much more to spark Union Democratic doubts. John Lamar gave these sentiments their clearest expression. "We have stood by the National Democracy under the abuse of a portion of our party in Georgia for five years," he complained, and "the very head & front of our offending in their eyes has been that we were too national, and were too much affiliated with the Northern Democracy." After thus standing "in the breach," he added, "we have seen that miserable faction taken by the hand at Washington & their insolent pretensions recognized, & the cold shoulder on us." In disgust, he asserted that "such ingratitude is enough to make one feel like he could 'turn Turk & stone the church.'"[78]

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[77] John H. Lumpkin to Alexander H. Stephens, January 28, 1852, Alexander H. Stephens Papers, Library of Congress, Washington D.C. (Hereafter: Stephens Papers, LC); John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, February 12, 1852; William H. Hull to Howell Cobb, February 14, 1852, Howell Cobb Papers.

[78] Hopkins Holsey to Howell Cobb, February 6, 1852, in Ulrich Bonnell Phillips, ed., The Correspondence of Robert Toombs, Alexander H. Stephens, and Howell Cobb (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1913), pp. 279-280; Thomas D. Harris to Howell Cobb, February 2, 1852; Luther J. Glenn to Howell Cobb, February 6, 1852; February 28, 1862; Henry R. Jackson and John E. Ward to Howell Cobb, February 28, 1852; James Jackson to Howell Cobb, February 7, 1852; William H. Hull to Howell Cobb, February 14, 1852; John B. Lamar to

Confronted with the anxious concern of his own Union Democrats, as well as the open revolt of Union Whigs, Governor Cobb again experienced the frustration of his inability to shape events in Washington. Since giving up his congressional seat, he occasionally had employed Georgia congressman E. W. Chastain as a mouthpiece to express his views on the floor of the House, but no Union Democrat in the state's delegation possessed Cobb's Washington connections or his skill at working the political system. In late February, the governor departed for Washington in hopes of once more bending events to his will.[79]

Although "the obstensible [sic] object of his visit ... [was] to conclude a contract for carrying the mail over the Western & Atlantic Railroad," few doubted the underlying political purpose of the trip. Shortly after reaching the capital, Cobb happily reported to Mary Ann that "I have been much gratified with the reception I have met from my old friends -- it could not possibly have been more cordial." The governor's pleasure at this reaction took added sweetness from the discomfort it caused his enemies. "This cordial reception," he gloated, "has been gall & wormwood to some of the fire eaters who see in it 'the handwriting upon the wall.'" Convinced that "things will ... work well for the

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Howell Cobb, March 8, 1852, Howell Cobb Papers.

[79] E. W. Chastain to Howell Cobb, February 8, 1852; February 29, 1852; John H. Lumpkin to Thomas D. Harris, February 23, 1852, Howell Cobb Papers.

good and faithful followers of true democracy," he enthusiastically predicted that his friends "would be willing to make me President or anything else."[80]

Cobb remained in Washington for several days, then travelled to New York before returning to the capital on his way back to Georgia. Besides consulting with national leaders, he took steps to justify his course before the country. He also worked to insure that the Union Democratic members of the Georgia delegation would sustain his positions. In both regards, he experienced considerable success.[81]

On March 5, the day after the Governor departed the capital for New York, Chastain delivered a Cobb-authored vindication of the Constitutional Union movement. Through Chastain, Cobb recalled the particulars of the recent crisis and its settlement. While willing to credit the critical votes given the compromise measures by "patriotic Whigs," he nevertheless claimed that "the compromise was a Democratic measure, based upon Democratic principles, and passed by Democratic votes."[82]

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[80] John H. Lumpkin to Thomas D. Harris, February 23, 1852; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, March 2, 1852, ibid.

[81] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, March 2, 1852; March 6, 1852, ibid.; Nichols, The Democratic Machine, p.39.

[82] E. W. Chastain to Howell Cobb, February 8, 1852; February 29, 1852; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, March 6, 1852, Howell Cobb Papers; Appendix to the Congressional Globe, Thirty-Second Congress, First Session, pp. 255-258.

Yet, while true Democrats had labored to save the Union in 1850 and 1851, others -- who now claimed Democratic status -- had labored mightily to block the compromise or overturn it after it had been enacted. To better effect their purpose, these men had sustained the Nashville Convention and then formed the Southern Rights party. They had denounced the compromise as degrading to the South and declared their determination to resist it even to the point of secession. Moreover, they had denounced allegiance to either national party as a betrayal of the South, and urged all true southerners to avoid participation in any national political convention. These same "maddened and infuriated men," he noted with disdain, "now profess to be the only true and sound exponents of Democratic principles."[83]

How could any honest man, Cobb demanded, accuse the Union Democrats of Georgia with desertion from the Democratic fold? Of what did their betrayal consist? They had resisted the doctrine of "peaceable secession." They had defended those measures and principles which even now the vast majority of the Democratic party still embraced. They had refuted Southern Rights condemnations of northern Democrats. They had opposed the establishment of "sectional parties upon sectional principles." If any of these acts constituted desertion from the Democratic party, he maintained, then so

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[83] Appendix to the Congressional Globe, Thirty-Second Congress, First Session, pp. 255-258.

be it. But, he warned, "with us you excommunicate every national Democrat in the land, and desecrate the memory of every republican father whose name is now associated with the struggles and triumphs of Democratic principles."[84]

Cobb registered dismay at the current Democratic attitude towards the Constitutional Union movement. Throughout their recent battles, the Constitutional Unionists had been supported by national Democrats in all sections of the country. Over the past year, the "Georgia Platform" -- promulgated by the Constitutional Unionists -- had been endorsed by most state Democratic organizations in both the North and the West. Influenced by these trends, Georgia's Union Democracy had viewed as inevitable the incorporation of their Union movement into the national Democracy. They had eagerly anticipated "seeing our ranks swelled with numbers of the patriotic Whigs of our own and other states, who had ... given these principles their sanction and approval."[85]

Unfortunately, it now appeared that a short-sighted fear of driving a few unworthy free-soilers and disunionists from "the holy temple of Democracy" might frustrate all these hopes and expectations. Union Democrats, Cobb argued, demanded no new tests of party loyalty. Nor did they demand that those who had opposed the adoption of the compromise now

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[84] Ibid.

[85] Ibid.

acknowledge mistake. All that they demanded was an affirmation by the national Democratic convention of principles already asserted by Democratic leaders -- a declaration "in favor of the finality of the compromise, as a permanent settlement of the slavery question."[86]

Despite their concerns, Cobb insisted that the Union Democrats would be present at the Baltimore convention. They recognized that "upon that Convention will rest a responsibility of no ordinary character." Not only did it bear responsibility for the future of the Democratic party, but upon its actions rested the fate "of the Republic itself."[87]

Thirteen days later, on March 18, Hillyer delivered an address very similar to that of Chastain. This speech assumed added importance because Cobb's Sixth District successor had been most prominent among the Union Democratic leaders urging him to adhere to the wait-and-see strategy advocated by Stephens and Toombs. Only five days before making this speech, Hillyer had pleaded with Cobb not to force the issue of Union Democratic participation at Baltimore. Aware that the governor was considering breaking up the Constitutional Union party unless Union Whigs agreed to send delegates to the Democratic national convention,

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[86] Ibid.

[87] Ibid.

Hillyer predicted that if Cobb acted hastily now, "you will be ruined."[88]

With considerable prescience, Hillyer privately warned his old friend that "you are in the crisis of your life & if the disruption of our party should take place you will be held responsible." In that event, he maintained, "you will be abandoned by the Whigs & you will not be able to control the Southern Rights Democrats." Even worse, the Georgia Democracy would be reorganized in such a fashion that "you will be shorn of your strength." This development, he argued, would possess both state and national implications. Once it became apparent that the governor had fallen "into the hands of the Southern men it will be believed throughout the Union that your power in Georgia is at an end." Thus robbed of his strength in Georgia, Cobb would no longer be viewed as a "strong man" by national Democratic leaders. A weak man, he suggested, need not aspire to high national office.[89]

Hillyer's compelling arguments notwithstanding, the governor could not be swayed. The congressman's March 18 speech signalled his acquiescence in Cobb's more aggressive strategy. Nevertheless, Hillyer persisted in his efforts to appease Union Whigs by suggesting that those Union Democrats

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[88] Ibid., pp. 319-322; Junius Hillyer to Howell Cobb, March 13, 1852, Howell Cobb Papers.

[89] Junius Hillyer to Howell Cobb, March 13, 1852, Howell Cobb Papers.

attending the Baltimore convention might act more as ambassadors delivering the demands of the Constitutional Union party than actual delegates.[90]

Cobb's visit -- combined with the Chastain and Hillyer speeches -- apparently precipitated one other development. Ever since the Democratic caucus had rejected the Cobb-Jones-Polk finality resolution, Union Democrats had maneuvered to get a similar resolution adopted by Congress. Henry S. Foote of Mississippi had initiated this campaign in the Senate with Cobb's blessing. Although most senators had taken the opportunity to go on the record as supporters of finality, they had also blocked every attempt to bring Foote's resolution to a vote.[91]

Stymied in the Senate, Unionists had directed their efforts to the House. On March 1, the same day that Cobb arrived in Washington, Representative Graham N. Fitch of Indiana sought a suspension of House rules so that he could introduce his own finality resolution. Fitch failed to secure the two-thirds majority needed for a suspension, but his motion to suspend did win a majority. More significantly, he secured a substantial plurality of northern Democratic votes and a majority of southern Democrats -- including both Southern Rights members of the Georgia

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[90] Appendix to the Congressional Globe, Thirty-Second Congress, First Session, pp. 320-321.

[91] Nichols, The Democratic Machine, pp. 37-40.

delegation. The overwhelming majority of northern Whigs voted against the suspension.[92]

Although Fitch's finality resolution did not actually come up for a vote, Georgia's Union Democrats saw victory in the roll-call on the motion to suspend. For the first time, a majority of the Democrats in Congress had embraced formally the idea of a finality resolution. The Democracy at last appeared ready to accept the "Georgia position." The additional demonstration that northern Whigs could not be trusted with vital southern concerns only added to their pleasure. Enraptured by news of this development, Hopkins Holsey of the Southern Banner raised the chant, "TO BALTIMORE! -- TO BALTIMORE!"[93]

Some three weeks after Fitch's effort, Joseph Jackson, the Southern Rights Democrat from Georgia, introduced a virtually identical resolution. Hillyer immediately introduced the original finality resolution rejected by the Democratic caucus. Despite strong opposition from free-soilers of both parties and a few Southern Rights men, the House adopted both resolutions by comfortable margins on April 5.[94]

Jackson's motives as a Southern Rights Democrat in pushing the finality resolution remain a mystery. There are

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[92] Ibid.; Athens Southern Banner, March 19, 1852.

[93] Athens Southern Banner, March 19, 1852.

[94] Nichols, The Democratic Machine, pp. 39-40.

indications that Cobb's lobbying had produced some movement in favor of Georgia's Union Democrats by national party leaders. Cobb himself noted this movement and voiced confidence that his efforts had exerted "a good effect in opening the eyes of our northern friends to the true condition of things in Georgia." He felt no doubt that the Baltimore convention would adopt the finality resolution rejected by the Democratic caucus "and thereby vindicate the principles and policy of the Union democracy of Georgia."[95]

While Georgia's Southern Rights men had certainly accomplished much in their redemption as national Democrats during the past five months, they hardly could have felt entirely confident of their standing in the party. Cobb's claims to represent the majority of his state's voters appeared to be validated by two recent state elections, and neither he, Chastain, nor Hillyer had exaggerated the anti-Democratic elements of the now defunct Southern Rights party. It is possible that Jackson felt compelled to push for passage of the finality resolution as a means of completing the interment of the Southern Rights organization and demonstrating the new commitment of its members to national solutions to sectional problems. By doing so, he also created doubts in the minds of national Democrats about the

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[95] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, March 6, 1852, Howell Cobb Papers.

true motives of the Union Democrats if they persisted in their refusal to reunite with their recent foes.[96]

Additionally, Jackson clearly knew of the growing difficulties between the Whig and Democratic wings of the Constitutional Union party over participation in the Baltimore convention. His support for the finality resolution possessed the potential of widening this split. Old party loyalties ran deep in Georgia. Jackson and the Southern Rights Democrats had reason to hope that this demonstration would weaken the bonds between Union Democrats and their Whig allies. They justifiably expected many Union Democrats to ask why they should suffer political isolation by clinging to ancient enemies when ancient friends sought a reconciliation.[97]

Cobb offered no reaction to Jackson's gambit, and his correspondence indicates that he had no hand in it. The speed with which Hillyer introduced the original finality resolution following Jackson's move further indicates that the Cobb forces had been taken by surprise. Nevertheless, many in Washington believed they saw Cobb's hands on the "political wires." Thomas Harris reported to the governor that "the introduction of Col. Jackson's resolution ... has created a vast amount of ill feeling against you among free soil members of congress." These men, he noted, "charge it

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[96] Athens Southern Banner, March 19, 1852.

[97] Ibid.

as a scheme ... gotten up by your single self for the purpose of forcing an endorsement of the position past & present of the Union party of the South, which can have, as they clamorously proclaim, no other effect at the North, than the destruction of the democratic party."[98]

From Washington, Cobb went on to New York. Again, legitimate state business -- the sale of bonds to sustain the Western and Atlantic -- provided justification for the trip. New York gave Cobb an even more enthusiastic reception than Washington. In a formal ceremony at city hall, the mayor and city council commended the governor for his role in the adoption and acceptance of the compromise measures. A few days later, the city's Democrats honored him with a banquet at Tammany Hall. Cobb's message, both when replying to the mayor and at the Tammany Society, stressed the same basic points which he had already outlined in the speech he wrote for Chastain. Declaring, "I was ... born a democrat, cradled a democrat, and, by the blessing of God, I will die one," he voiced certainty that the Democracy possessed the wisdom and courage to welcome into its ranks "patriotic Whigs."[99]

As in Washington, his reception left Cobb feeling optimistic. "The signs are as cheering as I would have hoped for," he confided to Mary Ann, but conceded that an

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[98] Thomas D. Harris to Howell Cobb, March 23, 1852, Howell Cobb Papers.

[99] New York Daily Times, March 11, 1852; Athens Southern Banner, March 25, 1852.

"unfavorable feature in the present posture of affairs is the probable nomination of Douglas for the Presidency." Although Cobb reluctantly acknowledged that Douglas had a better chance for the nomination "than any other man," he still gloated that he had "made some points upon him." Douglas backers had grown so "alarmed," he added, that they sought an opportunity for the presidential contender to explain his previous denunciation of the Constitutional Union movement. Cobb, who declined to be reconciled to a Douglas nomination, dryly observed that they wanted a chance for their man to "swear he did not mean what he said."[100]

Cobb stopped off in Washington for additional "politicking" before returning to Georgia. He found nothing there to undermine his belief that the Unionists now had "carried every point of principle which divided the democracy of Georgia." For all his optimistic assessments, however, Cobb returned home to a political situation which grew more unstable and more dangerous by the moment.[101]

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[100] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, March 6, 1852; March 9, 1852, Howell Cobb Papers.

[101] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, March 6, 1852, ibid.

Chapter Thirteen

"In the Power of Your Enemies"

During the governor's absence from Georgia, both the Southern Rights Democrats and the Constitutional Unionists proceeded with arrangements for their state conventions. The Southern Rights men planned to meet on March 31; the Constitutional Unionists on April 22. Still hoping to encourage a split within Constitutional Union ranks which might lead to a reunion of the old Democracy, Southern Rights leaders encouraged Union Democrats to participate in their convention.[1]

While eager to welcome back the rank and file Union Democrats, the fate of Union Democratic leaders following such a rapproachment remained less clear. Even as Southern Rights leaders and newspapers attempted to coax Union Democrats into their camp, they continued to attack Cobb. Attentive Union Democrats found it easy to discern the objective of many Southern Rights men. I. S. Fannin bluntly warned Cobb that a break-up of the Constitutional Union party "will place a few of you ... in the power of your enemies."

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[1] Percy Scott Flippin, Herschel V. Johnson of Georgia, State Rights Unionist (Richmond: Press of the Dietz Printing Company, 1931), pp. 46-48; Horace Montgomery, Cracker Parties (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1950), pp. 56-57; I. S. Fannin to Howell Cobb, April 11, 1852, Howell Cobb Papers, Felix Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia (Hereafter: Howell Cobb Papers).

He described the Southern Rights men as "willing to act in concert with the rank and file and let bye gones be bye gones," but predicted that "they are not willing to treat you particularly so because they look upon you as having headed the rebellion & desertion (as they term it)." Like all men, he added, "they would be willing only to compromise by killing or exiling the chief leader." He knew this, he asserted, "because they speak it out to me on all occasions that they never will forgive you."[2]

For the moment at least, the Union Democrats resisted the siren call of their recent foes, and clung to their Union Whig allies in hopes that they could be induced to participate in the Baltimore Convention. Disappointed, the Southern Rights Democrats met as planned. Claiming status as the "Regular" Democratic party of Georgia, they selected delegates to the Baltimore convention and named a slate of presidential electors. Despite the activities of Joseph Jackson in Congress, the convention declined to endorse the finality of the compromise.[3]

Constitutional Unionist preparations for their convention proved considerably more difficult. Cobb, E. W. Chastain, and Junius Hillyer had all given voice to the governor's determination that Georgia Unionists must be

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[2] Montgomery, Cracker Parties, pp. 54-57; Milledgeville Federal Union, March 23, 1852; April 13, 1852; I. S. Fannin to Howell Cobb, April 11, 1852, Howell Cobb Papers.

[3] Montgomery, Cracker Parties, pp. 56-57.

represented at Baltimore. Alexander Stephens had been equally open in his opposition to this movement. As each Constitutional Unionist county organization selected delegates to the state convention, they had no choice but to confront the issue. Many attempted to deal with this difficulty as they had with similar issues in the past -- by dividing seats in the convention between the two factions. Others took open stances supporting one or the other position. John H. Lumpkin summarized the attitude of the Cobbites. "The influence of the Whig Union Press, and the efforts of A. H. Stephens, & the silence of Toombs has [given] us some hard work at that convention," he lamented, "but it must be met, be the consequences what they may. What cannot be unravelled, must be severed with a knife."[4]

The Regular Democratic press thoroughly enjoyed reporting on the growing fragmentation of the Unionist movement. These organs placed special emphasis on the Constitutional Union meetings which selected delegations opposed to participation at Baltimore. They also stressed Stephens' opposition to a merger with the national Democracy and praised him for being "more honest in [his] present position than Gov. Cobb." Gloating that the Constitutional

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[4] John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, March 2, 1852, in Ulrich Bonnell Phillips, ed., The Correspondence of Robert Toombs, Alexander H. Stephens, and Howell Cobb (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1913), p. 287; John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, March 8, 1852; John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, April 14, 1852, Howell Cobb Papers; Milledgeville Federal Union, April 13, 1852.

Union party would soon go "to the dogs," the Federal Union joked that "the Convention on the 22nd inst., will not be a union Convention."[5]

Cobb's optimistic assessments of early March did not survive these developments unscathed. Faced with the unity of the Regulars, the growing dissension within Unionist ranks, and the determination of the national Democracy to reclaim the White House, the governor began to fear that a delegation of Georgia Unionists might be turned away from the Baltimore convention. This concern -- combined with anxiety created by predictions that the break-up of the Union party would leave him at the mercy of his enemies -- led him to reconsider his aggressive strategy. The news that the state convention of the Virginia Democracy had refused to adopt a finality resolution only served to undermine his optimism further.[6]

The governor made little attempt to conceal his loss of confidence from his correspondents. His expressions of alarm produced a strong reaction among those eager to see Union Democratic delegates in Baltimore. George Jones conceded that the actions of the Virginia Democrats and Regular Democrats in Georgia had been "a misfortune" which might

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[5] Milledgeville Federal Union, April 13, 1852.

[6] Junius Hillyer to Howell Cobb, March 13, 1852; I. S. Fannin to Howell Cobb, April 11, 1852, Howell Cobb Papers; A. J. Miller to Howell Cobb, April 3, 1852; George W. Jones to Howell Cobb, April 14, 1852; Thomas H. Bayly to Howell Cobb, April 16, 1852, Howell Cobb Papers.

weaken the chances of the Baltimore convention adopting a finality resolution -- but he did not think so. Emphasizing the recent adoption of the Jackson and Hillyer resolutions by the House of Representatives, Jones predicted that the "Baltimore Convention will do right on the subject." Under the circumstances, he insisted that "the Union party convention of Georgia should by all means adopt the compromise, the resolutions of Jackson and Hillyer, and send delegates to Baltimore." Thomas H. Bayly, a leading Virginia Democrat and an associate from Cobb's days in Congress, echoed Jones' arguments. He attributed the decision of the Virginia Democratic convention to a desire to appease "a few impracticable men" and urged the wisdom of a Union Democratic presence in Baltimore.[7]

No one found Cobb's expressions of doubt more alarming than Lewis Cass. Between April 15 and April 28, the presidential aspirant directed three letters to the governor. All emphasized the importance of Georgia Unionists sending a delegation to the Democratic national convention. Assuring his potential vice-presidential candidate that a finality resolution would be adopted there, he warned that failure by

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[7] George W. Jones to Howell Cobb, April 14, 1852; Thomas H. Bayly to Howell Cobb, April 16, 1852; B. F. Hallett to Howell Cobb, April 23, 1852, ibid.

Union Democrats to send delegates to Baltimore would represent a "suicidal policy."[8]

While these letters from Jones, Bayly, and Cass helped assuage Cobb's doubts, increasingly optimistic assessments by John Lamar and Thomas Harris hastened the process. Both men felt that the recent adoption of the Jackson and Hillyer resolutions by the House had weakened the resistance of Union Whigs to participation in the Baltimore convention. Lamar voiced this assessment most clearly when he reasoned that "seeing ... they must finally support the Baltimore nominee, they are losing their decided tone of opposition to sending delegates."[9]

One other bit of news completed the restoration of Cobb's optimism. Beginning in early April, he received reports that the presidential prospects of Stephen Douglas were "on the wane." Coming from a variety of sources, these reports all agreed that as Douglas' stock declined, that of Cass had risen markedly. Faced with the prospect of contributing to the "young Giant's" overthrow and the

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[8] Lewis Cass to Howell Cobb, April 15, 1852, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, pp. 291; Lewis Cass to Howell Cobb, April 26, 1852; April 28, 1852, Howell Cobb Papers.

[9] Thomas D. Harris to Howell Cobb, April 7, 1852; John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, April 12, 1852, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, pp. 289-290.

elevation of Cass with its potential of a vice-presidential nomination, Cobb found it impossible to hold back.[10]

Optimism and positive assessments notwithstanding, the Federal Union had offered a better analysis of the probable course of the Constitutional Union convention. When the meeting opened in Milledgeville on April 22, it rapidly became apparent that there would be no agreement to send delegates to Baltimore. Union Whigs held a majority. The delegates voted to deny the party's support to any presidential candidate nominated by a convention which did not also embrace both the compromise and its finality. Pending the action of the Democratic and Whig national conventions, however, they resolved to take no action regarding the upcoming election. Only after the national conventions had done their work would the Constitutional Unionists reassemble to choose the party with which they would associate.[11]

Unwilling to abide by the wait-and-see strategy of the Constitutional Union convention, the Union Democratic delegates -- now dubbed "Supplementals" -- hastily arranged a convention of their own the following day. This assemblage

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[10] Thomas D. Harris to Howell Cobb, April 7, 1852; Andrew Jackson Donnelson to Howell Cobb, April 25, 1852; May 10, 1852, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, pp. 289; 293-295; George W. Jones to Howell Cobb, April 14, 1852, Howell Cobb Papers.

[11] Milledgeville Federal Union, April 27, 1852; Athens Southern Banner, April 29, 1852; May 6, 1852.

adopted the national Democratic platform of 1848; endorsed the Jackson and Hillyer finality resolutions; insisted on the enforcement of all provisions of the compromise; and named twenty delegates to the Baltimore meeting. Although Cobb took no public part in the Union Democratic convention, the prominent role played by his close associates and the large number of his friends named as delegates to Baltimore indicates that the governor kept the meeting firmly under his control.[12]

Despite the overwhelming evidence of a growing division between Union Democrats and their Whig allies, Cobbites attempted to downplay the obvious. In the editorial columns of the Southern Banner, Hopkins Holsey claimed that the Union Democrats "had pursued the best course which could have been adopted." It virtually guaranteed, he argued, a merger of the entire Constitutional Union organization with the national Democracy. The editor went further. Neither Union Democrats nor Union Whigs, he insisted, bore any ill-will toward each other over their inability to reach a mutually acceptable position regarding Baltimore. They had simply "agreed to disagree -- at any rate not to quarrel on that point."[13]

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[12] Milledgeville Federal Union, April 27, 1852; Athens Southern Banner, April 29, 1852.

[13] Athens Southern Banner, April 29, 1852.

Georgia's newly christened "Regular" Democrats had no intention of allowing the Union movement to conceal its internal divisions. The Federal Union mocked their declarations of unity, and reminded its readers that it had seen "from the commencement that the action of the Convention would not be harmonious." Rather than an agreement to disagree, the Federal Union maintained that "much acrimony was exhibited by the two wings of the [Union] party." Unless Constitutional Union leaders took immediate steps to heal the breach, it predicted, the split between Union Democrats and Union Whigs might well become irreparable -- if indeed it had not already reached that point. The newspaper promised to keep a close eye on the activities of the Union Whigs after the Baltimore convention had adjourned. It did not expect them to support the Democratic nominee, even if the Democratic convention adopted the Jackson and Hillyer resolutions.[14]

Seeking to take advantage of the split between the two wings of the Constitutional Union party, the Federal Union argued that the action of the Union Democratic convention had removed any obstacles to a reunion of the Georgia Democracy. On the old issues of tariffs, banks, and federally funded internal developments, no differences existed between Regular and Union Democrats. Nor did the compromise now embody an insurmountable obstacle to a renewed Democratic alliance.

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[14] Milledgeville Federal Union, April 27, 1852.

To be sure, Regular Democrats still believed the compromise an unfair and demeaning settlement. But, the newspaper proclaimed, "Southern Rights Democrats will agree that the Compromise shall be considered a final settlement of the questions embraced in it. They seek not to disturb it." The Federal Union even conceded that Regulars would support Cass for president if he received the Democratic nomination.[15]

II

An interval of some five weeks linked the two Union conventions and the opening of the Democratic national convention. During that time the political situation in Georgia remained relatively static. Lumpkin attributed this interlude to the position occupied by the Union Democrats. Neither the Regular Democrats nor the Union Whigs, he declared, felt "satisfied with the Supplemental meeting held by the Union Democrats." The Regulars had desired an "open rupture" between the Union Democrats and Union Whigs, while the Union Whigs had hoped desperately that their Democratic allies would abide by the will of the Whig majority at the Constitutional Union convention. Although both Regulars and Union Whigs had been disappointed, Lumpkin observed that neither group would criticize the Union Democrats from fear of preventing a future alliance.[16]

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[15] Ibid.

[16] John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, May 2, 1852, Howell Cobb Papers.

Much of the news that Cobb received in these weeks helped alleviate his most immediate concerns. Trusted lieutenants provided the strongest possible assurances that the Union Democratic delegation would be received favorably in Baltimore. They did note that national party leaders preferred for the Regular and Union Democratic delegations to settle the division of the state's votes among themselves. Barring that, the convention organizers intended to seat both delegations. The Cobbites also maintained with equal vigor that the Baltimore convention would adopt the required finality resolution. Lumpkin confidently predicted that "the Southern Rights democracy will cordially cooperate with us in insisting on the adoption of the finality of the compromise measures." Additional reports about the continuing decline of Douglas' presidential prospects did nothing to cloud the governor's horizon.[17]

Robert Toombs even voiced cautious support for the course of the Union Democrats. "I concur with you in [the] opinion," he wrote to Cobb, "that the supplemental movement may be made available for much good, and I apprehend no danger from it." Confident that "the Democratic convention will unquestionably adopt the Compromise," he anticipated "we shall have no trouble." Moreover, he felt certain that Stephens "will cooperate freely whenever they get in his and

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[17] John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, May 2, 1852; Thomas D. Harris to Howell Cobb, May 19, 1852; May 28, 1852; Robert Toombs to Howell Cobb, May 27, 1852, ibid.

our line." Publicly, Toombs expressed the same confidence, declaring "himself out and out for the Democratic nominee, provided the Compromise is affirmed."[18]

Not all the news reaching Cobb proved equally satisfying. While recent developments -- Toombs' assertions notwithstanding -- might have reduced Cobb's expectations that the Union Whigs could be convinced to don a Democratic mantle, his desire that they might do so remained strong. Yet indications pointing to a hardening of lines between Union Whigs and Union Democrats were unmistakable. Within days of the two Union conventions, Stephens delivered a speech in the House. Raising the ante, he now declared that a simple finality resolution would be insufficient to earn either of the existing national parties public support. Besides binding commitments to the enforcement of the compromise, he attached the unacceptable condition that they must also drive from their midst all elements of abolitionism and disunionism. Within four weeks of this speech, the governor received a troubling report that Stephens and his followers had launched an unspecified movement in Georgia which further threatened the merger of Union Whigs into the Democracy.[19]

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[18] Robert Toombs to Howell Cobb, May 27, 1852; Thomas D. Harris to Howell Cobb, May 28, 1852, ibid.

[19] Thomas E. Schott, Alexander H. Stephens of Georgia, A Biography (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), pp. 145-146; J. W. Burke to Howell Cobb, May 20, 1852, Howell Cobb Papers.

Other Union Whigs, outraged by the actions of the Union Democrats, launched a movement to send delegates to the national Whig convention. Led by Senator William C. Dawson, this group favored the nomination of President Millard Fillmore. Although Toombs publicly repudiated this movement and Stephens denied it his support, the Dawson group did meet in convention on June 7, and selected a slate of Fillmore delegates.[20]

Not all activities encouraging a split between the Union factions of Georgia originated with Whigs. Since the beginning of the year, increasing numbers of Union Democrats had begun to question the logic of maintaining the Constitutional Union organization. Many of the rank and file who had sustained the Union movement during the recent crises quietly began making their way back into the Regular Democratic structure. Many other Union Democrats, more closely bound to Cobb, expressed their doubts but awaited guidance from their leader. In February, Hope Hull -- who only a month before had urged the creation of a permanent Union party in Georgia -- reversed himself. Now convinced that Union Whigs would never consent to merger with the Democracy, Hull reasoned "we cannot become Whigs -- that is absurd -- then we must be Democrats." In plain terms, he queried, "if we are to be Democrats why not be Democrats and

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[20] Schott, Alexander H. Stephens, pp. 147-148; Robert Toombs to Howell Cobb, May 27, 1852, Howell Cobb Papers.

let past quarrels be forgotten? .... We must get on the best way we can, and squabble it out with the Calhoun clique, as we used to, in the party bounds."[21]

Of course, the refusal of Union Democrats to abide by the will of the Constitutional Union convention did the most to harden lines between the factions. In the wake of that step, more Cobbites pressed for a reconciliation with the Regulars. W. C. Cohen reasoned that "the democratic party with much soundness and little rottenness," represented a far better alternative than "the Whig party which ... has not good men enough to save it from destruction." John H. Underwood, a Union Democratic delegate to Baltimore, went further. The Union party, he insisted, had "organized on National Democratic Principles & were democrats in everything but the name." Only by a complete abandonment of those principles could the Union men refuse to enter the Democratic fellowship. He maintained that the national Democracy now stood "firm upon their principles." He doubted that Union Whigs would stand upon them as well. The Regulars, he pointed out, "have dismissed their former animosity and seem willing to act together."[22]

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[21] William H. Hull to Howell Cobb, December 25, 1851; February 14, 1852, Howell Cobb Papers.

[22] W. C. Cohen to Howell Cobb, April 29, 1852, Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collection, Felix Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia (Hereafter: Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collection); John H. Underwood to Howell Cobb, May 26, 1852, Howell Cobb Papers.

The governor also received news about the contest for the presidential nomination that proved at once troubling and potentially beneficial. While he certainly welcomed the news of Douglas' declining prospects, he also began to receive unfavorable reports regarding Cass' chances. His informants continued to portray the party's standard-bearer from 1848 as the pre-convention leader, but they also voiced strong reservations about Cass' ability to command the two-thirds majority required for the nomination. Andrew Jackson Donelson attributed this to a lack of energy by Cass supporters and a fatal lethargy which gripped Cass himself.[23]

Cobb found these reports of Cass' lagging campaign troubling because he deemed him the most acceptable of all the leading candidates. The Cobbites had been in the Cass camp for several months, but Cobb himself apparently took no active steps to further Cass' chances before early May. It is probable that he felt constrained by Union Whig sensibilities from becoming too openly involved in the contest prior to the Constitutional Union convention. At any rate, by the first week of May, the governor launched a vigorous Cass campaign. Working mainly through Thomas Harris, he drafted and circulated a paper explaining why Cass

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[23] A. F. Owen to Howell Cobb, May 9, 1852; Thomas D. Harris to Howell Cobb, May 19, 1852; May 28, 1852; Robert Toombs to Howell Cobb, May 27, 1852, Howell Cobb Papers; Andrew Jackson Donelson to Howell Cobb, April 25, 1852; May 10, 1852; Henry Hull to Howell Cobb, May 25, 1852, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, pp. 293-295.

should be the party's presidential candidate. He also secured promises to get the ideas from his paper published in the national press.[24]

Now, Cass' apparent inability to win the nomination raised expectations that James Buchanan might mount a strong challenge for the prize. Despite Cobb's close personal friendship with Buchanan, the Pennsylvanian's efforts to win the support of southern-rights and free-soil Democrats by opposing a finality resolution had alienated Georgia Unionists. None of Cobb's correspondents expected Buchanan to win the necessary delegates, but at least one raised the specter of a deadlocked convention turning back to Douglas. As events soon revealed, Georgia's Union Democrats found Buchanan far preferable to the "Little Giant."[25]

The potential failure of all the leading contenders to claim the nomination raised renewed speculation that the party might turn to a "new man." Cobbites did not find such speculations entirely unappealing. As one bluntly expressed

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[24] J. B. Mower to Howell Cobb, January 25, 1852; Thomas D. Harris to Howell Cobb, May 19, 1852, Howell Cobb Papers.

[25] Thomas D. Harris to Howell Cobb, May 19, 1852; May 28, 1852; Robert Toombs to Howell Cobb, May 27, 1852, ibid.; Andrew Jackson Donelson to Howell Cobb, April 25, 1852; May 10, 1852; Henry Hull to Howell Cobb, May 25, 1852, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, pp. 293-295.

it, "I wish they would nominate [Cobb] when Cass and Buchanan and ... Douglas, etc., etc., quarrel among themselves."[26]

III

The Democratic national convention assembled in Baltimore on June 2. In the days leading up to the meeting, the Regular and Union Democratic delegations made half-hearted efforts to reconcile their differences. For all their declarations of an eagerness to cooperate with the Union Democrats, the Regulars insisted that they represented the true Democracy of Georgia, and hence should cast all the state's votes on the convention floor. The Union Democrats responded with an "ultimatum" -- preapproved by Cobb -- that they be permitted to cast five of the state's ten votes.[27]

Unable to reach accommodation, both delegations presented their case to the convention's credentials committee. James Jackson, Cobb's kinsman and member of the Union Democratic delegation, complained that the Regulars "made a dead fight to exclude us from the convention, after all their protestations of harmony at home." The credentials committee rejected the arguments of the Regulars and ordered that both delegations be seated. Contrary to Union

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[26] A. F. Owen to Howell Cobb, May 9, 1852; Thomas D. Harris to Howell Cobb, May 19, 1852; May 28, 1852, Howell Cobb Papers; Andrew Jackson Donelson to Howell Cobb, April 25, 1852; May 10, 1852; Henry Hull to Howell Cobb, May 25, 1852, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, pp. 293-295.

[27] Thomas D. Harris to Howell Cobb, May 28, 1852, Howell Cobb Papers.

Democratic hopes, however, the committee also refused to divide the state's votes between the two delegations. Instead, it ruled that both Regulars and Union Democrats should be admitted and act "as a unit."[28]

The credential committee's ruling effectively gave control of the Georgia delegation to the Regulars who had twenty-one delegates present. The Union Democrats, with only seventeen members in their delegation, found themselves "without any power [to] do much good or much harm." Disappointed that they had not been "received either by the convention or the Georgia democratic delegation in the spirit [we] had hoped," the Union Democratic delegates considered withdrawing from further participation in the convention. Acting on the "advice of our Cass friends," however, they finally opted to remain. They hoped by their participation to deny Douglas Georgia's vote and to avoid "a separation from the national Democracy."[29]

The Union Democrats proved reasonably successful in fulfilling both objectives. Every member of their delegation favored Cass. Eighteen of the Regular delegates favored Douglas, while three supported Buchanan. Again taking advice from the Cass campaign, the Union Democrats united their votes with those of the three Buchanan delegates and threw

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[28] John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, June 6, 1852; James Jackson to Howell Cobb, June 8, 1852, ibid.

[29] Ibid.

the state's support to the Pennsylvanian. By means of this strategy they succeeded in denying Douglas Georgia's votes for thirty-five ballots. At that point, the three Buchanan delegates abandoned their candidate and joined with the Douglas men. Although the Georgia votes went to Douglas on two successive ballots, Lumpkin believed that the vigorous protests raised by the Union Democratic delegates "destroyed all the moral effect of this vote." Yet even as they denied Douglas, they experienced the frustration of seeing Cass' chances fade as well.[30]

For more than two days the convention proceeded through ballot after ballot. Supporters of the leading presidential contenders spent this time bargaining, cajoling, and pleading for votes. But, as the hours dragged by, it became increasingly clear to the weary delegates that none of the "strong men" could secure the nomination. Fear that the convention might disintegrate without making a nomination began to grow. Somehow, as many had suspected, a "new man" must be brought forward. In so many ways, this had been the scenario desired by Cobbites. The lukewarm reception given the Union Democrats by the national convention and the open hostility of the Regulars, however, left no doubt that any attempt to raise Cobb's name would meet inevitable defeat.[31]

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[30] Ibid.

[31] Roy F. Nichols, The Democratic Machine, 1850-1854 (New York: Columbia University, 1923), pp. 132-145.

Not every potential "dark horse" candidate suffered from the same handicaps as the governor of Georgia. Boosters of Franklin Pierce from New Hampshire had been working for months to make him the man to whom the convention would turn, if it could settle on none of the leading candidates. A handsome hero of the Mexican War who favored the compromise measures, Pierce possessed a solid record of political experience. On the forty-ninth ballot the delegates stampeded into his camp.[32]

Lumpkin claimed that the lion's share of credit for this stampede should go to the Union Democrats. "It was at our instance that Georgia was the fourth State to cast the vote ... for Genl. Pierce," he maintained, "and when we agreed to this course in support of Virginia, ... other southern states followed, and they gave Genl. Pierce the nomination at once." Georgia's vote had such a profound impact, he reasoned, because "we had it announced when we cast the vote of the State for him that both delegations were united upon him and the moral effect on the convention was irresistible." While Lumpkin exaggerated the significance of the Union Democratic delegates, Georgia's early move to Pierce certainly facilitated his nomination.[33]

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[32] Ibid., pp. 119-145.

[33] Ibid., pp. 142-143; John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, June 6, 1852, Howell Cobb Papers.

With the presidential nomination now out of the way, the weary delegates turned to the nomination of a vice-presidential candidate and the adoption of a platform. The nomination of a northern man for the top place on the ticket meant that a southerner would probably receive the second spot. Several delegates approached the Union Democrats seeking permission to press Cobb's name for the vice-presidency. James Jackson, aware that the Regulars would oppose such a move, rebuffed these overtures, saying, "I told them you did not want it and if they voted for you I should withdraw your name." A few hours later, the convention nominated William R. King of Alabama. The delegates then finished their work by adopting a platform which included pledges of adherence to the compromise measures and resistance to renewed agitation on the subject.[34]

The Union Democrats departed Baltimore with mixed feelings. Lumpkin and Jackson agreed that "we have a platform entirely satisfactory and a Cass man for the nominee," but their cool reception by the convention and the cold hostility of the Regulars had chilled their optimism. Thus, when the Regulars approached the Union Democrats after the convention with plans for cooperation at home, the Union men held back. Jackson reported with disgust that "these S[outhern] R[ights] Delegates who wanted us kicked out of the

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[34] James Jackson to Howell Cobb, June 8, 1852, Howell Cobb Papers; Nichols, The Democratic Machine, p. 144.

convention are now as sweet and kind as cooing doves and anxious for a joint address to the Democratic party for a great ratification meeting in Georgia." Convinced once more by the Regulars' behavior that "we must carry the Whigs with us in the new organization," the Union Democrats rejected these overtures.[35]

Instead of immediate cooperation with the Regulars, Jackson advised that the Union Democrats wait until the Whig national convention had concluded. He predicted that the Whigs would nominate General Winfield Scott with no platform. Once the Whigs had acted, he felt certain that there could then be "a mass meeting of all friends of the [Pierce] nomination whether heretofore Union or fire-eater, Whig or Democrat." "By a premature arrangement with the fire-eaters," he warned, "we might drive off the Whig masses. By prudent conduct we may make Georgia a unit."[36]

Jackson's belief that "prudent conduct" might unify Georgians on the Pierce-King ticket did not appear ill-founded in the immediate aftermath of the Democratic convention. From Baltimore, Jackson went on to Washington for consultations with Stephens and Toombs. He happily reported that both found "the platform and the man ... entirely satisfactory." Toombs soon confirmed Jackson's

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[35] John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, June 6, 1852; James Jackson to Howell Cobb, June 8, 1852, Howell Cobb Papers.

[36] James Jackson to Howell Cobb, June 8, 1852, ibid.

analysis. Describing the Baltimore convention as a victory for Constitutional Union principles, he rejoiced that the platform resolutions on the compromise "are [so] full, clear & explicit, [that] no honest compromise man can object to them." Moreover, he expressed confidence that Pierce was "sound" on the vital issues facing the country. Like Jackson, Toombs predicted that the Whig convention would nominate Scott. Southern Whigs, he added, would rally to Pierce and "we shall have no trouble in Georgia."[37]

IV

It took but a matter of days to illustrate that Cobb would experience little except trouble in Georgia and elsewhere. The Baltimore convention scarcely had concluded before Regulars in Washington launched a whisper campaign claiming that Cass men believed Cobb's support had cost him the nomination. Although James Jackson assured the governor that Cass appreciated "our position and services," Tom Harris recognized a clear purpose in the rumor-mongering. "You are to be killed off not only at home, but with the democracy of the Country," he asserted; "Mr. Pierce ... must be made to understand in advance that Cobb ... is a cypher," while the Regular leaders "are the Solomons & great men in Israel."[38]

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[37] James Jackson to Howell Cobb, June 8, 1852; Robert Toombs to Howell Cobb, June 10, 1852, ibid.

[38] James Jackson to Howell Cobb, June 8, 1852; Thomas D. Harris to Howell Cobb, June 16, 1852, ibid.

Despite his own outrage, Harris pleaded with Cobb to "keep cool & quiet." The governor, in fact, did just that. Rather than flailing blindly at those spreading the rumors, he appealed directly to Cass for relief. The former candidate replied promptly. Although unaware of the whispered criticisms, he voiced certainty that they had not originated among the members of his campaign. As for Cobb, the former candidate insisted that no man ever had a "truer friend." Prominent members of the Cass campaign confirmed their leader's assessment. Confronted by these denials, the Regulars retreated from the fight.[39]

Even as Cobb turned back this Regular assault, the attack must have reminded him just how desperately he needed Union Whig support. When the Whig national convention convened in Baltimore on June 16, the prospects of continued cooperation between the Union Whigs and Union Democrats appeared to improve. The slavery issue had wrecked the Whig organization. As expected, the convention nominated General Winfield Scott, a Mexican War hero and firm opponent of slavery. Somewhat unexpectedly, the Whig delegates did appeal to their southern wing by adopting a platform which included a pro-compromise plank.[40]

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[39] Thomas D. Harris to Howell Cobb, June 25, 1852; Lewis Cass to Howell Cobb, June 29, 1852, ibid.

[40] Schott, Alexander H. Stephens, p. 148.

Neither Stephens nor Toombs were appeased by the Whig actions. Toombs conceded that the Whig party had "greatly strengthened itself by [its] new platform," but still expected the "Northern influence" to prevail over any concessions to the South. Two days after Scott's nomination, both men advised Union Whigs to withhold their support from the party's candidate.[41]

Encouraged by these developments, several Cobbites urged the governor to maintain -- if possible -- their alliance with the Whigs. Brother John saw two alternatives. The Constitutional Union party must either "convene & resolve themselves into the Democratic party & put out a ticket," or the "two wings ... of the old Democratic party [must] unite & have a 'new deal' in ... putting out an electoral ticket." For himself, Lamar maintained, "my impulses are all for the former if the Whigs are willing to form a permanent Democratic party with us."[42]

Even as Lamar outlined these two options, the Federal Union moved to eliminate chances for an equitable reunion with the Regulars. On June 22, the newspaper insisted that

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[41] Ibid.; Robert Toombs to Howell Cobb, June 24, 1852; Thomas D. Harris to Howell Cobb, June 25, 1852; Howell Cobb Papers.

[42] John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, June 22, 1852; Henry R. Jackson to Howell Cobb, June 22, 1852; A. J. Miller to William Steele, June 25, 1852; Thomas D. Harris to Howell Cobb, June 25, 1852; William Steele to Howell Cobb, June 26, 1852; Robert E. Martin to Howell Cobb, June 26, 1852, Howell Cobb Papers.

the slate of presidential electors named by the Regular convention must not be altered. On reading the Federal Union's editorial, Harris exploded in anger. Still fuming over the Regulars' rumor campaign, he raged, "I am mad almost to declaring myself a Scott man. Can it be possible that the fire-eating press of Ga. entertain the purpose of thrusting down our throats their electoral ticket, headed as it is by ... the most obnoxious men in the whole state." He pleaded with the governor to "escape these nuptials" with the Regulars. Certain that Stephens and Toombs could be brought on board, he begged that some means of maintaining the Union organization be found. Proclaiming an undying hatred for all Regulars, he avowed a burning "desire to put them down into the very dust."[43]

Cobb sought to make Harris' desires a reality. He planned another trip north where he hoped to maintain the status of Union Democrats within the national Democracy. Enroute, he stopped off in Savannah to plot strategy with several Union Democratic leaders. A relative wrote to Mary Ann from the city that despite temperatures which would make less buoyant souls "somewhat gloomy," the governor was "in his usual fine spirits."[44]

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[43] Milledgeville Federal Union, June 22, 1852; Thomas D. Harris to Howell Cobb, June 25, 1852, Howell Cobb Papers.

[44] Henry R. Jackson to John B. Lamar, June 26, 1852; Cornelia A. Jackson to Mary Ann Cobb, June 27, 1852, Howell Cobb Papers.

In the Savannah meeting which lasted late into the night of June 25, Cobb, Henry Jackson, John Ward, Richard Arnold, and others reached three critical conclusions. First, that they could neither recognize the Regulars as the legitimate Democracy of Georgia nor give their support to the Regulars' slate of presidential electors. The persistence of Regulars in maintaining their ticket, they reasoned, reflected a reckless disregard of the "true interests of the national Democracy" which sprang from a "vindictive desire of wreaking ... vengeance upon the Union Democrats." Second, that Union men must bring out their own Pierce-King electoral slate. Although confident that their ticket could carry the state, the group noted that even if the election went to the state legislature their friends would control it. Third, that this new Pierce-King ticket should be brought out by the Constitutional Union convention planned for July 15. If that convention refused to promulgate the desired ticket, then the Union Democratic delegates would have to do so independently.[45]

After entrusting Henry Jackson to circulate the results of the meeting to other Union leaders, Cobb headed north. In New York, he found much cordial feeling among northern and western Democrats towards the Union Democracy and bright prospects for Pierce. Although he received numerous invitations to speak, he only accepted one -- "to let my

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[45] Henry R. Jackson to Howell Cobb, June 26, 1852, ibid.

position be known" -- and thereafter declined the others. Besides resisting the urge to make speeches, the governor also resisted an inclination to "take the grand rounds of the city" because he felt compelled to "preserve the dignity of the office somewhat." While in the city, he also attempted to meet with Mary Ann's doctor, but, failing in that, he urged her to plan a trip to New York in the fall for a personal consultation.[46]

From New York, Cobb went on to Washington. There a "pleasant 'reunion' with my old friends" produced a renewed confidence. "Everything looks well here for the democratic party, and not withstanding the outbreak of the fire eaters of Ga., I feel perfectly certain that everything will work well there for our Union democratic friends. I was never better satisfied with the prospects of the future."[47]

As had been true of optimistic assessments so often over the past six months, events conspired to render this one erroneous even as Cobb made it. During the governor's absence, the impossibility of Union Democratic desires for a permanent Union machine became clear as the Constitutional Union movement rapidly swirled out of control. Nothing revealed the rush towards chaos so clearly as Cobb's inability to impose order on his own newspaper.

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[46] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, July 2, 1852; July 9, 1852, ibid.

[47] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, July 9, 1852, ibid.

During the last half of June, Hopkins Holsey and the Southern Banner embarked on an erratic course which befuddled friend and foe alike. Holsey first antagonized the Regulars by asserting the need for a new slate of Democratic presidential electors, with the lion's share of spots going to Union Democrats. He recklessly insisted that Union Democrats meant to have "54-40" on this point. Not surprisingly, this assertion alarmed Regulars who already feared that a compromise with the Union Democrats on their electoral slate would lead "at once" to claims "that they forced us to surrender & that they are the true party leaders." Holsey's wild declarations prompted the Federal Union editorial that had so angered Harris. Confronted by the firm response from the Regulars, Holsey meekly maintained that "in claiming up to 54-40 ... we by no means intended that we would not accept 49 as a compromise." He now called for a meeting of the Regular and Union Democratic executive committees to effect that compromise. If large numbers of Whigs wished to work for Pierce-King, he advised calling a statewide convention to select the new ticket.[48]

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[48] Athens Southern Banner, June 17, 1852; June 24, 1852; July 8, 1852; A. J. Miller to William Steele, June 25, 1852; William Steele to Howell Cobb, June 26, 1852; John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, July 1, 1852; A. Hood to Howell Cobb, July 5, 1852, Howell Cobb Papers; Montgomery, Cracker Parties, pp. 66-67; Joseph E. Brown to William L. Mitchell, June 21, 1852, E. Merton Coulter Collection, Felix Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia (Hereafter: Coulter Collection).

Then, acting on his own authority, the editor announced that "the Constitutional Union organization ... having accomplished its mission ... is henceforth dissolved." This meant, he added, that "the members are now at perfect liberty to take position with either of the national parties, without any imputation of a breach of faith." Neither Union Democrats nor Union Whigs knew what to make of this announcement.[49]

Most Union Democrats had anticipated that they would at least attempt to cooperate with the Union Whigs. Most resented the prospect that they soon might be subordinated to their Regular foes in a reconstituted Democracy which did not incorporate the Union Whigs. Holsey's editorials appeared to envision just the sort of reunion they dreaded. One angry Union Democrat bluntly informed Cobb that "Holsey is evidently crazy ... There's a screw loose. Your organ is out of tune. You would do well to see to it."[50]

An anxious Lamar alerted Cobb that he must not dally on his northern fence-mending mission. Warning that "every thing is in a very unorganized state," he pressed the

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[49] Athens Southern Banner, June 17, 1852; June 24, 1852; July 8, 1852; A. J. Miller to William Steele, June 25, 1852; William Steele to Howell Cobb, June 26, 1852; John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, July 1, 1852; A. Hood to Howell Cobb, July 5, 1852, Howell Cobb Papers; Montgomery, Cracker Parties, pp. 66-67.

[50] A. J. Miller to William Steele, June 25, 1852; William Steele to Howell Cobb, June 26, 1852; John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, July 1, 1852, A. Hood to Howell Cobb, July 5, 1852, Howell Cobb Papers.

governor to return to Georgia in time for the Constitutional Union convention. He complained that Holsey's editorials had generated considerable disorder within the Union organization, and would prompt many delegates to stay home.[51]

This blunder by the editor, however, represented but the tip of a growing disaster. Brother John groaned that Holsey's extreme assertions regarding Union Democratic claims to participate on the Regular Democratic ticket, followed by his hasty retreat, had given "our enemies the idea that we were disposed to supplicate." Worse still, Holsey's pronouncements had led Whigs "to believe ... that we were to unite with the S[outhern] R[ights] [men] ... & cast off our Whig friends cooly, when they no longer could serve our purpose."[52]

Lamar angrily added that Holsey's foolish actions had inspired the "fire eaters" who were now "as insolent as a set of drunken negroes on Christmas holiday." Noting Regular boasts "that we cannot put out a ticket that will carry 5000 votes," he warned that the Regulars "have their organization compact & their plans all laid & their people excited." With everything "as bad as it can be," he predicted, "it will require your utmost skill to <u>ward off ruin</u>." While certain that "their whole aim is at you," Lamar took consolation from

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[51] John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, July 1, 1852, <u>ibid</u>.

[52] <u>Ibid</u>.

the knowledge that "what depresses other men only stimulates you to action."[53]

Yet, Holsey's activities embodied but the most public manifestation of disorder in Unionist ranks. Lamar also relayed information that some Union Democratic leaders had suggested supporting the unaltered Regular ticket "rather than cause disturbance." He grimly noted that even John Lumpkin declined to attend the upcoming Constitutional Union convention. Lacking a reliable newspaper to get his views before the people, Lamar advised the governor to rely on his personal contacts to restore discipline.[54]

For the moment, Cobb could do nothing to "tune" his organ, so he took Lamar's advice about personal appeals for support. These produced few positive results. Lumpkin, for instance, persisted in his refusal to attend the Union convention. Although he attributed his refusal to business and family concerns, his lengthy explanation revealed underlying political motives.[55]

Despite the hostility demonstrated by the Regulars in Baltimore, Lumpkin admitted that he had continued to hope for a reconciliation. He now acknowledged that his dream of a reunited Democracy with a compromise slate of electors would

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[53] Ibid.

[54] Ibid.

[55] John H. Lumpkin to John B. Lamar, July 9, 1852; John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, July 11, 1852, ibid.

not be realized. The Regulars, he lamented, obviously cared nothing for the success of the Democracy's candidates or principles. He charged that they had only returned to the national organization to escape "utter annihilation" in Georgia, and would revert to their old secessionist tricks at the first opportunity. At present they sought only "to crush you and the Union democracy."[56]

Under the circumstances, Lumpkin sustained the idea of a second Pierce-King ticket in Georgia. He urged that the executive committee of the Union Democratic organization call for a Union Democratic convention to promulgate this ticket. Any Union Whigs willing to participate in a convention already committed to the national Democracy would be welcomed. If the Whigs preferred that it be called a Union ticket he cared not -- as long as they stood ready to sustain the national Democratic party. Lumpkin maintained, however, that he had participated in the Baltimore convention "as a Democrat"; that he supported both the candidates and the platform adopted by that convention; and that he "could not ... consistently with strict party obligations go into convention outside the National Democratic party." Thus, even as he vowed that "<u>my heart is with you, and my destiny is linked with that of yourself and the Union Democracy</u>," he nevertheless persisted that he could not "go into a Union

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[56] John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, July 11, 1852, <u>ibid</u>.

convention before it is pledged to the support of the Democratic nominees."[57]

Effectively, Lumpkin demanded that the Union Whigs agree to become Democrats before he would cooperate with them further. In truth, Cobb exercised less influence over the fragmented Union Whigs than he did over Holsey. One small group of Whigs offered outright support for Pierce. A second group, led by Senator William C. Dawson, had participated in the Whig national convention. Although Dawson's group had favored Fillmore's nomination, they resolved to support Scott. Stephens and Toombs led a third Whig faction. Immediately after the Baltimore convention, both men had expressed an inclination to support the national Democracy. With each passing day, however, their support grew more tentative. On June 24, Toombs pledged himself and Stephens to abide by the "action [of] the Union convention" and promised to press for a Pierce-King ticket. Four days later, Stephens published a letter urging Georgia Unionists to withhold their support from both national parties because neither had purged itself of unsound elements. He advocated the nomination of a third candidate. On July 14, his organ,

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[57] John H. Lumpkin to John B. Lamar, July 9, 1852; John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, July 11, 1852, ibid.

the Augusta Chronicle and Sentinel, suggested that Daniel Webster should be that man.[58]

The Constitutional Union convention assembled in Milledgeville on July 15. In light of the disorder and fragmentation which had grown within Unionist ranks since January, no one could have expected the meeting to succeed. Positions within the convention had been reversed since the April assemblage. Cobb's Union Democrats now held a comfortable majority. Many Union Whigs -- perhaps alienated by the refusal of Union Democrats to boycott Baltimore; perhaps confused by the pronouncements of Holsey; perhaps already determined to sustain Scott; or perhaps motivated by a mixture of the three -- stayed away. The Cobbites easily beat back an attempt by Stephens to endorse a ticket composed of Daniel Webster and Charles J. Jenkins of Georgia. The Cobb men and Union Whigs committed to the Democratic candidates then adopted a Pierce-King electoral slate for the Constitutional Union party.[59]

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[58] Schott, Alexander H. Stephens, pp. 148-149; Montgomery, Cracker Parties, pp. 65-69; Robert Toombs to Howell Cobb, June 24, 1852, Howell Cobb Papers; Alexander H. Stephens to the Editor of the Augusta Chronicle and Sentinel, June 28, 1852, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, pp. 304-306; (?) to Alexander H. Stephens, July 13, 1852, Alexander H. Stephens Papers, Library of Congress, Washington D.C. (Hereafter: Stephens Papers, LC); Augusta Chronicle and Sentinel, July 14, 1852.

[59] Milledgeville Southern Recorder, July 20, 1852; Milledgeville Federal Union, July 20, 1852; Athens, Southern Banner, July 22, 1852; Montgomery, Cracker Parties, pp. 69-71; Schott, Alexander H. Stephens, pp. 149-150.

Refusing to accept this decision, the Stephens-Toombs group -- quickly named the "Tertium Quids" by the state press -- withdrew from the convention and reassembled in a separate hall. After adopting pro-Webster resolutions, this group called a convention for August 17 to name their own electoral slate. With an eye to a possible reunion of Georgia Whiggery, the Tertium Quids scheduled their meeting to coincide with the convention called by Dawson's Scott Whigs. Both Whig factions made sincere efforts to effect a reconciliation, but without success. At their mid-August conventions, the Dawson group named an electoral slate committed to Scott, while the Tertium Quids remained firm in their loyalty to Webster. Georgia voters now possessed four presidential tickets vying for their support. Within a month, the muddled political situation in the Empire State of the South would grow even more confusing.[60]

V

The July convention effectively killed off the Constitutional Union party. Although its corpse continued to twitch for some weeks, the organization which had produced unparalleled political victories in Georgia could not be resuscitated. The party's demise produced immediate complications for Cobb. During the state's political realignment in the crisis of 1850, most Democratic newspapers

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[60] Milledgeville Southern Recorder, July 20, 1852; Schott, Alexander H. Stephens, pp. 149-150.

had cast their lot with the Southern Rights party, while Whig organs had sustained the Unionist crusade. With the collapse of the crisis party structure, the Southern Rights editors easily adopted the Regular Democratic line. Whig editors followed a trickier path to support of either Scott or Webster.[61]

These shifts in allegiance left the Union Democrats and their remaining Whig allies with few newspapers willing to shape public opinion in their favor. The few papers they still controlled were concentrated in the Fifth and Sixth Congressional Districts. Cousin Henry Jackson provided a stark analysis of the difficulty. "We cannot get along without papers," he observed with alarm, "We are now left without any organ in Augusta, Macon, & Milledgeville. This matter should be looked to at once." Yet, if Jackson could predict that failure to remedy this situation would ruin the chances of Union Democrats in two-thirds of the state, neither he nor Cobb possessed an immediate solution to the problem.[62]

Before a Union Democratic press could do much good, however, the Union Democrats must first develop a comprehensive strategy for the current presidential election.

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[61] Richard Harrison Shryock, Georgia and the Union in 1850 (Durham: Duke University Press, 1926), pp. 254-255, 286-288; Henry R. Jackson to Howell Cobb, July 20, 1852, Howell Cobb Papers.

[62] Henry R. Jackson to Howell Cobb, July 20, 1852; John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, July 27, 1852, Howell Cobb Papers.

In truth, the defection of their Whig allies left the Union Democrats with limited options. They could maintain the Constitutional Union ticket. Union Democrats now knew they had no hope of carrying Georgia, but with the Whigs divided between Scott and Webster and the Democratic factions each running a Pierce-King ticket, they did have a chance of denying any electoral slate a majority. If this proved to be the case, the election would be thrown into the state legislature. There, they felt reasonably confident that the shared goal among Regular and Union Democrats of a Pierce-King victory would serve as a lever to move the two Democratic factions towards an equitable reorganization.[63]

This strategy carried with it inherent risks. Since Baltimore, the flow of Union Democrats into the Regular faction had accelerated. Cobb and other Union Democratic leaders clearly recognized this trend. A frustrated Lumpkin substituted his previous contempt for Southern Rights men with hatred for the perfidious Union Whigs. "I am sick and tired of Whigs and Whiggery," he ranted, "our connection with them has been the principle reason that a majority of the democrats have gone against us." John Lamar expressed a similar understanding. He commented that Union Democratic strength had been reduced to "a handful in each of the midland & lower counties." This Union Democratic loss of

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[63] Henry R. Jackson to John B. Lamar, June 26, 1852; C. B. Cole to Howell Cobb, August 3, 1852; Thomas H. Bayly to Howell Cobb, August 14, 1852, ibid.

support raised the very real danger that their ticket would carry too few votes to influence the election. Should that occur, one friend warned, "the result will be exultingly referred to as proof ... that you had deserted the great body of the democrats of your state, & ... you will stand as the leader of a faction rather than ... the leader of a great party."[64]

Yet, a more ominous danger also existed. What if divisions between Regular and Union Democrats resulted in Georgia's electoral votes being cast for Scott or Webster? Although the likelihood of this event declined after the two Whig groups proved unable to patch over their differences, the specter of a reunited Whig party continued to haunt both Democratic factions throughout the summer.[65]

Regular and Union Democrats each launched campaigns to insure that the onus for a Democratic defeat in Georgia rested on the other. Using both editorials and private letters, the two factions accused their opponents of

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[64] Alex B. Morton to Howell Cobb, July 19, 1852; John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, July 23, 1852; John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, July 27, 1852; Thomas H. Bayly to Howell Cobb, August 14, 1852, ibid.

[65] Alex B. Morton to Howell Cobb, July 19, 1852; John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, August 2, 1852; Benjamin B. French to Howell Cobb, August 4, 1852; Garnett Andrews to John B. Lamar, August 4, 1852; John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, August 10, 1852; Thomas H. Bayly to Howell Cobb, August 14, 1852; William H. Hull to Howell Cobb, August 23, 1852, ibid; Herschel V. Johnson to Democratic Executive Committee, August 24, 1852, Herschel V. Johnson Papers, Special Collections Library, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina (Hereafter: HVJ, DU).

arrogantly placing self-interest above both Democratic principles and electoral success. Possessing neither the newspapers nor raw numbers of the Regulars, the Union Democrats fared poorly in this struggle. Reports from Washington revealed the extent of the Regulars' success. Benjamin French informed the governor of a widespread conviction "that it is perfectly in your power to cause a union of the two wings of the Democratic party on one Pierce & King electoral ticket." A failure by Cobb to act, he hinted, easily might result in a triumph for Georgia Whigs. Where French hinted, Thomas Bayly spoke with greater candor. If Pierce-King lost Georgia, he asserted, "your party being the minority one, will be looked upon as the seceders & will every where be held answerable for the result."[66]

The Union Democrats possessed one other option. They could seek an accommodation with the Regulars. This strategy, however, held its own dangers. Beginning in late 1851, the Regulars had begun to make overtures to the Union Democrats for a reconstitution of the old state organization.

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[66] Athens Southern Banner, August 5, 1852; August 12, 1852; Alex B. Morton to Howell Cobb, July 19, 1852; Solomon Cohen to Howell Cobb, July 28, 1852; Clipping from Albany Patriot, contained in William Steele to Howell Cobb, August 1, 1852; John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, August 2, 1852; August 10, 1852; Benjamin B. French to Howell Cobb, August 4, 1852; Thomas H. Bayly to Howell Cobb, August 14, 1852; William H. Hull to Howell Cobb, August 23, 1852; John E. Ward to Howell Cobb, August 24, 1852, Howell Cobb Papers; Herschel V. Johnson to Franklin Pierce, July 21, 1852; A. W. Venable to Franklin Pierce, July 22, 1852; Jonathan Lewis to Franklin Pierce, July 28, 1852, Franklin Pierce Papers, Library of Congress, Washington D.C. (Hereafter: Pierce Papers).

Humbled by their recent overwhelming defeats, they acknowledged a willingness to abide by the finality of the compromise measures. They named a Union Democrat to their slate of presidential electors, despite the absence of any sizeable Union Democratic contingent at their convention. They even voiced a willingness to modify their slate of electors to include more Union Democrats, if the Union Democrats agreed to abandon their organization immediately. The Union Democrats, still flush from their triumphs, still distrustful of the Regulars, and still hoping to forge a new state Democracy with the Whigs, rebuffed all these overtures. On occasion, they did so with such gloating arrogance as to reinvigorate old animosities.[67]

Following the Baltimore convention, the Regulars manifested much less inclination to make concessions. Indeed, they perceived less cause to act conciliatory. Joseph E. Brown -- one of the few men Cobb ever learned to hate -- gave voice to this sentiment when he protested calls to appease the Union Democrats by modifying the Regular ticket. "We have been recognized at Baltimore as the true democracy of Ga.," he avowed, "& it looks to me like a

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[67] Montgomery, Cracker Parties, pp. 56-61; James Jackson to Howell Cobb, June 8, 1852; Alex B. Morton to Howell Cobb, July 19, 1852; Solomon Cohen to Howell Cobb, July 28, 1852, Howell Cobb Papers; Milledgeville Federal Union, September 14, 1852.

surrender in the moment of victory for us now to yield to the Cobb men ... prominent places as leaders upon our ticket."[68]

A distinct antipathy toward Cobb and a growing awareness of Union Democratic weakness fueled these sentiments. In urging the Regular leadership to make no concessions to the Union Democrats, Brown explained that such "a step ... will place Cobb & Lumpkin in the lead of the democratic party in Ga." He saw no reason to make a needless error. He offered firm assurances that the Cobbites would never persist in maintaining a separate slate of electors because "it would not only show their [lack of] strength but would ruin them with the democratic party of the Union." At least one Regular Democrat vented his spleen directly to the governor. Solomon Cohen complained to Cobb that none of the Regular "efforts for conciliation were met in a corresponding spirit by you, or your party." In the past year, he snarled, Cobbites had treated the former Southern Rights men "as inferiors" and given Whigs preference in the allocation of "honors and offices."[69]

Cobb possessed no doubts about the depth of animosity which the Regulars felt towards him. He received numerous warnings of their determination to destroy him. Lamar

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[68] Joseph E. Brown to William L. Mitchell, June 21, 1852, Coulter Collection.

[69] Ibid.; Alex B. Morton to Howell Cobb, July 19, 1852; Solomon Cohen to Howell Cobb, July 28, 1852, Howell Cobb Papers.

informed him that "every Fire-eating hell-hound has slipped his leash & is yelling on your track to hunt you to the death." Brother John harbored no doubts that the continued loyalty of the Fifth and Sixth Districts represented the key to withstanding the coming onslaught. He maintained that these "districts form our defense against their vindictive fury." Let north Georgia remain "true to us," he declared, and "we can bide our time and wait for the reaction of next year." Although conceding that "our foes now have lost sight of all considerations" except "the one, cherished idea, of crushing you," he insisted, "if we can weather this storm, & come out of the contest with the mountain counties unshorn of their strength & faith, the fury will have spent itself."[70]

Lamar explained that in 1853, Georgia voters would go to the polls to elect legislators and congressmen. The legislature would elect a United States senator. In short, state politics would assume a more normal tone. Then Cobbites could resume their traditional status as a balance of power "to be courted & fawned on" by all factions. He believed that questions about the composition of the presidential ticket embodied the chief threat to Cobb's control over the mountain counties. An unsatisfactory

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[70] John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, July 27, 1852; August 2, 1852, Howell Cobb Papers.

arrangement on this one point, he feared, "may cause them to waver."[71]

Despite the difficulties and dangers inherent in seeking an accommodation with the Regulars, Cobb knew that most of his Union Democratic faction favored this course. The critical question, however, involved just how far Cobb and the Union Democrats would go to achieve a compromise. Much of the Regular leadership, still resentful of their treatment at the hands of the Union Democrats over the past two years, demanded surrender -- or at least public penance. They argued that their electoral slate represented a legitimate Democratic slate, composed of men committed to the platform and candidates adopted by the party's national convention. This ticket, they contended, rated support by any honest Democrat. The Union Democrats could best re-establish their Democratic credentials by abandoning their Constitutional Union organization and voting for the Regular ticket without complaint. Some Regular leaders did hint that a withdrawal of the Constitutional Union party's slate would result in a modified ticket.[72]

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[71] Ibid.

[72] John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, July 23, 1852; July 31, 1852; August 14, 1852; Garnett Andrews to John B. Lamar, August 4, 1852; James Jackson to John B. Lamar, August 6, 1852; James Jackson to Howell Cobb, August 6, 1852; John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, August 10, 1852; A. J. Miller to John B. Lamar, July 20, 1852; William H. Hull to Howell Cobb, August 23, 1852, ibid.; Milledgeville Federal Union, September 14, 1852.

A number of Union Democrats and all of the national Democrats with whom Cobb maintained communications urged a reconciliation even if it meant accepting the Regular electoral slate. They made no attempt to dissuade Cobb from viewing the electors on the Regular ticket as "justly obnoxious to you." Instead, they advised him to "look upon them as automatons -- as the mere agent to drop the ballot in the ballot box." Ominously, they warned, most rank and file Union Democrats probably would view the issue in just this fashion.[73]

Other Union Democrats also favored a reconciliation with the Regulars, but insisted that it be effected on terms other than unconditional surrender. No one desired a reunion of the Democracy more than John Lumpkin. On the eve of the Constitutional Union convention in mid-July, he regretfully had suggested that "it is as easy for oil and water to mix and mingle as it is for the two divisions of the Democracy to unite." In the wake of the Whig defection, he changed his mind. "I honestly confess," he admitted, "that I desire a

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[73] John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, July 1, 1852; Benjamin B. French to Howell Cobb, August 4, 1852; Garrett Andrews to Howell Cobb, August 4, 1852; James Jackson to Howell Cobb, August 6, 1852; John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, August 10, 1852; John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, August 14, 1852; Thomas H. Bayly to Howell Cobb, August 14, 1852; William H. Hull to Howell Cobb, August 23, 1852, Howell Cobb Papers.

compromise with the S. R. democrats upon fair and equal terms."[74]

Lumpkin offered concise reasons for his reversal. Besides being proper that all supporters of Pierce and King should unite on a single ticket, he believed a Democratic compromise would "teach ... whigs who have become so hostile to Gov. Cobb that they have jumped ... from the 'frying pan into the fire.'" Yet, while he pleaded for a compromise, Lumpkin insisted that Cobb make no embarrassing concessions. "I would not support the present [Regular] ticket and thereby recognize the organization of the Southern Rights party," he vowed, "even if there was no other ticket before the people for Pierce & King."[75]

Men who shared Lumpkin's views maintained that nothing less than a recasting of the current Regular ticket to include an appropriate number of Union Democratic electors would suffice. They believed this arrangement would achieve several objectives simultaneously. It virtually would guarantee the triumph of Pierce and King, while permitting the Union Democrats to retain "sufficient organization to keep ourselves from being crushed if [the Regulars] should seek revenge by proscription." Just as important, a

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[74] John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb,July 11, 1852; July 23, 1852; July 31, 1852; August 14, 1852; Garnett Andrews to Howell Cobb, August 4, 1852, ibid.

[75] John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb,July 11, 1852; July 23, 1852; July 31, 1852; August 14, 1852, ibid.

modification of the ticket would permit the Cobbites to avoid an abject surrender to former foes. These men legitimately feared that such a surrender -- either in appearance or reality -- would cost Cobb his entire political standing in the state and nation. Moreover, if the Union Democrats now extended the hand of compromise only to have it rejected by the Regulars, the responsibility of a Democratic defeat in Georgia would rest with their opponents.[76]

These men acknowledged the difficulties involved in carrying through such an arrangement. They understood that some Regular leaders "for the purpose of humbling Gov. Cobb & his friends have been ... opposed to the union of the Democracy," but insisted that this element represented no more than a small cabal. "Nine tenths of the rank and file of both divisions of the party," Lumpkin declared, "are for a fair and equal union of the two divisions." Democratic voters wanted this arrangement and meant to have it before November, he concluded, or those who had prevented it would "feel the power of the people."[77]

A third group within Union Democratic ranks posed a particular problem for the governor. This group had

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[76] Alex B. Morton to Howell Cobb, July 19, 1852; John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, July 11, 1852; July 23, 1852; July 31, 1852, August 14, 1852; Garnett Andrews to Howell Cobb, August 4, 1852; John E. Ward to Howell Cobb, August 24, 1852, ibid.

[77] William Steele to Howell Cobb, August 1, 1852; John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, July 31, 1852, ibid.

concluded that no arrangement other than complete surrender would satisfy the Regular faction. Determined that Union men should never be left thus "to the mercy of S. R. Democrats," they opposed any further attempts at a compromise ticket. Hopkins Holsey, as editor of the Southern Banner, proved the most important member of this group. Having been rebuffed once by the Regulars when seeking a compromise ticket, the editor swore that he would "give them no second opportunity to play that game upon him." The existence of a faction opposed to reconciliation, combined with one willing to support the Regular ticket rather than risk losing the state for Pierce, meant that whatever course Cobb pursued he probably would lose one wing of his Union Democratic organization.[78]

For two weeks after the demise of the Constitutional Union party, Cobb maintained a public silence regarding the best course for his Union Democrats to follow. He spent this time listening to the sentiments of his followers and consulting with Union Democratic leaders. On August 4, he drafted a letter which provided a general outline of his views. It appeared in the Southern Banner eight days later.[79]

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[78] A. J. Miller to Howell Cobb, July 20, 1852, ibid.; Athens Southern Banner, August 12, 1852.

[79] Howell Cobb to Orion Stroud, August 4, 1852, cited in Athens Southern Banner, August 12, 1852.

Cobb opened with criticism of the Whigs for their hostility to slavery and the Tertium Quids for advising Georgia voters to "throw away" their votes on a forlorn hope. He then declared that only the Democrats possessed both a platform and candidates sound on the compromise and the "Georgia Platform." Finding it incomprehensible "that there should be any dissentient voice in our state to the election of Gen. Pierce," he predicted that the Democratic candidate "will probably receive the largest vote ever given in Georgia to any presidential candidate since the unanimous vote given to Gen. Jackson." Yet divisions within the ranks of Pierce supporters threatened to mar this potential victory.[80]

While avoiding a digression on the origins of divisions within the Georgia Democracy, Cobb made clear his belief that the Regulars bore full responsibility for the current obstacles to a reunion of the state's Democratic factions. He complained that the Southern Rights party had met prior to the Baltimore convention, assumed the name of the Democratic party, and "placed their electoral ticket before the people of Georgia" -- prior to the nomination of a presidential candidate. Union Democrats had been unable to participate in these proceedings because they felt constrained by principle to await the action of the national Democratic convention.[81]

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[80] Ibid.

[81] Ibid.

Since Baltimore, however, Cobb asserted that "I have favored the proposition to run but one electoral ticket." Nevertheless, he avowed, "I could not myself support a ticket nor ask my friends to support it in the selection of which we have not participated and which its leading friends ... pertinaciously insisted should not be disturbed, for the purpose of conciliation and compromise." The "more liberal and just minded advocates" of the Regular ticket, he added, admitted that this amounted to "asking Union men to do what under similar circumstances they would not have been willing to have done themselves."[82]

Confronted with an impossible situation, Cobb reasoned, the Union Democrats had been compelled to put out their own Constitutional Union ticket. They now had no choice "but to stand by it to the end, unless a fair and honorable compromise could be made in the selection of one electoral ticket which could unite all the friends of Pierce and King in its support." He still favored such an arrangement over two separate tickets. "If divisions exist and continue and there should result from them any unhappy consequences," he concluded, "the fault will not be with me or my friends."[83]

Two days after penning this letter, Cobb and his closest advisors implemented a strategy designed to bridge the Regular-Union Democratic schism. With the governor's

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[82] Ibid.

[83] Ibid.

approval, James Jackson prepared a circular letter addressed to all members of the Constitutional Union slate. It requested each elector to "place his name at the disposal of the Union Executive Committee." As soon as the electors had accepted this request, Jackson instructed Lamar to extend a formal offer for a compromise ticket to the Regulars.[84]

Upon receiving Jackson's instructions, Lamar convened a meeting of the executive committee of the Constitutional Union party. The committee decided to go much further than either Cobb or Jackson had intended. After receiving responses from the members of the electoral slate, it authorized Lamar to issue an address "disbanding the party & giving a few obvious reasons for it." These reasons included the danger posed by two separate tickets to the success of Pierce-King and the expense of calling the legislature into a special session if no ticket received a majority. The committee also instructed Lamar to include "a delicate allusion to the responsibility assumed by the S. R. party in persisting in excluding a large portion of the friends of P&K from any participation in the ticket."[85]

Unexpectedly, the committee also recommended against making any "overtures of reconciliation" to the Regulars. Instead, it urged that the Union organization "disband in

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[84] James Jackson to Howell Cobb, August 6, 1852; James Jackson to John B. Lamar, August 6, 1852, Howell Cobb Papers.

[85] John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, August 10, 1852, ibid.

silence." Then, "if Pierce carries the state, it is because we made sacrifices ... & if he should fail, the responsibility rests wholly with the S. R. party." Lamar and the other members of the committee suggested that this "dignified course" actually had the best chance of producing a true compromise. They believed that the large mass of Regulars favored a reconciliation. Such sacrifice by the Union Democrats would spur the Regular rank and file to demand it. Moreover, this act of Union Democratic forbearance would force the Regulars "to shoulder the awful responsibility" that many potential Pierce-King voters might stay home on election day "because their feelings have been spurned by having no representation on the electoral ticket." Lamar assured Cobb that he could reconvene the committee quickly if this policy proved objectionable.[86]

Cobb's precise reaction to these suggestions is not recorded. Indeed, it is not clear how much time he really had to ponder the wisdom of the committee's proposals. During the first week of August, he received news that young Lamar had sustained a serious injury at school. On August 6, he and Mary Ann rushed to Marietta to check on their son. While playing, the boy had been struck a sharp blow to the head. The blow fractured the front of his skull near the eye, and subsequent movement by a bone chip had opened an ulcer on the eyelid. Besides being painful, the injury

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[86] Ibid.

produced frequent swelling in one or both eyes. The doctors treating Lamar warned that the ulceration would not heal until the bone chip had worked its way out of the wound. This process, they predicted, would be long and tedious. The doctors' prediction proved correct. It took more than a year for the boy's eye to heal. Under the circumstances, Lamar could not be left at boarding school and the anxious parents brought him home to Athens. Poor John A. now felt more alone than ever.[87]

Following his return from Marietta, Cobb yielded to the suggestion that the Constitutional Union party be officially disbanded. He apparently objected, however, to the recommendation that the Union Democrats make no formal attempt to force a reconciliation. While the committee's idea might represent the best theoretical means of exercising moral force, it hardly embodied practical political wisdom. Cobb knew that his forces had grown steadily weaker since January. The act of surrender envisioned by the Executive Committee seemed likely to hasten that erosion of support. Thus, even as the governor acceded to the lowering of the Constitutional Union banner, he almost certainly insisted

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[87] James Jackson to John B. Lamar, August 6, 1852; Mary Ann Cobb to John B. Lamar, January 16, 1853; Howell Cobb to John A. Cobb, June 8, 1853; Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, October 21, 1853; Mary Ann Cobb to Lamar Cobb, February 26, 1854, ibid.

that some means be found of maintaining the possibility of separate Union Democratic action.[88]

Lamar and the members of his committee fulfilled these requirements. In mid-August, they issued an address formally disbanding the Constitutional Union party and withdrawing its slate of presidential electors. The party having fulfilled its mission, they maintained, no longer served any constructive purpose. Several members of the committee, led by Lamar, then issued a second address calling for a convention in Atlanta on September 18 for "all friends of Pierce and King." There, they hoped, a truly Democratic ticket which represented both Regulars and Union Democrats might be promulgated. Should the Regulars refuse to participate in a compromise settlement at Atlanta, the Union Democrats would still possess the chance to put forth yet another ticket.[89]

VI

Initially, it appeared that this bid to restore the old Georgia Democracy on terms favorable to Cobb and his Union Democrats might succeed. John E. Ward reported from Washington that Cobb's public letter had received "the entire

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[88] "Address of the Executive Committee to the Constitutional Union Party of Georgia," August 1852; "Address of a Portion of the Executive Committee to the Union Democracy and Union Whigs, friends of Pierce and King," August, 1852, in R. P. Brooks, ed., "Howell Cobb Papers," The Georgia Historical Quarterly, V (December, 1921), 54-58.

[89] Ibid.

approval ... of ... all Democrats ... and the impression ... now is that the Union men have through you, done all which can be expected of them." If Pierce failed to carry the state, he concluded, national Democrats now acknowledged that "the blame must rest upon the Southern Rights men."[90]

Within Georgia itself, John Lamar observed strong opposition to reconciliation by the Ultra wing of the Regular Democracy. He nevertheless concluded that "the ball [of reconciliation] is in motion ... & increasing as it rolls." Noting that Cobb's opponent in the gubernatorial race, Charles McDonald, had assumed direction of the Ultra opposition, he predicted "if friend McDonald dont get out of its way it will crush all that was left uncrushed of him last year."[91]

Even better, several prominent Regular leaders endorsed the course pursued by the Union Democrats. Herschel V. Johnson, who had been instrumental in guiding the Regulars back into the national Democracy, declared that the dissolution of the Constitutional Union party "removes all obstacle to an amicable healing of the schism which has unfortunately existed in the ranks of the Democracy." Convinced that this development should be "hailed with pleasure by every friend of Pierce and King," Johnson urged

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[90] John E. Ward to Howell Cobb, August 24, 1852, Howell Cobb Papers.

[91] John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, September 4, 1852; September 5, 1852, ibid.

his fellow Regulars to respond "cordially and promptly" to the planned Union Democratic meeting in Atlanta. In order to facilitate a compromise, he placed his spot on the Regular electoral slate at the disposal of the Democratic Executive Committee. That group, he said, should feel at liberty to replace him with a Union Democrat if that would further the reconciliation process. Three other electors on the Regular ticket rapidly followed Johnson's example.[92]

Cobb expressed considerable confidence that the tide had turned once more in his favor. He confided to Mary Ann from Milledgeville that "politically things look well -- the address of the Executive Committee are well received here with all the Pierce & King men, and there is an enthusiastic spirit in favor of a compromise." If the same attitudes prevailed throughout the state, and "if we can avoid any discussion of details until the 18th," then he believed "there will be a regular love feast at Atlanta."[93]

The governor voiced similar confidence in letters to his old college chum, Henry L. Benning. Benning, a Columbus attorney, had supported the Southern Rights cause. Both men rejoiced that they would soon "be together again," and Benning gave qualified approval to his friend's assertion

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[92] Herschel V. Johnson to the Democratic Executive Committee, August 24, 1852, HVJ, DU; Milledgeville Federal Union, September 14, 1852; Montgomery, Cracker Parties, pp. 79-80.

[93] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, August 27, 1852; Howell Cobb to "Gentlemen," September 5, 1852, Howell Cobb Papers.

that a "universal feeling in favor of conciliation" existed within the state. In light of all these developments, Cobb could hardly be faulted for his conviction that "the future is bright and brightening."[94]

The Cobbites, however, wisely opted not to remain passive during the weeks between the disbanding of the Constitutional Union party and the planned Atlanta meeting. Their most important efforts focused on attempts to win the support of Pierce for a reconciliation on their terms. John Ward devised the basic strategy. In a meeting with vice-presidential candidate, William R. King, he learned that the Pierce administration would deny patronage to "that portion of the party" which prevented a reunion in Georgia. Spurred by this information, Ward headed to New Hampshire where he took station "not very far from the residence of Genl. Pierce." From there, he appealed to Cobb for a letter "strongly expressing your desire for a union of the Democrats in Georgia." Once he received this letter, Ward vowed to meet with Pierce and present it to him. He would then press the candidate to further the cause of reconciliation by writing to both Cobb and McDonald "expressing to each of you his wish for the union of the party in Georgia." The

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[94] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, August 27, 1852; Howell Cobb to Henry L. Benning, cited in Henry L. Benning to Howell Cobb, September 2, 1852; Henry L. Benning to Howell Cobb, September 2, 1852, ibid.

Regulars, he predicted, would ignore such a request at their peril.[95]

Cobb provided Ward with the desired letter and Ward met with Pierce as planned. The candidate completely charmed Cobb's emissary, who reported that he had entered the meeting "a warm and ardent supporter of the Democratic Candidate," but left "an enthusiastic supporter of Genl. Pierce." The candidate praised Cobb's communication as "'a fine letter and just such a letter as he should have expected from you from the opinion he had always formed of you.'" Although Pierce had received several letters from Regulars denouncing Cobb and advising him to avoid taking any position on Georgia's internal politics, he agreed to intervene. Besides writing the desired letters urging both Regulars and Union Democrats to heal the party schism, he repeated King's vow that a Pierce administration would deny patronage to either faction that frustrated reconciliation attempts. Convinced that Pierce would credit Cobb with a successful reunion of the state organization, Ward pushed the governor "to leave nothing undone to secure this result and to write to [Pierce] fully upon this subject."[96]

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[95] John E. Ward to Howell Cobb, August 24, 1852, ibid.

[96] Herschel V. Johnson to Franklin Pierce, July 21, 1852; A. W. Venable to Franklin Pierce, July 22, 1852; Jonathan Lewis to Franklin Pierce, July 28, 1852, Pierce Papers; John E. Ward to Howell Cobb, September 10, 1852; September 13, 1852; Franklin Pierce to Howell Cobb, September 10, 1852; Franklin Pierce to James Gardner, Jr., September 10, 1852, Howell Cobb Papers.

Despite these strenuous efforts on the state and national scene, events once more conspired to dash Cobb's hopes. Charles McDonald, perhaps motivated by a desire to revenge his defeat in 1851, rejected overtures from national leaders and continued a fairly effective campaign to shore up opposition to a modified electoral ticket. Disarray within Union Democratic ranks made McDonald's task easier. The decision to disband the Constitutional Union party and withdraw its ticket had contributed to the confusion. Most Union Democrats approved the decision, but a vocal minority, led by Holsey, opposed it. This minority almost certainly provided political cover for Ultras who preferred to avoid compromise.[97]

On September 2, a group of the most extreme southern-rights men met in convention. Outraged by the prospect of concessions to the Union Democrats by the Regulars, this group revived the Southern Rights party. They nominated a former Georgia governor, George M. Troup, for president and John A. Quitman of Mississippi for vice-president. The revival of the Southern Rights party proved decisive. The

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[97] Thomas Ritchie to Franklin Pierce, August 26, 1852, Pierce Papers; William H. Hull to Howell Cobb, August 23, 1852; John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, September 4, 1852; September 5, 1852, Howell Cobb Papers; Augusta Constitutionalist, August 14, 1852, cited in Athens Southern Banner, August 19, 1852; Athens Southern Banner, August 19, 1852; Montgomery, Cracker Parties, pp. 80-82; Horace Montgomery, "Hopkins Holsey," in Horace Montgomery, ed., Georgians in Profile, Historical Essays in Honor of Ellis Merton Coulter (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1958), p. 216.

Regular leadership, fearing further erosion from the Ultra wing of their party, began to back away from compromise with the Union Democrats. On September 7, the Federal Union signalled this change when it declared that any attempt to modify the existing Democratic ticket would weaken Pierce's chances in the state. Seven days later -- just four days before the Atlanta meeting -- the newspaper announced that the Regular executive committee had resolved not to alter their existing ticket. Nevertheless, the executive committee did take pains to be in Atlanta when the meeting convened.[98]

The Regular retreat away from a compromise ticket concerned Cobb, and by September 9, he conceded that "the political news is not very good, the spirit of harmony is not so all powerful as I had hoped it would be." It also forced the Union Democrats to give final consideration to their course if the planned "love feast" in Atlanta failed to materialize. The Union Democrats still possessed only two options. They must either promulgate another electoral slate or acquiesce in the existing Democratic ticket.[99]

Both options had advocates. Holsey had momentarily relented from his previously advanced position. He now seemed inclined to accept a reconciliation with the Regulars -- provided they agreed to modify the ticket. He even

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[98] Montgomery, Cracker Parties, pp. 80-82; Milledgeville Federal Union, September 7, 1852; September 14, 1852.

[99] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, September 9, 1852, Howell Cobb Papers.

acknowledged that the planned presence of the Regular executive committee in Atlanta while the Union Democrats met pointed towards a fair settlement. Still, he did not believe that the Regulars had acted "in good faith" when they had made previous offers of peace, and he persisted in his determination not to "support the ticket as it stands." If the Regulars refused to modify their slate, then the Union Democrats must put out a ticket of their own.[100]

James Jackson proved the most effective proponent of the alternative. He argued that any attempt to mount an independent Union Democratic ticket would prove a "suicidal policy" which he would "earnestly oppose." He believed that regardless of what happened in Atlanta, those participating in the meeting should issue a declaration asserting the single idea "'everything for the cause, nothing for men." Their objective now must be to "disarm the factious spirit of opposition on the part of our foes, not by a similar course of faction, but by true devotion to principle." Jackson justified his appeal to principle in the most practical of terms. "These people have the advantage of us now because the National convention endorsed their organization," he reasoned, and "we must look to the future & shape our policy accordingly." The Union Democrats must

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[100] Hopkins Holsey to Howell Cobb, September 16, 1852, in Brooks, "Howell Cobb Papers," pp. 60-62.

not risk a factional fight against an overwhelming foe, he contended, "we can make nothing out of it, & may lose all."[101]

As Cobb had begun to fear, the earlier expectations of a love feast in Atlanta largely had evaporated when the Union Democratic delegates began arriving in the city on September 17. In a preliminary meeting before the convention officially opened the next morning, dispirited delegates named a committee headed by Henry R. Jackson to open negotiations with the Regular executive committee which also had reached the city. Although the Regular leadership carried on these negotiations "in kind and conciliatory language," the efforts to secure a modified ticket "resulted in nothing." The Regular electoral slate would stand as originally selected.[102]

The next day, Jackson reported these disappointing results to the thinly attended convention. He then submitted a recommendation -- endorsed by a majority of the members of his committee -- that the Union Democrats should not put out another slate of Pierce electors. Such a step, he warned could do no good and would produce much harm by perpetuating the schism within Democratic ranks. Bowing to the wisdom of

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[101] C. Murphy to Howell Cobb, September 11, 1852; James Jackson to Howell Cobb, September 17, 1852, Howell Cobb Papers.

[102] Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, September 18, 1852, ibid.; Milledgeville Federal Union, September 28, 1852; Montgomery, Cracker Parties, pp. 82-83.

this course, the delegates adopted Jackson's report and adjourned.[103]

Cobb wasted no time in reporting to Brother John on these developments. He noted that the policy "to run no ticket" adopted by the Atlanta meeting, echoed "just what your committee originally determined." Although he had not protested the convention action, he confessed that it gave him no satisfaction. "I desired to run a ticket," he lamented, "but I found such dissensions within our ranks as to render it impracticable & unwise, though my feelings to the last urged me to that policy." Now, he saw no alternative to contending "with our enemies in the ... democratic party instead of out of it. Time alone can tell the result." For the moment, he admitted that "we are certainly under a cloud," but "with proper energy and spirit," he felt hopeful that "we shall have a brighter day to dawn upon us and we must bide our time."[104]

Yet even as Cobb struggled to maintain his usual optimism, he understood that the campaign to re-establish his standing in the state Democracy represented but one difficulty in his immediate future. He also recognized that as a result of the Atlanta meeting "there will be an exhibition of much bad feeling in our own small column."

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[103] Milledgeville Federal Union, September 28, 1852; Montgomery, Cracker Parties, pp. 82-83.

[104] Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, September 18, 1852, Howell Cobb Papers.

While hopeful that ill-feelings within Union Democratic ranks might soon "die away," he fully anticipated "an awful outbreak" by Holsey whom he expected "will be carried away by the first impulses of his indignation and passion." Moreover, it appeared that "every Union democratic editor" shared his attitude. Convinced that "the electoral ticket unchanged will fail to carry the state," Cobb took some consolation in the belief that "we will not be responsible for it."[105]

The divisions in "our small column" which Cobb anticipated manifested themselves more rapidly than he might have expected. On the same day that the Atlanta meeting resolved not to run an electoral ticket, a group of disgruntled delegates from the Cherokee region of north Georgia, met to decide on an alternative strategy. Composed of "a few Democrats & more Whigs," the press dubbed this the "Tugalo" faction, after a river in the Georgia mountains. Led by William B. Wofford, the Tugaloes nominated their own slate of Pierce electors. From Atlanta, they dispersed to their homes throughout the mountain counties. There, Cobb learned from friends and enemies, they adopted a tone "very bitter -- very bitter and denunciatory towards you."[106]

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[105] Ibid.

[106] Montgomery, Cracker Parties, p. 83; Athens Southern Banner, September 23, 1852; John W. Burke to Howell Cobb, September 20, 1852; Arthur Hood to Howell Cobb, September 22, 1852; William H. Pritchard to Howell Cobb, September 27, 1852; John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, October 3, 1852, Howell

Holsey reacted to these developments just as Cobb had predicted. The editor, who had not attended the Atlanta meeting, immediately embraced the Tugalo slate. Declaring that the Tugaloes owed allegiance to no party, the Southern Banner appealed for support from "all men who hate tyranny" but wanted Pierce and King elected. Those Union Democrats who refused to support the Tugalo ticket, it claimed, were no better than "SLAVES" returning to their "SOUTHERN RIGHTS MASTERS."[107]

Also, just as Cobb had feared, other Union Democratic editors shared Holsey's bitter antagonism. The Marietta Union, for instance, attributed the action by the Atlanta meeting to a plot "laid either by Gov. Cobb or among his friends in Chatham." The bitterness of the denunciations levelled both by the Tugaloes and the Union indicates that, whatever Cobb's personal inclination regarding a second Pierce ticket, he kept his views confidential.[108]

The only bright spot in an otherwise dark picture derived from the apparent good-will engendered among the Regulars by the sacrifice of the Union Democrats at Atlanta. Cobb had scarcely returned to his gubernatorial duties in Milledgeville before he observed this new sentiment. "The

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Cobb Papers.

[107] Athens Southern Banner, September 23, 1852.

[108] Marietta Union, cited in Montgomery, Cracker Parties, pp. 83-84.

Southern Rights people, with whom I have met," he commented, "dont hesitate to denounce the course of their leaders as illiberal & unjust." Nor did he see any "exhibition of triumphant feeling" among Regular leaders. None other than Charles McDonald, he commented, now "struggled hard to convince our friends that he had been misunderstood." These expressions of sympathy sparked renewed hopes for Cobb that the Regular ticket might yet be modified.[109]

Similar observations arrived from across the state. Henry Jackson summarized the feeling of most Cobbites when he reported that "our Union friends ... think we have obtained a decided victory [over] the S. R. leaders. I have heard many of the S. R. men say the same." The Regulars, he contended, "are convinced of having made a fatal exhibition of a want of devotion to principle in refusing ... to change the electoral ticket ... Concession was victory, instead of defeat."[110]

Even the Federal Union manifested an inclination to forget past disputes. When Tugalo newspapers charged that the Regulars had not abandoned their determination "to crush Gov. Cobb," the newspaper denied it. "If the position of Gov. Cobb is such as we have understood it to be," it

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[109] Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, September 20, 1852, Howell Cobb Papers.

[110] Henry R. Jackson to Howell Cobb, September 22, 1852; October 2, 1852; John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, October 3, 1852, ibid.

proclaimed, "so far from a desire to sacrifice his excellency the re-united Democracy of Georgia will accord him all honor, and ascribe to him all praise for his magnanimity and patriotism." It would be months before it became clear whether these professions represented a sincere desire for an honorable peace, or merely convenient rhetoric for a presidential campaign.[111]

VII

By mid-September, Georgians had five presidential tickets from which to choose: the two Pierce-King tickets of the Democrats and the Tugaloes; the Scott-Graham ticket of the Whigs; the Webster-Jenkins ticket of the Tertium Quids; and the Troup-Quitman ticket of the Southern Rights party. This political thicket became more confusing when Daniel Webster died on October 24. Although his demise left the Tertium Quids "all in a heap," Stephens and Toombs declined to take down their ticket. John Lamar jokingly suggested that they hoped to win the votes of the "'Rappers'" -- a group that believed it possible to communicate with the spirits of the dead.[112]

After Atlanta, Cobb quickly renewed his efforts to maintain his standing with the Pierce campaign. Recalling the assertions by both Pierce and King that they would punish

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[111] Milledgeville Federal Union, October 12, 1852.

[112] John B. Lamar to Mary Ann Cobb, October 27, 1852, Howell Cobb Papers.

whichever faction hindered a reunion of the Democracy in Georgia, Cobb provided the presidential candidate with his analysis of the Atlanta meeting. "It is to be regretted," he lamented, "that the Union democracy were not met in that spirit of conciliation and compromise which they sought to invoke." Yet, in having done "all -- if not more than could reasonably have been expected from them," the Union Democrats had placed "the responsibility of the future ... upon other shoulders."[113]

Cobb acknowledged that "a portion of the Union Democrats, outraged in their feelings at the course of the [Regular] democrats ... have put up another ticket." He insisted, however, that "this movement meets my decided disapprobation," and vowed to "do all I can to discountenance it." While he suspected the Tugaloes might succeed in forcing the election into the legislature, he assured Pierce that "your success there is pretty certain." With a clear eye on political effect rather than sincerity, the governor contended that "I do not propose to enlist your feelings in our domestic quarrels. It is bad enough to quarrel among ourselves, without seeking to involve our friends at a distance in our feuds."[114]

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[113] Robert M. Charlton to Franklin Pierce, September 21, 1852; Howell Cobb to Franklin Pierce, September 26, 1852, Pierce Papers.

[114] Howell Cobb to Franklin Pierce, September 26, 1852, ibid.

Keeping his promise to Pierce, Cobb worked quietly to undermine the Tugaloes. Despite his personal preference for a separate Union Democratic electoral slate, he viewed the Tugalo movement as a tactical error. In late September and early October, he actively sought to break up its ticket by urging General W. B. Wofford to decline service as an elector. The Regulars, working through Henry Jackson, sought to facilitate this strategy by offering Wofford a spot on their electoral ticket. These efforts failed. Wofford regretfully rejected Cobb's appeal and the Regular offer. Declaring himself Cobb's true friend, he professed to be "lost without you." Wofford nonetheless maintained that "the leaders of the [Regular] wing of the Democrats have acted badly and upon their heads must rest the responsibility." With this rebuff, Cobb apparently abandoned his efforts against the Tugaloes.[115]

Yet, if Cobb frowned on the Tugalo ticket, he manifested no better liking for that of the Regulars. Even before the Atlanta meeting convened, the Savannah Republican had charged that "the object of the [Regulars] is apparent. The leaders have determined to destroy Howell Cobb" by forcing him "to stand aloof in the present canvass and thus ruin him both at home and abroad." Whether or not this had been the strategy of the Regulars, their refusal to compromise on the ticket

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[115] Arthur Hood to Howell Cobb, September 22, 1852; Henry R. Jackson to Howell Cobb, October 2, 1852; W. B. Wofford to Howell Cobb, October 7, 1852, Howell Cobb Papers.

certainly left him in an awkward position. Having publicly declared in August that he could neither support nor encourage his friends to support an unmodified Regular electoral slate, he now found it impossible to do more now than maintain an uncomfortable silence.[116]

Cobb's refusal to give strong public support to the Regular Democratic ticket alarmed Henry Jackson. While Jackson empathized with his cousin's sensibilities, he believed that recent events had rendered them meaningless. "I know your position well," he insisted, "but ... I think that you ought now to come out & take a decided stand for this ticket." By their sacrifice in Atlanta, he repeated, Cobb and the Union Democrats had "completely got the advantage of the [Regulars]. They feel it."[117]

Jackson offered a variety of reasons for Cobb to alter his position. Many Regulars had wanted to see the ticket altered at Atlanta and many -- like Herschel Johnson -- had taken steps to make a modification possible. He claimed that the failure to effect the modification had more to do with party rules and misconceptions of the public will than evil intent. Following the Atlanta meeting, he added, Regulars

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[116] Savannah Daily Republican, cited in Augusta Chronicle and Sentinel, September 18, 1852, from a typescript in Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collection; William H. Pritchard to Howell Cobb, September 27, 1852; Henry R. Jackson to Howell Cobb, October 2, 1852; October 9, 1852, Howell Cobb Papers; Columbus Times, cited in Athens Southern Banner, January 6, 1853.

[117] Henry R. Jackson to Howell Cobb, October 2, 1852, Howell Cobb Papers.

had offered to make a spot on their ticket for General Wofford, if that would appease the Tugaloes. "There is a desire for change, attempts to change, an actual change of the ticket provided a Union Democrat will accept it," he reasoned, "should we not I ask, earnestly ask, should we not take the will for the deed?"[118]

Jackson argued that neither Cobb nor his loyal followers really cared which individual Democrats cast the state's electoral votes. Their real interest had always been "the policy." The policy, he declared, "has been conquered. It is with us." Under the circumstances, he believed that Cobb owed it "to principle, to your position in the national Democracy, [and] to the feelings of [Regulars] who sympathize with us," to sustain the existing Democratic ticket publicly. Moreover, he warned, Cobb must take decisive action or "lose position with the Democracy." If the Regular Democratic ticket carried the state outright -- a development which Jackson believed likely -- "it is important to have it appear that it was your influence that produced the result, at least that your influence did not oppose it."[119]

Cobb did not find cousin Henry's arguments compelling. Personally convinced that the Tugalo ticket would carry enough votes to throw the election in Georgia into the

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[118] Ibid.

[119] Henry R. Jackson to Howell Cobb, October 2, 1852; October 9, 1852, ibid.

legislature, he began drafting a letter for publication which placed responsibility for this result on the Regulars. When he confided his intention to his cousin, Jackson pleaded with him to hold back until the likely outcome of the election became clearer. If it looked like the Regulars might carry the state, he advised the governor to declare his intention of voting for their ticket. Before Cobb had an opportunity to consider this advice, family tragedy intruded to remove him momentarily from the Georgia political scene.[120]

VIII

On October 9, the same day that Henry Jackson begged him to reconsider the contents of his planned public letter, Cobb received an urgent message to return home to Athens. Laura, his and Mary Ann's second daughter and youngest child, had been ill for several days. Now, the doctors feared that a rapid turn for the worse might be imminent. Three days later, at six o'clock in the morning, the infant succumbed to complications from "bowel complaint & teething." Cobb arrived from Milledgeville ten hours later. He found his wife crushed by grief and rapidly lapsing back into her previous "nervous affliction." Growing profoundly worried when her "nervous spasms ... assumed a more painful and alarming character," Cobb resolved to take Mary Ann to New

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[120] John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, October 3, 1852; W. B. Wofford to Howell Cobb, October 7, 1852; Henry R. Jackson to Howell Cobb, October 9, 1852; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, October 9, 1852; Howell Cobb to (?), undated manuscript, ibid.

York. There, she would benefit from "a change of air and scene" while being treated by Dr. Bedford.[121]

Besides providing Mary Ann with a change of scene, the trip to New York also provided Cobb with a welcome political respite. Outside Georgia, he could work for Pierce and King without having to take a public position on the Regular or Tugalo tickets. He took advantage of the opportunity, and in the closing days of the campaign delivered an enthusiastic speech for the Democratic candidates in a "grand demonstration" at Tammany Hall.[122]

Cobb's activities in New York did not go unobserved at home. Some Regulars, with surprising insensitivity, suspected that the governor's hasty departure for the North reflected more of political escape than family concern. The Augusta Constitutionalist groused that if Cobb "has 'thought proper to take the stump for Mr. Pierce,' Georgia would have been a fairer field for his efforts." Brother John snapped back that "some dogs will snarl even if you feed them on mince pies."[123]

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[121] Martha J. Jackson to Howell Cobb, October 9, 1852; O. H. Prince to John B. Lamar, October 12, 1852; Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, October 13, 1852; Howell Cobb to John A. Cobb, October 20, 1852, ibid.

[122] New York Daily Times, October 27, 1852; John B. Lamar to Mary Ann Cobb, November 2, 1852; John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, November 6, 1852, Howell Cobb Papers.

[123] Augusta Constitutionalist, cited in John B. Lamar to Mary Ann Cobb, November 2, 1852; John B. Lamar to Mary Ann Cobb, November 2, 1852; Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, November 6, 1852, Howell Cobb Papers.

The Cobbs had not yet departed the city when the nation's voters went to the polls. As expected, Pierce won the presidency with a substantial majority in the electoral college. His majority in the popular vote was much narrower. In Georgia, Cobb's expectation of a deadlock among the five electoral slates proved unfounded. The Regular Democratic ticket carried the state with ease in an election which witnessed a thirty-five percent drop in voter turn-out over 1851. Of some 60,500 votes cast, the Regular ticket received 33,400; the Scott ticket, 16,000; the Tugalo ticket, 5,775; the Tertium Quid ticket, 5,225; and the Southern Rights ticket, 1,000.[124]

While Cobb rejoiced over the national Democratic victory, he found the results in Georgia disappointing. The Regulars had escaped any consequences from refusing to compromise their ticket. The governor had to worry that the Regular Democrats would conclude they no longer needed him to control the state. Even if the Regulars consented to take him back, how much additional penance must he do before being readmitted to the fellowship of Georgia Democracy? How many times must he "humble [himself] in the dust and ... kiss the rod that smites [him]?"[125]

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[124] Montgomery, Cracker Parties, pp. 89-91; Athens Southern Banner, November 11, 1852; December 2, 1852.

[125] Savannah Republican, cited in Augusta Chronicle and Sentinel, September 18, 1852, from a typescript in Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collection.

Chapter Fourteen

"My Faith in the Future is Unshaken"

In the aftermath of the presidential contest of 1852, Cobb's political future appeared particularly bleak. During the past year, the Constitutional Union coalition, which he had led along with Alexander H. Stephens and Robert Toombs, inevitably had shattered on the rocks of national affiliation with the Democratic party. The overwhelming majority of Whigs found it impossible to become Democrats; Cobb's Union Democrats found it impossible to be anything else.

Yet even within Union Democratic ranks, he had found it impossible to maintain a united front. Some, convinced that the success of the national Democratic ticket took precedence over all other considerations, bowed to the necessity of supporting the Regular Democratic electoral slate -- even though they had taken no part in its selection. Others, determined to resist such a humiliating surrender, formed the Tugalo faction and offered a Union Democratic slate of their own. Still others, emotionally inclined toward the Tugalo position but rationally convinced it could do only harm, stood aloof from the contest in Georgia. Cobb, himself, had occupied this last -- highly uncomfortable -- position prior to taking Mary Ann to New York for medical treatment.

The only bright spot in the picture derived from President-elect Pierce's previous promise to punish those who

hindered the cause of Democratic reconciliation in Georgia and to reward those who furthered it. Cobb firmly believed that his "sacrifice of feeling" in taking down the Constitutional Union ticket and declining to support that of the Tugalo faction had earned him a leading position among the peacemakers of the Georgia Democracy. He fully intended to pursue the benefits which should accrue to any man occupying that station. He did not expect, however, to secure these rewards without a struggle.[1]

The election returns scarcely had reached the governor in New York before he launched his campaign for a place in the Pierce cabinet. He immediately prepared an unsigned editorial for the New York Herald. In it, he reminded the president-elect that the Baltimore convention had organized the Democratic party "upon national principles." By its action, he declared, the Baltimore convention had silenced "the batteries of Northern fanaticism and Southern sectionalism." It only remained for Pierce to manifest his determination to govern as a "national man upon national principles." The president-elect, he contended, could do this best by "calling around him men of his own stamp."[2]

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[1] Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, November 6, 1852, Howell Cobb Papers, Felix Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia (Hereafter: Howell Cobb Papers).

[2] New York Herald, November 6, 1852, cited in Athens Southern Banner, November 25, 1852; Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, November 6, 1852, Howell Cobb Papers.

Loathe to appear too blatant in his pursuit of a cabinet post, Cobb opted to work behind the scenes. As usual, he insisted that he neither sought nor desired the position. In truth, he actually found it unnecessary to do much more than pen frequent pleas for information from friends and associates because his lieutenants proved eager to wage this fight. They did not await directions from their chief.[3]

By mid-December, cousin James Jackson had launched a broadly based offensive to organize support on both the state and national level. He labored to secure the backing of both Tugalo Democrats and Webster Whigs for a Cobb appointment. While conceding that his efforts had produced uncertain results among some of the Tugaloes who still felt bitter over Cobb's defection, Jackson voiced optimism that Toombs, Stephens, and their followers would welcome Cobb's elevation to the cabinet. He reported that Stephens had been "defending your course openly in the streets ... to the Whigs & justifying all your conduct." Moreover, he took "the bull by the horns" and wrote directly to Lewis Cass urging the

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[3] John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, November 17, 1852; (?) to Howell Cobb, December 7, 1852; C. Murphy to Howell Cobb, December 9, 1852; December 25, 1852; Lewis Cass to Howell Cobb, December 10, 1852; Junius Hillyer to Howell Cobb, December 29, 1852; Robert M. Charlton to Howell Cobb, January 2, 1853; January 11, 1853; Alexander H. Stephens to Howell Cobb, January 28, 1853; Henry R. Jackson to Howell Cobb, February 8, 1853; Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, February 24, 1853, Howell Cobb Papers; Howell Cobb to Alexander H. Stephens, February 2, 1853, Alexander H. Stephens Papers, Library of Congress, Washington D.C. (Hereafter: Stephens Papers, LC).

former presidential candidate to join the fight for a Cobb cabinet post.[4]

Junius Hillyer and other Cobb men in the national capital proposed a far more public and potentially decisive strategy. Hillyer suggested presenting "an argument [to Pierce] in support of the public policy of giving you a place in the cabinet." Cobb's appointment, he observed, would give "the most unequivocal indication ... that this administration would be conservative & safe." Hillyer conceded, however, that several Cobb men doubted the propriety of this maneuver. Nor, could he be certain that the president-elect would appreciate such an intrusion into his selection process. What, he inquired, did Cobb think of this policy?[5]

Six days later, without awaiting the governor's reply, Hillyer and E. W. Chastain resolved "to make a demonstration in your favour through the members of Congress." Shortly after they began circulating their petition, Hillyer reported that the effort had met "with better success than we had expected." "We find a decided good feeling in your favour," he added. Conceding that these activities might well produce a "counter protest from the S[outhern] R[ights] Democrats,"

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[4] James Jackson to Howell Cobb, December 17, 1852, Howell Cobb Papers.

[5] Junius Hillyer to Howell Cobb, December 6, 1852; December 29, 1852, ibid.

he reasoned that "there is no impropriety in incurring reasonable risks to accomplish a good end."[6]

Cobb's public actions indicate that he did not share Hillyer's assessment of incurring reasonable risks to accomplish good ends. The Hillyer-Chastain movement had been underway only a few days when a letter from Cobb reached Washington demanding that all such efforts be stopped. Insisting that Pierce be left alone to select whatever cabinet he thought best, Cobb declared, "I am unwilling that any thing shall be done by my friends in Washington, that shall place me, or seem to place me, in the attitude of an applicant to Gen. Pierce for a place in his Cabinet. I can never consent to occupy that position." Pertinent portions of Cobb's letter quickly made their way into the national press.[7]

Privately, however, Cobb did not view the Hillyer-Chastain petition as an entirely negative development. Shortly after ordering the petition drive stopped, he confided to John Lamar his satisfaction with the course of events. "You will see," he noted, "that they have stopped the paper in my favor at Washington. This is well, as the idea will now prevail there that I had it stopped, and so far as the demonstration is concerned, it has effected all that

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[6] Junius Hillyer to Howell Cobb, January 4, 1852, ibid.

[7] Junius Hillyer to Howell Cobb, January 11, 1853; Clipping from Baltimore Sun, included in Thomas D. Harris to Howell Cobb, January 12, 1853, ibid.

was necessary." Perhaps it was worth incurring some risks to "accomplish a good end" after all.[8]

Cobb's letter left Hillyer with no alternative but to abandon his campaign. The congressman now felt compelled to address a lengthy letter to the president-elect explaining that Cobb had played no part in initiating the petition. He further insisted that "no application will be made to you by Mr. Cobb or his friends with his authority." Having exonerated Cobb from complicity in the petition drive, Hillyer then petitioned Pierce for a Cobb cabinet post. He privately encouraged other Cobb supporters to do the same.[9]

Yet the Southern Rights wing of the Georgia Democracy had no intention of giving the Cobbites a clear field. The presidential contest had scarcely concluded before Southern Rights politicians and newspapers embarked on a vigorous campaign to block Cobb's elevation to the cabinet. The Macon Georgia Telegraph and the Columbus Times proved most vitriolic in their criticisms of the governor.[10]

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[8] Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, January 12, 1853; Junius Hillyer to Howell Cobb, January 4, 1853, ibid.

[9] Junius Hillyer to Franklin Pierce, January 11, 1853, copy in Howell Cobb Papers; Junius Hillyer to Howell Cobb, January 11, 1853, ibid.

[10] Columbus Times, November 12, 1852, cited in Athens Southern Banner, November 25, 1852; Columbus Times, December 16, 1852, cited in Athens Southern Banner, December 23, 1852; Macon Georgia Telegraph, November 16, 1852, cited in Athens Southern Banner, November 25, 1852.

Samuel J. Ray, editor of the Telegraph, advised that Pierce must not make the mistake of selecting men for the cabinet who represented his own views, but rather should turn to men "who really represent the views of their party at home." Any effort to appoint Cobb, he warned, would reignite the "the cold ashes" of intra-party conflict that had racked the state for the past several years. When D. C. Campbell, editor of the Milledgeville Federal Union, hinted that Cobb might deserve a cabinet seat, Ray strongly rebuked him. "To say that the appointment of Gov. Cobb is necessary for the purposes of conciliation," Ray thundered, "is sheer nonsense. Who are the men to be conciliated? .... All the leading spirits among the Union Democrats, with the exception of Mr. Cobb, himself, voted for the regular ticket." Such men did not require a "bribe" to maintain their allegiance. As for Cobb, Ray maintained that he "did not sustain the Electors who cast the vote of Georgia for Gen. Pierce. He does not represent the view of the party, and he knows it; and that single fact ought to settle his pretensions to a cabinet appointment."[11]

The Times asserted that "if the feelings and wishes of the Democracy of Georgia ... are consulted, the appointment of Gov. Cobb to a seat in the cabinet will not be made."

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[11] Macon Georgia Telegraph, November 16, 1852, cited in Athens Southern Banner, November 25, 1852; Macon Georgia Telegraph, December 7, 1852, cited in Helen Ione Greene, "Politics in Georgia, 1853-1854: The Ordeal of Howell Cobb," The Georgia Historical Quarterly, XXX (March 1946), 187.

Cobb's support, the Times insisted, consisted solely of the 6,000 votes tallied by the Tugaloes in the recent election. His appointment, it predicted, "would alienate and disgust nine tenths of the Pierce and King party in this state."[12]

Nor did the Southern Rights Democrats lack their own candidates for a cabinet spot. Southern Rights newspapers eagerly raised the names of Herschel V. Johnson and Charles J. McDonald as men worthy of reward at the hands of the Pierce administration. Organs such as the Augusta Constitutionalist particularly pressed the case for McDonald. This elder statesman of the Southern Rights cause, the Constitutionalist complained, represented the most "unfairly abused" man "in the Republic." Now that his principles held the ascendancy "among the entire State Rights Democracy of the South," it would be appropriate for his party to show "that his merits and his services in the cause of State Rights and the Constitution were fully appreciated."[13]

McDonald certainly wanted a cabinet appointment, and he clearly felt few of Cobb's qualms about making his desires known. Within days of the presidential election, John H. Lumpkin informed Cobb that McDonald had been working to make his desires a reality. The old man had secured guarantees

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[12] Columbus Times, November 12, 1852, cited in Athens Southern Banner, November 25, 1852; Columbus Times, December 16, 1852, cited in Athens Southern Banner, December 23, 1852.

[13] Augusta Constitutionalist, November 17, 1852, cited in Athens Southern Banner, November 25, 1852.

of support from Senator Robert M. T. Hunter, a state-rights Democrat from Virginia who possessed great influence with Pierce. This information prompted Lumpkin to predict that McDonald would also have the support of Ultras throughout the South. Lumpkin reported, however, that despite his success at having lined up such support, McDonald still lived "in great dread from you and your friends." For that reason, he commented, the former governor had been seeking to arrange a meeting between himself and Lumpkin in hopes of deflecting Cobbite opposition.[14]

In the months between Pierce's election and inauguration, Cobb received a steady flow of rumors about the likely composition of the new cabinet. The rumors ran the gamut of possibilities. Cobb definitely would be offered a spot; he definitely would not be offered a spot; he would be offered a spot _if Georgia was represented in the cabinet_; Georgia would be represented in the cabinet; Georgia would not be represented in the cabinet.[15]

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[14] John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, November 17, 1852, Howell Cobb Papers.

[15] Junius Hillyer to Howell Cobb, December 6, 1852; December 29, 1852; January 4, 1853; January 11, 1853; (?) to Howell Cobb, December 7, 1852; C. Murphy to Howell Cobb, December 9, 1852; December 25, 1852; Lewis Cass to Howell Cobb, December 10, 1852; Thomas D. Harris to Howell Cobb, December 29, 1852; January 12, 1853; John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, January 2, 1853; January 20, 1853; Robert M. Charlton to Howell Cobb, January 2, 1853; January 11, 1853; P. P. French to Howell Cobb, January 20, 1853; January 24, 1853; Alexander H. Stephens to Howell Cobb, January 28, 1853; J. C. Dobbin to Howell Cobb, undated manuscript, _ibid_.; Lewis Cass to Howell Cobb, December 18, 1852; George W. Jones to

More troubling rumors, however, arrived intermingled with those relating to Cobb's personal promotion. Increasingly, Union Democrats reported that Pierce hoped to reconcile the national party by selecting a cabinet dominated by free-soil and Southern Rights Democrats. Jefferson Davis of Mississippi, a Southern Rights man, and John A. Dix of New York, a Free Soiler, -- both close personal friends of the president-elect -- were believed to be high on Pierce's list of probable cabinet members. Union men tried to convince themselves that Pierce could never "actually think" of pursuing such a disastrous policy, but they nevertheless urged Cobb to do all in his power to avert a possible catastrophe for both the nation and the national Democracy. Fears that Pierce might adopt this flawed policy prompted some Cobb advisors to plead that the governor reject any seat in a "piebald cabinet." Brother Tom suggested that "your skirts are free of the contamination of freesoilers -- Keep them so."[16]

Howell Cobb, February 11, 1853; Thomas D. Harris to Howell Cobb, February 16, 1853, in Ulrich Bonnell Phillips, ed., The Correspondence of Robert Toombs, Alexander H. Stephens, and Howell Cobb (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1913), pp. 322-323, 325.

[16] Francis P. Grund to Howell Cobb, December 19, 1852; Thomas R. R. Cobb to Howell Cobb, January 25, 1853; Alexander H. Stephens to Howell Cobb, February 6, 1853; Henry R. Jackson to Howell Cobb, February 8, 1853; Robert M. Charlton to Howell Cobb, January 11, 1852; John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, February 16, 1853, Howell Cobb Papers; George W. Jones to Howell Cobb, December 12, 1852, in R. P. Brooks, ed., "Howell Cobb Papers," The Georgia Historical Quarterly, V (December, 1921), 63-64.

As the weeks after the election crawled by with neither an invitation to join the cabinet nor a summons to consult with the president-elect, Cobb realized that none would be forthcoming. He did receive an indirect assurance of Pierce's good-will relayed through William L. Marcy of New York, but probably took cold comfort from the president-elect's timid communication. By mid-January, Cobb resolved to wait no longer. He addressed a letter to his northern Democratic allies in which he voiced a positive refusal to even consider service in a "piebald cabinet" that included any free-soilers. In a nod to the continuing struggle to reunite the Georgia Democracy, he carefully avoided voicing any objection to service in a cabinet that included Southern Rights men.[17]

The governor acted from a mixture of motives. He clearly desired to avoid the embarrassment of pursuing a post that he did not receive. Moreover, he sought to warn Pierce of the dangers of selecting sectional extremists for his cabinet. Lewis Cass and Senator Jesse Bright of Indiana found Cobb's epistle so compelling that they wasted no time in forwarding the document to President-elect Pierce. They hoped that Cobb's sentiments might dissuade Pierce from a

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[17] Thomas D. Harris to Howell Cobb, January 24, 1853; John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, January 30, 1853, Howell Cobb Papers; Howell Cobb to Alexander H. Stephens, February 2, 1853, Stephens Papers, LC.

decision which could cripple his administration from the beginning.[18]

Although Cobb acknowledged that his letter had eliminated whatever slim chance he still had for a cabinet appointment, he continued to follow the rumors regarding the likely composition of the Pierce administration. He clearly hoped and believed that his stance had helped dissuade Pierce from the fatal policy of a "mongrel" program. Just as important, the composition of the cabinet could indicate which faction of the Georgia Democracy would control federal patronage in the state. The governor understood that a cabinet filled with "national democrats" probably would be friendly to the Union Democracy. If Cobb controlled the lion's share of the federal patronage in Georgia, his return to leadership of the state party would be facilitated.[19]

By late February, Cobb had secured accurate information regarding the composition of the Pierce cabinet. The president-elect attempted to appease every faction within the national Democracy except the Union Democrats. Both

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[18] John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, January 30, 1853, Howell Cobb Papers; Howell Cobb to Alexander H. Stephens, February 2, 1853, Stephens Papers, LC.

[19] Howell Cobb to Alexander H. Stephens, February 2, 1853, Stephens Papers, LC; Howell Cobb to William L. Marcy, February 10, 1853, William L. Marcy Papers, Library of Congress, Washington D.C. (Hereafter: Marcy Papers); Alexander H. Stephens to Howell Cobb, February 6, 1853; Henry R. Jackson to Howell Cobb, February 6, 1853; Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, February 24, 1853; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, February 25, 1853; R. M. Goodwin to Howell Cobb, February 28, 1853, Howell Cobb Papers.

appointees from the South -- Jefferson Davis of Mississippi and James C. Dobbin of North Carolina -- adhered to the Southern Rights faction. Surprisingly, Cobb objected only to the naming of Davis. Although Dobbin also possessed a Southern Rights affiliation, Cobb deemed him a close personal friend. Thus, the governor confided to Lamar, "with the exception of Davis, it is a thorough national cabinet." Even better, he observed, it included "my best personal friends as well as political."[20]

Many Cobb associates also manifested an inclination to put the best possible face on their disappointment over Pierce's cabinet selections. They found the president's failure to recognize Cobb's claims on the party most galling. Yet, while conceding that the cabinet "is not as we in Georgia wished it," Cobbites nonetheless expressed a willingness to "give them a fair trial." These men took particular hope from Pierce's inaugural. Besides embracing the Compromise of 1850, the new president reportedly had made acceptance of the ideas in his speech a "sine qua non" for service in the cabinet.[21]

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[20] Robert M. Charlton to Howell Cobb, cited in Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, February 24, 1853; Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, February 24, 1853; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, February 25, 1853, R. M. Goodwin to Howell Cobb, February 28, 1852, Howell Cobb Papers; Greene, "Politics in Georgia, 1853-1854," pp. 188-189.

[21] Caleb Jones to Howell Cobb, March 6, 1853; Phillip Clayton to Howell Cobb, March 7, 1853; George W. Jones to Howell Cobb, March 10, 1853, Howell Cobb Papers.

Several Cobb men insisted that Pierce's stance signalled the triumph of Union Democratic principles, though Southern Rights Democrats had won the competition for offices in the administration. Some even suggested that Pierce had executed a brilliant political maneuver by forcing Southern Rights appointees to endorse an inaugural based solely on national Democratic principles. Phillip Clayton described the acceptance by Davis and Dobbin of cabinet posts as "a complete surrender" of their previous principles. George W. Jones voiced the most blindly optimistic assessment. "What a triumph for you and I," he avowed to the governor, "We contended for principles. We have seen them triumph. Others have offices, very well." While Cobb certainly shared in his friend's appreciation for triumphs of principle, he had been in politics too long to dismiss so lightly the importance of the "spoils of victory."[22]

II

With his hopes for a cabinet appointment now exhausted, Cobb pondered his political future. He possessed three possible options, each fraught with its own particular difficulties. A number of Cobbites expected their leader to seek a second term as governor. Two terms, they suggested, was "conformable to usage" for an administration such as Cobb's which had been satisfactory to the people. Even more

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[22] Philip Clayton to Howell Cobb, March 7, 1853; George W. Jones to Howell Cobb, March 10, 1853, ibid.

Cobbites urged the governor to return to the House of Representatives and began laying groundwork for a new congressional campaign. Still others believed that election to the United States Senate represented the logical next step in Cobb's political career. They urged him to stand for the Senate seat to be filled by the next state legislature.[23]

Cobb rejected a second term as governor early on and with none of the equivocation which had characterized his decision to first seek the office two years before. In both private and public, he bluntly asserted that "about the governorship there is only one thing that may be considered as settled, ... I shall not under any circumstances be a candidate for reelection." Cobb reached this conclusion for both political and personal reasons. In light of the chaotic condition of Georgia's party structure -- particularly within the former Union organization -- and the animosities engendered during the recent presidential contest, he could by no means be assured of success. Yet even had his reelection been guaranteed, he probably would have declined a second term. Cobb had not found the governorship an

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[23] Edward R. Harden to Howell Cobb, March 15, 1853; Asbury Hull to Howell Cobb, March 16, 1853; William H. Hull to Henry R. Jackson, March 18, 1853; John E. Ward to Howell Cobb, March 19, 1853; Henry R. Jackson to Howell Cobb, March 21, 1853; J. D. Frierson to Howell Cobb, March 21, 1853; James Jackson to Howell Cobb, March 21, 1853; April 6, 1851; William H. Hull to Howell Cobb, March 28, 1853; Henry L. Benning to Howell Cobb, April 21, 1853; John W. Forney to Howell Cobb, April 29, 1853; George W. Jones to Howell Cobb, May 19, 1853, ibid.

especially satisfying office. Far removed from the seat of national power during his term, he had suffered intense frustration as he witnessed critical events unfold and found himself unable to exercise any direct influence over them. On one point he felt certain, his next political office must allow him to serve in Washington.[24]

A return to Congress, therefore, held much greater appeal to Cobb. Most of his chief lieutenants enthusiastically embraced this option. Bitter experience had convinced them that the decision to transfer their leader from the halls of the national government to the governor's chair in Georgia had been a terrible tactical error. They now sought to rectify past mistakes.[25]

Cobb's lieutenants argued that his return to Congress would accomplish three vital objectives. Within Georgia, his return to a position of national prominence seemed the most likely way to revive the flagging morale of Georgia's Union Democracy. Hope Hull insisted that a reversal of current trends must occur soon. Otherwise, he warned, many Union Democrats would begin to assert "that they always were pretty

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[24] Howell Cobb to Alexander H. Stephens, February 2, 1853, Stephens Papers, LC; Henry R. Jackson to William H. Hull, March 21, 1853, cited in Henry R. Jackson to Howell Cobb, March 21, 1853, Howell Cobb Papers.

[25] William H. Hull to Henry R. Jackson, March 18, 1853; John E. Ward to Howell Cobb, March 19, 1853; Henry R. Jackson to William H. Hull, March 21, 1853, cited in Henry R. Jackson to Howell Cobb, March 21, 1853; J. D. Frierson to Howell Cobb, March 21, 1853; William H. Hull to Howell Cobb, March 28, 1853, Howell Cobb Papers.

good fire eaters after all." At the national level, they believed Cobb's presence in Congress would allow him to influence the misguided policies -- as manifested in cabinet selections and other appointments -- of the Pierce administration. While confessing themselves "deeply indignant & mortified" at the treatment afforded Union Democrats by the new president, they continued to hope that he "is acting under ... mistaken views of party policy & not from a sympathy on his part with disunionists & fire eaters." Moreover, Cobbites feared that the retirement of their leader from public office at this juncture would wrongly signal an intention to abandon the political battlefield to the supremacy of the Southern Rights men.[26]

Here too, however, personal and political considerations raised serious obstacles. Junius Hillyer, Cobb's successor to the Sixth District seat and a long-time Cobb friend, did not want to surrender his post after only one term. He insisted that one more term would satisfy all his political ambitions. He appealed to the governor for support on the basis of their long friendship and his own previous political loyalty to Cobb. A man of Cobb's sensitivity for the feelings of others clearly found the legitimate pleas of an

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[26] William H. Hull to Henry R. Jackson, March 18, 1853; John E. Ward to Howell Cobb, March 19, 1853; Henry R. Jackson to William H. Hull, March 21, 1853, cited in Henry R. Jackson to Howell Cobb, March 21, 1853; J. D. Frierson to Howell Cobb, March 21, 1853; William H. Hull to Howell Cobb, March 28, 1853, ibid.

old friend difficult to resist. By early March, he had expressed a strong disinclination, if not an outright refusal, to deny Hillyer's desire for one more term.[27]

Despite the governor's expressed reluctance to challenge Hillyer, his advisors plotted throughout the spring to "choke off" the incumbent and replace him with Cobb. They adopted a two pronged approach. First, they labored to generate widespread public demand for a Cobb candidacy. Second, they encouraged leading Union Democrats in the Sixth District to pressure Hillyer into withdrawing from the race.[28]

Cobb's behavior in this instance proved no more admirable than his actions regarding the governor's race two years earlier. Although he maintained a technically principled position of support for his friend, his letters from Henry Jackson, James Jackson, John Ward, and Hope Hull demonstrate his complete cognizance of their efforts to undermine Hillyer. Rather than putting an end to their activities with an immediate and vigorous refusal to run, he

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[27] John E. Ward to Howell Cobb, March 19, 1853; Henry R. Jackson to William H. Hull, March 21, 1853, cited in Henry R. Jackson to Howell Cobb, March 21, 1853; J. D. Frierson to Howell Cobb, March 21, 1853; James Jackson to Howell Cobb, March 21, 1853; April 6, 1853; William H. Hull to Howell Cobb, March 28, 1853, ibid.

[28] William H. Hull to Henry R. Jackson, March 18, 1853; John E. Ward to Howell Cobb, March 19, 1853; Henry R. Jackson to William H. Hull, March 21, 1853, cited in Henry R. Jackson to Howell Cobb, March 21, 1853; J. D. Frierson to Howell Cobb, March 21, 1853; James Jackson to Howell Cobb, March 21, 1853; April 6, 1853; William H. Hull to Howell Cobb, March 28, 1853, ibid.

allowed their strategy to go forward until Hillyer appealed directly to him in late May. Thereafter, Cobb apparently made a firm resolution to stay out of the congressional campaign and references to a Cobb candidacy disappeared from his correspondence.[29]

While reluctance to disappoint an old friend clearly hindered Cobb's pursuit of a congressional seat, it remains unclear whether personal sensitivity or political doubt played the larger role in his final decision to stay out of the race. Both the governor and his leading advisors understood the absolute necessity of victory should he enter the race. In the past, Cobb's hold on the Sixth District had been so firm as to render his election a certainty. Yet, the political upheavals of recent years had so ravaged established loyalties and political affiliations, that virtually no Cobbite denied the possibility of defeat.[30]

The necessity for victory had prompted Cobbites to seek an arrangement whereby Cobb could run without serious

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[29] John E. Ward to Howell Cobb, March 19, 1853; Henry R. Jackson to William H. Hull, March 21, 1853, cited in Henry R. Jackson to Howell Cobb, March 21, 1853; J. D. Frierson to Howell Cobb, March 21, 1853; James Jackson to Howell Cobb, March 21, 1853; April 6, 1853; William H. Hull to Howell Cobb, March 28, 1853; Junius Hillyer to Howell Cobb, May 25, 1853, ibid.

[30] William H. Hull to Henry R. Jackson, March 18, 1853; John E. Ward to Howell Cobb, March 19, 1853; Henry R. Jackson to William H. Hull, March 21, 1853, cited in Henry R. Jackson to Howell Cobb, March 21, 1853; J. D. Frierson to Howell Cobb, March 21, 1853; James Jackson to Howell Cobb, March 21, 1853; April 6, 1853; William H. Hull to Howell Cobb, March 28, 1853; Junius Hillyer to Howell Cobb, May 25, 1853, ibid.

opposition. Unfortunately, they could not even devise a satisfactory method of placing his name before the public. They variously discussed the possibility of nominating him in either a Democratic convention, a Union Democratic convention, or a Union convention. Cobb rejected the last two possibilities almost immediately. Committed to winning restoration to the Regular Democracy, he knew that his nomination by a Union or Union Democratic convention would only exacerbate an already difficult task.[31]

Cobb himself favored nomination by a Democratic convention because he believed it would strengthen his position with the national party. Nomination by a Democratic convention, however, posed its own special problem. Should Southern Rights men control the meeting, they could deny Cobb the nomination. Such a development would be as disastrous as defeat in the general election. Ultimately, Cobb's advisors concluded that if he chose to run, he must simply announce his candidacy and define his platform in speeches before the voters.[32]

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[31] William H. Hull to Henry R. Jackson, March 18, 1853; John E. Ward to Howell Cobb, March 19, 1853; Henry R. Jackson to William H. Hull, March 21, 1853, cited in Henry R. Jackson to Howell Cobb, March 21, 1853; J. D. Frierson to Howell Cobb, March 21, 1853; James Jackson to Howell Cobb, March 21, 1853; April 6, 1853; William H. Hull to Howell Cobb, March 28, 1853; Junius Hillyer to Howell Cobb, May 25, 1853, ibid.

[32] William H. Hull to Henry R. Jackson, March 18, 1853; John E. Ward to Howell Cobb, March 19, 1853; Henry R. Jackson to William H. Hull, March 21, 1853, cited in Henry R. Jackson to Howell Cobb, March 21, 1853; J. D. Frierson to Howell Cobb, March 21, 1853; William H. Hull to Howell Cobb, March

The problem of making a Cobb candidacy public did not delineate the boundary of the Cobbites' difficulty. Hillyer manifested an inclination to contest the Sixth District seat if its former occupant sought to reclaim it. Should he be induced to step down, Cobbites still feared that the Tugaloes could put forth their own candidate. In the unsettled conditions of the times, their candidate might win.[33]

One other consideration probably influenced Cobb's decision not to force the issue of a congressional seat. The next state legislature would elect a United States senator. James Jackson, the only one of Cobb's close advisors to oppose his congressional candidacy, suggested that he pursue this higher office instead.[34]

In truth, a Senate campaign had much to recommend it. Since his days at the University of Georgia, Cobb had craved a spot in the Senate. Besides fulfilling a life-long dream, his success in this endeavor would signal that he had won restoration to the state Democratic organization, and that his political fortunes remained in the ascendancy. Even if

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28, 1853, ibid.

[33] William H. Hull to Henry R. Jackson, March 18, 1853; Henry R. Jackson to William H. Hull, March 21, 1853, cited in Henry R. Jackson to Howell Cobb, March 21, 1853; J. D. Frierson to Howell Cobb, March 21, 1853; James Jackson to Howell Cobb, March 21, 1853; William H. Hull to Howell Cobb, March 28, 1853; Junius Hillyer to Howell Cobb, May 25, 1853, ibid.

[34] James Jackson to Howell Cobb, March 21, 1853; April 6, 1853, ibid.

he failed to win election, but secured nomination by the caucus of Democratic legislators, he would still demonstrate that he possessed the support of the majority of the Democratic party.[35]

In addition, a Senate campaign held the extra lure of not requiring a public declaration that he desired the office. Because of the nature of the election process, he could do most of his campaigning behind the scenes. This situation, in turn, would eliminate much potential embarrassment should his Senate bid prove unsuccessful. To be sure, both Jackson and Cobb understood that Cobb's path to the Senate would be hindered by the same political obstacles that would have obstructed his course to reelection as governor, but both men also believed these obstacles could be overcome through careful management. Although Cobb kept the option of a congressional race open until the end of May, he had apparently resolved to embark on the Senate campaign by late March or early April.[36]

III

Whatever office he sought, Cobb and his lieutenants understood that they must somehow simultaneously restore harmony to the ranks of the Union Democracy, while effecting

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[35] James Jackson to Howell Cobb, March 21, 1853; April 6, 1853, ibid.

[36] James Jackson to Howell Cobb, March 21, 1853; April 6, 1853; Henry L. Benning to Howell Cobb, April 21, 1853, ibid.

a reconciliation between the Union and Southern Rights wings of the state Democratic organization. In many ways, these two tasks seemed mutually exclusive. For numerous members of the Tugalo faction, reconciliation with their former Southern Rights opponents represented an intolerable surrender. One especially frustrated Union Democrat warned Cobb that "you will learn to your sorrow that a fire eater is not to be trusted ... I will never surrender to them as you will have to do to act with them ... I will never play the fiddle for a fire eater to dance by." Nor could the governor be sure that the Regulars desired any reconciliation that involved the survival of his political career. Hope Hull gave voice to this concern when he worried that "there will be no harmony until they have crushed [Cobb]."[37]

Despite these difficulties, the Cobbites had embarked upon a coherent strategy to achieve both goals by early 1853. In January, Cobb and John Lumpkin met to discuss the contents of resolutions designed to reunite the Southern Rights and Union wings of the Democratic party in north Georgia. A week later, Lumpkin embarked on a series of meetings with upcountry Democrats from both factions. During these meetings, Lumpkin and John M. Spullock, a local Southern Rights leader, hammered out a set of resolutions acceptable to both. The key point in the resolutions "pledged ourselves

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[37] William H. Hull to Henry R. Jackson, March 18, 1853; Edwin R. Brown to Howell Cobb, March 28, 1853, ibid.

mutually to tolerate difference of opinion in regard to the right of secession and to discountenance and oppose any attempt to make it a test of party fidelity come from what source it may." Within weeks, Lumpkin reported that these "Rome 'harmony' resolutions" generally had been well received by all but the Tugaloes. Pleased with Lumpkin's success, Cobb apparently drafted resolutions for use in restoring party harmony in Cherokee County.[38]

Other Cobbites embarked on related efforts. In March, Henry Jackson and Hope Hull each prepared letters for publication in the Democratic press. Jackson directed his letter to R. B. Hilton of the Savannah Georgian. In it, he insisted that Cobb had labored for the reconciliation of the Democratic party in the weeks leading up to the election of 1852.[39]

Although Hull directed his letter to James Gardner, editor to the Augusta Constitutionalist, other Democratic editors reprinted it, thus giving his epistle wide circulation around the state. Like Jackson, Hull sought to justify Cobb's behavior during the recent presidential campaign. But he also exonerated Cobb from any

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[38] John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, January 20, 1853; February 20, 1853; Edward Harden to Howell Cobb, May 25, 1853, ibid.

[39] Savannah Georgian, March 29, 1853, cited in Horace Montgomery, Cracker Parties (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1950), p. 96; Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, April 19, 1853, Howell Cobb Papers.

responsibility for the Tugalo movement. The governor, he declared, had neither supported nor condoned the Tugalo ticket. Indeed, he had employed "earnest efforts" to prevent any such ticket from being put forth. Hull attributed Cobb's silence on the subject both before the election and since to his "noble and generous heart." While believing his friends in the Tugalo faction guilty of error, he could not "lift his hand" against men who "had stood by him through storm and sunshine." In explaining his intentions to Cobb, Hull avowed that "I thought it ought to be known. If there is any advantage in having been a Tugalo man, you are not intitled [sic] to it, & if there is any odium you ought not to bear it."[40]

At about the same time that Jackson and Hull were preparing their letters, Cobb was preparing one of his own. On March 7, Thomas Morris, a Union Democrat from Carnesville, requested that Cobb produce a public letter regarding "the proper course of political action to be pursued by that portion of the democracy with whom you and I are identified." Should the Union Democracy seek a revival of the Union organization, he demanded, or should it return once more to the old Democratic party? Although Morris' request prompted

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[40] Milledgeville Federal Union, April 5, 1853; William H. Hull to Howell Cobb, March 28, 1853, Howell Cobb Papers; Montgomery, Cracker Parties, pp. 95-96.

Cobb to make his views public, he had already settled on the answers to Morris' questions some time earlier.[41]

Cobb had resolved to seek a restoration of the Georgia Democracy the previous fall. Despite the refusal of the Regulars to make concessions regarding the presidential ticket and despite their opposition to his appointment to Pierce's cabinet, Cobb did not waver in his resolution. He concluded by late January that he would not participate in attempts to revive the Constitutional Union party. When Alexander H. Stephens raised this possibility, the governor privately informed him with "candor & frankness" that he viewed the Union organization as an lifeless entity. "My opinion," he declared, "is ... that parties in Georgia will form upon the old line of democratic & whig." The only obstacle to the re-establishment of the Democracy, he concluded, lay in the "great bitterness of feeling among the leading men of the two wings of the democracy." He indicated a disinclination to make any public demonstration in favor of a Democratic reunion until convinced that this obstacle could be overcome.[42]

It did not take long for Cobb to receive the indications he needed to come out openly in favor of restoring the Georgia Democracy. In early 1853, Henry L. Benning, one of

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[41] Thomas Morris to Howell Cobb, March 7, 1853, cited in Brooks, "Howell Cobb Papers," p. 40.

[42] Howell Cobb to Alexander H. Stephens, February 2, 1853, Stephens Papers, LC.

Cobb's oldest friends and a leader in the Southern Rights movement, had privately inquired about Cobb's terms for harmonizing the state Democratic party. "What is necessary to get your confidence [in] us," he asked, "will nothing do but that we foreswear the faith that is in us?"[43]

Cobb responded by pouring out his desire for a restoration of the old state party. He, in turn, asked if Benning felt a reunion truly possible. Benning replied that he did indeed sense a strong desire among the Regulars to see their party "harmonized." He insisted that regardless of previous views on the Compromise of 1850, both Regulars and Union Democrats now all stood alike on the Georgia Platform. Just as acceptance of that platform obligated the former Southern Rights men to acquiesce in the compromise measures, it also obligated the Union Democrats to resist any attempt to revive the slavery issue or to exclude a territory from statehood on the basis of slavery. Thus, he argued, nothing more than a disagreement involving the abstract right of secession divided the two Democratic factions. This abstraction, he reasoned, could only assume practical meaning if some future crisis revived the previous sectional conflict. Under the circumstances, he perceived no reason

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[43] Henry L. Benning to Howell Cobb, undated manuscript, Howell Cobb Papers.

why the two wings of the Georgia Democracy should not "chemically combine."[44]

While Cobb took considerable consolation from Benning's response, other developments also strengthened his determination to adhere to his chosen path. In January, Samuel J. Ray, editor of the Macon Georgia Telegraph, had died. An ardent Calhounite, Ray had been among the most violent anti-Cobb editors in the state. His successors at the Telegraph, however, did not share Ray's deep animosity towards the governor. The new editors soon began to call for a reconciliation of the state Democracy. Like Benning, they held that nothing but a meaningless difference over the abstract right of secession stood between the Regulars and their Union Democratic brethren. Besides reversing the Telegraph's virulent anti-Cobb rhetoric, the change in editors also made it easier for other Regular organs to soften their criticisms of Cobb. Thus, by the time Morris wrote to Cobb, the governor felt ready to place his views before the people. His reply to Morris began appearing in the state press in early April.[45]

Union Democrats, Cobb maintained, confronted one great issue: should they seek a "re-union of the Democratic party"

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[44] Henry L. Benning to Howell Cobb, March 6, 1853; Howell Cobb to Henry L. Benning, February 28, 1853, cited in Henry L. Benning to Howell Cobb, March 6, 1853, ibid.

[45] Macon Georgia Telegraph, February 8, 1853; Greene, "Politics in Georgia, 1853-1854," p. 191.

or "the reorganization of the Union party?" He could see no alternative to the former or reason for the latter. The Democratic organization of Georgia had been wrecked on the issues surrounding the Compromise of 1850. In all the events that had followed this Democratic schism, the people of Georgia and the national Democracy had embraced and affirmed the principles of the Union Democrats. The current Democratic administration in Washington, he observed, had campaigned and been elected on a platform which largely derived from Union Democratic principles. In assuming his executive duties, he added, President Pierce had reaffirmed the commitment of his administration to those principles. How then, Cobb demanded, could any individual who truly loved the Union decline to support either the Pierce administration or the national Democratic party?[46]

Cobb perceived but two obstacles to a reunion of the state Democratic organization. The first involved "a radical difference of opinion between the two wings of the party on the doctrine of "'secession.'" While Cobb did not deny the existence of this difference of opinion, he insisted that a similar doctrinal difference had characterized the party for at least twenty years. "Jackson democrats" had long adhered to the anti-secession principles expressed by their leader during the Nullification Crisis of the 1830s, while "Calhoun democrats" had contended for their leader's state-rights

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[46] Brooks, "Howell Cobb Papers," pp. 41-47.

doctrines. Differences over this abstract question, however, had not significantly hindered the cooperation of Jackson and Calhoun Democrats "in all the essential doctrines of the democratic party, upon which there existed no diversity of opinion." The past could provide direction for the future. Leave "the abstract question of 'secession' to the judgment of individual members of the party," he concluded, and make "neither ... the affirmation or denial of that doctrine a test of party faith."[47]

The second potential obstacle to a reunion of the Georgia Democracy, Cobb suggested, arose from the level of animosity felt by Southern Rights Democrats towards their Union Democratic brethren. Had Southern Rights hostility reached the point that it precluded just treatment of the Union wing of the party? Cobb boldly -- and perhaps naively -- dismissed this concern as a product of fear rather than judgment by Union Democrats. He believed that those most anxious on this point underestimated the integrity and wisdom of their recent foes. Moreover, those who feared proscription by the Southern Rights men also underestimated the actual strength of the Union Democrats. The Union Democrats would embody the balance of power in future political contests, and as such would command "the homage always paid to power." True, he acknowledged, past animosities and distrust would flavor relations between the

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[47] Ibid.

two wings of the party for a period, "but time and reflection will prove successful restoratives of good feeling where interest and policy fail to accomplish it." "With weak minds and bad hearts," he declared, "the process will be less rapid, but ... not less certain."[48]

Cobb closed his letter with an explanation of his opposition to attempts to revive the Union organization. He conceded that a vital crisis in national affairs had called the Constitutional Union party into being. He looked back on the victories and accomplishments of that party with pride, but its reason for being no longer existed. The crisis which had required its formation had passed, and with the crisis its necessity. Describing any effort to preserve the Union organization as "delusive," he argued that the recent presidential election had conclusively demonstrated the impossibility of ever molding Union Whigs and Union Democrats into a permanent party structure. A large portion of Georgia Whigs had freely admitted the preferability of the Democratic candidate and platform over that of the Whigs, but ultimately had opted "to throw their votes away on a nominal candidate" rather than affiliate with their Union Democratic allies within the national Democracy. All of Georgia's political needs, he concluded, now could best be effected

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[48] Ibid.

through the structure of the state's traditional political parties.[49]

Not surprisingly, much of Georgia's Regular Democratic press responded favorably to the Jackson, Hull, and Cobb letters. The Federal Union expressed profound satisfaction that these letters demonstrated Governor Cobb's anxiety "to see all obstacles to a hearty re-union removed." Of Cobb's letter in particular, the paper observed, "it will place this gentleman in a clear position before the Party, and contribute greatly to the re-union and fraternal good feeling to the ranks of the whole Democracy of the State." These overtures, it concluded, "should be met in a like spirit on the part of our friends."[50]

The more extreme Southern Rights elements of the Regular Democracy proved much less receptive to Cobb's desire for reconciliation. The Columbus Times rejected assertions by moderate Regulars and Cobbites that the right of secession represented a mere abstraction. "An impassable gulf," it avowed, separated any man who denied this most fundamental doctrine from fellowship in the Democratic party. True Democrats, it warned, must be on their guard against party leaders who placed "co-operation in the re-organization of the Democratic Party" above doctrinal purity. They must also

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[49] Ibid.

[50] Milledgeville Federal Union, April 5, 1853; April 12, 1853.

be on guard against "a wily politician" who would "co-operate with the party, because no other avenue is open for the advancement of his interests."[51]

Cobb no doubt appreciated the kind words of the moderate Regular press, but he had heard similar rhetoric when the Union Democrats had sought a reconstituted Democratic electoral ticket the previous fall only to see it proved meaningless. Nor did he find anything surprising in the ongoing hostility of the Times. Yet he found the reaction of the Union Democratic press and the Tugalo leadership disappointing -- if not actually surprising.[52]

Since the first emergence of the Tugalo faction in late 1852, Cobb had faced the danger that the Tugaloes would perceive any attempt at reconciliation with the Regulars as a surrender of both principle and place. He had hoped to avert this development by careful management, but the publication of Hull's letter and an article by Gardner of the Constitutionalist endorsing its contents sparked a storm of protest from several Union Democratic editors. The Marietta Constitutional Union led the first assault. Although the paper previously had endorsed a Democratic reconciliation provided that acceptance of the right of secession did not become a test of party loyalty, it apparently found the

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[51] Columbus Times, March 28, 1853, cited in Athens Southern Banner, April 7, 1853.

[52] Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, April 2, 1853, Howell Cobb Papers.

actual prospect of reunion unbearable. It responded to Hull's letter with a "violent assault" on Cobb for abandoning principle in favor of a futile political expediency. Other Union Democratic editors quickly reinforced the Constitutional Union's initial attack.[53]

Cobb accepted these assaults with considerable equanimity. While conceding that "there is evidently much bad feeling engendered," he nonetheless insisted that "my faith in the future is unshaken." He based his optimism on the hope that his own soon-to-be-published letter "will have the effect of calming the storm. Unfortunately, his hopes on this point fell victim to the realities of the continuing political animosities that gripped the state.[54]

Cobb's reply to Morris first appeared in the Athens Southern Banner. Cobbites had suspected that editor Hopkins Holsey actually might decline to publish it because of the growing chasm between his views and those of the governor. Although Holsey did print the letter "through courtesy to Gov. Cobb," he also printed an editorial in an adjacent column which refuted Cobb's main point regarding the abstract right to secession. Rejection of any such right, the embittered Holsey declared, had been a test of party loyalty between the founding of the Georgia Democracy on Jacksonian

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[53] Ibid.; Marietta Constitutional Union, cited in Milledgeville Federal Union, April 5, 1853.

[54] Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, April 2, 1853, Howell Cobb Papers.

principles in the 1830s until the disruption of the party in the crisis of 1850-1851. Now that Cobb intended to surrender to the Southern Rights majority, Holsey angrily observed, acceptance of the right to secession would be the new test of party loyalty. With an air of triumph, he pointed to editorials in the Columbus Times which made precisely this point.[55]

During the next four weeks, Holsey's analysis of Cobb's position grew even more biting. The governor, he lamented, appeared so determined to win readmission to the Democracy that he "has advanced some positions in his late letter that are false in fact -- false in theory -- and totally repugnant to each other." Worse still, Cobb had engaged in the promulgation of these false facts and theories "in order to drag the Union Democrats along with him into a party organization with the Secessionists." Holsey pleaded with Union Democrats not to be duped into joining Cobb's betrayal of principle.[56]

The divergence between the positions of Cobb and Holsey had been growing more and more visible for several months. The editor's increasingly independent and at time erratic views posed a special problem for Cobb. At both the state and national levels, the public viewed the Southern Banner

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[55] William H. Hull to Howell Cobb, March 28, 1853, ibid.; Athens Southern Banner, April 7, 1853.

[56] Ibid., May 5, 1853.

as Cobb's particular organ. Most people assumed when the Banner spoke, that it spoke with Cobb's voice. When Holsey expressed views at odds with those of Cobb or pursued an erratic course -- as he had done regarding the Democratic electoral slate in 1852 -- it created confusion within Cobbite ranks. When Holsey openly opposed and denounced him, as he had begun to do on the issue of Democratic reconciliation, it severely reduced Cobb's ability to shape public opinion.[57]

By mid-March, leading Cobbites had had enough of Holsey. Cobb received a sudden influx of letters from his chief lieutenants demanding that the Banner either be purchased from its owner-editor or that a rival organ be established. John Lamar warned his brother-in-law that Holsey's "flat footed" support for "reorganization of the Union party" threatened to "get things into a snarl." Lamar, apparently unaware of Cobb's impending reply to Morris, urged the governor to find some means of getting his own position before every voter in the Sixth District as quickly as possible. J. D. Frierson spoke more bluntly. Holsey, he charged, "seems to have lost his senses ... [and] says he will not support you under any circumstances if ... you have

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[57] James Jackson to Howell Cobb, February 14, 1853; March 21, 1853; March 24, 1853; John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, March 18, 1853; May 7, 1853; May 9, 1853; May 12, 1853; J. D. Frierson to Howell Cobb, March 21, 1853; William H. Hull to Howell Cobb, March 28, 1853; May 3, 1853; Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, May 9, 1853; Thomas R. R. Cobb to Howell Cobb, May 9, 1853, Howell Cobb Papers.

given your countenance to the Southern Rights Democratic organization and are willing to act with them." Frierson added pointedly that the editor "has been given to understand that he had better sell out his press and retire." Within a matter of days, James Jackson reported Holsey's willingness to sell the Banner.[58]

Anxious Cobbites immediately went to work on the arrangements for the purchase. Despite their eagerness, it still took more than a month to agree on terms and arrange financing. With each passing week, Cobbites found Holsey's criticisms of their leader and his course more and more frustrating. When, at the last minute, Holsey insisted on more secure financing arrangements, it appeared that the Cobb forces might have to launch a new paper after all. Writing from Milledgeville, Cobb issued instructions that Holsey be offered a larger down payment. If the editor rejected this offer, Cobb ordered that plans for a rival press be implemented. From Macon, brother John pledged an additional $1,500 and warned that time was the critical consideration. "You must not appear 'hors de combat' in your own stronghold a month longer ... if it is possible to avoid it," he warned, "It weakens you abroad more than you ... imagine." Let all be kept right in the Sixth District, he added, "& confidence

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[58] James Jackson to Howell Cobb, February 14, 1853; March 21, 1853; March 24, 1853; John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, March 18, 1853; J. D. Frierson to Howell Cobb, March 21, 1853; William H. Hull to Howell Cobb, March 28, 1853, ibid.

& strength elsewhere follows." Unknown to both men, Holsey had already relented. On May 9, Tom Cobb happily informed his brother that James Sledge, the new Banner editor, "is duly installed .... All well."[59]

IV

Brother Tom's assessment that all was well could hardly have been more inaccurate. To be sure, the Banner once more resided in friendly hands, but the departing Holsey remained implacably opposed to Cobb. He meant to do his former patron all the damage he could. He soon began laying plans to challenge Hillyer as an independent candidate for the Sixth District congressional seat. Nor did Holsey's removal significantly alleviate Cobb's other political difficulties. Like the death of Samuel Ray, Holsey's departure probably facilitated Democratic reconciliation, but it remained to be seen if the Regulars really desired a reconciliation that included a politically viable Howell Cobb. It also did little to assuage the still lingering animosity felt towards Cobb by the most committed Tugaloes. Finally, Holsey's replacement did nothing to improve the rapidly deteriorating relations between the Cobbites and the Pierce administration.

Cobb had understood even before the election of 1852 that he must control a sizeable portion of federal patronage

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[59] John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, May 7, 1853; May 9, 1853; May 12, 1853; William H. Hull to Howell Cobb, May 3, 1853; Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, May 9, 1853; Thomas R. R. Cobb to Howell Cobb, May 9, 1853, ibid.

in Georgia following a Pierce victory. Besides making it easier to instill renewed discipline within Union Democratic ranks, control of federal patronage would help legitimize his claims to be a Democrat in good standing. Although a cabinet appointment would have done most to serve Cobb's purpose in both regards, the employment of his political friends in a variety of federal jobs would meet his needs almost as effectively. Yet from the beginning of his administration, Pierce followed a course clearly designed to reward Southern Rights men over Union Democrats.

Few political observers failed to recognize this trend. John Forney, a Pennsylvania editor confided to Cobb his belief that Pierce had erred in giving too much weight to the Southern Rights Democrats. When Cobb remarked to George Jones that "'things have been going on after a strange fashion at Washington of late,'" the Tennessee congressman could only agree. "The President," he acknowledged, "seems to have determined to avow and act upon the principles of the Compromise Union men, and distribute the patronage among the fire-eaters and free-soilers."[60]

By late April, Cobb felt compelled to register the dissatisfaction felt by himself and his loyalists. "The feelings of our wing of the party," he complained to

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[60] John W. Forney to Howell Cobb, April 29, 1853; Howell Cobb to George W. Jones, cited in George W. Jones to Howell Cobb, May 19, 1853; George W. Jones to Howell Cobb, May 19, 1853, ibid.

Secretary of State William L. Marcy, "are growing quite sensitive over the appointments to prominent offices." Insisting that he cared nothing about the matter personally, he nevertheless believed the administration should be aware of "the effort ... being made to impress the Union democracy with the idea that they are not regarded with much favor at Washington." Soon other Cobbites began to echo their chief's sentiments that they had grown "a little sore about appointments."[61]

These complaints, however, exerted no visible impact on the Pierce administration. All across the state, federal posts continued to go to the Southern Rights wing of the Democracy. Worse still from Cobb's perspective, the choice jobs often went to men who had been especially vigorous in attacking him.[62]

Although Cobb wrote several letters endorsing Union Democratic applications for patronage appointments, he made it explicitly clear to the administration that Henry Jackson's request for appointment as United States minister to Brazil represented the one he most wanted filled. Declaring it "the only appointment which I have ventured to

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[61] Howell Cobb to William L. Marcy, April 25, 1853, Marcy Papers; Richard D. Arnold to John W. Forney, May 15, 1853, in Richard H. Shryock , ed., Letters of Richard D. Arnold, M.D., 1808-1876 (Durham: The Sherman Press, 1929) pp. 63-64.

[62] Greene, "Politics in Georgia, 1853-1854," pp. 193-194.

urge upon the administration as a personal request," he added that "it is the only one in which my feelings are involved to any extent."[63]

While waiting to hear of the administration's reaction to his appeal in Jackson's behalf, the governor received ominous news about the fate of another of his friends. Jacob R. Davis had been appointed superintendent of the federal mint at Dahlonega on Cobb's recommendation. On May 2, Secretary of the Treasury James Guthrie informed Cobb that serious "moral" charges leveled against Davis by Joseph E. Brown and other Southern Rights Democrats had necessitated the summary removal of Davis from his post by the president. Phillip Clayton, writing from his post within the Treasury Department, however, reported that Davis' true offense had been his affiliation with Cobb and the Union Democracy. "I was ... told by a fire-eater," he confided, "that [Davis'] greatest vice was that he was a Union Democrat & appointed upon your recommendation, which has given great dissatisfaction to the fire-eaters in Georgia."[64]

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[63] Howell Cobb to William L. Marcy, April 25, 1853; April 27, 1853, Marcy Papers; Philip Clayton to Howell Cobb, March 7, 1853; Howell Cobb to James Guthrie, May 23,1853, Howell Cobb Papers.

[64] James Guthrie to Howell Cobb, May 2, 1853; Howell Cobb to James Guthrie, May 23, 1853; Philip Clayton to Howell Cobb, May 23, 1853; James Denton to Howell Cobb, June 6, 1853; Jacob R. Davis to Howell Cobb, June 20, 1853, Howell Cobb Papers.

Cobb replied to the administration's action with seething anger. Although confinement to bed with an unspecified illness had delayed his response for two weeks or more, his outrage had lost none of its edge. In a two page letter to Guthrie, he lectured the administration on its ethical cowardice as well as it political incompetence. He opened his discourse with the assumption that Guthrie's letter had been designed "to afford me an opportunity of confessing my ignorance of Mr. Davis' character and withdrawing my recommendation." This act of betrayal he refused to make. On the contrary, he proclaimed, "I reaffirm all that I said ... and repeat that he is a worthy man ... [who] would have made a faithful officer." Davis' removal "upon false charges without a hearing," he thundered, violated every principle of "simple justice." Unfortunately, he rumbled in indignation, "it seems to be otherwise at Washington."[65]

Yet the political ineptitude which the removal demonstrated rivaled its fundamental injustice. Men of good will in Georgia had been working mightily to rebuild the shattered Democracy in their state. Union Democrats had labored faithfully despite receiving "few if any marks of favor and confidence from the administration." The Davis appointment, however, had done much to ease their feelings of rejection and resentment. His removal, as a matter of

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[65] Howell Cobb to James Guthrie, May 23, 1853, ibid.

course, clearly would exacerbate an already dangerous situation. As to the accusations themselves, Cobb asserted that "the records of your office will show that these charges are of a stereotypical character, always on hand, to be made against any thorough national democrat." He ventured the opinion "that your only course is to retrace your steps and reinstate Mr. Davis." Guthrie and Pierce ignored the governor's advice, and the Davis case continued to sour relations between Union Democrats and the president for months.[66]

Cobb's feelings toward the Pierce administration did not improve when he learned of the dispensation of Henry Jackson's application. Jackson did receive an appointment, but to the lesser office of chargé d'affaires in Austria rather than the desired ministry to Brazil. Although Jackson decided to accept the lower position, Cobb received the news of the appointment "with regret and disappointment." Philip Clayton had already advised the governor that "your Honor & your Self-Respect would best be preserved by asking no [further] favors of the administration." Cobb now seemed inclined to take that advice. "The administration has my best wishes for its successful administration of the

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[66] Howell Cobb to James Guthrie, May 23, 1853; Jacob R. Davis to Howell Cobb, June 20, 1853; July 26, 1853; March 3, 1854; J. D. Frierson to Howell Cobb, June 29, 1853; John E. Ward to Howell Cobb, July 3, 1853; Mary Ann Cobb to John B. Lamar, July 22, 1853; John W. Forney to Howell Cobb, July 29, 1853, ibid.

government," he asserted to Marcy, "though I do not feel it has any claims upon my personal confidence." Whatever confidence Cobb still might retain in the future, it clearly derived more from hope than from fact.[67]

V

Thus, by spring, 1853, after some eight or nine months of effort, Cobb's political prospects appeared no brighter than they had in the fall and winter of 1852. The ranks of his followers in north Georgia remained in disarray as Holsey and a hardcore cadre of Tugaloes persisted in their refusal to heed Cobb's call for harmony within the old Georgia Democracy. The majority of Regular Democratic newspapers in the state had continued to speak in favor of Democratic reconciliation and moderated their criticisms of the governor. But the behind-the-scenes efforts of Southern Rights men to frustrate the appointment of Davis and others friendly to Cobb hinted that the voice of the Columbus Times provided a more accurate picture of the real feelings of his recent Democratic foes. Additionally, Cobb's relations with the Pierce administration hardly could have been worse. The president's apparent determination to deny Cobb and the Union Democrats any significance in the Democratic party seemed intentionally designed to force them to either abandon the party or unconditionally surrender to the Regulars.

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[67] Philip Clayton to Howell Cobb, May 23, 1853; Howell Cobb to William L. Marcy, June 2, 1853, ibid.

Despite these difficulties, Cobb did not waiver in his determination to force his way back into the front ranks of the Democratic party at both the state and national levels. He saw no viable alternative. Hope Hull, no doubt, spoke for Cobb and many other Union Democrats when he confessed to sharing Holsey's raging "disgust for the Calhoun dynasty & his unwillingness to see them rule in the old Democratic party of Georgia." Yet he further confessed that "I do not perceive ... what else is to be done. The Union Party is a dead horse, it is no use to mount it .... I see no remedy but to let the fire eaters have rope, in hopes that they will soon hang themselves."[68]

While awaiting the happy day when the Southern Rights men might "hang themselves," Cobb continued his struggle to win their acceptance. The Senate election remained his primary focus. Unable to influence the outcome of the Senate contest directly, Cobb and his lieutenants concentrated on removing potential hindrances to their eventual success.

Shortly after making his decision to seek the Senate seat, Cobb consulted with Henry L. Benning about potential rivals from the Southern Rights wing of the party. Benning reported that Southern Rights leader Alfred Iverson had voiced a strong interest in going to the Senate, but noted that he had also applied to the Pierce administration for a diplomatic appointment to Chile where he hoped to get rich.

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[68] William H. Hull to Howell Cobb, April 7, 1853, ibid.

Given the choice between the honor of service in the Senate and the chance to acquire wealth, Benning predicted that Iverson would choose the latter. Cobb had scarcely received this information before he had a letter recommending Iverson's appointment to Chile on its way to Washington.[69]

Benning also suggested that Cobb's chances for success would be enhanced if the "candidate for governor [came] from the fire eating wing of the party." Cobbites had already anticipated the wisdom of this strategy. They expected that any Democratic reconciliation would be accompanied by a division of offices -- much as the Constitutional Union party previously had divided the offices of senator and governor between its Whig and Democratic wings. They resolved early on that the gubernatorial nomination must go to a Southern Rights man.[70]

Benning proposed that Cobb endorse Charles McDonald for governor, on condition that McDonald reciprocate by endorsing Cobb for senator. Neither Cobb nor his chief advisors gave any serious consideration to Benning's proposal. They refrained in part, because they already knew that the McDonald camp hoped to see their man elevated to the Senate. But they also refrained because they believed McDonald too

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[69] Henry L. Benning to Howell Cobb, April 21, 1853, ibid.; Howell Cobb to William L. Marcy, April 25, 1853, Marcy Papers.

[70] James Jackson to Howell Cobb, April 6, 1853; Henry L. Benning to Howell Cobb, April 21, 1853; John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, June 3, 1853, Howell Cobb Papers.

closely associated with the Nashville Convention and secessionism to ever be acceptable to the mass of Union Democrats. Moreover, they had not forgotten the prominent role played by McDonald in frustrating their attempts to recast the Democratic electoral ticket in 1852. Rather than McDonald, the Cobbites preferred either Hugh Haralson or Herschel V. Johnson. Although most Cobbites preferred Haralson who "occupied a less prominent [Southern Rights] position, took no bitter ground, & has less prejudice arrayed against him," Cobb apparently preferred Johnson. He probably based this preference on the prominent public stance taken by Johnson on reconciling the Democratic party and remaking the party's slate of presidential electors.[71]

The Cobbites, however, did not operate in a political vacuum. Friend and foe alike had been speculating since the beginning of the year that Cobb intended to seek the Senate seat. The mass of Southern Rights men demonstrated little sincere interest in dividing political offices with their past foes. Nevertheless, if the offices must be divided, they preferred to see the Union Democrats control the governorship while they selected the senator. This proved particularly true of the men who favored McDonald's elevation to the Senate. Having been frustrated in their hopes of seeing their man compensated by a cabinet post for his

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[71] James Jackson to Howell Cobb, April 6, 1853; Henry L. Benning to Howell Cobb, April 21, 1853; John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, June 3, 1853; June 5, 1853; June 7, 1853, ibid.

humiliating defeat at the hands of Cobb, they now concluded that election to the Senate would serve equally as well.[72]

In early June, leaders of the McDonald forces began to pressure John Lumpkin to run for governor. They used the lure of a reunited Democracy from north Georgia acting as unit in the state convention as their bait. Initially, Lumpkin rejected their overtures on the grounds that his participation in the race would harm Cobb's senate chances. He did so despite a life-long desire to be governor that rivaled Cobb's own desire to be a senator.[73]

Over the next week, the McDonald men relentlessly increased the pressure on Lumpkin. Any Democratic reunion, they insisted must be carried out according to their terms. If Lumpkin refused to cooperate, the McDonald forces held out the possibility that the gubernatorial nomination would go to Judge Hiram Warner. Lumpkin and other Union Democrats found this prospect especially repugnant. Originally a prominent Union Democrat, Warner had deserted his allies considerably before the Constitutional Union party had hauled down its banner. His defection to the Southern Rights men had done much to disorganize the Constitutional Union cause in the Georgia upcountry. Warner's defection

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[72] Milledgeville Federal Union, April 5, 1853; John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, June 3, 1853; June 5, 1853; June 7, 1853, Howell Cobb Papers.

[73] John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, June 3, 1853, Howell Cobb Papers.

notwithstanding, the McDonald men insisted that his earlier Union Democratic affiliation would be considered sufficient by the Southern Rights men to justify giving the senatorship to their candidate. At any rate, they hinted, Howell Cobb would never be the next senator from Georgia.[74]

Lumpkin found the combination of these arguments, the prospect of a reunited Democracy in the Fifth and Sixth Districts, and the possible fulfillment of a cherished ambition irresistible. He agreed that his name could be placed before the state convention, but only if it appeared certain that no Southern Rights candidate could win the nomination. He assured Cobb that this in no way represented a betrayal. Rather, he insisted, it represented a realistic appraisal of a difficult situation. "I am a candidate in opposition to Warner," he asserted, "and ... my running has taken the votes from Cherokee from him ... I have to this extent crippled him." To achieve this goal, he had been compelled to cooperate with the friends of McDonald, and "I could have no hope of cooperation in any movement that was calculated to defeat [him] for the Senate."[75]

Cobb's letters provide no indication of his feelings regarding Lumpkin's decision, but it seems unlikely that he gave it strong support. Besides raising yet another obstacle

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[74] John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, June 5, 1853; June 7, 1853, ibid.

[75] John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, June 7, 1853, ibid.

to his Senate aspirations, he could find himself personally and politically embarrassed if he had to choose between the nomination of a close friend and his own political advancement. Fortunately, the course of events in the state convention spared him the necessity of making such an awkward choice.[76]

The Democratic state convention assembled in Milledgeville on June 15. Cobb, Hillyer, and Henry Jackson all attended. They found the proceedings of this Democratic meeting entirely to their satisfaction. From the beginning it proved clear that Herschel Johnson commanded a majority of delegate support. Consequently, Lumpkin's supporters made no move to place his name in nomination. Despite Johnson's strong delegate support, the adoption of the "two thirds rule" forced the convention to undergo five ballots before selecting him as the nominee. The platform adopted by the convention proved just as satisfactory to the Cobbites. Besides renewing the party's traditional commitment to strict construction of the Constitution, low tariffs, and no national bank, the delegates refrained from making belief in the right of secession a test of party loyalty. Instead, they adopted resolutions embracing the Georgia Platform and

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[76] Greene, "Politics in Georgia, 1853-1854," p. 198.

denouncing anyone who attempted to revive the sectional dispute over slavery.[77]

The political future of Georgia's Whigs did not appear nearly as bright. Until late April, it was by no means certain that the Tertium Quids and the Scott Whigs would reconcile sufficiently to offer an opponent to the Democratic candidate. On April 26, the Milledgeville Southern Recorder called for a "Gubernatorial Convention" to nominate an opposition candidate. On June 22, delegates from fifty-two of the state's counties led by Robert Toombs met in Milledgeville. Seeking to maintain the illusion of a Union movement, the meeting avoided the name Whig and billed itself the "Gubernatorial Convention of Republican Citizens." Toombs prepared a convention platform which denounced the Pierce administration for placing the principles of the Georgia Platform in jeopardy through its appointment of secessionists and free-soilers to political offices. He called on members of both parties in Georgia to unite with the "Republican Citizens" in saving the Union. The convention then nominated Charles J. Jenkins, a prominent Union Whig for governor.[78]

Initially, Cobb assessed Johnson's chances as "very fair." He did acknowledge that the nomination had prompted

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[77] Milledgeville Federal Union, June 21, 1853; Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, June 25, 1853, Howell Cobb Papers; Montgomery, Cracker Parties, pp. 100-101.

[78] Montgomery, Cracker Parties, pp. 102-103.

expressions "of dissatisfaction in many quarters," but apprehended no "serious trouble." He confided to Lamar that "the nomination of Johnson will operate as favorably to my success as any other ... would have done."[79]

Reports flowing in to Cobb from all across the state during the next several days indicated that he might have been too sanguine in his assessment of Johnson's prospects. From Augusta, J. D. Frierson predicted that Johnson "will be beat ten thousand votes." Despite the demonstration of unity at the state convention, Frierson warned that "the elements of discord in the Democratic ranks portend a storm."[80]

Reports from north Georgia proved no more promising. Here too there were predictions that Johnson would lose by "ten thousand votes." Cobb's upcountry correspondents suggested the causes for this unfavorable circumstance. Many Union Democrats, they observed, simply could not overlook the recent past. They looked on Johnson "as the 'Disunion Candidate'" and felt no enthusiasm for him. One Cobbite avowed that "those [who] do not vote for [Jenkins] will not vote at all." They also complained that the Whigs had misled many Union Democrats into believing that "the Union Party still lives & that Jenkins its great foster father still adheres to it." In this regard, the Whigs had an easy task.

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[79] Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, June 25, 1853, Howell Cobb Papers.

[80] J. D. Frierson to Howell Cobb, June 29, 1853, ibid.

Jenkins had played a significant role in drafting the Georgia Platform -- so much so that his friends now suggested that he should be called "Father of the Georgia Platform." Nor did the Jenkins men hesitate to use the Pierce administration's patronage policies as a wedge to drive between Union Democrats and their erstwhile Southern Rights allies.[81]

Surprisingly, many Southern Rights Democrats in middle and south Georgia appeared little more enthusiastic about Johnson than Union Democrats in the upcountry. Alex Morton reported from Columbus that "the nomination of H. V. Johnson has fallen stillborn -- not a shout or approving word has welcomed it; even his old friends (the S. R. wing) take it coldly." Some leading Southern Rights men, he added, had openly vowed not to vote for Johnson. Robert Martin offered a similar evaluation of Johnson's lack of popularity. He predicted that "Jenkins will get a vote in Southwestern Georgia that will astonish all parties."[82]

Ironically, Johnson's relative lack of popularity in central and south Georgia probably stemmed from a feeling among the more extreme Southern Rights men that the "Disunion

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[81] A. Hood to Howell Cobb, July 9, 1853; July 18, 1853; S. Thomas to Howell Cobb, July 19, 1853, ibid.; Montgomery, Cracker Parties, pp. 103-106.

[82] Alex Morton to Howell Cobb, July 2, 1853, Howell Cobb Papers, Special Collections Library, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina (Hereafter: Cobb Papers, DU); Robert E. Martin to Howell Cobb, July 14, 1853, Howell Cobb Papers.

Candidate" had demonstrated an excessive zeal for compromising with Union Democrats. Even before the Democratic state convention had made its nomination, extreme Southern Rights organs had indicted moderate Southern Rights men for "billing, cooing, bowing, and scraping to Gov. Cobb, and turning somersets for his amusements." Whig organs had played upon these Southern Rights concerns by taunting that "it would be quite funny if the Secessionists at last caved, and had not only to receive Gov. Cobb as a leader, but also as the true exponent of their views." News of Johnson's nomination scarcely had been made before the Whig press raised the specter of collusion between the candidate and Cobb. The Southern Recorder charged that Johnson would receive Cobb's support for governor and, in turn, Johnson would support his senatorial aspirations. Cobb laughed off these accusations and suggested that they "will do no harm." Indeed, he believed they might enhance his current standing because they elevated his importance within the Democratic party in the public mind. Yet it would appear that he underestimated the bitter hostility towards himself that lingered among the fire-eaters.[83]

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[83] Columbus Southern Democrat, cited in Greene, "Politics in Georgia, 1853-1854," p. 196; Columbus Cornerstone, cited in Milledgeville Southern Recorder, March 29, 1853; Milledgeville Southern Recorder, May 3, 1853; June 21, 1853; Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, June 25, 1853, Howell Cobb Papers.

As the difficulties confronting Johnson became increasingly clear, requests that Cobb take the stump began to pour in. For the moment, however, the governor could do nothing to assist the man campaigning to succeed him. Mary Ann's health continued precarious and he had already made arrangements to take her to New York where she could consult with Doctor Bedford and take the waters at Sharon Springs.[84]

Any inclination which Cobb felt to remain in Georgia and assist Johnson's campaign probably evaporated when John E. Ward informed him of a private meeting that he had held with President Pierce. The meeting, Ward related, had been about Cobb, and at the president's instigation. Although Ward declined to provide the governor with specific details in his letter, he did report that Pierce expressed warm feelings for both Cobb and his Union Democrats. On the question of patronage, the president relayed assurances that "it was a mere question of time" before the Cobbites would be satisfied. In addition, Ward reported an urgent desire by the president for a meeting with Cobb in Washington. Pierce also promised to send Postmaster-General James Campbell, a key distributor of the "public plunder," to meet with Cobb during his visit to New York.[85]

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[84] Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, June 25, 1853; Mary Ann Cobb to John B. Lamar, July 27, 1853, Howell Cobb Papers.

[85] John E. Ward to Howell Cobb, July 3, 1853, ibid.; Roy F. Nichols, The Democratic Machine, 1850-1854 (New York: Columbia University, 1923), p. 196.

As it happened, Cobb did not have to settle for a conference with Postmaster-General Campbell. Cobb's arrival in New York coincided with the presence of President Pierce, himself, who had agreed to participate in the opening ceremony of the city's Crystal Palace Exposition. In fact, both the Cobbs and the presidential party took quarters at the Astor House Hotel. Despite her personal disdain for the policies followed by the Pierce administration, Mary Ann could not avoid being impressed by the handsome president. After witnessing him "on a splendid black charger" in the parade proceeding the opening of the exposition, she confessed her inclination to "forget the man, and only recognize him as the great head of a great and glorious republic." Nor could she deny the president's personal charm. Upon hearing Secretary of War Jefferson Davis inquiring about her, Pierce requested an introduction. He would "feel himself badly treated," he declared, "if deprived of this pleasure." Seeking to reconcile the president's policies towards her husband with his impressive and charming demeanor, Mary Ann concluded that either "he has been badly imposed upon by knaves, or he is a most consummate hypocrite."[86]

The president experienced considerably less success in his efforts to charm Cobb. As a visiting dignitary, Cobb shared a seat on the presidential platform at the

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[86] Mary Ann Cobb to John B. Lamar, July 27, 1853, ibid.

Exposition's opening ceremonies, and Pierce proved "very pointed in his attentions" to him. The president requested a private interview "which Mr. Cobb granted." During this meeting, Cobb gave him "a regular anatomical dissection of his acts and their effects upon Georgia politics." Pierce did not flinch in the face of Cobb's assessment, but instead urged him to come to Washington for further consultations. When Cobb voiced private doubts about the use of undertaking the trip, Mary Ann "pressed [him] to go." Acting on her advice, he "decided it politic to adopt this course."[87]

Before going to Washington, Cobb returned to Georgia. Mary Ann remained behind at Sharon Springs to continue her recuperation. The political situation at home remained precarious for the Democrats. Johnson's popularity showed no signs of improvement. Just as bad, the collapse of party discipline in the Sixth District appeared to be generating an accelerated fragmentation of Cobb's old political base. Already, Tugalo leader William B. Wofford had announced his intention to run against Hillyer for the Sixth District seat. Within days of Wofford's announcement, two little known Democrats, William M. Morton and Colonel John B. Stanford, had declared themselves challengers for Hillyer's congressional seat as well. This quartet would soon be joined in the race by Hopkins Holsey. One observer lamented to Cobb that "as fell the Empire of Alexander, in the contest

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[87] Ibid.

which ensued after his death, between his subordinates, so I fear the same fate awaits your old district."[88]

Just as bad, Cobb's relations with the Pierce administration remained clouded by ambiguity. In the aftermath of his meeting with the president in New York, Cobb had protested a post office appointment of a Southern Rights Democrat named Daniel who had been particularly vicious in his attacks on the governor. Probably recalling the speed with which the administration had responded to Southern Rights complaints about Davis, Cobb may have intended his protest as a test of the goodwill professed by Pierce in New York. If Cobb so intended, he learned that the administration felt no strong inclination to deviate from its established course. John Forney, acting as Pierce's spokesman, informed Cobb that Daniel already had been appointed and no corrective measure could be taken. As a sop, Forney offered assurances that the president had been "deeply mortified and chagrined" when he learned of his appointee's verbal assaults on Cobb. He also relayed a presidential promise that "as soon as you got here that the case of Davis will be looked after."[89]

On a brighter note, Forney provided more favorable news regarding Cobb's senatorial prospects. Commenting on a

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[88] Joseph Henry Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, July 8, 1853; Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, September 16, 1853, ibid.

[89] John W. Forney to Howell Cobb, July 29, 1853, ibid.

meeting between Pierce and James Gardner, Southern Rights editor of the Augusta Constitutionalist, Forney reported that Gardner had praised Cobb for serving the Southern Rights wing of the reunited Democracy "nobly." The Southern Rights men, he added, had determined that "you should go to the U. S. Senate." Forney also noted that the president felt "greatly pleased at Gardner's course."[90]

Whatever doubts Cobb might have harbored about the true intentions of the Pierce administration, he dutifully made the promised trip to Washington for consultations with the president and his cabinet. The members of the administration gave him a "cordial ... reception," and appeared receptive to any suggestions that he cared to offer. As he had done in New York, Cobb lectured the president about the mistaken policies of his administration. The administration, he insisted, "must give some practical evidence of a change of policy ... as it requires something of the kind to redeem the party from utter destruction." Although he believed that Pierce and the cabinet had "received it well," he could only hope that his "candid talk" would spur them to action.[91]

By the time Cobb returned to Georgia, he had begun to think seriously about taking the stump in support of Johnson's candidacy. Johnson had scarcely been nominated before Cobb began receiving letters urging him to campaign

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[90] Ibid.

[91] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, August 3, 1853, ibid.

for the Democratic candidate in the Georgia upcountry. Although confident of success elsewhere, Democrats worried that ongoing animosities between Southern Rights men and Union Democrats threatened to give Jenkins the governorship by allowing him to carry the Fifth and Sixth Districts. Cobb, himself, now believed Johnson's defeat likely. He appreciated the growing Southern Rights willingness to acknowledge his importance to the success of the Democratic party. If he could demonstrate on the stump that he did indeed possess "more influence in that section than any man in the state," his foes within the Democracy might feel compelled to reward him with the desired Senate seat. If Johnson lost the election, Cobb could not afford to have it appear that he bore any responsibility.[92]

Cobbites did not agree on the wisdom of this course. John Lumpkin, who appeared to desire a Democratic reunion even more than Cobb, urged the governor to attend a party rally at Kingston in Bartow County. Besides Herschel Johnson, the speakers list for the rally included Charles McDonald and A. H. Chappell, two of Cobb's rivals for the Senate seat.[93]

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[92] A. Hood to Howell Cobb, July 9, 1853; July 18, 1853; (?) Puckett to Howell Cobb, July 13, 1853; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, August 9, 1853; Joseph Henry Nisbet to Howell Cobb, August 17, 1853, ibid.

[93] John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, August 26, 1853, ibid.

Others, however, believed that any public effort by Cobb in Johnson's behalf would represent a serious tactical error. Robert Martin contended that Cobb still retained considerable support within the ranks of the old Union Whigs who now styled themselves the "Republican Citizens." Many of their candidates for the legislature, he insisted, would support Cobb's claims for the Senate provided that he did nothing to antagonize them prior to the election. If Cobb mounted the stump for Johnson, Martin warned, it would be worse than "arm[ing] yourself & shooting down every whig you see."[94]

Hope Hull shared Martin's view. All across the state, he grumbled, "the fire-eaters have acted ... with their usual good feeling. They have proscribed the Union Democrats wherever they have the power to do so." He argued that Cobb should abandon all hope of winning the fire-eaters' support, because "their hatred for you will only end with life." He urged the governor to decline taking the stump for Johnson on the grounds that it "violated the proprieties of your position." Besides, he added, a Cobb campaign in Johnson's behalf would prompt many Southern Rights men to "secretly drop Johnson only because he is understood to be your friend."[95]

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[94] Robert E. Martin to Howell Cobb, August 14, 1853, ibid.

[95] William H. Hull to Howell Cobb, August 16, 1853, ibid.

Despite the clearly developed logic in the arguments offered by Martin and Hull, Cobb found the potential benefits of taking the stump and the potential dangers of not taking it too compelling to resist. In early September, he informed Mary Ann that business with the state railroad required that he travel up the line from Atlanta. While in the upcountry, he planned on "giving the democracy a little help."[96]

Cobb made his first appearance on Johnson's behalf at the Kingston rally as requested by Lumpkin. Despite a strong storm the night before and intermittent showers throughout the day, the rally attracted an audience of about 2,000. The governor shared the platform with several other speakers. When Cobb's turn to address the crowd came, he focused on the concerns of Union Democrats. With more enthusiasm than he felt, he declared his satisfaction with the Pierce administration. More importantly, he sought to reassure the Union Democrats of the Fifth and Sixth Districts that his own return to the ranks of the Georgia Democracy involved no surrender of principle. To be sure, he avowed, he "was fighting now for the same principles which he was fighting for two years ago; he was against sectionalism then -- he was now; he maintained the soundness of the national democratic party then -- he did so now." He urged Union Democrats to

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[96] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, September 3, 1853, ibid.

reject Jenkins' Whig overtures and rally to Johnson's Democratic banner.[97]

Just as Martin had predicted, Cobb's decision to take to the stump alienated many of the Republican Citizens who had previously avoided criticizing Cobb. Whig organs turned their full fury on the governor they had helped to elect two years before. Besides accusing him of forsaking Union principles for political gain, they complained that he was "lowering the dignity of his office" by taking the stump for Johnson while still governor. In addition, they charged that Cobb had degraded himself as a man by campaigning for a candidate and a party which had been ruthless in their attacks on him in recent years.[98]

James Sledge, the new editor at the Banner, wasted no time in springing to Cobb's defense. Whig accusations, he countered, lacked substance. "Has Gov. Cobb abandoned the Georgia Platform?" he demanded, "Has he suddenly become a sectional agitator? Has he swerved one hair's breadth from the position he maintained two years ago?" Indeed not, thundered the editor in answer to his own query, the Whigs now denounced their former ally precisely "because he is consistent; because he is carrying out, in good faith, the programme laid down by the late Union party; and because he

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[97] Cassville Standard, cited in Athens Southern Banner, September 22, 1853.

[98] Athens Southern Banner, September 22, 1853.

is faithful to the Georgia Platform in its true intent and spirit."[99]

Sledge found Whig complaints that Cobb had degraded the governorship and himself by campaigning for Johnson laughable. Echoing the arguments made by the Union press during the gubernatorial contest two years earlier, he denied that any office, "however high, lifts its possessor above the people, or makes it beneath his dignity to mix with them and talk to them." Nor, Sledge added, had Cobb shamed himself by speaking out for men who had previously criticized him. To be sure, Southern Rights men had been bitter in their criticisms of Cobb, but no more bitter than the Whigs had been prior to the creation of the Constitutional Union party. Prior Whig attacks had not stopped Cobb from cooperating with Whigs when the safety of the Union required it; prior Southern Rights attacks would not keep him from cooperating with Democrats for the same reason. Sledge noted with some humor that if Cobb followed the Whig course of only cooperating with those who had never criticized him, he would be forced from politics entirely. "Gov. Cobb," he observed dryly, "enjoys the distinction of having been, at some period or other, denounced by every political paper in the State."[100]

Family letters indicate, however, that the Cobbs found it more difficult than Sledge to dismiss Whig criticisms that

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[99] Ibid.

[100] Ibid.

Cobb had degraded the governor's office by campaigning for Johnson. Mary Ann privately described her husband's actions as "rather undignified," but insisted that "the Whigs are not the ones to point out his dishonoring the office." If only the Whigs had stood by him as they ought to have done, then "he would never have needed to speak one word for Johnson or two for himself from the stump." Besides, she added, "if their honorable Senator Toombs can stump for Jenkins, where is the difference."[101]

These doubts notwithstanding, Cobb saw no alternative to his chosen course. He still believed Johnson's chances for success unpromising, and knew that his own future prospects hinged on the perception that he had done all within his power to insure a Democratic victory. Although Cobb had intended to limit his appearances on Johnson's behalf to a couple of speeches, the rapid influx of appeals for his assistance throughout the upcountry rendered it impossible for him to adhere to his original plan. Following his Kingston speech, he travelled with Johnson to Jackson and Walton counties where he delivered additional speeches. Later in the month, he campaigned in the mountain counties. He met Stephens in debate at Jonesboro and reported that many listeners had described the encounter as "a model of courteous debating which ought to be followed by all stump

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[101] Mary Ann Cobb to John B. Lamar, September 16, 1853, Howell Cobb Papers.

speakers." Not all shared in this favorable appraisal, however, as one Whig observer gloated over the governor's "poor" performance.[102]

VI

As expected, the election proved a close one. Out of some 95,000 ballots cast, Johnson eked out a narrow majority of 510 votes. His success in both the Fifth and Sixth Districts probably provided his margin of victory. Although Cobb had voiced doubts about his effectiveness in stumping on Johnson's behalf, Cobbites wasted no time in claiming credit for the Democratic triumph. The Banner vigorously proclaimed the Cobbite's case. Editor Sledge noted that Whig post-mortems of their narrow defeat included acknowledgements of the critical role played by Cobb's campaigning against them. "Gov. Cobb," he declared, "is a host in himself, and his name is a tower of strength in this district."[103]

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[102] W. G. Deloney to Howell Cobb, September 10, 1853; J. C. Longstreet, et al., to Howell Cobb, September 12, 1853; John Dickinson, et al., to Howell Cobb, September 13, 1853; William Phillips to Howell Cobb, September 13, 1853; James Jackson to Howell Cobb, September 13, 1853; Mary Ann Cobb to John B. Lamar, September 16, 1853; Joseph E. Brown to Howell Cobb, September 20, 1853; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, September 29, 1853, ibid.; Athens Southern Banner, September 22, 1853; (?) to John M. Berrien, September 30, 1853, John M. Berrien Papers, Southern Historical Collection, Library of the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

[103] Macon Georgia Telegraph, October 11, 1853; October 18, 1853; Athens Southern Banner, October 13, 1853; October 27, 1853; Montgomery, Cracker Parties, pp. 114-115.

Although Governor-elect Johnson privately conceded the accuracy of the Banner's assertions, it remained to be seen if the Southern Rights wing of the party had been sufficiently appeased by Cobb's efforts to reward him with the senatorship. Initially, Cobb's chances appeared favorable. James Gardner of the Augusta Constitutionalist, a Southern Rights organ, openly avowed that Cobb's efforts on behalf of Johnson and a reunited Democracy had earned Union Democrats recognition of the highest order. Besides demonstrating that a "spirit of proscription" did not dominate the councils of the Southern Rights wing of the Democracy, Gardner insisted that no step could do more to harmonize the Georgia Democracy than Cobb's election to the Senate. His status as leader of the Union Democrats; his efforts to reunite the two wings of the Democracy since the Baltimore Convention of 1852; his decisive role in securing Johnson's election; and the probability that his defeat would perpetuate the distrust which still divided the two wings of the party, all pointed to him being "pre-eminently the man ... for that position."[104]

Cobb's prospects for success in his Senate race appeared to be further enhanced by reports from Washington. Thomas Harris reported that "Jef. Davis is anxious for your election

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[104] Montgomery, Cracker Parties, p. 115; George Lamar to Howell Cobb, October 22, 1853, Howell Cobb Papers; Augusta Constitutionalist and Republic, cited in Athens Southern Banner, November 3, 1853.

and ... Pierce is doubly so." Under the circumstances, Harris reasoned, "if ... the legislature is an Administration legislature, it seems to me there can be no such thing as fail with you."[105]

Yet, as had been true of so much of Cobb's political life over the past several years, he found these positive trends more than counterbalanced by negative reports. Despite Harris' favorable news regarding the support of Pierce and Davis, Cobb continued to receive mixed signals from the administration. Even before the gubernatorial race in Georgia had run its course, he learned that the president happily would name him minister to France if he asked for the position. While this move might have represented nothing more than the president's desire to soothe animosities aroused by his patronage policies, it appears more likely that Southern Rights men hoped to eliminate Cobb as a rival to McDonald in the upcoming senatorial election -- just as Cobb had sought to eliminate Alfred Iverson with a similar diplomatic appointment.[106]

In the aftermath of the Georgia state elections, relations between Cobb and the administration remained uncertain. The voting scarcely had ended in Georgia before

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[105] Thomas D. Harris to Howell Cobb, October 13, 1853, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, p. 336.

[106] George W. Jones to Howell Cobb, August 28, 1853, Howell Cobb Papers.

Jefferson Davis informed Cobb of the administration's intention to remove Philip Clayton from his post at the Treasury Department. Davis cited rumors that Clayton had aligned himself with Whigs during the recent contest as justification for this step. Davis outlined a plan to move the newly appointed director of the Dahlonega mint to Washington and restore Jacob Davis to his old position there. Besides being a personal friend, Clayton also represented one of Cobb's chief sources of information from the capital. Cobb promptly addressed a strong protest to Jefferson Davis on Clayton's behalf. Although he succeeded in saving Clayton's position, Jacob Davis' claims on the administration remained unfulfilled.[107]

Developments in Georgia rapidly assumed an even more ominous appearance. Virtually every report that Cobb received indicated declining prospects for his senatorial ambitions. While his decision to take the stump on Johnson's behalf had alienated Whigs, it had done little to improve his standing with much of the Regular Democracy. From a variety of sources, he learned that "the Whigs are as bitter as wormwood. They will beat you with <u>anybody that runs</u>." Even worse, he learned that the Southern Rights wing of the Democratic party continued to register a willingness "to make war to the knife" to secure the election of a Southern Rights

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[107] Jefferson Davis to Howell Cobb, October 9, 1853; November 5, 1853, <u>ibid</u>.

man to the Senate. Hopkins Holsey's ongoing vendetta against Cobb further complicated the situation. John Cobb warned his older brother from Athens that Holsey meant to attend the opening of the legislature where he intended to do everything possible to prevent Cobb's election.[108]

Cobb cared little about Holsey's actions and nothing about the anger of the Whigs. Yet assessments of persistent Southern Rights hostility clearly worried him, as he freely admitted that "it is the support & confidence of the democratic party I seek." Cobb made an immediate bid to gage the depth of this tide of Southern Rights opposition. He directed several urgent inquiries to Henry Benning: "'Is your whole section against me? .... What is the extent of their opposition? .... Is it limited to a preference for [my opponents] or does it extend to uncompromising hostility?'" Benning offered limited reassurance. Although he felt certain that "our whole section is opposed to you," he felt almost equally certain that "there exists [nothing] like uncompromising hostility to you in the breast of a single member from this circuit." In short, he concluded, "I believe every democratic member from our section will be

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[108] A. Hood to Howell Cobb, October 10, 1853; Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, October 14, 1853; John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, October 15, 1853; Luther J. Glenn to Howell Cobb, October 17, 1853; John T. Grant to Howell Cobb, October 18, 1853; William H. Hull to Howell Cobb, October 21, 1853; Henry L. Benning to Howell Cobb; Thomas R. R. Cobb to Howell Cobb, October 28, 1853; John B. Cobb to Howell Cobb, November 3, 1853, Howell Cobb Papers; Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, October 22, 1853, Cobb Papers, DU.

willing ... to go into caucus & ... to stand the cast of the die in [that] caucus."[109]

With Benning's appraisal to bolster his hopes, Cobb continued to plot a strategy which he believed likely to result in his nomination by the Democratic caucus. He urged John Lamar to intercede with delegations from central and south Georgia, while other lieutenants labored to line up votes among the representatives from the northern portions of the state. Ultimately, however, the Cobbites resorted to the same strategy they had adopted in the recent gubernatorial contest. They resolved to "as far as possible, ... secure the election of S.R. Democrats to subordinate posts, such as President of the Senate, Speaker of the House, secty & clerk." Luther Glenn freely avowed, "let us give them everything so that they will give us the Senator."[110]

Despite the many reports of widespread opposition to his election, Cobb remained cautiously optimistic about his prospects throughout much of October. He confided to Mary Ann in mid-month that "so far as my election is concerned everything looks tolerable fair, though it is a doubtful matter." At month's end, he reported to brother John that

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[109] Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, October 22, 1853, Cobb Papers, DU; Howell Cobb to Henry L. Benning, cited in Henry L. Benning to Howell Cobb, October 24, 1853; Henry L. Benning to Howell Cobb, October 24, 1853, Howell Cobb Papers.

[110] Luther J. Glen to Howell Cobb, October 12, 1853; Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, October 31, 1853, Howell Cobb Papers.

"upon the whole the prospect is flattering. I am satisfied that the popular feeling with the democrats is with me, but I shall encounter some pretty bitter and stern opposition."[111]

Yet by the time Cobb surrendered the governorship to Johnson in early November, his cautious optimism had yielded to the certainty of defeat. Although he offered no explanation for his change of heart, he privately predicted to Mary Ann "that I shall be beat." Cobb's certainty of defeat did not lead him to withdraw from the contest. On the contrary, he voiced a determination to remain in Milledgeville until the party's caucus had completed its work. Even if he failed to win the coveted Senate seat, he recognized the need "to give matters a proper direction for my future interest."[112]

When the caucus assembled on the evening of November 16, the determination of the former Southern Rights men to bestow the Senate nomination on one of their own became readily apparent. All their previous talk of reconciliation notwithstanding, the Regulars once more revealed their determination neither to forget nor forgive Cobb's past rebellion. Through a series of seven ballots, Cobb

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[111] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, October 19, 1853; Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, October 31, 1853, Howell Cobb Papers; Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, October 22, 1853, Cobb Papers, DU.

[112] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, November 8, 1853; November 14, 1853; Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, November 11, 1853; November 16, 1853, Howell Cobb Papers.

consistently ran second to McDonald. On every ballot, McDonald's vote exceeded that given to Cobb by nearly two to one; on the final and decisive ballot, McDonald's vote exceeded Cobb's by better than five to one.[113]

Not surprisingly, Cobbites viewed the caucus defeat as another manifestation of Southern Rights vindictiveness. Many Union Democrats declared their unwillingness to tolerate further humiliation at the hands of Southern Rights men. Some of these Union Democrats in the state senate united with Whigs there in voting to delay the election of a United States senator for two years. Although the lower house declined to embrace this movement, it nevertheless stalled efforts to elect a senator.[114]

Cobb, who departed Milledgeville almost as soon as the caucus completed its work, had scarcely reached Athens before receiving urgent requests that he return to the state capital. Both Union Democrats and Southern Rights men urged this course upon him. They warned that Cobb's early departure from Milledgeville had created the impression that he did not support the nominee of the party's caucus. Moreover, the action of a small group of Union Democrats in blocking the election of a senator had undermined the good

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[113] Athens Southern Banner, November 24, 1853.

[114] James Gordon to Howell Cobb, November 18, 1853; George Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, November 20, 1853; John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, November 21, 1853; November 22, 1853, Howell Cobb Papers; Montgomery, Cracker Parties, pp. 119-120.

will among Southern Rights men engendered by the nomination of McDonald. Southern Rights men who had just begun to praise Cobb's devotion and sacrifice for the cause of Democratic unity, now denounced the action by the state senate as another of his corrupt maneuvers to subvert the will of the party for his own advancement.[115]

Somehow, Cobb's correspondents warned, he must prevail upon the recalcitrant Union Democratic senators to back away from their fatal course. Otherwise, the Democracy would be disrupted by perpetual conflict between the followers of McDonald and Cobb. By returning to Milledgeville and urging the necessity of both party unity and McDonald's election, they concluded, Cobb would make himself "the strongest man in Georgia." R. W. McCune advised Cobb that a public effort on McDonald's behalf -- whether successful or not -- "will draw to you the sympathy and high respect of the nation." John Lumpkin stated the dilemma in the bluntest of terms. Cobb must secure the election of McDonald in order to secure his own political future.[116]

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[115] James Gordon to Howell Cobb, November 18, 1853; John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, November 21, 1853; November 22, 1853; R. W. McCune to Howell Cobb, November 22, 1853; J. W. Horne to Howell Cobb, December 1, 1853; L. Q. C. Lamar to Howell Cobb, December 3, 1853; December 14, 1853; Thomas C. Howard and H. K. Green to Howell Cobb, December 3, 1853, Howell Cobb Papers.

[116] James Gordon to Howell Cobb, November 18, 1853; John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, November 21, 1853; November 22, 1853; R. W. McCune to Howell Cobb, November 22, 1853; J. W. Horne to Howell Cobb, December 1, 1853; L. Q. C. Lamar to Howell Cobb, December 3, 1853; December 14, 1853; Thomas C.

Despite the urgency of these appeals, Cobb did not take immediate steps to return to the capital. Although there is no evidence that he played any role in the action taken by the state senate, he certainly felt satisfied that the Southern Rights men should be taught so quickly that the Union Democrats did indeed hold the balance of power in Georgia. Early in December, he confided to John Lamar his commitment to a policy of "masterly inactivity." Besides representing a sound political strategy, he confessed that concern over Mary Ann's health also made him reluctant to leave home so soon. A week later, he announced that Mary Ann's health had improved sufficiently that he might undertake a trip to Milledgeville in the next few days. Three days after that, on December 17, he arrived in the state capital.[117]

Democrats of all factions immediately deluged Cobb with requests to address the party. This he agreed to do at a meeting of the Democratic caucus two days later. In his speech, Cobb passionately pleaded for unity within Democratic ranks and declared his unwavering support for President Pierce. Yet, only willing to go so far, he refrained from calling for McDonald's election. Nevertheless, the caucus

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Howard and H. K. Green to Howell Cobb, December 3, 1853, ibid.

[117] John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, November 19, 1853; Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, December 4, 1853; December 14, 1853; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, December 17, 1853, ibid.

gave him a warm reception. The members repeatedly interrupted his remarks with applause and afterwards declared it "a most masterly effort."[118]

Cobb did not disagree with these appraisals. He privately rejoiced to Mary Ann that "my visit was upon the whole a pleasant one, and politically speaking, a profitable one, though we must wait for the future to develop that fact." After reading newspaper accounts of his effort, other Cobbites voiced similar reactions. John Lumpkin rejoiced that "you have been to Milledgeville and ... there made the great speech of your life .... It has at one stroke put you ... at the head of the Democratic party of the State of Georgia." He even suggested that Cobb's speech might result in his election to the Senate during the current session of the legislature.[119]

Lumpkin's suggestion that Cobb might yet secure the Senate seat did not rest beyond the realm of possibilities. Rumors had already begun to circulate that McDonald intended to resign his nomination in hopes of bringing on the election of a senator while the Democrats still controlled the state legislature. These rumors, combined with reports that

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[118] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, December 17, 1853, ibid; Milledgeville Federal Union, cited in Athens Southern Banner, December 29, 1853; Athens Southern Banner, December 29, 1853.

[119] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, December 21, 1853; John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, December 28, 1853, Howell Cobb Papers.

Jefferson Davis meant to resign from the cabinet and seek a Senate seat from Mississippi, led Georgia Democrats to design a scheme to satisfy both factions of the state organization. They planned to secure the soon-to-be-vacant cabinet post for McDonald and bestow the "senatorial robes" upon Cobb. If they succeeded in effecting this arrangement, nearly all Democrats agreed that "the party in Georgia will be once more thoroughly united and cemented." The prospects for success gained added impetus from Davis' apparent endorsement of the scheme.[120]

Unfortunately for Cobb, McDonald, and the dream of an easy path to Democratic reconciliation, the scheme collapsed when Davis met defeat in the Mississippi Democratic convention. He remained in the cabinet, thus eliminating any chance of an appointment for McDonald. Frustrated by his inability to break the deadlock in the legislature, McDonald did indeed resign his nomination. In mid-January, 1854, the Democratic majority in the legislature elected Alfred Iverson to the United States Senate. Although from the Southern Rights wing of the party, Iverson had been less prominent in the struggle with the Union Democrats than McDonald, and hence proved more acceptable to their representatives. Cobbites had the satisfaction of knowing that if the Southern

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[120] John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, December 28, 1853; January 18, 1854; R. W. McCune to Howell Cobb, December 30, 1853; Herschel V. Johnson to Howell Cobb, January 10, 1854, ibid.; Montgomery, Cracker Parties, pp. 120-121.

Rights men had succeeded in denying their leader his rightful place, that at least they retained sufficient power to do the same in return.[121]

Cobb accepted the outcome of the Senate campaign with reasonable equanimity. He believed it better that the election proceed rather than see the question remain "a continuing quarrel within the party." Nevertheless, he must have viewed the future with some anxiety, however unshaken his faith in that future might be. It was the first time in his adult life that he looked to the future from outside the sphere of political office.[122]

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[121] William C. Davis, Jefferson Davis: The Man and His Hour (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), pp. 244-245; Montgomery, Cracker Parties, pp. 120-122.

[122] Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, January 17, 1854, Howell Cobb Papers.

Chapter Fifteen

"Richard Is Himself Again"

Almost immediately after leaving the governorship, Cobb returned to his legal practice. He had little choice. He had to compensate for the loss of income which accompanied his loss of political office. Recently increased pressure from his creditors gave added impetus to his efforts. Although minuscule in comparison with the financial disaster which beset him in the 1840s, the calls of his creditors for prompt payment nevertheless caused Cobb, Mary Ann, and Brother John many anxious moments.[1]

Despite the family's financial concerns, Mary Ann welcomed the semblance of normal family life which Cobb's return to legal practice permitted. Since the death of the couple's young daughter Laura in late 1852, Mary Ann's health had been quite poor. Anxiety caused by the wound to Lamar's eye and the slow process of healing that followed had exacerbated her own medical problems -- some of which were almost certainly psychosomatic. She variously suffered from

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[1] Asbury Hull to Howell Cobb, August 16, 1853; Mary Ann Cobb to John B. Lamar, April 10, 1854; John A. Breedlove to Howell Cobb, June 24, 1854; September 6, 1854; Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, December 10, 1854; December 13, 1854; December 19, 1854; February 14, 1855; February 25, 1855; Iverson Harris to Howell Cobb, December 27, 1854; January 14, 1855; John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, February 18, 1855, Howell Cobb Papers, Felix Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia (Hereafter: Howell Cobb Papers).

fevers, headaches, weak eyes, and a general sense of nervousness. On occasion, she suffered from such an "extreme sensitiveness of the nerves" as to cause her "teeth and flesh to be on edge, all the time." In such cases, she found it a "constant misery ... to touch anything or be touched or to eat." Her doctors combatted these symptoms by prescribing laudanum, camphor, "raw brandy," red pepper applied to the back of her neck, and a medicine "which is to act directly upon the nerves of my womb and prevent a recurrence of these attacks."[2]

Although the doctors' nostrums produced no significant benefit for Mary Ann's health, the passage of time did help. As the intensity of her grief over Laura's death eased, her own condition improved. A pronounced renewal of her religious faith aided her convalescence. By February, 1854, she had recovered sufficiently to take a philosophical view of her afflictions. When young Lamar voiced frustration at the continued swelling and inflammation of his eye, she urged that he patiently accept his discomfort as a manifestation of God's will. Since "the time of my sore affliction in 1847 & 48," she confessed, "my mind was in chaos as regarded spiritual things." The death of her infant sons Basil and Henry during that same time period, she added, had resulted

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[2] Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, April 29, 1853; May 1, 1853; December 4, 1853; Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, October 3, 1853; October 6, 1853; October 21, 1853; November 16, 1853; Mary Ann Cobb to John B. Lamar, April 18, 1854; Mary Ann Cobb to "My Dear Sarah," May 31, 1854, ibid.

in a "hardness of heart" towards God which had persisted even to the recent past. The near loss of Lamar's eye, followed by the death of Laura, however, had convinced her of her complete dependence "upon God for help." She could only hope that her son's current distress would teach them both to "bear patiently the rod that God has laid upon us and meekly trust that He will remove it when it has done his bidding."[3]

The general good health and high spirits of her surviving children also contributed to Mary Ann's improving outlook. A doting mother, she took intense pride in her "little family." Mayon, the youngest, was now a four year old picture of health and gaiety who her mother described as being "all day ... as happy as an uncaged bird." Eleven year old Howell, Jr., possessed his father's gregarious nature and love of fun and crowds. He liked being the center of attention, and, while the more reserved Lamar accused him "of making a fool of himself when he gets into a crowd," Mary Ann noted that the local girls found his antics quite entertaining. At thirteen, Lamar manifested a quiet and studious nature. He worked hard at mastering his Latin and Greek. Like his father before him, the boy found Greek difficult, but his diligent persistence led teacher Scudder to declare him a true scholar.[4]

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[3] Mary Ann Cobb to Lamar Cobb, February 26, 1854, ibid.

[4] Mary Ann Cobb to John B. Lamar, April 18, 1854, ibid.

Only John A. seemed determined to cause his parents constant frustration. Now a strapping fifteen year old, he had never reconciled himself to the discipline of school. His inclination to rebellion against authority became even more pronounced after Lamar's injury necessitated his removal from N. A. Pratt's school in Roswell. The boy's deportment and attention to his school work deteriorated steadily in the absence of Lamar's stabilizing influence. A series of letters from his anxious father blended scolding, cajoling, rationalizing, and pleading in a bid to convince him to change his ways. Although John A. promised to do better, by September, 1853, he pleaded with his parents to remove him from school before Mr. Pratt expelled him for misbehavior. The teacher denied any intention of expelling the boy, but did mention that John A. had been involved in a series of practical jokes at his expense. The angry parents refused John A.'s plea, and Mary Ann firmly assured him that if Pratt would tolerate him, he must remain at Roswell until ready to enter the University.[5]

John A.'s behavior did improve, but as always the improvement proved temporary. In May, 1854, Pratt informed the Cobbs that John A. must leave. In his letter announcing John A.'s expulsion, Pratt explained that in addition to the

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[5] Howell Cobb to John A. Cobb, October 5, 1852; October 20, 1852; May 12, 1853; July 17, 1853; Mary Ann Cobb to John A. Cobb, September 8, 1853; N. A. Pratt to Mary Ann Cobb, September 9, 1853, ibid.

boy's inattention to his studies and poor behavior, he had begun to bully smaller students. When one of the victims complained of this treatment to Pratt in John A.'s presence, young Cobb openly threatened his accuser with physical retaliation. Pratt voiced outrage at these threats. An equally outraged John A. made as if to strike the schoolmaster. Although the boy refrained from the attack, Pratt's patience had been exhausted. A few days after he returned home, John A.'s distressed parents re-enrolled him at the school of his old educational nemesis -- the dreaded Mr. Scudder. While the boy probably liked Scudder no better than before, he certainly relished the chance to live at home again.[6]

Unfortunately, Mary Ann's recovery proved short-lived. In late December, 1854, she gave birth to the couple's second daughter, Sarah Mildred. In the months that followed, her previous symptoms returned and became even more varied. They now included ringing in the ears and twitching about the eyes. Her list of medicines also expanded to include "chloroform, quinine, [and] morphine."[7]

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[6] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, February 5, 1854; N. A. Pratt to Howell Cobb, May 28, 1854; Mary Ann to Howell Cobb, June 7, 1854; John A. Cobb to Howell Cobb., June 11, 1854, ibid.

[7] Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, December 26, 1854; Howell Cobb to "My Dear Son," May 1, 1854; Mary Ann Cobb to John A. Cobb, May 4, 1855; Mary Ann Cobb to Dr. R. D. Moore, July 10, 1855; Mary Ann Cobb to John B. Lamar, August 21, 1855; Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, September 11, 1855, ibid.

However much Mary Ann enjoyed the semblance of normal family life made possible by Cobb's retirement from political office, she understood early on that his retirement would only be temporary. By spring, 1854, she confided to brother John her expectation that "he is waiting to see what Providence designs towards us in the way of new 'responsibilities.'" With considerable foresight she mused that "I shrewdly expect he has still a penchant for Congress and is abiding his time, 'till the fall discloses the desire of the people."[8]

Cobb did not welcome his retirement with the same enthusiasm as his wife. While he found the rigors of riding the legal circuit no more physically demanding than stumping his district in an election campaign, he did find it less satisfying. In one important regard Cobb's legal practice now differed dramatically from his early days as a circuit riding lawyer. No longer did he have to scrounge for cases left over by the better known attorneys. As one of the most prominent men in the state clients eagerly sought his services. Consequently, he frequently found himself "engaged in every important case in Court." During the month of April, 1854, alone, he handled two murder cases. In one, he won an acquittal "after a hard fight." In the other, he fought equally as hard but -- due to a "popular prejudice" against the accused -- failed to get his client acquitted.

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[8] Mary Ann Cobb to John B. Lamar, April 18, 1854, ibid.

Nevertheless, he succeeded in having him sentenced to life in the penitentiary rather than death on the gallows.[9]

Despite the demands of his existing practice, the family's need for funds led him to look further afield for large fees. When he learned of several murder cases to be tried in Baldwin County, he wrote to Judge James Jackson about the likelihood of being hired to defend one or more of the accused. The promise of $1,000, he suggested, would secure his services. Unfortunately for Cobb's finances, there is no evidence that he received employment in any of the cases.[10]

II

Cobb's busy schedule notwithstanding, politics remained the focus of his interest. He anxiously followed events in Washington. The reports he received conveyed a distressing picture of disarray within Democratic ranks. Most of his correspondents attributed this unhappy situation to the flawed patronage policy of the Pierce administration. At its Baltimore convention in 1852, the Democratic party had adopted a platform which embraced the principles contained in the Compromise of 1850. As president, Franklin Pierce had sought to reconcile the Southern Rights and free-soil extremists within the Democracy to their ideological defeat

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[9] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, February 24, 1854, April 9, 1854; April 16, 1854; Mary Ann Cobb to John B. Lamar, April 18, 1854, ibid.

[10] Howell Cobb to James Jackson, March 25, 1854, ibid.

by rewarding them with choice political offices. In pursuing this policy, Pierce managed to appease many Democratic extremists -- especially former Southern Rights leaders such as Herschel V. Johnson -- but at the price of alienating much of the party's Unionist majority. Virtually all those writing to Cobb from the capital insisted that Pierce would be incapable of sustaining his administration before the people at the next presidential election.[11]

Besides watching the course of general trends in the national capital, Cobb also paid particular attention to the fate of the Kansas-Nebraska Bill. Senator Stephen A. Douglas of Illinois had introduced this legislation in January, 1854. It called for the creation of two new territories -- Kansas and Nebraska -- from the unorganized portions of the Louisiana Purchase. Dedicated to western development and a northern route for the proposed transcontinental railroad, Douglas sought to win southern congressional votes by repealing the Missouri Compromise line. Rather than a congressionally imposed ban on slavery in these new territories, he proposed that the fate of the peculiar institution be determined by popular sovereignty. He justified this portion of his legislation by arguing that the

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[11] George W. Jones to Howell Cobb, January 19, 1854; February 13, 1854; Colin M. Ingersoll to Howell Cobb, January 20, 1854; Philip Clayton to Howell Cobb, February 9, 1854; Thomas D. Harris to Howell Cobb, April 10, 1854; Thomas H. Bayly to Howell Cobb, May 6, 1854, ibid.

Compromise of 1850 had supplanted the old Missouri agreement.[12]

Somewhat surprisingly, many of Cobb's southern friends in Washington viewed the Douglas legislation with skepticism. Representative George W. Jones of Tennessee spoke eloquently for this group when he voiced profound concern about the likely consequences of Douglas' proposed repeal of the Missouri line. Denouncing it as "a most impolitic and mad movement for the South," he argued that no practical good can come of it because there is none in it." He insisted that both the South and the country most needed "calm, peace and repose" before the wounds of the recent past could heal. Douglas, he complained, had not consulted with the mass of southern members before introducing his measure. Most of them, he contended, would have advised against it. Nevertheless, now that Douglas had laid the groundwork for a crisis, southern men and their true northern allies had no alternative but to "come square up to the work."[13]

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[12] George W. Jones to Howell Cobb, February 9, 1854; February 16, 1854; Philip Clayton to Howell Cobb, February 9, 1854; Stephen A. Douglas to Howell Cobb, April 2, 1854; Thomas D. Harris to Howell Cobb, April 10, 1854; Thomas H. Bayly to Howell Cobb, May 6, 1854, ibid; Howell Cobb to Stephen A. Douglas, February 5, 1854, cited in Robert W. Johannsen, The Letters of Stephen A. Douglas (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1961), p. 300; Horace Montgomery, Cracker Parties (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1950), pp. 129-132.

[13] George W. Jones to Howell Cobb, February 16, 1854, Howell Cobb Papers.

Cobb, no doubt, understood exactly what Jones meant when he spoke of coming "square up to the work." Nonetheless, he appeared to share none of his friend's doubts. His organ, the Athens Southern Banner, endorsed the Kansas-Nebraska Bill shortly after its introduction. He, himself, wrote directly to Douglas in early February to praise the senator's course. "I hope to hear," he asserted, "that the Administration & the entire democratic party are united in sustaining your position." He believed it essential that all Democrats should rally around the Douglas bill because "it is a crisis in the national democratic party and he who dallies is a dastard & he who doubts is damned." When -- after a hard fight and a narrow vote -- the measure had been adopted and signed into law, Cobb praised Douglas even more fully and suggested that his heroics had earned him a claim on the Democratic presidential nomination in 1856.[14]

Cobb's enthusiasm for the Kansas-Nebraska Bill derived from several sources. In light of his recent political experiences, he scarcely could afford to appear laggard in rallying to any measure which seemed to favor southern interests. More importantly, the introduction by a northern Democrat of legislation which removed congressionally imposed restrictions on the spread of slavery verified his

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[14] Athens Southern Banner, January 26, 1854; February 2, 1854; Howell Cobb to Stephen A. Douglas, February 5, 1854, cited in Johannsen, The Letters of Stephen A. Douglas, p. 300; Howell Cobb to Stephen A. Douglas, cited in Stephen A. Douglas to Howell Cobb, October 6, 1855, Howell Cobb Papers.

longstanding contention that the safest harbor for southern interests lay in an alliance with northern Democrats. Nor should it be forgotten that Cobb -- as Douglas recognized -- had long been an ardent proponent of popular sovereignty as the most legitimate mode of determining the fate of slavery in the territories.[15]

Yet, Cobb found the role of well-informed observer less than satisfying. He ached to return as a full participant to the political arena. Shortly after his bid for a Senate seat ended in failure, he learned through an intermediary that President Pierce had pronounced him "'a prince,'" and avowed his intention "to show my appreciation of him on the first occasion that presents itself." Soon, rumors surfaced that he would be appointed United States minister to Spain. Somewhat later, rumors also surfaced that Pierce meant to appoint Cobb to the cabinet if reports of Secretary of the Navy James C. Dobbins' planned resignation proved accurate.[16]

Both posts had political benefits to recommend them. As minister to Spain, Cobb would be ideally placed to play a central role in American efforts to acquire Cuba. The desire to gain this Spanish territory, by fair means or foul, nearly had reached fever pitch by 1853. Plots to secure the

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[15] Stephen A. Douglas to Howell Cobb, April 2, 1854, Howell Cobb Papers.

[16] Colin M. Ingersoll to Howell Cobb, January 20, 1854; Charles A. L. Lamar to John B. Lamar, June 5, 1854; June 8, 1854; Daniel Sickles to Howell Cobb, June 23, 1854; John W. Forney to Howell Cobb, September 7, 1854, ibid.

island, popular with southerners eager to gain additional slave territory and expansion-minded northern Democrats, had received official sanction from President Pierce when he appointed advocates of Cuban acquisition to diplomatic posts in several European countries. The administration fully expected these men to cooperate in winning Cuba from Spain for the United States. Should Cobb play a prominent role in securing the island -- or at least play a prominent role in the attempt -- his standing with Southern Rights Democrats would certainly improve. A cabinet appointment, even a belated one, would demonstrate that Georgia's Union Democrats had at last been welcomed back into full fellowship with the national Democracy.[17]

Ultimately, Cobb declined to accept any post in the Pierce administration. He did so because he doubted that Pierce could win either the Democratic nomination or the presidential election in 1856. The reports which he had been receiving about the disrupting influence of Pierce's patronage policy on the national Democracy played a critical role in his decision, as did the advice of trusted lieutenants. Gazaway Lamar urged his kinsman to avoid accepting any post from "a doomed administration." Brother John stated the case just as bluntly. Relaying his advice through Mary Ann, he suggested that "'he would mix himself

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[17] Allan Nevins, Ordeal of the Union: A House Dividing, 1852-1857, two vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1947), II, 347-363.

up as little as possible with the present administration. President Pierce looked on quietly and let you paddle yourself out of your difficulties without any assistance from him, and in turn, he may paddle himself out the best way he can.'" Under the circumstances, Cobb continued to support the administration publicly, while refusing to become entangled with it.[18]

Having resolved neither to seek nor accept a position from the Pierce administration, Cobb turned his political ambitions elsewhere. Just as Mary Ann had predicted, he began to consider running for his old Sixth District congressional seat. Riding the legal circuit proved beneficial in this instance, because it permitted him to assess his chances and repair the damage done to his political organization during the upheavals of the past several years.[19]

Cobb was pleasantly surprised to learn that his political organization appeared to have suffered no permanent harm. By October, 1854, he happily reported that "I have met with the leading democrats from all ... upper counties of my district, and with one voice they call upon me to return to Congress." Even better, he asserted, "the Southern Rights

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[18] Gazaway B. Lamar to John B. Lamar, June 21, 1854; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, July 1, 1854; Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, January 3, 1855, Howell Cobb Papers.

[19] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, October 1, 1854; Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, February 14, 1855, ibid.

men seem to be the warmest friends I have whilst the Union men are as true as ever." He confidently predicted that "if the election was tomorrow I would win every vote in Rabun County, and a larger vote in all the other counties than I ever got before." Over the next several months, a succession of county meetings in the Sixth District tendered Cobb their endorsement of his congressional ambitions. By May, 1855, every county in the district had done so, and Cobb quietly announced through the Southern Banner that he would make the race.[20]

Cobb also received encouragement from sources outside his district. One of his regular Washington informants, Thomas DeKalb Harris, assured him that his old associates in Congress enthusiastically welcomed news that he might soon be in their midst once more. They wanted him back, Harris relayed, because they believed that "'he will be able to exert a controlling and happy influence in righting the somewhat shattered condition of the Democratic party.'" They insisted that "'Cobb ... owes it not only to himself, but to the party, to put himself in position to work out this result.'"[21]

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[20] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, October 1, 1854; April 14, 1855; John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, March 2, 1855; D. W. Spencer to Howell Cobb, May 2, 1855; S. Y. Jameson to Howell Cobb, May 3, 1855, ibid.; Athens Southern Banner, April 19, 1855; April 26, 1855; May 31, 1855.

[21] Thomas D. Harris to Howell Cobb, December 28, 1854, Howell Cobb Papers.

Several Georgia newspapers, including a number that did not approve of Cobb's political past, shared in these sentiments. The Savannah Journal & Courier, an organ recently affiliated with the Southern Rights party, greeted the news that Hillyer would not seek reelection with an expression of hope that Cobb would replace him. "Much as we have differed with him upon questions no longer at issue," it declared, "as a citizen of the State we are proud of the reputation which he gained for her and himself in the Councils of the Republic." The Savannah Republican, a journal which approved of nothing about Cobb except his support for sectional compromise in 1850 and 1851, echoed this hope. Even as it castigated him for "his selfish abandonment of the Union party," the paper acknowledged him "one of the ablest men in Georgia, and, if we consider his age, one of the ablest in the Union." Whatever his other shortcomings, it concluded, "he is perfectly sound and reliable" on the critical issues before the country and "Georgia cannot afford to lose the services of so able a man."[22]

Despite these favorable signs, Cobb now confronted a political environment significantly different from any he had encountered before. The crisis of 1850 and its aftermath had resulted in severe dislocations within the political

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[22] John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, March 2, 1855, ibid.; Savannah Journal & Courier, February 5, 1855; Savannah Republican, February 15, 1855.

organizations at both the national and state levels. The Democratic party, while badly divided, had managed to hold together. Even in Georgia, where the Democratic schism had been most pronounced, the Southern Rights and Union Democrats had patched over their bitter differences -- although it remained to be seen how tightly the patches would hold. The Whig party had not fared as well. Its organization had been obliterated by the crisis.

The American or Know Nothing party attempted to fill the vacuum created by the demise of the Whigs. The Know Nothings blended the rituals of a secret society with the structure of a political party. This organization grew out of a nativist movement that appeared in the 1840s and 1850s as an influx of immigrants sparked fears that American political, religious, and cultural traditions might be swamped. The Know Nothings focused much of their nativist invective against the two largest immigrant groups, the Irish and Germans. They did so because they felt particularly alarmed about the Catholicism and socialist ideals that many Irish and German immigrants brought with them. Members of the American party received the name Know Nothings from their instructions to reply "I know nothing" to inquiries about their organization.[23]

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[23] David M. Potter, The Impending Crisis, 1848-1861 (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1976), p. 248; Montgomery, Cracker Parties, pp. 126-129, 135-136.

The Know Nothings made their first appearances in Georgia in 1853 and 1854. Many former Whigs, unwilling to merge with the Democrats or to surrender the political battlefield to their traditional foes, rushed to take the secret oaths of initiation into the new party. Not all Georgia Whigs, however, welcomed the new political arrangement. Anti-Know Nothing Whigs, led by Alexander H. Stephens and Robert Toombs, openly opposed their former comrades.[24]

The emergence of the Know Nothing party created consternation within Democratic ranks. When the new organization virtually swept the Augusta city elections in the spring of 1854, this anxiety became more pronounced. The secrecy of the Know Nothings only served to exacerbate Democratic fears. Loyal Democrats could not gage how many members of their party had secretly abandoned the Democracy, but they feared there were many. The Know Nothings took great glee in encouraging these fears. In desperation, John H. Lumpkin proposed that lists be compiled in each county of those Democrats "willing to do battle against the Know Nothings." Any Democrat who declined to have his name thus enrolled, he reasoned, had deserted their cause already, but

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[24] Montgomery, Cracker Parties, 126-129, 135-142.

it would provide a good indication of true Democratic strength.[25]

Within his own district, Cobb encountered many pleas that he avoid criticizing the Know Nothings. Those making such pleas offered assurances that the Know Nothings bore him no hostility and would happily support his election, provided he did not provoke their anger by publicly denouncing them. Even Mary Ann advised him to avoid needlessly attacking groups whose hostility might later hinder his advancement.[26]

Cobb ignored all such pleas. He found everything about the nativist doctrines of the Know Nothings repugnant. As a student at the University of Georgia, he had argued passionately that the United States held a special role as a haven for Europe's dispossessed and oppressed. As a boy, he had proclaimed that immigration benefitted both the immigrants and the national interest. His views had not changed in the intervening years. Expressing disgust that Georgia Democrats should be intimidated by the Know Nothings, he growled that "my friends advise forbearance -- another word for truckling -- I am trying to inspire them with a better feeling." He acknowledged that his determination to

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[25] Ibid.; Robert L. Roddy to Howell Cobb, February 25, 1855; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, April 6, 1855; John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, May 6, 1855, Howell Cobb Papers.

[26] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, May 6, 1855; Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, April 9, 1855; Robert Martin to Howell Cobb, May 10, 1855; William Bacon to Howell Cobb, May 15, 1855, Howell Cobb Papers.

confront the Know Nothings would necessitate a thorough canvass of his district, but insisted "my motto is an honest victory or defeat."[27]

The Know Nothings did not represent the only threat to a Democratic victory in the 1855 state elections. The emergence of a new southern unity movement in the spring raised the specter that all the efforts to reunite the Georgia Democracy might be undone. Members of this Southern Union Movement sought to assume the mantle of the old Calhounites and the recently deceased Southern Rights party. Meeting in the Columbus Temperance Hall on May 26, this group adopted resolutions urging the establishment of an all-southern party. Like their predecessors, they warned that the faith of southern leaders in unreliable northern allies had left the South dangerously vulnerable to its enemies. Moreover, they noted that the northern Democracy had been mauled in the elections of the preceding fall by antislavery candidates. Even if reliable, the northern Democracy had ceased to have any power to defend the South. To avert further danger, they called on all Georgians to sever immediately all "entangling alliances" with national political organizations.[28]

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[27] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, April 6, 1855; April 14, 1855, ibid.

[28] John A. Jones to Howell Cobb, May 28, 1855, ibid.; Montgomery, Cracker Parties, pp. 142-143.

Leaders of the reunited Democracy viewed the Southern Union Movement as a potentially serious threat. Cobb wasted no time in responding by public letter to the appeal of the Temperance Hall meeting. To be sure he raised no objection to the idea of a united South. Indeed, he avowed, the "Georgia Platform" already had united Georgians "in heart and sentiment." This document had defined the terms under which Georgia would remain in the Union and, he declared, "every Georgian is prepared to stand upon that platform."[29]

Cobb asserted that the true test of the viability of the Union rested with the North. He believed that the introduction of the Kansas-Nebraska Bill and its adoption by a combination of loyal northern Democratic and southern votes indicated "a determination to maintain the ... Union upon terms of fairness and equality." Yet the outrage that had gripped so many in the North over this legislation and the defeats sustained by northern Democrats in the 1854 elections had revealed the dangers still confronting the South and the Union. Soon, he predicted, Kansas would apply for statehood as a slave state. If Congress should reject its application because of slavery, the "Georgia Platform" had defined Georgia's proper response. "Such an event," he asserted,

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[29] Montgomery, Cracker Parties, pp. 144-145; Athens Southern Banner, June 7, 1855, cited in Milledgeville Federal Union, June 19, 1855.

"makes Georgia 'one party and one people' and a dissolution of the Union is certain and inevitable."[30]

Still, he observed, the "Georgia Platform" had also established that Georgia's citizens viewed "the American Union, as secondary in importance only, to the rights and principles it was designed to perpetuate." Thus, he reasoned, the true southern strategy lay in devising some means by which Kansas might be admitted as a slave state and the Union perpetuated. The honest northern Democrats held the key to such a strategy. With their votes and the votes of a united South, victory would be certain. True, the northern Democracy had been beaten badly in recent elections, but it did not comport with southern traditions of chivalry to abandon one's fallen comrades on the field of battle. Rather than abandoning northern Democrats, southerners must revive them through the "defeat of the Know Nothings at the South." Within days, Governor Herschel Johnson, leader of the Southern Rights wing of the Democratic party, penned a response to the Temperance Hall meeting that expressed sentiments virtually identical to Cobb's.[31]

The successive repudiations of the Southern Union Movement by the most prominent leaders of the two wings of

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[30] Athens Southern Banner, June 7, 1855, cited in Milledgeville Federal Union, June 10, 1855.

[31] Ibid.; Herschel V. Johnson to John E. Howard, June 11, 1855, Herschel V. Johnson Papers, Special Collections Library, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina.

the reunited Democracy effectively quashed this crusade before it gained significant momentum. Just as important, Johnson had based his rejection of an all-southern party on precisely the same arguments that Cobb had long used to justify his own opposition to both Calhounism and the Southern Rights party. That Johnson should now publicly endorse these very ideas demonstrated the impact of the Cobb led Union Democratic insurgency between 1850 and 1852. Although the Union Democrats had proven incapable of perpetuating the existence of the Constitutional Union party, their electoral victories had forced Southern Rights men to moderate their extreme positions by revealing how little popular support those positions enjoyed. Regardless of how much Southern Rights men disliked this necessity, and regardless of any hidden resentments they might bear Cobb for his role in forcing it upon them, they now found themselves committed to the moderate stance of their former foes.

This trend towards moderation continued when the state Democratic convention assembled in Milledgeville on June 5. There, the delegates adopted a platform that endorsed the "Georgia Platform" and praised those northern Democrats who supported enforcement of the fugitive slave law and passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act. The delegates placed special emphasis on that portion of the "Georgia Platform" which vowed resistance if the North violated the Compromise of

1850. Governor Johnson easily won renomination on the first ballot.[32]

Cobb attended the convention as a delegate from Clarke County. He took an active role in its activities and delivered a speech which received a warm welcome from the delegates and from the state Democratic press. Besides blaming antislavery men for all current sectional tensions regarding the enforcement of the fugitive slave law and the fate of slavery in Kansas, he also introduced a resolution calling for "retaliatory legislation" against northern states that adopted personal liberty laws designed to hinder the return of runaway slaves. The delegates happily incorporated his proposal into the party platform.[33]

Thus, if Cobb's old Southern Rights opponents had been forced to moderate their positions, he too had moved towards them. In his letter to the Temperance Hall meeting and in his remarks to the convention, he emphasized the resistance provisions in the "Georgia Platform." Yet, Cobb's new emphasis on resistance reflected more a change in tone than a change in substance. He was and always had been a good southerner as committed to southern interests and the peculiar institution as any of his rivals. The primary

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[32] Milledgeville Federal Union, June 12, 1855; Montgomery, Cracker Parties, p. 142.

[33] Milledgeville, Federal Union, June 12, 1855; Montgomery, Cracker Parties, p. 142; Atlanta Intelligencer, cited in Athens Southern Banner, June 14, 1855.

difference between Cobb and his Ultra opponents had been over means rather than ends. While the Ultras had believed the key to defending southern interests rested with an all-southern party -- and many felt grave doubts that the South could ever be safe in the Union -- Cobb had placed his confidence in the national Democracy and good faith sectional compromise. He always had viewed abolitionists and free-soilers with the same concern as did more radical southerners, though to be sure he viewed Ultras in the South as an equal threat. Consequently, he had spent most of his career engaged in a two front war against extremism in both the North and the South.

By 1855, this situation had changed dramatically. While the Southern Union Movement proved that a residue of Ultras remained active in Georgia, the vast majority of Southern Rights men now espoused the national view long advocated by Cobb. In the current environment, he perceived the primary threats to the Union as originating in the North. The Compromise of 1850 had scarcely been enacted before antislavery forces had manifested a clear determination to nullify the law by both legal and illegal means. Moreover, the Kansas-Nebraska Act had already begun to bear a deadly fruit of sectional discord as northerners and southerners engaged in an increasingly bitter competition for control of Kansas. Ominously, antislavery men, outraged by the Kansas-Nebraska legislation, had coalesced into the new Republican

party -- a sectional organization committed to the free-soil crusade.[34]

Under these circumstances, Cobb's decision to embrace so publicly the resistance plank of the "Georgia Platform" represented sound practical politics. Besides conciliating the Southern Rights wing of the party and signalling the restoration of harmony within the Georgia Democracy, it also undermined the Southern Union Movement. Why, any sensible Georgian might ask, did their state need that movement when Georgia Democrats stood united in their determination to defend southern interests? Simultaneously, Cobb's embrace of the resistance plank offered a clear warning to northern Democrats, northern Know Nothings, and Republicans that they must not trifle with the South by ignoring the provisions of the "Georgia Platform," particularly in Kansas.

Still, even as Cobb accomplished these objectives, he also further committed the Georgia Democracy to a moderate course. The resistance plank of the "Georgia Platform" had declared that Georgia would resist even to secession any failure either to enforce the fugitive slave law or to admit a new state because its constitution included slavery. By securing the adoption of his resolution calling for "retaliatory legislation," Cobb effectively provided Georgia with a means of resistance which stopped short of secession.

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[34] Potter, The Impending Crisis, pp. 199-207.

Cobb left Milledgeville well satisfied with the work of the convention. Although he had no announced competition, he launched an immediate canvass of his district. He did so for two reasons. The secrecy of the Know Nothings continued to alarm Sixth District Democrats. They worried that the opposition might be plotting some trickery which they would spring on a complacent Democracy. Cobb wanted to alleviate these fears as much as possible. He also wanted to insure a large majority in the Sixth for Herschel Johnson in his contest with the Know Nothing candidate, Garnett Andrews. Such a showing would consolidate further his standing with the reunited Democracy.[35]

The hard travel over rough roads interrupted by long speeches extracted their toll on man and carriage. After some two weeks of campaigning, he reported from Dahlonega that "I am well nigh tired down ... I've never had a more fatiguing canvass. The roads are in wretched condition & my buggy has suffered. It is now at the carriage repair shop." Despite the rigors of stumping his district, he felt certain of success. He declared that "I have never known the democracy in finer spirits & I believe that we shall not only carry this district but the state by a handsome margin."[36]

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[35] A. E. Cochran to Howell Cobb, June 3, 1855; J. J. Field to Howell Cobb, July 26, 1855; Samuel Weil to Howell Cobb, September 11, 1855, Howell Cobb Papers.

[36] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, June 22, 1855, ibid.

During the next four months neither his level of exertion nor his certainty of victory faltered, even when a candidate finally entered the race against him in mid-September. The lack of a Know Nothing candidate had not been part of an insidious plot, but rather the result of an inability to find anyone willing to challenge Cobb. Indeed, Cobb's announced opponent, Leonard Franklin, had no known official connection with the Know Nothing organization. Instead, he appeared to be nothing more than a disgruntled Southern Rights man with a score to settle. Nevertheless, the Know Nothings adopted him as their own. Unfortunately for the Know Nothings, Franklin proved an abysmal candidate. He entered the race late, and his entire campaign consisted of a published letter announcing his candidacy. For personal reasons, he declined to canvass the district. The Southern Banner jokingly dismissed him as a man of little intellect, little ability, and little threat.[37]

Cobb did not allow the lackluster opposition to deter his efforts. In speech after speech, he denounced the Know Nothings as a threat to American traditions of civil and religious liberty. Know Nothing candidates, he declared, faced an impossible dilemma if elected, because they could not be true simultaneously to their secret oaths and to the

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[37] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, June 23, 1855; June 28, 1855; July 20, 1855; September 9, 1855, ibid.; Athens Southern Banner, September 13, 1855; Atlanta Intelligencer, cited in Athens Southern Banner, September 20, 1855.

Constitution. As Know Nothings, they pledged to remove Catholics from office and to deny them political appointments; as elected officials, they must take an oath to uphold the Constitution which forbade all religious tests for officeholders. Consequently, any Know Nothing who won election must either betray his party or the Constitution.[38]

Despite his confidence, Cobb found the campaign somewhat frustrating. Lacking a candidate for most of the contest, the Know Nothings resorted to a campaign of slander and silliness. John Christy, editor of the Athens Southern Watchman -- formerly the Southern Whig -- spearheaded these attacks. Calling Cobb "Don Lopez Howell, Bedini of the Sixth District," Christy labelled him the candidate of the "Foreign, Sag-Nichts-Erin-go-unum-E-Pluribus-bragh" party. When, in a speech at Athens, Cobb asserted that he had rather trust his life to a "southern Roman Catholic" than to trust an antislavery northern protestant with a dime, the Know Nothings circulated rumors that Cobb had expressed preference for any Roman Catholic over any protestant. Inevitably, both the Southern Watchman and the Know Nothings revived all the old charges from previous campaigns.[39]

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[38] Athens Southern Banner, July, 5, 1855; August 9, 1855.

[39] Athens Southern Watchman, September 20, 1855; September 27, 1855; Athens Southern Banner, July 5, 1855; July 12, 1855; August 9, 1855.

Both Cobb from the stump and the Southern Banner responded to these Know Nothing gambits. They each offered the same basic retort: "a party must be rotten and depraved indeed that has to resort to such means to defeat a political opponent." Such an organization could not be trusted with political power. Nonetheless, Cobb's anger at the revival of old accusations occasionally got the better of him. At a mass meeting in Jackson County, he urged voters to "judge ... him by the principles he advocated ... before them, and not by the false and malignant charges of personal and political enemies." When he learned that several Know Nothings had taken a prominent role in a religious revival hosted by a Reverend Wilkes, he noted with grim humor "if he can make them tell the truth, I shall feel that he has done some service to his state as well as his religion."[40]

Early on, Cobb began to receive urgent appeals that he travel to other parts of the state to campaign for fellow Democrats. He responded to as many such requests as he could. He made a campaign swing through southwest Georgia and through the Fifth District where, like Cobb, John Lumpkin had decided to reclaim his old seat. Cobb worked mightily for his fellow Democrats. In Americus, he delivered a "speech of three hours, which was well received by my friends and as it made the other side pretty mad I think it likely

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[40] Athens Southern Banner, July 12, 1855; August 9, 1855; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, July 17, 1855, Howell Cobb Papers.

that good was done." Late in the campaign, he followed a grueling course through the Fifth District where he delivered "four speeches in three days, with only one nights sleep." Although worn out by these efforts, his activities outside his own district added to his expectation that "we shall beat the Know Nothings badly."[41]

Election day proved that Cobb's confidence had not been misplaced. Governor Johnson easily won reelection, winning 54,476 votes to 43,750 for Garnett Andrews and 6,261 for Basil Overby, the Temperance party candidate. Democrats and Anti-Know Nothing congressional candidates won six of the state's eight seats. In the Sixth District, Cobb carried every county except his home county of Clarke, where the death of the Whig party had not eased traditional political hostility to the Democracy. He defeated Franklin with a vote of 9,203 to 5,227.[42]

Having triumphed in the election, Georgia's Democratic leaders moved promptly to consolidate their victory by incorporating Anti-Know Nothing Whigs into their organization. Most of these "Anties" had supported Democratic candidates in the just concluded contest, but no

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[41] John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, July 15, 1855; August 31, 1855; J. J. Grant, et al., to Howell Cobb, July 18, 1855; Martin Crawford to Howell Cobb, August 6, 1855; Henry L. Benning to Howell Cobb, August 6, 1855; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, July 20, 1855; September 9, 1855, Howell Cobb Papers.

[42] Milledgeville Federal Union, October 16, 1855.

formal fusion of the two groups had occurred thus far. The failure to merge the two groups had stemmed from the reluctance of Stephens and Toombs -- the most prominent "Anti" leaders -- to endorse the Democratic ticket. Although both men had concluded during the summer of 1855 that the Democracy represented the only safe harbor for southern interests, a personal enmity between Stephens and Johnson underlay their silence.[43]

With the election over, Johnson resolved to overcome this difficulty. The official vote scarcely had been tallied before he requested that Cobb assist in this effort. Knowing that Cobb enjoyed reasonably good personal relations with the two men, the governor urged him to intercede by arranging for both to attend a fusionist caucus in Milledgeville when the legislature assembled in November. Cobb fulfilled this assignment, and both Stephens and Toombs were present when the caucus assembled.[44]

In keeping with his role as the bridge between the Democrats and the Anti-Know Nothing Whigs, the caucus selected Cobb as its presiding officer. The participants

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[43] Joseph Nisbet to Howell Cobb, October 15, 1855; Herschel V. Johnson to Howell Cobb, October 15, 1855, Howell Cobb Papers; Thomas E. Schott, Alexander H. Stephens of Georgia, A Biography (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), pp. 187-191; Montgomery, Cracker Parties, pp. 152, 155.

[44] Herschel V. Johnson to Howell Cobb, October 15, 1855; Alexander H. Stephens to Howell Cobb, October 22, 1855, Howell Cobb Papers; Milledgeville Federal Union, November 13, 1855; Montgomery, Cracker Parties, p. 155.

then named Stephens and Toombs to the resolutions committee. This group reported back resolutions which endorsed the "Georgia Platform" -- particularly the resistance plank -- and the Kansas-Nebraska Act. As Cobb had asserted in his letter to the Temperance Hall meeting, the resolutions committee warned that rejection of Kansas statehood because of slavery would be sufficient provocation for secession. Toombs and Stephens perfected the merger by publicly declaring themselves Democrats.[45]

Cobb could have hardly viewed these developments with anything other than satisfaction. For years he had labored to build a Democratic party in Georgia with a national outlook. As part of that objective, he had sought to draw Whigs within the scope of that party. Along with preserving the Union, these considerations had provided his primary goals when he entered the Constitutional Union movement. Although he had failed then to achieve his dream, he had done much to set the stage for the events that culminated with the fusion caucus of November, 1855. Following that meeting, political power in Georgia rested largely in the hands of a Democratic party with a national perspective that included much of the former Whig organization.

The price of this success had been high. Many within the former Southern Rights ranks would never forgive him for

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[45] Milledgeville Federal Union, November 13, 1855; Schott, Alexander H. Stephens, pp. 190-191.

frustrating their ambitions and dreams. Others, including men such as Stephens and Toombs who had been equally adept at changing course as the political winds shifted, now privately criticized him as being politically unreliable. Ironically, just as he saw his longtime objective coming to fulfillment in Georgia, the northern Democracy, on which he relied so much, proved itself increasingly unable to respond satisfactorily to southern requirements.[46]

III

When Cobb departed Athens in late 1855 to take his seat in Congress, he was grief-stricken and depressed. During the summer, his father's health had begun to decline rapidly, and by July family members despaired of his recovery. Apparently suffering from cancer, John Addison faced death with a calm dignity. His greatest concern seemed to derive from the fear that he might die while the demands of campaigning kept his oldest son away from home. In this regard at least, John Addison's fears proved groundless. He lived until November 23, and died while his son was at home.[47]

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[46] John A. Jones to Jefferson Davis, November 17, 1853, Jefferson Davis and Family Papers, Library of Congress, Washington D.C.; Alexander H. Stephens to Linton Stephens, December 4, 1853, Alexander H. Stephens Papers, Manhattanville College of the Sacred Heart, Purchase, New York (Hereafter: Stephens Papers, MC); Robert Toombs to Thomas W. Thomas, February 9, 1856, Robert A. Toombs Papers, Special Collections Library, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina (Hereafter: Toombs Papers).

[47] Williams Rutherford, Jr. to Howell Cobb, July 22, 1855; John C. Whitner to Mary Ann Cobb, August 16, 1855; Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, November 5, 1855; Howell Cobb to

John Addison's death affected Cobb more profoundly than the death of any member of his family ever had. No one had done as much to shape his character, his political beliefs, or his ambition. The necessity of taking financial responsibility for his parents in the 1840s had only served to strengthen the bonds between father and son. In his last moments with his son, John Addison had echoed the same message that Sarah had stressed for years. He pleaded with Cobb to look beyond the "fading honors of this world ... & seek first the kingdom of God."[48]

The old man's dying words exerted a profound influence on Cobb. He had striven always to fill the role of the good and dutiful son. Although a frequent attender of church, previously religion had interested him more as an intellectual subject than a spiritual pursuit. But now, racked by grief and haunted by the "dying faith of the kindest of fathers," he sought spiritual relief through prayer. At his father's death bed he poured out his soul. "If ever I put up a sincere prayer to Heaven," he later recalled, "it was at that time and by that bed side." Other men, he lamented, had assured him that when praying at such moments they "felt an influence upon their hearts, that spoke to them in the language of another world and gave them inward

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Mary Ann Cobb, November 7, 1855; Williams Rutherford, Jr., to Mary Ann Cobb, November 7, 1855, Howell Cobb Papers.

[48] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, December 2, 1855; Sarah Rootes Cobb to Howell Cobb, January 9, 1856, ibid.

evidence of the reality of religion." Yet when he had prayed he had only heard the sound of his own words echoing in the empty chambers of grief. In distress, he cried out to Mary Ann, "am I worse than other men. Is my heart harder to reach?" It would be years before he could answer that question.[49]

Travelling alone did nothing to lift Cobb's low spirits. Mary Ann had initially refused to return to Washington at all. Her letters to brother John shortly after the election indicated resentment that Cobb had determined to go back to Congress. "Mr. Cobb goes to Washington with all his heart in the matter, and I on the other hand stay at home with all my heart." There was "no necessity for him to return to Congress in my view" she wrote, but her children needed the presence of at least one parent. "God helping me," she declared, "I will never forsake their interest, whatever it may cost me." Within a few days, however, her resolution wavered and she agreed to join her husband later in the session.[50]

Cobb's grief and spiritual despair exerted a powerful influence on his behavior during much of the first session

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[49] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, December 2, 1855; December 4, 1855; December 8, 1855; December 10, 1855; December 13, 1855; January 1; 1856, January 9, 1856, ibid.

[50] Mary Ann Cobb to John B. Lamar, October 16, 1855, ibid.; Howell Cobb to (?), October 20, 1855, Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collection, Felix Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia (Hereafter: Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collection).

of the Thirty-Fourth Congress. His election in October had sparked immediate speculation that he would be a serious contender for the speakership. Thomas Harris, acting as Cobb's unofficial spokesman in the capital, insisted that Cobb neither wanted the post nor the nomination of the Democratic caucus "unless it shall be ... believed that some important party end is to be accomplished." Cobb, himself, gave Harris' assertions a more formal voice when he declared on October 20, "I have no aspirations for the speakership & do not expect it [but] the compliment of being selected by my political friends as their candidate would be grateful to my feelings." In short, prior to his father's death, the statements of Cobb and his lieutenants sounded much like his usual disclaimers of any desire for a political office -- even as he maneuvered to win it.[51]

Only days after his father's death, however, Cobb refused even to allow his name to go before the Democratic caucus. He did so, "much to the annoyance of some of my friends," even though "the nomination would have been tendered to me by a handsome majority ... if I had desired it, or ... consented to have run the race." Yet, for the first time in his life, the pursuit of earthly accomplishments had lost its luster. A few days after his refusal to run, he confessed to Mary Ann that "my time hangs

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[51] Thomas D. Harris to Howell Cobb, October 15, 1855, Howell Cobb Papers; Howell Cobb to (?), October 20, 1855, Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collection.

heavy on my hands. I do not feel my usual interest in what is going on as my mind is turning every moment towards home." When not actually on the floor of the House, he remained secluded in his room.[52]

Had Cobb not been disconsolate over his father's death, he still would have possessed sound political reasons for avoiding the speakership contest. The Democrats possessed neither a majority nor a plurality in the House. Should he be elected as a result of a compromise or coalition, brother Tom warned, he would still have to rely on a minority party for support. In such a position, he would find his rulings easily overturned by the antislavery majority. In effect, Tom maintained, "you would be powerless to do good & yet responsible for the evil."[53]

When Cobb declined the Democratic nomination for speaker, the caucus selected William A. Richardson of Illinois as its candidate. Richardson had played a prominent part in forcing the Kansas legislation through the previous Congress. The caucus also adopted resolutions which reasserted the party's commitment to the Kansas-Nebraska Act

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[52] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, December 2, 1855; December 4, 1855; December 8, 1855; December 25, 1855; December 30, 1855; January 1, 1856, Howell Cobb Papers.

[53] Thomas Reade Rootes Cobb to Howell Cobb, December 24, 1855, ibid.

and its hostility to the nativist doctrines of the Know Nothings.[54]

The actions of the Democratic caucus profoundly impacted subsequent developments in the House. The Thirty-Fourth Congress included members from several parties and factions, none of which possessed a majority. Like the Thirty-First Congress which had elected Cobb as its speaker, it appeared that the current Congress would have to resort to the plurality rule to elect a speaker -- unless the members could rally on some moderate man acceptable to a majority of representatives or two of the parties forged a coalition and between themselves controlled the House organization.[55]

In nominating a man so closely linked with the Kansas-Nebraska Act and in reaffirming their support for that legislation, the Democrats insured the alienation of all antislavery members. More importantly, the anti-Know Nothing resolution adopted in the Democratic caucus alienated a group of thirty southern Know Nothing congressmen. This group may well have held the balance of power in the Thirty-Fourth Congress. They did not wish to see their votes -- either directly or indirectly -- be the agency by which an antislavery man became speaker, but they could not bring

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[54] Nevins, Ordeal of the Union, II, 414.

[55] Ibid.

themselves to vote for Richardson, the nominee of a party which had repudiated them.[56]

Under the circumstances, it came as no surprise that efforts to organize the House immediately fell into deadlock. The Republicans, who held the largest block of seats, supported Nathaniel P. Banks of Massachusetts. A handful of free-soil members, however, refused Banks their votes and thus denied him a quick victory. The Democrats stood firm for Richardson, while the southern Know Nothings cast their votes for Henry M. Fuller, an anti-Nebraska man from Pennsylvania.[57]

As the balloting dragged on for days with no speaker elected, Democrats again attempted to dissuade Cobb from his determination to stay out of the speaker's contest. Again, they failed. Increasingly, both Republicans and southern Know Nothings grumbled that only the obstinacy of the Democrats stood in the way of a prompt organization of the House. The southern Know Nothings proved most vociferous in giving voice to these charges. Let the Democrats select another candidate or withdraw their offensive resolution, they contended, and the southern Know Nothings would cooperate with them in organizing the House. These arguments proved sufficiently persuasive that rumors soon began to circulate that after a courtesy vote for Richardson on

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[56] Ibid.; Schott, Alexander H. Stephens, pp. 192-193.

[57] Nevins, Ordeal of the Union, II, p. 414.

December 21, the Democrats would throw their support to a "new man." Rumor named Cobb as that man.[58]

On December 21, Cobb took the floor to refute the various charges against the Democrats. He dismissed the complaints of the Republicans with contempt. The Republicans and Democrats, he noted, shared "no sympathy of feeling ... on any question." There could be no cooperation between them. Moreover, the antislavery groups possessed a majority in the House. How then, he demanded, could the minority be held accountable for the lack of organization?[59]

Cobb gave the complaints of southern Know Nothings more attention, but he treated them with hardly more respect. With the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, he argued, the mass of southerners had recognized -- at last -- the true reliability of northern Democrats, and resolved to "be but one voice, one people, one party." Just at that moment, southerners discovered in their midst a "secret political organization" which insisted on the proscription of Catholics and foreigners as the test of orthodoxy for political cooperation. Thus, he charged, it had been the Know Nothings

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[58] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, December 10, 1855, Howell Cobb Papers; The Washington Correspondent to The New York Herald, December 22, 1855; The Washington Correspondent to The Daily Pennsylvania, December 22, 1855, in R. P. Brooks, ed., "Howell Cobb Papers," The Georgia Historical Quarterly, VI (June, 1922), 157-162.

[59] Congressional Globe, Thirty-Fourth Congress, First Session, pp. 65-68.

rather than the Democrats who had first erected barriers to cooperation with their fellow southerners.[60]

With grim determination, Cobb vowed that organization of the House "never will be purchased ... by the sacrifice of the principles involved in the resolutions passed by the Democratic caucus." Democrats held this position, he proclaimed, because there were three great principles at stake: "the rights of the states; freedom of conscience; and the rights of the foreign born citizen." Until the Republicans ceased their war on the first principle and the Know Nothings ceased their's on the latter two, the Democrats could but cling to their principles for the sake of the nation.[61]

Cobb acknowledged that southern Know Nothings seemed willing to forget their objection to the Democratic resolution if the Democrats withdrew their support from Richardson and united with them on some other man. In short, he charged, if the southern Know Nothings could not convince the Democrats to abandon their principles, then they hoped to convince them to abandon their organization. The very survival of the Union, he maintained, hinged on their refusal to abandon neither. How, he inquired, could any southern man urge him "to abandon the Democratic organization in the hour in which, purged of the last Free-Soil sentiment that ...

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[60] Ibid.

[61] Ibid.

destroyed its power and usefulness, it is entering on a new career of triumph of ... constitutional freedom?" He could never do it, "believing as I do ... that the best interest of this country, if not its very existence, depends on the preservation of the national Democratic party." If the southern Know Nothings truly loved their section and their nation, he advised, let them rally to the party which embraced the critical Kansas-Nebraska Act and vote for Richardson.[62]

Cobb took intense pride in this speech. He confided to Mary Ann "that I never made a speech here before that produced such an effect." As proof of his assertion, he noted that "over thirty thousand copies have been subscribed for by the members for circulation." More importantly, he reported, "I now feel that the great object I had in returning to Congress has been effected. This speech has fully reinstated me with the national democracy. 'Richard is himself again.'"[63]

Indeed, Cobb did not greatly exaggerate the impact of his speech. It received widespread favorable notices in the newspapers. The Washington correspondent of The Daily Pennsylvanian, for instance, praised it as a "remarkable speech" which exerted a "powerful effect." Most private

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[62] Ibid.

[63] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, December 23, 1855, Howell Cobb Papers.

opinions echoed those of the press. One admirer called the speech "the blow of the session" and expressed confidence that it would produce "great good." Even Stephen Douglas, recovering from painful throat surgery in Ohio, conveyed his "delight & admiration" of Cobb's efforts on behalf of the Democracy. "Our success depends on standing firmly by our organization and our Platform," Douglas insisted, "above all there must be no coalition with any factions -- no concessions to the enemy in any form."[64]

Not all, however, echoed this praise. The Washington correspondent for The New York Herald complained that the speech had been "designed wholly for party purposes, and to keep steady those members who have thus far given their votes for Mr. Richardson." Cobb had been motivated, the corespondent maintained, by a determination to remove himself from consideration as a compromise candidate for speaker. Cobb had succeeded, he noted, with the likely consequence that the deadlock in Congress would continue. The reporter viewed this result as unfortunate. Those who sought to substitute Cobb for Richardson, he maintained, correctly believed that Cobb could be elected. By rejecting their efforts, Cobb had made it more likely that Banks would

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[64] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, December 23, 1855; December 25, 1855; Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, December 29, 1855; Wilson Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, January 5, 1856; Stephen A. Douglas to Howell Cobb, January 8, 1856; Sarah Rootes Cobb to Howell Cobb, January 9, 1856, ibid.; The Washington Correspondent to The Daily Pennsylvanian, December 22, 1855, in Brooks, "Howell Cobb Papers," pp. 158-162.

eventually triumph. Should that be the result, he bitterly observed, "Mr. Cobb will have the satisfaction of knowing that he possibly might have prevented so sad a result."[65]

These criticisms notwithstanding, Cobb persisted in his course. His primary concern remained focused on the necessity of holding the Democratic party to its avowed principles. As the balloting dragged on, he remained ready to counter any attack on the course pursued by the Democratic members. Because of Cobb's efforts, the Democrats stood firmly behind Richardson for 122 ballots. When Richardson withdrew, the Democratic caucus threw their votes to James L. Orr of South Carolina. The Republicans remained united on Banks and the southern Know Nothings clung to Fuller. The stalemate continued.[66]

Since the opening days of the session, Cobb had been firmly convinced that ultimately the Republicans would place an antislavery man in the speaker's chair, but not before the members adopted the plurality rule. Sometime in early January, he devised a strategy which would give Democratic votes for the plurality rule to the Republicans -- but at a cost. He prepared a resolution to be introduced when the frustration of the members had peaked. It called for the

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[65] The Washington Correspondent to The New York Herald, December 22, 1855, in Brooks, "Howell Cobb Papers," pp. 157-158.

[66] Congressional Globe, Thirty-Fourth Congress, First Session, pp. 251-255; Schott, Alexander H. Stephens, p. 193.

adoption of the plurality rule, provided that "all the present candidates are withdrawn." If adopted, he noted, it "will kill off Banks & this is the great point to be carried ... as we will have defeated their favorite & most obnoxious man."[67]

Cobb never introduced his plan. Instead, he reluctantly threw his support to a strategy devised by Alexander Stephens who still believed the Democrats could win the speakership. The Stephens plan was designed to secure southern Know Nothing support by substituting Warren Aikens of South Carolina for Orr when the House finally adopted the plurality rule. Besides enjoying great personal popularity, Aikens had not attended the Democratic caucus and hence had no direct connection to the anti-Know Nothing resolution. The southern Know Nothings declared themselves willing to vote for him. Unfortunately for the Democrats, their plan went awry. In early February, the House adopted the plurality rule. Banks defeated Aikens with a vote of 103 to 100.[68]

IV

With the House organized at last, Cobb made time for a trip home. Besides being eager to handle some potentially

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[67] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, December 4, 1855; December 8, 1855; December 10, 1855; December 13, 1855; December 19, 1855; December 23, 1855; January 5, 1856; January 13, 1855; January 22, 1856; January 26, 1856; February 2, 1856, Howell Cobb Papers.

[68] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, February 2, 1856, ibid.; Schott, Alexander H. Stephens, pp. 193-194.

lucrative legal cases in person, he also had a pressing family matter which required his attention. John A.'s travails with formal education continued. He had won admission to the University, only to be expelled for fighting in front of the chapel. When family members counseled him to seek readmission, he flatly refused. He found regular attendance to his studies an impossibility, and he denounced the members of the faculty as scoundrels. Following his expulsion from the University, he spent several happy months engaged in carpentry projects around the house for his mother. The boy demonstrated a real affinity for such practical tasks, and his parents gave serious consideration to putting him to work in a local store where he might learn the mercantile trade. As Cobb observed, "the turn of his mind is for the realities and not the theories of life."[69]

Mary Ann, however, could not accept that her oldest son's schooling should terminate in failure. After giving some thought to enrolling him in a military school -- a proposal Cobb strongly opposed because he feared "the morals of the boys at them" -- she settled on the idea of enrolling him at the Episcopal Institution for Boys in Alexandria, Virginia. Cobb acquiesced in the plan, but sought to insure its success by enlisting John A.'s willing participation.

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[69] Joseph LeConte to Howell Cobb, June 13, 1855; Mary Ann Cobb to John B. Lamar, June 18, 1855; September, 1855; John A. Cobb to John B. Lamar, August 10, 1855; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, January 29, 1856; February 12, 1856, ibid.

He reminded the boy that he had "now arrived at that age when his conduct must be regulated by his own good sense, and not by the rules of the school." If he could not commit to obey the rules of "his own free will" like a man, then he should not undertake the venture. Mary Ann soon reported that this advice had produced the desired response and added that John A. believed Cobb "'the best father he ever saw.'"[70]

With John A.'s promise of good behavior, Cobb made arrangements to enroll him in the Alexandria school. When he returned to Washington in early March, he took the boy with him. They spent several days together in Washington before going to Alexandria. This time may well have been the first extended period the two had spent in each other's presence. The father seemed somewhat surprised to find "Johnny such pleasant company." He found him such pleasant company, in fact, that he felt "strongly tempted to keep him with me all the time." Loathe to disappoint Mary Ann, however, he assured her that he would not "sacrifice his interest to my own selfish feelings."[71]

Cobb entered John A. at the school as planned, but within a matter of days the boy voiced strong dissatisfaction with his new academic environment. Within a few more days, a chagrined Cobb confessed that he had withdrawn John A. from

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[70] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, January 1, 1856; January 17, 1856; January 26, 1856; Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, January 6, 1856; January 23, 1856, ibid.

[71] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann, March 10, 1856, ibid.

the school and brought him back to Washington. He planned to keep him until Mary Ann arrived later in the spring. Although livid at the frustration of her plan, Mary Ann could do little more than fume and "feel spitefully."[72]

While Cobb regretted both John A.'s failure and Mary Ann's anger, he probably welcomed the boy's presence all the more because he found his congressional duties so tedious. Most of his activities on the floor of the House involved debates over procedural issues and points of order. Assigned to the prestigious Ways and Means Committee, he complained that the committee met for several hours each day and described his duties as "rather annoying." In truth, he had not been especially pleased to return to the House of Representatives. When he had departed Washington a few years before, he had envisioned that his return would involve elevation to a higher office -- either the Senate or the cabinet. As he had noted after his speech on December 21, his purpose in seeking a congressional seat had been directed to the single goal of reestablishing his standing with the national Democracy. Convinced that his speech had

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[72] Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, March 7, 1856; March 28, 1856; March 31, 1856; John A. Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, March 17, 1856; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, March 22, 1855; March 25, 1856; Mary Ann Cobb to John A. Cobb, April 6, 1856, ibid.

accomplished that goal, he declared himself ready to resign and return home.[73]

Ironically, Mary Ann strongly advised against this step. She liked his political career no better than before, but she appreciated that the country faced another serious sectional crisis over Kansas-Nebraska. "For the present," she assured him, "your path is marked out plainly, and I can from my heart give you a cordial God speed to any energetic effort you may make to advance the country's interest, which is your interest, and my interest, and our children's interest." Despite these words of encouragement, he nevertheless avowed that he would not seek reelection under any circumstances. "I am determined to quit," he insisted, "I am tired of the concern, and whilst I might be willing to come back to the Senate, I am done with the House."[74]

The Kansas issue dominated the political scene in Washington. By the time Congress had assembled in December, 1855, the situation had reached crisis proportions. The Kansas-Nebraska Act scarcely had been enacted before the North-South competition to control the territory had begun. Northern antislavery men moved first by establishing emigrant aid societies designed to assist free-soil settlers in the

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[73] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, December 23, 1855; March 25, 1856, ibid.

[74] Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, December 4, 1855; December 29, 1855; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, August 16, 1856, ibid.

move to Kansas. These efforts produced an inevitable southern reaction -- particularly among proslavery men living in Missouri. The likely course of future events became readily apparent during the first territorial elections when a horde of Missouri proslavery "Border Ruffians" crossed the line into Kansas and stole the election.[75]

Despite the clearly fraudulent election results, territorial governor Andrew Reeder declared most of the returns valid. When the proslavery legislature convened, it adopted a harsh slave code and enacted laws making it illegal to criticize slavery or assist fugitive slaves. It then voted to expel all antislavery members from the legislature. Reeder made a futile attempt to veto these acts. The proslavery members retaliated by demanding that Pierce remove him. The president yielded to this demand.[76]

Pierce's choice for Reeder's successor, Wilson Shannon of Ohio, proved unfortunate. Shannon immediately aligned himself with the proslavery men. This action so outraged the free-soil settlers that they declared the existing territorial legislature "bogus" and took steps to establish their own government. Their delegates met in Topeka where they drafted an antislavery constitution. By early 1856, the antislavery settlers had ratified their constitution, elected a legislature and governor, and taken preliminary steps

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[75] Potter, The Impending Crisis, pp. 199-202.

[76] Ibid., pp. 202-204.

towards statehood. Only free-soil men had participated in this process. With ideological lines now clearly defined, both sides began making sure they had sufficient weapons should their heretofore rhetorical battles turn violent.[77]

Thus, by the winter of 1855-1856, the settlers of Kansas were divided into two well-armed factions, neither of which recognized the legitimacy of the other. Violent conflict appeared inevitable. In November, armed clashes between proslavery and antislavery men began. They rapidly escalated both in scope and intensity. Soon the territory would be properly known as "Bleeding Kansas."[78]

Cobb could not help but look on these developments with alarm. In November, he confided to Henry R. Jackson his fear that "the future of our country is ... darkened by clouds." By February, his concern had increased considerably. He lamented to Mary Ann that "the accounts from Kansas indicate danger of a civil war out there .... I fear we have ugly weather ahead in the political world."[79]

In light of the growing conflict in Kansas and his own anxiety about it, Cobb voiced relief after returning from his trip to Georgia that "the troubles in Kansas do not attract as much attention as I expected to find." This happy calm,

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[77] Ibid., pp. 205-207.

[78] Ibid., pp. 207-209, 211-214.

[79] Henry R. Jackson to Howell Cobb, November 27, 1855; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, February 12, 1856, Howell Cobb Papers.

however, did not last long. On May 19 and 20, Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts delivered an antislavery tirade entitled "The Crime Against Kansas." During the course of a speech which most in the Senate deemed ill-considered and offensive, Sumner launched an intemperate assault on the state of South Carolina in general and its elderly Senator Andrew P. Butler in particular. Two days later, Senator Butler's younger and more vigorous kinsman, Representative Preston Brooks, caned Sumner while the senator sat at his desk in the Senate chamber. Although Sumner apparently suffered relatively minor physical injuries, the attack produced a nervous collapse which kept him from his seat for more than two years.[80]

The breakdown of civility in Washington accompanied a paroxysm of violence in Kansas itself. On May 21, a posse of several hundred Missourians, armed with several pieces of artillery, invaded the free-state town of Lawrence. There, they burned a couple of buildings, threw two printing presses into a nearby river, and "liberated" a considerable quantity of whiskey. The only casualty in this riot was a proslavery Missourian crushed when a wall from one of the burning buildings collapsed on him. Two days later, a fanatical abolitionist named John Brown retaliated for the "sack of Lawrence" by butchering five unarmed proslavery men. Both

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[80] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, March 10, 1856, ibid.; Potter, The Impending Crisis, pp. 209-211.

proslavery and antislavery forces immediately took the field. Civil war had truly come to Kansas.[81]

Some in Congress did attempt to restore peace to Kansas. In June, Toombs introduced a bill in the Senate that proposed the appointment of five "disinterested" men to supervise fair elections in the territory. Most observers agreed that the measure offered a real possibility for the restoration of order and legitimate popular government in the tormented territory. It passed easily in the Democratic controlled Senate, only to be rebuffed by Republicans in the House because President Pierce would have named the committee. House Republicans also had no desire to see the territorial crisis resolved before the presidential election of 1856. Nor did they wish to run the risk that slavery might be permanently fixed in another territory.[82]

Congress proved no more capable of decisive action in the Brooks-Sumner affair. The House moved promptly to appoint a five-member Select Committee to investigate the incident and make recommendations. The committee consisted of three northerners and two southerners -- one of whom was Cobb. From the beginning, most of the letters Cobb received approved of Brooks' actions as a proper response to Yankee insolence. Only Gazaway Lamar condemned Brooks' behavior.

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[81] Potter, The Impending Crisis, pp. 207-214.

[82] Robert W. Johannsen, Stephen A. Douglas (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), pp. 524-527.

Damning it as cowardly, ill-timed, and unconstitutional, he urged that the South Carolinian be expelled from the House. A few days later, after receiving an explanation of the events from Cobb, Lamar reversed himself. "I concur with you in the opinion that, tho' not justifiable to the full extent, ... under the extreme provocation, Sumner got no more than he richly merited."[83]

Cobb declined to applaud Brooks when the Select Committee made its report to the House, but he also refused to criticize his actions. Splitting along strictly sectional lines, the committee submitted both a majority and a minority report. The northern majority recommended that Brooks be expelled from the House for committing a "breech of privilege of the Senate." Cobb, reporting for the southern minority, denied that the House possessed any jurisdiction over the activities of its members when they were not actually participating in the functions of that body. Thus, he concluded, the House possessed neither the obligation nor the authority to punish Brooks for an action taken in the Senate chamber while the House was adjourned. If Brooks had violated the law in attacking Sumner, he argued, let him be arrested and put on trial before a jury. Surely, Sumner

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[83] Junius Hillyer to Howell Cobb, May 28, 1856; Gazaway B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, May 31, 1856, June 9, 1856, Howell Cobb Papers; Schott, Alexander H. Stephens, p. 205.

could demand no more privilege than any other citizen wrongly assaulted.[84]

The Select Committee submitted its reports on June 2, but the House debated Brooks' future until mid-July. When the votes on the reports finally came, Cobb's assertion that the House lacked jurisdiction met defeat. The House then voted 121 to 95 -- dividing along sectional lines -- to expel Brooks. Lacking the required two-thirds majority, however, this resolution also failed. Not satisfied with this result, Brooks resigned his seat. His constituents overwhelmingly reelected him. Although the Brooks-Sumner affair had been officially laid to rest, the growing sectional animosity and the violence in Kansas had not yet finished its poisonous work.[85]

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Despite his prominent role in the Brooks-Sumner affair, the upcoming presidential contest of 1856 dominated Cobb's thoughts. By late 1854, he had concluded that Pierce must not be renominated. Besides his own disappointments at the hands of the Pierce administration, all the reports of widespread dissatisfaction within Democratic ranks reinforced his belief. The drubbing that Democrats had taken in the

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[84] Congressional Globe, Thirty-Fourth Congress, First Session, pp. 1348-1352.

[85] Ibid., p. 1628; Schott, Alexander H. Stephens, p. 205.

northern and western elections of 1854 had served to harden this inclination into conviction.[86]

Cobb viewed James Buchanan as the most desireable replacement for Pierce. Writing to Buchanan in December, 1854, he remarked that "the renomination of General Pierce is certain and inevitable defeat ... [and] the same remark may with equal truth be applied to every member of his cabinet." Buchanan, he declared, was "not only, the strongest, but perhaps the only man that can succeed in 1856." He attributed Buchanan's unique position to dual considerations. First, his service as minister to Great Britain for the past two years had kept him out of the country "during the bitter Nebraska contest." This consideration he deemed especially important. "Whilst we hold that the democratic party is fully committed to the principles of that measure, and must stand or fall by it," he penned, "yet it is important that in the next presidential race we should be relieved from the bitter personal feelings which exists towards those who were most prominent in that matter." Second, he believed that both the Democracy and the people at large felt "a very general averseness to a speculative candidacy." The country, he declared, wanted a statesman of known views and abilities.[87]

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[86] Howell Cobb to James Buchanan, December 5, 1854, James Buchanan Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (Hereafter: Buchanan Papers).

[87] Ibid.

Having stated his case so strongly, Cobb probably received Buchanan's response with disappointment. The Pennsylvanian related that following the failure of his candidacy for the Democratic nomination in 1852, he had resolved not to make any future presidential bids. He cited his age as the primary reason. Noting that by the end of a term beginning in 1856 he would be nearly seventy years old, he asserted that "the people ..., unless under most extraordinary circumstances, should never elect a man of such age as their president." He suggested that the country should turn to one of the highly capable younger men it possessed -- "among the most prominent of whom, ... I would class yourself."[88]

However much Cobb appreciated Buchanan's kind words, he was astute enough a politician to recognize the equivocation in Buchanan's letter. Preserving the national Democracy and the Union would certainly qualify as "extraordinary circumstances." Consequently, Cobb did not despair of Buchanan as a potential candidate and continued to work in that direction.[89]

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[88] James Buchanan to Howell Cobb, January 3, 1855, Howell Cobb Papers.

[89] James Buchanan to Howell Cobb, January 3, 1855; W. K. De Graffenried to Howell Cobb, May 13, 1856; Henry Branham to Howell Cobb, May 16, 1856, ibid.; Howell Cobb to (?), April 21, 1856, in Ulrich Bonnell Phillips, ed., The Correspondence of Robert Toombs, Alexander H. Stephens, and Howell Cobb (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1913), pp. 363-364.

Yet, he also investigated other possibilities. Stephen Douglas possessed both aspirations for and claims on the party's nomination. Friends of Cobb, aware of past tensions between Cobbites and Douglas, suggested early on that he establish friendly relations with the Douglas men. Cobb took this advice to heart. In letters to Douglas, he sincerely praised the Kansas-Nebraska Act. Conveniently, he ignored the arguments he had made regarding that act and the presidency to Buchanan, and suggested that Douglas' prominent role in its adoption might earn him the nomination. Like Buchanan, Douglas correctly replied that he would not seek a nomination, but, unlike Buchanan, he expressed no reservations about accepting it if offered.[90]

If Cobb's correspondence with Douglas indicated a certain political calculation not backed by sincerity of feeling, then Douglas' letters to Cobb reflected an equal level of flattery designed to win Cobb's support. No potential candidate, however, courted Cobb with the avidity shown by Franklin Pierce. After snubbing Cobb during the first two years of his administration, the president began soliciting the Georgian following the state elections of 1854. The intensity of Pierce's wooing increased as Cobb's standing with the national Democracy improved and the

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[90] James Mercer Green to Howell Cobb, July 11, 1855; Howell Cobb to Stephen A. Douglas, cited in Stephen A. Douglas to Howell Cobb, October 6, 1855; Thomas D. Harris to Howell Cobb, February 23, 1856, Howell Cobb Papers.

president's hopes of renomination declined. The president's efforts to win Cobb over placed the Georgia congressman in an awkward position. Too good a party man to criticize a Democratic president publicly, Cobb maintained what he considered an appropriate stance of public support for presidential policies. Pierce sought to convert that public support to a personal commitment.[91]

On Christmas day, 1855, the president invited Cobb to the White House for an interview. During this meeting, he read portions of his planned message to Congress. That message took a decidedly pro-southern stance regarding events in Kansas. The president stressed the urgency of getting his message before Congress and pressed the congressman to hasten the organization of the House. He also urged Cobb to defend administration policy when the antislavery majority attacked it. Pierce assured Cobb that he had not taken any other member of the House into his confidence on this matter.[92]

A few days later the two men spoke again. At that meeting, Cobb advised Pierce to break with precedent and submit his message before Congress organized. Reporting to Mary Ann, Cobb commented that "he was startled at the

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[91] Stephen A. Douglas to Howell Cobb, October 6, 1855; January 8, 1856; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, December 25, 1855; December 30, 1855; January 1, 1856; January 29, 1856; February 12, 1856; Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, January 25, 1856, ibid.

[92] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, December 25, 1855, ibid.

boldness of the idea, but seeing no constitutional obstacle in the way, I urged ... him to play Genl. Jackson and take the responsibility of inaugurating a new state of things." Although Pierce initially "hesitate[d] to do it," within a matter of days he had resolved to take Cobb's advice. Pierce's action surprised both his supporters and opponents, but Cobb happily noted that the "whole" Democracy had endorsed it. With some regret, he observed that had the president "had bold counsellors from the beginning, he would not be in the position he is."[93]

Cobb suspected strongly after his first meeting with the president that Pierce had the ulterior motive of drawing him into the administration orbit. Any doubts on that subject evaporated when Pierce again relayed an offer of a possible administration post. As usual, Cobb sought Mary Ann's advice. She replied with scathing forthrightness. "Mr P. stoops to conquer," she exploded, "but I hope you will teach him [that] as a statesman, and partizan you can overlook private grievances and injustices for the good of the country and the Dem. party; still you would never condescend to accept any office ... within his gift, particularly one that will bring you in daily [discourse] with him." Pierce's only purpose, she declared, "[is] to make a tool of you to secure his renomination and reelect him." With considerable

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[93] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, December 30, 1855; January 1, 1856, ibid.

satisfaction, Cobb acknowledged that "you expressed my views & feelings fully."[94]

Although Cobb did not waiver in his resolve to avoid entanglement with the Pierce administration, he did agree to a speaking tour in the president's home state of New Hampshire. While Cobb's public support of the administration induced Toombs to accuse him of "playing between Pierce and Buchanan," this analysis represented a total misinterpretation of his motives. In going to New Hampshire, he sought to further his own rehabilitation as a national Democrat -- not to enhance Pierce's chances of reelection. During his speeches, he espoused the doctrines of state rights and popular sovereignty, but concentrated on denouncing Know Nothingism. True, he acknowledged, each state as a sovereign entity "possessed the power to oppress the poor foreigner who had fled here for refuge .... But had [it] the right to do so?" "Did our Revolutionary fathers," he demanded, "purchase this right when they fought for their own liberties?" One antislavery editor astutely observed that "we were glad to hear him make the distinction between power and right, and every one of his arguments on this point

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[94] Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, January 25, 1856; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, January 29, 1856; February 12, 1856, ibid.

... were as good a moral plea against slavery as we ever heard."[95]

Such observations notwithstanding, Cobb and his family viewed his speaking venture into New England as quite successful. Mary Ann observed sourly, "imagine had you been sent for to Concord, three [years] ago, the country would have been in a more ... peaceful condition than we now find it." For himself, Cobb described his experiences in "the East" as pleasant and declared that his speeches "took admirably."[96]

While these events unfolded to the North, Cobbites at home worked to insure that the state's delegation to the national Democratic convention scheduled to meet in Cincinnati in June would be friendly to Cobb's interests. Several of Cobb's lieutenants expressed hope that the convention would find itself deadlocked between delegates supporting Buchanan, Douglas, and Pierce. In that event, they predicted, the convention would turn to Cobb -- but only if he could command the support of his own state. They mainly worried that Stephens and Toombs might let jealousy over Cobb's advancement prompt them to support someone else.

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[95] Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, February 11, 1856; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, February 12, 1856, ibid.; Robert Toombs to Thomas W. Thomas, February 9, 1856, Toombs Papers; Portsmouth Morning Chronicle, February 9, 1856, clipping in Howell Cobb Papers.

[96] Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, February 11, 1856; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, February 12, 1856, Howell Cobb Papers.

Some Cobbites also voiced concern over maneuvers to secure a vice-presidential nomination for Herschel Johnson. "Depend upon it," one Cobbite warned, "there are those among us, who for the sake of obtaining the Second Office themselves would make Georgia give up all idea of obtaining the first for another."[97]

For his own part, Cobb placed no stock in these efforts. He certainly wanted a delegation that he could control in Cincinnati, but more to support Buchanan's candidacy than his own. When Cobb travelled to Pennsylvania for a consultation with "Old Buck," Brother John wholeheartedly endorsed Cobb's decision and declared "he is the man to tie to, for the weal of the country ... (& for the good of some one else too,) or I have been ciphering it out wrong."[98]

Cobb had already begun to work openly for "Old Buck's" nomination. He vigorously rebuffed suggestions by some southerners that Buchanan's strong support for the extension of the Missouri Compromise line to the Pacific during the crisis of 1850 indicated a lack of support for the current doctrine of popular sovereignty. Buchanan, he insisted, had embraced the Missouri line as a pro-southern and as "a

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[97] W. Burns to Howell Cobb, October 1, 1855; William H. Hull to Howell Cobb, December 22, 1855; January 23, 1856; Junius Hillyer to Howell Cobb, January 23, 1856; Thomas Reade Rootes Cobb to Howell Cobb, March 24, 1856; John B. Lamar to Mary Ann Cobb, May 8, 1856; Robert E. Martin to Howell Cobb, May 9, 1856, ibid.

[98] John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, May 8, 1856, ibid.

national measure" designed to end the slavery issue on equitable grounds. He now endorsed popular sovereignty for the same reason. In reporting on his activities to Buchanan's headquarters, he expressed great confidence that "Old Buck" would be both nominated and elected.[99]

Despite Cobb's optimistic assessments, by the time the Democratic national convention assembled Buchanan's prospects appeared far from certain. Cobb did not attend. The convention elected his close friend and advisor, John E. Ward of Savannah, as its presiding officer. Ward immediately warned Cobb that while Buchanan enjoyed considerable support, his opponents were plotting to deny him the nomination. The Georgia delegation -- although pledged to Pierce -- appeared badly divided and included ardent supporters of Pierce, Douglas, and Buchanan. Under the circumstances, he did not believe any of the three could be nominated, but suggested that Douglas probably had the best chance.[100]

Although he did not say so at the time, Ward recognized that the Georgia delegation felt little friendship for Cobb's advancement. Even if the convention had deadlocked and Cobb's name been suggested as a darkhorse candidate, he later maintained, the Georgia delegation would have blocked it. In evaluating attitudes toward Cobb as manifested by the

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[99] Howell Cobb to (?), April 21, 1856, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, pp. 363-364.

[100] John E. Ward to Howell Cobb, June 3, 1856, ibid., p. 367.

various delegations, Ward suggested that "the feeling for you at the North, at the East, and at the West was overwhelming, but the South will strike you unless their fangs are drawn." This goal could only be achieved, he predicted, "by a distinct recognition by the next administration." Clearly, the wounds of the past political wars in Georgia had not yet healed.[101]

Ward's appraisal of the course of the convention initially proved quite accurate. Buchanan led in the voting with a comfortable majority from the beginning, but under the two-thirds rule Douglas and Pierce commanded sufficient support to deny him the nomination. Following the first day's balloting, the Douglas men convinced the Pierce delegates to throw their votes to the senator. The convention then stood deadlocked for two ballots. As tensions began to rise, the Douglas floor leaders -- acting on instructions from their chief -- withdrew his name. The convention then nominated Buchanan and rewarded Douglas by naming his close friend, John C. Breckinridge of Kentucky, for the vice-presidency.[102]

Southern delegations accepted Buchanan's nomination without great enthusiasm. Douglas had been the first choice of most southern Democrats. While willing to support the

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[101] John E. Ward to Howell Cobb, July 5, 1856, ibid., pp. 372-373.

[102] Nevins, Ordeal of Union, II, 457-460.

party's nominee as the only viable alternative to a "Black Republican" triumph, southern support for Buchanan did not spring from any popular enthusiasm for the man.[103]

The Know Nothings and the Republicans held their national conventions in February and June, respectively. Badly divided on the slavery issue, the Know Nothings nominated former president Millard Fillmore, a man who did not belong to their party. They attempted without success to conceal their division over slavery through obfuscation. The shattered remnants of the Whigs also nominated Fillmore. Shortly after the Know Nothing convention adjourned, the antislavery segment of the party broke away to form the "North Americans." By June, this faction had merged with the Republicans who nominated John C. Fremont. The son-in-law of Missouri Senator Thomas Hart Benton, Fremont's chief fame derived from his exploratory expeditions to the Far West in the 1840s. Although it quickly became apparent that the real race would be between Buchanan and Fremont, the prospect that Fillmore might carry enough states to throw the presidential election into the House of Representatives raised alarm in Democratic circles.[104]

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[103] Bruce W. Collins, "The Democrats' Electoral Fortunes During the Lecompton Crisis," Civil War History, XXIV (December, 1978), 314-315; Johannsen, Stephen A. Douglas, p. 519.

[104] Potter, The Impending Crisis, pp. 254-262; Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, July 18, 1856, Howell Cobb Papers; Appendix to the Congressional Globe, Thirty-Fourth Congress, First Session, pp. 1028-1031.

Cobb wasted no time in joining the campaign. Reports from Georgia uniformly reflected a determination to sustain the Democratic nominee. Brother Tom wrote from Athens that Buchanan's nomination had been well received by Georgia Democrats. Even better, neither the local Know Nothings nor the old line Whigs evinced any desire to put up an opposition. Several prominent members of the old Whig organization had gone so far as to publicly declare their intention to support Buchanan. Brother John, writing from Macon, echoed this assessment. "Old Buck's" nomination he avowed "takes like pine straw in a draught here." In Macon also, prominent old Whigs attended Democratic ratification meetings and declared their new allegiance to the Democracy. One of the converts summarized the motives of many when he proclaimed "there [are] but two parties in the country, the Democracy & the Black Republicans & he who is not on the side of the former, [is] indirectly aiding & abetting the latter."[105]

With Georgia solidly in the Buchanan column, Cobb concentrated his campaign efforts in the North. In June, he made speeches in both New York and Philadelphia. The following month, he made a flying trip to Georgia to escort

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[105] Thomas Reade Rootes Cobb to Howell Cobb, June 16, 1856; John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, June 16, 1856; June 18, 1856; Henry Branham to Howell Cobb, June 17, 1856; James Buchanan to Howell Cobb, July 10, 1856; July 22, 1856, Howell Cobb Papers; Howell Cobb to James Buchanan, July 14, 1856; July 27, 1856; August 3, 1856; August 4, 1856; August 14, 1856, Buchanan Papers.

his family -- who had arrived in Washington in May -- home for the summer. He took advantage of his time there to campaign for Buchanan and assess the political situation for himself. He concluded that his lieutenants had probably understated Buchanan's strength in Georgia and the South. In August, he spoke in Portland, Maine. He conceded that Portland "is a good ways to go" for a speech, but justified it because the Buchanan men "urge it upon me as an important matter."[106]

At every campaign appearance Cobb delivered the same message. The harmony that had characterized the Union in its early days had now been supplanted by sectional animosity. He warned that unless this trend could be reversed, the Union would not endure. On every critical point, he declared, the "Black Republicans" labored to increase the alienation between North and South. They demanded the admission of Kansas as a free state regardless of the desires of its residents and a ban on the admission of future slave states. They sought the repeal of the fugitive slave law and the abolition of the interstate slave trade. In effect, he declared, Republicans opposed the Constitution on every point where it touched slavery. Could a party which held the Constitution in contempt, he queried, be trusted with the

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[106] John B. Lamar to Mary Ann Cobb, June 16, 1856; Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, July 18, 1856; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, August 5, 1856; August 11, 1856, Howell Cobb Papers; Howell Cobb to James Buchanan, July 27, 1856, Buchanan Papers.

preservation of that Constitution? He further warned that the "Black Republicans" had also demonstrated contempt for the Constitution by allying with the northern Know Nothings, a group which repudiated civil and religious liberty. Fremont, he disdainfully observed, "is a fit representative of such a concern, but utterly unfit for the present condition of the country."[107]

Many Americans, in both the North and the South, believed that Fremont's election would sound the death knell of the Union. Cobb and his lieutenants shared this grim appraisal. John Lamar worried that the people of the country "have gone clear 'daft.'" In despair, he lamented that if "the North is strong enough to elect Fremont, the condition of the Southern states in the Union would be like that of Ireland toward Great Britain -- a conquered province." Under the circumstance, he concluded, "the sooner we separate the better." Cobb's private letters reveal that he shared Lamar's view. When writing to John Ward in mid-July, he bluntly declared that "Fremont's election is a dissolution of the Union." The Southern Banner gave public voice to this conclusion. It proclaimed that "the Duty -- the Rights --

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[107] Howell Cobb, speech outline, 1856, Howell Cobb Papers.

the Honor of ... the South would never submit to the iron rule of a Black Republican President."[108]

Yet, Cobb generally avoided direct threats of secession during his northern appearances. Other southern speakers campaigning for Buchanan in the North demonstrated less restraint. Herschel Johnson, when sharing a podium with Cobb in Philadelphia, flatly asserted that "if Fremont is elected ... the day on which his election is announced will close the history of the Union." Cobb did not doubt that this message must be delivered to the people of the northern states. But he preferred to let others make the direct threats, while he offered veiled warnings and emphasized the more positive message of sectional reconciliation that would accompany a Buchanan victory. He did so in part because he felt a sincere "faith in the people and cannot doubt Buchanan's election." Yet he was also a practical politician. He still sought complete rehabilitation as a national Democrat -- one who would be eligible for a high position in a Buchanan administration and perhaps an even higher office in 1860.[109]

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[108] John B. Lamar to David C. Barrow, July 22, 1856, David C. Barrow Papers, Felix Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia; Howell Cobb to John E. Ward, July 19, 1856, in Brooks, "Howell Cobb Letters," p. 169; Horace Montgomery, "Georgia's Howell Cobb Stumps for James Buchanan in 1856," Pennsylvania History, XXIX (January, 1962), 48; Athens Southern Banner, October 2, 1856.

[109] Philadelphia Dollar Weekly Pennsylvanian, September 20, 1856, cited in Montgomery, "Howell Cobb Stumps for James Buchanan," p. 48; Howell Cobb to John E. Ward, July 19, 1856, in Brooks, "Howell Cobb Letters," p. 169.

Besides bearing a message of sectional reconciliation, Cobb also appealed to northern audiences by manifesting his willingness to accept the northern interpretation of popular or "squatter" sovereignty. Since its first introduction by Lewis Cass back in the 1840s, this doctrine had been vague as to when the residents in a territory might decide on the fate of slavery. Although Douglas' Kansas-Nebraska legislation had made popular sovereignty the law of the land, he had not clarified this point. While northern Democrats upheld the authority of territorial legislatures to decide the issue, southern Democrats insisted that the decision on slavery could not be made until the territory drafted its state constitution. Southerners sneeringly termed the northern interpretation "squatter sovereignty."[110]

Despite the obvious dangers, Cobb possessed few alternatives to embracing this northern interpretation. In Buchanan's letter accepting the presidential nomination, the candidate had asserted that "the people of a Territory, like those of States, shall decide for themselves, whether slavery shall or shall not exist within their limits." Anti-Buchanan and anti-Cobb men in Georgia immediately pounced on this phrase as an endorsement of "squatter sovereignty." Frequent claims in the northern Democratic press that Buchanan indeed had endorsed the northern view undermined efforts by

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[110] Horace Montgomery, "A Georgia Precedent For the Freeport Question," Journal of Southern History, X (May, 1944), 200-207.

Georgia's Democratic press to refute the charge. Hope Hull warned Cobb that he must confront this issue directly. He must defend Buchanan's support for "squatter sovereignty" or see the opponents of the Union and the national Democracy use it to the detriment of both.[111]

Cobb and his loyalists boldly accepted this challenge. Through the columns of the Athens Southern Banner and stump speeches by Junius Hillyer, Cobbites offered a closely reasoned defense of their position. They contended that their Democratic brethren had drawn a distinction without a difference in their dispute over popular sovereignty. Slavery, they noted, could not exist without slave codes and other supportive legislation. If a majority of a territory's residents opposed slavery, their legislature would not adopt the laws necessary for slavery's survival. Slavery would disappear. If a majority favored slavery, the legislature would enact the required legislation and slavery would thrive. By this process, the issue of slavery in a territory would be effectively decided by "the will of the majority of the people" -- long before they rendered an official verdict in their state constitution.[112]

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[111] James Buchanan, Letter of Acceptance, cited in Macon Journal and Messenger, July 2, 1856; William Hope Hull to Howell Cobb, July 14, 1856, Howell Cobb Papers; Horace Montgomery, "A Georgia Precedent For the Freeport Question," pp. 200-207.

[112] Athens Southern Banner, September 14, 1856; October 21, 1856.

Cobb offered the same arguments in his northern speaking engagements. "The Government of the United States," he declared, "should not force the institution of slavery upon the people either of the Territories or of the States." The right of the people to determine their own domestic institutions embodied the central tenet of constitutional government, he proclaimed, and whether the people of a territory resolve the issue of slavery "by prohibiting it ... OR BY REFUSING TO PASS LAWS TO PROTECT IT ... is immaterial. The majority of the people, BY THE ACTION OF THE TERRITORIAL LEGISLATURE, will decide the question; and all must abide by the decision when made."[113]

Inexplicably, the opposition press in Georgia failed to exploit this clear deviation from southern orthodoxy. While it is possible that anti-Buchanan editors were unaware of Cobb's assertions in the northern states, they could not have been ignorant of the arguments appearing in the Southern Banner or in Hillyer's speeches. Yet only the Athens Southern Watchman offered a direct response. Editor John Christy weakly countered that territorial legislatures held a constitutional obligation to adopt laws protecting slavery. He then reluctantly conceded the accuracy of the Cobbite

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[113] Howell Cobb, speech delivered at West Chester, Pennsylvania, September 19, 1856, cited in Stephen A. Douglas to the Editors of the San Francisco National, August 16, 1859, in Johannsen, The Letters of Stephen A. Douglas, pp. 453-466; Philadelphia Press, June 3, 1858, cited in Milledgeville Southern Recorder, June 28, 1858.

assessment when he lamented that "it is virtually leaving the whole question to arbitration, and suffering our antagonist to select the arbitrators." Despite the absence of a strong response by the opposition, the Cobbite position proved significant. It clearly demonstrated that Cobb remained sufficiently committed to the Union and the national Democracy to run considerable political risks at home for their preservation.[114]

Cobb's message took well with his northern audiences. He, himself, wrote that the crowds "responded with a hearty good will to the national and constitutional doctrines which I advocated before them." Press reports echoed his evaluation. Following his visit to Portland, the Maine Free Press praised him as a man who had previously "put to hazard his political reputation ... when state rights' democrats had fallen into the whirlpool of disunion excitement." The scars that he had received in those battles, it observed, "are yet upon him." Any man, the paper concluded, who so deeply loved the Union, "made every man feel that our state had the right to claim him as one of her own sons."[115]

Only Cobb's congressional responsibilities kept him from doing more on Buchanan's behalf during the mid-summer months.

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[114] Athens Southern Watchman, August 28, 1856; September 4, 1856; September 11, 1856.

[115] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, August 11, 1856, Howell Cobb Papers; Maine Free Press, November 28, 1856, clipping in Howell Cobb Papers.

With the adjournment of Congress in September, he became a full-time operative for "Old Buck." Although Cobb received invitations to stump for Buchanan in several states, it had already become clear that any chance for a Democratic presidential victory hinged on carrying Pennsylvania. By mid-September, the Democrats already had sustained local defeats in several northern states -- including Maine. Should the Democracy lose the Keystone state, a Buchanan presidency would become a virtual impossibility. The Republicans could count as well as the Democrats and they made plans to challenge their opponents for every vote in Buchanan's home state. Under the circumstances, the Buchanan men concluded that Cobb should focus his efforts there.[116]

After a short visit to Georgia, Cobb arrived in Philadelphia on September 14. He appreciated the Herculean task confronting him, but declared his determination "to give my whole heart to the work, doing what I can to save my country from ruin." Noting that the Buchanan men believed that "my presence will be of great service to them," he wryly observed that "of this I shall be better able to judge after the election." Happily, he commented, the Pennsylvania

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[116] Montgomery, "Howell Cobb Stumps for James Buchanan," pp. 45-46; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, September 15, 1856, Howell Cobb Papers.

Democrats did not appear disheartened by the thrashing the party had taken in Maine.[117]

The Pennsylvania Democracy put Cobb to work at once. During his first evening in Philadelphia he delivered two orations. Shortly thereafter, he and several other Democrats -- including Governor Johnson of Georgia -- addressed a huge crowd gathered in Independence Square to commemorate the adoption of the Constitution. One local Democratic newspaper estimated the crowd as numbering some 50,000. Cobb continued to portray the Republicans as a malignant threat to sectional reconciliation. Recalling the Toombs' bill of the past session, he contended that Congress at that moment had held an equitable settlement of the Kansas issue in its grasp. But the "Black Republicans" had blocked peace in Kansas because they desired a political issue rather than a solution. Who then, he demanded, bore responsibility for the dangers now confronting their common country? When the crowd roared back "Republicans," he concluded, "you are right, my friends."[118]

From Philadelphia, Cobb embarked on a thorough canvass of the state. The pace proved more grueling than anything

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[117] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, September 15, 1856, Howell Cobb Papers.

[118] Philadelphia Argus, September 16, 1856, cited in Athens Southern Banner, September 25, 1856; Philadelphia Dollar Weekly Pennsylvanian, September 20, 1856, cited in Montgomery, "Howell Cobb Stumps for James Buchanan," pp. 47-48.

he had ever experienced. Travelling day and night through inclement weather, he delivered at least one speech each day and oftentimes two. When travel by railroad could not be arranged, he resorted to "private conveyance." He described this means of getting about as "extremely unpleasant, especially at night in the rain." On occasion, things got worse. "On yesterday I travelled twenty five miles in a snow storm," he reported on October 2, and "then had to stand in the open air with my hat and overcoat on, & speak for an hour & a half, with the snow pouring down upon me." Yet, he confessed, "there were about three thousand people assembled & as they were willing to stand & listen, I was determined to speak for them." He would, he asserted, "continue the work for an indefinite time if I can only aid in saving the country from the great calamity of Fremont's election."[119]

Despite the rigors, his efforts did bring their own compensations. He continued to receive a warm and enthusiastic welcome at each stop, and the Democratic press gave wide circulation to reports of both his power as a speaker and his popularity with the people. Some Democratic organs hailed him as "the great Union champion." Campaigning held other pleasures as well. When speaking in Frankford on September 22, there were some three hundred women in the audience. Before his visit ended, Cobb kissed them all.

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[119] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, September 21, 1856; September 25, 1856; October 2, 1856, Howell Cobb Papers.

Reports of his success with the ladies created considerable mirth around the family dinner table in Athens. Brother Tom taunted Cobb's mother, saying that she had a son "worse than Solomon or the Mormons."[120]

For the most part, Cobb viewed Buchanan's prospects for victory in Pennsylvania as certain. Nevertheless, he confided to Mary Ann that at times his faith in success wavered. "I do not know that my opinion about the election here has undergone any change," he confessed, "some days I am perfectly confident, & then my heart fails me." Both Democrats and Republicans, he added, "are working with all their might. The excitement runs high, and both parties are confident of success." Mary Ann, as usual combining the role of secretary and advisor during her husband's campaigns, relayed news that Democrats in Georgia felt a more persistent gloom about Buchanan's chances than did he. Nevertheless, she encouraged him to continue his efforts. Already, she warned, local Know Nothings had prepared their taunts should

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[120] Thomas D. Harris to Howell Cobb, September 23, 1856; September 30, 1856; Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, October 7, 1856; Leonora Clayton to Mary Ann Cobb, November 12, 1856, ibid.; Thomas D. Harris to Howell Cobb, October 4, 1856, Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collection; Philadelphia Public Ledger, September 20, 1856; Philadelphia Dollar Weekly Pennsylvanian, October 4, 1856; October 11, 1856; Meadville, Crawford Democrat, September 30, 1856; October 7, 1856, all cited in Montgomery, "Howell Cobb Stumps for James Buchanan," pp. 49-51; Philadelphia Daily Pennsylvanian, September 20, 1856, clipping in Howell Cobb Papers; Chester County Democrat, cited in Athens Southern Banner, October 9, 1856; York Gazette, November 4, 1857; Macon Telegraph, both cited in Athens Southern Banner, November 13, 1856.

Fremont carry the Keystone state. She bitterly denounced them as "not a whit better than the Black Republicans."[121]

Cobb completed his work in Pennsylvania in early October and immediately departed for Indiana in response to urgent pleas that he stump that state as well. By the middle of the month, he returned home to Georgia. There he delivered a few speeches to bolster the Buchanan cause and settled down to await the election results. His efforts in the North proved fruitful as the Democrats carried both Pennsylvania and Indiana in their October state elections. The presidential election proved almost as satisfying. Buchanan carried nineteen states -- including Pennsylvania and Indiana -- and rolled up a majority of 174 votes in the electoral college. Fremont finished a strong second, carrying eleven states and collecting 114 electoral votes. Fillmore finished a distant third with one state and eight electoral votes.[122]

Democrats rejoiced over their victory, but Republicans proved far from devastated. Besides winning control of several state governments and additional seats in Congress, they had made an outstanding showing for a new party in its

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[121] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, September 21, 1856; September 25, 1856; Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, September 12, 1856; September 16, 1856; October 2, 1856; October 9, 1856, Howell Cobb Papers.

[122] J. D. Bright to Howell Cobb, September 17, 1856; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, October 5, 1856; October 7, 1856, ibid.; Athens Southern Banner, September 18, 1856; October 23, 1856; October 30, 1856; Nevins, Ordeal of the Union, II, 507-514.

first national election. They had carried eleven of the sixteen northern states and come close to victory in the others. Fremont had outpolled Buchanan and Fillmore combined by some 300,000 votes in the North. The Republicans could look forward with anticipation to future campaigns -- especially if the Democrats failed to resolve the issues confronting the nation.[123]

Southern extremists appreciated the danger. The Charleston Mercury urged the South to recognize the ominous nature of the election returns. The recent election, it declared, had been an issue of "life and death" for the South; "we have barely come out of it with life." It now remained to be seen if the Buchanan administration could revive the Union, or if events would conspire to break it all to pieces.[124]

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[123] Nevins, Ordeal of the Union, II, 507-514; Kenneth M. Stampp, America in 1857, A Nation On the Brink (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 13.

[124] Charleston Mercury, January 12, 1856, cited in Stampp, America in 1857, p. 13.

Chapter Sixteen

"There Is Trouble Ahead"

Athens Democrats greeted Buchanan's victory with jubilation. The Southern Banner joyously proclaimed that the crisis had passed and the national flag still bore thirty-one stars. The election, it declared, confirmed "the capability of man for self-government." The local Democracy further manifested its satisfaction with a torchlight parade replete with cannon fire, transparencies, and speeches. Among the banners was one proclaiming "HOWELL COBB FOR PRESIDENT IN 1860."[1]

Before departing for Washington, Cobb attended to other duties. The most important of these involved his responsibilities as a trustee of the University of Georgia. During the board's December meeting, Cobb at last secured the long-sought professorship for his brother-in-law Williams Rutherford, Jr.[2]

Rutherford's appointment alleviated a persistent family financial concern, but proved secondary to the settlement of John A.'s future. Following Mary Ann's abortive attempt to secure his education at the Episcopal School the preceding

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[1] Athens Southern Banner, November 20, 1856.

[2] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, December 11, 1856, Howell Cobb Papers, Felix Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia (Hereafter: Howell Cobb Papers).

spring, his parents abandoned hope regarding their oldest son and formal education. They allowed John A. to accompany Brother John on a tour of the northern states and parts of Canada. Afterwards, Lamar undertook to train his nephew in plantation management. He also made arrangements for John A. to clerk in a general store. Clerking suited the boy no better than school. He soon pleaded with his father to purchase him a plantation. Cobb agreed to consider the request if the boy continued to clerk for two more years.[3]

If John A.'s parents reluctantly accepted this arrangement, they took consolation in the educational attainments of their other children. Lamar had entered the University in October, 1854, and already had established a reputation as an outstanding student. Howell, Jr., was making good progress in his preparation for college, and little Meyon soon would show a love of reading.[4]

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[3] John A. Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, August 16, 1856; September 5, 1856; September 12, 1856; September 19, 1856; January 3, 1858; Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, December 11, 1856; January 17, 1857; Mary Ann Cobb to John B. Cobb, January 17, 1857; John B. Lamar to John A. Cobb; John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, October 23, 1857; Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, October 29, 1857; John A. Cobb to John B. Lamar, November 4, 1857; Howell Cobb to John A. Cobb, October, 28, 1858, ibid.

[4] Williams Rutherford, Jr. to Howell Cobb, November 29, 1855; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, January 28, 1857; July 6, 1857; August 4, 1857; Howell Cobb to Lamar Cobb, June 30, 1857; Mary Ann Cobb to John B. Lamar, March 4, 1860, ibid.; Lamar Cobb to John B. Lamar, August 14, 1855, Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collection, Felix Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia (Hereafter: Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collection).

II

With these concerns attended to, Cobb departed for the national capital. His outlook had improved considerably since his journey of the previous year. Following Buchanan's triumph, a flow of letters and editorials urging a prominent cabinet post for Cobb began to arrive. John Forney reported from Pennsylvania that "our whole state, everybody indeed in the north is for you in the cabinet." No man, he insisted, had done more to save Pennsylvania for the Democracy. And in saving Pennsylvania, Cobb had "saved the Union, the Constitution, the South, and the people."[5]

Cobb welcomed these assessments. He had been pondering his chances for a cabinet post since the summer, although true to form he denied interest in such a job. He believed that a cabinet appointment would complete his restoration as a leader of the national Democracy, but he also reasoned that a secondary cabinet post would not be adequate for his future needs -- particularly if he hoped to succeed Buchanan as president in 1860. Consequently, shortly after returning to Washington, he made it known that he would accept no post

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[5] Thomas D. Harris to Howell Cobb, November 14, 1856; A. Hood to Howell Cobb, November 16, 1856; John E. Ward to Howell Cobb, November 25, 1856; John W. Forney to Howell Cobb, November 30, 1856, Howell Cobb Papers; Athens Southern Banner, December 11, 1856; Philadelphia Daily Pennsylvanian, February 26, 1857, cited in Athens Southern Banner, March 12, 1857; Maine Lincoln Democrat, cited in Athens Southern Banner, May 28, 1857; West Chester, Pennsylvania, Republican and Democrat, December 2, 1856, clipping in Howell Cobb Papers.

other than secretary of state. He confided to Mary Ann his confidence that Buchanan would tender him a cabinet seat, "and I have as little [doubt] that he wants me to take the only place that I would accept -- the State Department." He soon learned, however, that Buchanan had determined "to tender me either the State or the Treasury." Again, he took "some pains to let him know that there is but one place that I would take."[6]

Most of the information that Cobb received regarding the cabinet proved accurate. Buchanan had resolved early on that he wanted the Georgia Unionist in his administration. Determined to avoid Pierce's flawed strategy of drawing his cabinet from the extremes of the party, Buchanan intended to include in his cabinet only men who shared his conservative views. Cobb was one of those men and Buchanan wanted him to have the post he desired. Unfortunately, Old Buck quickly found himself mired in the numerous factional fights which fractured Democratic ranks, and these disputes threatened Cobb's chances for acquiring his prize.[7]

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[6] Howell Cobb to John E. Ward in R. P. Brooks, ed., "Howell Cobb Papers," The Georgia Historical Quarterly, VI (June, 1922), 169; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, December 1, 1856; December 17, 1856; December 24, 1856, Howell Cobb Papers.

[7] John W. Forney to Howell Cobb, November 30, 1856, Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, December 27, 1856, Howell Cobb Papers; J. Glancy Jones to James Buchanan, December 3, 1856, James Buchanan Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (Hereafter: Buchanan Papers); Roy F. Nichols, The Disruption of American Democracy (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1948), pp. 54-58; Philip S. Klein,

A struggle for political dominance in the Old Northwest between Senators Stephen A. Douglas of Illinois and Jesse D. Bright of Indiana raised the first complication. Buchanan could not appoint a cabinet member recommended by one of these men without risking the alienation of the other, but he believed it essential to have a representative of their region in his administration. Bright suggested that he appoint Senator Lewis Cass of Michigan as a compromise and Douglas seemed willing to accept this arrangement. The seventy-five year old Cass, who recently had been defeated in his reelection bid, welcomed the possibility of not returning home a defeated man. Yet his record of service to the Democracy and the nation precluded an offer of anything less than the senior cabinet post.[8]

Southern Rights Democrats, still harboring a grudge over Cobb's "betrayal" of their movement during the crisis of 1850, had resolved to deny him the state department. Aware of his terms regarding service in the cabinet, a broadly based clique of Southern Rights men also began to push for Cass' appointment. Although Cobbites knew that Jefferson Davis of Mississippi headed this group, they suspected that

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President James Buchanan (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1962), pp. 262-267.

[8] Nichols, The Disruption of American Democracy, pp. 57-58; Klein, President James Buchanan, pp. 266-267; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, December 27, 1856, Howell Cobb Papers.

Georgia's Governor Herschel Johnson -- eager for his own cabinet appointment -- also had a hand in these maneuvers.[9]

The Cass movement created a serious dilemma for Cobb. He could not deny that Cass' record and seniority entitled him to first place in the cabinet. Besides, he sincerely respected the elder statesman. Under no circumstances would he consent to engage in a competition with the older man for the position of "premier" of the Buchanan administration. When informed by one of Buchanan's "confidential friends" that the president-elect felt "embarrassed in reference to myself & Genl Cass," Cobb moved to relieve "Old Buck" by withdrawing his name from consideration for the cabinet.[10]

Neither Buchanan nor his advisors would accept this solution. Forney pleaded that Cobb "must not desert your friends." Even if Cass served as secretary of state, he asserted, the Georgian would still "be to the National Democracy, their main [pillar] under Mr. B's administration." Buchanan's "confidential friend" -- probably Senator William Bigler of Pennsylvania -- argued that Cobb's withdrawal would not relieve the president-elect's embarrassment. "Mr.

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[9] Nichols, The Disruption of American Democracy, 56-58; Klein, President James Buchanan, pp. 266-267; John E. Ward to Howell Cobb, November 25, 1856; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, December 27, 1856; January 6, 1857; John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, January 21, 1857, Howell Cobb Papers; New Orleans Delta, cited in Athens Southern Banner, February 19, 1857.

[10] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, December 27, 1856, Howell Cobb Papers.

Buchanan," he insisted, "is anxious to have you in his cabinet & is not content to make it up without you." If Cass received the state department, Buchanan wanted Cobb to head the treasury. Bigler soon reported to headquarters his conviction that Cobb would not refuse Buchanan's request.[11]

Although Bigler overstated the impact of his talk with Cobb, he did not exaggerate much. Cobb found the appeals of Buchanan's advisors difficult to resist. In seeking the advice of his chief lieutenants, he stated the arguments for and against accepting the treasury post. The most telling argument against it, he explained, derived from a lack of any real interest in the job. Moreover, he worried that the immense patronage controlled by the secretary of the treasury might prove a two-edged sword. "Its distribution," he observed, "will make innumerable enemies & but few lukewarm friends."[12]

On the other hand, Cobb noted, it would be no dishonor to accept a "secondary position to my old friend & leader." Nor, he acknowledged could he comfortably ignore the wishes of Buchanan and other political friends. More pressing was the realization that his rejection of Buchanan's offer would leave him without any close friend in the administration.

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[11] John W. Forney to Howell Cobb, December 26, 1856; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, December 27, 1856, Howell Cobb Papers; William Bigler to Howell Cobb, December 29, 1856, Buchanan Papers.

[12] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, December 27, 1856, Howell Cobb Papers.

He had hoped possibly to substitute John E. Ward of Savannah as attorney general in lieu of himself, but learned that Buchanan intended that position for another. Most important of all, he worried that a cabinet appointment might go to another Georgian -- perhaps Herschel Johnson. Such a development, he commented, would be heralded as a defeat for himself and could damage his future political prospects.[13]

For the most part, Cobbites advised their leader to accept the treasury department -- if Cass became secretary of state. John B. Lamar echoed Cobb's concern about a Johnson cabinet appointment. Looking to the presidential contest of 1860, he warned that Cobb could ill-afford to have a rival placed to "foist himself on the people four years hence as the man of Georgia." From a practical point, he concluded, "it will not do for a man to be out of view in these times, & he must mount the steps as they present themselves, or he will be left behind." James Jackson offered an even more pragmatic view. A man of Cass' age, he observed, probably would not survive Buchanan's entire term. As secretary of the treasury, Cobb would be placed ideally to fill any vacancy at State. Even if Cass lived out the term, he added, he was "too old to be in your way ... & you will be number one."[14]

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[13] Ibid.

[14] James Jackson to Howell Cobb, December 30, 1856; John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, January 2, 1857; Junius Hillyer to Howell Cobb, January 7, 1857, ibid.

Sentiment among Cobbites did not prove unanimous. Gazaway Lamar, voicing doubts about Buchanan's resolve to stand firm on slavery and other constitutional issues, urged his kinsman to stay out of the cabinet. Brother Tom advised Cobb to reject any cabinet post except secretary of state. No other cabinet office, he argued, could enhance his brother's reputation.[15]

By early January, 1857, Cobb had decided to accept a position secondary to Cass. This decision caught the Southern Rights men by surprise. They had expected him to resist. By yielding, he chuckled, he had "knocked all their calculations into Pi." Almost immediately, Southern Rights support for Cass began to evaporate. Cobb reported that they now insisted "it is all a mistake about the South wanting his appointment." Cobb's "magnanimity" also took Cass by surprise. When the two men met outside the Senate chamber, the old man expressed his gratitude. Both men became choked with emotion and after a short conversation "parted with a few broken incoherent words on both sides."[16]

The Southern Rights men had no choice but to shift tactics in their campaign to keep Cobb out of the cabinet.

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[15] Gazaway Lamar to Howell Cobb, January 6, 1857; Thomas Reade Rootes Cobb to Howell Cobb, January 17, 1857; John E. Ward to Howell Cobb, January 30, 1857, ibid.

[16] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, January 6, 1857; February 10, 1857, ibid. Henry Wise to James Buchanan, January 5, 1857; John Appleton to James Buchanan, January 11, 1857, Buchanan Papers.

They now threw their support to Robert J. Walker. Walker, a native of Pennsylvania and resident of Mississippi, had been mentioned for the state department early on. He had served as secretary of the treasury during the Polk administration and worked diligently for Buchanan in New York during the campaign. Besides Southern Rights support, he also enjoyed the backing of business interests in New York City and northern expansionists. Douglas, too, gave support to the Walker movement -- perhaps because he hoped to eliminate Cobb as a rival for the presidency in 1860.[17]

Although Cobb and his supporters initially did not deem the Walker movement a serious threat, they enlisted the assistance of Senator John Slidell of Louisiana -- a trusted Buchanan advisor -- in making sure "Old Buck" understood that Cobb's opponents did not want Walker so much as "they dont want Cobb." Then, in mid-February, Cobb received a frantic warning from Martin Crawford of Georgia "that this movement for Walker is extensive and dangerous." It had become so because the name of Senator Robert M. T. Hunter of Virginia

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[17] Robert W. Johannsen, Stephen A. Douglas (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 552; Klein, President James Buchanan, pp. 264-267; Nichols, The Disruption of American Democracy, pp. 56-58; James P. Shenton, Robert J. Walker, A Politician From Jackson to Lincoln (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961), pp. 142-145; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, February 3, 1857; A. Birdsall to Howell Cobb, February 4, 1857; Martin Crawford to Howell Cobb, February 15, 1857, Howell Cobb Papers; Robert M. McLane to Howell Cobb, February 14, 1857, in Ulrich Bonnell Phillips, ed., The Correspondence of Robert Toombs, Alexander H. Stephens, and Howell Cobb (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1913), pp. 395-396.

had been introduced to the competition for secretary of state. Hunter's appointment held out the possibility of ending a factional dispute between Hunter and Governor Henry A. Wise in the Old Dominion.[18]

The prospect of Hunter's elevation mortified Forney, who had been a persistent supporter of Cobb. Forney had engaged in a bitter dispute with the Virginia Democracy during the Pierce administration. The rancor lingered and following the election Virginia Democrats had blocked Forney's appointment as editor of the Washington Union, the official organ of the administration. Forney's enmity for the men who had frustrated his editorial ambitions deepened when a Buchanan-backed attempt to secure his election as senator from Pennsylvania went awry. Confronted with the possibility of an open enemy taking the highest post in the administration, Forney suddenly threw his support to Walker. Crawford warned that Cobb's only chance lay in Buchanan's insistence that the Georgian agree to enter a Walker-led cabinet.[19]

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[18] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, February 3, 1857; Martin Crawford to Howell Cobb, February 15, 1857, Howell Cobb Papers; Robert M. McLane to Howell Cobb, February 14, 1857, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, pp. 395-396; John Slidell to James Buchanan, February 14, 1857, Buchanan Papers.

[19] Nichols, The Disruption of American Democracy, pp. 58-59, 61-63; Klein, President James Buchanan, pp. 264-265; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, January 13, 1857; Martin Crawford to Howell Cobb, February 15, 1857; John W. Forney to Howell Cobb, January 30, 1857; February 18, 1857, Howell Cobb Papers.

Cobb did not waver in his determination to be second only to Cass. Nor did he hesitate to register his feeling that Forney had betrayed him. Forney offered an immediate defense. He insisted that he had thrown his support to Walker only when he believed it a final choice between Walker and Hunter. "When Hunter, our foe, <u>your</u> <u>foe</u>, and Mr. Buchanan's foe, is to be forced upon us, we say 'take any shape but that.'" He had not betrayed his friend, he avowed, and pleaded that Cobb "give me some credit for fidelity." On a brighter note, he added, "now all is changed and Hunter out of the way and you or Cass is certain."[20]

The importance of Cobb's angry refusal to stand second to either Walker or Hunter in shaping Buchanan's final decision cannot be gaged, but events soon proved Forney's final assessment correct. Walker, sensing that he would not be tendered the post, threw his support to Cass. He did so in part to punish Cobb for refusing to serve in a position secondary to himself, but also because he doubted Cass' prospects of living out the term. Magnanimity now might win reward later on. On February 21, Buchanan tendered Cobb the appointment of secretary of the treasury. He noted that he had offered Cass the state department, and expressed

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[20] John W. Forney to Howell Cobb, February 18, 1857, Howell Cobb Papers.

confidence that Cass' appointment "cannot fail to be agreeable to you."[21]

Had Cobb known the terms of Cass' appointment, it probably would have been even more agreeable to him. Buchanan shared neither Cobb's affection nor respect for Cass. He only accepted him for the state department because he represented a compromise acceptable to Bright, Douglas, Southern Rights men, and Cobb. Nevertheless, Buchanan required that Cass, a notorious Anglophobe, refrain from anti-British comments. The president-elect also demanded that he select the secretary of state's main assistants. In effect, Cass would serve as figurehead while Buchanan directed the affairs of the department. Clearly, old Cass would not challenge Cobb for leadership in the cabinet.[22]

The arrival of Buchanan's letter ended some fourteen anxious weeks for Cobb. Most of that distress had derived from Buchanan's determination to refrain from announcing anything about his appointments until the last minute. Although motivated by a desire to avoid giving offense should events require him to make changes, his silence also inspired every element in the Democracy to join in the game of cabinet

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[21] Shenton, Robert J. Walker, pp. 143-145; James Buchanan to Howell Cobb, February 21, 1857, Howell Cobb Papers.

[22] Klein, President James Buchanan, pp. 267-268; 275-276; Nichols, The Disruption of American Democracy, p. 66.

making. Moreover, it proved frustrating to his supporters and created doubts about his resolution.[23]

Mary Ann gave voice to these sentiments first. In January, she expressed concern that Buchanan might yield to the pressure and repeat Pierce's mistake of trying to please everyone with his cabinet appointments and thus please no one. "I fear," she confessed, that "the old man lacks nerve." A few days later Brother John echoed her anxiety about a replay of the Pierce administration. He warned that if Buchanan did not announce his cabinet soon the competition between various Democratic factions would tear the party apart. Even Forney confided his belief that Buchanan's policy of silence had cost Cobb the state department. "Had Mr. Buchanan behaved like a bold Jackson and put you into state at once" he contended, "no trouble would have ensued."[24]

Although Cobb persisted throughout that he possessed no deeply held desire to serve in the cabinet, his close interest in the subject and his outrage when he believed that Forney had betrayed him provided a more accurate measure of his feelings. Nevertheless, he manifested considerable patience with "Old Buck's" extended cabinet selection

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[23] Klein, President James Buchanan, pp. 264-265.

[24] Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, January 18, 1857; March 9, 1857; John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, January 21, 1857; January 24, 1857; John W. Forney to Howell Cobb, February 18, 1857, Howell Cobb Papers.

methods. He did not deny that harm had been done by the delay. But, after meeting with Buchanan in late January, he suggested that delay had been inevitable because "Old Buck" had not yet made up his mind on the best course. Delays notwithstanding, he felt certain that "he will do in the end what is the best for the country." From Cobb's perspective, Buchanan's offer of the treasury department confirmed that judgment.[25]

Cobb's appointment provoked a favorable response in the Democratic press which declared the country "fortunate ... in finding such a man" to administer the nation's finances. "His energy and talents, his sound political principles, his zeal, sagacity and indomitable will, together with his cordial manners, tact, and management," they asserted, gave him a "peculiar fitness for the Treasury Department." They felt certain that he would be "the controlling member of President Buchanan's cabinet." Even the opposition press grudgingly conceded Cobb's abilities. Horace Greeley's New York Tribune -- an organ which generally held the president and cabinet in low regard -- acknowledged his "decided ability ... stong sense, energy and indomitable will." Describing the new secretary as "shrewd, strong, coarse,

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[25] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, December 21, 1856; December 24, 1856; January 2, 1857; January 6, 1857; February 3, 1857; February 10, 1857; Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, January 31, 1857, ibid.; Howell Cobb to Jeremiah S. Black, April 26, 1857, Jeremiah S. Black Papers, Library of Congress, Washington D.C. (Hereafter: Black Papers).

ambitious, intensely proslavery, but not a Disunionist," the Tribune shared the Democratic expectation that Cobb "is plainly to be the master spirit of the new Cabinet."[26]

III

Cobb received Buchanan's offer to join the cabinet while visiting Athens. Although he promptly departed for Washington, transportation problems delayed his arrival until March 3 -- inauguration eve. Upon reaching the capital, he went directly to Buchanan's quarters at the National Hotel. There, he formally accepted his appointment as secretary of the treasury.[27]

When Buchanan took the oath of office on the east portico of the Capitol the next day, it represented the pinnacle of a long and distinguished career. Throughout that career, Buchanan had taken a pro-southern stance on matters of sectional dispute. After 1856, political considerations made it unlikely that he would deviate from his past record, because the majority of votes that had put him in the White House had come from southern states. Yet, he hoped to oversee the elimination of the Republican party. Thus, even as he attempted to satisfy the South, he must increase the

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[26] Athens Southern Banner, March 12, 1857; Greenville Patriot Mountaineer, cited in Athens Southern Banner, March 26, 1857; New Hampshire Patriot; Barnstable Patriot, both cited in Athens Southern Banner, April 30, 1857; New Castle Lincoln Democrat, cited in Athens Southern Banner, May 28, 1857; New York Daily Tribune, March 7, 1857.

[27] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, March 3, 1857, ibid.

Democracy's appeal to northern voters. His success largely would hinge on how effectively he handled the Kansas issue.[28]

Buchanan's inaugural address outlined the objectives of his administration. He called for a fair settlement in Kansas based on popular sovereignty. The people of the territories, he declared, must be free to determine their own domestic institutions. The federal government's primary duty derived from its responsibility to secure the right of each citizen of a territory to express his opinion at the ballot box. Acknowledging a difference between the sections as to when territorial residents might ban slavery, Buchanan declared the difference of little consequence. It embodied a "judicial question" which the Supreme Court would answer soon. Buchanan -- already aware of the pro-southern tone of the upcoming ruling in Dred Scott v. Sanford -- avowed his personal sympathy for the southern view that slavery could not be excluded until a territory applied for statehood. Let the nation resolve these issues, he reasoned, and the justification for both sectional quarrels and the Republican party would cease to exist.[29]

With the inauguration over, the new administration moved to its task. The cabinet had not yet been completed.

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[28] Allan Nevins, The Emergence of Lincoln: Douglas, Buchanan, and Party Chaos, 1857-1859, two vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1950), I, 64-67; Kenneth M. Stampp, America in 1857, A Nation On the Brink (New York: Oxford University Press), pp. 47-49.

[29] Stampp, America in 1857, pp. 64-66.

Besides Cass and Cobb, Buchanan had named only three other members before his inauguration. John B. Floyd of Virginia assumed responsibility for the war department. A former governor and Southern Rights Democrat, the highly personable but ailing Virginian lacked both the energy and capacity for his post. Despite having to reprimand Floyd often, "Old Buck" liked his secretary of war and tolerated his shortcomings. This tolerance would later haunt Buchanan as his political foes used Floyd's lax administration and incompetence as the basis for damning accusations of corruption.[30]

For secretary of the interior, Buchanan selected Jacob Thompson of Mississippi. Like Floyd, Thompson adhered to the Southern Rights wing of the Democracy. His past service as chairman of the House Committee on Public Lands provided him a solid grounding in land policy and Indian affairs. Aaron V. Brown of Tennessee assumed the duties of postmaster general. A very wealthy man with poor health, Brown previously had served as a congressman and as governor of his state. Along with Cobb, these appointments insured a southern majority in the cabinet.[31]

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[30] Klein, President James Buchanan, pp. 276-278; Stampp, America in 1857, p. 62; Nichols, The Disruption of American Democracy, pp. 78-80; Mark W. Summers, The Plundering Generation: Corruption and the Crisis of the Union, 1849-1861 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 239-246.

[31] Klein, President James Buchanan, pp. 276-278; Stampp, America in 1857, p. 62; Nichols, The Disruption of American Democracy, pp. 78-80.

Within a few days of taking office, Buchanan made his last two cabinet appointments. He named Isaac Toucey of Connecticut secretary of the navy and Jeremiah S. Black of Pennsylvania as his attorney general. Toucey had served with Buchanan in the Polk cabinet. Like Floyd, his flawed administrative policies eventually resulted in serious accusations of corruption. Black, a talented lawyer, had been a longtime associate of Buchanan in Pennsylvania politics.[32]

The members of the cabinet were not well acquainted with each other when they assumed their duties, but shortly after the inauguration Cobb reported that good-will permeated the administration. "The cabinet gets on harmoniously" he commented, "& everything promises well." The cabinet members soon fondly referred to their chief as "The Squire" -- but only behind his back.[33]

Just as John Forney and James Jackson had predicted, Cobb soon emerged as the "premier" of the administration. At forty-one, Cobb was the youngest cabinet member, but he

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[32] Klein, President James Buchanan, pp. 276-278; Stampp, America in 1857, p. 62; Nichols, The Disruption of American Democracy, pp. 78-80; Mark W. Summers, The Plundering Generation, pp. 246-248.

[33] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, March 8, 1857, Howell Cobb Papers; Klein, President James Buchanan, pp. 275-276; Stampp, America in 1857, p. 70; Virginia Clay Copton, A Belle of the Fifties: Memoirs of Mrs. Clay of Alabama Covering Social and Political Life in Washington and the South, 1853-1866 (London, 1905), p. 30; Mary B. Clayton, ed., Reminiscences of J. S. Black (St. Louis, 1887), p. 106.

and the sixty-six year old president had much in common besides their adherence to Jacksonian political ideology. As boys, both had been expelled from college for teenage pranks, and as men neither had been able to exercise a firm control over the Democratic organizations in their respective states. Both shared a fondness for good food and good wine. Moreover, Buchanan enjoyed Cobb's good cheer and sense of humor. The Georgian soon became the administration's "jolly Falstaff," as well as its premier. The president grew so attached to the younger man that over the next four years he insisted on Cobb's residing -- or at least dining -- at the White House whenever Mary Ann visited Georgia.[34]

The friendship between the two men blossomed despite Buchanan's understanding that Cobb hoped to succeed him in 1860. Indeed, Buchanan acknowledged the presidential ambitions of his treasury secretary and other members of the cabinet during one of their many long meetings. During his inaugural, "Old Buck" had announced that he would not seek reelection. In light of his declared intention of serving only one term, he had no apparent reason to resent his

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[34] Klein, President James Buchanan, pp. 275-276; Stampp, America in 1857, pp. 70-71; Samuel Boykin, ed., A Memorial Volume of the Honorable Howell Cobb of Georgia (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1870), pp. 28-29; Clay-Copton, A Belle of the Fifties, p. 30; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, May 13, 1859; September 16, 1859; Kate Thompson to Mary Ann Cobb, May 18, 1859, Howell Cobb Papers; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, May 9, 1859, Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collection; Greenville Patriot Mountaineer, cited in Athens Southern Banner, March 26, 1857.

lieutenant's ambitions. Yet many doubted the sincerity of his decision not to seek a second term. Those who doubted "Old Buck's" sincerity or who favored the elevation of one of Cobb's rivals searched diligently for some manifestation of resentment by the president toward his premier. But even if Buchanan harbored some secret desire for a second term, it never exerted a negative impact on his relationship with Cobb. "Old Buck" well might have counted on the younger man's personal loyalty to keep him out of the race if he sought reelection.[35]

Occasionally, Buchanan presumed upon their friendship to snoop into Cobb's personal matters. In one instance, he inquired "you are rich I suppose?" When Cobb replied to the contrary, Old Buck observed "Mrs Cobb is I understand, and that is the same thing. How much ... is her estate?" When Cobb responded that his wife owned property worth some $250,000, Buchanan asked "why dont you pay that debt of fifteen thousand that you say you owe?" Confessing that Buchanan's queries had taken him aback, Cobb admitted a strong inclination "to ask him to loan me the money, but ... I let it pass." Mary Ann bridled at her husband's being

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[35] Jeremiah S. Black to Howell Cobb, April 30, 1857, Howell Cobb Papers; C. W. C. Dunnington to Robert M. T. Hunter, July 25, 1857; September 20, 1857; October 6, 1857, in Charles Henry Ambler, ed., Correspondence of Robert M. T. Hunter, 1826-1876 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1918), pp. 235-236; Richard R. Stenberg, "An Unnoted Factor in the Buchanan-Douglas Feud," Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society, XXV (January, 1933), 271-284, argues that Buchanan secretly desired a second term.

"'put on the stand.'" While conceding that a personal acquaintance with the president might change her opinion of him, she now exclaimed that "he is blunt to the point of rudeness" and "I am not at all prepossessed in his favor."[36]

The president's favor carried with it other burdens as well. Buchanan expected his chief lieutenant to remain on station most of the time, especially when he left the capital for vacations. Despite Cass' seniority, Cobb often chaired cabinet meetings in the president's absence.[37]

At times Buchanan's expectations created real dilemmas for Cobb. In April, Mary Ann gave birth to another son whom the proud parents dubbed Andrew Jackson in honor of both the former president and Mary Ann's deceased younger brother. Eager to visit home, Cobb found himself compelled to remain at his post by a presidential request. Later, he had to abandon plans personally to escort his family back to the capital. Although he had vowed his intention "to go whether [Buchanan] is willing or not," the president was away when Cobb's departure date arrived. The Squire declined to have his premier absent from the capital at the same time as

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[36] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, June 6, 1857; Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, June 11, 1857, Howell Cobb Papers.

[37] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, March 22, 1857; March 29, 1857; Howell Cobb to John A. Cobb, April 17, 1857; John A. Cobb to John B. Lamar, August 18, 1857, ibid.; Stampp, America in 1857, p. 71.

himself. Reluctantly, Cobb dispatched an assistant to bring his family on to Washington.[38]

Although Cobb clearly occupied a preeminent position within the cabinet, many observers at the time and thereafter exaggerated his influence on the president. Cobb scarcely had assumed his duties before the opposition New York Tribune declared that "Mr. Cobb will be content if allowed to have his own way on all matters of importance." Thomas W. Thomas groused to Alexander H. Stephens that "Cobb ... is the President as much as if he were sworn in." Buchanan's Republican enemies sought partisan advantage by encouraging rumors that the president had become a tool of the proslavery men in his cabinet. Subsequent students of the period have charged that a Cobb-led "Directory" of southern cabinet members usurped the president's authority and controlled his policies.[39]

These assessments fundamentally misrepresented the nature of the Buchanan presidency. From its beginning, the

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[38] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, March 22, 1857; March 29, 1857; Howell Cobb to John A. Cobb, April 17, 1857; John A. Cobb to John B. Lamar, August 18, 1857, Howell Cobb Papers; Klein, President James Buchanan, p. 276.

[39] New York Daily Tribune, March 7, 1857; Thomas W. Thomas to Alexander H. Stephens, January 12, 1858, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, pp. 427-428; A. Birdsall to Howell Cobb, February 4, 1857, Howell Cobb Papers; Stampp, America in 1857, p. 68; Nevins, The Emergence of Lincoln, I, 72-79, 239, 240-243, 371-373, 403-404, most fully presents the case that a southern-dominated "Directory" controlled the policies of the Buchanan administration.

president controlled the major policy decisions, and the members of the cabinet soon comprehended that he would not be governed by their wishes. Cass had learned this lesson even before joining the cabinet. Cobb also learned it early on. When he found himself unable to secure Buchanan's permission to remove several treasury department officials and replace them with Cobbites, he enlisted the assistance of Attorney General Black in persuading the president. Black soon responded that he had done his best, but had been unable to move Buchanan. He reported that the president "listened with attention to my general propositions ... but postponed for the present a decision of the case. He is a stubborn old gentleman -- very fond of having his own way." Although Cobb eventually won approval for the removals, approval only came when Buchanan decided to grant it and not before.[40]

Buchanan's determination to maintain control continued throughout his presidency. As Cobb's experience indicated,

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[40] Jeremiah S. Black to Howell Cobb, April 30, 1857; Howell Cobb to Junius Hillyer, May 7, 1857, Howell Cobb Papers; Howell Cobb to James Buchanan, July 29, 1857, Buchanan Papers; Philip Gerald Auchampaugh, James Buchanan and his Cabinet On the Eve of Secession (Lancaster: Lancaster Press Inc., 1926), pp. 125-129; William N. Brigance, Jeremiah Sullivan Black: A Defender of the Constitution and the Ten Commandments (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1934), pp. 73-74; Klein, President James Buchanan, pp. 285; 307-308, Stampp, America in 1857, pp. 68-71, Stenberg, "An Unnoted Factor in the Buchanan-Douglas Feud," pp. 271-284, and David E. Meerse, "Presidential Leadership, Suffrage Qualifications, and Kansas: 1857," Civil War History, XXIV (December, 1978), 293-313, all reject the idea of a "Directory." Their interpretation has contributed much to this portion of the narrative.

the president insisted on reviewing all major patronage decisions. On occasion, he overrode the objections of his cabinet in making appointments. Secretary of War Floyd, whose incompetence earned him more than one withering presidential rebuke, commented that "Mr. Buchanan was different from Genl. Jackson; ... Genl. Jackson could be coaxed from his purpose, but ... Mr. B. could neither be coaxed nor driven." Although the cabinet continued to meet whenever the president left Washington, its members knew that these gatherings amounted to little. "We ...'discuss' very much," Floyd observed, "but I believe we all feel it to be ... the play of Hamlet with the part of Hamlet left out." According to one observer, the cabinet members viewed the president with the awe of students before a respected schoolmaster, and Cobb himself reportedly asserted "we were like a bunch of school boys." But another commentator maintained that "the Cabinet are all afraid of Mr. B.," especially after he "overhauled the Secretary of War."[41]

While the members of the cabinet did not view their chief with awe, they certainly did not fear him. Instead, they respected him and accepted their subordinate status.

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[41] Klein, President James Buchanan, pp. 283-284; Clayton, Reminiscences of J. S. Black, p. 106; John B. Floyd to James Buchanan, July 31, 1857; John Appleton to James Buchanan, August 6, 1857; Buchanan Papers; Philadelphia Weekly Press, August 25, 1881, cited in Brigance, Jeremiah Sullivan Black, p. 72; C. W. C. Dunnington to Robert M. T. Hunter, September 7, 1857; October 6, 1857, in Ambler, Correspondence of Hunter, pp. 224; 235-236.

On most critical issues, however, no need existed for Buchanan to impose his will on the cabinet -- or for cabinet members to impose their will on him. The president scrupulously had avoided including men in his cabinet who held extreme views. True, he had included some Southern Rights Democrats, but none belonged to the Ultra faction. The cabinet included no free-soilers. Having thus only invited men to serve who already shared his views, the Squire generally could rely on a consensus among his lieutenants. For good or ill, Buchanan formulated the policies of his administration, but those policies almost invariably enjoyed the cordial support of the cabinet.[42]

IV

Buchanan scarcely had been elected before he found himself besieged by office seekers hoping to share in the spoils of his victory. Once his cabinet had been announced its members found themselves similarly inundated with requests for patronage. As secretary of the treasury, the more than 400 patronage jobs at Cobb's command stood second in number only to those in Brown's postal department. Only five days after assuming his duties at treasury, Cobb provided Mary Ann with an insight to the task before him. Insisting that "such labor I have never before undertaken," he observed that "the number of applicants for office [is]

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[42] Klein, President James Buchanan, pp. 307-308; Stampp, America in 1857, pp. 68-71.

immense. My mail this morning ... [had] over one hundred letters in it, & a bushel not yet opened." He humorously observed, "man earneth his bread truly by the sweat of his brow -- but in my case it will be by sweating all over." In the weeks that followed, he experienced no let up in his task. He generally worked from nine in the morning until midnight.[43]

Buchanan and the cabinet attempted to cope with the influx of patronage requests by assembling on a daily basis for marathon sessions. These patronage issues proved particularly vexing for the Buchanan administration because it did not follow an administration from an opposition party. Those already holding patronage jobs belonged to the Democratic party, even if they had been appointed by Pierce. Moreover, many Pierce appointees had seen their salaries assessed to fund the Buchanan campaign during the recent contest. Not surprisingly, these men wanted to keep their sinecures. Unfortunately, those who had been most vigorous

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[43] Nichols, The Disruption of American Democracy, p. 81; Stampp, America in 1857, pp. 71-72; Philip Clayton to Jacob Thompson, May 6, 1857, Correspondence of the Secretary of the Treasury, Letters Sent to Cabinet Officers and Department Heads, B Series, Record Group 56.2.1, National Archives, Washington D.C. (Hereafter: Letters to Cabinet Officers); Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, March 8, 1857; March 22, 1857 March 29, 1857; Philip Clayton to Mary Ann Cobb, March 17, 1857, Howell Cobb Papers.

in their support of Buchanan now expected to be rewarded with office.[44]

In a bid to satisfy his own loyalists without excessively angering Pierce appointees, Buchanan attempted to revive the idea of rotation in office espoused by President Jackson. The rotation rule maintained that no one should hold office too long lest they be corrupted by power. Pierce appointees would be permitted to complete the usual four year term of office, but would then be subject to removal. Their places could then be filled by loyal Buchanan men. Unfortunately, this "rotary rule" sounded better in theory than it worked in practice. Pierce men who lost their jobs almost inevitably believed that "they had suffered under a vicious rule ... adopted without common sense ... and never intended to be applied in good faith."[45]

Although Cobb had anticipated the difficulties inherent in his patronage responsibilities, he probably was not prepared for just how difficult this portion of his job would be. Beyond the bushels of written requests and extended cabinet meetings, the treasury secretary also had to sit

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[44] Stampp, America in 1857, pp. 72-75; House Reports, Thirty-Sixth Congress, First Session, Number 648 (Serial 1071), pp. 22-24 (Hereafter: Covode Committee Report).

[45] Stampp, America in 1857, pp. 72-75; Covode Committee Report, pp. 22-24; David E. Meerse, "Origins of the Buchanan-Douglas Feud Reconsidered," Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society, LXVII (February, 1974), 166-167; William L. Marcy Diaries, March 17, 1857; March 29, 1857; April 18, 1857, William L. Marcy Papers, Library of Congress, Washington D.C. (Hereafter: Marcy Diaries).

through countless interviews -- sometimes as many as two hundred per day -- with those who chose to present their requests for employment in person. Cobb found this portion of his duties particularly difficult. He lamented that disappointed office seekers departed "some cursing, some swearing vengeance, and not a few begging money to get home." The tenderhearted Cobb found this latter class of applicant the most "troublesome customers of all. They have cost me more money already than I am either able or willing to [invest] in such characters."[46]

Despite Cobb's earlier prediction that distribution of the patronage would make many enemies and but few lukewarm friends, he nevertheless attempted to employ the patronage for his own future political benefit. In one of his first acts as secretary of the treasury he promoted Philip Clayton to the post of assistant secretary. A former Whig, Clayton had been appointed to a post in the treasury department during the Taylor administration. He had been retained by the Pierce administration as a favor to Cobb who had developed a close friendship with him. While Clayton's promotion provided the secretary with an aid who understood the internal functioning of his department and who could direct its affairs during Cobb's absences, it also served as a reward to the recent Whig additions to the Georgia

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[46] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, March 22, 1857, Howell Cobb Papers; Charleston Evening Telegraph, cited in Macon Georgia Telegraph, March 29, 1857.

Democracy. The wisdom of the appointment notwithstanding, the elevation of a former Whig to such a prominent position drew criticism from disappointed Democrats.[47]

Although Cobbites denied it, Cobb further used the patronage at his disposal to control the succession to his Sixth District seat. Not surprisingly, Junius Hillyer viewed Cobb's appointment to the cabinet as an opportunity to return to Congress. James Jackson -- a kinsman of Cobb and one of his most reliable lieutenants -- also desired the seat. Cobb favored Jackson's claim, but he also wanted to avoid offending his old friend Hillyer. He offered to secure Hillyer's appointment as solicitor of the United States Treasury. After brief consideration of the offer, Hillyer agreed to adopt Cobb's "suggestion" that he not challenge Jackson. Having convinced Hillyer, however, it still took the secretary several months to secure Buchanan's approval for his appointment. Even then, he held back the appointment until the congressional elections had been completed. He did so in part to avoid charges that Hillyer had been bribed, but also to insure Hillyer's good behavior during the campaign.[48]

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[47] Marcy Diaries, March 17, 1857; Philip Clayton to Howell Cobb, April 24, 1857; Leonora Clayton to Mary Ann Cobb, March 13, 1857, Howell Cobb Papers; Jeremiah S. Black to Howell Cobb, April 25, 1857 [typescript], Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collection; Athens Southern Banner, March 26, 1857.

[48] Jeremiah S. Black to Howell Cobb, April 30, 1857; Junius Hillyer to Howell Cobb, May 7, 1857; John B. Cobb to Howell Cobb, August 23, 1857; James Jackson to Howell Cobb, August 27, 1857; Howell Cobb Papers; Howell Cobb to James

Nor did the secretary fail to reward his friends. He secured an appointment through the Justice Department as special United States attorney for cousin Henry R. Jackson, when he returned from his diplomatic service in Austria. John E. Ward, who had seen his hopes for a cabinet seat frustrated by Cobb's appointment to the treasury, received compensation in the form of a state department appointment as minister to China. Cobb secured Hope Hull a post in Washington, but the Athenian declined it because of family concerns.[49]

Yet, as Cobb had understood from the beginning, he could not satisfy everyone. Within weeks of assuming his duties at treasury, the secretary received a plaintive letter from John Lumpkin. No man in his congressional district, he protested, "held any Federal office either high or low," and he had been given no assurances that anyone in his district would be appointed. This silence placed him in an awkward position, he frankly acknowledged, because "there are several men ... that I have given assurances that they will be

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Buchanan, July 29, 1857, Buchanan Papers; Junius Hillyer to Howell Cobb, January 30, 1861, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, pp. 535-536; Athens Southern Banner, May 7, 1857.

[49] Howell Cobb to John A. Cobb, May 16, 1857; William Hope Hull to Howell Cobb, May 30, 1858; Henry R. Jackson to Howell Cobb, August 9, 1858; January 29, 1859; John E. Ward to Howell Cobb, November 2, 1858, Howell Cobb Papers; Tom Henderson Wells, The Slave Ship Wanderer (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1967), p. 38-39; Caleb Carr, The Devil Soldier: The Story of Frederick Townsend Ward (New York: Random House, 1992), pp. 74, 95.

appointed to lucrative clerkships in some of the Executive Depts at Washington City through your influence." While Cobb provided sufficient appointments to satisfy his old friend, he did not always enjoy such success.[50]

Outside of Georgia, Cobb found patronage issues even more difficult. Internal struggles within the Democracy created dangers which he scarcely could hope to avoid. Ill-will continued to fester between Southern Rights and Union Democrats. Numerous state Democratic organizations suffered from fragmentation as local party leaders wrestled for dominance. All involved looked to the administration for some sign of favor. Those denied their expected perquisites -- or denied them in sufficient quantities -- inevitably felt badly used and resentful. Cobb responded to charges that this or that faction had been subjected to proscription with assurances that the administration "regards the Democratic Party as a united organization" and had no desire to revive "those divisions in our Party which have heretofore ... impaired its usefulness." Declaring that "in this feeling I most cordially concurr [sic]," he cited the appointment of

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[50] John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, April 28, 1857; Henry R. Jackson to Howell Cobb, January 29, 1859, Howell Cobb Papers; Joseph E. Brown To Howell Cobb, February 12, 1859, Letter Book, Joseph E. Brown Papers, Felix Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia (Hereafter: Brown Papers).

Southern Rights men to federal posts in Georgia as proof of his sincerity.[51]

Few disgruntled Democrats placed much stock in such declarations. Most -- not without reasonable cause -- attributed Cobb's role in patronage machinations to his presidential ambitions for 1860. "Cobb is laying his plans for the succession," one declared, and "the removal from and appointments to office in his department it is thought will be made with exclusive reference to this object." Most, however, grudgingly understood that Cobb's activities violated no accepted standards of political behavior. Most knew that in his position they would do the same.[52]

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[51] John Slidell to Howell Cobb, April 5, 1857; James L. Orr to Howell Cobb, April 20, 1857, Howell Cobb Papers; Howell Cobb to Pierre Soulé, April 8, 1857, Correspondence of the Secretary of the Treasury, Miscellaneous Letters, Record Group 56.2.1, National Archives, Washington D.C. (Hereafter: Miscellaneous Letters); Francis Mallory to Robert M. T. Hunter, April 21, 1857; Thomas S. Bocock to Robert M. T. Hunter, July 23, 1857; A. D. Banks to Robert M. T. Hunter, July 24, 1857; September 19, 1857; John Strode Barbour, Jr. to Robert M. T. Hunter, July 24, 1857; C. W. C. Dunnington to Robert M. T. Hunter, July 25, 1857; August 7, 1857; September 7, 1857; September 20, 1857; October 6, 1857; William Old, Jr. to Robert M. T. Hunter, August 15, 1857; John W. Fink to Robert M. T. Hunter, September 14, 1857; Erastus T. Montague to Robert M. T. Hunter; William W. Crump to Robert M. T. Hunter, September 15, 1857, in Ambler, Correspondence of Hunter, pp. 205-214, 216-219, 224-231, 235-236; Joel H. Silbey, The Partisan Imperative, The Dynamics of American Politics Before the Civil War (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 126; Stampp, America in 1857, pp. 50-56, 71-82.

[52] C. W. C. Dunnington to Robert M. T. Hunter, July 25, 1857; August 7, 1857; September 7, 1857; September 20, 1857; October 6, 1857; Erastus T. Montague to Robert M. T. Hunter, September 14, 1857, in Ambler, Correspondence of Hunter, pp. 213-214, 216, 224-227, 230-231; A. Birdsall to Howell Cobb,

In no place, however, did patronage distribution prove more perilous than in New York City. There, internecine conflict between several Democratic factions had produced virtual chaos. President Buchanan avoided being sucked into this maelstrom early on by declining to name a New Yorker to his cabinet and by dividing the available patronage between the various factions. The distribution of patronage in the city apparently generated some difference of opinion between the president and his treasury secretary. While Cobb preferred to see the best patronage plums of his department go to a faction headed by Congressman Daniel Sickles, "Old Buck" insisted that the chief prize -- Collector of the Port of New York -- go to an old friend, Augustus Schell. Schell, a man of immense wealth and limited scruples, would soon dupe Secretary of War Floyd into signing off on several fraudulent land deals. Sickles' moral development had been equally retarded.[53]

In the months that followed, Cobb pursued a challenging course of attempting to maintain friendly relations with Schell and his followers while simultaneously preserving his

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February 4, 1857, Howell Cobb Papers.

[53] Daniel E. Sickles to Howell Cobb, July 23, 1857; Thomas Reade Rootes Cobb to Howell Cobb, June 18, 1858, Howell Cobb Papers; Stephen D. Dillaye, Letter to the Hon. Howell Cobb, Secretary of the Treasury (New York, 1858), pp. 1-16; Howell Cobb to James Buchanan, August 4, 1858; August 6, 1858; August 7, 1858. in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, pp. 440-442; Stampp, America in 1857, p.76; Summers, The Plundering Generation, pp. 240, 242-244.

connection with the Sickles men. This balancing act proved impossible to maintain. When Schell dismissed two Sickles loyalists, Cobb responded favorably to Sickles' urgent request that they receive other government employment. The secretary also delayed confirmation of some Schell appointments -- again apparently at Sickles urging.[54]

An explosion could not be avoided. It came when Cobb dismissed General Appraiser Stephen Dillaye, a Pierce appointee and Schell loyalist, for corrupt practices. Although the charges against Dillaye probably possessed merit, the appointment of one of the fired Sickles men in his place indicated political motives as well. Bitterly outraged, Dillaye publicly assailed Cobb as a man of "neither ... honor or ... integrity." Cobb, he claimed, had alienated southern Democrats by his perfidy in the early 1850s and now possessed no alternative to following "the NORTHERN CHANNEL TO THE PRESIDENCY." Charging that the secretary had made himself the willing tool of Sickles, who he denounced as a "pimp" and a "vampire," Dillaye damned Cobb for pursuing a course "of treachery and meanness, without parallel in the annals of corrupt and selfish ambition." Alarmed by Dillaye's public assault, the secretary employed brother Tom as an emissary to Schell and his faction. Tom reported that

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[54] Daniel E. Sickles to Howell Cobb, July 23, 1857; Thomas Reade Rootes Cobb to Howell Cobb, June 18, 1858, Howell Cobb Papers; Dillaye, Letter to the Hon. Howell Cobb, pp. 1-16.

several Schell men voiced doubts about Cobb's intentions, but noted that Schell did not share these doubts.[55]

Despite the pressures generated by difficult patronage decisions, Cobb lost neither his sense of humor nor his penchant for practical jokes. His home county of Clarke had been a Whig bastion throughout his life and had in every election except his race for governor given a majority to his opponents. Throughout both Whig and Democratic administrations, it generally had succeeded in maintaining a Whig as the local postmaster in the county seat at Watkinsville. Cobb now prevailed upon Postmaster Brown to replace the incumbent Whig with a Democrat named Dickens. The outraged local opposition denounced the appointment as "a d---d mean trick" and the Banner taunted them with a headline proclaiming "Great Excitement in Watkinsville -- A Democrat in Office."[56]

Nor did Cobb's fellow cabinet members escape his antics. When Interior Secretary Thompson made merry at Cobb's expense during a cabinet meeting over a letter from a woman for whom Cobb had promised to seek employment at the Interior Department, Cobb quickly turned the tables. While the other

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[55] Thomas Reade Rootes Cobb to Howell Cobb, June 18, 1858, Howell Cobb Papers; Dillaye, Letter to the Hon. Howell Cobb, pp. 1-16; Howell Cobb to James Buchanan, August 4, 1858; August 6, 1858; August 7, 1858. in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, pp. 440-442.

[56] John A. Cobb to Howell Cobb, April 22, 1857, Howell Cobb Papers.

cabinet members joined in Thompson's mirth, Cobb surreptitiously inscribed on the back of the letter "'Request granted -- J. Thompson, Secy of Interior." The unsuspecting Thompson returned the letter to his clerk who promptly followed the directions Cobb had written. When the clerk informed Thompson the next day that "Mrs. Reilly" had accepted the position, the surprised secretary realized that Cobb had reversed the joke. At the next cabinet meeting, Cobb chortled, "I had the laugh on him."[57]

V

Despite the expenditure of time on patronage issues, the Buchanan administration did not ignore the territorial crisis which yet threatened to tear the country apart. On March 6, only two days after Buchanan took the oath of office the Supreme Court handed down its much-anticipated ruling in the case of Dred Scott v. Sanford. Although the Court had been called upon to determine whether residence in a free state or territory freed the slave Dred Scott, the southern dominated tribunal went beyond the basic question of the case in an attempt to resolve the larger issue of slavery in the territories. Declaring that Scott did indeed remain a slave and that blacks possessed no rights which whites were bound to respect, the Court then declared that the now defunct Missouri Compromise line had always been unconstitutional. It ruled that under the Fifth Amendment to the Constitution,

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[57] Howell Cobb to John A. Cobb, May 16, 1857, ibid.

neither Congress nor territorial legislatures, possessed the authority to close a territory to slavery.[58]

The president naively had hoped that this verdict finally would settle the vexing territorial question, but it rapidly became clear that such would not be the case. While southerners welcomed the Court's confirmation of their moral and constitutional position, angry abolitionists and free-soilers vowed resistance. Under the circumstances, it became even more critical that the administration's Kansas policy be both equitable and successful. Few Democrats doubted that the fate of their party would be decided on the Kansas prairies.[59]

Order had been restored in the territory through the efforts of John W. Geary, Pierce's third territorial governor. Geary's evenhanded treatment of free-state men, however, alienated the proslavery minority who still controlled the territorial legislature. Realizing that their chance to make Kansas a slave state was slipping away, the proslavery legislature resolved to force Kansas into the Union as a slave state without awaiting the adoption of enabling legislation by Congress. In February, 1857, it called for a territorial convention to draft a state constitution. After seeing his veto of this legislation

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[58] Stampp, America in 1857, pp. 82-109.

[59] Ibid.

overridden and facing threats of assassination, Geary abandoned Kansas and returned to Washington.[60]

By the time Geary reached the capital in early March, the Buchanan administration had assumed power. He warned the president and his cabinet that Kansas could not be made a slave state by any legitimate means. Efforts to make it a slave state by illegitimate means, he predicted, would only insure that it would not be a Democratic state either. Geary reluctantly tendered his resignation. Although worn down by his thankless efforts on the prairie, he wanted to return and complete the job. The animosity borne him by frustrated southerners, however, made him too much a political liability for the new administration.[61]

Buchanan wanted a prominent Democrat with a national reputation to implement his Kansas policy. The survival of his party and his country might well hinge on this one appointment. He turned to Cobb's rival for the state department, Robert J. Walker. The ambitious Walker appeared an excellent choice. A northerner by birth, he had lived in Mississippi for many years. In addition, he maintained business ties in New York. If a man trusted in both the North and the South peacefully shepherded Kansas into the Union, there should be few to question the equity of the

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[60] Ibid., pp. 152-158.

[61] Ibid.; Howell Cobb to T. Lomax, July 9, 1857, Howell Cobb Papers, Library of Congress, Washington D.C. (Hereafter: Cobb Papers, LC).

process. When Walker manifested a profound reluctance to undertake the mission, the administration mounted a full-scale campaign to win his participation. President Buchanan and a veritable host of Democratic leaders besieged both Walker and his wife until he consented to go.[62]

The governor-designate, however, already held strong views on proper Kansas policy. During the presidential campaign, he had written a pamphlet in which he argued that Kansas must ultimately be a free state because its climate and population decreed it. He believed the status of slavery in the territory less important than the dominance of the Democratic party there. Buchanan had read Walker's pamphlet and praised its contents.[63]

Before accepting the territorial governorship, Walker insisted that the administration commit to support the right of Kansans to determine their own social institutions through the submission of the state constitution to a fair and honest vote of all the territory's bona fide residents. Buchanan promptly committed himself and the members of his cabinet to

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[62] Stampp, America in 1857, pp. 158-159; Shenton, Robert J. Walker, pp. 145-146; Covode Committee Report, pp. 103-107; Howell Cobb to T. Lomax, July 9, 1857, Cobb Papers, LC; Lewis Cass to Robert J. Walker, March 30, 1857; Robert J. Walker to (?), November 10, 1857, Robert J. Walker Papers, Library of Congress, Washington D.C. (Hereafter: Walker Papers).

[63] Stampp, America in 1857, p. 159; Shenton, Robert J. Walker, pp. 141-142; Covode Committee Report, pp. 103-107.

this policy. He personally approved key portions of Walker's inaugural address.[64]

Walker reached Kansas in late May and delivered his inaugural at Lecompton on May 27. He promised all Kansas citizens fair elections and honest vote counts. He encouraged free-state men to participate in the upcoming elections and warned that residents who declined to vote must be assumed to acquiesce in the outcome. Yet he also put the proslavery men on notice. If the upcoming Lecompton constitutional convention refused to submit its work to popular ratification, then he hoped and expected that Congress would reject the constitution. The new governor repeated his conviction that nature already had determined the fate of slavery in Kansas. An "isothermal line," he declared, "regulating climate, labor, and productions" had effectively banned slavery from the territory. No law enacted by man could alter the decree of "the Almighty."[65]

In demanding the submission of the constitution to popular ratification, Walker clearly voiced administration policy. Yet neither Buchanan nor his cabinet had ever intended that the governor should take sides on the issue of slavery or no slavery. The administration's position called

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[64] Covode Committee Report, pp. 105-107; Lewis Cass to Robert J. Walker, March 30, 1857, Robert J. Walker to (?), November 10, 1857, Walker Papers; Stampp, America in 1857, pp. 159-160; Shenton, Robert J. Walker, p.147.

[65] Stampp, America in 1857, p. 165; Covode Committee Report, pp.107-108; Athens Southern Banner, July 2, 1857.

for strict non-intervention. Let the people of Kansas decide upon their own domestic institutions; let the government insure that their will receive a full and fair hearing by guaranteeing honest elections. In light of his familiarity with Walker's pamphlet, the president could scarcely deny knowledge of his governor's views, but he justifiably might have argued that he expected Walker's good judgement to keep him from creating unnecessary issues.[66]

Two days after Walker's inauguration, the proslavery men elected the convention charged with drafting the Kansas constitution. Free-state settlers persisted in their determination not to participate in the process. Despite the proslavery victory, the governor's speech created a firestorm of protest among southern radicals. Ignoring precedents to the contrary, including the recently adopted enabling legislation for the Minnesota Territory, they raged that Walker had exceeded all legitimate bounds of federal authority by declaring the submission of the constitution to the people a requirement for statehood. Moreover, they complained that his "isothermal line" remark revealed an antislavery bias. If Buchanan failed to repudiate Walker,

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[66] Howell Cobb to Alexander H. Stephens, June 18, 1857, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, pp. 402-403; Howell Cobb to T. Lomax, July 9, 1857, Cobb Papers, LC; Covode Committee Report, pp. 112-113.

they warned, the entire South would be forced to oppose his administration.[67]

Ominously, moderate southern Democrats echoed their more extreme brethren. Thomas Thomas bitterly complained to Stephens that "we are ruined and ought to be if we sustain Buchanan." Stephens and Toombs shared Thomas' assessment. Toombs complained that Walker's "'isothermal' and 'thermometrical' arguments ... simply means that Kansas is too cold for 'niggers.'" That decision, he groused, properly rested with the people of Kansas, and Walker had overreached himself in demanding submission of the constitution to popular vote. He hoped the people would treat the governor's demand with the contempt it deserved by ignoring it. From Mississippi, Lucius Q. C. Lamar, a Cobb kinsman and candidate for Congress, voiced doubt that any southern man could support Walker. Southerners did not object to submitting the constitution, he insisted, but they denied the right of a federal official to impose such terms on the people of any state or territory.[68]

The criticisms of Walker's call for submission of the Kansas constitution to popular ratification levelled by

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[67] Stampp, America in 1857, pp. 168-169.

[68] Stampp, America in 1857, pp. 168-169; Thomas W. Thomas to Alexander H. Stephens, June 15, 1857; Howell Cobb to Alexander H. Stephens, June 17, 1857; June 18, 1857; Robert Toombs to W. W. Burwell, July 11, 1857; Lucius Q. C. Lamar to Howell Cobb, July 17, 1857, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, pp. 400-406.

Stephens and Toombs at the very least bore the aroma of hypocrisy. Stephens had recently voted in the House of Representatives to require the submission of the constitution drafted for the Minnesota Territory to popular ratification. He had declared on the floor of the House in January, 1857, that the fate of Kansas as a free state already had been determined by the presence of an overwhelming free-soil population. Toombs had included a provision in his compromise legislation of 1856 seeking a resolution in Kansas which would have required that any constitution drafted for the territory must be ratified by its residents -- ironically, a provision deleted by Stephen A. Douglas while the proposal was before the Committee on Territories.[69]

While the thunder of the Ultras probably caused the administration only limited concern, the rumble of discontent from moderate southern Democrats generated real alarm. No president who so clearly owed his election to southern votes could afford to ignore such dissatisfaction within his political base. The lack of confidence in Buchanan's capacity to defend southern interests manifested by many southerners since his nomination rendered an effective administration response critical. Reports arrived that both

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[69] William H. Stiles to Howell Cobb, August 26, 1857, Howell Cobb Papers; Speech of Alexander H. Stephens, January 6, 1857, cited in Athens Southern Banner, January 29, 1857; Stampp, America in 1857, p. 284; Johannsen, Stephen A. Douglas, pp. 524-525.

Stephens and Toombs planned to desert the president over Walker.[70]

Cobb led administration efforts to assuage the outrage of southern Democrats. Time proved a primary concern because of the awkward proximity of Walker's inaugural to Democratic conventions in several southern states. Neither the current administration nor Cobb's presidential hopes could afford to have those conventions adopt resolutions which repudiated the administration and its Kansas policy.[71]

The secretary immediately mounted a vigorous campaign in defense of the administration. He offered the most positive possible interpretation of Walker's actions. While freely acknowledging that he disapproved of the form of Walker's inaugural, he coyly suggested that Walker "thought at the time he wrote it that Kansas would come in as a slave state." The governor's apparent antislavery bias, he suggested, merely sprang from his desire "to satisfy the other side that they would have a fair chance to be heard."[72]

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[70] Stampp, America in 1857, pp. 168-177; Bruce W. Collins, "The Democrats' Electoral Fortunes During the Lecompton Crisis," Civil War History, XXIV (December, 1978), 314-318; Thomas Reade Rootes Cobb to Howell Cobb, July 15, 1857, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, pp. 404-405; William H. Stiles to Howell Cobb, August 26, 1857, Howell Cobb Papers.

[71] Stampp, America in 1857, pp. 168-177.

[72] Howell Cobb to Alexander H. Stephens, June 17, 1857, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, pp. 401-402; Athens Southern Banner, July 2, 1857; July 23, 1857; July 30, 1857; August 20, 1857; September 3, 1857; September 24, 1857.

Unfortunately, this explanation of Walker's motives rang hollow -- particularly when the governor's widely distributed campaign pamphlet clearly took the opposite position. Consequently, Cobb attempted to create distance between the administration and its governor. Conceding that "the Walker embroglio" had harmed the southern Democracy, he insisted that the most objectionable portions of the inaugural had misrepresented the administration's position. Buchanan and his cabinet, he asserted, had discussed and approved the submission of the constitution to the voters for ratification. While he believed this a sound decision, it in no way included a desire to influence the outcome of the voters' decision on slavery. Still, he persisted in his contention that Walker expected Kansas to enter as a slave state and that anxious southerners had made too much of the governor's inaugural.[73]

The southern people, Cobb maintained, had demanded the full implementation of popular sovereignty as defined in the Kansas-Nebraska Act and the Dred Scott decision. They now had an administration that had done so. "It would be a hard blow," he declared, "to lose the whole benefit of it by having a false issue made before the country." The secretary ventured his own belief that the Lecompton convention should draft a constitution which made no mention of slavery. Once

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[73] Howell Cobb to Alexander H. Stephens, June 18, 1857; July 21, 1857, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, pp. 402-403, 406-407.

the state had been admitted to the Union, then its citizens could decide the fate of slavery at their leisure.[74]

Cobb's efforts to soothe southern anger proved only partially successful. Although he helped divert public outrage away from any direct repudiation of the president, the Democratic state conventions in both Georgia and Mississippi adopted resolutions demanding Walker's removal as a token of Buchanan's reliability. Many, including Cobb, recognized that the denunciation of Walker actually represented an oblique criticism of the president. The editor of the Sandersville Central Georgian grumbled that "they must ... lay hold of this Bull by the horns for the sake of State politics, but let the Buck go free for the sake of National politics."[75]

In truth, Cobb viewed political developments in Georgia during the month following Walker's inaugural as a virtual disaster. Initially, his old friend and ally, John H. Lumpkin, appeared likely to fulfill his longstanding desire to win the party's gubernatorial nomination. Unfortunately for Lumpkin, anti-Cobb forces -- including the Stephens brothers -- had no intention of permitting their foes this

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[74] Howell Cobb to Alexander H. Stephens, June 17, 1857; June 18, 1857, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, pp. 401-403.

[75] Milledgeville Federal Union, June 30, 1857; Athens Southern Banner, July 23, 1857; Horace Montgomery, Cracker Parties (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1950), pp. 191-194; Sandersville Central Georgian, July 8, 1857; Howell Cobb to T. Lomax, July 9, 1857, Cobb Papers, LC.

prize. Although able to command a majority of the delegates on several ballots, Lumpkin could not secure the two-thirds majority required for nomination. When it became clear that the convention had deadlocked, the delegates selected a special committee to break the impasse.[76]

This committee, following the lead of Linton Stephens, recommended the nomination of darkhorse Judge Joseph E. Brown of Cherokee County. Brown, an adherent of the Southern Rights wing of the party, had previously opposed reconciliation with Cobb during the presidential contest of 1852. A man of humble origins, the humorless Brown was a devout Baptist and a hardheaded businessman. He quickly proved himself a practical politician who seldom let political principles stand between himself and success. The convention accepted the committee's suggestion, and Brown became the unexpected nominee of the Georgia Democracy. The only bright spot in Georgia for Cobb derived from the

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[76] Milledgeville Federal Union, June 30, 1857; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, June 20, 1857; June 22, 1857; June 27, 1857; June 29, 1857; John A. Cobb to John B. Lamar, July 5, 1857; Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, July 10, 1857; John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, July 14, 1857; George Houston to Howell Cobb, August 23, 1857; William H. Stiles to Howell Cobb, August 26, 1857; Leroy Pattillo to Howell Cobb, September 10, 1857, Howell Cobb Papers; Montgomery, Cracker Parties, pp. 191-194; Thomas E. Schott, Alexander H. Stephens of Georgia, A Biography (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), pp. 232-233.

nomination of James Jackson for Cobb's old congressional seat by a convention of Sixth District Democrats.[77]

Dismayed and disheartened by these developments, Cobb lamented that "the course of the party in Ga. is to me inexplicable. They have lost all their good sense & seem bent on self destruction." While confessing himself "very much put out" with Brown's nomination, he focused his ire on the resolution denouncing Walker. Not only had the delegates made a needless "issue with the administration," they had also "gotten up a terrible excitement in Ga, Ala, and Miss." From all indications, he feared "that we are to have the fight of 1850 over again." Still, he voiced a general confidence in the administration's ultimate success. "The little breeze that has sprung up in the South has not yet affected our nerves," he declared, "I think we [will] stand stronger squalls without wincing."[78]

Not deterred by these setbacks, Cobb continued his campaign in defense of both Walker and the administration.

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[77] Milledgeville Federal Union, June 30, 1857; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, June 20, 1857; June 22, 1857; June 27, 1857; June 29, 1857; Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, July 10, 1857; John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, July 14, 1857; George Houston to Howell Cobb, August 23, 1857; William H. Stiles to Howell Cobb, August 26, 1857; Leroy Pattillo to Howell Cobb, September 10, 1857, Howell Cobb Papers; Montgomery, Cracker Parties, pp. 191-194; Schott, Alexander H. Stephens, pp. 232-233.

[78] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, June 20, 1857; June 22, 1857; June 27, 1857; June 29, 1857; John A. Cobb to John B. Lamar, July 5, 1857; Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, July 10, 1857, Howell Cobb Papers.

In letter after letter, he labored to convince southern Democrats that the resolutions condemning Walker had been a mistake which should be set aside. On every point in Kansas, he argued, the president had given the South all that it reasonably could demand. He had dismissed Governor Geary, his personal and political friend, because the South had opposed him. He had selected as Geary's replacement Governor Walker, a "southern man" who only recently had been backed by the Ultras for the "first place in his cabinet." He had filled other posts in Kansas with either southerners or "such northern democrats as were national in their principles and entirely acceptable to our friends." He had instructed Walker to enforce the laws of the territory and insure that the principle of popular sovereignty received a fair test. He had recognized the legitimacy of the proposed Lecompton convention, even though it had been called prior to the enactment of enabling legislation by Congress. What more, he demanded, could be asked of the administration?[79]

To be sure, Cobb conceded, Walker's statements of policy had been harsher than necessary and his "isothermal" remarks had been wholly superfluous. Yet did these errors in judgement represent unforgivable mistakes? Walker, he

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[79] Howell Cobb to T. Lomax, July 9, 1857, Cobb Papers, LC; Howell Cobb to Alexander H. Stephens, July 21, 1857; July 23, 1857; September 3, 1857; September 12, 1857; September 19, 1857, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, pp. 406-408, 421-424; Howell Cobb to L. Q. C. Lamar, July 27, 1857, cited in Stampp, America in 1857, p. 176; Athens Southern Banner, September 3, 1857.

maintained, had violated no fundamental principle of justice or the Democratic party. His demand that the people ratify the work of the Lecompton convention comported fully with the principles of the Kansas-Nebraska Act. Moreover, his "isothermal" comments would not change a single vote for or against slavery. Far too many southern Democrats, Cobb complained, had rushed to condemn Walker without knowing the true situation in Kansas.[80]

In truth, conditions in Kansas appeared to be improving. Kansas Democrats -- from both the North and South -- met as the "National Democracy of Kansas" in early July. This convention unanimously adopted resolutions expressing support for Walker's efforts to maintain law and order in Kansas. The effect of these resolutions was enhanced by reports supportive of Walker made by southern observers returning from the territory. These men suggested that rather than alienating the proslavery men in Kansas, he had won their support. Walker, they maintained, "has made no public opinion in Kansas, but only conformed to what was public opinion among our friends when he got there." Cobb happily

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[80] Howell Cobb to T. Lomax, July 9, 1857, Cobb Papers, LC; Howell Cobb to Alexander H. Stephens, July 21, 1857; July 23, 1857; September 3, 1857; September 12, 1857; September 19, 1857, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, pp. 406-408, 421-424; Howell Cobb to L. Q. C. Lamar, July 27, 1857, cited in Stampp, America in 1857, p. 176.

relayed these reports to the South as quickly as they arrived.[81]

With good reason, Cobb warned that ill-considered actions of the Democratic state conventions in Georgia and Mississippi threatened a renewal of the strife that had shattered the Democracy a few years before. Pleading with southerners to remember that Buchanan possessed an obligation to the whole country, he insisted that differences over Kansas required no disruption of the Democracy -- "the only party organization which is ... able to maintain the ... rights of every section of the country."[82]

Throughout these difficult months, Cobb did not relent in his support for popular ratification of the constitution. He consistently argued that Congress had a "right and duty" to know that the constitution represented the will of the people of Kansas. A popular vote provided the best means of demonstrating the majority will. He could discern no legitimate basis for opposing popular ratification. Should the Lecompton convention refuse to submit its work to the

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[81] Stampp, America in 1857, pp. 171, 173-175, 177-179; Howell Cobb to Alexander H. Stephens, July 21, 1857, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, pp. 406-407; Howell Cobb to T. Lomax, July 9, 1857, Cobb Papers, LC; Athens Southern Banner, July 30, 1857.

[82] Howell Cobb to T. Lomax, July 9, 1857, Cobb Papers, LC; Howell Cobb to Alexander H. Stephens, July 21, 1857; July 23, 1857; September 3, 1857; September 12, 1857; September 19, 1857, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, pp. 406-408, 421-424; Howell Cobb to L. Q. C. Lamar, July 27, 1857, cited in Stampp, America in 1857, p. 176.

voters, then the North would demand "again and again ... why refuse to submit to qualified voters, if you believe that it was approved by them, and if you do not so believe, then do you desire to force upon an unwilling people a constitution they condemn?" Cobb's views echoed those of Buchanan, who assured Walker that "on the question of submitting the constitution to the bona fide resident settlers of Kansas, I am willing to stand or fall."[83]

Nor did the secretary relent in his public support for Governor Walker, despite a growing suspicion by both members of the cabinet and Cobbites that Walker meant to use his position in Kansas as a springboard to higher office. Walker scarcely had enunciated his inaugural before Tom Cobb complained that the governor had made himself a "foe" of the administration by "playing for the succession." Cobb echoed this sentiment little more than a week later when he groused that "there is no doubt of the fact that Walker is playing a bold game for the succession."[84]

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[83] Howell Cobb to T. Lomax, July 9, 1857, Cobb Papers, LC; Howell Cobb to Alexander H. Stephens, July 21, 1857; July 23, 1857; September 3, 1857; September 12, 1857; September 19, 1857, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, pp. 406-408, 421-424; Howell Cobb to L. Q. C. Lamar, July 27, 1857, cited in Stampp, America in 1857, p. 176; James Buchanan to Robert J. Walker, July 12, 1857, in Covode Committee Report, pp. 112-113.

[84] Thomas Reade Rootes Cobb to Howell Cobb, July 15, 1857; Howell Cobb to Alexander H. Stephens, July 23, 1857, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, pp. 404-405, 407-408.

Within a few days, suspicion of Walker manifested itself in the cabinet. Walker, who had come into conflict with free-soil settlers in Lawrence, requested that additional military force be forwarded to Kansas. With Buchanan away on vacation, Secretary Cass summoned the meeting. While Cobb merely suggested that Walker be required "to explain what use he intended to make of the required troops," other cabinet members accused the governor of ulterior motives. Cass spoke for several cabinet members when he bluntly warned that "Walker is endeavoring to make a record for the future."[85]

The anxious secretary watched the political developments at home as closely as he did those in Kansas. The news he received did not inspire optimism. Although he saw some signs of an improving situation, negative assessments far exceeded the positive. Brother Tom observed ongoing intense hostility to Walker and reported that Toombs had vowed to block the governor's confirmation in the Senate. Stephens publicly voiced the opinion that the Buchanan administration could not sustain Walker and maintain its southern support. Even James Jackson, Cobb's handpicked Sixth District successor, confessed the necessity of damning Walker from the stump if he hoped to win. One Georgia editor privately

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[85] Lewis Cass to James Buchanan, July 31, 1857; John B. Floyd to James Buchanan, July 31, 1857; Jeremiah Black to James Buchanan, August 1, 1857; John Appleton to James Buchanan, August 6, 1857, Buchanan Papers; Stampp, America in 1857, 177-179; Nevins, The Emergence of Lincoln, I, 171-173.

asserted that "the Democracy of Georgia differ with the administration on the Walker business, but in all else we agree." This awkward compromise was the best Cobb could get. Not without reason did brother Tom predict, "there is trouble ahead."[86]

Despite Cobb's inability to win an endorsement by moderate southern Democrats of administration policy, he possessed no viable alternative to continued cooperation with men such as Alexander Stephens and Robert Toombs. He kept a close eye on the upcoming state elections in Georgia. He persistently flailed against the anti-Walker plank of the Democratic platform and protested the constant castigation of Governor Robert Walker by gubernatorial nominee Joseph E. Brown. Dismissing Brown as a political neophyte, Cobb pleaded with Stephens and Toombs to take the candidate under their supervision. Otherwise, the secretary warned, "he may blunder."[87]

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[86] Richard Arnold to Howell Cobb, July 13, 1857; W. R. De Graffenried to Howell Cobb, July 14, 1857; Thomas Reade Rootes Cobb to Howell Cobb, July 15, 1857; T. Lomax to Howell Cobb, July 21, 1857; James Jackson to Howell Cobb, August 27, 1857; William H. Stiles to Howell Cobb, August 26, 1857; Leroy Pattillo to Howell Cobb, September 10, 1857, Howell Cobb Papers; Robert Toombs to W. W. Burwell, July 11, 1857; Alexander H. Stephens to the Voters of the Eighth Congressional District of Georgia, August 14, 1857, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, pp. 403-404, 405-406, 409-420; Stampp, America in 1857, 169-171.

[87] Howell Cobb to Alexander H. Stephens, July 23, 1857; September 3, 1857; September 12, 1857, October 9, 1857, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, pp. 407-408, 421-425.

The worried secretary also urged Stephens to arrange a meeting in Athens during commencement at the University to "relieve the embarrassments which the unfortunate resolution of our convention has thrown around the canvass." Although such a meeting did occur, what transpired there remains unclear. Within a brief time, however, the opposition press charged that a "secret midnight council" had muzzled the Democratic gubernatorial candidate -- a charge which Brown vigorously rebutted.[88]

In many ways, Cobb's concern proved unnecessary. Brown, Stephens, and James Jackson all won their elections and the Democrats retained control of both the state legislature and Georgia's congressional delegation. Toombs, with Cobb's help, beat back a Southern Rights challenge mounted by Charles McDonald and won reelection to the Senate. Generally pleased with these results, Cobb found his pleasure tempered by a Democratic meeting held shortly after the election. Chaired by Herschel Johnson, with both Stephens and Toombs serving on the resolutions committee, the meeting adopted a

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[88] Howell Cobb to Alexander H. Stephens, July 23, 1857; September 3, 1857; September 12, 1857, October 9, 1857, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, pp. 407-408, 421-425; Montgomery, Cracker Parties, pp. 195-198; Augusta Chronicle & Sentinel, cited in Sandersville Central Georgian, September 24, 1857; Athens Southern Watchman, September 3, 1857.

platform which praised the administration but renewed the demand that Walker be dismissed.[89]

The secretary conveyed his congratulations to Brown in a letter seeking state employment for two friends. Hoping to draw Brown into the administration's orbit, he lectured the new governor on the foolhardiness of the first resolution condemning Walker. It had split the party unnecessarily, he asserted, and reduced the size of Brown's majority. It could have cost him the election if the Know Nothings had made effective use of it. He urged Brown not to "mistake the wild ultraism of a few for the public sentiment of the mass." Georgians wanted Kansas as a slave state, he acknowledged, but they would not abandon the great and abiding principles of popular sovereignty and majority rule for a temporary advantage. They would not force a constitution on an unwilling population.[90]

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[89] Howell Cobb to Alexander H. Stephens, October 9, 1857; October 19, 1857; Robert Toombs to W. W. Burwell, November 20, 1857, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, pp. 424-427; Thomas Reade Rootes Cobb to Howell Cobb, October 1, 1857; October 8, 1857; James Smyth to Howell Cobb, October 7, 1857; October 8, 1857, Howell Cobb Papers; Montgomery, Cracker Parties, pp. 195-202; Milledgeville Federal Union, November 17, 1857.

[90] Howell Cobb to Joseph E. Brown, October 8, 1857, Joseph E. and Elizabeth G. Brown Papers, Felix Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia; Thomas Reade Rootes Cobb to Howell Cobb, October 1, 1857, Howell Cobb Papers.

Chapter Seventeen

"The Most Doubtful Battle Ever Fought for the Union"

As the scheduled September meeting of the Lecompton convention approached, Cobb maintained a firm support for popular ratification of its work as the safest and best way of determining the will of the people. He predicted that failure of the delegates to take this critical step would spark "the most dangerous crisis we have yet had on the Kansas question." He confided to Stephens that the administration felt so certain of the convention's compliance with its wishes that the president and cabinet had not even considered a strategy based on the convention's refusal to submit it.[1]

On one point, however, he no longer possessed any doubts. In a free and fair election, the voters of Kansas would reject a proslavery constitution. That Kansas would enter the Union a free state he now felt certain. Both honest principle and simple justice, he contended, required the South to accept this verdict. "I tell you," he forcefully expounded to Stephens, "that an effort to get a

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[1] House Reports, Thirty-Sixth Congress, First Session, Number 648 (Serial 1071), pp. 160-161, 164-165, 167, 318-319 (Hereafter: Covode Committee Report); Howell Cobb to Alexander H. Stephens, September 12, 1857; September 19, 1857; October 9, 1857, in Ulrich Bonnell Phillips, ed., The Correspondence of Robert Toombs, Alexander H. Stephens, and Howell Cobb (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1913), pp. 422-425.

free state into the Union over the will of a majority of its citizens would not be submitted to at the South."[2]

Despite his strong words, Cobb still dreaded the dangerous situation in Kansas. Just as he knew that southerners would never permit the North to force a free state into the Union, he also knew that northerners would never permit the South to force in a slave state. Yet he worried that the diatribes of southern extremists would "have the effect of making many of our friends in Kansas believe that the whole South will sustain them in sending a proslavery constitution to Congress, though they know a majority of the qualified voters of the territory ... disapprove of it." He prayed that the efforts of southern radicals would not have this result, because he believed "it useless to expect the admission of Kansas under such circumstances." Nothing would result from such a disaster, he predicted, except the creation of another Southern Rights party and another "fearful crisis."[3]

These concerns notwithstanding, initial signs from Kansas appeared promising. Many of the Lecompton convention delegates had won election on platforms which promised to

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[2] Howell Cobb to Alexander H. Stephens, September 12, 1857; September 19, 1857; October 9, 1857, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, pp. 422-425.

[3] Howell Cobb to James L. Orr, September 29, 1857, Orr-Patterson Papers, Southern Historical Collection, Library of the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

submit the constitution to the voters. Unfortunately, delegate enthusiasm for submission began to wane in late summer when they learned that free-state men meant to participate in the elections for the new territorial legislature. Uncomfortably aware that this participation signalled their likely participation in a ratification vote, the proslavery men adopted a wait-and-see attitude.[4]

At their September meeting, the Lecompton delegates elected John Calhoun as convention president. Calhoun, a proslavery man who had received his appointment as the territorial surveyor-general at the behest of Stephen Douglas, voiced support for submitting the constitution to the voters in his remarks to the convention. After establishing committees to begin writing the constitution, the convention adjourned until October 19 to await the outcome of the territorial elections. Privately, Calhoun warned Douglas that a free-state victory would significantly reduce chances for submission of the constitution.[5]

When the Lecompton Convention reassembled the next month, it appeared that all hopes for submission of the convention's work had evaporated. Like so many previous elections in Kansas, the election of the new territorial

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[4] Kenneth M. Stampp, America in 1857, A Nation on the Brink (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 266-267; Covode Committee Report, pp. 108, 154-155.

[5] Stampp, America in 1857, pp. 266-267; Covode Committee Report, pp. 108, 110-111.

legislature had been marred by flagrant frauds -- frauds which gave the proslavery men a majority of seats. After investigating, Governor Walker disallowed a large portion of the proslavery votes. His decision settled control of the legislature on the free-state men. It also outraged the proslavery delegates at Lecompton who now manifested a determination to retaliate by drafting a proslavery document and refusing to submit it for popular ratification.[6]

Fearing the consequences of a proslavery constitution submitted to Congress without popular ratification, secretaries Cobb and Thompson sought to influence the outcome of events in Kansas. In October, Thompson dispatched H. L. Martin, an interior department clerk, to Lecompton. Although ostensibly there to investigate the activities of the local land office, he received private instructions from both Thompson and Cobb to convince the delegates to submit their work to popular vote. He also carried a "strong and forcible" letter from Cobb to delegate Hugh M. Moore arguing the same point. Rather than receiving plaudits from the North for their efforts, both Cobb and Thompson soon faced unfounded rumors that they had used Martin to transmit a "programme" designed to deny the voters of Kansas a chance to reject the work of the Lecompton Convention.[7]

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[6] Stampp, America in 1857, pp. 257-275; Covode Committee Report, pp. 161-163.

[7] Covode Committee Report, pp. 157-160, 314-319.

Martin labored diligently to fulfill his instructions, but the animosity of the delegates towards Walker doomed his efforts to failure. By early November the delegates had drafted a constitution making Kansas a slave state. The only issue that remained involved the critical issue of submission. On November 6, extremists defeated by a single vote a motion to submit the constitution to the voters. Desperately, Martin and the moderate delegates urged a plan of partial submission which would permit the residents of Kansas to vote on the single issue of the constitution with or without slavery. The idea of a partial submission had been afoot in Kansas for many months, but as drafted by the convention it represented a sham. Even if the residents voted for the constitution without slavery, those slaves already in the territory would remain slaves. Thus Kansas would enter the Union a slave state regardless of how its citizens voted.[8]

Throughout the North, both Republicans and Democrats immediately registered their opposition to the Lecompton Constitution. Northern Democrats, who had recently scored impressive victories over the Republicans in local elections, greeted the news from Lecompton with shock and dismay. They quickly concluded that their political future required a vigorous rejection by both the president and Congress of the

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[8] Covode Committee Report, pp. 157-176; Stampp, America in 1857, pp. 272-273.

Lecompton constitution. At the very least, they warned, the document must be sent back to the territory with a requirement for popular ratification.[9]

In light of their previous insistence on popular ratification, Buchanan and his cabinet seemed likely to respond favorably to the expectations of their northern allies. It now lay within Buchanan's grasp to fulfill one of his administration's primary goals. With a single stoke, he could smite the Republicans a decisive blow, while greatly enhancing the standing of northern Democrats with the voters in their section. Yet, when confronted with the decision for partial submission the administration abandoned its previous principled position and forwarded the document to Congress with a favorable recommendation for its acceptance.[10]

Although surviving documents are unclear regarding the specifics of this reversal, the administration's broader motives are discernible. The fulfillment of Buchanan's dream of smashing the Republicans and building up the northern Democracy by rejecting Lecompton could only be achieved at the risk of further alienating his southern base. While some southern leaders insisted that Kansas did not represent a vital southern interest, most southerners did not share this view. The issue of submission, they argued, held no

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[9] Stampp, America in 1857, pp. 277-279; Covode Committee Report, pp. 270-272, 282-284.

[10] Stampp, America in 1857, pp. 281-283; Covode Committee Report, pp. 6, 106, 112-113, 157-167, 314-319.

relevance because the Lecompton convention had been a legally constituted body authorized by the legal legislature of Kansas. That legislature had imposed no requirement for submission when it called the convention. Thus the Lecompton delegates had been under no legal obligation to submit their work to the people for ratification.[11]

Determined to have Kansas a slave state by fair means or foul, much of the South stood ready to drive the northern Democracy off a precipice to get it. The price of southern affiliation with national parties had always been southern control of the slavery issue. That price had not changed. The Buchanan administration felt a very real fear -- if not outright panic -- that a denial of statehood for Kansas because of slavery would precipitate secession in "at least one" southern state. Even before the Lecompton Convention had completed its work, brother Tom raised the alarm. "If Kansas is rejected with a proslavery constitution because of the failure to refer for ratification," he warned, "the most doubtful battle ever fought for the Union will be ahead of us. I tremble for the result."[12]

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[11] Stampp, America in 1857, pp. 279-281, 286.

[12] Ibid.; Thomas R. R. Cobb to Howell Cobb, October 8, 1857; Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, March 12, 1858, Howell Cobb Papers, Felix Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia (Hereafter: Howell Cobb Papers; Henry Stuart Foote, Casket of Reminiscences (Washington D.C.: Chronicle Publishing Company, 1874), pp. 112-122.

Perhaps just as important, Buchanan believed that he could achieve his goal without alienating the South. Convinced that a quick resolution of the Kansas dispute would rob the Republicans of their most effective issue, he had no desire to see the Kansas question prolonged. Any decision by himself or Congress to send the Lecompton Constitution back to the territory for a popular vote -- a vote certain to result in its rejection -- would produce an undesirable continuation of the sectional struggle. Buchanan realized that his decision probably would produce "a hell of a storm," but -- just as the Kansas-Nebraska furor of 1854 had faded before the elections of 1856 -- he expected this storm to dissipate before 1860.[13]

Under these circumstances, leading members of the administration convinced themselves that simply allowing the voters to accept the constitution with or without slavery provided an adequate expression of the popular will in Kansas. After all, the president and his men reasoned, slavery embodied the only issue seriously in dispute. As Cobb later asserted, "I was looking with great earnestness to see what would be the action of that convention, and when the news was received it was considered that, as the only question at issue -- the slavery question -- had been

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[13] Stampp, America in 1857, pp. 282-285; Roy F. Nichols, The Disruption of American Democracy (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1948), pp. 156-158; New York Tribune, February 3, 1858; February 4, 1858; February 9, 1858; February 12, 1858.

submitted, the material point had been attained; and it was regarded as virtually carrying out the policy of submission."[14]

Nevertheless, no set of politicians had made a more egregious blunder since Douglas first began the deal-making that culminated in the Kansas-Nebraska Act. The administration's stance reinvigorated a Republican party whose morale had slipped in the face of Democratic triumphs. Republicans immediately renewed past charges that a weak and irresolute Buchanan operated under the control of a proslavery Directory. To be sure, the administration's southern orientation contributed to its blind spot regarding the depth of northern feeling on this subject, but not in the way that Republicans charged. Buchanan fully shared in the distaste for the antislavery crusade felt by his southern dominated cabinet. Rather than being duped into supporting the Lecompton Constitution, neither he nor his chief advisors perceived any fatal flaw in the policy of partial submission adopted by the moderates in the Lecompton Convention. They believed that appeals to party loyalty -- sweetened if necessary with patronage rewards -- would suffice to carry the constitution through the Democratically controlled Congress.[15]

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[14] Covode Committee Report, pp. 318-319.

[15] Stampp, America in 1857, p. 285; Foote, Casket of Reminiscences, pp. 118-119.

Ominously, it quickly became apparent that the president had overestimated the strength of party loyalty. The extent to which the administration had miscalculated became clear when rumors began to circulate that Stephen Douglas meant to lead the opposition in Congress to the Lecompton Constitution. Honestly outraged by the gross violation of popular sovereignty perpetrated by proslavery men in Kansas, Douglas' decision to break ranks with the administration gained added impetus from the realization that he faced a tough campaign for reelection to the Senate in 1858. He knew all too well that failure in 1858 would ruin his presidential ambitions for 1860. Alerted to Douglas' likely opposition, Buchanan and his loyalists joined in an attempt to divert Douglas from his intended course. These efforts culminated in two ugly confrontations between the president and the senator at the White House. The senator from Illinois would sacrifice neither his principles nor his future prospects for the sake of a unified Democracy.[16]

Buchanan, hoping to see "the vexed question" settled, formally endorsed Lecompton in his message to Congress on December 8. In calling for its prompt acceptance by Congress, he voiced the southern position. The Kansas-Nebraska Act, he noted, had left "'the people of the Territory perfectly free ... to form and regulate their

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[16] Stampp, America in 1857, pp. 289-293, 297-298; Robert W. Johannsen, Stephen A. Douglas (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), pp. 581-589.

domestic institutions in their own way.'" Acting under the authority of that law, the Lecompton convention had been duly called by the legal territorial legislature. The territorial legislature, he added, had established reasonable voting qualifications and the administration had dispatched Governor Walker with full authority to insure fair elections. The failure of free-state men to participate in the election of delegates had not invalidated the election results. Although Buchanan deviated from a strictly southern perspective when he insisted that the Kansas-Nebraska Act obligated the convention to submit the slavery issue to popular vote, he fully embraced their view that Congress lacked the authority to compel the submission of any other portion of its work to the voters.[17]

The next day, Douglas rose in the Senate to declare his break with the administration. In the absence of enabling legislation by Congress or popular ratification, he denounced the Lecompton Constitution as nothing more than a petition drafted by a group of citizens. As such it exerted no controlling influence on the deliberations of the national legislature. During the months that followed, the anti-Lecompton elements in Congress and the pro-Lecompton forces in the administration, the Congress, and the public waged a bitter political war over Kansas. Although Douglas had no

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[17] Washington Union, cited in Milledgeville Federal Union, December 1, 1857; February 9, 1858.

chance of blocking the constitution in the overwhelmingly Democratic Senate, his allies in the House -- many northern Democrats and all the Republicans -- controlled sufficient votes to force a deadlock. It was in the House that the real battle over Lecompton would be fought.[18]

Events in both Kansas and Washington further undermined the administration's position. Governor Walker, unwilling to participate further in the Lecompton "swindle" and doubtful of his Senate confirmation, resigned on December 15 under protest that the president had violated his previous pledges to sustain popular sovereignty whatever the price. Six days later, the ratification vote on the Lecompton Constitution took place. Although the administration had encouraged the approval of the constitution "without slavery," the territory's proslavery men ratified it "with slavery" by a recorded vote of 6,226 to 569. Free-state men refused to participate in this vote.[19]

On January 4, 1858, free-state men held their own referendum on the constitution. Their ballots permitted votes for the constitution with and without slavery, but also gave voters a chance to reject the entire constitution. In

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[18] Baltimore Sun, December 17, 1857, cited in Milledgeville Federal Union, December 29, 1857; Johannsen, Stephen A. Douglas, 589-593; Stampp, America in 1857, pp. 303-327.

[19] Allan Nevins, The Emergence of Lincoln: Douglas, Buchanan, and Party Chaos, 1857-1859, two vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1950) I, 264-270; Stampp, America in 1857, pp. 316-321; New York Tribune, December 2, 1857.

an election boycotted by proslavery men, the Lecompton Constitution was rejected by a recorded vote of 10,226 "against the constitution," 138 for the constitution "without slavery," and 24 for the constitution "with slavery." With this vote, the prospects of passing the Lecompton Constitution through the House of Representatives virtually evaporated as some twenty-five northern anti-Lecompton Democrats organized to resist their president. Their votes, combined with those of Republican and Know Nothing representatives, would deny the administration a majority.[20]

Despite the evidence of strong opposition among northern Democrats, the administration entered the contest over Lecompton confident of a quick victory. In late January, anti-Lecompton Democrats presented the president with a powerful appeal that he withdraw his support from the Lecompton constitution. Besides denouncing its fraudulent origins, they warned that it could not pass the House. Buchanan rebuffed them with an assertion that the Lecompton Constitution embodied the "legal" will of the people of Kansas and he could not ignore it. Rather than refusing it his support, he vowed to force Lecompton through the Congress

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[20] Nevins, The Emergence of Lincoln, I, 264-270; Stampp, America in 1857, pp. 316-321.

within thirty days and thus eliminate Kansas as an issue before the fall elections.[21]

Cobb shared these sentiments. In a public letter, he avowed the administration's determination to hold the legal high ground. Its Lecompton policy, he insisted, adhered to the principles expressed in the Kansas-Nebraska Act and the Cincinnati platform of the Democratic party. Damning the "abolitionists of Kansas" for endeavoring "to justify their rebellion by a false appeal to a great principle," he repeated the administration's view that the failure of the free-state men to participate in the election of delegates had not negated the election results. In a clear jab at Douglas, he argued that the free-soil position "certainly derives no additional strength from the fact that it has found new advocates and defenders." The true issue before the country, he concluded, "is between peace and quiet, on the one hand, and excitement, turmoil, and bloodshed, on the other."[22]

Incredibly, the secretary privately denied the existence of any "great excitement in the political world." The administration, he maintained, "will stand perfectly firm in its policy ... in reference to Kansas ... and we shall in the

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[21] Nichols, The Disruption of American Democracy, pp. 156-158; New York Tribune, February 3, 1858; February 4, 1858; February 9, 1858; February 12, 1858.

[22] Howell Cobb to Messrs. Plitt, Witte, and others, December 26, 1857, in Milledgeville Federal Union, January 12, 1858.

end be triumphantly sustained. I have no fears upon [that] point." While he did concede the likelihood of a "hard fight," he voiced only confidence that "Kansas will be admitted with the Lecompton Constitution" -- regardless of Douglas' opposition. Yet, he could not refrain from an expression of bitterness over the relatively muted southern reaction to the senator's course. Douglas, he groused, had received less criticism for his open betrayal of southern interests than Buchanan had received the previous summer upon the mere suspicion that he had played the South false.[23]

With each passing week, however, the animosity between the two sides became more pronounced. Old lines of loyalty began to give way. John Forney, who had grown increasingly resentful over his belief that Buchanan had failed to reward him adequately after the election, had launched a newspaper venture in Philadelphia. He now openly threw his editorial support to Douglas. An effort by Attorney General Black to win back Forney's loyalty with a substantial federal printing contract only served to incite accusations that the administration would stop at no corrupt practice to force a foul constitution on the unwilling citizens of Kansas.[24]

More ominously, the bonds that had held both the national Democracy and the Union together in previous crises

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[23] Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, January 24, 1858, Howell Cobb Papers.

[24] Covode Committee Report, pp. 246-250, 291-304, 319-322; Stampp, America in 1857, pp. 311-312.

now began to fray visibly. Northern Democrats voiced outrage that their supposed southern allies should manifest such insensitivity to their needs. One frustrated northerner exploded that "this seals the Doom of the dimocratic [sic] party North, there is no Democratic party South. There is no party South but Despotism and opression [sic]." The "whole Power of the Government," he complained, "is used to promote Slavery and ... no office holder ... is allowed to speak against the peculiar institution of the South. How long is this State of things to last?"[25]

Southerners, frustrated by the failure of northern Democrats to bow to the administration's Lecompton policy once more raised the specter of disunion. Such threats gained added credence when Governor Brown warned that congressional rejection of the Lecompton Constitution because of its slavery provision would require him -- under the terms of the Georgia Platform -- to summon a state convention to plan Georgia's response to yet another act of antislavery aggression. Ultras in the South once more raised the specter of secession.[26]

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[25] Stampp, America in 1857, pp. 313-316; Thomas Whipple to James F. Simmons, May 8, 1858, James F. Simmons Papers, Library of Congress, Washington D.C. (Hereafter: Simmons Papers); New York Tribune, November 30, 1857; December 2, 1857; December 3, 1857.

[26] Stampp, America in 1857, pp. 313-316; Joseph E. Brown to Alexander H. Stephens, February 9, 1858; March 26, 1858, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, pp. 431-433; Foote, Casket of Reminiscences, pp. 114-117.

Throughout the long Lecompton struggle, Buchanan relied heavily on Cobb's political skills. As the contest reached its climax, he ordered the secretary to attend neither cabinet meetings nor the treasury department when the House was in session. Instead, he wanted Cobb working the floor to build support for the administration. Cobb undertook this assignment with all his energy, even though it meant long nights at his desk in the treasury department catching up on official business missed during the day.[27]

Although the secretary remained generally optimistic about eventual success, by March he had begun to acknowledge the possibility of defeat. Kansas, he observed on March 10, "is still the universal talk, but every body seems to be anxious to have an end of it. I have no doubt that the bill will pass." But only two days later, he confessed to John Lamar his feeling that "the future looks a little gloomy at best about the slavery question [and] the Union." While still willing to predict "that Kansas will be admitted," he nevertheless worried that "the struggle will be a hard one & close." What would the South do if his predictions proved wrong? That question, he confessed, "involves a great many thoughts upon which I am not prepared to hazard an opinion."[28]

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[27] Nichols, The Disruption of American Democracy, p. 174.

[28] Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, March 10, 1858; March 12, 1858, Howell Cobb Papers.

As the battle played itself out in Congress, the Buchanan forces employed all available weapons. Douglas loyalists lost federal jobs and saw them filled by anti-Douglas men willing to swear fealty to the administration. Members of the cabinet -- especially Cobb, Thompson, and Postmaster Brown -- actively lobbied House members for their votes. They did not restrict these efforts to their powers of persuasion. They extended offers of patronage appointments and profitable government contracts to those willing to sustain Lecompton; they held up promised appointments until votes had been cast; and they threatened retaliation against Democrats who refused to sustain the president. President Buchanan personally appealed to reluctant Democratic congressmen to sustain administration policy for the sake of the Union and the Democracy. Friends of the administration worked to buy out hostile newspapers or to fund new pro-Lecompton organs. The administration also brought loyal holders of government patronage to Washington to lobby members of Congress.[29]

Frustrated anti-Lecompton men charged that the administration also resorted to outright cash bribery of

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[29] Stampp, America in 1857, pp. 310-312; Mark W. Summers, The Plundering Generation: Corruption and the Crisis of the Union, 1849-1861 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 251-260; Nichols, The Disruption of American Democracy, pp. 164-166; Johannsen, Stephen A. Douglas, pp. 601-603; Covode Committee Report, pp. 120-151, 229-231, 247-251, 260-294, 304-305, 310-311, 319-323; Foote, Casket of Reminiscences, pp. 118-119.

recalcitrant members. Cobb forcefully refuted these accusations when summoned before a House investigating committee established by the Republicans in 1860. When asked if he possessed any knowledge of money being used "corruptly or any way to secure passage of the English bill," he replied, "I do not, sir; nor do I believe that such an idea ever entered the mind of the President or any member of the administration, until the charge was made."[30]

Nor did Cobb hesitate to defend administration efforts to win back Forney's support. Long before Forney's open break with the president over Lecompton, he testified, both Black and himself had labored to convince the disgruntled editor that Buchanan had not abandoned him. They had attempted to convince him to accept a lucrative appointment to the Liverpool consulate and had sought public printing contracts for him before Lecompton became an issue. They even had continued to do so afterward until "he placed it out of [our] power by the course which he adopted." No one, Cobb might have added, expected any administration to reward its enemies.[31]

Cobb's testimony notwithstanding, evidence indicates that cash bribery possibly played a role in bolstering support among wavering pro-Lecompton Democrats and swaying anti-Lecompton men. Prominent administration supporters such

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[30] Covode Committee Report, pp. 318-322.

[31] Ibid.

as Cornelius Wendell -- holder of lucrative government printing contracts -- used the flagrant distribution of cash -- some $30,000 - $40,000 -- to lobbyists in an effort to reinforce the administration's more ethically acceptable promises of patronage and contracts. In one instance, Wendell allegedly exclaimed that "a bushel of gold is no object in this matter." At least some of these funds probably found their way into the pockets of corrupt legislators, but the Republican investigation failed to prove it.[32]

Despite the administration's strenuous efforts, by spring, 1858, it had become painfully clear that contrary to Buchanan's expectations the administration could not force the Lecompton Constitution through the House of Representatives. The Buchanan forces now began a frantic search for a solution which might spare the president and the South the appearance of a humiliating defeat. A compromise influenced by Cobb but crafted by Alexander H. Stephens and William H. English, an anti-Lecompton Democrat from Indiana, offered a way out.[33]

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[32] Ibid., pp. 120-151, 178-197 are representative of testimony which consistently denied any corrupt uses of money by members of the Buchanan administration, 214-218; Summers, The Plundering Generation, pp. 253-254; Nichols, The Disruption of American Democracy, pp. 165-166.

[33] William H. English to James Buchanan enclosed in James Buchanan to Howell Cobb, March 31, 1858, Howell Cobb Papers; George Sanders to James Buchanan, March 29, 1858, Buchanan Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (Hereafter: Buchanan Papers); Stampp, America in 1857, pp. 327-329; Johannsen, Stephen A. Douglas, pp. 609-613; Nichols, The Disruption of American

Observing that the Lecompton Constitution demanded a larger than normal federal land grant for Kansas, Stephens and English proposed to offer the territory a much smaller land grant. Under the English bill, the constitution with the smaller land grant would be returned to the territory's voters for ratification. If they accepted the reduced land grant, Kansas would enter under the Lecompton Constitution; if they rejected it, Kansas would not be eligible for admission as a state until its population reached the number normally required for statehood. By means of the English legislation the people of Kansas would be permitted a referendum on their constitution, but officially the focus would be on land and not slavery.[34]

Although a flurry of last minute opposition from Southern Rights Democrats who recognized that adoption of the English Bill ended hopes for slavery in Kansas required a final burst of lobbying by Cobb and other cabinet members, Congress adopted the subterfuge on April 30. About half of the anti-Lecompton Democrats in the House deserted Douglas to give the administration its margin of victory. The senator and his tiny squad of hardcore anti-Lecompton

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Democracy, pp. 167-175.

[34] William H. English to James Buchanan enclosed in James Buchanan to Howell Cobb, March 31, 1858, Howell Cobb Papers; George Sanders to James Buchanan, March 29, 1858, Buchanan Papers; Stampp, America in 1857, pp. 327-329; Johannsen, Stephen A. Douglas, pp. 609-613; Nichols, The Disruption of American Democracy, pp. 167-175.

Democrats refused to sanction the agreement with their votes. Four months later, the voters of Kansas overwhelmingly rejected the Lecompton Constitution. The Kansas issue had been removed from the national arena at last, but not in the way the administration or its supporters had envisioned. The deadly seed planted in Kansas four years earlier, however, had not yet produced its last pieces of poisoned fruit.[35]

II

The administration's Kansas policy had been a disaster. Nevertheless Buchanan and his cabinet greeted passage of the English bill as a victory. In one regard their view could be justified. At least Kansas now had been removed from the national stage. Mary Ann reflected this palpable sense of relief when she declared to her sons that "the Kansas Bill has passed!!! ... Both Houses in one day!!! Your father and all true Democrats are rejoicing."[36]

Rejoicing, however, was not restricted to members of the administration. Throughout the country, all those who had dreaded the possible outcome of the Lecompton crisis voiced a profound relief. Cobb's Southern Banner proclaimed that "the friends of law and order have triumphed over the enemies of the South and the Union." Hope Hull declared the English

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[35] Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, March 10, 1858; April 19, 1858, Howell Cobb Papers; Nichols, The Disruption of American Democracy, pp. 174-175.

[36] Mary Ann Cobb to "My Dear Son," undated manuscript, Howell Cobb Papers.

Bill "the most brilliant idea I ever heard of in politics ... It has saved the party & the country." Not only had the English legislation frustrated the "Black Republicans," he gloated, it had also left the disunionists in the South "badly cowed." Ultras had expected Congress to reject Lecompton and precipitate a secession crisis. Now, he chortled, "they dont know what to say or do." According to Hull, even the ever grumpy Thomas Thomas conceded that the English Bill "was evidently inspired for no human wisdom could ever have devised it."[37]

Yet Governor Brown, a man destined to play an increasingly important role in Cobb's future, might have been the most relieved man in Georgia. He noted that the compromise embodied in the English Bill had negated the necessity of calling a state convention. While conceding that some southerners would complain about the settlement, he nevertheless felt certain that "the act ... will ... receive the hearty approval of the great mass of the people of the South." The governor particularly praised Cobb's role in the settlement. "Your untiring efforts for the success of the measure," he avowed, "have attracted the attention and

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[37] Athens Southern Banner, May 6, 1858; William Hope Hull to Howell Cobb, May 30, 1858, Howell Cobb Papers.

commanded the approbation of the people of Georgia, and ... of the other southern states also."[38]

Cobb certainly welcomed such praise. Throughout the long struggle, he had never expressed any doubts regarding the correctness of the administration's position. All his previous assertions regarding the necessity of submitting the Lecompton Constitution to the people notwithstanding, he appeared sincere in his conviction that the limited scheme of submission adopted at Lecompton had comported adequately with administration requirements. He voiced hope that "the Southern people will now learn to estimate properly Mr. Buchanan, who is the truest & soundest northern man in the Union." The president, he insisted, "has stood firm on every issue & could not be driven from his wise & patriotic course by the clamor either of the South or North -- for he has encountered and resisted both."[39]

In some regards, the congressional struggle over Lecompton did produce a minor increase in southern support for the administration. Tom Cobb spoke for many when he applauded Buchanan's congressional message embracing the Lecompton Constitution. Surprised by Douglas' opposition,

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[38] Joseph E. Brown to Alexander H. Stephens, May 7, 1858, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, p. 434; Joseph E. Brown to Howell Cobb, May 7, 1858, Letter Book, Joseph E. Brown Papers, Felix Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia (Hereafter: Brown Papers).

[39] Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, March 10, 1858, Howell Cobb Papers.

he urged that the administration adopt a policy of "no parleying with him or any one else." Douglas, he charged, was "throwing high die for the northern Democracy for Pres[ident]." Another Cobbite reported that resolutions critical of the administration had been defeated in the Georgia legislature despite a coalition between dissident Democrats and Know Nothings. Buchanan's stance on Lecompton, it seemed, now meant that "the Administration will be sustained by the [southern] people."[40]

Still, deep animosity toward the administration remained alive in Georgia. Herschel Johnson spoke for an important minority within the Georgia Democracy who yet harbored ill-feelings toward the administration because of its previous support for Governor Walker. Johnson only wanted Kansas admitted if the voters ratified the Lecompton Constitution with slavery intact. Otherwise, he insisted, southerners should block admission and send the constitution back to Kansas "as a rebuke to the administration." Only reluctantly did he agree to support the administration if the southern members of Congress deemed this course best. Despite Thomas Thomas' grudging praise for the English measure, he did not back away from an earlier assertion that "nothing short of

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[40] Thomas Reade Rootes Cobb to Howell Cobb, December 11, 1857; A. Hood to Howell Cobb, December 21, 1857; John W. H. Underwood to Howell Cobb, February 5, 1858, Howell Cobb Papers; Joseph E. Brown to Howell Cobb, May 7, 1858, Letter Book, Brown Papers.

seeing the Holy Ghost descending upon old Buck in the form of a dove ... could ever make me trust him again."[41]

Know Nothings in Georgia attempted to make political capital out of these sentiments. While the struggle over Lecompton ran its course in Congress, the Macon Journal and Messenger proclaimed that breaks within Democratic ranks signalled "THE DOOM OF DEMOCRACY." Upon the adoption of the English Bill, both the Milledgeville Southern Recorder and the Columbus Enquirer denounced the measure and claimed that "the South has been sold." Mocking Democratic denunciations of the "apostasy" of Douglas, the Southern Recorder, roared in outrage -- real or feigned -- that "the Southern National Democrats are the traitors, not Mr. Douglas." Employing the traditional politics of slavery, they avowed that southern Democrats scarcely could continue to portray their party as reliable defenders of southern rights. "The South is already excluded from all participation in the Territories through Democratic engineering," the Athens Southern Watchman lamented, "what has she now to fear from the Black Republicans."[42]

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[41] Herschel V. Johnson to Alexander H. Stephens, December 24, 1857, Herschel V. Johnson Papers, Special Collections Library, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina (Hereafter: HVJ, DU); Thomas W. Thomas to Alexander H. Stephens, January 12, 1858; January 21, 1858; February 7, 1858, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, pp. 427-430.

[42] Milledgeville Southern Recorder, May 25, 1858; October 12, 1858; Milledgeville Southern Recorder, cited in Milledgeville Federal Union, May 18, 1858; June 1, 1858;

Democratic organs vigorously replied to these sallies. They denied that the English Bill violated either southern rights or the Georgia Platform. Any treason to the South, they charged, had been committed by southern Know Nothing congressmen who had withheld support from the administration when their votes could have carried the Lecompton measure. That Douglas had betrayed the South they did not deny, but his betrayal had been the action of a renegade and did not represent the sentiments of a northern Democracy fundamentally sound on the slavery issue.[43]

The events surrounding the Lecompton struggle left Cobb with profoundly ambivalent feelings. He undoubtedly welcomed the virtual certainty that Douglas "has ruined himself with the democratic party" and hence ruined his chances for the presidency in 1860. The Illinois senator, who had enjoyed widespread popularity in the South because of the Kansas-Nebraska legislation, now found himself widely repudiated by southerners outraged by his stance on the Lecompton Constitution. Rumors quickly began to circulate that Douglas secretly had pledged to tie his fortunes to those of the "Black Republicans" in 1860. He only remained in the

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Athens Southern Watchman, September 16, 1858; October 14, 1858; Columbus Enquirer, cited in Milledgeville Southern Recorder, October 26, 1858; Horace Montgomery, Cracker Parties (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1950), pp. 218-219.

[43] Athens Southern Banner, April 8, 1858; Milledgeville Federal Union, May 4, 1858; May 18, 1858; June 1, 1858; Montgomery, Cracker Parties, pp. 218-219.

Democracy until then, the rumor ran, so as to harm the Democracy's chances a much as possible.[44]

The secretary had little trouble believing Douglas capable of such perfidy. He placed full responsibility for the crisis over Kansas and the fragmentation of the national Democracy at Douglas' feet. The senator's course, he maintained, "has astonished every one." Even before hearing the anti-Douglas rumors, he had predicted that Douglas would "ultimately land in the ranks of the [Republican] opposition if indeed he is not already there." Both Cobb and his lieutenants labored to encourage anti-Douglas sentiment. Cobb's Southern Banner damned Douglas as a "renegade Democrat" who valued his own advancement more than principle or the survival of a unified Democracy. Cobb himself publicly lamented in a letter to the New York Democracy that no rival party ever could have done the Democracy so much harm as Douglas and his apostates.[45]

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[44] Milledgeville Federal Union, January 19, 1858; Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, March 10, 1858; March 12, 1858; Isaac H. Sturgeon to Howell Cobb, May 17, 1858, Howell Cobb Papers; Milledgeville Federal Union, May 4, 1858; May 18, 1858; June 1, 1858; Athens Southern Banner, April 8, 1858; July 1, 1858; July 22, 1858; Milledgeville Southern Recorder, October 12, 1858; Charleston Mercury, cited in Milledgeville Southern Recorder, July 26, 1859.

[45] Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, March 10, 1858, Howell Cobb Papers; Athens Southern Banner, February 11, 1858; February 25, 1858; Howell Cobb to New York State Democratic Committee, March 1, 1858, in Athens Southern Banner, March 18, 1858.

While the political motives behind these attacks on Douglas are transparent, Cobb's dissatisfaction over what he deemed Douglas' betrayal also sprang from deeper sources. During the crisis of 1850, Cobb had risked his political life by sustaining compromise measures opposed by the southern rights wing of the Georgia Democracy. He still bore the scars of that conflict, and the shadow of its memory yet shaded his political future. In light of his own experiences, he probably had expected Douglas to take a similar risk to preserve the national Democratic party. When Douglas failed to measure up to this standard, Cobb felt entirely justified in his disappointment. For the first time he began to doubt the viability of the northern Democracy and hence the Union.

Although most Georgians damned Douglas just as Cobb wished, many others -- particularly those ambivalent about or opposed to Cobb's presidential ambitions -- viewed the senator's course with sincere regret. Herschel Johnson cast Douglas' break with his southern adherents in almost tragic terms. "I grieve over the defection of Douglas," he wrote, "I suppose he ... will be among the leaders of the BLK Rep Hoard." Johnson rued Douglas' loss all the more because he believed that "there was no necessity for [him] to take the

step ... But if he will, let him go -- the victim of his own ambition."[46]

Others, however, voiced a determination to excuse Douglas' course on Lecompton. Thomas Thomas complained that Buchanan had "violated or permitted to be violated the principles of his party, his own personal pledges, and the law of the land." Despite such presidential perfidy, he lamented, "Southern men persisted in shouting hozannas ... after the man ... who had betrayed us." Under these circumstances, he held that Douglas had no motive "for remaining true." He argued that, having "proved ourselves unworthy ... Douglas did well for himself and no wrong to us by looking to his own interest at home. Douglas has as much right to be President as Cobb." Stephens, who shared Thomas' assessment of the Kansas fiasco, also bore Douglas no grudge. For all his bluster about southern rights in Kansas, he acknowledged the glaring fraud embodied in Lecompton and blamed Buchanan for the disaster. He refused to condemn Douglas and urged the administration to reconcile with him.[47]

Although rumors circulated that Cobb wanted a "war to the knife and the knife to the hilt" against Douglas, the

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[46] John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, October 12, 1858; Herschel V. Johnson to Alexander H. Stephens, December 24, 1857, HVJ, DU.

[47] Thomas W. Thomas to Alexander H. Stephens, January 12, 1858, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, pp. 427-428; Thomas E. Schott, Alexander H. Stephens of Georgia, A Biography (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), pp. 251-255.

secretary endorsed efforts to effect a reconciliation between the Illinois senator and the administration. To be sure, the secretary had no desire to see his rival's standing with the national Democracy enhanced, but he also understood that his own presidential ambitions would be threatened if the Kansas schism within Democratic ranks continued to fester into 1860. Let Douglas agree to accept the English Bill as an accomplished policy and pledge the administration his future support and peace might be restored. Although Douglas expressed a desire to heal his differences with the administration, his expressions of good will evaporated after he returned home to begin his reelection campaign. Discerning Buchanan's lack of support, Douglas renewed his attacks on the administration in strong terms.[48]

An open political war between the senator and the president ensued. The administration matched Douglas' criticisms from the stump with a full-scale assault on those Douglas loyalists who still retained federal patronage plums. It then used appointments to the now vacant offices in a bid to build a Illinois Democratic party loyal to Buchanan. Administration Democrats in Illinois nominated a full slate

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[48] Thomas Harris to Charles H. Lanphier, May 8, 1858; James Green to Samuel Treat, September 28, 1858, both cited in Nevins, The Emergence of Lincoln, I, 349; Nichols, The Disruption of American Democracy, pp. 210-215; New York Herald, October 26, 1858; Athens Southern Banner, February 4, 1858; July 22, 1858; July 29, 1858; September 2, 1858; Milledgeville Federal Union, August 3, 1858; September 14, 1858; Klein, President James Buchanan, pp. 328-329.

of candidates for the upcoming elections, including Sidney Breese as a senatorial candidate to challenge Douglas. Although anti-Douglas Democrats insisted that Breese could win, his nomination probably did more to provide cover for a move to siphon Democratic votes away from Douglas without openly embracing his Republican opponent.[49]

The Washington Union led administration organs across the country in denouncing Douglas as a "traitor by action, design, and position" who had deserted the national Democracy for the embrace of the "scarlet woman of abolitionism." Pro-Buchanan newspapers admitted no difference between the "abolitionist" Douglas and his abolitionist opponent, Abraham Lincoln. Attorney General Black summarized administration sentiments when he declared "now, what should be the difference to us between such a man and an abolitionist, except such a man, elected by democratic votes, would do more injury to the democratic cause than an abolitionist would have it in his power to do."[50]

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[49] Johannsen, Stephen A. Douglas, pp. 646-650; Athens Southern Banner, September 2, 1858; Milledgeville Federal Union, September 28, 1858.

[50] Washington Union, July 20, 1858; July 27, 1858; August 3, 1858; August 8, 1858; August 17, 1858; September 3, 1858; Jeremiah Black to Sidney Breese, August 7, 1858; September 17, 1858, all cited in Johannsen, Stephen A. Douglas, pp. 646-650; Jeremiah Black to J. W. Davidson, August 1, 1858, Covode Committee Report, pp. 323-324; Johannsen, Stephen A. Douglas, pp. 646-650; Athens Southern Banner, July 22, 1858; July 29, 1858; September 2, 1858.

As had been true during the Lecompton struggle, Cobb's activities in the administration's war against Douglas remained largely behind the scenes. Douglas supporters such as John Forney declared him "the most proscriptive member of the Cabinet," and laid responsibility for the administration's entire anti-Douglas strategy at his feet. They denounced Cobb for creating the divisions that now threatened the Democracy. Cobb's Southern Banner voiced "indignation and contempt" at these charges by a "renegade editor" who had done so much to disrupt the national party. While denying Cobb's involvement with anything untoward in Illinois, it also insisted that "if he is the life and soul of those who expelled Douglas from the party, ... he is engaged in a most righteous undertaking."[51]

Indeed, there is little direct evidence of anti-Douglas activities by Cobb. It cannot be doubted, however, that he wholeheartedly embraced the campaign against Douglas' reelection. Although Cobb, himself remained publicly silent on events in Illinois throughout the summer and fall, the Southern Banner maintained an increasingly bitter diatribe against the "traitor" Douglas. Other administration organs such as the Federal Union echoed the Banner's attacks -- although with somewhat less vitriol. How, they demanded, could southern Democrats ever trust Douglas and his followers

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[51] Philadelphia Press, cited in Athens Southern Banner, June 24, 1858; Athens Southern Banner, June 24, 1858.

not to merge with the Black Republicans if it suited their selfish purposes? In fact, they charged, no practical difference existed between Douglas and the leaders of abolitionism. "What is DOUGLAS or LINCOLN to [southern men] that they should take sides in the fight," the Banner asked, "what difference would there have been between the two ... last winter, when Kansas was applying for admission to the Union."[52]

These efforts by Georgia's pro-Buchanan Democratic press received a shock when Stephens publicly endorsed Douglas and denounced the administration's war on him as "wickedly foolish." Stunned by Stephens' pronouncement, administration organs turned their batteries on Georgia's Douglas Democrats. The Southern Banner charged Douglas Democrats in the South with the grossest ingratitude. Each kind word for Douglas amounted to a knife in the back of loyal Democrats in the North who had risked all for the sake of the South in the Lecompton struggle. "It is in vain," editor James Sledge warned, "that any man calls himself a Democrat, who does not support the Administration of James Buchanan." Recalling the vehemence with which Stephens and so many others had denounced Governor Walker, the Banner reasoned that "if

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[52] Athens Southern Banner, February 4, 1858; June 24, 1858; July 1, 1858; July 22, 1858; July 29, 1858; September 2, 1858; September 16, 1858; September 30, 1858; October 21, 1858; Savannah News, cited in Athens Southern Banner, July 29, 1858; Milledgeville Federal Union, January 19, 1858; August 3, 1858; September 14, 1858; September 28, 1858.

WALKER deserved beheading for raising his arm against the South, surely DOUGLAS who struck us such a heavy blow, deserves equal, if not greater, punishment."[53]

Other newspapers friendly to Cobb elaborated on this view. The Federal Union, finding it "'wickedly foolish'" that Douglas should be encouraged in his war against the administration, warned that a southern Democratic betrayal of their true northern allies would deprive the South of "the entire moral weight of their position." Commenting on the Whig origins of many Georgia Douglasites, it did not question their loyalty but warned them against "error." The Cassville Standard offered a harsher analysis. The former Whig leaders now in Democratic ranks, it complained, "are giving the Democracy trouble, and the sooner their places are filled by 'Simon Pure' Democrats the better it will be for us."[54]

Douglas' attempts to reconcile the Dred Scott decision with his own theory of popular sovereignty during his debates with Lincoln exacerbated Democratic difficulties in Georgia. In his so called Freeport Doctrine, the senator held that territorial residents could exclude slavery by refusing to enact slave codes required for its existence. Southern Know

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[53] Schott, Alexander H. Stephens of Georgia, pp. 254-257; Athens Southern Banner, July 22, 1858; July 28, 1858; September 9, 1858; September 16, 1858.

[54] Milledgeville Federal Union, October 5, 1858; October 19, 1858; Cassville Standard, cited in Athens Southern Watchman, October 7, 1858 and Milledgeville Southern Recorder, October 12, 1858; Milledgeville Southern Recorder, October 26, 1858.

Nothings damned the Freeport Doctrine as further proof that northern Democrats could not be trusted to defend southern rights. They also labored to exploit differences between old Democrats and their Whig converts. Former Whigs, they asserted, had only merged with their new associates "to get on the big side." Now convinced that the "strength of the Democratic party North is with Douglas," apostate Whigs had resolved once more to stay with the winners. Pro-Cobb editors -- perhaps constrained by the enunciation of doctrines similar to those of Douglas by both Cobb and the Southern Banner in the election of 1856 -- offered only mild criticisms of the Freeport Doctrine.[55]

Concern over developments in Georgia prompted Cobb to direct a personal appeal to Stephens. "I cannot agree with you about Douglas," he wrote. Denying any motivation based on the senator's "outrageous conduct towards me personally," he maintained that his opposition to Douglas derived solely from the senator's failure to abide by the peace effected between himself and the administration at the close of the congressional session. "If Judge Douglas had done as he promised ... that is, acquiesce in the action of his party in the passage of the English bill -- and cease his war upon the Administration," he argued, "then ... all of us ought to

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[55] Athens Southern Watchman, September 16, 1858; October 7, 1858; October 14, 1858; Milledgeville Southern Recorder, September 14, 1858; October 12, 1858; October 26, 1858; July 26, 1859.

have sustained him." But Douglas had not followed this course. "Publicly," Cobb complained, "he attacks the administration and the Democratic party as having attempted to perpetrate a fraud ... Privately, he engages in the coarsest abuse of the President and on all occasions is peculiarly abusive of myself." He charged that no individual had done more than Douglas to disrupt the Democracy and "to ask our support is to ask too much."[56]

Cobb insisted that the nascent administration party in Illinois could defeat both Douglas and Lincoln if given proper support. True party policy, he swore, allowed no other course. If Douglas rated Democratic support, then all traitors to the South warranted similar support. Should the Democracy pursue this cowardly course, he demanded to know "with what propriety can the South ask their friends in the North to stand by them if we show such anxiety to clasp to our confidence the men who opposed and still continue to oppose our principles." Pleading with Stephens not to "allow your kind feelings and past confidence in Douglas to deceive you in this matter," he repeated warnings that Douglas must eventually make his way into Black Republican ranks. "The democratic party and the South," he regretfully concluded, "have nothing to hope for from his success." Cobb's pleas

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[56] Howell Cobb to Alexander H. Stephens, September 8, 1858, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, pp. 442-444.

fell on deaf ears, however, and Stephens could not be dissuaded from his pro-Douglas stance.[57]

As administration Democrats in Georgia followed the Senate race in Illinois, they persisted in claims that -- should Breese's election prove impossible -- they would favor Douglas' election over Lincoln. When reports of the electoral disaster overtaking the Democrats throughout much of the North in the fall elections began to arrive in October, the Southern Banner exploded in rage. Although the Democratic defeat stemmed from a variety of causes that included northern anger over Lecompton, factional disputes within state organizations, and the onset of economic hardtimes in late 1857, editor Sledge discerned nothing save the perfidy of Stephen A. Douglas in the rout. Reflecting Cobb's own views, the Banner proclaimed that "our eyes have been opened ... and we have seen ... the injury that DOUGLAS has done the South and the Democratic party." The extent of the disaster caused by this "treachery" now prompted the paper to reverse its previous stance. It prayed for the senator's defeat even if it meant the election of the Black Republican Lincoln. Despite these prayers the senator won reelection.[58]

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[57] Ibid.

[58] Athens Southern Banner, September 2, 1858; October 21, 1858; Milledgeville Federal Union, August 3, 1858; September 14, 1858; September 28, 1858.

Douglas' victory left Cobb more distressed than any political disappointment he had ever suffered. Describing the general outcome of the northern elections as "disastrous," he lamented Douglas' triumph as "a hard blow upon the south." A blow, he added, "for which she has to thank her own recreant sons, who have contributed their aid & sympathy to bring it about." He predicted that the North would now claim Douglas' win as "a repudiation of the English bill and we shall see the strange spectacle of southern men rejoicing over ... the defeat of their principles." Such a strange spectacle scarcely could fail to demoralize those northern Democrats who had so bravely defended the South's interests in the recent crisis. "How can we expect northern men to remain true to us," he exploded, "when we take to our bosom those who win their victories at the north by sacrificing our rights and interests?"[59]

In the weeks that followed, Cobb remained "exceedingly bitter" against Douglas. Stephens warned him to avoid any effort to drive Douglas out of the Democracy or prepare to be "whipped" in the attempt. The angry secretary heatedly replied, Stephens reported, that "if Douglass [sic] ever was restored to the confidence of the Democracy of Georgia it would be over his dead body politically." Stephens "laughed at him" in response and warned that "he would run his future

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[59] Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, November 4, 1858, Howell Cobb Papers.

and his [party] into the ground, just as he did his Tugalo ticket -- I told him it would be another Tugalo fight." Despite this warning, Cobb had made an unalterable resolution that Douglas must be denied the presidency even if it destroyed the national Democracy and the Union. Neither a party nor a nation willing to elevate such a renegade to its highest office was worth saving.[60]

III

Even as Cobb spearheaded administration activities during the Lecompton fight and its aftermath, he simultaneously served as point-man for the administration's response to the Panic of 1857. Although the 1850s generally had been a period of prosperity, structural weaknesses in the economy virtually insured the onset of a crisis. By 1857, agricultural production -- most notably in the grain-growing western states -- had outstripped demand. A similar imbalance between manufacturing capacity and domestic demand became apparent at about the same time. A persistently unfavorable balance of trade -- made worse by a declining European demand for American grain following the end of the Crimean War in 1856 -- produced a steady flow of specie out of the country. State and private banks -- operating without sufficient regulatory oversight by state governments --

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[60] Johannsen, Stephen A. Douglas, pp. 676-679; Alexander H. Stephens to Linton Stephens, December 7, 1858, Alexander H. Stephens Papers, Manhattanville College of the Sacred Heart, Purchase, New York (Hereafter: Stephens Papers, MC).

exacerbated matters with the excessive issuance of banknotes unsecured by adequate specie reserves. This practice fueled a binge of easy credit and a speculative spree in western lands, stocks, and railroad construction.[61]

Concern over the economy began to appear in the public presses in the spring of 1857. Horace Greeley, editor of the New York Tribune warned that "too much extravagance, too much buying abroad, and on time" threatened to suffocate economic prosperity. The crisis that Greeley feared began on August 24, when the Ohio Life and Trust Company suspended redemption of its banknotes in specie because of embezzlement by the head of its New York branch. The bank's announcement sparked a panic in New York. Stock prices, already wobbly, plummeted and bankers scrambled to build up specie reserves in anticipation of runs on their institutions.[62]

Initially, the public expected the "revulsion in trade and commerce" to remain confined to New York. New York's role as the nation's financial center, however, rendered this scenario unlikely. Within a matter of weeks, the panic had extended its tentacles throughout the country. Increasing numbers of banks, unable to secure enough gold coin, proved incapable of withstanding runs by those holding their paper.

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[61] James L. Huston, The Panic of 1857 and the Coming of the Civil War (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987), pp. 1-34; Stampp, America in 1857, pp. 213-226.

[62] Huston, The Panic of 1857, pp. 14-23; Stampp, America in 1857, pp. 219-221; Washington Union, June 13, 1857, cited in Stampp, America in 1857, p. 219.

As banks closed their doors, merchants and manufacturers found it impossible to secure the lines of credit needed to continue their operations. They began to reduce their work forces and unemployment rates rose sharply. Farmers -- particularly those in the West -- found it difficult to sell their crops as agricultural prices collapsed. Land prices soon followed in their wake. From Washington, Mary Ann observed: "the Banks are popping like crackers here and northward ... and ... the Cotton Mills ... are stopping for want of funds." Recalling the devastation that the Panic of 1837 had visited on her own family, she voiced relief that "this is the second [economic] crisis ... that I have lived to see, but thank God!! I am now a spectator only."[63]

As treasury secretary, Cobb scarcely could take the role of "spectator." He moved promptly to increase the amount of specie available to financial markets. Relying on a balance of some $18,000,000 in gold in government coffers, he announced on September 23 that for a limited time the government would use its gold to purchase a portion of the national debt from bondholders. He further increased the amount of gold available by using government funds to purchase foreign silver -- which the United States no longer recognized as money -- held by American merchants. He also ordered $4,000,000 of gold in the New York assay office

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[63] Huston, The Panic of 1857, pp. 14-34; Stampp, America in 1857, pp. 219-236; Mary Ann Cobb to John A. Cobb, September 30, 1857, Howell Cobb Papers.

minted into coin. Interior Secretary Thompson lent support by using nearly $1,000,000 from Indian trust funds to purchase state bonds.[64]

Although Cobb initially concentrated on relieving the business community in New York, he soon extended his efforts to other financial centers as well. While this government intervention did produce some positive results, the Treasury did not possess sufficient specie to restore public confidence in the nation's financial system. On October 14, New York's banks suspended specie payments. Those banks that had been holding on throughout the country saw no alternative but to follow suit. Cobb, conceding defeat, abandoned his attempt to infuse the economy with gold. The cycle of business failure and unemployment continued and accelerated.[65]

Despite his inability to stem the spreading disaster, Cobb received high marks for his initial response to the panic. Democratic newspapers that had praised his appointment as treasury secretary no doubt felt justified in their confidence by his prompt and vigorous action. In the

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[64] Huston, The Panic of 1857, pp. 16-17; Stampp, America in 1857, pp. 223-224; Nichols, The Disruption of American Democracy, pp. 132-134; Senate Executive Documents, Thirty-Fifth Congress, First Session, Ex. Doc. #1 (Serial 918) p. 11 (Hereafter: Treasury Report, 1857); [Also see Athens Southern Banner].

[65] Huston, The Panic of 1857, pp. 16-17; Stampp, America in 1857, pp. 223-224; Nichols, The Disruption of American Democracy, pp. 132-134; Treasury Report, 1857, p. 11; [Also see Athens Southern Banner].

midst of the crisis, one paper declared him "the man for the Times" and noted that without his wise actions "the extent of injury to the country from the wild panic would have been almost immeasurable."[66]

Even after it became clear that Cobb's intervention in the financial markets has failed to avert the crisis, he continued to receive praise for the attempt. One member of the New York business community who described himself as "a Henry Clay Whig" tendered Cobb "the heartfelt thanks of the Merchants of the Union" for the "prompt, considerate, and incalculable benefit you conferred upon the whole nation during the panic of 1857." Mary Ann voiced considerable relief at the public reaction. "Your father is winning golden opinions for his practical management of the Treasury at this fearful crisis," she reported to her sons, "and I am reconciled to his being in office -- now that I have a palpable evidence that he can add to his former reputation instead of sinking it."[67]

Having failed in his bid to stay the financial crisis, Cobb now focused on assessing the causes of the disaster.

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[66] Huston, The Panic of 1857, pp. 16-17; Nichols, The Disruption of American Democracy, pp. 132-134; [Also see Athens Southern Banner].

[67] Mary Ann Lamar to John A. Cobb, October 2, 1857; Thomas Reade Rootes Cobb to Howell Cobb, October 8, 1857, Howell Cobb Papers; "Many" to Howell Cobb, December 13, 1860, Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collection, Felix Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia (Hereafter: Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collection).

By determining its origins, he hoped to develop a program of reform that would spare the nation future "revulsions." He also hoped to devise strategies for coping with the current difficulties. Political and financial leaders, as well as millions of average Americans, attributed the Panic of 1857 to a variety of sources that ranged from a corrupt citizenry, to the presence of too many lawyers, to the Democratic policy of free trade embodied in the tariffs of 1846 and 1857. Most everyone agreed, however, that reckless banking practices had contributed significantly to the onset of economic hardtimes. Most everyone also agreed that the situation required a much stronger system of regulation that would force banks to tie their issuance of paper money to the actual amount of specie in their vaults.[68]

Despite the widespread consensus that banks bore primary responsibility for the Panic of 1857, agreement regarding the best means of coping with its consequences proved harder to come by. Cobb received numerous suggestions in his correspondence and through the newspapers. Some members of both parties pleaded for a program of public works to alleviate the suffering and potentially violent discontent of unemployed urban laborers. Old line Whigs -- now a significant part of the Republican coalition -- sought the revival of Henry Clay's American System with a Bank of the

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[68] Treasury Report, 1857, pp. 6-28; Huston, The Panic of 1857, pp. 35-65; Stampp, America in 1857, pp. 230-238.

United States and protective tariffs. While a national bank would impose effective restraints on the activities of state and private banks, a protective tariff would enhance domestic demand for American-made goods by raising the price of imports. Republicans found it difficult to exploit the panic, however, because the Free-Soil Democratic wing of the coalition continued to espouse Jacksonian economic principles. Only in Pennsylvania did they succeed in making effective use of the tariff issue against the Democrats during the elections of 1858.[69]

Cobb considered each of these suggestions as he prepared his first report to Congress in October and November, 1857. Although he had prepared reports of a similar nature while serving as governor, he clearly found the task of explaining the crisis and proposing a policy for coping with it daunting. He confessed to brother John that "it is the most difficult and embarrassing duty I have ever had to perform." Nevertheless, he undertook a thorough review of statistics and other information and vowed to make his report "a regular business document." He found his task eased somewhat by his erroneous belief that the worst of the economic difficulty already had passed.[70]

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[69] E. B. Hart to Howell Cobb, October 23, 1857, Howell Cobb Papers; Huston, The Panic of 1857, pp. 35-53; Stampp, America in 1857, 230-238.

[70] Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, October 29, 1857; November 6, 1857, Howell Cobb Papers.

The secretary submitted his report on December 8. He began with a straightforward estimate that the customs service and public land sales should generate some $36,000,000 for the balance of the fiscal year ending June 30, 1858. This sum, he acknowledged, fell considerably below the revenue generated over a similar time period for the previous fiscal year. He attributed about half the loss to the impact of the panic and about half to the effect of the Tariff of 1857. Expressing doubt that these receipts would be adequate to meet all demands on the treasury, he urged Congress to authorize an issue of $20,000,000 in treasury notes should such a step prove necessary to protect the government's credit. Convinced that the after-effects of the panic would be short-lived, he anticipated that government revenues would return to normal levels by mid-1858.[71]

Cobb then turned his focus to the various proposals for coping with the nation's economic troubles. In quick succession, he rejected calls for government sponsored public assistance to the unemployed, a protectionist tariff policy, and a new national bank. Cobb justified his stance by offering a vigorous defense of the Jacksonian economic creed which stressed limited government and tariffs for revenue only.[72]

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[71] Treasury Report, 1857, pp. 6-10.

[72] Ibid., pp. 11-17.

Conceding that the "revulsion in ... monetary affairs" had produced "distress among the people," the secretary nevertheless insisted that direct relief must not become the province of the national government. To be sure, the tenderhearted Cobb lamented the widespread public suffering. But those who suggested it the duty of government to "provide relief in all cases of trouble," had been motivated by "their necessities" and "not their judgements." The "true theory of our government," he reminded, "is one of limited powers to be exercised for specified purposes." The absence of any constitutional provision authorizing "the use of the public credit and treasury" to "afford temporary relief," he concluded, provided "an unanswerable argument to the suggestion."[73]

Although Cobb regretted the necessity of adding to the national debt by issuing treasury notes, he insisted that Congress should reject all demands for an alteration in current tariff policy. A temporary economic slump need not be countered by a permanent increase in taxes. He noted that the Tariff of 1857, with its moderate free trade provisions, had only been in effect for a few months when the current "disastrous revulsion" struck the country -- "a length of time too short to judge of its workings, even under the most favorable of circumstances."[74]

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[73] Ibid.

[74] Ibid.

More important, Cobb argued, advocates of a protectionist tariff policy fundamentally misunderstood the functioning of the economy and the needs of consumers. "The people are already suffering from distress," he declared, "and the proposition seeks to diminish their suffering by adding to their burdens." He admitted that a protective tariff would provide a temporary benefit to a tiny minority of American manufacturers, but only at the expense of most people. Not only would they pay higher prices, but also additional taxes as the government turned to alternative sources of revenue to replace the funds lost to protectionism. Nor, he added, should the importance of exports to the national economy be overlooked. "We cannot expect," he warned, "to furnish the world with our cotton, breadstuffs, tobacco, rice, and other productions unless we are willing to receive in return their productions."[75]

Cobb held calls for a new national bank in no higher regard than he did demands for a protectionist tariff policy. Indeed, he did not refer to the idea of a national bank directly. Instead, he praised the existing Independent Treasury system whereby the government held its own funds and dealt only in gold coin. Democrats, he noted, had created this system after the Panic of 1837 revealed the disastrous consequences of the government involvement with banks. The secretary urged Congress to compare the impact of government

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[75] Ibid.

fiscal policy during the panics of 1837 and 1857. In 1837, he observed, "the demand of the government for its funds ... weakened the banks, crippled their resources, and added to the general panic and pressure." In 1857, however, "the disbursements by the government of its funds, which it kept in its own vaults, supplied the banks with specie, strengthened their hands, and would thus have enabled them to afford relief, when it was so much needed, if they had been in a condition to do it."[76]

Yet the secretary did not ignore the need for a concrete reform program in response to the crisis. While firm in his determination that the government should not fund public relief projects, he did note that normal government operations required large expenditures on numerous construction projects. Even if the people possessed no legitimate right to expect government sponsored relief projects, they had every right to expect their government to fulfill its contracts and commitments. Consequently, he advised that no construction projects already undertaken be cancelled. To this extent, he reasoned, "the people may look with propriety to the operations of the government for relief." That said, he announced his intention of cancelling all nonessential projects for which contracts had not yet been signed.[77]

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[76] Ibid., pp. 19-23.

[77] Ibid., pp. 11-13.

Cobb had entered office determined to streamline the operations of the treasury department. Upon assuming his duties, he began dispatching special inspectors to customs houses around the country. He instructed these inspectors to prepare reports touching on office hours observed, the number and compensation of employees, and whether the number of employees appeared proportional to the work required. In addition, he requested data on the outside business involvements of employees and their impact on customs house activities. He also wanted to insure that each custom house functioned in full compliance with all laws regarding the handling of government funds. Whenever possible, he sought suggestions for reducing both operational expenses as well as the number of employees. The onset of the panic only served to heighten his sense of urgency.[78]

In keeping with this determination to protect the public treasury from waste and abuse, Cobb urged Congress to rationalize its system of funding federal construction projects. To protect the government from "improvident

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[78] Howell Cobb to C. P. Cooper, April 6, 1857; Howell Cobb to J. B. Guthrie, April 22, 1857; Howell Cobb to John Hubbard, May 14, 1857; August 17, 1858; Howell Cobb to Hugh Anderson, December 5, 1857; Howell Cobb to Robert S. Sproule, January 5, 1858; July 30, 1858; October 29, 1859; Howell Cobb to Josiah T. Spriggs, October 11, 1858; Howell Cobb to John Babson, April 23, 1859; Howell Cobb to Murray Whalen, March 29, 1860, Correspondence of the Secretary of the Treasury, Miscellaneous Letters, Record Group 56.2.1, National Archives, Washington D.C.; Howell Cobb to John Faunce, February 12, 1858, Howell Cobb Papers, Robert W. Woodruff Library, Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia.

expenditures ... as well as to secure equality and justice to different localities," he advised that federal buildings "should be first erected at those points where the largest amount of business is transacted." Observing that the legislature made special appropriations to cover the costs of these projects, he reminded Congress that the costs of operations and maintenance for the completed projects became a regular expense of government and a permanent drain on its resources. Even as government revenues "rapidly diminished," he commented, "these charges are daily increasing in amount." He obliquely suggested that far too many federal construction projects reflected more of political "pork" rather than any legitimate need of government.[79]

Declaring that "the true cause" of the panic resulted from the "undue expansion of the credit system," he offered a thoroughly Jacksonian system of reforms to avoid such abuses in the future. While the public properly attributed the nation's financial difficulties to banks, the secretary maintained that the reckless activities of railroad corporations had played a role nearly as important in pushing the credit system to the point of collapse. Although the only solution to the present crisis lay in a quick "liquidation and settlement," he counselled that the likelihood of future "revulsions" could be reduced by a "compulsory bankrupt law" for banks and railroads. Failure

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[79] Treasury Report, 1857, pp. 10-11.

of such corporations to meet their legal obligations, he admonished, should result in their mandatory "civil death."[80]

The secretary believed a federal law regulating such economically powerful institutions necessary because of "the ruinous effects produced by their operations when carried beyond legitimate bounds." The object of the proposed bankruptcy law, he avowed "is not to injure them, but to protect the community ... to restrain their operations within proper limits, and thereby insure to the country all the benefits they are capable of conferring, without the accompanying hazards of wild speculations and ruinous revulsions." As proof of his assertion, he reported that since 1849 the amount of specie in American banks had climbed from $43,000,000 to $60,000,000. During the same period, their issues of paper currency had exploded from $114,743,415 to $214,778,822. His proposed bankruptcy law, he assured, would restrain such reckless behavior. He further suggested that the states could enhance the benefits of this proposal if they emulated the Independent Treasury system and moved towards a metallic currency by abolishing all banknotes under twenty dollars.[81]

Cobb's report received an enthusiastic reception from most of the country's Democrats and from many former Democrats now in Republican ranks. Brother John rejoiced

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[80] Ibid., pp. 17-23.

[81] Ibid.

that it "will be popular with the people -- every body except the Banks & other monopolists." These favorable reactions notwithstanding, little came of the report. Despite some grousing from Republican ranks, Congress moved promptly to authorize the $20,000,000 loan that the treasury secretary had requested, but the proposed bankruptcy law urged by both Cobb and Buchanan died in committee. Nor did Congress manifest any inclination to rationalize its process of allocating funds for construction projects. In truth, the first session of the Thirty-Fifth Congress spent relatively little time on economic issues. Congressmen as well as members of the administration -- and to a considerable degree the public -- recognized the Lecompton crisis as far more important.[82]

In each of his three succeeding annual reports to Congress, and in numerous supplemental communications, the secretary continued to press for the adoption of his proposals. He continued to do so even after the nation's recovery from the panic was well under way. As the worst aspects of the panic faded into memory, however, any chances for his success completely evaporated.[83]

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[82] John B. Lamar to Mary Ann Cobb, December 13, 1857, Howell Cobb Papers; Athens Southern Banner, January 14, 1858; Huston, The Panic of 1857, pp. 114-127.

[83] Senate Executive Documents, Thirty-Fifth Congress, Second Session, Ex. Doc. #2 (Serial 979) pp. 18-19 (Hereafter: Treasury Report, 1858); Senate Executive Documents, Thirty-Sixth Congress, First Session, Ex. Doc. # 3 (Serial 1027), pp. 11-12 (Hereafter: Treasury Report,

Although Congress failed to act on most of his proposals, the secretary did not relent in his determination to reduce the expenditures of his department. Assuming that congressional silence implied consent, he refused to push ahead with construction of federal buildings which had not yet been contracted -- even though Congress had appropriated the necessary funds. When consulted by congressional committee chairmen about additional construction projects, he consistently recommended against them. He stepped up his appointment of special inspectors to evaluate treasury department operations and suggest cuts. He implemented these suggestions whenever he legally could do so without specific congressional approval. By December, 1859, he estimated that his efforts had reduced the cost of collecting revenue by some $500,000. He once more reminded Congress that far more could be saved if the national legislature would act on his proposals.[84]

Publicly Cobb did not flinch in his determination to reduce government expenditures, but privately he conceded that as a practical politician and as a compassionate man it

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1859); House Executive Documents, Thirty-Sixth Congress, Second Session, Ex. Doc. #2 (Serial 1093), pp. 10-11 (Hereafter: Treasury Report, 1860).

[84] Howell Cobb to C. C. Clay, January 26, 1858; Howell Cobb to John Cochran, April 3, 1858, Correspondence of the Secretary of the Treasury, Letters Sent to Committees of Congress, Record Group 56.2.1, National Archives, Washington D.C.; Treasury Report, 1858, pp. 18-19; Treasury Report, 1859, pp. 9-12.

pained him to dismiss faithful civil servants -- particularly when those dismissed were also loyal Democrats. "It is hard ... to reduce the number of offices any where," he lamented, "In one place it ruins the party -- in another it falls heavily upon faithful men who have served a long time in their places." Still, he saw no alternative. Declaring that "I have to deal with the matter as it stands -- and not as I would have it," he concluded that "an honest and conscientious officer" could pursue no other course. Few of those who lost their jobs probably sympathized with the secretary's dilemma. More than seven years after Cobb left office, one disgruntled Tennessean complained that Nashville's application for a customs house had been "fraudulently and wickedly withheld from us by a Rebel Secy of the Treasury (Howell Cobb) and it certainly ought to be restored to us."[85]

When the secretary submitted his first report to Congress in December 1857, he believed the worst of the crisis over and based his revenue estimates on that assumption. By May, 1858, it became clear that the economy was not recovering as quickly as anticipated and that actual receipts would fall about $10,000,000 below expectation.

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[85] Howell Cobb to William Porcher Miles, April 22, 1859, William Porcher Miles Papers, Southern Historical Collection, Library of the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, North Carolina; (?) to William B. Campbell, February 17, 1867, Campbell Family Papers, Special Collections Library, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina.

Appropriations by Congress which also exceeded his estimates and the expense of an unexpected military expedition against the Mormons in Utah added to the fiscal difficulty. Cobb remained steadfast, however, in his commitment to preserving the Tariff of 1857 unaltered. Repeating his earlier assertions that it had not yet received a fair test, he requested instead that Congress authorize an additional loan of $15,000,000.[86]

By this point the English Bill had been adopted and Congress turned its full attention to the loan request. Protectionist elements within the Republican party used this opportunity to renew their calls for an adjustment of tariff rates as a means of relieving public suffering. Democrats, with their free trade tradition, vigorously rejected such arguments in terms similar those used by Cobb. Retrenchment and low taxes, they insisted, offered the best governmental response to the panic. The Republicans joined the Democrats in extolling the virtues of frugality, but neither party made significant efforts to bring government spending into line with its revenues. Congress authorized the loan late in the session. Within a matter of days, the president and his financial minister became convinced that the amount should be increased to $20,000,000. After further angry debate, the

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[86] Senate Executive Documents, Thirty-Fifth Congress, First Session, Ex. Doc. #60, pp. 1-3.

request for the additional $5,000,000 received congressional sanction.[87]

Subsequent sessions of the Thirty-Fifth and Thirty-Sixth Congresses proved no more eager to embark on a real program of retrenchment than their predecessor. While government receipts improved in 1858 and 1859, they still fell below expenditures for much of that time. Consequently, Cobb had no alternative save to request additional loans on a regular basis throughout his tenure. A new economic downturn in late 1860 clouded his closing weeks in the treasury department. Only in 1859, did the secretary have the pleasure of seeing the budget approach balance. Even then, shortfalls in the Post Office and War Department threatened the momentarily brightening picture. With a mixture of rueful humor and hope, Cobb reported to the president "save us from deficiencies & the Treasury will walk through the fiscal year 'like a thing of life.'"[88]

Throughout 1857 and much of 1858, Cobb and President Buchanan agreed that a policy of retrenchment rather than tariff adjustments embodied the best way of coping with the government's fiscal difficulties. By late 1858, however, Buchanan began to deviate from this position. While both the

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[87] Huston, The Panic of 1857, pp. 129-133.

[88] Treasury Report, 1858; Treasury Report, 1859; Treasury Report, 1860; Howell Cobb to James Buchanan, August, 2, 1858, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, p. 440; Huston, The Panic of 1857, pp. 137, 173-194.

president and the secretary acknowledged the need for additional revenues, Buchanan's shift in position reflected his alarm over the fall elections in Pennsylvania. There, unlike most of the northern states, Republicans effectively blended the tariff issue and public anger over the Lecompton debacle into an effective weapon. They used it to inflict a stinging defeat on the president's party in his home state.[89]

The outcome in Pennsylvania came as no surprise. Cobb had predicted several months before the elections that "the greatest trouble will be in Illinois produced by Douglass' [sic] course, and in Pennsylvania on account of the tariff." Buchanan himself responded to the results in his home state with the observation that "Well! we have met the enemy ... & we are theirs. This I have anticipated for three months. Yesterday ... we had a merry time of it, laughing ... over our crushing defeat. It is so great that it is almost absurd." From home, the president received an urgent warning that "Forney has created an impression that you are so much under Southern influence that you will not stand by Pennsylvania on the Tariff." Unless Buchanan disabused the state's voters of this notion, Pennsylvania could never be redeemed. Although the president doubted the efficacy of a protectionist policy, he nevertheless urged, in his 1858 message to Congress, that tariff rates be raised and that the

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[89] Huston, The Panic of 1857, pp. 139-140, 144-172.

ad valorem system be replaced with a schedule of specific duties.[90]

For the only time prior to his resignation from the cabinet in 1860, Cobb vigorously disagreed with the president in public. In his own report to Congress, Cobb refused to endorse Buchanan's move towards protectionism. While he agreed that Congress legitimately might raise rates in some minor way, he continued to insist that the temporary nature of the "exigency" best could be met by temporary measures rather than a permanent tax increase. If tariff rates must be raised, he pleaded, let the original purpose of the 1857 legislation be preserved. Let the purpose of the increase be restricted to raising revenue needed by the treasury. He denounced any thought of returning to specific duties.[91]

This open split between the president and his treasury secretary generated considerable public comment. In an unusual turnabout, Republicans found much good in the tariff portion of the president's message. Although Pennsylvania Democrats criticized the secretary for disloyalty to his chief, more northern Democrats applauded Cobb's adherence to

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[90] Ibid., pp. 137-138, 168-175; Howell Cobb to Robert M. T. Hunter, July 26, 1858, in Charles Henry Ambler, ed., Correspondence of Robert M. T. Hunter, 1826-1876 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1918), p. 261; James Buchanan to Harriet Lane, October 15, 1858, cited in Huston, The Panic of 1857, p. 166; Duff Green to James Buchanan, October 14, 1858, Buchanan Papers.

[91] Treasury Report, 1858, pp. 6-16.

principle and praised his report "'as one of the ablest that has ever issued from that Department."[92]

If anything, the South proved even more enthusiastic about Cobb's stance. While negatively impacted by the panic early on, the South had recovered more rapidly from its effects than the rest of the country. Besides prompting boasts about the superiority of the South's "King Cotton" over the manufacturing and commercial economy of the North, it also hardened southern opposition to revisions in tariff policy which would benefit the North at the South's expense. The Milledgeville Federal Union praised Cobb's report as "a very important State paper" because it so effectively refuted arguments that "the financial convulsion [which] swept over the country last year was owing to a reduction of the tariff." Although the president's proposal generated long debates in Congress, Democrats -- bolstered by Cobb's report -- blocked all attempts to adjust the tariff.[93]

Surprisingly, Cobb's tariff rebellion exerted no adverse influence on his relations with Buchanan. "Old Buck" intended his shift in policy as a gesture to the Pennsylvania Democracy. He lacked any confidence in it as either a sound ideological or practical economic measure. Hence, he apparently felt no inclination to enforce conformity on Cobb

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[92] Huston, The Panic of 1857, pp. 174-178.

[93] Milledgeville Federal Union, December 28, 1858; Huston, The Panic of 1857, pp. 179-194.

-- or other cabinet members -- who objected to the change. Indeed, on this policy the president stood alone. Cobb reportedly commiserated that "the President is opposing the administration." Gazaway Lamar shared this view, and saw the president's change of policy as a confirmation of his previous assessment that Buchanan could not be relied upon. "Mr. Buchanan has deserted his Party on the Tariff question & complains that the party left him," he groused, "I advised Mr. C to cut loose from the Cabinet on the first leading point & set up for himself." Cobb had no intention of heeding such advice, however, at least not over an issue on which he had prevailed.[94]

IV

Cobb's treasury department duties involved more than Kansas and economic policy. He also led administration efforts to quash attempts to revive the African slave trade. He probably found his activities on this front rendered somewhat awkward by the prominent role played in these plots by his kinsman, Charles A. L. Lamar. Charlie, the hotheaded son and business partner of Gazaway Lamar, adhered to the Ultra faction in Georgia. He believed the federal laws banning the importation of slaves from Africa unconstitutional and unenforceable, and rebuffed all arguments to the contrary. What, he demanded, was the

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[94] New York Daily Tribune, cited in Huston, The Panic of 1857, p. 184; Gazaway B. Lamar to John B. Lamar, March 15, 1859, Howell Cobb Papers.

difference between going to Africa for slaves and going to Virginia? John Lamar half-jokingly warned that Charlie seemed destined for prison -- "if he escape a lunatic asylum."[95]

Whatever his feelings of awkwardness, Cobb resolutely confronted cousin Charlie's challenge to federal authority. Lamar's first bid to violate the law came in July, 1857. When customs officials seized his vessel, the E. A. Rawlins, on suspicion of being a slaver, Charlie appealed to the treasury secretary for its release. After a thorough search of the vessel failed to produce conclusive evidence of criminal intent, Cobb had no alternative but to comply with the request. Only a loss of nerve by the captain of the Rawlins prevented Lamar from importing his first cargo of contraband Africans in 1857.[96]

Having failed in his first attempt, Charlie now sought to enlist the aid of the treasury secretary in bringing a test case on the federal ban before the Supreme Court. First by letter and then by a personal meeting at Cobb's Washington home, cousin Charlie urged Cobb to permit him to send a ship to Africa for a cargo of blacks. Upon its return to the United States, he intended to unload the vessel in "open

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[95] Tom Henderson Wells, The Slave Ship Wanderer (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1967), pp. 4-5; John B. Lamar to Mary Ann Cobb, June 12, 1858; Gazaway B. Lamar to John B. Lamar, October 16, 1858, Howell Cobb Papers.

[96] Wells, The Slave Ship Wanderer, pp. 6-7.

day," thus permitting the issue to be tested "'amicably.'" If the Supreme Court ruled against him, he vowed to abandon the fight. As proof of his honest intentions, he pledged that his vessel would sail in consort with a United States warship both to and from the African coast. Not surprisingly, Cobb declined involvement in this scheme.[97]

Lamar then voiced his determination to attempt a circumvention of federal law by legal subterfuge. Arguing that the existing law did not prohibit the importation of African "apprentices," he informed the secretary that he intended to pursue this course unless Cobb believed it would "damage his [own] prospects." If Cobb believed these activities would be harmful to himself, Charlie promised to "stop it there." According to Lamar's recollection some two years later, Cobb replied "'go home & make your application: it can't effect me." On receipt of such an application, Cobb indicated his intention to submit the entire matter to Attorney General Black for a ruling.[98]

Acting through his Charleston agent, Lafitte and Company, Lamar sought clearance for the Richard Cobden "for the purpose of taking on board African emigrants ... and returning with the same to a port in the United States." Lamar's request raised the suspicion of the Charleston

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[97] Charles A. L. Lamar to O. H. Prince, cited in O. H. Prince to Mary Ann Cobb, February 26, 1858, Howell Cobb Papers.

[98] Ibid.

customs collector. He denied clearance -- as Lamar had anticipated -- and appealed to Cobb for guidance.[99]

To Lamar's chagrin, the secretary did not refer the application to Attorney General Black. Instead, he endorsed the collector's action. The clear intent of the voyage, he reasoned, "must be either to import Africans, to be disposed of as slaves, or to be bound to labor or service -- or else to bring them into the country like other emigrants ... entitled ... to ... freedom." The first possibility violated federal law. The second would violate the law of every slave state and that of nearly all the free. In those few free states that theoretically permitted such "emigrants," he observed, the Africans would not "receive a tolerant, much less a cordial welcome." Lacking any prospect for honest profit or compelling humanitarian motive, he could only conclude that Lamar had criminal intent. While conceding that he generally opposed government officials acting on the mere suspicion of guilt, he believed the criminal intent in this case so clear that simple duty required action. Despite publication of a vigorous protest by Lamar, the secretary did not relent. Cousin Charlie's second venture now collapsed.[100]

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[99] Ibid.; Howell Cobb to William F. Colcock, May 22, 1858, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, pp. 434-439.

[100] Wells, The Slave Ship Wanderer, pp. 6-7; Howell Cobb to William F. Colcock, May 22, 1858, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, pp. 434-439.

Undeterred either by failure or the feeling that Cobb had betrayed him by not referring the matter to the attorney general, Lamar next secured possession of the Wanderer. Lamar and his associates had the vessel, which had been built as a yacht, modified to carry a cargo of slaves. They dispatched it to the African coast in July, 1858. Returning, the vessel made landfall at Jekyll Island along a lonely stretch of the Georgia coast in November with some 400 African captives on board. There, the African captives were off-loaded and dispersed into Georgia and South Carolina. Rumors of these activities began to circulate. Government officials undertook an investigation which turned up considerable evidence -- including the Wanderer and several of the imported blacks. The indictment and arrest of Lamar and several co-conspirators soon followed.[101]

Attorney General Black demonstrated little enthusiasm for the case. Cobb manifested no such reluctance, however, and pressed hard for a vigorous prosecution. He secured the appointment of Henry R. Jackson as special United States attorney and assured brother John that "the government will spare no effort in enforcing the law." "Our friend Charlie is in for it at last," he chortled, "and is beginning ... to

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[101] Wells, The Slave Ship Wanderer, pp. 13-46; Charles A. L. Lamar to O. H. Prince, cited in O. H. Prince to Mary Ann Cobb, February 26, 1858, Howell Cobb Papers.

find out that the people of Ga. have no sympathy with ... speculating violators of the law."[102]

Cobb's determined response to cousin Charlie's activities did enjoy substantial southern support. The secretary's refusal to order clearance for the Richard Cobden prompted one grateful southerner to voice confidence that "our country will allow no revival of this abominable thing." Cobb received similar expressions of support following the seizure of the Wanderer and the arrest of Lamar. W. C. Daniell, writing from Lamar's home city of Savannah, offered assurances that "the result of the effort to revive the slave trade in Georgia has received so prompt and stern a rebuke from our citizens that it will not be renewed." Daniell believed the opposition to any revival of the trade was "almost unanimous." J. Hamilton Couper, father of one of the prosecutors in the case, shared much of Daniell's assessment. Yet he also appreciated the powerful pull that the defense of slavery exerted on the southern mind. "The fear of being accused of abolition feeling," he lamented, "has deterred the sounder minds of the south from openly opposing the radical

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[102] Wells, The Slave Ship Wanderer, pp. 38, 51-52, 57, 61-62; Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, January 6, 1859; Henry R. Jackson to Howell Cobb, January 29, 1859, Howell Cobb Papers.

and demoralizing principle of ... reopening the slave trade."[103]

An embarrassed Gazaway Lamar took pains to insure that Cobb knew he did not condone Charlie's actions. "I am not on Charles' side in the controversy with Mr. Cobb," he avowed, "& I have repeatedly told him his errors." Regrettably, he confessed, "he is so impulsive, & so crazy on that negro question, that I can make no impression on him." Acknowledging the correctness of Cobb's position regarding both the Richard Cobden and the slave trade, he suggested that his headstrong son unintentionally had done the secretary "much good" with the public.[104]

Not everyone, however, agreed with Cobb's resolve to maintain the sanctity of federal law. Every southern state possessed a cadre of political leaders, editors, government officials, and citizens fully prepared to undermine the ban on importing Africans. At about the same time that the Wanderer approached the Georgia coast with its tightly packed human cargo, a group of southern-rights men in the Georgia legislature launched a bid to repeal Georgia's state

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[103] J. J. Flournoy to Howell Cobb, June 6, 1858; W. C. Daniell to Howell Cobb, February 5, 1859; Thomas R. R. Cobb to Howell Cobb, August 24, 1858; Howell Cobb Papers; J. Hamilton Couper to Hamilton Couper, December 31, 1858, Wanderer Papers, Black History Collection, Library of Congress, Washington D.C. (Hereafter: Wanderer Papers); Nevins, The Emergence of Lincoln, I, 433-440.

[104] Gazaway B. Lamar to John B. Lamar, October 16, 1858, Howell Cobb Papers.

restriction on importing Africans. Whether this movement represented part of Charlie's overall strategy is not clear, but its timing clearly raised the possibility.[105]

Supporters of this southern-rights legislation offered a clever defense of the measure. Existing federal law, they maintained, rendered the state prohibition unnecessary. Moreover, the retention of the superfluous state law served as a needless "negative reflection on the institution of slavery." By simultaneously denying their own radical motives and exploiting the members' "fear of being accused of abolition feelings," the bill's backers hoped to win a victory. Cobbites, seeing through this ruse, protested that the "real object ... is to make way for the passage of a Law authorizing the introduction of Africans & thus bring the state in direct conflict with the General Government." Despite their fears of being labelled abolitionists, a majority of members summoned sufficient courage to defeat the measure.[106]

Ultimately, Cobb's determination, the efforts of the prosecutors, and the public opposition to the African slave trade all failed to produce a guilty verdict in court. A variety of forces influenced this outcome. Charlie Lamar's own actions did much to frustrate the prosecutors. Through

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[105] John E. Ward to Howell Cobb, November 21, 1858, ibid.; Nevins, The Emergence of Lincoln, I, 433-440.

[106] John E. Ward to Howell Cobb, November 21, 1858, Howell Cobb Papers.

the assistance of a United States marshal and a local magistrate with strong southern-rights sentiments, he managed to deny prosecutors Henry Jackson and Hamilton Couper the use of their most compelling physical evidence -- the Wanderer and the recovered African captives. When friendly officials proved inadequate, cousin Charlie resorted to physical force to eliminate evidence. A friendly federal judge only simplified matters for the slavers.[107]

Yet even without these advantages, Lamar and his fellow conspirators well might have gone free. In this and related cases after 1858, southerners proved increasingly reluctant to convict one of their own in any case involving the legitimacy of slavery. Frustrated by the Lecompton crisis, the growing difficulty of securing enforcement of the fugitive slave law in the northern states, and John Brown's raid on the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia, southern judges and juries retaliated by refusing to convict -- or even indict -- those accused of violating the prohibition on the African slave trade.[108]

Moderates -- including Cobb -- appreciated the dangers posed by this escalation of lawlessness justified by moral appeals to a "higher law" than the laws of man. "If the

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[107] Wells, The Slave Ship Wanderer, pp. 44-47, 49-50, 54, 59, 60-62; Henry R. Jackson to Howell Cobb, January 29, 1859, Howell Cobb Papers.

[108] Nevins, The Emergence of Lincoln, I, 433-440; Wells, The Slave Ship Wanderer, pp. 45-46, 49-52, 61-62.

states give impunity to crime," J. Hamilton Couper warned, "there is an end of the reign of law ... there is an end of all true government." The "lovers of law, of morality, and of the country," he avowed, must overcome their fear of being denounced as traitors to their section or risk seeing "morals, humanity, and law [placed] at defiance." The Washington Union gave voice to a similar sentiment. If the adherence to "higher law" doctrines prevailed, it conceded, "our 'institutions will have proved a failure.'"[109]

Even before the Wanderer cases had run their course, Charlie Lamar accused Cobb and the Buchanan administration of persecuting him to curry favor with northern voters. It cannot be denied that -- in the aftermath of the Lecompton fiasco -- the administration desperately needed to recover strength in the North. Nor can a probable political motive be dismissed in Cobb's decision to reject personally Lamar's application for the Richard Cobden instead of passing it on to the Attorney General as he had said he would do. A strongly worded repudiation of Lamar's scheme seemed likely to restore at least some of the northern support he had lost by endorsing the Lecompton Constitution.[110]

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[109] Washington Union, cited in J. Hamilton Couper to Hamilton Couper, December 31, 1858; J. Hamilton Couper to Hamilton Couper, December 31, 1858, Wanderer Papers.

[110] Wells, The Slave Ship Wanderer, p. 50; Charles A. L. Lamar to O. H. Prince, cited in O. H. Prince to Mary Ann Cobb, February 26, 1858, Howell Cobb Papers.

Yet the sincerity of Cobb's opposition to activities by Lamar and other southern hotheads scarcely can be questioned. Some months before being named to the cabinet, he vigorously had voiced his opposition to reviving the African slave trade. Just as he deplored the reckless words and deeds of antislavery men in the North, he deplored the provocative actions of southern men.[111]

Like J. Hamilton Couper and the Washington Union, Cobb now clung desperately to the idea that the country could be saved only by a rigid adherence to the law. He believed this adherence especially necessary for those laws that some groups or individuals found morally repugnant. Herein, may rest the origins of his deep bitterness towards Douglas. In denouncing the English Bill as a "fraud" to be resisted, the Illinois senator gave encouragement to extremists throughout the country that they need not yield obedience to laws they deemed offensive. Cobb defined his own position in the starkest possible terms. "I am utterly ... opposed to the reopening of the African Slave trade," he declared, "& I am opposed to Congressional legislation on Slavery in the territories." If the Democracy abandoned principle in favor

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[111] James Mitchell to Howell Cobb, December 24, 1856; Howell Cobb to James Mitchell, December 30, 1856, Howell Cobb Papers.

of "higher law" doctrines on either issue, then "I am ruled out of the party."[112]

[112] Howell Cobb to (?), August 20, 1859, C. C. Jones Collection, Special Collections Library, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina; Speech of Honorable James Jackson, February 10, 1859, in Milledgeville Federal Union, March 3, 1859.

HOWELL COBB OF GEORGIA
A BIOGRAPHY

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in

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Chapter Eighteen

"The Days of the Union Are Numbered"

Throughout Cobb's years in the Treasury Department -- indeed even before he had been named to the cabinet -- he maintained a constant watch over his presidential prospects. By mid-1858, he had begun to pay increasing attention to the practicalities of winning the Democratic nomination. Recognizing that all his hopes for the presidency rested on his ability to control the Georgia Democracy, he focused his efforts on insuring a Georgia delegation to the national Democratic convention committed to his advancement.[1]

His first and most important task in this regard involved effecting a reconciliation between Governor Joseph Brown and John Lumpkin, Cobb's long-time ally in Georgia's Fifth District. Lumpkin, who harbored some resentment toward Brown because of his own inability to win the Democratic gubernatorial nomination in 1857, had grown increasingly resentful because of Brown's removal of Lumpkin loyalists from jobs on the state railroad. He began making plans to

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[1] John E. Ward to Howell Cobb, January 30, 1857; November 2, 1858; November 21, 1858; A. Birdsall to Howell Cobb, February 4, 1857; J. W. H. Underwood to Howell Cobb, February 5, 1858; John Letcher to Howell Cobb, July 29, 1858; John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, October 14, 1858; October 25, 1858; November 18, 1859; Thomas Reade Rootes Cobb to Howell Cobb, November 13, 1858; Oliver H. Prince to John A. Cobb, October 8, 1859, Howell Cobb Papers, Felix Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia (Hereafter: Howell Cobb Papers).

challenge Brown's renomination in 1859. While Cobb might have thrown his support behind a Lumpkin challenge to Brown's renomination, several prominent Cobb men warned that Brown's popularity, a result of his opposition to bank relief measures during the Panic of 1857 and his administration of the state railroad, rendered such a bid futile. Robert Martin spoke for many Cobbites when he advised his chief that "no man can beat him .... He is the peoples man by all odds."[2]

Lumpkin also reluctantly conceded the hopelessness of challenging Brown and, with some coaxing from Cobb, opened negotiations with the governor through intermediaries. He did so, however, with the warning that the deep animosity towards Brown felt by Lumpkin men who had lost patronage jobs threatened to disrupt any settlement he reached. He doubted his ability to control these men and advised that the secretary rely on federal patronage jobs to secure their acquiescence. For himself, Lumpkin added, he could yield to

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[2] John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, April 28, 1857; October 14, 1858; October 25, 1868; November 14, 1858; December 28, 1858; Thomas Reade Rootes Cobb to Howell Cobb, November 13, 1858; James Jackson to Howell Cobb, July 14, 1858; John E. Ward to Howell Cobb, November 21, 1858; Robert E. Martin to Howell Cobb, December 25, 1858, ibid.; Joseph E. Brown to Howell Cobb, May 7, 1858, Letter Book, Joseph E. Brown Papers, Felix Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia (Hereafter: Brown Papers).

no arrangement with Brown which failed to "embrace our friends and be satisfactory to them."[3]

Brown, hoping to eliminate any threats to his position, proved receptive to these overtures. The governor insisted that his removal of Lumpkin men from the state railroad had been motivated less by political considerations than by a comprehensive plan of reform. After lengthy discussions, a tenuous peace between the two men was effected and Brown indicated a willingness to support Cobb for the presidency provided that Cobbites offered no opposition to his renomination. As a demonstration of his good will, the governor secured Tom Cobb a patronage job codifying state laws.[4]

Brown slyly structured this arrangement to his entire satisfaction. He insisted that -- because Cobb's seniority in the party "ranked the governor" -- the secretary should endorse his reelection before he made any declaration on

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[3] John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, April 28, 1857; October 14, 1858; October 25, 1868; November 14, 1858; December 28, 1858; Thomas Reade Rootes Cobb to Howell Cobb, November 13, 1858; James Jackson to Howell Cobb, July 14, 1858; John E. Ward to Howell Cobb, November 21, 1858; Robert E. Martin to Howell Cobb, December 25, 1858, Howell Cobb Papers.

[4] John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, October 25, 1858; November 14, 1858; December 29, 1858; March 15, 1859; Thomas Reade Rootes Cobb to Howell Cobb, November 13, 1858; Joseph E. Brown to Howell Cobb, November 15, 1858; Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, April 6, 1859, Howell Cobb Papers; Joseph E. Brown to John H. Lumpkin, January 5, 1859; Joseph E. Brown to Thomas Reade Rootes Cobb January 7, 1859; January 14, 1859; Joseph E. Brown to Howell Cobb, February 12, 1859, Letter Book, Brown Papers.

Cobb's behalf. Moreover, he carefully avoided actually pledging his support for Cobb's presidential ambitions. Nevertheless, he strongly implied that any movement by Cobb would be "met on halfway ground," and that he "sincerely [desired] a cooperation with you and your friends."[5]

To further reduce the possibility of a change of mind by Lumpkin, Brown suggested with Cobb's approval, that the Fifth District leader seek reelection to his old congressional seat. Rumors in the opposition press soon had it that Cobb would get the presidency, Brown the governorship, and Lumpkin Alfred Iverson's seat in the United States Senate. Brown's public denials of this deal, as well as Cobb's private insistence that he could not afford to become entangled in a senatorial contest between Democratic factions call these rumors into doubt. Lumpkin himself later suggested that the secretary use the promise of Iverson's seat as bait to draw Brown into a more open support of Cobb's presidential bid. Indeed, Cobbites seriously considered seeking Iverson's seat for Cobb -- if his presidential plans went awry.[6]

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[5] John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, October 25, 1858; November 14, 1858; December 29, 1858; March 15, 1859; Thomas Reade Rootes Cobb to Howell Cobb, November 13, 1858; Joseph E. Brown to Howell Cobb, November 15, 1858; Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, April 6, 1859, Howell Cobb Papers; Joseph E. Brown to John H. Lumpkin, January 5, 1859; Joseph E. Brown to Howell Cobb, February 12, 1859, Letter Book, Brown Papers.

[6] Joseph E. Brown to Howell Cobb, February 12, 1859; Joseph E. Brown to John H. Lumpkin, April 13, 1859, Letter Book, Brown Papers; James Spullock to John H. Lumpkin,

Not all Cobbites allowed their leader's hopes for cooperation with Brown to override their fundamental distrust of the governor. John E. Ward, preparing to depart for his diplomatic mission to China, advised Cobb to place no confidence in Brown. While conceding that "opposition [to him] would be useless," he still expressed absolute certainty that Brown would never lend his support to Cobb's advancement.[7]

Others, such as Judge James Spullock, paid lip service to the Brown-Cobb alliance, but apparently continued to work for Brown's defeat. Spullock's activities proved particularly embarrassing because Cobb had secured Spullock's appointment as United States marshal for Georgia. He had done so on Lumpkin's advice that his appointment would stop just these activities. Lumpkin had personally guaranteed Spullock's good behavior to both the governor and the secretary. When Brown received reports of Spullock's efforts to secure delegations hostile to him at the state convention, he promptly complained to both Lumpkin and Cobb. Lumpkin now advised Cobb to remove the marshal rather than jeopardize good relations with the governor. Although Spullock denied

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November 16, 1859; John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, March 15, 1859; undated manuscript; Thomas Reade Rootes Cobb, September 11, 1859; Howell Cobb Papers; Atlanta Southern Confederacy, cited in Athens Southern Watchman, April 14, 1859; May 12, 1859; Horace Montgomery, Cracker Parties (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1950), pp. 222-223.

[7] John E. Ward to Howell Cobb, November 21, 1858, Howell Cobb Papers.

engaging in any anti-Brown activities, he once more pledged his acceptance of the new alliance to keep his job.[8]

Despite these efforts by Cobb and Lumpkin, Brown had no intention of being firmly bound by any agreement -- either stated or implied -- that he made with the two. Motivated by a desire to eliminate threats to his reelection, the governor felt few qualms about betraying his new allies if such became necessary to his own interest. Even after implying his support for Cobb's presidential bid, he urged Alexander H. Stephens "not to say positively that you would not accept the nomination of the Charleston Convention if tendered." Much, he advised, could change within a year. When reports of his anti-Cobb activities occasionally reached Cobbite ears, he coolly denied any wrongdoing.[9]

While the wooing of Brown progressed, Cobb labored to insure that the Democratic state gubernatorial convention did nothing to weaken his presidential chances. He mainly worried that "an effort may be made ... to give a turn to things to operate upon the Charleston convention." He

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[8] Joseph E. Brown to John H. Lumpkin, February 9, 1859; February 21, 1859; Joseph E. Brown to Howell Cobb, February 12, 1859, Letter Book, Brown Papers; John J. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, February 21, 1859; John H. Lumpkin to John B. Lamar, March 7, 1859, Howell Cobb Papers.

[9] Joseph H. Brown to Alexander H. Stephens, June 4, 1859; June 21, 1859, in Ulrich Bonnell Phillips, ed., The Correspondence of Robert Toombs, Alexander H. Stephens, and Howell Cobb (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1913), pp. 444-446; Joseph E. Brown to John H. Lumpkin, April 13, 1859, Letter Book, Brown Papers.

especially feared a potential alliance of Douglas Democrats and advocates of reopening the African slave trade. This "Douglas -- slave trading -- antiadministration party" would be dedicated to the enactment of a resolution endorsing the African slave trade as well as blocking the "usual resolution" endorsing the Buchanan administration. He believed these groups had a threefold purpose: to elevate Stephen Douglas; to weaken the administration; and to ruin himself.[10]

Cobb clearly appreciated the dangers inherent in an unfriendly convention. While he believed it important to block a resolution favoring the slave trade, he especially deemed a pro-Buchanan resolution essential to his presidential ambitions. Failure on this point, he noted, would "have an effect not only in Georgia, but throughout the Union." If he could not control his own state party on this relatively minor point, how could he hope to command the national Democracy.[11]

From Washington, the secretary and his lieutenants sought to bolster public support for the Buchanan administration. In Congress, cousin James Jackson offered

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[10] Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, April 6, 1859; May 23, 1859; James Jackson to Howell Cobb, May 30, 1853; A. F. Owen to Howell Cobb, June 9, 1859, Howell Cobb Papers; Athens Southern Banner, June 2, 1859; Montgomery, Cracker Parties, pp. 224-226.

[11] Athens, Southern Banner, June 2, 1859; Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar April 6, 1859; May 23, 1859, Howell Cobb Papers.

a coherent defense of administration policies in the face of ongoing sectional crisis. Cobb almost certainly helped mold his arguments. Emphasizing the theme of law and order which had become so important to Cobb as extremists across the country espoused dangerous "higher law" doctrines, Jackson warned that "this law of Conscience ... is a crown of absolute sovereignty placed upon the brow of every man." Recognizing that such an idea "involves a repudiation of ... civilized society," he defended the administration as a bulwark against approaching chaos. James Buchanan and his cabinet had assumed this position through an unwavering commitment to the enforcement of all laws. They had endorsed the Lecompton Constitution because it met all the requirements of the national Constitution and existing law. They had frustrated efforts to revive the African slave trade for the same reason. It now rested, he concluded, "on the moral force of public opinion" to save "our free institutions" by rallying to the president's support.[12]

In seeking to avert the potential disaster of an unfriendly convention, Cobbites even appealed to Stephens and Robert Toombs for support. Governor Brown lent his assistance to these efforts -- after Cobb made a flying trip to Georgia for direct consultations with his erstwhile ally. Cobbite pleas for justice to an administration with a strong

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[12] Speech of the Honorable James Jackson, February 10, 1859, in Milledgeville Federal Union, March 3, 1859.

pro-southern record ultimately exerted less influence on the two former Whigs -- or on Brown -- than did a desire to maintain harmony within Democratic ranks for the upcoming state elections. All three agreed that "a very general indorsement [sic] of the national administration is all that could be expected in Georgia, and that much ... it [is] the duty of the convention to give."[13]

Cobbite efforts paid off. When the convention met, it did all that Cobb reasonably could have expected. Convention managers introduced three resolutions. The first reaffirmed the Georgia Democracy's support for the Cincinnati Platform of 1856; the second, tepidly endorsed the Buchanan administration; and the third, called for Brown's renomination by acclamation. While delegates adopted the first and third resolutions without opposition, elements of the "Douglas -- slave trading -- antiadministration party" that Cobb had feared sought to block the second resolution. An impassioned recitation of President Buchanan's career-long record of support for the South's vital interests by Henry R. Jackson, however, helped defeat this movement. The

[13] John A. Cobb to John B. Lamar, May 5, 1859; May 8, 1859; James Jackson to Howell Cobb, May 30, 1859, Howell Cobb Papers; Joseph E. Brown to Howell Cobb, June 4, 1859, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, pp. 444-445.

convention then adopted the second resolution by a vote of 374-34.[14]

Cobb greeted these results with obvious relief -- despite charges by the opposition press that the convention had damned Buchanan "with faint praise." Although he and other Cobbites groused that the second resolution should have been more "emphatic" in praising the administration, he conceded that the convention had done enough to meet his most pressing needs. The Southern Banner mocked the opposition claims that the convention had partially condemned the president. Cobbites, it roared with more satisfaction than Cobb felt, had "passed [the resolution] just as they wanted it."[15]

With developments in Georgia appearing favorable to his chances, Cobb still fretted over lingering support for Stephen A. Douglas among elements of the state Democracy. Most troubling, Stephens persisted in his advocacy for the Illinois senator. Cobbites worried that Stephens would use his position to frustrate their leader's efforts to control the Georgia Democracy.[16]

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[14] Milledgeville Federal Union, June 21, 1859; Montgomery, Cracker Parties, pp. 225-226.

[15] Athens Southern Watchman, June 28, 1859; July 7, 1859; Athens Southern Banner, July 7, 1859; Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, June 21, 1859; Oliver H. Prince to John B. Lamar, July 9, 1859, Howell Cobb Papers.

[16] Thomas Reade Rootes Cobb to Howell Cobb, November 13, 1858; August 24, 1859; John H. Lumpkin to John B. Lamar, March 7, 1859; Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, April 6, 1859;

Even before the Democratic gubernatorial convention assembled in the spring of 1859, Stephens emerged as a significant threat to Cobb's advancement. Rumors circulated that he intended a presidential bid of his own. By March, Lumpkin warned John Lamar that "we are to have a contest in this state, between the friends of Gov. Cobb, and Mr. Stephens, for the presidential nomination in 1860." Lumpkin insisted that Cobbites must prepare for this eventuality "and act in concert to prevent [Cobb] being overthrown in his own state."[17]

Although Stephens regularly denied that he possessed any presidential ambitions, Cobb did not believe him. Stephens, he confided to Lamar, anticipated a "hot contest among southern men for the nomination" and a deadlock on the floor of the Charleston convention. Should such prove the case, Stephens expected the convention to turn to a "new man." He hardly could have forgotten that both James K. Polk and Franklin Pierce had been darkhorse candidates. Cobb charged that his rival now hoped to become one of these "Lightning Candidates" who waited "for the nomination to strike them like lightning -- when it is least expected." Even if sincere in his assertions regarding the presidency, however, Cobb and his lieutenants still worried that Stephens might

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May 23, 1859, Howell Cobb Papers.

[17] John H. Lumpkin to John B. Lamar, March 7, 1859; Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, April 6, 1859; May 23, 1859, Howell Cobb Papers.

employ a possible presidential race as a weapon to weaken him in Georgia and thus benefit Douglas.[18]

Despite his analysis of Stephens' intentions, Cobb sought to dissuade him from adhering to Douglas. Douglas, he insisted, "is now out of the way. His strength is gone even at the North." He informed Stephens that unnamed Douglas loyalists privately had confessed that sound party policy required the nomination of "a Southern man" at Charleston. Predicting that the Republicans would nominate William H. Seward of New York in 1860, he believed the country could only be saved from ruin if the Democratic convention at Charleston "make a nomination that will secure every southern State and will at the same time be sufficiently acceptable to the Northern Democracy to secure the soundest of the Northern states." Although Cobb refrained from saying so, he clearly believed himself the embodiment of that nominee. Stephens, however, remained unconvinced.[19]

Cobb's failure with Stephens notwithstanding, Cobbites still believed that Toombs might be won over -- if he could be separated from Stephens' influence. For his part, Toombs

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[18] Thomas E. Schott, Alexander H. Stephens of Georgia, A Biography (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), pp. 256-257, 266; Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, April 6, 1859, Howell Cobb Papers.

[19] Howell Cobb to Alexander H. Stephens, November 14, 1859, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, pp. 448-449.

at least appeared to play the hypocrite. In a private meeting with Tom Cobb, he forcefully avowed both his and Stephens' support for Cobb's presidential ambitions. He declared his belief that failure by the Georgia Democracy to send a Cobb delegation to the Democratic national convention in Charleston would "be unworthy of the state."[20]

Yet Toombs privately denounced Buchanan and his cabinet as "rabid and imbecile" and spoke often of his desire to see Senator Robert Hunter of Virginia receive the Democratic nomination. He also urged Stephens not to remove himself from presidential consideration. While doubtful that Douglas possessed adequate strength to claim the Democratic nomination for himself, Toombs felt sure that the Illinois senator could nominate any other man he chose. At the moment, he seemed inclined to endorse his Georgia supporter. Civic duty, he argued, required Stephens to accept the nomination if offered. Unaware of Toombs' real feelings, brother Tom praised him as "candid & sincere."[21]

Newspapers favorable to Douglas and hostile to the Cobb-Brown axis also proved troubling. Although several organs in Georgia favored Douglas' stance, the Augusta Constitutionalist proved the most aggressive.

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[20] Thomas Reade Rootes Cobb to Howell Cobb, August 24, 1859, Howell Cobb Papers.

[21] Robert Toombs to Thomas W. Thomas, December 4, 1859; Robert Toombs to Alexander H. Stephens, December 26, 1859; January 11, 1860, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, pp. 449-452, 455-456.

Constitutionalist editor James Gardner had been a candidate for the Democratic gubernatorial nomination in 1857. Cobb's firm support for Lumpkin and Brown's unexpected nomination had left the editor hostile to all three. By May, 1859, Cobb concluded that Gardner must be disciplined. Turning to James Smythe, former editor of the Augusta Republic, the secretary urged that an administration organ be established in the city. Smythe conceded this step might prove necessary, but suggested the propriety of first warning Gardner about likely consequences of his hostility. If this appeal failed, he advised that Cobb and his friends strike back hard. "The effort has been made and is now making," he warned, "to countermine you."[22]

Smythe moved promptly to implement this strategy, but after two conversations with Gardner he reluctantly admitted that "all is lost, so far as his paper is concerned." He had promised the dissident editor the governor's nomination two years hence and warned that the Cobb-Brown forces intended to establish a rival press pending a change in Constitutionalist editorial policy. Gardner rejected both the offer and the warning. Smythe concluded that "the only hope in this section is the establishment of an

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[22] Montgomery, Cracker Parties, pp. 218, 223-224; James Smythe to Howell Cobb, May 29, 1859, Howell Cobb Papers.

administration organ. The sooner this can be done the better it will be."[23]

Taking his own advice, Smythe immediately began raising funds for the new paper. Within a few weeks he had received pledges from Cobb, Henry R. Jackson, and others totaling $2,000. He enthusiastically pledged Cobb "the most cordial and effective support in my power." Almost as quickly as the venture had begun, however, it ended. Gardner, seeking to rob the movement against him of momentum, abruptly endorsed Brown's renomination. Although the editor refused to abandon his support for Douglas, the Cobbites apparently viewed his endorsement of Brown as a sufficient token of surrender and abandoned the effort.[24]

In an effort to undermine attempts by Stephens and a handful of newspapers to rehabilitate Douglas with Georgia voters, editors friendly to Cobb maintained a stream of criticism aimed at the "Little Giant." These attacks proved successful in maintaining the general feeling that Douglas had betrayed the South during the Lecompton Crisis and

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[23] James Smythe to Howell Cobb, June 3, 1859, Howell Cobb Papers.

[24] James Smythe to Howell Cobb, July 19, 1859, ibid.; Augusta Constitutionalist, June 18, 1859; July 30, 1859: Montgomery, Cracker Parties, pp. 223-224.

afterwards, but they had no impact on the hard-core Douglas supporters led by Stephens.[25]

Yet the persistence of any pro-Douglas sentiments in the South drove Cobbites to distraction. When Cobb spoke of preserving the Democratic party, brother Tom demanded to know if "it is worth saving." He could see no reason to preserve "a party that rewards traitors & turns its back on true men, whose presses laud Douglas ... and abuse <u>even at the South</u> Mr. Buchanan and his administration!" Observing that "the South has been faithless to every Northern man who has sacrificed himself at home ... in protection of Southern Rights," he could only marvel that "all Northern Democrats do not follow Douglas and kick and cuff the South awhile, in order to raise a party there." Happily for the Cobbites, no broadly based popular support for Douglas emerged in the South. By October, 1859, Mary Ann confidently predicted that "Douglass [<u>sic</u>] ... is a dead cock in the pit."[26]

On one point at least, Cobb had no need for worry. When rumors began to circulate that Buchanan meant to retract his one term pledge and seek reelection in 1860, the president

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[25] Athens <u>Southern Banner</u>, February 4, 1858; June 24, 1858; July 29, 1858; September 2, 1858; September 9, 1858; September 16, 1858; September 30, 1858; October 21, 1858; January 6, 1860; March 22, 1860; Milledgeville <u>Federal Union</u>, January 19, 1858; March 16, 1858; August 3, 1858; September 14,1858; September 28, 1858; October 19, 1858; May 31, 1859; April 17, 1860; May 22, 1860.

[26] Thomas Reade Rootes Cobb to Howell Cobb, July 10, 1859; September 11, 1859; Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, October 2, 1859, Howell Cobb Papers.

moved promptly to squelch them. While acknowledging that he could not hope to silence all wagging tongues, he instructed Cobb to draft a statement for the press flatly repudiating the reports. "You may say," he told his finance minister, "that under no circumstances would I again consent to become a candidate."[27]

II

Intense efforts to control Georgia's delegation to the 1860 Democratic national convention scheduled for Charleston began in the summer of 1859. With a majority of state representatives in the legislature friendly to Cobb's aspirations, the Cobbites favored an early state convention to select the state's delegation to Charleston. Anti-Cobb men preferred a later convention; one that did not assemble until the following spring. In November, a Democratic caucus in the state legislature called for a convention to meet in Milledgeville on December 8, 1859.[28]

Although this call by the caucus conformed to state party practice, anti-Cobb forces protested that there would not be sufficient time for the people to elect delegates.

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[27] James Buchanan to Howell Cobb, July 23, 1859, ibid.

[28] Montgomery, Cracker Parties, pp. 236-237; Schott, Alexander H. Stephens, pp. 277-279; James M. Spullock to John H. Lumpkin, November 16, 1859; John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, undated manuscript; November 18, 1859, Howell Cobb Papers; Thomas Reade Rootes Cobb to David C. Barrow, November 17, 1859, David C. Barrow Papers, Felix Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia (Hereafter: Barrow Papers).

They insisted that a spring convention to be summoned by the executive committee created by the last state convention embodied the legitimate voice of the Georgia Democracy. They further contended that a delegation selected in such close proximity to the Charleston convention would come fresh from the people and better represent their will in relation to the national political scene.[29]

Cobbites countered that the executive committee had been created to oversee party interests during the last gubernatorial contest. Its authority to speak for the state party had ceased with the election. They protested that a spring convention -- coming during planting season and at a time when forty-one Superior Courts were in session -- would render it difficult for many loyal Democrats to attend. The inability of "the people" to attend, they warned, would leave control of the assembly to the political "wire-pullers" who had nothing else to do. A few anti-Cobb men even conceded the legitimacy of these arguments. While most Democratic newspapers in the state urged a peaceful solution to this dispute for the sake of party harmony, pro and anti-Cobb

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[29] Montgomery, Cracker Parties, pp. 236-237; Schott, Alexander H. Stephens, pp. 277-279; Milledgeville Federal Union, November 1, 1859; November 29, 1859; December 20, 1859; February 7, 1860; February 14, 1860; March 6, 1860; March 13, 1860; Augusta Constitutionalist, cited in Athens Southern Banner, February 2, 1860; Savannah Express, cited in Milledgeville Federal Union, February 7, 1860; Columbus Times, cited in Milledgeville Federal Union, February 21, 1860.

organs persisted in defending their positions and criticizing their opponents.[30]

The December convention assembled as scheduled. As had been true in the past, most of the delegates in attendance came from the legislature. Delegations from seventy-three counties participated, but the representatives of some twenty counties declined to take part. Although the non-participants came mainly from counties with a strong Southern Rights background, Cobbites happily noted that they manifested no overt hostility to Cobb's presidential aspirations. The convention adopted resolutions praising both President Buchanan and his treasury secretary. The delegates then appointed a delegation to attend the Charleston convention with instructions to cast the state's votes for Cobb's presidential nomination.[31]

The anti-Cobb men consistently had denounced the December meeting as a plot by the Cobbocracy to usurp the

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[30] Montgomery, Cracker Parties, pp. 236-237; Schott, Alexander H. Stephens, pp. 277-279; Milledgeville Federal Union, November 1, 1859; November 29, 1859; December 20, 1859; February 7, 1860; February 14, 1860; March 6, 1860; March 13, 1860; Augusta Constitutionalist, cited in Athens Southern Banner, February 2, 1860; Savannah Express, cited in Milledgeville Federal Union, February 7, 1860; Columbus Times, cited in Milledgeville Federal Union, February 21, 1860; Herschel V. Johnson to A. E. Cochran and James M. Spullock, December 3, 1859, Herschel V. Johnson Papers, Special Collections Library, Duke University (Hereafter: HVJ, DU).

[31] Milledgeville Federal Union, December 13, 1859; William G. Delony to Howell Cobb, December 8, 1859, Howell Cobb Papers.

state party's endorsement by suppressing the voice of the people. The state executive committee, acting on instructions from Governor Brown, called for a convention to meet on March 14, 1860. Brown, who had won reelection easily the preceding fall, no longer worried about a Cobbite challenge. He now manifested no hesitation at stabbing in the back men for whom he had recently professed the warmest political friendship.[32]

At this point, Brown reasoned that an alliance with Stephens had more to offer. Although Stephens had recently retired from Congress and insisted that he had finished with politics, Brown -- like Cobb -- did not believe his protestations about not desiring the presidency. Having already done everything possible to wreck Cobb's presidential chances, Brown appealed to Stephens' vanity by asking him how best to preserve harmony within the state party. No doubt expecting some expression of satisfaction that the likely destruction of Cobb's hopes had improved Stephens' own chances in Charleston, the governor probably found the retired congressman's reply surprising. Party unity, he argued, remained absolutely essential. The March convention should ratify the work of the December meeting and go home. Brown promised to work toward this end provided the Cobb men

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[32] Schott, Alexander H. Stephens, pp. 277-288; Augusta Constitutionalist, cited in Athens Southern Banner, February 2, 1860; Savannah Express, cited in Milledgeville Federal Union, February 7, 1860; Columbus Times, cited in Milledgeville Federal Union, February 21, 1860.

"will unite in the convention in March." Cobbites, however, had already learned the value of Brown's promises.[33]

The call for a March convention threw Cobbites into some disarray. A debate immediately sprang up within their ranks as to whether they should participate in the convention or boycott it. Although Cobb declined to render a public judgement on this question, he privately urged his lieutenants to participate in the March assembly. While he echoed previous Cobbite arguments that the December convention complied with party practice and represented the legitimate voice of the Georgia Democracy, he also maintained the impossibility of allowing the use of his name before the Charleston convention unless it clearly reflected the unambiguous will of Georgia's Democrats. "My name," he vowed, "shall not be used to distract the democratic party of the state, at a time when a united South is so imperatively required for our common protection."[34]

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[33] Schott, Alexander H. Stephens, pp. 278-279; Joseph E. Brown to Alexander H. Stephens, December 29, 1859; January 5, 1860, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, pp. 453-454.

[34] Howell Cobb to James M. Spullock, January 14, 1860, James M. Spullock Papers, Georgia Department of Archives and History, Atlanta, Georgia (Hereafter: Spullock Papers); A. Hood to Howell Cobb, January 13, 1860; Oliver H. Prince to John B. Lamar, February 6, 1860; W. M. Varnum to Howell Cobb, January 13, 1860, Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, January 15, 1860; John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, January 23, 1860; Luther J. Glenn to Howell Cobb, January 26, 1860, Howell Cobb Papers.

Cobb's reasons for this stance are clear. He believed, as did his lieutenants, that he possessed the support of most state party members. Consequently, he felt confident that with hard work and a good showing by his supporters at the March convention he could carry the day and present himself at Charleston as the true favorite son of Georgia.[35]

Moreover, practical politics left him few alternatives. Although some Cobbites expected the momentum for the spring meeting to "frazzle out," Cobb grimly discounted these expectations. He had no doubt that the second state convention would assemble. The true issue was whether or not that convention would be "left in the hands of our enemies." If that happened, he warned, the anti-Cobb forces would have accomplished their primary objective -- "which is to present Georgia at the Charleston convention divided." He understood that this result "would be as fatal to my interest as an out & out defeat." Just as important, he keenly felt the charges by his opponents "that I was afraid for the people in another convention to pass upon my claims." Not only did he feel honor bound to refute these accusations, he worried that

[35] Howell Cobb to James M. Spullock, January 14, 1860, Spullock Papers; A. Hood to Howell Cobb, January 13, 1860; Oliver H. Prince to John B. Lamar, February 6, 1860; W. M. Varnum to Howell Cobb, January 13, 1860, Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, January 15, 1860; John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, January 23, 1860; Luther J. Glenn to Howell Cobb, January 26, 1860, Howell Cobb Papers.

their circulation would damage his standing with Democratic organizations "out of the state."[36]

Yet deeper feelings underlay Cobb's reluctance to risk a rupture of the Georgia Democracy. Events on the national scene in late 1859 and early 1860 cast a pall over the Union's future. In the fall elections, the anti-Democratic trend which had characterized the previous year's elections in the North continued. The growing power of the Republican party in the northern states could not be denied.[37]

At about the same time that the election results arrived, so did news of an abolitionist plot to spark servile insurrection throughout the South. The brainchild of fanatical abolitionist John Brown, the conspiracy revolved around the seizure of the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia in October, 1859. Brown, who had previously murdered five proslavery settlers in Kansas, planned to use the weapons seized at Harpers Ferry to arm a slave army and spread insurrection throughout the southern states. Although the raid proved a fiasco which ended in his capture, it nevertheless sent a tidal wave of fear sweeping across the

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[36] Howell Cobb to James M. Spullock, January 14, 1860, Spullock Papers; A. Hood to Howell Cobb, January 13, 1860; Oliver H. Prince to John B. Lamar, February 6, 1860; W. M. Varnum to Howell Cobb, January 13, 1860, Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, January 15, 1860; John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, January 23, 1860; Luther J. Glenn to Howell Cobb, January 26, 1860, Howell Cobb Papers.

[37] Allan Nevins, The Emergence of Lincoln: Prologue to Civil War, 1859-1861, two vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1950), II, 64.

South. Revelations that Brown had received encouragement and financial support from prominent northern abolitionists heightened a growing southern conviction that their security could not be guaranteed within the Union. The inclination of northern citizens to grant Brown martyr status after his execution on a Virginia gallows only served to exacerbate the South's fear and anger.[38]

In this highly charged atmosphere, social relations in Washington began to break down. Early in the first session of the Thirty-Sixth Congress, Toombs reported to Stephens that "the social intercourse between North and South or rather between Dems. and Reps. seems almost wholly to have ceased, and all sides seem sullen and ill-natured." In the House of Representatives, where sectional animosities once more had produced a deadlock in the struggle to elect a speaker, violence became a real possibility. Members of the House began to carry weapons. One worried senator observed that "the only persons who do not have a revolver and a knife are those who have two revolvers." More than a few of those present now felt willing to see the sectional quarrel resolved by force; a few no doubt hoped to see it thus resolved.[39]

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[38] Ibid., pp. 72-101; Schott, Alexander H. Stephens, pp. 275-277.

[39] Robert Toombs to Alexander H. Stephens, December 28, 1859, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, pp. 452-453; James Henry Hammond, cited in Nevins, The Emergence of Lincoln, II, 121; J. Henly Smith to Alexander

Cobb looked on the developments with a growing sense of despair. Even as he struggled to secure the Democratic presidential nomination, he increasingly doubted its value. In mid-November -- before either of Georgia's state conventions had been called -- he confessed that "the future of the country looks badly. I never felt less hopeful in my life." Every indication, he worried, pointed "to a fearful crisis on the slavery question." With the North apparently "determined to force upon us the issue of submission to Sewardism or disunion," he only could conclude that "the days of the Union are numbered." He conceded that "it is to my mind a fearful thought, but it is preferable to dishonor and degradation and ultimate ruin."[40]

In the weeks and months ahead, his dark view of the future did not brighten. When questioned on the appropriate southern reaction to a Republican president, he voiced confidence that "the South will never submit to the election of a black republican President & I dont think they ought. It would be the beginning of the end for the South." His response to queries regarding the proper attitude of Cobbites regarding the March convention reflected a similar gloom. "I may feel less solicitous about this matter than I would

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H. Stephens, January 14, 1860, Alexander H. Stephens Papers, Library of Congress, Washington D.C. (Hereafter: Stephens Papers, LC).

[40] Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, November 19, 1859, Howell Cobb Papers.

under other circumstances," he admitted, "I am more desirous of obtaining the full confidence of the people of Ga., that I may serve them in the trying crisis that is before us, than I do to obtain even presidential honors."[41]

Whatever his innermost feelings, Cobb and his followers had now hazarded their political futures on his presidential bid, and they saw no alternative to pressing forward. His determination that his followers should participate in the March convention produced consternation within Cobbite ranks. Although some had taken immediate steps to organize meetings and select delegates, other resented making concessions to their foes. Initially, John Lumpkin argued that men who had endorsed the actions of the December convention as "legitimate and regular," could not participate in the March assembly without a loss of honor. After having "maturely considered" the question," he revised his appraisal. Still, he and others viewed participation in March as a terrible strategic mistake. Not only did the appearance of a Cobbite retreat strike Cobb loyalists as repugnant, it also opened the door to mischief by anti-Cobb forces.[42]

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[41] Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, December 5, 1859; January 15, 1860, ibid.

[42] A. Hood to Howell Cobb, January, 13, 1860; W. M. Varnum to Howell Cobb, January 13, 1860; Howell Cobb to James M. Spullock, January 14, 1860; February 13, 1860; Oliver H. Prince to John B. Lamar, February 6, 1860; John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, January 23, 1860; Luther J. Glenn to Howell Cobb, January 26, 1860, ibid.

Despite these expressions of dissatisfaction, Cobb did not deviate from his determination that the Georgia Democracy must present a united front at Charleston. He voiced regret that "there should be a difference of opinion among our friends on a matter of so much importance," but consistently argued that he saw no viable alternative. Although he maintained that "I cannot and will not complain of any course that may be adopted," he nonetheless did all he could from Washington to insure that Cobbites followed the course he had staked out.[43]

Loyally, Cobb's lieutenants undertook the task of securing delegations friendly to his interests for the March meeting. Judge Spullock vowed to "go from one county to another and try and get up delegates for you from the several counties in this district." Prince worked with equal diligence, but confessed that "the whole thing has got so mixed up that it is impossible to decide ... what is for the best." He persevered, however, and soon reported positive results from his efforts in north Georgia. Brother John took control of matters in Macon. Although anti-Cobb men mounted an offensive in that sector, Lamar smashed them in the Bibb County meeting and secured both a delegation and resolutions

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[43] Howell Cobb to James M. Spullock, January 14, 1860; February 13, 1860; John A. Cobb to John B. Lamar, January 27, 1860, ibid.; Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, February 13, 1860, Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collection, Felix Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia (Hereafter: Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collection),

favorable to his brother-in-law. He happily reported to the secretary that "we met the enemy and mauled them."[44]

By mid-February, Cobb began to receive favorable reports from most of the state. With visible relief, he noted that "my friends have carried the meetings in Macon, Atlanta, [and] Milledgeville." He now felt certain that "if the upcountry is at Milledgeville, in full force, we shall have a large majority of the convention." Observing that the fire-eaters in Columbus had elected an unusually large delegation to the March convention as a show of strength, he advised his lieutenants to have a friendly county meeting do the same for him. If he could carry the convention in March, he declared, "it will be by long odds the greatest triumph I have ever had in Georgia."[45]

Yet dangers still remained. The "dilatoriness" of Cobbites in responding to the threat of anti-Cobb plots -- perhaps spurred by lingering resentment of Cobb's decision to participate in the March meeting -- meant that much remained to be done in calling county meetings and electing friendly delegations. Still, most leading Cobbites believed

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[44] John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, February 3, 1860; February 7, 1860; February 8, 1860, Howell Cobb Papers.

[45] John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, January 23, 1860; Luther J. Glenn to Howell Cobb January 26, 1860; Oliver H. Prince to John B. Lamar, February 11, 1860; Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, February 11, 1860; Mark Johnston to Howell Cobb, February 18, 1860; February 22, 1860; Oliver H. Prince to Mary Ann Cobb, February 22, 1860; February 26, 1860; March 2, 1860; John H. Lumpkin to John B. Lamar, March 3, 1860; David C. Barrow to Howell Cobb, March 6, 1860, ibid.

this difficulty could be overcome "by united and energetic action."[46]

The possible absence of Henry R. Jackson from the March convention also raised concern. Cobb expected him to serve as his convention manager. Without Jackson's presence, he worried that he would be forced to rely on men with less experience and fewer parliamentary skills. When cousin Henry failed to win election as a delegate from Chatham County, Cobb immediately launched a strenuous effort to secure his selection from "some of the upcounties." Jackson's sudden announcement that he would not attend the convention stunned Cobb. Jackson's motives are not clear, but it is possible that he simply found the idea of yielding any point to his and Cobb's enemies unbearable. Whatever his reasons, brother Tom spoke for much of the Cobbite leadership when he lamented "this is terrible & renders it the more necessary that influential men from this part of the State should go."[47]

Other threats could not be gaged so easily. Although Stephens eased some Cobbite fears when he assured Judge Spullock that he regretted rumors of "a contest between Mr. Cobb & myself for the vote of Georgia," concerns regarding his intentions lingered. The possible course of Governor

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[46] Mark Johnston to John B. Lamar, February 18, 1860; February 22, 1860, ibid.

[47] Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, February 13, 1860, Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collection; Thomas Reade Rootes Cobb to David Barrow, undated manuscript, Barrow Papers.

Brown proved even more troubling. Neither Cobb nor his loyalists any longer viewed him as a reliable ally, but they hoped to avoid turning him into an open enemy. Most agreed that the pragmatic governor would offer no challenge if the Cobbites demonstrated overwhelming strength on the convention floor. They felt equally certain, however, that Brown would take any sign of weakness as a signal to throw his strength against them.[48]

Despite the presence of such clouds on the horizon, Cobb and his loyalists felt increasing confidence as the March convention drew near. Only ten days before the convention assembled, Lumpkin gloated about the certainty of a Cobb triumph. "Gov. Cobb's friends will have the control of the March convention," he chortled, "and he will again be recommended ... as the first choice of the Democratic party of Georgia." Even Charlie Lamar expressed a willingness to "bury the hatchet" with his kinsman and vowed to express no opposition to his advancement. Indeed, the situation looked so favorable that brother Tom warned "you have but one thing to fear in the March convention. <u>It is the over-confidence of your friends</u> & their consequent absence."[49]

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[48] Alexander H. Stephens to James M. Spullock, February 8, 1860, Spullock Papers; Mark Johnston to Howell Cobb, February 18, 1860; February 22, 1860, Howell Cobb Papers.

[49] Oliver H. Prince to Mary Ann Cobb, February 26, 1860; March 2, 1860; John H. Lumpkin to John B. Lamar, March 3, 1860; Thomas Reade Rootes Cobb to Howell Cobb, March 4, 1860, Howell Cobb Papers.

Tom's fears were well-founded. The two-day March convention proved an unmitigated disaster for Cobb's presidential chances. Initially, it appeared that the convention might follow the scenario Cobbites had anticipated. In their first test of strength with the anti-Cobb men, they succeeded in electing one of their own -- Alexander R. Lawton -- as the convention president over Solomon Cohen of Savannah with a fifteen vote majority. From that point, however, the Cobbite effort fell apart. The next test of strength involved the actual business of the convention. Cobbites proposed the creation of a committee to prepare an agenda for the convention. They expected this committee to recommend the ratification of the delegates and resolutions adopted by the December convention.[50]

The anti-Cobb forces, marshalled by Cohen and assisted by the perfidious Governor Brown, blocked this move. In its place they successfully substituted a proposal for a committee to select a slate of delegates to the Charleston convention. After rancorous maneuvering by both sides, the Cobbites and their foes agreed to combine the delegates selected in December with an equal number of delegates acceptable to the anti-Cobb forces. This delegation then

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[50] Milledgeville Federal Union, cited in Athens Southern Banner, March 22, 1860.

received instructions from the convention to vote as a unit in Charleston.[51]

The Cobbites enjoyed no greater success when they sought ratification of the resolutions adopted by the December convention -- including that which committed the state's delegation to support Cobb's nomination. Again, amid scenes of rancor and bitterness, the anti-Cobb forces rallied to strike down their foes. By a vote of 162 to 174, they defeated the Cobbite resolutions. In the aftermath of the convention, the Federal Union grimly observed "it is the most silly thing imaginable to say that the Democracy of Georgia are united."[52]

Stunned and angry, Cobb men sought to comprehend their sudden overthrow. Most all agreed with the assessment offered by John Lamar two days after the March convention adjourned. Every anti-Cobb faction, he charged, had united in a coalition of "hatred, envy, [and] malice." Cobb had been defeated, he complained, by "the hypocracy [sic] of Stephens, the villany [sic] of Brown, the juggling of the

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[51] Ibid.; Milledgeville Southern Recorder, March 20, 1860; March 27, 1860; J. H. Nisbet to Howell Cobb, March 15, 1860; John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, March 16, 1860; March 17, 1860; John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, March 17, 1860; James M. Spullock to Howell Cobb, March 18, 1860, Howell Cobb Papers; John B. Lamar to David C. Barrow, March 19, 1860, Barrow Papers.

[52] Milledgeville Federal Union, cited in Athens Southern Banner, March 22, 1860; John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, March 15, 1860, Howell Cobb Papers; Milledgeville Federal Union, March 26, 1860; Milledgeville Southern Recorder, March 20, 1860; March 27, 1860.

opposition, the inefficiency of your friends in the convention & the over-sanguine expectations of your friends out of it, who failed to come."[53]

For several days following their defeat, anti-Stephens sentiment spewed from the mouths and pens of virtually all Cobb loyalists. They uniformly damned him for uniting with the Ultras from south Georgia to defeat Cobb. By doing so, they charged, he meant to open the way in Charleston for Douglas or -- failing that -- himself. The truth, however, proved more complicated. In keeping with his assurances to Spullock, Stephens had written two letters to friendly delegates before the convention stating that he would not accept the presidential nomination. He expected both men to make his feelings known to the convention. Instead, both concealed these epistles and united with other anti-Cobb delegates in using Stephens' presidential "claims" as a weapon against Cobb. While Stephens might have avoided all confusion by stating his position in a public letter, he rejected this option. The publication of such a letter on the eve of the March convention undoubtedly would have

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[53] John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, March 14, 1860; March 15, 1860; March 16, 1860; March 17, 1860; J. H. Nisbet to Howell Cobb, March 15, 1860; March 17, 1860; Thomas Reade Rootes Cobb to Howell Cobb, March 15, 1860; March 18, 1860; John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, March 17, 1860; James Spullock to Howell Cobb, March 18, 1860; Luther J. Glenn to Howell Cobb, March 18, 1860; Sarah Rootes Cobb to Howell Cobb, March 18, 1860; Oliver H. Prince to Mary Ann Cobb, March 25, 1860; Howell Cobb Papers; John B. Lamar to David C. Barrow, March 19, 1860, Barrow Papers.

insured Cobb's triumph and further weakened Douglas in the South. That result, he was determined to avoid.[54]

Stephens found the widespread criticism of himself frustrating. In letters to friends, he forcefully defended his course. With some accuracy, he complained that most of his critics knew nothing of his quiet efforts to harmonize the party. He had not sought a contest with Cobb, he repeated, and noted that he had done much to suppress attempts "to get up a sort of 'a tempest in a tea pot' ... between Mr. Cobb and myself." Nevertheless, while professing to "esteem ... Cobb highly," he insisted that "Mr. Cobb is not the choice of the Democracy of Georgia, not as between me and him but as between him and any other prominent man of the party."[55]

Although Stephens demanded that his feelings regarding Cobb's strength in Georgia remain private, he felt compelled to offer a direct defense of himself to Cobbites regarding charges in the Southern Banner and elsewhere that he had

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[54] John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, March 17, 1860; John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, March 17, 1860; Luther Glenn to Howell Cobb, March 18, 1860; James M. Spullock to Howell Cobb, March 18, 1860; Thomas Reade Rootes Cobb to Howell Cobb, March 18, 1860, Howell Cobb Papers; Alexander H. Stephens to Dr. Henry Casey, March 9, 1860, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, pp. 463-464; Cassville Standard, March 29, 1860; Milledgeville Federal Union, March 6, 1860; March 13, 1860; Schott, Alexander H. Stephens, pp. 279-281.

[55] Alexander H. Stephens to J. Henly Smith, March 18, 1860, in Phillips Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, pp. 465-467; Schott, Alexander H. Stephens, p. 283.

entered into a secret arrangement with Douglas. In a letter to editor James Sledge of the Southern Banner, he denied both a deal with Douglas and any desire for the presidency. Despite pressure from Sledge, he refused to permit the publication of this letter. He did agree that it might be circulated privately among leading Cobbites in Washington. This step had the desired results and Stephens soon received information that Cobb and his associates had begun to do him "justice."[56]

If Stephens' letter had eased -- if not eliminated -- Cobbite anger at the retired congressman, nothing could soothe their anger at Governor Brown. Although it is not certain what course Brown would have pursued in the face of overwhelming Cobb strength at the convention, he clearly discerned the weakness and poor organization of the Cobb forces early on. Just as Cobb's lieutenants had feared, he took this weakness as a signal to throw his support to Cobb's foes. By doing so, he carried the delegations of at least two north Georgia counties into the columns of the opposition. In light of the close votes on the critical resolutions, Brown's defection probably proved critical to Cobb's defeat. The Southern Banner spoke for most of the Cobbocracy when editor Sledge vowed that "we know of one man

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[56] Alexander H. Stephens to James Sledge, March 25, 1860; J. Henly Smith to Alexander H. Stephens, April 3, 1860, Stephens Papers, LC; Lamar Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, March 26, 1860, Howell Cobb Papers; Athens Southern Banner, March 22, 1860; Schott, Alexander H. Stephens, p. 283.

who has been a warm friend and supporter of [Brown], whose vote he will never get again."[57]

If anything, the Cobb forces felt even more bitter toward their ancient foes in the southern-rights wing of the party. Solomon Cohen, who had worked so diligently to frustrate Cobb's ambitions back in 1852, again acted as his nemesis. John Lamar described Cohen as "the brains of the opposition." According to Lamar, he had pulled the wires that nullified Cobbite advantages and established fraudulent advantages for Cobb's opponents. He had maintained the unity of the anti-Cobb coalition. Brother John scarcely could contain his hatred for this particular enemy. "That damned old Jew Cohen," he raged, "did us more harm than any body else."[58]

Yet, even as they directed their fury outward at their foes, Cobbites admitted that their defeat resulted mainly from their own failures. Cobb's lieutenants had been so confident of victory that they had failed to maintain their usual discipline. Several counties loyal to Cobb had held

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[57] J. H. Nisbet to Howell Cobb, March 15, 1860; John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, March 16, 1860; March 17, 1860; John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, March 17, 1860; James M. Spullock to Howell Cobb, March 18, 1860, Howell Cobb Papers; Athens Southern Banner, March 22, 1860; Montgomery, Cracker Parties, pp. 237-238.

[58] J. H. Nisbet to Howell Cobb, March 15, 1860; March 17, 1860; John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, March 16, 1860; John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, March 17, 1860; James M. Spullock to Howell Cobb, March 18, 1860, Howell Cobb Papers; John B. Lamar to David C. Barrow, March 19, 1860, Barrow Papers.

meetings and elected delegations instructed to sustain the actions of the December convention. These delegations -- apparently believing Cobb's strength so great as to render their votes superfluous -- did not appear in Milledgeville. Other counties adopted pro-Cobb resolutions, but failed to name delegates. In some instances these counties intended to give their proxy to other delegations. No one supervised this process and necessary authorizations were not forthcoming. Hence, additional Cobb votes did not materialize at the convention. Even worse, some critical Cobb delegates departed Milledgeville during the convention. Others, pledged to Cobb, deserted him on the floor.[59]

Cobbites did not doubt that all these failures might have been overcome had they only had a strong-willed and experienced convention manager. Not one of Cobb's most prominent and reliable friends attended the convention as a delegate. While Lamar attended, he did so as an observer and took no part in the convention's numerous floor fights. Consequently, the direction of Cobb's forces fell to men such as Judge Spullock and A. E. Cochran. While unwavering in

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[59] John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, March 14, 1860; March 15, 1860; March 16, 1860; March 17, 1860; J. H. Nisbet to Howell Cobb, March 15, 1860; March 17, 1860; Thomas Reade Rootes Cobb to Howell Cobb, March 15, 1860; March 18, 1860; John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, March 17, 1860; James Spullock to Howell Cobb, March 18, 1860; Luther J. Glenn to Howell Cobb, March 18, 1860; Sarah Rootes Cobb to Howell Cobb, March 18, 1860; Oliver H. Prince to Mary Ann Cobb, March 25, 1860; Howell Cobb Papers; John B. Lamar to David C. Barrow, March 19, 1860, Barrow Papers.

their devotion to Cobb, they lacked both the parliamentary skills and statewide reputations needed to rally Cobbite forces in a desperate fight.[60]

Lamar perceived this weakness immediately. He telegraphed his brother-in-law from the convention that the Cobb men possessed "a clear majority," but warned of "bad management" by his floor leaders which "has done us injury." In the days following the convention, his opinion did not change. "If we had had a leader in the convention, we could have carried it easy," he declared, "It was a flock without a shepherd. Nobody to rally around, nobody to manage." Left without "an earnest man of ability" to lead them, the Cobb forces suffered parliamentary abuse after parliamentary abuse without protest. The anti-Cobb men, led with "adroitness and earnest impudence," he groaned, "demanded ... things such as they never expected us to accede to & to their astonishment there was only faint opposition that soon gave way." In the face of such miserable weakness, Cobb's foes "seized on all they wanted & felt a contempt for those who would yield it without a struggle."[61]

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[60] John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, March 15, 1860; March 16, 1860; March 17, 1860; Luther J. Glenn to Howell Cobb, March 18, 1860; Sarah Rootes Cobb to Howell Cobb, March 18, 1860; Oliver H. Prince to Mary Ann Cobb, March 25, 1860; Howell Cobb Papers; John B. Lamar to David C. Barrow, March 19, 1860, Barrow Papers.

[61] John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, March 15, 1860; March 16, 1860; March 17, 1860; Oliver H. Prince to Mary Ann Cobb, March 25, 1860; Howell Cobb Papers; John B. Lamar to David C. Barrow, March 19, 1860, Barrow Papers.

Not surprisingly, some frustrated Cobbites resorted to blame-placing and recriminations. More than once, brother John voiced the conviction that the key to Cobb's defeat had been Henry Jackson's refusal to attend the convention. Even Cobb's mother could not refrain from criticizing him for failing her son. She lamented that cousin Henry's "refusing to go has sent an adder's sting to my heart which rankles there & will do so till I can hear some good reason for his doing so." Such behavior only served to illustrate, she concluded, "that the friendship of this world is but a name."[62]

Nor did Cobb escape criticism. Both John Lumpkin and J. A. Nisbet made haste to assure him that his overthrow in Georgia had stemmed directly from his insistence on participating in the March convention. Within hours of the convention's adjournment, Nisbet declared "I am now satisfied that it was a mistaken policy, to go into this convention .... Had we kept out entirely, [it] would have proved a farce." Lumpkin echoed this sentiment a few days later. "I do not think you have gained anything by countenancing this movement," he dryly observed, "I hope you have lost nothing."[63]

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[62] John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, March 16, 1860; March 17, 1860; Sarah Rootes Cobb to Howell Cobb, March 18, 1860, Howell Cobb Papers.

[63] J. H. Nisbet to Howell Cobb, March 15, 1860; John H. Lumpkin to Cobb, March 17, 1860, ibid.

III

Despite their unexpected defeat in the March convention, Cobb men did not give way to despair. To be sure, the convention had been a setback. Yet they did not believe it fatal to his political career. Indeed, many insisted that with proper management the results of the convention might be turned to his immediate advantage. Brother John insisted that no one could now doubt the extent of Cobb's strength in Georgia. Every anti-Cobb faction in Georgia had united to oppose him; his opponents had been well organized and disciplined; with the exception of the Southern Banner and the Federal Union, every major newspaper in the state had been against him; his own forces had been poorly organized and worse led. Nevertheless -- "after all this formidable array" -- the December resolutions had been defeated by a mere twelve votes. Brother Tom shared in this view. The idea that Cobb's defeat had been the result of "Douglas Trickery" was gaining wide circulation, he reported, and now worked to increase his popular strength both in Georgia and other southern states.[64]

Not all of Cobb's lieutenants accepted these sanguine evaluations. Nisbet believed the March convention had destroyed any realistic chance for a Cobb presidential nomination in 1860. Rather than pursuing that goal further,

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[64] John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, March 17, 1860; Thomas Reade Rootes Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, March 18, 1860; Thomas Reade Rootes Cobb to Howell Cobb, March 18, 1860, ibid.

he urged his chief to withdraw his name from consideration. Yet, like his more optimistic brethren, he did not despair. This step, he argued, would work to Cobb's future political benefit. As to the presidency, he advised that Cobbites focus on neutralizing Georgia's vote at Charleston. He charged that Cobb's foes in the March convention had made "open and bitter war" against him. While Cobbites no longer could avoid the feud, "one thing I am certain, we have got the power to keep the vote of Ga from any other Georgian than yourself, and 'by the eternal' we will do it."[65]

Whatever their views regarding the impact of the convention on Cobb's relative strength, all his lieutenants agreed that a proper response to the March convention would prove critical to his future prospects. While some -- convinced that a majority of Georgia's expanded delegation still favored his nomination -- contended that he should remain an open candidate, others did not. They echoed Nisbet's advice that he formally announce his withdrawal from the race. They did not deem this withdrawal as the end of Cobb's presidential bid, but rather as a maneuver to remove him from the "bear fight" until the anticipated deadlock in

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[65] J. H. Nisbet to Howell Cobb, March 15, 1860; March 17, 1860; John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, March 17, 1860, ibid.

the Charleston convention opened an opportunity to reassert his claims.[66]

Cobb, too, embraced the idea of a formal withdrawal. Five days after the second state convention adjourned, he penned a public letter withdrawing his name from consideration before the Charleston convention. This letter mainly reiterated the arguments he had made for participating in the March convention. He repeated his conviction that the December convention had conformed to party traditions and that its actions represented the will of most Georgia Democrats. Nevertheless, he had yielded to an irregular call for a second convention by a defunct Democratic Executive Committee for the sake of party unity. The issues now confronting the nation raised too many dangers to behave otherwise. While nothing in the March convention shook his belief that a majority of Georgians strongly favored his nomination, the convention had revealed an "equally decided ... opposition to me." Under these circumstances, he believed his continued candidacy "as calculated to produce discord where there should be harmony, and distraction where

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[66] John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, March 17, 1860; Thomas Reade Rootes Cobb to Howell Cobb, March 18, 1860; Luther J. Glenn to Howell Cobb, March 18, 1860; James M. Spullock to Howell Cobb, March 18, 1860; Mark Johnston to Howell Cobb, March 28, 1860, ibid.

there should be unity." Thus, he removed his name from the race.[67]

Cobb did not restrict his comments to the immediate issue of his own candidacy. For the first time, he gave public voice to his increasingly pessimistic view of the impending crisis of the Union. "In common with our brethren of the South" he grimly predicted, "we approach a contest involving the issues of life and death." In the Republican party, he warned, the South confronted "fanatical and unscrupulous enemies -- leagued together in a political organization -- formidable in numbers -- malignant in its purposes." This organization now threatened to take control of the federal government -- "that government formed by our fathers for the protection of all" -- in the next presidential election. The duty of every patriot lay in the destruction of the Republicans. The duty of every southern man lay in "saving ... ourselves ... from the dishonor and ruin, which would follow the successful inauguration of a black republican administration." The only hope for fulfilling either duty lay in Democratic unity. He vowed to work towards that end and prayed for Georgia's support in his efforts.[68]

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[67] Howell Cobb to I. T. Irwin, March 20, 1860, in Milledgeville Federal Union, March 27, 1860.

[68] Ibid.

The timing of Cobb's decision to make public his views concerning the necessity of disunion should a Republican win the presidency almost certainly reflected political expediency. His motive in writing the letter had been to bolster his standing as a "Lightning Candidate." While his withdrawal for the sake of party harmony certainly would go far towards accomplishing this goal, an uncompromising southern rights assertion seemed equally likely to reduce hostility by southern-rights men to his advancement.[69]

Yet, the sincerity of Cobb's conviction on this point should not be questioned. Although he had expressed the belief that the election of a Republican president must result in disunion as early as 1856, he truly began to despair for the Union from the moment Douglas broke ranks with the administration over Lecompton. Douglas' reelection over administration opposition and the widespread repudiation of loyal northern Democrats by their constituents in subsequent elections, convinced him that the North meant to force a crisis upon the South. Few could doubt that the crisis must come in the election of 1860. Consequently, he hardly could have kept his beliefs on the issue private much longer. By making them public now, he still had a chance to rally the South against Douglas, the man he believed most responsible for the approaching disaster. Perhaps he could

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[69] Thomas Reade Rootes Cobb to Howell Cobb, March 31, 1860, Howell Cobb Papers.

insure that the Charleston convention anointed a man -- such as himself -- who might yet save the Union.

Cobb's letter of withdrawal produced the desired effect. From all quarters of the state, he received assurances that his announcement had earned him high praise for his sacrifice. Brother Tom reported "that a tremendous reaction or rather indignation is getting up in the State against the action of the March convention." Even some of Cobb's most bitter enemies, he added, had conceded the nobility of his sentiments. One southern rights delegate to the Charleston convention had been particularly impressed. "He says," Tom recounted, "he thought you were too much of a submissionist. Your letter opened his eyes."[70]

John Lamar witnessed a similar reaction in central portions of the state. "The appearance of your letter has evidently staggered your [southern rights] enemies so lately joyous over their ill gotten triumph at Milledgeville," he gloated, and "numbers of them begin to suspect that ... they were there used by the secret friends of Douglas."[71]

Newspapers friendly to Cobb worked diligently to encourage such sentiments. The Federal Union declared the March convention a success -- if its purpose had been to "smoothe the way for the nomination of Mr. Douglas." When

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[70] Thomas Reade Rootes Cobb to Howell Cobb, March 31, 1860; Oliver H. Prince to Howell Cobb, March 31, 1860, ibid.

[71] John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, April 5, 1860; April 13, 1860, ibid.

the Columbus Times, a leading southern rights organ, spoke in defense of the March meeting, the Federal Union taunted that it did not object if the Times wished to serve as "Wheel Horse of the Douglas element in Georgia." The Southern Banner adopted a similar tone. Petty animosities, it claimed, had conspired to "drive away from the National Convention, Georgia's favorite son" and "to deprive the entire party of the Union, of the fittest man in the Union to control its destinies in this crisis."[72]

While Cobb welcomed these accounts, he also appreciated that his chances for the presidential nomination now had become the longest of long shots. Although he fully intended to keep an eye on the main chance, he had little alternative but to consider other possible candidates. In general, he believed Georgia should "go with the south for some named candidate, putting our faces sternly against 'all tied out nags.'" Like Toombs, he preferred Senator Robert M. T. Hunter of Virginia. Hunter, he maintained, "will unite the South & he is my friend, & ... if elected will make a good president." To encourage movement in this direction, he drafted a pro-Hunter letter for the Federal Union which the paper printed as an editorial. Should it prove impossible to nominate the Virginian, he had no objection to Senator Jefferson Davis of Mississippi. If neither man could win the

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[72] Athens Southern Banner, March 22, 1860; March 29, 1860; Milledgeville Federal Union, March 27, 1860; April 10, 1860; April 17, 1860.

nomination, then he believed the party should look northward to Joseph Lane of Oregon. On one point only would he refuse compromise. "I dont think we ought under any circumstances to support Douglas," he insisted, "surely Georgia can never be brought to his support."[73]

As to his own political future, Cobb began maneuvering to replace Alfred Iverson in the United States Senate. Less than a week after the March convention fiasco, he urged Lamar to test the political waters in Georgia. Even if his letter of withdrawal failed to secure him a presidential nomination, it might temper southern rights opposition to him sufficiently to permit his election as senator.[74]

Still, Cobb knew the necessity of caution. "It would be a great point for me to be elected to the Senate," he observed, "but I dont want to hazard another defeat." Consequently, he believed it necessary "to see how the land lies before I go into the contest." While acknowledging "that it would be asking too much of you," he nonetheless urged brother John to seek election to the state legislature. "It would certainly be a great advantage ... for you to be there. You could do more to secure my success than any one now in the legislature." For the next seven months, Cobb

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[73] Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, April 8, 1860; April 24, 1860, Howell Cobb Papers.

[74] Mark Johnston to Oliver H. Prince, March 28, 1860; John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, April 13, 1860; Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, April 24, 1860, ibid.

continued to lay plans for a Senate bid. By the time he gave them up, Lincoln's election had convinced him that Georgia must leave the Union. Yet, he still wanted to be elected senator -- as a symbol of his standing with the state Democracy.[75]

IV

Even as Cobb pondered his chances for a Senate seat, the Democratic national convention assembled in Charleston on April 23. Douglas, the strongest candidate before the convention, nonetheless had many enemies in the convention hall. The chief weakness of the senator's opponents derived from their inability to unite on a single candidate. William Lowndes Yancey, the Alabama fire eater, took charge of the anti-Douglas delegations from the Deep South.[76]

Two days before the convention began, Yancey arranged a caucus of the delegations from Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Florida, Arkansas, and Texas. The Alabama state convention had drafted resolutions instructing its delegates to secure a platform which embraced the most

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[75] Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, April 24, 1860; July 1, 1860; October 31, 1860; Thomas Reade Rootes Cobb to John B. Lamar, June 28, 1860; Oliver H. Prince to Mary Ann Cobb, October 26, 1860; October 27, 1860; Thomas Reade Rootes Cobb to Howell Cobb November 5, 1860; Howell Cobb to James Jackson, November 1, 1860, ibid.

[76] Allan Nevins, The Emergence of Lincoln, II, 203-228; Roy Franklin Nichols, The Disruption of American Democracy (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1948), pp. 292-305; Robert Johannsen, Stephen A. Douglas (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), pp. 750-757; Schott, Alexander H. Stephens, pp. 286-287.

extreme southern rights position regarding slavery in the territories. Not only did Alabama demand that the Democracy deny both Congress and territorial legislatures the authority to ban slavery, they also insisted that the platform call for the enactment of a federal slave code to protect slavery in the territories. If the convention rejected this platform the Alabamians had been instructed to bolt the convention. Unable to unite on a candidate to block Douglas, the delegations from the other Deep South states resolved to defeat the "Little Giant" by forcing the adoption of a platform he could not accept. They vowed to stand as a unit on this "Alabama Platform."[77]

Cobb did not attend the Charleston convention, but maintained contact with his adherents by telegraph throughout the proceedings. Although the decision to demand a federal slave code plank clearly violated his own oft-repeated principles regarding congressional non-intervention in the territories, he deemed this reversal an acceptable price to pay for the defeat of Douglas. "There is one point on which I trust Georgia will stand firm," he declared, "& that is under no circumstances to support Douglas." Thus, he approved the decision of Georgia to march in lock step with

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[77] Nevins, The Emergence of Lincoln, II, 203-228; Nichols, The Disruption of American Democracy, pp. 292-305; Johannsen, Stephen A. Douglas, pp. 750-757; Schott, Alexander H. Stephens, pp. 286-287.

the other Deep South states -- even if that decision tore the national Democracy to pieces.[78]

The convention deviated from tradition early on when it voted to adopt its platform before selecting its candidate. Ironically, both supporters and opponents of Douglas favored this step. Douglas' foes saw the platform as a way to derail his nomination. Douglas supporters, expecting to win the platform fight, believed a small-scale walkout by a few Deep South delegates would strengthen their man in the North.[79]

The slave states held a narrow majority on the platform committee thanks to the support of California and Oregon which had been purchased with generous administration patronage. This committee struggled to draft a national Democratic platform. After several days of fruitless deliberations the committee submitted three separate reports for the convention's consideration. The majority report embraced the party's Cincinnati Platform of 1856, but added the Alabama Platform to it. The minority report also embraced the Cincinnati Platform, but added a proviso declaring the issue of slavery in the territories a matter

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[78] George Hillyer to Howell Cobb, April 28, 1860; John A. Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, April 29, 1860; Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, April 24, 1860; May 3, 1860, Howell Cobb Papers; Howell Cobb to Robert Collins, et al., May 9, 1860, in Athens Southern Banner, May 17, 1860.

[79] Nevins, The Emergence of Lincoln, II, 203-228; Nichols, The Disruption of American Democracy, pp. 292-305; Johannsen, Stephen A. Douglas, pp. 750-757; Schott, Alexander H. Stephens, pp. 286-287.

to be decided by the Supreme Court. The Douglas men favored this platform. A third report, offered solely by Benjamin Butler of Massachusetts, simply called for continued adherence to the existing Cincinnati Platform.[80]

A bitter floor fight ensued. Possessing a clear majority of the delegates, the Douglas men easily substituted their minority report for the majority southern report. Immediately, the delegations from Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, South Carolina, Florida, Texas, and Arkansas stalked out of the hall to the enthusiastic cheers of Charlestonians in the galleries. The Georgia delegation followed them out the next morning.[81]

Efforts to effect a compromise between the Douglas men and the "seceders" came to naught. Neither side was any mood to cooperate. The rump convention failed in its efforts to nominate Douglas and adjourned with plans to reassemble in Baltimore on June 18. The southern delegates organized in a nearby hall. They adopted the majority southern report unanimously, but on the advice of John Lumpkin refrained from making any nominations. Instead, they adopted a resolution offered by Henry Jackson that "the states opposed to Douglas

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[80] Nevins, The Emergence of Lincoln, II, 203-228; Nichols, The Disruption of American Democracy, pp. 292-305; Johannsen, Stephen A. Douglas, pp. 750-757; Schott, Alexander H. Stephens, pp. 286-287.

[81] Nevins, The Emergence of Lincoln, II, 203-228; Nichols, The Disruption of American Democracy, pp. 292-305; Johannsen, Stephen A. Douglas, pp. 750-757; Schott, Alexander H. Stephens, pp. 286-287.

and squatter sovereignty, be asked to send delegates to meet at Richmond on the 2nd Monday in June."[82]

In the six weeks that followed, southern Democrats scrambled to devise the best possible response to the existing party crisis. The Democratic leadership in Georgia proved almost as divided as that on the national level. Cobb, Toombs, and Stephens all received urgent appeals for guidance. Each agreed that the state must be represented in Baltimore, but there Cobb and Toombs parted company with Stephens. Stephens refused to embrace the "Alabama Platform." The South had long stood on the principle of non-intervention, he exclaimed, and under that doctrine the South need have no fear for the security of slavery. He complained that the position adopted by the Charleston "seceders" had been intentionally concocted to generate a needless quarrel with the northern Democracy. "Bad men" with "no loyalty to principle, he complained, "have got control of the country." They must be resisted, he warned, or "strife, dissension, disorder, and anarchy" inevitably would follow. Herschel V. Johnson soon lent his support to Stephens' position.[83]

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[82] Nevins, The Emergence of Lincoln, II, 203-228; Nichols, The Disruption of American Democracy, pp. 292-305; Johannsen, Stephen A. Douglas, pp. 750-757; Schott, Alexander H. Stephens, pp. 286-287; John H. Lumpkin to Howell Cobb, May 8, 1860, Howell Cobb Papers.

[83] Schott, Alexander H. Stephens, pp. 287-289; Montgomery, Cracker Parties, p. 238; Alexander H. Stephens to J. Henly Smith, May 8, 1860, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, p. 470; Alexander H. Stephens to Thirteen Gentlemen of Macon, May 9, 1860, cited in Schott,

In a reversal of his usual position, Toombs found himself opposed to Stephens and allied with Cobb. He declared his approval of the actions taken by the Georgia delegation to the Charleston convention. The crisis had been forced upon the South by Douglas' determination to make the hated doctrine of squatter sovereignty official Democratic policy. "The friends of this political opinion have tendered us the issue and demanded its acceptance," he declared, and "it can no longer be avoided either with safety or honor." He denied that "the danger to Union is ... one of our greatest perils." The great danger, he believed, "is that the Union will survive the Constitution."[84]

Cobb took a position equally as strong as Toombs. From Washington, he acknowledged that "both the safety of the South and the integrity of the Union are seriously threatened." Only "a firm, wise and unfaltering policy" by the South, he avowed "will give security to her own rights and peace and quiet to the Union." The Deep South delegations, he insisted, had been right to resist the efforts of the Douglas men to impose both a platform and a candidate unacceptable to the South. Had they returned from Charleston "bearing ... the humiliating terms of surrender which the majority of the convention sought to impose upon

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Alexander H. Stephens, pp. 288-289.

[84] Robert Toombs to Robert Collins et al., May 9, 1860, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Toombs, pp. 477-478.

them ... the people would have received their report in sorrow and spurned their candidate." For being "true and loyal to the trust reposed in them," they deserved "the cordial approval and renewed confidence of their constituents."[85]

Still, he could not bring himself to give up hope for the salvation of the national Democracy. In rejecting Douglas and his minions, the South need not reject all northern Democrats. There yet remained a "sound Democracy of the North ... determined to stand by the South in this hour of trial, if the South will only be true and faithful to herself." He saw the starkest of options for southerners. "The Democracy of Georgia must now choose between the two wings of the party at the North," he bluntly asserted, "The one has been true and faithful in the past .... The other abandoned you in the hour of danger and trial .... With the first you will certainly maintain your honor .... If an alliance with the latter promises any greater advantage, I confess my inability to discover it." He deplored any further demonstrations of support in Georgia or the South for Douglas. "The unwise declaration of a few southern men in favor of the nomination of Mr. Douglas ... has contributed in no small degree to the present unhappy state of things."[86]

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[85] Howell Cobb to Robert Collins, et al., May 9, 1860, in Athens Southern Banner, May 17, 1860.

[86] Ibid.

As a practical matter, Cobb advised against summoning a new state convention -- no doubt sharing the Southern Banner's assessment that the state had "already held one Convention more than we should have done." Instead, he urged that the March convention reassemble in Milledgeville. That meeting should reaffirm the authority of the Charleston delegation to act without specific instructions both at Baltimore and Richmond. In Baltimore, he called for continued efforts to settle the differences that had caused the disruption of the party at Charleston. Failing that, they could then move on to Richmond.[87]

More certain than ever that Douglas could not command the support of the national Democracy, Cobb hardly could be blamed for a resurgence of his hopes that the Baltimore convention might turn to him as a darkhorse presidential candidate. Just as several of his loyalists had predicted, the state's delegation to Charleston had proved friendly to Cobb's aspirations. Once more, however, the state executive committee seemed to threaten his prospects when it called for yet another convention to assemble on June 4. This call opened the door to a strong effort by Stephens, Johnson, and other Douglas men to secure a delegation friendly to the senator. Cobbites immediately charged that "Stephens expects to be the nominee at Baltimore if he can get the Delegation

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[87] Ibid.

from Georgia in favor of Douglas." Under the circumstances, Cobb men resolved to "act vigorously and soon."[88]

Determined to preserve the original delegation if possible, Cobb and his loyalists responded vigorously to the pro-Douglas movement. Cobbites entered into county meetings determined to prevail. Describing this convention as "the most important ... that ever assembled in Georgia," Cobb decided to return home and personally lead the fight on the convention floor. Brother Tom secured his election as delegate from Clarke County. For his part, Cobb saw no danger "unless our friends differ, which must be avoided ... unless we send true men, there will be a bogus delegation."[89]

Cobb reached Milledgeville a few days before the convention assembled. He received a warm reception and he happily reported "it has filled my heart with a new devotion to the Old State." On a less satisfying note, he found his anti-Douglas forces less united than he had hoped and the opposition forces stronger. Expecting a hard fight, he voiced regret that Toombs had not come with him. Nevertheless, he did not doubt the fundamental weakness of

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[88] James Smythe to Howell Cobb, May 5, 1860; John B. Cobb to Howell Cobb, May 18, 1860; William G. Delony to Howell Cobb, May 18, 1860, Howell Cobb Papers; Athens Southern Banner, May 17, 1860.

[89] Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, May 10, 1860; May 29, 1860; John B. Cobb to Howell Cobb, May 18, 1860; John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, May 28, 1860; Thomas Reade Rootes Cobb to Howell Cobb, May 28, 1860, Howell Cobb Papers; Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, May 22, 1860, in Phillips, Correspondence Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, pp. 479-480.

Douglas support in Georgia and remained confident of success.[90]

In this instance, Cobb's confidence was not misplaced. The absence of Stephens, who was ill at home, left the Douglas men "almost without an advocate, certainly without a champion." Herschel Johnson assumed leadership of the Douglas delegates, but found his forces so outnumbered that he could do nothing. He complained that "we were born down by an arrogant, insolent, intolerant ... majority ... [who] hardly treated us with respect." By a comfortable margin, the Cobb-led convention reappointed the Charleston delegation and instructed it to bolt the Baltimore convention if the party again rejected the "Alabama Platform." Johnson and the Douglas contingent now bolted the state convention. Organizing themselves as the National Democrats, they appointed their own delegation to Baltimore. Events followed a similar course in several other Deep South state conventions.[91]

Cobb, realizing that Douglasites might use delegations like those headed by Johnson as a barrier to shut the "seceders" out at Baltimore, attempted to avert this threat. He dispatched Junius Hillyer from the Treasury Department to New York with instructions to undermine Douglas and win

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[90] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, June 2, 1860, Howell Cobb Papers.

[91] Herschel V. Johnson to Alexander H. Stephens June 9, 1860, HVJ, DU; Schott, Alexander H. Stephens, p. 290.

support for seating the original delegations. Douglas' lieutenants offered a stout defense against these efforts. Congressman William A. Richardson flatly informed Hillyer that if the Baltimore convention seated any "seceder" who had not first been reelected by his state then he would bolt the convention himself.[92]

Not surprisingly, the Baltimore convention proved no more harmonious than that in Charleston. The issue of seating delegations from the Deep South states threatened to shatter the convention before it had begun. The Douglasites, who controlled the convention organization, knew that seating all the delegates who had bolted in Charleston would render Douglas' nomination an impossibility. Thus, they insisted on admitting some pro-Douglas delegations from the Deep South. The anti-Douglas men from the South vowed to walk out if the convention refused to seat any of the original delegations and appeared "perfectly indifferent" to the outcome.[93]

While the convention's credentials committee wrestled with this dilemma, party leaders engaged in intense efforts to find an acceptable compromise. Douglas, conceding that his chance of leading a united party had evaporated, yielded to increasing pressure that he abandon his claims on the

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[92] Johannsen, Stephen A. Douglas, pp. 763-764.

[93] Ibid., pp. 767-769.; John A. Cobb to John B. Lamar, June 18, 1860; June 20, 1860, Howell Cobb Papers.

presidency. On June 20, he privately instructed William A. Richardson to withdraw his name from consideration -- if a platform based on congressional non-intervention could be obtained. Although Richardson kept Douglas' letter secret, he did make overtures to the opposition. As Cobb had hoped, some southern leaders tendered him as a compromise candidate, but Richardson rejected him as unacceptable to Douglas. When the Douglas men countered with an offer to support Stephens, both Cobb and Toombs declared him unacceptable. Douglas again repeated his offer to withdraw, but his frustrated managers refused to consider further concessions.[94]

On June 21, the day after Douglas extended his first offer to withdraw, the credentials committee submitted both a majority and a minority report. The majority report proposed to admit the original delegations from Texas and Mississippi, the Douglas delegations from Alabama and Louisiana, and to divide the votes of Georgia between the pro and anti-Douglas delegations. The minority report called for the seating of all the original delegations. The convention voted to accept the majority report the next day and the Deep South delegations again walked out. Most of the delegates

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[94] Johannsen, Stephen A. Douglas, pp. 768-771; Nichols, The Disruption of American Democracy, pp. 316-317; Schott, Alexander H. Stephens, pp. 291-292; Herschel V. Johnson to Alexander H. Stephens, June 19, 1860, HVJ, DU; Stephen A. Douglas to William A. Richardson, June 20, 1860; Stephen A. Douglas to Dean Richmond, June 22, 1860, in Robert Johanssen, ed., The Letters of Stephen A. Douglas (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1961), pp. 492-493.

from the Upper South, California, and Oregon soon joined the "seceders." Elements of the Massachusetts delegation walked out as well, including convention president Caleb Cushing. Massachusetts was followed by a handful of delegates from Pennsylvania, New York, and Minnesota. The once mighty Democratic party had wrecked itself on the rock of slavery.[95]

The delegates who remained behind nominated Douglas. Although he preferred Stephens as his running mate, his managers yielded to the few remaining southerners who preferred Senator Benjamin Fitzpatrick of Alabama. When Fitzpatrick declined the nomination, the Democratic executive committee conferred the spot on Herschel V. Johnson. Johnson reluctantly accepted the nomination "as a matter of patriotic duty." He did not see how the Douglas-Johnson ticket could triumph, but declared his willingness to make "a vigorous fight."[96]

The "seceders" did not go to Richmond as planned. Rather, they and their new allies convened in nearby Market Hall. There, they nominated Vice-President John C. Breckinridge of Kentucky for president and Joseph Lane of

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[95] John A. Cobb to John B. Lamar, June 20, 1860; John A. Cobb and Phillip Tracy to John B. Lamar, June 23, 1860, Howell Cobb Papers; Johannsen, Stephen A. Douglas, pp. 768-771; Nichols, The Disruption of American Democracy, pp. 317-319.

[96] Johannsen, Stephen A. Douglas, pp. 771-773; Herschel V. Johnson to Alexander H. Stephens, June 29, 1860, HVJ, DU; John A. Cobb to John B. Lamar, June 23, 1860, Howell Cobb Papers.

Oregon as his running mate. Although a Cobb nomination apparently enjoyed considerable support among the delegates present in Market Hall, fear that the nomination of a candidate from the Deep South might cost the ticket support in other sections killed any movement in this direction. A few days later, the Richmond convention ratified the nominations of Breckinridge and Lane.[97]

V

While the national Democracy tore itself apart, its opponents in the coming campaign prepared for battle. The rival Democratic candidates would face two additional competitors. The Republicans met in Chicago in May, 1860, and nominated Abraham Lincoln of Illinois on a platform promising free soil, a Pacific railway, a protective tariff, and free homesteads. During that same month, border state men who had previously adhered to the Whig and Know Nothing parties coalesced into the Constitutional Union party. This new organization nominated Senator John Bell of Tennessee for president and pledged to maintain both the Constitution and the Union.[98]

The campaign began immediately. Herschel Johnson embarked on a strenuous campaign for the Douglas-Johnson

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[97] John A. Cobb to John B. Lamar, June 23, 1860, Howell Cobb Papers; Nichols, The Disruption of American Democracy, pp. 318-320.

[98] Nichols, The Disruption of American Democracy, p. 340.

ticket in the face of generally hostile crowds who cheered his every mention of Breckinridge. Frustrated by this reception, Johnson heatedly lashed out at Cobb as leader of the opposition to Douglas. "If a certain prominent man from Georgia had stood any chance to have been nominated," he charged, "there have been no secession from Georgia." Following a Johnson speech in Macon, a crowd "hung & then burnt [the vice-presidential candidate] in effigy." Cobb saw no humor in such antics which he denounced as "impolitic, and calculated to excite sympathy" for their victim.[99]

Cobb, too, engaged in a rigorous campaign. Although his duties in Washington rendered it impossible to canvass Georgia thoroughly for Breckinridge, he returned to Georgia whenever possible to stump for the Southern Democratic ticket. He made one trip home in August and another in October after securing a month's leave of absence from President Buchanan. During these trips, Cobb spoke in all parts of the state, but concentrated his efforts in the upcountry where Unionist sentiment appeared strongest.[100]

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[99] Herschel V. Johnson, quoted in John A. Cobb to Howell Cobb, June 30, 1860; John A. Cobb to Howell Cobb, June 30, 1860; Mary Ann Cobb to John A. Cobb, July 6, 1860, Howell Cobb Papers.

[100] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, August 13, 1860; October 10, 1860; Mary Ann Cobb to John A. Cobb, October 6, 1860; Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, Jr., October 9, 1860, Howell Cobb Papers; Macon Georgia Telegraph, September 16, 1860; James M. Spullock to Howell Cobb, August 7, 1860, R. P. Brooks, ed., "Howell Cobb Papers," The Georgia Historical Quarterly, VI (September, 1922), 247-248; Zachary Taylor Johnson, The Political Policies of Howell Cobb (Nashville:

On the stump, Cobb continued to lay all the blame for the current crisis at Douglas' feet. Had the "Little Giant" but done his duty as a patriot and a Democrat the country would not now be in such peril. Damning Douglas' squatter sovereignty and his Freeport Doctrine, Cobb complained that these heresies violated the most sacred principles of a Union based on equal protection for every citizen and his property. Only by voting for Breckinridge and Lane, he warned, could citizens repudiate Douglas' heresies, preserve the Union as their forefathers had made it, and spare themselves the further danger of Black Republican rule. He did not retreat from his previous assertions that a Republican victory would "be just cause for any or all the southern States to secede."[101]

Cobb's efforts received an enthusiastic response from the public. In Marietta, he addressed such an "immense crowd" that "it was difficult for my voice to reach the outskirts." One observer commented on his particular effectiveness in describing the horrors of a Lincoln victory. "When [Cobb] touched upon the danger to the country from the growing power of the Black Republican party," he reported, "the audience was held in breathless silence, the people

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George Peabody College for Teachers, 1929), pp. 162-163.

[101] Macon Georgia Telegraph, August 16, 1860; October 26, 1860; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, October 10, 1860, Howell Cobb Papers; Johnson, The Political Policies of Howell Cobb, pp. 162-163.

seemed really to look with awe into the abyss to which we seem to be hastening." Cobb appreciated the impact of his efforts on the stump. "The people of Georgia will not stand the election of Lincoln. I regard that as a fixed fact ... The mountain country is in a perfect blaze and this you know is the section where the strongest union feeling prevails."[102]

Cobb also labored behind the scenes in Georgia. While he now enjoyed the support of most leading newspapers at home, the Douglas men relied primarily on editor James Gardner and the Augusta Constitutionalist to disseminate their message. Cobb once again revived his and Smythe's plan to choke off Gardner by establishing a rival press. To that end, he pledged $500 that brother John could ill-afford.[103]

The secretary proved no less active in his efforts on Breckinridge's behalf in Washington. With Buchanan's blessings, he employed federal patronage in the candidate's behalf. He also instructed his bureau chiefs to assess employees for campaign contributions. On occasion, he delivered speeches for Breckinridge and Lane in Washington. Late in the campaign he responded to a frantic summons by travelling to New York with Interior Secretary Jacob Thompson. There, he participated in a massive anti-Lincoln political rally and played on the anxieties of the city's

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[102] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, October 10, 1860, Howell Cobb Papers; Macon Georgia Telegraph, August 16, 1860.

[103] Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, July 1, 1860, Howell Cobb Papers.

business leaders by warning that only a Breckinridge victory could insure national peace and commercial stability.[104]

Ever the optimist, he reported home that "Mr. Thompson & myself have been mingling with our friends & fellow citizens here pretty freely and I hope with some success." He sensed "a far more favorable feeling for the defeat of Lincoln than I had expected to find," and voiced special satisfaction because the city's "commercial interest begins to realize the danger & that ... is a great point gained." His visit to the city left him "hopeful" that Lincoln might yet be defeated.[105]

As Cobb's letters from New York indicate, the schism in the national Democracy did not cause him to despair of victory. During the summer and early fall, Douglas failed to make headway in the South. By the first week of July, Cobb happily observed that "there seems but little disposition to make an effort for Douglas in the South." He expected the Douglas-Johnson ticket to be taken down within a matter of weeks. Even after Douglas rejected an administration proposal tendered by Jefferson Davis that he,

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[104] Nichols, The Disruption of American Democracy, pp. 338-339; 364-365; Athens Southern Banner, July 19, 1860; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, October 24, 1860, Howell Cobb Papers.

[105] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, October 24, 1860; Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, October 31, 1860, Howell Cobb Papers.

Bell, and Breckinridge withdraw from the race in favor of a fusion candidate, Cobb did not abandon hope.[106]

Yet he understood that the election would be decided in critical swing states such a Pennsylvania and New York. In mid-October, while campaigning in Georgia, he kept an anxious eye turned towards Pennsylvania and its elections. "We are all looking with breathless anxiety to hear from Pa election," he wrote, "I do hope that it has gone right." But the results did not go "right" in Pennsylvania. Still, Cobb did not resign himself to defeat. Lincoln could not win outright if New York went against him and until the end Cobb retained some faith in a triumph there. Nevertheless, his optimistic nature could not deny political reality completely. "There is a chance and only a chance for the defeat of Lincoln in that state."[107]

By November 6, even this thin strand of hope had been severed. Lincoln swept all the free states except New Jersey which he split with Douglas. Breckinridge carried all the slave states except Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee, and Missouri. The first three of these went to Bell and the last to Douglas. The crisis of the Union which Cobb had feared and anticipated was now upon the country.

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[106] Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, July 9, 1860, ibid.; Johannsen, Stephen A. Douglas, pp. 792-794.

[107] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, October 10, 1860; October 24, 1860; Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, October 31, 1860, Howell Cobb Papers.

As news of Lincoln's election swept through the telegraph wires to every state, the forces of secession now moved to their fruition. Almost immediately Cobb began receiving urgent calls to resign his office and return home to Georgia. Even before Lincoln's election had been confirmed, brother Tom warned of a submissionist attitude being expressed by many in the state. Already he had heard numerous declarations that "'Lincoln will make a good President." All the "timid," he complained, "are saying 'Let us wait for an overt act." Such words made him doubt "Southern men & Southern principles." Only strong action could redeem the situation and spare the South the humiliation of living under a Black Republican administration.[108]

Others soon lent their voices to Tom Cobb's expressions of concern. On November 12 and 13, the secretary received a series of telegrams pleading for his return to Georgia. One communication from Toombs, Henry L. Benning, James Jackson, and William G. Delony declared "your friends and the friends of Resistance wish your presence here. Men are confounded. We need your council. Come at once." John Lamar, already busy in raising troops to defend the state,

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[108] Thomas Reade Rootes Cobb to Howell Cobb, November 5, 1860, ibid.

advised that "you ought to resign and come here forthwith if you can do so consistently with your obligations."[109]

Lamar's last caveat identified Cobb's dilemma. He had not faltered in his conviction that "submission on the part of the South to [Lincoln's] election is certain and inevitable ruin," but he did not believe the South should depart the Union prior to inauguration day on March 4, 1861. The logic behind his position proved simple. "As the government passes into the hands of the abolitionists," he avowed, "we should pass out. To secede whilst the government is in the hands of our friends would be wrong and unjustifiable, but to remain after the abolitionists take possession would be ... degradation." Cobb had first voiced this opinion a few days prior to Lincoln's election, and he saw no immediate reason to change it.[110]

Under the growing pressure from Georgia, however, the secretary began to waver. He poured out his heartfelt anguish to Lamar. "The ordeal through which I am now passing is the most trying one of my life," he lamented, "and being here without anyone to advise with, I am left almost to my own counsels." He stated his difficulty in succinct terms. His sense of loyalty to President Buchanan -- "the truest

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[109] Robert Toombs, Henry L. Benning, William G. Delony, James Jackson, and Thomas Reade Rootes Cobb to Howell Cobb, November 12, 1860; John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, November 12, 1860; November 13, 1860, ibid.

[110] Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, October 31, 1860, ibid.

friend to the south that ever sat in the presidential chair" -- rendered a resignation awkward. To abandon the president "in the hour of his greatest trial," he feared, "would be denounced as unworthy & ungrateful." He also felt constrained by a renewed financial crisis that had accompanied the recent political instability. This crisis inevitably would "greatly embarrass the operations of the Treasury." He knew that an immediate resignation would lead to unjust charges that his "bad management" had caused the difficulties. Such charges, he feared, would leave him "a disgraced man."[111]

Just as important, Cobb knew that "my presence here at this time is of most importance to the South." A few days after the election the president presented "a very elaborate paper" to the cabinet suggesting a strong federal response to secession. While the northern members enthusiastically endorsed the document, Cobb, Thompson, and Floyd raised vigorous objections. For his part, Cobb complained that "it [inculcated] submission to Lincoln's election and intimated the use of force to coerce a submission to his rule." Such protests by the southern cabinet members exerted a strong influence on the fundamentally pro-southern president. Shortly thereafter, Buchanan suggested to the cabinet "a convention of the States" to adjust current difficulties.

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[111] Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, November 16, 1860, ibid.

Cobb desperately wanted to insure that Buchanan took no action that would mar the administration's record of friendship for the South.[112]

Nevertheless, Cobb understood that he could not remain in the cabinet much longer. Already tensions had begun to rise within the administration on the subject of secession. Cobb's unflinching opposition to Buchanan's first proposal led to an ugly clash with his good friend Attorney General Black. Black bluntly told him that no man holding federal office should give voice to such utterances. When Cobb protested, Black proposed that each man prepare his views on the subject and submit them to the president. Whoever the president disagreed with should then resign, he declared, "for there is certainly not room enough in the Cabinet for both of us while holding and expressing such diverse views." Cobb angrily complained that Black had insulted him. Black insisted that he meant no insult, but would not retreat from his position.[113]

Under the circumstances, Cobb confided to Lamar in mid-November his expectation that he would be out of the cabinet

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[112] Ibid.; Diary of John B. Floyd, November 10, 1860; November 13,1860, cited in Phillip Gerald Auchampaugh, James Buchanan and His Cabinet on the Eve of Secession (Lancaster: Lancaster Press, Inc., 1926), p. 133.

[113] Philadelphia Weekly Press, August 18, 1881; August 25, 1881, cited in William N. Brigance, Jeremiah Sullivan Black: A Defender of the Constitution and the Ten Commandments (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1934), p. 90.

and on his way South within a few weeks. He intended to remain at his post until he had finished his annual report to Congress. At that point, he meant to issue a "public address" to the people of Georgia "reviewing the present state of things & urging secession ... on the fourth of March." The publication of that address, he believed would render a prompt resignation inevitable.[114]

More practical problems also contributed to Cobb's hesitation. Mary Ann was pregnant again and within weeks of delivering. If at all possible, he preferred to avoid having her undertake a long and uncomfortable journey in her condition. Still, if events forced his resignation at an inopportune moment, he might confront the equally unpleasant necessity of leaving his wife and children in Washington while he returned home to wage the battle for secession. Debts to local merchants totalling nearly $5,000 which he could not pay added to his embarrassments.[115]

As he had done so many times before, brother John took responsibility for family decisions and freeing his brother-in-law from the burdens of debt. He strongly urged Cobb to get Mary Ann and the children home as quickly as possible and dispatched both John A. and Lamar to Washington to serve as escorts for their mother and siblings. He also authorized

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[114] Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, November 16, 1860, Howell Cobb Papers.

[115] Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, November 16, 1860; December 1, 1860, ibid.

the secretary to draw on him for needed funds to settle his debts. Gratefully, Cobb accepted both the advice and the loan.[116]

While Cobb pondered his own course, his relatives in Georgia struggled to insure that the state did not back away from the secession. Young Lamar, just launching his law practice in Macon by successfully defending a slave woman accused of arson, speaking for himself and John A. declared "I am for secession -- dissolution -- disunion or whatever you may call it." Both he and his older brother proudly sported the "blue cockade" of secession on their hats. Brother Tom joined Toombs and others on the stump to spread the secession gospel. Many -- including John Lamar -- praised his speeches as the best they ever heard. Brother John, Mary Ann recounted, "thinks of nothing but Secession, and is working all day for it. His house is filled with secession Documents .... Everything looks revolutionary here." John B. Cobb proudly proclaimed "resistance to oppression is obedience to God."[117]

Advocates of secession in Georgia continued to pepper Cobb with urgent appeals for his early return home to assume a leading role in the crusade. These calls became more

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[116] John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, November 19, 1860; John A. Cobb to John B. Lamar, November 27, 1860; Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, December 1, 1860, ibid.

[117] Lamar Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, November 14, 1860; Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, December 10, 1860, ibid.; Pope Barrow to David C. Barrow, November 13, 1860, Barrow Papers.

insistent when, in mid-November, the legislature called elections for a state convention to consider secession. Following a visit to Milledgeville, Oliver Prince urged Mary Ann to encourage her husband's resignation. "Every one felt the absolute necessity of [Cobb's] presence to unite conflicting elements," he reported, "all is confusion even now among our friends while the submissionists are consolidating their strength & will give us a strong fight for the convention." Even cousin Charlie Lamar wanted Cobb in Georgia. "Come home at once," he begged, "we shall have Revolution if we do not have secession."[118]

During the last week of November, despite a sudden severe illness, Cobb labored in his office on his report to Congress. By December 1, he had completed his work. At about the same time, he got his first look at the president's message to Congress. He did not expect it to satisfy either the North or the South. The northern states would resent portions of the message which "justly charges all our troubles on them." The South would resent the president's rejection of secession as a legal doctrine. Cobb, himself, declared that he could not accept the president's position. Just as he had abandoned his opposition to a federal slave

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[118] Oliver H. Prince to Mary Ann Cobb, November 22, 1860; Charles A. L. Lamar to Howell Cobb, December 8, 1860; Thomas Reade Rootes Cobb to Howell Cobb, December 8, 1860, Howell Cobb Papers; John B. Cobb to Howell Cobb, November 29, 1860, Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collection; Montgomery, Cracker Parties, p. 244.

code for the territories to defeat Douglas, he now abandoned his arguments of 1850 that secession represented an unconstitutional doctrine. Still, he urged a respectful reception of the document from the southern people because "there is in it no word of rebuke to the south -- not a word."[119]

Cobb's motive in reversing his previous rejection of secession as an illegal doctrine shared a common source with his determination to defeat Douglas regardless of the cost. If southerners lent their support to the election of Douglas -- the man Cobb believed had betrayed the South in its hour of greatest need -- then it would stand dishonored and degraded before the rest of the country. Having accepted such a position of inferiority, southerners hardly could expect their previously loyal northern Democratic allies to risk further losses in defense of the South. In large measure, the cost of defeating Douglas had been the election of Abraham Lincoln. Just as the potential election of Douglas had represented a price which in Cobb's view exceeded the value of the Union, so too did Lincoln's election.

The South, Cobb concluded, must move quickly to avoid the danger posed by an aggressive and malevolent northern power. He viewed disunion as inevitable, but emphasized the critical issue of timing. Prompt action by a unified South,

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[119] Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, December 1, 1860, Howell Cobb Papers.

he believed, provided the key to "preserving the peace." He reasoned that such action must impress the Republicans and would result "in the discharge of the only remaining duty to be performed -- ... a peaceable and perpetual separation." If southerners hesitated or demonstrated any lack of harmony, however, they invited "the Federal Government to attempt coercion." The consequence would be "secession ... through revolution and civil war."[120]

It is not likely that in embracing secession Cobb actually had changed his mind about its legality. Even when denouncing the doctrine as unconstitutional back in 1851, he had insisted that the Declaration of Independence incorporated a natural right "of the people to change their form of government when in their opinion it has become tyrannical" by revolutionary means. In the face of tyranny, he had conceded, the people need not worry about whether their "'mode and measure of redress'" sprang from legal or revolutionary doctrines. He did not doubt that Lincoln and his "Black Republicans" embodied an impending tyranny. He felt equally certain that disunion represented the South's only recourse. For more than thirty years Southerners had been trained in the doctrine of secession. If acceptance of

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[120] Speech of the Honorable Howell Cobb, Macon Daily Telegraph, December 21, 1860; Howell Cobb to William Porcher Miles, January 10, 1861, William Porcher Miles Papers, Southern Historical Collection, Library of the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, North Carolina (Hereafter: Miles Papers).

that doctrine now provided the most effective means of getting the South out of the Union and preserving the peace in a revolutionary situation, then so be it.[121]

After reading the president's message, Cobb knew that he could not delay for many more days the publication of his address to the people of Georgia. On December 6, he placed Mary Ann and his youngest children in the charge of his two oldest sons and watched forlornly as their train pulled away to the South. Reluctant to go back to an empty house, he wandered the streets of the city, called on a few friends, and finally returned home very late. During the night, he became so ill that he summoned a doctor. In a few hours he felt "entirely relieved," but remained quietly at home the next day. He gloomily wrote to Mary Ann that his chief companion was Jack, his pet dog, "who quietly sits by my side & looks up to me as much to say 'we walk alone these banquet halls deserted."[122]

Already his call for Georgia's secession had been delivered to the printer. In it, he argued that the South confronted a single question: "Does the election of Lincoln to the Presidency, in the usual and constitutional mode,

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[121] Howell Cobb to John Rutherford and Others, August 12, 1851, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, pp. 249-259; Speech of the Honorable Howell Cobb, Macon Daily Telegraph, December 21, 1860; Howell Cobb to William Porcher Miles, January 10, 1861, Miles Papers.

[122] Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, December 1, 1860; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, December 7, 1860, ibid.

justify the Southern States in dissolving the Union?" The entire history of the Republican party pointed to an affirmative answer.[123]

Nothing united the Black Republicans, Cobb asserted, beyond their open hatred of slavery and the South. Under Republican rule, the southern states possessed no hope of equality under the Constitution or protection of the laws. The Republicans had prevented the spread of slavery into the territories; they had killed southern hopes of additional slave states; they had rendered the federal fugitive slave law effectively null and void in the North; they had demonstrated their unwillingness to abide by rulings of the Supreme Court which guaranteed the South its rights. Now that they held power over the federal government, he demanded, why should the South look to an improvement in its status?[124]

Yet, he asked, what of slavery in the southern states? Perhaps the Republicans would be content with preventing the further spread of slavery and refusing to return escaped slaves. The record of the party, he believed, belied even this tiny hope. He maintained that the Black Republicans adhered to doctrines of "negro equality." They believed, he snorted, that the reference to human equality in the

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[123] Howell Cobb to The People of Georgia, December 6, 1860, ibid.

[124] Ibid.

Declaration of Independence applied to the South's slaves. Thus, the Republicans had no alternative but to use their new power to destroy slavery. Failure to "use all the power in their hands to eradicate the evil and restore the Government to its 'ancient faith,'" he noted "would be to write themselves down as self-convicted traitors both to principle and duty."[125]

Indeed, he warned, failure to respond promptly to the Republican threat promised to leave the South weaker with each passing year. Through the use of federal patronage, Lincoln possessed the power of "organizing in the South a band of apologists ... to be allies of this party in its insidious warfare upon our family firesides and altars." The South must not hesitate in this moment of crisis. It possessed no "remedy for these evils short of secession." Hopes for compromise, he advised, only increased the danger. "You have to deal with a shrewd, heartless and unscrupulous enemy, who in their extremity may promise anything, but in the end will do nothing." Each hour that Georgia remained in the Union after March 4, he concluded, "will be an hour of degradation."[126]

Sometime on December 7 -- perhaps mindful of their earlier dispute -- Cobb gave a copy of his address to Black for delivery to the president. The next day he forwarded his

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[125] Ibid.

[126] Ibid.

resignation to the Old Squire. Throughout the weeks since Lincoln's election, he had dreaded this moment. He desperately wanted to part with his chief on friendly terms. In his letter of resignation, Cobb spoke of his heartfelt regret at being compelled by "duty" to take this step and of his warm personal feelings for Buchanan. On December 10, Buchanan regretfully accepted his resignation.[127]

For nearly twenty years, Cobb had waged the battle of the Union and the South. He had struggled to find some solution which at once would preserve the rights of the South and the Union created by the Revolutionary generation. He had suffered permanent political wounds in winning temporary respites in a crisis that could not be settled until resolved -- until it had been determined if the United States would be all slave or all free. Having now failed to preserve the Union, he turned his steps southward to join in the awesome task of building a southern nation.

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[127] Howell Cobb to James Buchanan, December 8, 1860; James Buchanan to Howell Cobb, December 10, 1860; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, December 10, 1860, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, pp. 517-519.

Chapter Nineteen

"Our Revolution"

Having severed his official connection with the forlorn Buchanan administration, Cobb soon departed Washington on his journey homeward. Brother Tom and other proponents of immediate secession continued their pleas that he make haste. They felt a growing anxiety about the popular influence of those who advocated a wait-and-see policy towards the Lincoln administration. John B. Cobb damned these "submissionists" and predicted that any delay in his brother's return increased their chances to stifle revolutionary sentiment in the sixth congressional district. Tom frantically warned: "we have trouble ... here -- & no one but yourself can quell it."[1]

Despite these dire predictions, Cobb persisted in travelling at his own pace. He stopped off in Columbia, South Carolina to observe the functioning of that state's secession convention. The delegates promptly honored their visitor by voting him access to the convention floor. Perhaps it was during this visit that Cobb first learned of

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[1] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, December 10, 1860; John B. Cobb to Howell Cobb, December 14, 1860; Thomas Reade Rootes Cobb to Howell Cobb, December 15, 1860, Howell Cobb Papers, Felix Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia (Hereafter: Howell Cobb Papers).

another honor extended him by South Carolina -- the naming of a ship in its small navy after him.[2]

During his stay in Columbia, however, Cobb did more than observe. Even before resigning his post at the Treasury, he had been involved in discussions regarding a possible joint act of secession by Georgia and South Carolina. Shortly before leaving the national capital, he had instructed his allies in Georgia to secure him a legislative appointment as commissioner to the neighboring state.[3]

Although the desired commission failed to materialize, he did relay an urgent message from Governor Brown to the convention delegates. Brown wrote that the course of South Carolina secessionists was vital in the current crisis. The Georgia governor discounted any chance for joint action by the two states, but offered assurances that if South Carolina moved for secession promptly, it would not find Georgia an "idle spectator." Should the Palmetto State hesitate, he warned, the cause of southern independence might well be lost in Georgia.[4]

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[2] John T. Sloan to Howell Cobb, December 17, 1860, ibid.; F. N. Bonham to James North, February 4, 1861, Francis W. Pickens-Milledge Bonham Papers, Library of Congress, Washington D.C.

[3] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, December 10, 1860, Howell Cobb Papers; John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, December 13, 1860, David C. Barrow Papers, Felix Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia (Hereafter: Barrow Papers).

[4] Joseph E. Brown to Howell Cobb, December 15, 1860, Howell Cobb Papers.

On December 20, Cobb returned to Georgia. He did not go directly to Athens, but went first to Macon for consultation with John Lamar. Swept up in the fervor of southern revolution, Lamar had turned the "Bears Den" into a "hotbed of secession." There he and other southern revolutionaries labored mightily to plan a strategy for Georgia's secession campaign. Cobb assisted these efforts by securing copies of the ordinances adopted by the South Carolina convention.[5]

The state's secessionist leaders welcomed his arrival. One longtime political associate expressed his relief to again have Cobb on "Georgia soil." Much critical work had been allowed to go undone, and only leaders of Cobb's reputation could hope to retrieve the situation. He warned of the harm being done the cause by advocates of a cautious policy of cooperation. The proponents of cooperation proposed a convention of delegates from the southern states -- not unlike the Continental Congresses of the American Revolution -- authorized to undertake secession for the southern states as a unit. Although the secession of South Carolina on December 20 hurt this proposal, it did not kill

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[5] Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, December 10, 1860, ibid.; Howell Cobb to William Porcher Miles, January 10, 1861, William Porcher Miles Papers, Southern Historical Collection, Library of the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, North Carolina (Hereafter: Miles Papers); William Porcher Miles to Howell Cobb, January 14, 1861, in Ulrich Bonnell Phillips, ed., The Correspondence of Robert Toombs, Alexander H. Stephens, and Howell Cobb, (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1913), pp. 528-529.

it. In despair, Cobb's correspondent wailed, "the cry of cooperation is injuring us -- while it means submission it deceives a great many brave and patriotic people." Cobb must see to it that secession "missionaries" went forth to every part of the state.[6]

Cobb began his own missionary work immediately. He delivered an emotionally charged speech on the necessity of immediate secession to a packed house in Macon. Repeating most of the same arguments he had already outlined in his public letter of December, he declared that immediate action represented the best way to preserve peace. Delay only increased the likelihood of civil war. His passionate oratory moved the audience to tears several times. At the conclusion of his remarks, a Presbyterian minister became so carried away that he leaped upon the stage and professed that Cobb "had made a convert of him."[7]

Completing the good work in Macon, Cobb boarded a train and carried his mission into the counties of north Georgia. Here, in an area of small farmers and few large slaveowners, the work of conversion appeared less likely to yield victory. Nevertheless, he undertook the difficult task, because it was here that he believed he could do the most good. He did

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[6] A. Hood to Howell Cobb, December 19, 1860; Henry R. Jackson to Howell Cobb, December 19, 1860, Howell Cobb Papers.

[7] J. B. Guthrie to Philip Clayton, December 27, 1860, ibid.

enjoy some success. J. B. Guthrie reported that "I never heard anything like his speeches. He stirs up the hearts of the people in a way I never saw done before and they show how they are affected by their cheers." After hearing Cobb make two speeches, Guthrie declared: "My God, what a dangerous man he would be in a bad cause."[8]

For his own part, Cobb saw reason for optimism. In many of the counties he visited he found "the Union or submission sentiment ... overwhelming." Yet the people turned out to hear him in large numbers. In some instances, he attracted larger audiences than he had ever drawn before in these counties. The audiences, he reported, listened "with the greatest attention for more than two hours and give evidence of their approval and satisfaction." In most instances, he declared, "I am satisfied that a great change was made." In the mountain town of Carnesville, a center of "submissionist" sentiment, he was pleased to observe that someone had raised a secession flag in front of the courthouse following his speech there. Cobb did not believe that in the limited time available the secessionists could produce a significant victory in this region. He did hope to sway enough voters, however, to elect some secession delegates. Yet he did not doubt the basic patriotism and loyalty of the "submissionists" within his audiences. They only needed time

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[8] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, December 26; December 28, 1860; J. B. Guthrie to Philip Clayton, December 27, 1860, ibid.

for enlightenment, and if given a month to campaign for the election of delegates to the state convention, he asserted, "I honestly believe the state could be made a unit."[9]

Georgia voters went to the polls on January 2, to elect their delegates. Through icy temperatures, made worse by wind-whipped torrential rains, eighty percent of those who had cast ballots in the presidential election a few months before struggled to their voting places. The results revealed a closely divided electorate. The official returns -- released by Governor Brown some four months after the election -- revealed a result of 50,243 for immediate secession and 37,123 for cooperation.[10]

The advocates of immediate secession certainly experienced some disappointment over the closeness of the vote. Nevertheless, they hoped that the cooperationist delegates might be persuaded to support immediate state action when the convention convened. Cobb also felt some personal disappointment. He would not be a delegate to the critical state convention.[11]

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[9] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, December 26, 1860, ibid.

[10] Thomas E. Schott, Alexander H. Stephens of Georgia, A Biography (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), pp. 316-317; Michael P. Johnson, Toward a Patriarchal Republic: The Secession of Georgia, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977), p. 63; Bruce W. Collins, "Governor Joseph E. Brown, Economic Issues, and Georgia's Road to Secession, 1857-59," Georgia Historical Quarterly, LXXI (Summer, 1987), 219-225.

[11] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, December 26, 1860, Howell Cobb Papers.

Tom had begun a campaign to secure his brother's nomination as a candidate for the convention while Cobb wrapped up his affairs in Washington. Fears that the hostility of old Whigs might result in his defeat in Clarke County led Tom to work for his nomination by secessionists in another county. Here, too, serious obstacles existed. Other secessionist allies had already declared themselves as candidates and any last minute intrusion by Cobb threatened to breed conflict within a movement desperately in need of unity. Cobb reluctantly accepted the situation and remained out of the race. He explained to Mary Ann that he could not run the risk of a campaign "as it would have given my enemies too much joy [for me] to have been a candidate & be defeated." Lest he seem too disappointed, however, he added that he only desired a seat in the convention "because my presence there might be of some service in keeping the delegates from this section of the state on the true line."[12]

Despite his inability to win a seat in the convention, Cobb received a warm welcome when he at last returned to Athens in the aftermath of the election. He arrived in the midst of a public meeting at the town hall celebrating the election's outcome. Several men, including Tom, had already addressed the large gathering when Cobb entered the hall. Immediately cries of "'Cobb, Cobb, Howell Cobb'" rang from

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[12] Thomas Reade Rootes Cobb to Howell Cobb, December 18, 1860; Sarah Rootes Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, December 23, 1860; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, December 26, 1860, ibid.

every throat. As the crowd parted he advanced down the aisle and mounted the platform. When he turned to face his audience, the shouts and cheers gave way to a hushed silence. No record of his speech survives, but one observer reminisced years later that "it was certainly the most powerful appeal I ever listened to .... He had stood upon the floors of Congress .... He had lifted his voice in defense of his beloved South around the council board of the Cabinet, but never was he greater, grander than that night among his home folks ... in that old Town Hall."[13]

Cobb's stay in Athens proved brief. Within a matter of days, he left for Milledgeville to observe the convention scheduled to open its deliberations on January 16. He almost certainly hoped to do what he could to hold the delegates to the "true line." His task became easier when the members voted to grant seats on the convention floor to him, Governor Brown, and Judge Charles J. Jenkins.[14]

Cobb and other secessionists realized that the success of their cause hinged on rapid action -- not in Georgia alone but in all the southern states. Already Alabama, Mississippi, and Florida had followed South Carolina out of the Union. Georgia must not be allowed to lag behind. Cobb

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[13] F. N. Newell, "Secession Days in Athens in '60," in Henry Rootes Jackson Scrapbooks, Georgia Department of Archives and History, Atlanta, Georgia (Hereafter: Jackson Scrapbooks); Athens Southern Banner, January 9, 1861.

[14] Schott, Alexander H. Stephens, pp. 319-320.

had maintained close contact with allies in other southern states, in the North, and in Washington. Virtually all agreed that the South must stand upon its principles and act with both speed and unity. Gazaway Lamar, a Georgian working in New York as president of the Bank of the Republic, warned that "the North will make war on the South -- because of the tardiness of the Southern States in joining together to maintain their rights." Still, he declared, "Cotton is King," and with a vigorous strategy "you can make cotton rule."[15]

With such impetus, the secessionists arrived in Milledgeville determined to force the issue. They found their opposition disorganized and poorly prepared. Alexander H. Stephens, the acknowledged leader of the cooperationists, arrived without a prepared speech, resolutions, or even the outlines of a strategy. He offered neither leadership, nor meaningful support to his allies. Stephens, it appears, had succumbed to despair and the certainty of defeat.[16]

The secessionists wasted no time in taking advantage of the chaos in cooperationist ranks. On January 18, Eugenius Nisbet of Macon introduced a set of pro-secession

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[15] Howell Cobb to William Porcher Miles, January 10, 1861, Miles Papers; B. F. Hallet to Howell Cobb, December 14,1860; Henry R. Jackson to Howell Cobb, December 19, 1860; E. B. Hart to Howell Cobb, December 20, 1860; Gazaway Bugg Lamar to Howell Cobb, January 5, 1861; William Henry Trescott to Howell Cobb, January 14, 1861, Howell Cobb Papers.

[16] Schott, Alexander H. Stephens, pp. 320-321.

resolutions. Herschel V. Johnson responded with resolutions designed to delay the secession process. The Nisbet resolutions passed with a thirty-six vote majority. Cobb joyfully telegraphed John A., "we go out tomorrow." His prediction proved correct. On the following day, the delegates voted 209 to 89 in favor of immediate secession.[17]

II

In its vote on January 19, the Georgia secession convention had carried out its primary mission. Other tasks remained, however, before its work would be complete. No one expected Georgia to remain independent. All realized that secession represented but one step in a transfer of state allegiance from the old national government to a new southern confederacy. Thus it fell to the state convention to select a ten man delegation to represent Georgia in a convention of the seceded states scheduled to assemble in Montgomery, Alabama on February 4. In a move aimed at conciliation, the convention named delegates drawn from both the secessionist and cooperationist camps. The Georgia delegation included the Cobb brothers and Toombs, all ardent secessionists. It also included Stephens, one of the minority who had voted against the final secession ordinance. Neither of the Cobbs

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[17] Ibid., pp. 321-322; Howell Cobb to John A. Cobb, January 18, 1961; Howell Cobb to Lamar Cobb, January 19, 1861, Howell Cobb Papers.

took any comfort from the presence of such a prominent cooperationist in the midst of the Georgia delegation.[18]

Within a matter of days Cobb departed for Montgomery. Shortly after his arrival, he reported "a general disposition to make me president of the convention." On the following day this "disposition" became reality when at the convention's opening session Robert Barnwell Rhett of South Carolina moved that Cobb be named to the post by acclamation. Rhett's motion received unanimous support, and a committee of three conducted Cobb to the chair.[19]

The new president opened his service with a short address to the delegates. After expressing gratitude for the honor just conferred on him, Cobb vowed to fulfill his duties in a "faithful and impartial" manner. The delegates, he commented, had gathered to complete a task "of no ordinary character." To them fell the responsibility of constructing a government for a new confederacy. This government must be capable of providing for the "future security and protection" of its citizens, while insuring that secession was recognized as "perfect, complete, and perpetual." It must also attempt to draw the remaining slave states into its jurisdiction, even as it maintained peaceable relations with "our former

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[18] Journal of the Congress of the Confederate States of America, 1861-1865, seven vols. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1904), I, 11.

[19] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, February 3, 1861, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, pp. 536-537; Journal of the Confederate Congress, I, 16.

Confederates, as with the world." He concluded with an optimistic assessment: "I doubt not that we shall prove equal to the occasion ... and with confidence in the guidance and blessing of a kind Providence, we will this day inaugurate for the South a new era of peace, security, and prosperity."[20]

The convention then adopted resolutions authorizing it to serve as both a constitutional convention and provisional congress pending the creation of a permanent government. The delegates also adopted resolutions calling for the election of a provisional president and vice-president for the new nation.[21]

The issue of electing a president and vice-president had figured prominently in the thoughts of most southerners for some time prior to the meeting of the convention. When Cobb arrived in Montgomery, he already possessed a fairly accurate picture of the presidential contest. He knew that he had a sizeable body of supporters in both Georgia and some other states. His correspondence of January and early February indicated that the possibility of his election to the post had been discussed during his December visit to South Carolina. William H. Trescott, a South Carolina secessionist had written in veiled terms of Cobb's probable success in mid-January. By February, Trescott felt sufficiently

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[20] Journal of the Confederate Congress, I, 16.

[21] Ibid., p. 20.

confident to speak more openly of the presidency. He reported to Cobb "it is certain ... that the popular expectation is that either [Jefferson] Davis or yourself should have charge of the provisional government." Popular rumor, he added, suggested that Davis preferred a high military command. Trescott viewed this as the perfect position for Davis, a graduate of West Point, hero of the Mexican War, and former secretary of war in the Pierce administration. Such an arrangement appeared likely to make Cobb president by default.[22]

Consequently, by the time Cobb reached Montgomery, he realized that Davis represented the most likely obstacle to his own election. This realization became stronger within hours of his arrival in the Confederate capital. Tom recorded that "the strongest current is for Jeff Davis," but noted the existence of support for both Cobb and Toombs. Indeed, many of Cobb's friends viewed the move to elect him president of the convention as a political maneuver designed to eliminate him from consideration for the higher office. They attributed this strategy to old-line fire-eaters who still hated him for his unionist activities during the early

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[22] William Henry Trescott to Howell Cobb, January 14, 1861; February 2, 1861; February 6, 1861, Howell Cobb Papers.

1850s. Some Cobbites suggested that he quietly decline this secondary honor.[23]

Cobb refused to entertain such suggestions. He vigorously denied any desire to hold the position of national president. Writing to Mary Ann, he maintained that "the Presidency of the Confederacy is an office I cannot seek and shall feel no disappointment in not getting." He argued that the "general good feeling and disposition to unite and harmonize on whatever may be found the best policy," far outweighed any personal interests.[24]

Cobb's protestations convinced Tom, who observed, "Howell honestly I believe shrinks from the responsibility of the position and asks his friends not to urge or use his name as his wishes are adverse to it." His denials of any desire for the post also convinced his friends, and Tom soon complained that "Stephens is looming up for President since Howell's name has been almost withdrawn." Nevertheless, he

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[23] Thomas Reade Rootes Cobb to Marion Cobb, February 3, 1861, Thomas Reade Rootes Cobb Papers, Felix Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia (Hereafter cited as T. R. R. Cobb Papers); Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, February 3, 1861, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, pp. 536-537; Horace Montgomery, Howell Cobb's Confederate Career (Tuscaloosa: Confederate Publishing Company, Inc., 1959), pp. 24-25.

[24] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, February 3, 1861, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, pp. 536-537.

still believed Davis held the inside track in the presidential election.[25]

On February 9, the members of the Provisional Congress took several important steps. On the previous evening, they had unanimously adopted a provisional constitution. Now they gathered to take the oath of allegiance to uphold the document. Judge Richard W. Walker of the Alabama Supreme Court first administered the oath to Cobb. Cobb then administered the oath to the members by state delegations as the entire body stood. When all the members had been sworn, Cobb clutched the Bible used in the ceremony close to his heart and vowed to preserve it as a memento of the occasion. Following the oath-taking, the Provisional Congress voted to create a committee authorized to design a flag for the Confederate States of America, and another to prepare a permanent constitution. It then proceeded to elect the president and vice-president. In a great show of unity the members unanimously elected Jefferson Davis to the presidency and Alexander H. Stephens to the vice-presidency.[26]

Despite the public show of unity by the congressmen, there had been considerable maneuvering in the hours before the presidential election. Tom Cobb left a detailed account

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[25] Thomas Reade Rootes Cobb to Marion Cobb, February 6, 1861; February 8, 1861, T. R. R. Cobb Papers.

[26] Journal of the Confederate Congress, I, 39-40; Thomas Reade Rootes Cobb to Marion Cobb, February, 1861, in Jackson Scrapbooks.

of the activities within the Georgia delegation. On the evening before the election, the Cobbs undertook a "'counting of noses'" to test the political winds. They found that Alabama, Mississippi, and Florida stood firmly behind Davis. Louisiana and Georgia, Tom believed, backed Cobb. His assumption regarding Georgia, however, appeared questionable in light of subsequent discussions within the delegation. South Carolina declared itself divided between Davis and Cobb. Faced with this lack of consensus, Cobb immediately expressed his desire that "Davis should be elected unanimously."[27]

While the Cobbs counted noses, at least one other member of their delegation carried on negotiations of his own. Stephens met with members from the six states represented in Montgomery. When he refused to pledge his willingness to strike the first blow against the old Union -- a critical issue for radicals who believed such a blow represented the only hope of bringing the border slave states into the Confederacy -- all support for his election evaporated.[28]

The Georgia delegates met in caucus the next morning. Stephens promptly introduced a motion that Toombs receive a "complimentary" vote from his home state. Tom responded with an assertion that four states already favored Davis. He then

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[27] Thomas Reade Rootes Cobb to Marion Cobb, February 11, 1861, in Jackson Scrapbooks.

[28] Schott, Alexander H. Stephens, pp. 327-328.

suggested that any vote for Toombs might place him "in a false position." Toombs, who like Cobb professed no interest in the presidency, expressed doubt that Davis really had the support of four states. He insisted that the state delegations again be canvassed. A brief survey confirmed Tom's claims.[29]

The Georgians then turned their attention to the vice-presidential spot. Toombs "returned the compliment" by suggesting Stephens for the job. Amid a "death-like stillness," the Cobbs realized that they lacked the support to block Stephens' nomination. As Tom recalled, "we saw they had us, so after a few minutes Howell retired. [Francis] Bartow followed him and I followed Bartow." Shortly thereafter, they arrived at the capital and learned that "Georgia had presented Mr. Stephens" for vice-president. The three men took a few moments to compose themselves and "then let it rock on."[30]

Despite Cobb's protestations to the contrary, it is difficult to believe that he felt no disappointment in the outcome of the presidential election. His legislative and executive experience gained as congressman, governor, and cabinet member provided him technical qualifications for the post. His proven skill as a negotiator and compromiser

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[29] Thomas Reade Rootes Cobb to Marion Cobb, February 11, 1861, in Jackson Scrapbooks.

[30] Ibid.

suggested deeper qualifications. In addition, even his opponents acknowledged the critical role he had played in leading the secession movement in Georgia. Were it possible to earn the highest political office in the new nation, he probably believed that he had earned it.[31]

Cobb's actions during the election process reflected a complex web of political and personal motives. In part his behavior reflected nothing more than his long-standing practice of avoiding the open pursuit of any office he felt incapable of winning. He also wanted to insure that the Confederacy's highest office did not go to Alexander H. Stephens. His declaration that Davis should be elected unanimously aimed -- in part -- at preventing just that.[32]

Cobb's expression of support for Davis involved much more than petty rivalry with Stephens. Stephens' cooperationist role in the Georgia secession campaign had made him suspect. At Montgomery, he had declared himself in favor of permanent separation from the North. Cobb praised his statement, but suspicions that he secretly favored "reconstruction" persisted. Even the slightest possibility that he might win election seemed more than either of the

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[31] Alexander H. Stephens, A Constitutional View of the Late War Between the States: Its Causes, Character, Conduct and Results, two vols. (Philadelphia: National Publishing Company, 1870), II, 332; Montgomery, Howell Cobb's Confederate Career, pp. 24-26.

[32] Thomas Reade Rootes Cobb to Marion Cobb, February 8, 1861, T. R. R. Cobb Papers; Howell Cobb to "My Dear Son," February 10, 1861, Howell Cobb Papers.

Cobbs could bear. They had not come this far to see power vested in a man who might secretly subvert all they had worked to accomplish. Cobb stood determined to prevent it if at all possible.[33]

Still, other and deeper forces were also at work. Cobb had made an intensely personal commitment to the success of the South's revolution. This commitment transcended selfish ambition. The triumph of the southern cause required both unity and harmony. His course, now and in the future, repeatedly illustrated his determination not to jeopardize either. Moreover, as he had already confided to Mary Ann, the presidency was an office he could not "seek." The honor must be offered freely and not represent the fruit of obvious political manipulation. Thus, when it became clear that the majority of delegates favored Davis, and that only flagrant political bargaining could get him into the running, he chose to withdraw. A republican statesman could do nothing else. In this regard, Cobb had changed but little from the student delivering orations in the Phi Kappa hall at the University of Georgia so many years before.[34]

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[33] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, February 6, 1861, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, p. 537; Thomas Reade Rootes Cobb to Marion Cobb, February 9, 1861, T. R. R. Cobb Papers; Howell Cobb to "My Dear Son," February 10, 1861, Howell Cobb Papers.

[34] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, February 3, 1861, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, pp. 536-537.

Nevertheless, in the aftermath of the presidential election Cobb declared his intention to retire from public life at the conclusion of his service in the Provisional Congress. When his supporters mentioned him for a possible cabinet post in the Davis administration, he flatly refused. He assured Mary Ann that she "need have no fear of being in another cabinet. Whatever else may be in doubt -- there is none on that point." Having been denied the top spot in the Confederate government, Cobb apparently concluded that he would accept no position. At times of personal frustration in the past, he had made similar announcements of impending retirement only to be drawn immediately back into the political arena. Had the Civil War not intervened, it is impossible to imagine Cobb long remaining out of politics.[35]

III

Whatever Cobb's personal disappointment, he manifested a willingness to cooperate with Davis. He also acknowledged the potential wisdom of Stephens' election as a sop for cooperationists and lure to conservatives in the border states. Nevertheless, he declined to endorse the vice-president. He wrote to John A. that "the election of Mr. Stephens was against my judgement and I acquiesced only when I found opposition was useless." The only way to block the

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[35] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Lamar Cobb, February 16, 1861, Howell Cobb Papers; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, February 20, 1861, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, p. 544.

election, he claimed, "was to run myself." This he had refused to do. He felt no desire to receive the "empty compliment" of a job that held no effective power. Tom Cobb spoke for many secessionists when he described Stephens' election as a "bitter pill," and complained that "the man who fought against our rights and liberty is selected to wear the laurels of our victory."[36]

The Provisional Congress still had much to attend to, and its busy schedule left Cobb little time for recriminations. During the course of the next several weeks, the Congress concentrated on producing a permanent constitution for the Confederacy. This document, largely the result of Tom's intensive labor, was adopted on March 11. Cobb proudly declared that the Confederate Constitution had eliminated the sore points "which led to the dissolution of the late Union."[37]

The Congress did take time out from its busy schedule to inaugurate Davis and Stephens. Davis, who had not been in attendance at Montgomery, arrived in the Alabama city on

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[36] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, February 10, 1861, Howell Cobb Papers; Thomas Reade Rootes Cobb to Marion Cobb, February 9, 1861, T. R. R. Cobb Papers; Montgomery, Howell Cobb's Confederate Career, pp. 25-26.

[37] Allen D. Candler, ed., Confederate Records of the State of Georgia, six vols. (Atlanta: Franklin Printing and Publishing Company, 1909-1911), I, 705-706; Montgomery, Howell Cobb's Confederate Career, p. 26; William B. McCash, Thomas R. R. Cobb, (1823-1862), The Making of a Southern Nationalist (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1983), pp. 218-227.

February 16. Two days later, at a "most impressive" ceremony in front of the capitol, Cobb administered the oath of office to the new president. An audience estimated to number between 10,000 and 25,000 witnessed the inauguration. The crowd heartily approved when Davis -- as Cobb had done at the opening of the Provisional Congress -- declared that reunion was neither "practical nor desirable." Several days earlier, in a quieter ceremony, Cobb had swallowed the "bitter pill" of swearing in the vice-president.[38]

During these weeks Cobb struggled to predict the course of future events. His informants provided him with a steady flow of news and rumors. Most of his correspondents agreed that the Confederate cause languished in the border states. Robert M. T. Hunter wrote from Virginia that nothing less than a flagrant move by the North to coerce the seceded states would prompt the Old Dominion to take action against the federal government. Junius Hillyer warned that "unless you proceed with the greatest caution you will have the border slave states thoroughly bound with our foes against us & making common cause with them to conquer a settlement."[39]

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[38] Journal of the Confederate Congress, I, 43, 63-66: Howell Cobb to Marion Cobb, February 20, 1861, Howell Cobb Papers.

[39] Junius Hillyer to Howell Cobb, January 30, 1861; February 11, 1861; Philip Clayton to Howell Cobb, February 11, 1861; Robert M. T. Hunter to Howell Cobb, March 15, 1861, Howell Cobb Papers.

Not everyone, however, viewed the situation as entirely negative. Raphael Semmes, soon to win a reputation as a Confederate naval hero, observed that should the border states be held in the Union by compromise, then they would "be a barrier and a safeguard to you and will hold the hands of the Vandals who might ... be disposed to make war upon you." Gazaway Lamar elaborated on the sentiments expressed by Semmes. Let some slave states remain with the Union, he declared, and "the way the North will deal with them will show your people what they have escaped."[40]

On the critical issues of war and peace, Cobb's informants expressed much less agreement. Junius Hillyer and Philip Clayton, for instance, insisted that the Republicans lacked the necessary force of will to move against the South. Clayton, who had not yet departed Washington, assured Cobb that the tendency towards coercion was fast disappearing in the North. He urged Cobb to do all in his power to pursue policies designed to continue this favorable trend. Hillyer, also in Washington, observed "a growing tendency here to a peaceable acquiescence in our revolution." The Republicans, he declared, "are as much afraid of us as we are of them." All the Confederacy need do was avoid any conflict prior to

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[40] Raphael Semmes to Howell Cobb, January 26, 1861; Gazaway Bugg Lamar to Howell Cobb, April 13, 1861, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, pp. 561-562.

Lincoln's inauguration and its independence would be secured.[41]

There were many who disputed these hopeful appraisals. None did so more forcefully than Gazaway Lamar. Early on, he had warned that the North would make war on the South. As events progressed, he became more certain of his assessment. By March, he bluntly declared, "the North will sooner or later invade the South to emancipate the slaves, Union or no Union." Describing a "latent feeling of opposition generally prevailing against the South," he concluded that if the North did not make war, "it is not for want of inclination." The Confederacy, he insisted, "cannot prepare too largely and efficiently for war."[42]

Cobb studied this information, as well as anything available in the northern press. Like other Confederates, he desperately hoped to add the territory and population of the border states to his new country. Yet he profoundly desired to preserve the peace between North and South. If the acquisition of the border states required war, as Hunter's letter claimed, Cobb's ongoing faith in a peaceful settlement indicates that he preferred to sacrifice the

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[41] Philip Clayton to Howell Cobb, February 8, 1861; Junius Hillyer to Howell Cobb, February 9, 1861; February 11, 1861, Howell Cobb Papers.

[42] Gazaway Bugg Lamar to Howell Cobb, January 5, 1861; March 9, 1861; March 25, 1861, ibid.; Gazaway Bugg Lamar to Howell Cobb, April 13, 1861, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, pp. 561-562.

border states rather than go to war. If war could be avoided, he believed that the border states would eventually join the Confederacy.[43]

Cobb had good reasons to hope that the North would not fight to prevent secession. During the secession campaign, he had repeatedly promised that secession represented the only way to avoid war. He had no wish to be forsworn by events. He also had three sons of military age. Like any father, he preferred not to hazard their lives on the battlefield. Upon reading Lincoln's inaugural address, he wrote to John A., "I do not believe that there will be any war. Lincoln intends to continue the policy of Buchanan until a collision comes ... at some of the ports -- and then he will negotiate." These negotiations, he insisted, "will lead to peaceable separation." Assurances from Lincoln's Secretary of State, William H. Seward, that the federal government intended no hostile acts strengthened Cobb's conviction. He clung to this view long after events led most people -- North and South -- to abandon it.[44]

Other matters plagued Cobb as well. On the same day that the Provisional Congress elected Davis to the presidency, Gazaway Lamar informed Cobb that Governor Brown

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[43] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, March 28, 1861; April 29, 1861, Howell Cobb Papers.

[44] Howell Cobb to John A. Cobb, March 5, 1861; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, March 29, 1861, ibid.; Thomas Reade Rootes Cobb to Marion Cobb, April 29, 1861, T. R. R. Cobb Papers.

had responded to the seizure of an arms shipment in New York by seizing northern vessels in the harbor of Savannah. When New York authorities refused to release the weapons, Brown impounded more ships. Lamar complained that Brown's independent response only increased "irritation and agitation." Cobb did not doubt that Brown had blundered. He denounced the seizures as a "folly" carried out "without a particle of authority," which "may precipitate us into trouble." Cobb acknowledged the impossibility of countering Brown's independent action, but expressed hope that the Confederacy might succeed in spite of the governor. Within weeks, he would render much harsher verdicts regarding Brown.[45]

Office-seekers added to his burden. The men in Montgomery faced the awesome task of creating a national government with all its attendant agencies and bureaucrats. The possibility of war with the North also necessitated the creation of a military establishment. Hopeful civil servants and military officers besieged both the congressmen and the chief executive. Cobb explained his own failure to write home more often to their presence. He commented to his son that "it really seems as if half Georgia was here after office." The other half, he observed, "were at home writing letters ... on the same subject." Nevertheless, Cobb had

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[45] Gazaway Bugg Lamar to Howell Cobb, February 9, 1861; February 22, 1861; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, February 23, 1861, Howell Cobb Papers.

been in politics too long to be overly bothered by the press of suitors. As he had done so often in the past, he worked to secure suitable positions for friends and family members. He managed to get jobs for both Philip Clayton and Junius Hillyer, among others. When he heard rumors that the possibility of war threatened to close the University in Athens, he moved quickly to procure a military appointment for brother-in-law, Williams Rutherford, Jr.[46]

Despite the many burdens, these busy weeks also had their satisfactions. Cobb gave voice to these when he addressed the Provisional Congress on March 16, at the close of its first session. Responding to a unanimous resolution of gratitude for his service as president, he expressed great pride in the vigorous work done by the members. He applauded the high quality of debate which had characterized all their deliberations. He praised their consistent and intentional quest for unity. Above all, however, he took pride in the permanent Confederate Constitution that the Congress had produced. Based on "that noble legacy of our Revolutionary fathers, the Constitution of the United States," he declared it "the ablest instrument ever prepared for the government of a free people."[47]

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[46] Junius Hillyer to Howell Cobb, February 11, 1861; Howell Cobb to John A. Cobb, February 15, 1861; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, February 23, 1861; Howell Cobb to Williams Rutherford, Jr., May 11, 1861, ibid.; Thomas Reade Rootes Cobb to Marion Cobb, February 20, 1861; T. R. R. Cobb Papers.

[47] Journal of the Confederate Congress, I, 152-153.

IV

Following the adjournment of Congress, Cobb made a brief visit to Georgia. During his time there, he addressed a letter to his former chief, James Buchanan. Cobb explained that he had often desired to write, but refrained because he knew that "my opinions differed so widely from yours that any suggestions from me would be obtrusive and unacceptable." Now that the advent of March 4 had released the ex-president "from troubles and difficulties ... which were forced upon you by the folly and madness of your enemies," he felt at liberty to write.[48]

Cobb had been reluctant to leave Buchanan's cabinet back in December -- not because he doubted the necessity of secession, but rather because he believed it disloyal to desert a true friend of the South in a moment of great crisis. Repeated pleas from family, friends, and allies, as well as the course of events had compelled him to act more quickly than he desired. In the intervening months, a mutual friend had assured Cobb that "Old Buck" still spoke of him "in great kindness & sadness." Almost certainly bothered by a sense of guilt, Cobb now hoped to mend fences by again insisting that Lincoln's election had effectively "dissolved" the Union. The Republican victory had forced the South -- and by extension Cobb -- to take immediate action. There

[48] Howell Cobb to James Buchanan, March 26, 1861, James Buchanan Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

is no evidence that Buchanan ever responded to Cobb's letter.[49]

After a short stay in Macon with his family, he left to attend a Masonic convention in New Orleans. While there, he undertook an informal diplomatic mission to the president of Mexico -- himself a Mason. Cobb explained his purpose, saying, "it is all important that we should have first place in the confidence of the Mexican government." He did not appreciate how close Mexico itself stood to revolutionary upheaval.[50]

Although too busy to do much sightseeing, he did take time to tour the city's business district and view the Mississippi. He found the river a disappointment, confiding to Mary Ann, "I scarcely realized that I was looking at the great father of waters -- so placid and quiet did it seem." He also found it difficult to accept the relaxed attitude of the citizens toward the Sabbath. He wrote to Mary Ann that there were horse races on Sunday, but added that "I have not yet become sufficiently acclimated to New Orleans morality to attend."[51]

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[49] Ibid.; Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, November 16, 1861; Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, undated manuscript, 1860; Kate Thompson to Mary Ann Cobb, February 3, 1861, Howell Cobb Papers.

[50] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, March 5, 1861 (misdated manuscript), Howell Cobb Papers.

[51] Ibid.; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, April 7, 1861, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, pp. 559-560.

Other sights impressed him much more. He attended a ceremony at a Catholic church where the city's volunteer military companies had collected to have their Confederate flags blessed by the archbishop. The families of the soldiers were in attendance, and Cobb recorded his impression that "every heart seem[ed] to beat responsive to the patriotism of the occasion, as the solemn ceremony bound the hearts of all in iron bonds to the cause of our new Confederacy. It was a day not soon to be forgotten."[52]

In a more humorous vein, he described a late night serenade by the Louisiana Guards. His "Masonic brethren" had already kept him out quite late, and he had not returned to his hotel until nearly midnight. He had gone straight to bed and was "snoring away most delightfully when the sound of martial music aroused all the guests (myself included.)" The Guards boisterously informed him that he was the subject of their attention and insisted that he return the honor by making some public remarks. Cobb hastily dressed and went out, "half awake," to address the soldiers. Happily, he observed, "there were no reporters & I shall not be subjected to the mortification of reading that speech in print."[53]

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[52] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, April 7, 1861, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, pp. 559-560.

[53] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, April 2, 1861, Howell Cobb Papers.

While Cobb took care of his "Masonic business" and tried to relax in the Crescent City, events elsewhere moved towards a crisis. As Cobb had predicted, North and South faced off over the federal government's determination to hold forts in southern harbors. Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor emerged as the focal point of the dispute. Lincoln could not abandon the fort and be certain of retaining any meaningful power to preserve the Union. Davis could not allow federal occupation of Confederate territory to continue indefinitely if he hoped to assert Confederate independence at home and abroad. Thus, even as Lincoln moved in ways designed to preserve one national government, Davis labored to insure the existence of two. A collision became inevitable.[54]

The critical moment came when Lincoln resolved that he must resupply the fort's small garrison. Although he dispatched assurances to South Carolina officials that he would make no effort to throw reinforcements or additional armaments into the fort provided they did not fire on the resupply ships, Davis concluded that the resupply effort must be blocked. He authorized Confederate forces ringing Sumter to reduce the fort, and in the pre-dawn hours of April 12, southern artillery opened fire on the installation. The next afternoon, the fort's commander, Major Robert Anderson,

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[54] James M. McPherson, Battle Cry of Freedom, The Civil War Era (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 264-275.

agreed to surrender to Confederate forces commanded by Brigadier General Pierre G. T. Beauregard.[55]

The clash of armed forces at Fort Sumter sparked a new round of intense activity on both sides of the Mason-Dixon line. While President Davis ordered the Provisional Congress to reassemble in Montgomery on April 29, President Lincoln declared the existence of an insurrection and issued a call for 75,000 troops. The slave states of the Upper South reconsidered the issue of secession. Four of them -- Virginia, Arkansas, Tennessee, and North Carolina -- soon responded to Lincoln's call for troops with secession ordinances of their own. Even before Virginia had officially joined the Confederacy, Governor John Letcher informed Davis that he desired to form a military alliance with the Confederate States pending a formal union. Davis responded immediately and within days troops from the Deep South states moved northward to Virginia. Among those hastening to the defense of the Old Dominion were Cobb's two oldest sons, John A. and Lamar.[56]

Cobb received news of these developments as he concluded his visit to Louisiana and began his trip back to Georgia. Enroute, he stopped off in Oxford, Mississippi for a brief visit with Jacob and Kate Thompson. He then pushed on to

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[55] Ibid.

[56] Ibid., pp. 274-307; John A. Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, April 23, 1861, Howell Cobb Papers; Schott, Alexander H. Stephens, p. 336.

Macon. There he learned that another son, Howell, Jr., had enlisted in a volunteer artillery unit. Like his brothers before him, young Howell soon would be departing for active service. For this son at least, military service represented an escape as he stood on the brink of expulsion from the University for failing to attend to his studies.[57]

By the time Cobb departed Georgia to retrace his steps to Montgomery, he was firm in his determination to retire from political life. He, too, would make his contribution to the war effort through military service. He wasted no time in publicly manifesting his intention. On the same day that the Provisional Congress reassembled, he wrote a letter to the Banner "positively refusing under any circumstances to accept ... any civil office." Brother Tom observed, "he seems to be in earnest." He was. He began to make plans for raising a regiment.[58]

Before Cobb could give complete attention to his military aspirations, however, he must first fulfill his responsibilities as president of the Provisional Congress. Most of the congressmen who met in Montgomery believed war imminent. Tom expressed the sense of the majority, saying,

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[57] William Henry Waddell to Howell Cobb, February 12, 1861; Kate Thompson to Mary Ann Cobb, April 15, 1861; John A. Cobb to John B. Lamar, April 27, 1861; Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, April 30, 1861, Howell Cobb Papers.

[58] Thomas Reade Rootes Cobb to Marion Cobb, April 29, 1861, T. R. R. Cobb Papers; Montgomery, Howell Cobb's Confederate Career, p. 30.

"the opinion is pretty general here that we will have to take Washington City." This view also dominated public attitudes. One Macon citizen, fearing that "the government does not realize that this is a war of conquest -- not so much by the Lincoln government as the Northern masses," pleaded with Cobb to take heed. He warned that a "trial of strength ... between the two sections is inevitable [and] it is a death struggle depend upon it!"[59]

Despite the widespread expectation of war, Cobb persisted in his view that neither the clash at Fort Sumter nor Lincoln's call for troops necessitated war. Upon arriving in Montgomery, he assured Mary Ann that both he and Toombs expected a settlement "without much if any fighting." He conceded that his was not the majority view, and confessed that he had not yet studied all the information available. Nevertheless, a few days later he still confidently maintained, "I don't think ... there will be much of a war." Making an apparent reference to the mobbing of a Massachusetts regiment by a secessionist mob in Baltimore, he asserted, "this is what I have been looking for & if a conflict is avoided for sixty days -- I believe there will be a general stampede in the northern army." He gained

[59] Thomas Reade Rootes Cobb to Marion Cobb, April 29, 1861, T. R. R. Cobb Papers; S. T. Bailey to Howell Cobb, May 4, 1861, Howell Cobb Papers.

further confidence from rumors that the Lincoln government faced increasing fiscal difficulties.[60]

Two days later Cobb offered an even more optimistic, albeit more strategically accurate appraisal. He now declared that if conflict could be avoided for only forty days, then "there will be no fighting." The great danger, he felt, was that "before that time a conflict may be precipitated around or about Washington."[61]

Whatever his views regarding the probability of war, Cobb fully endorsed the program of military preparation proposed by the Davis administration, reasoning, "it is the best way of preserving peace -- and also the best way to meet the war -- if it must come." During this session the Congress passed legislation recognizing the existence of a state of war with the United States. It authorized Davis to issue letters of marque and reprisal for privateers raiding Union shipping and continued the work of building an army. It also took an initial step towards paying for all these measures when it authorized a $50,000,000 loan to the Confederate government. On May 20, the Congress voted to relocate the Confederate capital to Richmond when it reconvened in July. Cobb proudly informed Mary Ann that "there continues to be great unanimity in Congress on all

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[60] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, April 29, 1861; May 3, 1861, Howell Cobb Papers.

[61] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, May 5, 1861, ibid.

important questions. It is the policy of all to press forward with the utmost energy in the preparations for our defense."[62]

Concepts of proper policy, however, were not universally agreed upon. Governor Brown continued on his independent course, and again drifted into conflict with Confederate authorities. Cobb predicted that "there is a fair prospect of a quarrel between President Davis & our worthy Joe Brown." Brown, he confided, resented acts of Congress designed to remove control of state troops from the governors. Accusing the governor of "trying to ride the high horse," Cobb vowed to "sustain Davis and our Congress." If they but showed "the right spirit," he felt certain "we will thoroughly put down the miserable demagogue who now disgraces the Executive chair of Ga."[63]

V

As soon as the Provincial Congress adjourned, Cobb departed for home to begin recruiting his regiment. Getting the groundwork underway, he soon departed for Richmond. Here he sought a colonel's commission and presidential acceptance

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[62] Ibid.; Journal of the Confederate Congress, I, 177-181, 255-257; James Matthews, ed., The Statutes at Large of the Provisional Government of the Confederate States of America from the Institution of the Government, February 8, 1861 to Its Termination, February 18, 1862, Inclusive, (Richmond, 1864), pp. 117-118; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, May 5, 1861, Howell Cobb Papers; Montgomery, Howell Cobb's Confederate Career, pp. 30-31.

[63] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, May 5, 1860; May 18, 1860, Howell Cobb Papers.

of his regiment for Confederate service. Although not unfriendly, Davis declined an immediate accsptance because the government lacked the guns to arm the proposed regiment. Receiving encouragement from several cabinet officers, Cobb continued to press his cause, noting, "it seems to be well understood that I am shortly to take after the yankees."[64]

While waiting in the new Confederate capital to learn the fate of his proposed unit, Cobb received a secret communication from Dr. A. T. W. Lytle of Hall County, Georgia. The doctor urged Cobb to consider the benefit of chemical warfare. Lytle recommended that the Confederate military utilize fire engines loaded with nitric acid in battle. Any man, he observed, "who gets a drop in his eye will forget he is a soldier. Horses will become unmanageable." Such weapons, Lytle argued, could be used in the field, for the defense of forts, and on naval vessels. Cobb's response to the doctor's suggestion is not known, but his failure to advocate it might have stemmed from the realization that the northern states probably owned far more fire engines than the South.[65]

Cobb also took advantage of his proximity to Norfolk, to visit John A. and Lamar. The boys were stationed with

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[64] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, June 20, 1861; Lamar Cobb to Howell Cobb, June 7, 1861; June 14, 1861, ibid.; Montgomery, Howell Cobb's Confederate Career, pp. 31-32.

[65] A. T. W. Lytle to Howell Cobb, June 14, 1861, Howell Cobb Papers.

their unit at Sewall Point on the Virginia Peninsula. It lay just across Hampton Roads from the Union stronghold at Fortress Monroe.. During his visit, he got a taste of camp life, and experienced being under hostile fire for the first time. Lamar reported to Mary Ann that the enemy sent eleven artillery shells "whizzing ... over." Initially surprised by the cool response of his sons and their comrades to this bombardment, he quickly became as accustomed to the shells as the "veterans" and "paid no further attention to them."[66]

For a time it appeared that Cobb's visit to Sewall Point might bear unexpected fruit. Some officers of the four company battalion to which his sons belonged suggested that their unit be incorporated into Cobb's regiment. Although eager to secure the "four best drilled companies in the army," Cobb declined to discuss the matter with the balance of the officers and men until clearing the plan with the war department.[67]

Secretary of War Leroy P. Walker proved agreeable. Moreover, he authorized Cobb to raise ten new companies should the battalion decline to merge into a regiment. Unfortunately, guns remained scarce and Cobb complained "if any body but Joe Brown was Governor I could get them at home & and have no further trouble about it." When the men in the battalion voted to remain a separate unit -- much to John A.

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[66] Lamar Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, June 22, 1861, ibid.

[67] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, June 23, 1861, ibid.

and Lamar's disgust -- Cobb had no alternative but to revert to his original proposal.[68]

Mary Ann did not wholeheartedly approve her husband's military pursuits. She promised him her prayers "that God will fulfill the desire of your heart respecting arms," but insisted that he need not seek out the battlefield. She summarized her view succinctly: "As President of the Congress and with three sons to sustain yr. principles in the field you should be satisfied." Yet she understood her husband. She warned him to beware that "the old ambition is not budding again," even as she acknowledged that "your constitution calls for excitement I know and I will not throw any obstacle in your way."[69]

Cobb had given his decision to enter the military much thought, and he stated his case with a clarity that rivaled Mary Ann's. He explained his reasons to John Lamar following his return from Richmond. In part, he had based his decision on the conviction that "the step would have a good effect upon the people of the upcountry -- who you know were very hard to bring in." Besides, he added, "it [is] but right

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[68] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, June 23, 1861; Howell Cobb to Leroy P. Walker, June 24, 1861, ibid.; Montgomery, Howell Cobb's Confederate Career, pp. 32-33.

[69] Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, June 24, 1861, Howell Cobb Papers.

that I should take part in a fight that I had contributed in no small degree to bring about."[70]

He confessed to Lamar, however, that he also had a deeper and more compelling reason for embarking upon a military career. Simply put, he had three sons in the military and "I believed ... I could provide for and protect them, better by being in the army myself. It was to be in a position where I could do this more certainly and effectively that I have taken this important step." He held no false illusions in this regard, confessing to Lamar that this reason "would not be considered by the critical world as patriotic as the one already given." Nonetheless, he assured his brother-in-law that the determination to look out for his boys had been the "controlling" force in his decision.[71]

Cobb returned from Richmond in late June. He had to be back in the capital by July 20 for the opening of Congress. In the intervening weeks, he concentrated on recruiting soldiers for his regiment. When he departed Athens, much of the work had been completed, but some companies were not yet up to strength. His recently appointed staff adjutant, Lieutenant James Barrow remained behind to supervise the last stages of recruitment, and then bring the regiment on to

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[70] Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, June 30, 1861, ibid.

[71] Ibid.

Richmond. Before leaving for Richmond, he requested that John Lamar forward him a sword and a "colonels suit."[72]

On July 21, the day after the Congress reassembled, the first large battle of the war occurred at Manassas Junction, about twenty-five miles south of Washington. President Davis availed himself of his position as commander-in-chief to ride out and observe the clash. Those left behind in Richmond anxiously awaited the news from the front.[73]

Late in the afternoon, many prominent government officials, Cobb among them, gathered at the war department to get a first look at dispatches from the battle. The atmosphere inside the secretary of war's office reflected the tension that gripped the streets and homes of the city. As early reports began to arrive, anxiety levels increased. Cobb ventured the opinion that the dispatches pointed to a "drawn battle." This observation drew an angry rebuke from Colonel Albert T. Bledsoe, who apparently equated any doubt in total victory with disloyalty. Shortly thereafter, Varina Davis relayed a message of victory which she had just received from her husband. Immediately, both anxiety and short-tempers dissipated into rejoicing and celebration.[74]

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[72] Ibid.; E. Merton Coulter, Lost Generation: The Life and Death of James Barrow, C.S.A. (Tuscaloosa: Confederate Publishing Company, Inc., 1956), p. 58.

[73] J. B. Jones, A Rebel War Clerk's Diary At the Confederate States Capital, two vols. (Philadelphia: J.P. Lippincott & Co., 1866), I, 64.

[74] Ibid., p. 64-65.

In the aftermath of victory at Manassas, many in the South believed the war virtually won. A few realized that the battle represented little more than the opening act in a bloody and destructive civil war. Cobb confessed that his previous prognostications had been so flawed that he doubted his powers of prophesy. Nevertheless, he did hazard another prediction. He suggested to brother John that "the effect of the defeat has been to make the leaders at the North desperate & they swear vengeance at all costs." Thus, he correctly predicted, "the war will be waged with fury and malignity." Not satisfied to stop with a safe forecast, he then went on to argue that this situation would only prevail until January, 1862. Thereafter, he maintained, the North's "financial embarrassments [will] compel them to stop."[75]

Even as Cobb awaited the arrival of his regiment, he began his program of looking out for his boys. He quickly secured transfers to his staff for John A. and Lamar. John A. received the rank of quartermaster sergeant, while Lamar assumed the duties of sergeant major. Within a matter of months, Lamar departed to join General Henry R. Jackson's command in Savannah as an aide-de-camp. Howell, Jr. replaced him on Cobb's staff.[76]

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[75] Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, July 28, 1861, Howell Cobb Papers; Montgomery, Howell Cobb's Confederate Career, pp. 34-35.

[76] Thomas Reade Rootes Cobb to Marion Cobb, July 24, 1861, T. R. R. Cobb Papers; John A. Cobb to John B. Lamar, August 1, 1861; January 1, 1862; Lamar Cobb to Howell Cobb,

Elements of Cobb's regiment began to arrive in mid-August. By the end of the month all ten companies -- some 900 men -- had arrived. Officially enrolled as the Sixteenth Georgia Infantry Regiment, the unit was ordered to encamp at the Richmond Fair Grounds. "Camp Cobb" only lay a mile from the State House. This location made it easy for the Sixteenth's colonel to spend his evenings in camp while attending to his congressional duties during the day, though these arrangements required a period of adjustment. Tom Cobb, commander of Cobb's Georgia Legion, described his brother's first night in camp, saying, "he went to bed at eleven o' clock and got up at four this morning and he felt certain that he had been in bed at least a fortnight so long did the night appear."[77]

Because Cobb's congressional duties kept him away from the regiment during most days, the actual responsibility for training and discipline fell to his second in command, Lieutenant Colonel Goode Bryan. A graduate of West Point and a veteran of the Mexican War, Bryan had left the military to pursue life as a Georgia planter. Rumors that he had a weakness for alcohol caused Cobb some concern early on, but the opportunity to observe his subordinate in camp convinced

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August 2, 1861; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, December 23, 1861, Howell Cobb Papers.

[77] Thomas Reade Rootes Cobb to Marion Cobb, August 22, 1861, T. R. R. Cobb Papers; John A. Cobb to John B. Lamar, August 28, 1861, Howell Cobb Papers.

him that he could not have found a better officer. Writing to brother John, he noted, "I consider myself peculiarly fortunate in getting Goode Bryan .... He ... has worked wonders in the regiment already .... In a short time I shall have a regiment as well drilled as any in the service."[78]

Yet Cobb had no intention of shirking his own military responsibilities. He undertook a course of self-study designed to give him at least a rudimentary knowledge of drill and tactics. The Richmond press voiced approval of his efforts, and observed that "for over a month Col. Cobb has been industriously training himself in the duties and discipline of the soldier, and numerous are the attestations to his rapidly acquired proficiency in the art of war." Cobb's efforts received additional recognition when on August 28, the Congress confirmed his colonelcy and voted to present him with a commemorative sword and his regiment with a battle flag.[79]

Despite these plaudits, Cobb encountered many difficulties and frustrations in his role as soldier. Many of the independent-minded southern privates found it difficult to adjust to the strict discipline of army life. Before transferring to his father's regiment, John A. had

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[78] Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, August 30, 1861, Howell Cobb Papers; Montgomery, Howell Cobb's Confederate Career, p. 34.

[79] Richmond Examiner, July 31, 1861; Thomas Reade Rootes Cobb to Marion Cobb, August 30, 1861, T. R. R. Cobb Papers; Journal of the Confederate Congress, I, 435.

reported to his mother on the enlisted men's sport of "spanking" their officers for entertainment. Cobb had no intention of permitting such behavior. As a signal of his determination, he utilized the guard tent and court-martials freely. He asserted, "I intend to have discipline or quit the business .... It is true that I have had to fill the guard tent more than once ... but they begin to find out that obedience to orders will save trouble."[80]

Even as Cobb labored to instill a firm discipline in his regiment, he found himself beset by a far more insidious foe. Like many units new to the field in both the Confederate and Union armies, the Sixteenth fell victim to serious illness. Men and boys growing up in the relative isolation of rural America often had not been exposed to communicable diseases such as mumps and measles. When gathered into the close contact of camp life, they proved highly vulnerable. Before the end of August, Tom lamented that his Legion had some fifty-seven cases of measles, while the Sixteenth had more than twice that number. Within days, three of Cobb's men had died. Before the epidemic ran it course, the Sixteenth had nearly 300 men stricken, and about twenty deaths. When five

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[80] John A. Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, June 6, 1861; Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, September 22, 1861, Howell Cobb Papers; Thomas Reade Rootes Cobb to Marion Cobb, August 25, 1861, T. R. R. Cobb Papers.

men died in a single day, Tom noted that "it has created quite a panic in [Howell's] camp."[81]

Cobb suffered the sting of sorrow with each case of illness, and especially with each death. He also experienced a personal struggle between compassion for the sick and the conviction that duty required him to maintain the strictest discipline. He related his difficulties to Mary Ann: "Duty requires me to enforce discipline and often to do for the good of the men what they ... believe is only an arbitrary exercise of power. How little do they know of what is going on in my mind & heart ... I visit them daily ... I smooth their foreheads with my hand ... and try to drive away despondency."[82]

Disease in Cobb's Virginia camp sparked rumors in Georgia. Soon newspapers long hostile to Cobb politically, gave widespread circulation to stories that the Sixteenth consistently suffered a death rate of six men per day. Some even charged that he had ordered an officer flogged for removing sick men from camp. Cobb bitterly attributed these

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[81] Thomas Reade Rootes Cobb to Marion Cobb, August 29; September 3; September 6; September 11; September 12, 1861, T. R. R. Cobb Papers; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, undated manuscript, 1861, Howell Cobb Papers.

[82] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, September 7, 1861, Howell Cobb Papers.

reports to "meddling women" and "meddlesome outsiders who infest all communities."[83]

These trouble-makers, Cobb charged, took offense at his determination to keep sick men in camp where their care might be supervised by the regimental surgeon and men who knew them. Some of the sick had desired to seek care in private homes or hospitals. Cobb declined permission unless the surgeon recommended their removal from camp. Several sick men slipped out of camp, and wandered about Richmond looking for people to take them in. Their actions fueled rumors about conditions at Camp Cobb. Ultimately, the death rate provided grim evidence for the wisdom of Cobb's position. Of the 240 sick who remained in camp, nine died. Fifty men sought care outside camp. Nine of them also died. Several regiments, Cobb duly noted, had experienced much worse mortality rates.[84]

Early on, Mary Ann attempted to lay the rumors to rest by writing a vigorous refutation over the pen-name "Truth." She submitted the article to the Augusta Constitutionalist, a leader in printing the anti-Cobb stories. To her dismay, the editors violated the traditional rule of preserving the anonymity of authors, and identified her as the

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[83] Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, September 13, 1861; J. D. Frierson to Howell Cobb, October 4, 1861; Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, September 22, 1861, ibid.

[84] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, undated manuscript, 1861; Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, September 22, 1861, ibid.

correspondent. They added insult to injury by insisting that she retract her "charges." Outraged, she replied that she had made no charges. She had but stated the truth. Eventually, a series of articles in the Banner clarified the issue of disease and death in the Sixteenth.[85]

The problems of discipline and disease, however, did not represent the only difficulties confronting Colonel Cobb. From the beginning of Cobb's efforts to raise the Sixteenth, President Davis had warned of the obstacle posed by the shortage of adequate firearms. Although the regiment began to arrive in Richmond in August, it still took several weeks to procure guns for the men.[86]

Cobb constantly pressed war department officials to supply guns and found their inability to comply extremely frustrating. In mid-September, he learned of a large shipment of Enfield rifles due to arrive in Savannah. He quickly secured promises that a portion of these guns would be used to equip his men. Only a few days later, he received information that agents for Governor Brown had seized the guns for use in Georgia. Cobb's usual equanimity deserted him. Describing himself as "enraged beyond all control," he

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[85] Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, September 13; September 18, 1861, ibid; Athens Southern Banner, October 23, 1861; November 6, 1861; December 11, 1861.

[86] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, June 14, 1861; June 23, 1861; August 6, 1861; September 30, 1861; John A. Cobb to John B. Lamar, August 21, 1861; Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, September 22, 1861, Howell Cobb Papers.

launched upon a tirade demanding that the war department force Brown to relinquish the guns. Commenting on Brown's recent reelection, he fumed that "as a man, a christian, a gentleman and a Georgian I feel humiliated into the very dust."[87]

Under pressure from Cobb, the Confederate government ordered Brown to release the guns. Brown agreed, but as usual imposed a price. He retained 1,000 rifles from the shipment for distribution to coastal defense units in Georgia. The long awaited guns finally arrived in October. Unfortunately, they had gotten rusty during shipment. The rifles required several days of refurbishing before they could be distributed to the troops.[88]

VI

With his regiment at last healthy and armed, Cobb prepared to take the field. The Sixteenth had been ordered to join the "Army of the Peninsula" in early September, but disease and the wait for guns delayed its departure from Richmond for several weeks. Commanded by Major General John Bankhead Magruder, the "Army of the Peninsula" consisted of less than 10,000 men. The army's area of operations lay on

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[87] Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, September 22, 1861; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, September 30, 1861, ibid.; Joseph H. Parks, Joseph E. Brown of Georgia (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977), p. 163.

[88] Montgomery, Howell Cobb's Confederate Career, p. 37; Briscoe Baldwin to Howell Cobb, October 14, 1865, Howell Cobb Papers.

the Virginia Peninsula, a critical strip of territory between the York and James Rivers. Its principle task in October, 1861, lay in the prevention of any strategic move against Richmond by Union forces holding Fortress Monroe.[89]

The Sixteenth received a special send-off from Richmond. On October 17, the regiment formed up on the parade ground at Camp Cobb beneath a threatening sky. A military band blared out Dixie. Joseph Davis, representing his brother the president, and a party of Confederate dignitaries presented the sword and flag which Congress had voted to give Cobb and his regiment. Cobb accepted the gifts on behalf of his troops, and in a brief speech intended to fire their patriotism and martial ardor, he called upon them to view their new banner as a sacred object. When the Sixteenth finally faced the enemy, he cried, let the flag become the rallying point and "rather than surrender it, let it wave over the burial ground of every man in the regiment."[90]

Two days later, the men crowded onto cars of the Richmond and York River Railroad and moved out for Yorktown and the "Army of the Peninsula." At West Point, they transferred from the railroad to a steamboat, the C.S.S. Logan, and continued their journey by water. The men enjoyed this part of the trip. After the disease and monotony of

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[89] Montgomery, Howell Cobb's Confederate Career, pp. 35, 40.

[90] Ibid.; Athens Southern Banner, October 23, 1861; November 6, 1861.

camp life, they enjoyed the change of scenery and chance to relax. Some men took the opportunity to try out their new rifles by shooting at waterfowl. A brass band provided musical entertainment.[91]

Cobb, too, appreciated the change of scene. For some weeks he had experienced doubts regarding his status with the Davis administration. Long used to being consulted by presidents and other national leaders, Cobb now acknowledged his isolation from the seat of power. Writing to Mary Ann, he complained, "I feel like a piece of timber floating on the current with no power to control my destiny .... I never see the President .... I stay in my camp and devote myself to my studies."[92]

A belief that Davis had worked to frustrate his military ambitions furthered his sense of isolation. Cobb personally said little on the subject, but the ever critical Tom demonstrated no such restraint. Accusing the president of acting from "petty jealousy," he contended that Davis had "thrown every difficulty he could in the way of Howell's

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[91] Athens Southern Banner, November 6, 1861; Joseph White Woods, "History of Service of Joseph White Woods, Soldier in the War Between the States, Written by Himself - After the War," in Confederate Diaries, Bible Records, War Records, and Letters, Georgia Department of Archives and History, Atlanta, Georgia, 134, 136, (Hereafter: "Service of Joseph White Woods"); Montgomery, Howell Cobb's Confederate Career, pp. 39-40.

[92] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, September 30, 1861, Howell Cobb Papers; William C. Davis, Jefferson Davis: The Man and His Hour (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), pp. 444-445.

regiment." Davis' ill-concealed faith in the superiority of West Point-trained officers exacerbated the situation -- not just with the Cobbs, but with many prominent individuals who left private careers to serve their country.[93]

Upon their arrival, Cobb and the Sixteenth established Camp Bryan about three miles south of Yorktown. Camp Bryan occupied a pleasant field surrounded by a mixed forest filled with wild grapes and a variety of nuts. These fresh foods, combined with the availability of wild turkeys and fresh oysters provided a varied diet. This variety proved welcome as the hardtack issued by commissary officers appeared inedible to soldiers who had not previously encountered that fare. Camp Bryan's proximity to the monument commemorating Washington's victory over Cornwallis enhanced the attractiveness of the site for a new generation of southerners engaged in a struggle for their liberty. The historic nature of their location also inspired jokes as "some of the boys declared [their hardtack] had been saved from the Revolutionary War." The nearby encampment of brother Tom's Georgia Legion added to the appeal of the new camp.[94]

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[93] Thomas Reade Rootes Cobb to Marion Cobb, August 30, 1861, T. R. R. Cobb Papers; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, January 25, 1862, Howell Cobb Papers; Montgomery, Howell Cobb's Confederate Career, pp. 38-39; Davis, Jefferson Davis, pp. 444-445.

[94] "Service of Joseph White Woods," p. 136; John A. Cobb to John B. Lamar, October 21, 1861, Howell Cobb Papers; Montgomery, Howell Cobb's Confederate Career, pp. 39-40.

Cobb's new commander had already won renown as victor at the Battle of Big Bethel. Although little more than a skirmish compared with the battles to come, in the early days of the war every victory tended to be magnified in importance. A graduate of West Point and a career soldier, Magruder's flamboyance, sartorial splendor, and fondness for theatrics had won him the sobriquet, "Prince John." He demonstrated a tendency towards excitability and found it difficult to delegate authority.[95]

Magruder, who had been pleading for reinforcements, enthusiastically welcomed Cobb. He kept his new subordinate close at hand, and busy. Within days, Cobb declared that "he would as leave be under [Magruder] as any Genl. in the army." Lamar described his father's feelings in stronger terms, writing, "he is delighted with him." Aware of reports that "Prince John" spent much of his time drunk, Cobb moved quickly to dispel them. He denounced the rumors as base slanders and insisted, "he is not a drinking man."[96]

Magruder immediately put Cobb and his men to work digging fortifications. Cobb humorously observed that these new duties made him feel as if he had "quit the military and turned Irish Ditcher." Yet constructing fortifications only

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[95] Douglas Southall Freeman, Lee's Lieutenants, A Study in Command: Manassas to Malvern Hill, three vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1942), I, xxxiv.

[96] Lamar Cobb to John B. Lamar, October 23, 1861, Howell Cobb Papers.

represented the beginning of Magruder's assignments for Cobb. The colonel soon informed Mary Ann that "I have been here now ten days -- and it has been the hardest working ten days of my life." He reported being "in my saddle some days from 8 in the morning until 2 at night only stopping to eat, and every day five or six hours -- besides drilling my regiment -- sometimes two hours at a time." Frequent alarms of impending night attacks further added to his demanding schedule. Cobb commented, however, "we are getting customed to alarms. So much so that I rouse up -- issue orders & as soon as they are attended to I turn in and go to sleep in less than a minute."[97]

Although Magruder kept the men in his command busy, the Cobb clan still found time for sightseeing. They especially enjoyed the opportunity to visit "White Marsh," the plantation of their maternal grandfather. Tom described it as "one of the most magnificent estates I ever beheld." After walking through the family graveyard, they manifested surprise to learn that their grandfather had died before reaching the age of sixty. During the visit, the current resident observed that "Howell ... was just like Grandpa."[98]

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[97] Thomas Reade Rootes Cobb to Marion Cobb, October 26, 1861, T. R. R. Cobb Papers; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, October 29, 1861, Howell Cobb Papers.

[98] Thomas Reade Rootes Cobb to Marion Cobb, November 5, 1861, T. R. R. Cobb Papers.

In addition to sightseeing, Cobb amused himself by growing a beard, which he retained for the rest of his life, and by refining his knowledge of "camp talk." As to the beard, Mary Ann reported to John Lamar that one observer believed it an attempt to conceal his identity in battle. Another believed it rendered him "ugly enough to frighten the devil." She had no higher regard for the earthy "camp talk" expressions which crept into his correspondence. She suggested that if he must use such language, then at least have it translated into French. This, she noted, would give his "conversation & writing a shade of elegance and refinement."[99]

Even in Yorktown, Cobb could not entirely escape Richmond politics. The news from the Confederate capital did not inspire optimism. Writing in strict confidentiality from the war department, Cobb's close friend William N. Browne painted a picture of dissent and petty disputes. Commenting that "patriotism is not a common plant," he related details of arguments between Davis and several generals. He also complained that Brigadier General Robert Toombs labored constantly "to fan the flames to devour" Davis. Toombs' blustering, Browne charged, represented "a concerted scheme in the interest of A. H. S." Praising Cobb's public loyalty to Davis, Browne warned that he must be prepared "for a

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[99] Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, October 27, 1861; Mary Ann Cobb to John B. Lamar, December 6, 1861, Howell Cobb Papers; Montgomery, Howell Cobb's Confederate Career, p. 41.

lively session of Congress. The fight will be hot and heavy."[100]

Browne did not suspect just how difficult Cobb found it to maintain a facade of unwavering support for the Davis administration. The "Colonel" became increasingly convinced that the president placed his faith in men who either lacked the capacity or the moral fiber to carry the South through to victory. He viewed Davis' failure to take men such as himself into close confidence as proof of the chief executive's poor character judgement.[101]

Davis did nothing to ease Cobb's doubts. Even before the Sixteenth had left Richmond, Cobb had reason to believe that Davis and the "West Point crowd" had blocked his promotion to Brigadier General. After arriving on the Peninsula, he learned of a move to make Tom a General. Tom, who expressed real anxiety at holding rank superior to his elder brother, protested. Over Tom's objections, Cobb secretly wrote administration officials urging the promotion. He loyally offered to serve in his brother's proposed brigade. When the administration failed to respond favorably, Cobb simply noted, "like myself [Tom] is no particular favorite with the government." Convinced that the administration scorned their efforts to further the southern

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[100] William M. Browne to Howell Cobb, November 4, 1861, Howell Cobb Papers.

[101] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, December 5, 1861; January 18, 1862; January 25, 1862, ibid.

cause, the Cobbs began to investigate the prospects of having the Sixteenth and the Legion transferred back to Georgia.[102]

On November 15, Cobb travelled to Richmond to preside at the fifth and last session of the Provisional Congress. In light of his many military duties, he considered resigning his post as president of Congress, but decided against it. As it was, he spent much of his time during the next three months shuttling back and forth between the Confederate capital and Yorktown where the Sixteenth labored to erect winter quarters. When a Yankee amphibious force commanded by General Ambrose Burnside raised a potential threat to the Army of the Peninsula, he raced back to the front in company with General Magruder.[103]

Following this incident, Cobb again found it necessary to defend his commander against charges of drunkenness. Responding to reports that Magruder was "in a frolic," he asserted, "I came with him & was with him in Richmond. Therefore I know that he was perfectly sober." That was not to say that Cobb agreed with Magruder's tendency to call out the troops in response to every hint of movement by the

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[102] Montgomery, Howell Cobb's Confederate Career, pp. 38-39; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, November 1, 1861; Thomas Reade Rootes Cobb to Howell Cobb, November 4, 1861, Howell Cobb Papers; Thomas Reade Rootes Cobb to Marion Cobb, November 5, 1861; Howell Cobb to Thomas Reade Rootes Cobb, November 14, 1861, T. R. R. Cobb Papers.

[103] Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, November 14, 1861; John A. Cobb to John B. Lamar, January 1, 1862; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, January 1, 1862, Howell Cobb Papers.

enemy. Nevertheless, he appreciated the burdens of command, and defended the general's hypersensitivity, commenting that "he was justified in taking the steps he did."[104]

Following this dash back to Yorktown, Cobb lingered with the regiment for several days while waiting to see if the Yankees really meant to attack. Although no attack materialized, Cobb wrote to Mary Ann that "we are still the victims of nightly alarms, which result in marching to our position & waiting in rain & sleet for the Yankees who wont come -- & in my opinion have no notion of coming _this way at this time_." On one occasion, Cobb concluded that thus leaving his men exposed all night bordered on stupidity, and ordered them back to camp on his own authority. Magruder endorsed the decision when Cobb reported it to him. Still retaining his sense of humor, the colonel observed, "I never was troubled with corns on my toes, but if I get through this campaign without a few on my hips and thighs, I shall be agreably [_sic_] disappointed."[105]

Cobb's time on the Peninsula gave him a chance to insure that the quarters being constructed at "Camp Lamar" provided the men with adequate shelter for the winter. Both he and his troops agreed that the quarters more than met minimal standards. One private recalled many years later that "we

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[104] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, January 1, 1862, _ibid_.

[105] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, January 6, 1862; January 10, 1862; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Lamar Cobb, January 13, 1862, _ibid_.

built ... good comfortable cabins with stick and dirt chimneys ... We had a good time there, comfortable and warm quarters, plenty to eat, time to write letters ... with no fighting." Cobb described his own quarters as "a double cabin, each about 16 by 18 feet, with a ten foot passage between. It is really delightful quarters -- comparatively speaking." He added that he had a bedstead, "not of most finished style," consisting of a frame with a "plank" bottom. Upon this structure, he spread a buffalo robe and several blankets. There, he reported, "I sleep away at the rate of ten knots an hour ... I have seen softer beds -- but I venture no beds have ever seen harder sleepers."[106]

Whatever the rigors of life with the army, things almost certainly looked more favorable in Yorktown than they did in Richmond. When there, Cobb could not ignore the growing signs of trouble for the Confederacy. From home, John Lamar expressed concern that if the Union-imposed blockade of the Confederate coast remained in effect another year, they would be hard pressed to supply their slaves adequately. Mary Ann complained of growing scarcity and rising prices. Cobb could observe this inflationary process for himself in the Confederate capital.[107]

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[106] Ibid.; "Service of Joseph White Woods," p. 137.

[107] John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, November 3, 1861; John B. Lamar to Mary Ann Cobb, December 12, 1861, Howell Cobb Papers.

During the closing months of 1861, the "Trent Affair" raised southern hopes that the British might intervene in their behalf to lift the blockade. The incident involved the seizure of Confederate diplomats from a British merchant vessel by the captain of a United States warship. The British government demanded an apology and the release of the diplomats. It also made preliminary preparations for war. Much to the South's disappointment, the Lincoln government avoided disaster by complying with British demands. Seeking to put the best face on this result, Cobb argued that the world must now recognize "that the rebellion is a formidable affair, and they will also see that the pride of the United States has been humbled." Besides, he pointed out, "I do not look for the aid of England or any European power, but to our own strong arm & just cause for ultimate success."[108]

While Cobb might thus dismiss the hope of foreign intervention as non-essential, he could not overlook the growing evidence of internal dissent and dissatisfaction with the Davis administration. Most of his correspondence -- including that from members of his own family -- reflected serious criticisms of Davis. Cobb clearly recognized that these sentiments represented a dangerous threat to the national unity he considered so critical to success. With

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[108] McPherson, Battle Cry of Freedom, pp. 389-391; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, January 6, 1862; January 18, 1862, Howell Cobb Papers.

frustration and a heavy heart, he resolved to do all in his power to retrieve the situation.[109]

One problem required immediate attention. Many of the men in the army had enlisted for twelve months. Their enlistments would soon be up, and few showed inclination to reenlist. Even worse, many of those who planned to go home also intended to take their guns with them. Cobb wrote from the front pleading with the president to instruct commanders that they should mix "kindness with discipline." He also suggested that the twelve-month men be discharged early, in hope that after a visit home many might return. Davis offered no response to the plan for early discharge, but responded that he agreed with Cobb's ideas concerning discipline. The president claimed to have already urged this policy on the army and attributed the failure of commanders to temper their use of discipline "to either old habit or a hard nature." Ultimately, the Confederacy would be forced to enact conscription in a bid to resolve its manpower shortage.[110]

The issue of reenlistments was further complicated by a series of Confederate reverses in early 1862. Defeats of

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[109] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, November 5, 1861; January 18, 1862; January 25, 1862; Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, January 11, 1862; John A. Cobb to John B. Lamar, December 16, 1861; James Mercer Green to John B. Lamar, December 16, 1861, Howell Cobb Papers.

[110] C. S. Memminger to Howell Cobb, January 1, 1862; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, January 18, 1862, ibid.

Confederate forces in Missouri, Kentucky, North Carolina, and the fall of Forts Henry and Donelson in Tennessee drove Confederate morale downward. Cobb knew that such would be the case, but argued that southerners must use these defeats as an opportunity to purify their will and harden their resolve. Our people, he warned, "must be prepared for the greatest pecuniary sacrifices -- clothe & feed the army -- & let them, if necessary fight for nothing. With this spirit we are invincible. Without it we are lost."[111]

In the midst of these difficulties, Cobb found himself in an awkward position. He still harbored bitter resentments towards Davis, and attributed many of the Confederacy's troubles to misguided administration policies. He carefully concealed his views from the public, and deemed open criticism of the Confederate government as little better than treason.[112]

Yet Cobb made no attempt to hide his feelings from Mary Ann. As news of military defeats flowed in, he bitterly complained that "Davis is perverse & obstinate and unless we can beat some liberal and just notions into his head, we shall have much trouble in the future which could easily be avoided." He cited Davis' disdain for civilian officers as proof. He maintained that Davis "can see no good outside

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[111] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, January 23, 1862, ibid.

[112] Montgomery, Howell Cobb's Confederate Career, pp. 111-112.

West Point in military matters & has carried this idea to such an extent that he prefers drunken West Point men ... to worthy and accomplished men from private life." Nevertheless, Cobb remained convinced that basic patriotism required unflinching support for the government, and for good or ill, Davis represented the central figure in that government.[113]

When Cobb returned to Richmond in January, he expressed regret when he discovered "that the President is not only very unpopular in Congress, but I might almost use the term odious." Nothing, he added, "but the condition of the country -- prevents an open violent & unrelenting war upon him and his administration." Under the circumstances, he confessed, "it looks strange but it is true, that I (who have never received a kindness at his hands), have to interpose between him and his former pets to save him from bitter attacks on the floor of Congress." He insisted, however, that "I desire no thanks at his hands, for it is no personal kindness or regard for him that prompts me. We must save the country & this requires the sacrifice of all merely personal considerations."[114]

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[113] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, January 18, 1862; January 25, 1862, Howell Cobb Papers.

[114] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, January 18, 1862; January 23, 1862; January 25, 1862, ibid.; Montgomery, Howell Cobb's Confederate Career, pp. 48-49.

Cobb's ability to protect the Confederate president from attacks in Congress proved of relatively brief duration. On February 17, 1862, the Provisional Congress of the Confederate States of America concluded its work, and prepared to surrender its power to the permanent government elected the previous November. Before declaring the Provisional Congress adjourned, Cobb addressed its members and through them the people of the Confederacy. He reminded his listeners of the conservative nature of their revolution. It had been the product of a rational resort to the ballot box rather than the instantaneous overflow of popular passion. Its motive -- "to preserve those conservative principles of the fathers of the Republic, which were fast being overwhelmed by ... fanaticism." Thus far, he added, the South had known great success largely because of the unity manifested by all agencies of the Confederate government. He fervently hoped that all future presiding officers of Congress might conclude their service bearing testimony to the continuation of this harmony. With that, he declared the Provisional Congress adjourned "'without a day,'" and forever closed his political career.[115]

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[115] Journal of the Confederate Congress, I, 845-846.

Chapter Twenty

"Days of Sorrow"

After the close of the Provisional Congress, Cobb remained in Richmond to assist in the inauguration of the permanent government. That responsibility completed, he prepared to dedicate his full attention to his military duties, which recently had increased. On February 12, he had been promoted to the rank of Brigadier General.[1]

Cobb's first assignment in this new rank involved more diplomacy than soldiering. Seeking to take advantage of his negotiating skills, the government ordered him to Norfolk to arrange a permanent cartel for overseeing the exchange of prisoners of war. Within a matter of days Cobb met with General John Wool on board a steamer provided by the Confederate government. The two generals easily agreed that all prisoners should be exchanged promptly, with surplus prisoners being paroled until exchanged. When Cobb added a Confederate proposal that all prisoners be transported to friendly territory within ten days of capture at the expense of the capturing party, Wool declined an agreement pending consultation with his government. Cobb expressed disgust

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[1] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, February 18, 1862, Howell Cobb Papers, Felix Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia (Hereafter: Howell Cobb Papers); Journal of the Congress of the Confederate States of America, 1861-1865, seven vols. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1904), p. 811.

that Wool's "slow coach movements" should detain him. He contended that an hour should have sufficed to make all needed arrangements. To his surprise, the Lincoln government, holding a glut of Confederate prisoners in the aftermath of recent Union victories, rejected the proposal and ended the negotiations.[2]

Cobb manifested no regret at the outcome of his mission -- in fact, he described the results as "emminently [sic] successful." He described the plan for a cartel as a "bad bargain," because any program providing for the rapid restoration of prisoners to their homes would be "an invitation to our army to surrender." Such, he predicted, must appear especially attractive to "drafted men ... [and] a strong temptation to a good many others."[3]

This rather pessimistic appraisal of morale within the Confederate army reflected Cobb's increasingly accurate understanding of the nature of the Civil War. Despite his repeated insistence that "I cannot despair and do not ....

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[2] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, February 18, 1862; February 25, 1862, Howell Cobb Papers; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, February 22, 1862, in Ulrich Bonnell Phillips, ed., The Correspondence of Robert Toombs, Alexander H. Stephens, and Howell Cobb (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1913), pp. 588-589; The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies, 128 vols. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), Series One, XI, part 1, 1052-1056; Series Two, III, 663, 800-801, 812-913, 893; Series Two, IV, 14, 31, 48, 773, 797-798; Series Two, V, 21-22 (Hereafter: Official Records).

[3] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, March 4, 1862, Howell Cobb Papers.

All will be well in the end," he at last began to appreciate the depth of northern resolve and resources. The defeats of January and February, 1862, had come as an epiphany for Cobb. He confessed to Mary Ann how little he and others had understood heretofore. Until now, he admitted, "men have not realized the magnitude of the task we have undertaken. Both the North & South are disappointed ... the one did not look for such gigantic efforts to subjugate & the other did not anticipate such stern resistance. The truth is now breaking upon both parties."[4]

Cobb responded to his new understanding with revolutionary fervor. He, brother Tom, Robert Toombs, and M. J. Crawford produced "An Address to the People of Georgia." In it, they called upon their fellow Georgians to greet northern invaders with grim determination. Warning that the rapacious Yankee came "with lust in his eye ... and hell in his heart," they urged "let every woman have a torch, every child a firebrand -- let the loved homes of youth be made ashes, and the fields of our heritage be made desolate." Only by these desperate measures, Cobb privately asserted, could southerners "manifest to the North that <u>any</u> alternative

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[4] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, February 13, 1862; February 18, 1862, <u>ibid</u>.

is preferable to association with them." Then, he vowed, "we shall soon have peace and independence."[5]

Even as his concept of the nature of the war grew clearer, Cobb persisted in his fundamentally optimistic view. He freely acknowledged that the Union strategy of surrounding the South and then cutting it into isolated parts was a good one. But he manifested an unflinching confidence in the Confederacy's capacity to frustrate it. Nor did he abandon completely his faith in a short war. He voiced hope that defeat of the North's present intensive military effort could "give us a short and desperate struggle and also an earlier peace, than otherwise might have come." He summarized his basic view thus: "We have hard work ahead and a good deal of it but we are equal to it."[6]

Following the breakdown of his negotiations with General Wool, Cobb returned to duties with Magruder's forces on the Peninsula. Only days after reporting back to Magruder, Cobb assumed command of his new brigade. Although he had hoped for a unit composed exclusively of Georgia regiments, he made no complaints about the composition of his 5,000 man force. It included five regiments: the Sixteenth Georgia, Cobb's

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[5] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, January 23, 1862, ibid.; Milledgeville Southern Federal Union, February 11, 1862; Horace Montgomery, Howell Cobb's Confederate Career (Tuscaloosa: Confederate Publishing Company, Inc., 1959) p. 49.

[6] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, February 13, 1862; Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, March 7, 1862, Howell Cobb Papers.

Legion, the Twenty-Fourth Georgia, the Fifteenth North Carolina, and the Second Louisiana. An Athens unit, the Troup Artillery, was also assigned to the brigade.[7]

Almost immediately, Cobb received orders to reinforce Confederate troops defending Suffolk. Less than two weeks after reaching Suffolk, new orders directed him to shift his command further south to Goldsboro, North Carolina. The men welcomed the transfer, he commented, "as it takes them that much on their way towards home." The troops also felt eager to escape Suffolk where disease had killed several of their comrades and left more than a hundred others too sick to move out with the rest of the brigade.[8]

Although Cobb expected the army concentrating in Goldsboro to clear North Carolina of federal forces, no such offensive materialized. Shortly after arriving, Cobb's brigade received orders to retrace its journey back to the Peninsula. Events there had taken an unexpected turn. General George B. McClellan had launched a vast amphibious

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[7] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, March 4, 1862; Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, March 7, 1862, ibid.; Montgomery, Howell Cobb's Confederate Career, pp. 53-55.

[8] Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar, March 7, 1862; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, March 20, 1862, Howell Cobb Papers; Joseph White Woods, "History of Service of Joseph White Woods, Soldier in the War Between the States, Written by Himself - After the War," in Confederate Diaries, Bible Records, War Records, and Letters, Georgia Department of Archives and History, Atlanta, Georgia, 138-139 (Hereafter: "Service of Joseph White Woods."); Official Records, Series One, IX, 449; Montgomery, Howell Cobb's Confederate Career, pp. 53-54.

flanking maneuver designed to bypass the main Confederate army in northern Virginia by shifting the Army of the Potomac to Fortress Monroe. With luck, he hoped to end the war at one stroke. The plan had much to recommend it. Unfortunately for the Union cause, McClellan's excessive caution doomed his strategy to failure.[9]

During the early days of April, the Confederates hurried additional troops to Magruder's army in a bid to counter the threat posed by McClellan. Cobb's brigade was among the reinforcements. Designated the Second Brigade of the Second Division commanded by fellow Georgian, Lafayette McLaws, Cobb's unit received orders to occupy a position defending Dams #1 and #2 on the Warrick River. Because of its repeated rapid moves of the previous month, Cobb's brigade temporarily had been separated from much of its baggage. Consequently, he reported his men "living in the woods without tents or covering." The weather added to their discomfort. Constant rain made it impossible to dry out clothes and equipment, even as it flooded the Confederate trenches. For six days after his arrival, he noted, he had slept fully clothed -- "[and] did not even take off my spurs at night" -- in anticipation of an immediate Union attack. Thereafter, he

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[9] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, March 29, 1862; John A. Cobb to John B. Lamar, April 6, 1862, Howell Cobb Papers; E. Merton Coulter, Lost Generation: The Life and Death of James Barrow, C.S.A. (Tuscaloosa: Confederate Publishing Company, Inc., 1956), pp. 70-71.

felt sufficiently confident to remove both his coat and boots before sleeping.[10]

On April 16, Cobb got his first taste of combat command. By all accounts, he acquitted himself well. At about 8:00 a.m., Union forces opposite Dam #1 advanced two guns and opened a bombardment of the Second Louisiana. This bombardment continued until about 3:00 p.m., when four additional guns reinforced those already in action. Thirty minutes later the Vermont Brigade emerged from cover and rapidly advanced on the Confederate works. They aimed at rifle pits occupied by the Fifteenth North Carolina, just downstream from the dam. Some nine companies of the Vermonters managed to get across the Warrick at a ford and at the dam itself.[11]

Cobb's other regiments raced forward from their encampments to support their comrades. He deployed them in line of battle as they arrived. As these units came up, Colonel Robert McKinney, commander of the Fifteenth, resolved to drive the Vermonters back across the stream. He quickly formed his regiment and charged the Yankee troops who had already occupied the advance Confederate rifle pits. The Fifteenth surged forward, but Mckinney received a fatal wound

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[10] Coulter, Lost Generation, pp. 70-71; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, April 15, 1862, Howell Cobb Papers.

[11] Howell Cobb to Lafayette McLaws, April 22, 1862, Howell Cobb Papers; Official Records, Series One, XI, part 1, 363-379, 403-423.

almost immediately. Deprived of their leader, these green troops hesitated in the face of a withering fire and then fell back in disorder. Cobb already had begun deploying the Eleventh and Sixteenth Georgia regiments on the right flank of the North Carolinians. Their sudden departure left these regiments vulnerable and they, too, fell into some disorder.[12]

Across the river, General McClellan failed to appreciate the situation. His forces had pierced Magruder's defensive line and for a moment the way to Richmond lay open. With the thousands of troops at hand, he need only reinforce the Vermonters to make the entire Confederate line untenable. McClellan did nothing.[13]

Cobb did not hesitate. He immediately galloped among his shaken units calling upon them to rally. Magruder later reported that in the face of a "terrible fire" Cobb quickly restored their steadiness "by his voice and example." His brigade then repulsed four attacks by the Vermont troops. Finally, reinforced by a brigade of Georgia troops commanded by Colonel G. T. Anderson of Toomb's division, Cobb ordered a counterattack which drove the Union intruders back across

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[12] Howell Cobb to Lafayette McLaws, April 22, 1862, Howell Cobb Papers; Official Records, Series One, XI, part 1, 363-379, 403-423.

[13] Howell Cobb to Lafayette McLaws, April 22, 1862, Howell Cobb Papers; Official Records, Series One, XI, part 1, 363-379,403-423; Stephen Sears, To the Gates of Richmond: The Peninsula Campaign (New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1992), pp. 55-56.

the river. During the course of the day's action, the Union forces sustained 165 casualties. Cobb estimated his own losses at about 90.[14]

In the aftermath of the clash at Dam #1, Cobb felt vindicated from earlier aspersions cast upon him as a "political general." He certainly shared in John Lamar's appraisal that "the expression 'handled the troops under his command with consummate skill' in the account of the action will read strangely to ... the West Pointers, who think politics disqualifies a man from being a general." People, Lamar noted, "are getting to believe that you are pretty good at anything you put your hands to."[15]

Praise from West Point-trained officers added to Cobb's sense of pride. His division commander, General McLaws, reluctantly applauded him for rallying his troops at a critical moment, and for launching the counterattack which restored the Confederate lines. Had Cobb known that McLaws privately considered him unfit for brigade command, the general's acknowledgement might have proved even more satisfying. Upon learning that McClellan had been present at the battle, and that Congress had ordered an investigation of its conduct by the Union commander, Cobb proudly observed

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[14] Howell Cobb to Lafayette McLaws, April 22, 1862, Howell Cobb Papers; Official Records, Series One, XI, part 1, pp. 363-379, 403-423; Sears, To the Gates of Richmond, pp. 55-56.

[15] John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, April 23, 1862, Howell Cobb Papers.

"this fight ... begins to assume quite an important character."[16]

Cobb took great pride in his role as commander in the fight at Dam #1, and he voiced bitter anger when rumors began to circulate in the press that Colonel Anderson actually had directed the Confederate forces. Describing these reports as a "most remarkable ... unmitigated falsehood ... [which] exceeds Munchausen in his best days," he responded that "the explanation is that Col. Anderson wants to be Genl Anderson." In disgust he wondered who might claim credit next. He wryly suggested that Robert Toombs might use his position as Anderson's division commander to claim the glory -- even though "Genl Toombs did not reach Dam 1 until the day after the fight."[17]

On April 17, General Joseph Johnston arrived at Yorktown and superseded Magruder as commander of Confederate forces on the Peninsula. Despite Magruder's previous success at bluffing the Union commander, Johnston considered the Warrick River line vulnerable. Consequently, on the evening of May

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[16] Official Records, Series One, XI, part 1, 363-379, 403-423; Lafayette McLaws to Mrs. Lafayette McLaws, September 29, 1861, Lafayette McLaws Papers, Southern Historical Collection, Library of the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, North Carolina (Hereafter: McLaws Papers); Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, May 14, 1862, Howell Cobb Papers.

[17] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, May 17, 1862, Howell Cobb Papers.

3, he began a retreat up the Peninsula towards more secure positions around Richmond.[18]

Neither Cobb nor his men relished the process of retreat. A veteran of the Sixteenth Georgia later recalled that this retreat "was one of the most trying of the war," characterized by "much rain, low marshy country and little to eat." By May 13, Cobb reported to Mary Ann that the army had occupied lines about twenty miles in front of Richmond. Within a few days, the Confederate army drew even closer to Richmond, taking position only four miles in front of the capital. Cobb's men moved into defensive works behind the Chickahominy River. The enemy occupied the far bank, and Cobb reported that "we have the mutual pleasure of looking at each other during the day, and keeping an equally close watch during the night." He predicted that a major battle would be fought within a few days.[19]

The battle that Cobb anticipated came on May 31, at Seven Pines, but his brigade took no part in the fighting. Although the battle failed to produce a decisive military result, it did have far reaching consequences. Johnston received a severe wound which forced him to relinquish command of the army to General Robert E. Lee. Moreover, the

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[18] Douglas Southall Freeman, Lee's Lieutenants, A Study in Command: Manassas to Malvern Hill, three vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1942), I, 150-155.

[19] "Service of Joseph White Woods," p. 141; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, May 17, 1862, Howell Cobb Papers; Montgomery, Howell Cobb's Confederate Career, p. 59.

horrors of the battlefield had unnerved McClellan. Having sought to spare his men such slaughter, the Union general became incapable of further forward movement.[20]

For several days after the battle, both the Confederate and Union armies proved content to rest and reorganize. During this period McClellan and Lee took steps to reopen negotiations regarding the exchange of prisoners. Lee designated Cobb to speak for the Confederacy. McClellan appointed Colonel Thomas M. Key as his spokesman. Possibly in hopes of finding some basis for a negotiated peace, McClellan authorized Key to broaden the nature of these discussions under the guise of informal conversation.[21]

The two men met on the morning of June 15. Key reported to his superiors that Cobb did most of the talking. Cobb repeated the earlier Confederate position on prisoners. Satisfied that he understood the Confederate proposal, Key shifted the conversation to other topics. Expressing pleasure that they could meet on a peaceful errand, Key voiced the wish that a permanent peace might soon follow.[22]

Cobb immediately took the bait. He insisted that peace might be "established within half an hour." When Key

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[20] Freeman, Lee's Lieutenants, I, pp. 252-253, 262-263.

[21] Richard Wheeler, Sword Over Richmond, An Eyewitness History of McClellan's Peninsula Campaign (New York: The Fairfax Press, 1986), p. 283-286; Official Records, Series One, XI, part 1, 1053-1055.

[22] Wheeler, Sword Over Richmond, p. 283-286; Official Records, Series One, XI, part 1, 1053-1055.

inquired how this might be accomplished, Cobb responded at length -- after adding the caveat that he spoke only for himself. The North's decision to wage a war of "slaughter and waste" upon the South, he maintained, had destroyed the last remaining shreds of Union sentiment in the South. The war, he insisted, "could only end in separation or extermination ... reunion could be effected only by subjugation and permanent military occupation."[23]

Key pressed Cobb by asserting that the North's superiority in men and material rendered a southern victory impossible. Cobb made no attempt to refute these claims, but nevertheless insisted that the Union forces before Richmond lacked sufficient strength to force their way into the city. The Yankees, he vowed, could only enter it when the Confederate government "saw fit to abandon it." He added a further warning. Even if the Union armies captured Richmond and "every other important point in the Confederate States," nothing would be changed. The North could only hold the South by military conquest, and every Yankee post would be surrounded by "a hostile population."[24]

Not yet satisfied, Key proposed that the best route to peace lay in a joint declaration of submission by President Davis and amnesty by President Lincoln. Cobb replied that

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[23] Wheeler, Sword Over Richmond, p. 283-286; Official Records, Series One, XI, part 1, 1053-1055.

[24] Wheeler, Sword Over Richmond, p. 283-286; Official Records, Series One, XI, part 1, 1053-1055.

"no Confederate leader could openly advocate such a proposition and continue to live." On this note the pair ended their interview.[25]

Key came away from the meeting impressed by Cobb's courtesy and frankness. He also came away with two useful pieces of information. The Confederates had no intention of yielding their capital without a bloody struggle. Moreover, only a sustained military effort, followed by overwhelming victory could end the rebellion.[26]

II

With the issue of prisoner exchanges still unresolved, Cobb returned to his brigade. The lull that had prevailed since Seven Pines continued for another ten days. On June 26, a small clash between Union and Confederate troops at Oak Grove signalled the beginning of the Seven Days Battle. Although the fight at Oak Grove arose from an attempt by McClellan to adjust his lines, the combat that followed over succeeding days grew out of a series of blows delivered by Lee's newly named Army of Northern Virginia.[27]

During most of this campaign, Cobb's brigade saw little fighting. Assigned first to the forces defending Richmond against a sudden Yankee thrust, Cobb's men spent several days

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[25] Wheeler, Sword Over Richmond, p. 283-286; Official Records, Series One, XI, part 1, 1053-1055.

[26] Wheeler, Sword Over Richmond, p. 283-286; Official Records, Series One, XI, part 1, 1054.

[27] Freeman, Lee's Lieutenants, I, 503-604.

on constant alert. When McClellan began to withdraw down the Peninsula, Cobb received orders to join in the pursuit of the retreating Union army. The brigade suffered through two grueling days of marching and countermarching with almost no food. Cobb later reported that his brigade shrunk from 2,700 men to less than 1,500 as troops dropped out of the ranks due to exhaustion and fatigue.[28]

After six days of combat, McClellan stood on the verge of escaping his Confederate tormenters. Despite hard fighting by southern troops, Lee's division commanders had failed to coordinate their attacks for a decisive blow. Determined to strike the enemy once more before he found haven under the guns of the federal fleet operating on the James, Lee ordered an all-out assault for July 1. In doing so, he gave his army an almost impossible task. McClellan's powerful rear guard occupied a strong position on Malvern Hill. Numerous federal batteries covered the open ground the Confederates must cover to attack the Yankee infantry.[29]

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[28] Ibid., pp. 508, 538-557, 560-562, 563-564, 566, 568-569, 582-583, 585-587, 589-592, 598-603, 654; Official Records, Series One, XI, part 1, 1064-1065; Series One, XI, part 2, 956-957; Series One, XI, part 3, 530-531; Series Two, III, 674-675, 983; Montgomery, Howell Cobb's Confederate Career, pp. 61-62.

[29] Freeman, Lee's Lieutenants, I, 508, 538-557, 560-562, 563-564, 566, 568-569, 582-583, 585-587, 589-592, 598-603, 654; Official Records, Series One, XI, part 1, 1064-1065; Series One, XI, part 2, 956-957; Series One, XI, part 3, 530-531; Series Two, III, 674-675, 983; Montgomery, Howell Cobb's Confederate Career, pp. 61-62.

When Cobb's brigade arrived on the battlefield, he received orders to deploy Cobb's Legion in support of a Confederate battery. He then received instructions to detach the Sixteenth from his direct control as well. With his troops thus posted at three different points, he found his own position "an embarrassing one." Logically, he retained command of the largest segment of his brigade. Brigadier General Lewis Armistead soon called upon him for support. Without hesitation, Cobb led his available troops -- the Twenty-Fourth Georgia, the Second Louisiana, and the Fifteenth North Carolina -- to Armistead's assistance. This movement required his men to cross an open field under enemy artillery fire and then fight their way through a tangle of dense woods and deep ravines. Cobb praised them for making this difficult march in good order at the double-quick.[30]

Initially, Cobb's regiments deployed in a defensive position guarding Confederate artillery. While occupying this line, his men suffered from a galling fire by Union batteries. When federal infantry began to advance, Cobb's brigade joined in a successful counterattack, and then pushed ahead with other Confederate brigades in a futile attempt to carry the enemy guns in their front. The southern

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[30] Freeman, Lee's Lieutenants, I, 508, 538-557, 560-562, 563-564, 566, 568-569, 582-583, 585-587, 589-592, 598-603, 654; Official Records, Series One, XI, part 1, 1064-1065; Series One, XI, part 2, 956-957; Series One, XI, part 3, 530-531; Series Two, III, 674-675, 983; Montgomery, Howell Cobb's Confederate Career, pp. 61-62.

infantry fell in droves as federal musketry and artillery fire turned the field into a killing ground. Unable to withstand the whirlwind of federal fire, the Rebels pulled back. Cobb's brigade left 66 dead on the field. Another 347 wounded also littered the ground. Eighteen of these men later died of their wounds. In his official report on the action, Cobb observed that the gallantry of his men could only be gaged by the presence of his brigade's dead among the most advanced elements of the Confederate charge.[31]

The fight at Malvern Hill signalled the end of both the Seven Days and McClellan's great offensive. A period of quiet followed these days of constant combat. Both sides held large numbers of prisoners. Movements to negotiate a system of exchanges resumed, and Lee requested that Cobb again undertake the task. Cobb, however, begged off. The almost constant strain of the past two years had begun to tell on the forty-six year old general, and he needed rest. He secured thirty days of leave and went home to recover.[32]

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[31] Freeman, Lee's Lieutenants, I, 508, 538-557, 560-562, 563-564, 566, 568-569, 582-583, 585-587, 589-592, 598-603, 654; Official Records, Series One, XI, part 1, 1064-1065; Series One, XI, part 2, 956-957; Series One, XI, part 3, 530-531; Series Two, III, 674-675, 983; Montgomery, Howell Cobb's Confederate Career, pp. 61-62.

[32] Robert E. Lee to George Washington Randolph, July 10, 1862, Felix Hargrett Collection, Felix Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia, Athens Georgia; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, June 19, 1862; July 7, 1862; Leave of Absence for Howell Cobb, July 12, 1862, Howell Cobb Papers.

Even before Cobb reached Athens, rumors again blossomed at home. Although delighted that the invader had been driven back from Richmond, southerners had hoped for more. McClellan's escape had to be explained, and many sought scapegoats. Reports began to spread that much of the responsibility rested on Magruder, Toombs, and Cobb. These three, rumor had it, had been drunk on the field throughout the Peninsula and Seven Days Battles. Family members attempted to keep news of these rumors from Mary Ann, but this "false kindness" merely resulted in her learning of them from a stranger eager to spread evil tidings. By the time she relayed word of the situation to her husband, he had already departed from Virginia. Thus, while his reaction to these tales is not known, it might well be imagined.[33]

While recuperating in Athens, Cobb observed public sentiment away from the front. As would be his habit for the rest of the war, the "General" relayed his conclusions to the Confederate government. Writing to Secretary of War George W. Randolph, he opened what would prove a long and futile campaign against the Confederacy's recently enacted conscription law. Over time, he offered more elaborate arguments against the legislation, but at this point merely suggested that it had "done all ... it will do in the way of filling up the Army." Fearing that continued use of

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[33] Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, July 13, 1862, Howell Cobb Papers; Montgomery, Howell Cobb's Confederate Career, p. 62.

conscription might breed popular discontent, he advised that future enforcement of the law be abandoned. In its place, he urged reliance upon the governors of the several states to fill quotas established by Congress.[34]

Cobb also warned that the practice of impressing slaves to labor on military fortifications had produced negative feelings among the planter class. These men, he reported, had given over the production of cotton to grow food and fodder desperately needed by the South. Only the most shortsighted of policies would now rob them of the labor critical to a successful harvest. He concluded with the observation that "our people are willing to make ... sacrifices, but they like to see reason and common sense in the officials of Government."[35]

III

In mid-August, Cobb returned to the army. He found his brigade in "a very pleasant bivouac" about twelve miles from Richmond near the James. Much had changed during his absence. Magruder had departed the Army of Northern Virginia for a post in the Trans-Mississippi Department. This transfer had been in the works for some time, and consequently came as no surprise to Cobb. With Magruder's

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[34] Official Records, Series Four, II, 34-35.

[35] Ibid.

transfer, Cobb's brigade became a permanent part of McLaws' division.[36]

On a happier note, the most immediate threat to Richmond seemed to be rapidly disappearing. Lincoln, having momentarily given up on McClellan, now rested his hopes in the military talents of Major General John Pope and his newly created Army of Virginia. The beleaguered Union president ordered McClellan to begin transferring the Army of the Potomac back to northern Virginia.[37]

At about the same time that Cobb returned to the army, Lee began to shift the bulk of his forces northward for a confrontation with Pope. He hoped to destroy this new threat before the arrival of McClellan's troops provided the new Yankee commander with an overwhelming force. Still wary of a sudden movement against an undefended Richmond, Lee detached the divisions of Richard Anderson, D. H. Hill, John Walker, and McLaws to guard the city and keep an eye on McClellan's shrinking force. Within a few days of Lee's departure, however, Cobb reported that a rigorous all day "armed reconnonsance [sic]" by troops under McLaws and himself had revealed beyond doubt that McClellan had

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[36] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, August 16, 1862; August 19, 1862, Howell Cobb Papers; Freeman, Lee's Lieutenants, I, 262, 606-607.

[37] James M. McPherson, Battle Cry of Freedom, The Civil War Era (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 524-533.

"skedaddled." Now certain of Richmond's safety, Lee ordered the troops at the capital to hasten after his main force.[38]

The next several days proved trying for both Cobb and his men. He wrote to Mary Ann that in the nine days since rejoining the brigade he had moved his camp five times. Because of the rapid movement to catch Lee, wagons bearing camp equipment could not keep pace. Consequently, he had been compelled to sleep "in the open air with my head pillowed against a tree." A sudden late-night rain added to his discomfort by soaking his only available clothing.[39]

Conditions soon worsened. General D. H. Hill bore responsibility for directing the march to rejoin Lee. Determined to be available when Lee needed him, Hill set a killing pace. By the end of August, all members of the Cobb clan condemned him as a monster. Howell, Jr., commenting on Hill's past profession and drawing from his own unhappy experiences, noted that the general "like all old school teachers is a selfish brute."[40]

Cobb shared these opinions. He complained that troops had never suffered "a worse conducted" march. Each day's

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[38] Ibid., p 535; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, August 16, 1862; August 19, 1862, Howell Cobb Papers; Douglas Southall Freeman, Lee's Lieutenants, A Study in Command: Cedar Mountain to Chancellorsville, three vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1942), II, 145-146.

[39] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, August 23, 1862, Howell Cobb Papers.

[40] John A. Cobb to Lucy Barrow, August 28, 1862; Howell Cobb, Jr. to Mary Ann Cobb, August 29, 1862, ibid.

grinding ordeal began at first light and continued until dark. Often, he noted, the men made these marches on empty stomachs. He laid responsibility for their trials at the feet of Hill, "a weak -- self conceited heartless & cruel ass." As a result of Hill's incapacity, he raged, men had fallen out and died by the side of the road. His own brigade had been reduced to 1,300 men after beginning the movement with nearly 2,100. Even as the troops under Hill trudged northward, Lee smashed Pope's Army of Virginia in the Battle of Second Manassas. Although Hill's men made no contribution to this fight, their arrival made good Lee's losses against Pope. Convinced that federal forces had been demoralized by the failures of their commanders, Lee determined to preserve his strategic momentum by invading the North.[41]

On September 4, with regimental bands blaring "Maryland, My Maryland," the Army of Northern Virginia began wading across the Potomac. Cobb's brigade entered Maryland two days later. Although not privy to the higher councils of the army, Cobb fully appreciated the underlying motives of Lee's gamble. Writing to Mary Ann, he noted that "the campaign in this quarter cannot be a long one and our General is therefore making his hay whilst the sun shines."[42]

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[41] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, August 29, 1862, ibid.; Freeman, Lee's Lieutenants, II, 145-146.

[42] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, September 6, 1862, Howell Cobb Papers.

Cobb's own recent frustrations had been somewhat alleviated by the presence of brother John on his staff. Lamar had begun to feel guilty that so many others bore the hazards of battle while he remained safe at home tending the plantations. When he expressed a determination to join the army in some capacity, Cobb urged him to serve as a volunteer aide on his staff. Thus he might fulfill his sense of duty, while remaining free to supervise plantation operations. Lamar found this arrangement satisfactory and joined the army as it moved northward.[43]

While the army concentrated around the small town of Frederick, Maryland, Lee completed his plans for the opening phase of the invasion. He intended to utilize the Shennandoah Valley as his main line of communications with Virginia. The presence of a large federal garrison at Harpers Ferry threatened this line and must be eliminated before the army could safely advance further North. Lee resolved to divide his army. While three divisions continued to advance towards Pennsylvania, the bulk of the Confederate troops -- operating in three widely separated columns -- would converge on Harpers Ferry.[44]

Lee assigned McLaws two divisions. He ordered him to move westward, cross South Mountain at Brownsville Gap, then

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[43] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, March 29, 1862; Howell Cobb, Jr. to Mary Ann Cobb, August 29, 1862, ibid.

[44] McPherson, Battle Cry of Freedom, p. 536.

turn south and approach Harpers Ferry from the Maryland side of the Potomac. There, he was to occupy Maryland Heights. From this position he could cooperate with the two columns approaching from the Virginia side of the river. In addition, Lee instructed him to secure critical passes across South Mountain. Failure to hold these gaps would enable the enemy to split the Army of Northern Virginia in two.[45]

McLaws' column moved out on September 10. Three days later he completed the occupation of Maryland Heights, and believed that his deployment adequately secured the vital South Mountain gaps. He could not anticipate the potential disaster taking shape to his rear. McClellan, who had returned to command of the army following Pope's thrashing at Second Manassas, moved with great caution to counter Lee's invasion. Union troops did not reach Frederick until September 12. McClellan pondered his next move. His task became much easier when two of his soldiers discovered a misplaced copy of Lee's orders to his division commanders. Appreciative of this unexpected advantage, McClellan moved with unusual promptness to pursue his foe.[46]

By September 14, McClellan had three army corps approaching South Mountain. Two of these aimed at gaps being held by troops under D. H. Hill. The third had orders to push through Crampton's Gap and then march rapidly to the

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[45] Freeman, Lee's Lieutenants, II, 184-192.

[46] Ibid.

relief of Harpers Ferry. Prior to the morning of the fourteenth, McLaws did not know that Crampton's Gap existed. Brigadier General Paul Semmes, who had been sent to hold Brownsville Gap, discovered Crampton's, and dispatched Colonel William Parham with three small regiments and a battery to hold it. Confederate cavalry commander Jeb Stuart soon arrived on the scene. He, too, appreciated the danger of a sudden enemy thrust through the gap. Fearing that Parham's small force might be inadequate to hold the pass against a determined attack, Stuart detached a cavalry brigade under Colonel Thomas Munford to assist in the defense until additional forces arrived. Messengers soon apprised McLaws of the situation.[47]

So far, Cobb's brigade had seen little action during the campaign. On September 13, he had been ordered to seize the tiny hamlet of Sandy Hook just across the river from Harpers Ferry. Facing only light opposition, the brigade easily carried out this assignment. Cobb's men occupied Sandy Hook until about one o'clock the next afternoon. Cobb then received orders to march northward to the village of Brownsville. For some unexplained reason, McLaws did not directly inform Cobb of his responsibility upon reaching Brownsville. Instead, he instructed General Semmes to relay orders for Cobb to assume command of the forces at Crampton's Gap. At any rate, Stuart soon joined McLaws on Maryland

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[47] Ibid.

Heights and assured him that only a Union brigade threatened the gap. Focused on his operations against Harpers Ferry, McLaws concluded that the situation in his rear posed no serious problem.[48]

Cobb's command made the five mile march from Sandy Hook to Brownsville in about three hours. Semmes later reported that he informed Cobb of McLaws' orders. Unfortunately, these failed to convey any sense of urgency, and included no indication that Cobb need hurry his weary men on to the gap. Consequently, he allowed his men to fall out for some much needed rest. At about five o'clock, he received a message from Munford urging him to come up. Cobb immediately ordered his two strongest regiments forward. Before these units had departed, another message arrived. In it, Parham warned that he faced overwhelming odds, and desperately pleaded for assistance. Cobb now ordered his two remaining regiments to join in the march to the gap. While getting his men into line, he received yet a third message. This one from McLaws

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[48] Ibid.; Official Records, Series One, XIX, part 1, 144-153, 812, 825-828, 852-857, 870-883; Howell Cobb to Lafayette McLaws, September 22, 1862, McLaws Papers; Montgomery, Howell Cobb's Confederate Career, pp. 72-74; Robert Underwood Johnson and Clarence Clough Buel, eds., Battles and Leaders of the Civil War, four vols. (New York: The Century Company, 1887), II, 591-597; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, September 17, 1862, Howell Cobb Papers.

ordered him to "hold the gap if it cost the life of every man in [his] command."[49]

Although Cobb knew little about the developing crisis to his front, the tone of the messages from Parham and McLaws impressed upon him the need for prompt action. With half his brigade already toiling up South Mountain, he led the other half forward "with the utmost dispatch." He took the additional precaution of ordering two guns of the Troup Artillery to move to the gap.[50]

By the time Cobb approached the mountaintop, the situation already teetered on the brink of disaster. Parham's troops, bolstered by Munford's cavalry, had been battling the Union VI Corps since three o'clock. Outnumbered more than twelve to one, the Confederates were forced back up the slope in heavy fighting. When it appeared that the tiny band of defenders might be driven off the mountain before reinforcements reached them, Parham launched a desperate counterstroke which momentarily forced back the

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[49] Freeman, Lee's Lieutenants, II, 184-192; Official Records, Series One, XIX, part 1, 144-153, 812, 825-828, 852-857, 870-883; Howell Cobb to Lafayette McLaws, September 22, 1862, McLaws Papers; Montgomery, Howell Cobb's Confederate Career, pp. 72-74; Johnson and Buel, Battles and Leaders, II, 591-597; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, September 17, 1862, Howell Cobb Papers.

[50] Freeman, Lee's Lieutenants, II, 184-192; Official Records, Series One, XIX, part 1, 144-153, 812, 825-828, 852-857, 870-883; Howell Cobb to Lafayette McLaws, September 22, 1862, McLaws Papers; Montgomery, Howell Cobb's Confederate Career, pp. 72-74; Johnson and Buel, Battles and Leaders, II, 591-597; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, September 17, 1862, Howell Cobb Papers.

federal center. Yet each yard the Confederates advanced left their flanks increasingly vulnerable to the longer Union battle line.[51]

Upon his arrival, Cobb quickly recognized the danger, and ordered two regiments to deploy on the right flank and two on the left. Unfamiliar with the terrain, he prevailed upon Munford to guide his troops to their positions. Before this movement could be completed, the federal center surged forward. Parham's men had fought gallantly, but they could stand no more. Breaking ranks, they fled in panic. The collapse of the Confederate center left Cobb's troops exposed on both flanks and in danger of being surrounded. They, too, broke and raced after Parham's fleeing men. As the Confederates fled to the rear, the Union attackers leaped to the pursuit, shooting down those who continued to resist and capturing many of those who did not.[52]

Dismayed by this sudden collapse, Cobb and his staff galloped among the terror-stricken men attempting to restore

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[51] Freeman, Lee's Lieutenants, II, 184-192; Official Records, Series One, XIX, part 1, 144-153, 812, 825-828, 852-857, 870-883; Howell Cobb to Lafayette McLaws, September 22, 1862, McLaws Papers; Montgomery, Howell Cobb's Confederate Career, pp. 72-74; Johnson and Buel, Battles and Leaders, II, 591-597; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, September 17, 1862, Howell Cobb Papers.

[52] Freeman, Lee's Lieutenants, II, 184-192; Official Records, Series One, XIX, part 1, 144-153, 812, 825-828, 852-857, 870-883; Howell Cobb to Lafayette McLaws, September 22, 1862, McLaws Papers; Montgomery, Howell Cobb's Confederate Career, pp. 72-74; Johnson and Buel, Battles and Leaders, II, 591-597; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, September 17, 1862, Howell Cobb Papers.

order. Cobb seized a regimental standard. Waving it frantically, he pleaded with his troops to rally. A Minie ball smashed into the banner's staff, shattering the wood, and driving the flag from his hand. Nearby, John Lamar reeled sharply in the saddle as a bullet slammed into his body. Sensing the futility of further efforts to retrieve the situation, Cobb supervised the evacuation of his mortally wounded brother-in-law, and then followed his shattered command down the mountain. Along with his staff and other officers on the field, Cobb rode at the rear of the retreating mass attempting to shield his men from the Yankee fire.[53]

The small battery that Cobb had ordered up earlier encountered the fleeing Confederates at the base of the mountain. After the wreckage of defeat had swept by, the general and his staff galloped up. While staff members assisted Lamar further to the rear, Cobb stopped to oversee the deployment of the guns. In a voice hoarse from pleading for his men to rally, he greeted the artillerymen by doffing his hat and shouting "three cheers for the Troup Artillery!" The gunners made a half-hearted effort to comply, but as one

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[53] Freeman, Lee's Lieutenants, II, 184-192; Official Records, Series One, XIX, part 1, 144-153, 812, 825-828, 852-857, 870-883; Howell Cobb to Lafayette McLaws, September 22, 1862; R. Semmes to J. M. Goggin, September 24, 1862, McLaws Papers; Montgomery, Howell Cobb's Confederate Career, pp. 72-74; Johnson and Buel, Battles and Leaders, II, 591-597; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, September 17, 1862, Howell Cobb Papers.

later commented, "the situation forbade much enthusiasm." Cobb directed the battery to advance to a low knoll where it could open on the enemy with greater effect. He realized how vulnerable the guns would be without infantry support. Yet he knew the oncoming Yankees must be slowed if not stopped, and determined to sacrifice both the guns and the Georgians who manned them if necessary.[54]

By the time the battery unlimbered, the mountainside was cloaked in twilight. The gunners perceived a large body of men approaching, but in the half-light the dust covered soldiers appeared to be clad in gray. Uncertain if they faced friend or foe, the gunners hesitated. A Private Hogan from Cobb's Legion had turned back from the retreating infantry and accompanied the battery up the mountain. He insisted that the advancing men were the enemy. When the guns still did not open, Hogan exclaimed, "I <u>know</u> they are Yankees, & if <u>you</u> dont fire I will!" With that, he took careful aim and began shooting. Hogan's first shot drew the fire of an entire brigade on the battery. For the next five minutes the gunners worked their pieces with frantic desperation as the enemy pelted them with "murderous volleys." Then, in danger of being overrun, the battery

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[54] J. F. Dillard to Howell Cobb, Jr., October 26, 1892; John O. Waddell to Howell Cobb, Jr., December 8, 1892, E. Merton Coulter Collection, Felix Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia (Hereafter: Coulter Collection); Johnson and Buel, <u>Battles and Leaders</u>, II, 594.

withdrew, leaving one crippled gun and several dead or wounded comrades on the field. Despite heavy losses, the Troup Artillery had helped stall the VI Corps' advance. During the night, McLaws brought up additional brigades and the Confederates succeeded in patching together a new line.[55]

Although the battered Confederates managed to form a new battle line, their position remained perilous. Should the numerically superior Yankees press their advantage, the rebels could hardly hope to withstand them. Only six miles separated the victorious VI Corps from the beleaguered garrison at Harpers Ferry, but as the dark hours crept by it became clear that the federals had halted their advance.[56]

Cobb could take little consolation in the enemy's mistake. He had led 1,300 men from his brigade into battle that afternoon. Only about 300 answered the role call the next morning. The fate of nearly 1,000 men -- many of them friends and relatives -- remained a mystery. The mortal wound of brother John only added to the ache of defeat. Lamar lived until the next day, and Cobb reported that he appeared to suffer no great pain. Still, his death marked a severe loss for the entire family. A loss in which normal

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[55] J. F. Dillard to Howell Cobb, Jr., October 26, 1892; John O. Waddell to Howell Cobb, Jr., December 8, 1892, Coulter Collection; Johnson and Buel, Battles and Leaders, II, 594; Official Records, Series One, XIX, part 1, 854-855.

[56] Freeman, Lee's Lieutenants, II, 192.

grief would be compounded by the necessity of reorganizing the administration of the family's business operations.[57]

On September 15, the VI Corps remained inactive. The battered Confederates watched warily from their lines. A few miles away, convinced that further resistance was pointless, the federal garrison at Harpers Ferry surrendered to Stonewall Jackson. Even as the drama at Harpers Ferry played itself out, Lee began to concentrate his dispersed forces around the Maryland town of Sharpsburg. Late that afternoon the advance elements of the Army of the Potomac also arrived in the area. Two days later, the armies joined in mortal combat at Antietam Creek.[58]

For reasons that are not entirely clear, Cobb did not participate in the battle at Antietam. The remnants of his brigade performed admirably in the bloody fight under the direction of Lieutenant Colonel William MacRae of the Fifteenth North Carolina. In his official report on operations in Maryland, Cobb merely stated that "I was necessarily absent for two days from the command, and reached it the morning after the battle." His personal correspondence is only slightly more enlightening. While his command moved towards Sharpsburg, he travelled to Charlestown, Virginia. It seems likely that this movement

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[57] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, September 17, 1862, Howell Cobb Papers.

[58] Freeman, Lee's Lieutenants, II, 203-225.

stemmed from the need to gather in as many of his missing men as possible. On September 17, he wrote from Charlestown that 500 brigade members had straggled into camp. He also took advantage of the relative quiet at Charlestown to dispatch John A. and Howell, Jr., home with John Lamar's body.[59]

Lee held his ground at Antietam, but the Army of Northern Virginia suffered a horrendous mauling. Cobb, who arrived at Sharpsburg on the day following the battle, mournfully noted that the "army is greatly reduced numbering ... not more than forty thousand." Some years afterward, he related how he and other Confederate officers approached Lee with a proposal to open negotiations with McClellan. Speaking for the officers, Cobb presented their opinions "as strongly as the circumstances would permit." Warning that the war must be ended by negotiation or ruin, he argued for a ninety day truce. He expressed confidence that if such an arrangement could be effected by the army commanders, the people in both sections would never allow the fighting to resume. Lee listened attentively, and, Cobb believed, "in full sympathy." Yet, he declined to take any action, saying he did not believe the effort could succeed. Nor did he expect President Davis to endorse a request to secure an interview with McClellan. Not to be put off, Cobb pressed further. He suggested that Lee permit him to write the Union

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[59] Official Records, Series One, XIX, part 1, 870-872; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, September 17, 1862, Howell Cobb Papers.

commander. He pledged to mention neither a truce nor negotiations, but vowed that "in less than twelve hours" Lee would receive a request for an interview from McClellan. Lee, Cobb recalled, seemed "much in doubt as to his proper course," but persisted in his refusal.[60]

Although Cobb's post-war account of this meeting with Lee cannot be verified, events in Maryland certainly left him with a profound sense of war weariness. He confided to Mary Ann his wish that their sons might consent to perform the balance of their military service in Georgia. They had, he declared, "all done their full part in this bloody war." Nevertheless, he still expressed certainty that the troops' remained confident and stood "ready to meet the enemy in whatever numbers they may appear." Lee, however, knew his army could no longer sustain its invasion. Reluctantly, he drew back across the Potomac to Martinsburg, Virginia.[61]

The aftermath of the Maryland invasion found Cobb embroiled in an unpleasant dispute with his division commander. In the days following the disaster at Crampton's Gap, McLaws made numerous ill-considered public remarks that Cobb had been "a great bother" during the Maryland campaign. It is difficult to explain McLaws' motives in thus publicly

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[60] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, September 24, 1862, Howell Cobb Papers; Augustus O. Bacon Diary, October 11, 1868, Southern Historical Collection, Library of the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

[61] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, September 17, 1862; September 24, 1862, Howell Cobb Papers.

humiliating his subordinate. He had long held a low opinion of Cobb's talents, and much earlier in the war had threatened to resign rather than see the politician hold a higher rank than himself. Yet more than disdain was involved.[62]

McLaws might have been influenced by the battle report filed by Colonel Munford. Apparently unaware of the breakdown in communications between McLaws and the units guarding his rear, Munford insisted that with prompt reinforcements the gap could have been held. Although Munford praised Cobb's courage under fire, he criticized his failure to reach Crampton's Gap more expeditiously.[63]

It seems more likely, however, that McLaws sought a scapegoat to cover his own failures in command. Lee had given him two critical tasks. He was to occupy Maryland Heights and secure the passes through South Mountain. The first task involved the success of operations against Harpers Ferry. The second involved the safety of the Army of Northern Virginia. McLaws carried out his first assignment with methodical effectiveness, but never seemed to give the second his full attention. He failed to reconnoiter South Mountain, and hence only learned of Crampton's Gap by fortuitous accident. After learning of the gap's existence, he promptly ordered troops to the area, but communicated his

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[62] Howell Cobb to Lafayette McLaws, September 24, 1862, ibid.; Lafayette McLaws to Mrs. Lafayette McLaws, September 29, 1861, McLaws Papers.

[63] Official Records, Series One, XIX, part 1, 826-827.

instructions in a vague and confusing manner. At no point prior to the disaster of September 14, did he make an effort to inspect personally the deployment of the forces holding the vital South Mountain gaps. Even when it became clear that the units holding the gaps were engaging the enemy, he simply accepted General Stuart's outdated information that no more than a federal brigade threatened Crampton's Gap, and remained focused on his operations against Harpers Ferry.[64]

Whatever McLaws' motives, it did not take long for Cobb to learn of the criticism being directed at him. He responded with a blunt letter of protest and a request that his brigade be transferred to another division. Declaring that McLaws had "used ... [language] about myself which I cannot consent to put on paper," Cobb concluded that "I have not your respect and confidence [as an] officer." Thus, he felt compelled to seek a transfer because "my own self respect forbids I should serve under an officer who entertains of me such an opinion." Cobb's vigorous response apparently caught McLaws by surprise. He quickly moved to apologize. Avowing that "there is no one in whom I have more confidence as an officer," he assured his subordinate that any offensive remarks reflected nothing more than an expression of bad temper "which I am constantly repenting." Satisfied with this expression of repentance, Cobb declared that it "restores ... the sincere regard which I have felt

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[64] Freeman, Lee's Lieutenants, II, 193-202.

for you since I have been under your command." He promptly withdrew his request for transfer. The two men publicly sealed their reconciliation at a dinner hosted by Cobb in early October. There is evidence, however, that neither man acted in complete good faith. In a notation on the back of Cobb's letter accepting his apology, McLaws continued to insist that Cobb's performance during the Maryland campaign had been substandard. Cobb, he wrote, "did not understand his orders, did not seem to know his responsibility." For his part, Cobb wasted no time in renewing his attempt to secure a new post -- preferably in Georgia.[65]

Within days of his public reconciliation with McLaws, Cobb departed the Army of Northern Virginia. He had developed a painful sore on his foot which became infected. Unable to wear a boot, and in too much pain to exercise day-to-day command, he decided to return home to recuperate and oversee the settlement of Lamar's affairs. While enroute to Athens, he stopped off in Richmond where he apparently opened discussions regarding the transfer of his brigade to Georgia. Upon reaching his home state, he openly began to seek such an arrangement. On October 27, the war department authorized his transfer, and ordered him to report to General Beauregard at Charleston, South Carolina for further

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[65] Howell Cobb to Lafayette McLaws, September 24, 1862; Lafayette McLaws to Howell Cobb, September, 1862, Howell Cobb Papers; Howell Cobb to Lafayette McLaws, September 24, 1862, McLaws Papers; Coulter, Lost Generation, pp. 77-78.

instructions. Despite early favorable reports, however, he soon learned that his brigade must continue its service in Virginia.[66]

Cobb's decision to leave the Army of Northern Virginia stemmed from more than his dispute with General McLaws. John Lamar's death had left the family's plantations without central supervision. Although John A. resigned his commission to go home and assist with the plantations, Cobb realized that his relatively inexperienced son hardly could be expected to cope with the myriad responsibilities of plantation management. Thus he desired to be close by where he might offer advice and support, while continuing to serve the country. Cobb's concern for efficient plantation management reflected more than merely selfish interest. He increasingly recognized the depth of the South's supply problems. He knew that the Confederacy must focus its agricultural production on food and fodder vital to the success of the war effort. His presence in Georgia might well be the difference between success and failure in this critical endeavor on the family plantations. Moreover, he appreciated the severity of the blow his wife had suffered in the death of her beloved brother. Even though John A.

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[66] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, October 6, 1862; November 3, 1862; William R. McLaws to Howell Cobb, October 24, 1862; David C. Barrow to John A. Cobb, October 24, 1862; William P. Miles to Howell Cobb, October 27, 1862, Howell Cobb Papers; Montgomery, Howell Cobb's Confederate Career, p. 76.

reported that she had withstood the loss better than expected, Cobb certainly wished to comfort her with his own presence.[67]

Military politics also contributed to Cobb's decision. The disaster at Crampton Gap -- regardless of who bore primary responsibility -- virtually had precluded his further advancement in the Army of Northern Virginia. Moreover, his continued presence appeared certain to block brother Tom's chances for promotion. Although Tom voiced great anxiety to join his brother in Georgia, shortly after Cobb's departure he was promoted to brigadier rank.[68]

Yet Confederate officials had their own reasons for favoring Cobb's transfer. They felt increasing concern about public sentiment in Georgia. Shortly after Cobb assumed his new responsibilities, William M. Browne, an old friend now serving as aide-de-camp to President Davis, warned that "bad designing men" -- such as Alexander Stephens -- labored constantly to "bring Joe Brown into open rebellion" against the Davis administration. The government must rely upon "the

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[67] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, September 17, 1862; November 1, 1862; March 13, 1863; John A. Cobb to Howell Cobb, October 3, 1862; January 21, 1863, Howell Cobb Papers; Montgomery, Howell Cobb's Confederate Career, p. 77.

[68] Thomas R. R. Cobb to Marion Cobb, October 15, 1862, Thomas R. R. Cobb Papers, Felix Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia (Hereafter: T. R. R. Cobb Papers); Montgomery, Howell Cobb's Confederate Career, p. 67; William B. McCash, Thomas R. R. Cobb, 1823-1862, The Making of a Southern Nationalist (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1983), pp. 312-313.

energy, sense & popularity" of men like Cobb to counter this threat to the war effort. Should Stephens and company succeed in their dishonorable course, Browne warned, "our position will be more than critical."[69]

Besides his potential value as a political counterbalance to Stephens and Brown, Confederate officials believed Cobb's personal popularity might prove helpful in raising troops. Secretary of War James A Seddon stated the case bluntly when he wrote: "relying on the popularity of General Cobb, it is hoped that his efforts to obtain troops in his own State and the States adjoining will be so far successful as to enable him to collect a sufficient force until aid from other quarters can be sent him."[70]

IV

Before reporting for duty, Cobb spent several weeks settling Lamar's affairs and familiarizing himself with plantation operations. To his pleasant surprise, he discovered that John A. knew far more about plantation management than he had expected. He confided to Mary Ann that "I really dont know how I should have got along without

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[69] William M. Browne to Howell Cobb, January 21, 1863, Howell Cobb Papers; E. Merton Coulter, William Montague Browne, Versatile Anglo-Irish American, 1833-1883 (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1967), pp. 92-101.

[70] Official Records, Series One, XIV, part 1, 68; Montgomery, Howell Cobb's Confederate Career, pp. 76-77.

him in the management of the business -- about which he knew a great deal more than I did."[71]

Careful plantation management had always been important to the family's financial well being. With the outbreak of war, however, productivity became critical. The Cobbs, their slaves, and, to a lesser extent, the Confederacy itself depended upon the corn, wheat, and pork raised on the Cobb-Lamar holdings. As the Union blockade grew increasingly effective, food self-sufficiency came to represent a matter of survival.[72]

Early in the war, John Lamar had reduced cotton acreage in favor of food production. He took pride in his ability to insure that neither family members nor slaves need fear hunger. When Mary Ann complained that rising prices had reduced housekeeping to a "farce," and expressed doubts about providing for her house servants, Lamar offered reassurance. He urged her to bring her children and servants to Macon, because "I have got plenty to eat & no mistake .... The

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[71] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, November 1, 1862, Howell Cobb Papers.

[72] John B. Lamar to Mary Ann Cobb, November 3, 1861; November 9, 1861; December 12, 1861; Mary Ann Cobb to John B. Lamar, November 3, 1861; November 11, 1861; A. Preston to John B. Lamar, March 12, 1862; Stancil Barwick to John B. Lamar, March 12, 1862, ibid.; John B. Lamar to Mary Ann Cobb, May 30, 1861, Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collection, Felix Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia (Hereafter: Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collection).

blockade has not found me scarce of something to live on for all hands."[73]

Following Lamar's death in Maryland, Cobb and John A. continued his emphasis on raising provisions. They further reduced cotton acreage, and by 1863 had turned completely to the production of food. Cobb explained this decision, saying "if want and suffering come upon the country from planting cotton, the fault shall not be mine."[74]

These efforts produced positive results. Neither family nor slaves suffered privation during the war. There are even indications that the Cobbs' slaves ate better than many neighboring white families. Moreover, the Cobb-Lamar plantations provided the Confederate government with huge quantities of food and fodder. Although family members frequently complained about government pricing and transportation policies, Cobb insisted that John A. comply. Besides what they sold to the government, the Cobbs also made

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[73] John B. Lamar to Mary Ann Cobb, November 3, 1861; November 9, 1861; December 12, 1861; Mary Ann Cobb to John B. Lamar, November 3, 1861; November 11, 1861; A. Preston to John B. Lamar, March 12, 1862; Stancil Barwick to John B. Lamar, March 12, 1862, Howell Cobb Papers; John B. Lamar to Mary Ann Cobb, May 30, 1861, Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collection.

[74] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, March 13, 1863; March 16, 1863; Howell Cobb to Sarah Cobb, February 20, 1864; John A. Cobb to Howell Cobb, March 15, 1863; March 22, 1863; May 11, 1863; May 20, 1863; June 15, 1863; July 1, 1863; July 6, 1863; July 16, 1863, Howell Cobb Papers.

considerable amounts of food available to the families of soldiers at prices far below market value.[75]

Despite these contributions to the war effort, it sometimes seemed that state and national officials had determined to frustrate the Cobbs' efforts to maximize production. The seizure of slaves for service in labor details constructing fortifications around the state robbed them of valuable manpower. These seizures proved a minor irritation, however, when compared to the frustration they experienced in trying to keep their overseers out of military service. While the Cobbs accepted the impressment of their slaves as a bitter necessity in the manpower-starved Confederacy, they justifiably damned interference with their overseers. With Cobb, Lamar, and Howell, Jr. in the army, only John A. was free to supervise the plantations. The operations of five plantations clearly exceeded the capacity of one man to provide day-to-day direction. When the Confederate Congress enacted legislation making overseers subject to conscription, Cobb protested vigorously, but paid nearly $2,500 in special fees to secure their exemptions. Having paid this sum, he soon learned that his overseers had been called up for service in state forces by Governor Brown. John A. reported that the draft only involved fifty men from

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[75] John A. Cobb to Howell Cobb, May 20, 1863; July 6, 1863; January 23, 1864; John A. Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, February 21, 1863; March 9, 1863; Stancil Barwick to Mary Ann Cobb, February 14, 1863; Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, February 22, 1863; January 22, 1864, ibid.

the area, but included three of their four overseers. The fourth received his own draft notice from state officials within a few days. John A. bitterly voiced the suspicion that they had been subjected to "a mean trick."[76]

News of this "mean trick" prompted a vigorous response from Cobb. Complaining that the situation was "enough to make a preacher say what he ought not to," he went to Milledgeville to plead his case before state officers. Unable to secure satisfaction there, he appealed to Secretary of War Seddon. Noting that the overseers of civilians had been routinely excused from active duty, he demanded "am I not entitled to as much protection as those who are not in the service?" Seddon, probably sensing the futility of another confrontation with Brown, provided no meaningful assistance.[77]

Cobb poured out his frustration in a vitriolic letter to Mary Ann. She hastened to soothe her husband's ill temper by reminding him that "you went into the Secession movement with the feelings of a true patriot -- retain them to the end of our struggle -- take every cross and trial that comes ...

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[76] Stancil Barwick to John A. Cobb, July 16, 1861; John B. Lamar to John A. Cobb, August 6, 1862; John A. Cobb to Lucy B. Cobb, February 15, 1864; John A. Cobb to Howell Cobb, May 20, 1863; June 15, 1863; July 1, 1863; August 9, 1863; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, May 13, 1863; Burton N. Harrison to Howell Cobb, June 29, 1863; Howell Cobb to John A. Cobb, July 6, 1863; J. M. Moore to Howell Cobb, July 22, 1863, ibid.

[77] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, August 12, 1863; Howell Cobb to James A. Seddon, August 19, 1863, ibid.

as a part of 'the cost' ... of delivering your country from Abolition." Cobb welcomed her "consoling counsel." He admitted that the loss of his overseers and the exposure of his property to "ruin" was enough "to arrouse [sic] a spirit of complaint & I confess that I felt it deeply." Still, he vowed to "bear with patience every trial."[78]

As had always been true, the ultimate success or failure of the Cobb-Lamar plantations hinged upon the family's ability to induce their slaves to work. If the Cobbs' correspondence provides an accurate picture, the upheavals of the war exerted little impact on fundamental relations between family members and their servants prior to the South's final military defeat. No family member ever expressed any anxiety regarding the behavior of their slaves, and while there were occasional discipline problems, these generally reflected nothing different from antebellum days.[79]

Numerous instances indicate that the family slaves viewed their plantation homes as places of relative security. While escorting John Lamar's body home from Maryland, John

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[78] Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, August 11, 1863; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, August 19, 1863, ibid.

[79] John A. Cobb to John B. Lamar, October 10, 1861; Mary Ann Cobb to Dr. W. Muller, January 2, 1862; Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, March 27, 1862; John A. Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, May 14, 1863; James L. Grant to John A. Cobb, May 19, 1863; Dr. W. Muller to Mary Ann Cobb, July 2, 1863; John A. Cobb to Lucy B. Cobb, March 3, 1864; Stancil Barwick to John A. Cobb, July 4, 1864; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, July 6, 1864; John A. Cobb to Howell Cobb, June 6, 1863; December 3, 1864, ibid.; Jenny Lamar to Mary Ann Cobb, 1863, Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collection.

A. found it necessary to leave his uncle's ailing servant Henry with a family in Virginia. Although John A. left Henry adequate funds to get back to Georgia on his own, he voiced both surprise and satisfaction when the slave turned up some weeks later. Writing to his mother, John A. declared, "I was very much surprised when ... he got here for I did not expect to see him again. I had missed him a great deal."[80]

Other slaves, less closely associated with family members, demonstrated similar behavior. In 1863, the Cobbs opened a salt works on the Gulf coast. Hoping to supply their own needs for this vital commodity and further contribute to the war effort, they dispatched a group of slaves and an overseer to operate the works. The slaves quickly decided that they had no taste for this type of labor, and ran away. They made no attempt, however, to escape to the Yankees. Instead, they returned home to the plantation.[81]

Lacking any slave accounts to explain this behavior, it is difficult to understand their motives fully. Yet some suppositions are possible. Whatever the labor demands, the Cobb-Lamar plantations did represent places of real physical security. Throughout the war, the Cobb family never wavered

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[80] John A. Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, October 12, 1862, Howell Cobb Papers; Jenny Lamar to Mary Ann Cobb, 1863, Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collection.

[81] Stancil Barwick to John A. Cobb, December 23, 1863, Howell Cobb Papers.

in its determination to insure that their slaves' standard of living remained as close to prewar levels as possible. Long proud of the generous treatment they accorded their human property, the Cobbs' determination reflected an ongoing combination of paternalism and self-interest.[82]

On occasion, this determination placed the family under considerable financial strain, even as it required extensive efforts just to locate scarce items. On the eve of his departure for the Maryland campaign, John Lamar instructed the plantation overseers to secure shoes for the slaves -- regardless of cost. While not eager to pay an excessive price, he saw no alternative, noting that "I put no limit -- because if I did the negroes would go barefoot next winter." Although Lamar appreciated that poorly clad and poorly shod slaves would be more prone to disease, low morale, and resentment, he also manifested a deep sense of pride when he affirmed that "our negroes know less of hard times than any people I have ever known ... black or white." Following Lamar's death, Cobb and John A. persevered in his policy regarding the material needs of their slaves. Despite soaring inflation within the Confederacy and the increasing

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[82] John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, November 3, 1861; John B. Lamar to Mary Ann Cobb, December 12, 1861; August 9, 1862; John A. Cobb to Howell Cobb, July 6, 1863; May 26, 1863; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, October 23, 1864; Bills for Medical Treatment of Slaves, August 14 - September 18, 1863; June 5 - November 11, 1864, ibid.

scarcity of goods, surviving records indicate that they managed to keep their slaves reasonably well-supplied.[83]

Still, it seems unlikely that the Cobbs' slaves felt no motivation beyond materialistic concerns. Some, such as Henry and Mary Ann's faithful Aggy, clearly had developed a sincere attachment to the family. Most probably possessed their own agenda. The institution of slavery had taught them to be circumspect in their relations with whites -- all whites. The liberating hordes of the North represented a chance for freedom. But with that chance came an uncertain future based largely upon the good will of unknown whites. The absence of any Union armies in the vicinity of the Cobb-Lamar plantations in Sumter County spared those slaves the necessity of making an immediate decision. Yet, when General William T. Sherman's forces swept directly over the Hurricane plantation in Baldwin County in late 1864, family correspondence indicates that few if any slaves chose to act on this chance for freedom. Rather, they did what they had always done. They watched and waited. They concentrated on

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[83] John B. Lamar to Howell Cobb, November 3, 1861; John B. Lamar to Mary Ann Cobb, December 12, 1861; August 9, 1862; John A. Cobb to Howell Cobb, July 6, 1863; May 26, 1863; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, October 23, 1864; Bills for Medical Treatment of Slaves, August 14 - September 18, 1863; June 5 - November 11, 1864, ibid.

protecting their families and community. They bided their time.[84]

V

After satisfying himself that he had done everything necessary on the plantations, Cobb departed for Charleston. There, he had a favorable interview with General Pierre G. T. Beauregard and learned of his assignment to the newly created Military District of Middle Florida. Although the boundaries of this district extended from the Suwannee River to the Choctawhatchee River, Cobb's main concern would focus on guarding the Apalachicola against incursions by Union forces. In addition to preventing direct movements up the major rivers, he also bore responsibility for guarding against overland movements against his flank, and protecting vital salt works on the Gulf coast. Beauregard provided little specific information on Cobb's new command. Rather, he instructed him to inspect the district and compile a report on its condition and resources at the first opportunity.[85]

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[84] John A. Cobb to Howell Cobb, December 3, 1864, ibid.; Clarence L. Mohr, On the Threshold of Freedom: Masters and Slaves in Civil War Georgia (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986), pp. 288-289; William Tecumseh Sherman, The Memoirs of General W. T. Sherman, edited by Charles Royster (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, Inc., 1990), pp. 661-662.

[85] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, November, 1862, Howell Cobb Papers; Official Records, Series One, XIV, 684, 696-698, 735-736; Montgomery, Howell Cobb's Confederate Career, pp. 78-80.

Eager to assume his new duties, Cobb departed for his headquarters at Quincy, Florida in early December. He stopped off in Columbus where he learned that only 700 troops garrisoned all of Middle Florida. Captain Theodore Moreno, an engineer assigned to his command, assisted Cobb in drawing up plans to block the rivers that drained into the Gulf of Mexico. By sinking obstructions into the waterways and creating rafts of flotsam by extending chains across major channels, the two men hoped to close off the most obvious routes for both invasions and raids. Aware that all such efforts must come to nought unless adequate troops could be obtained, Cobb immediately fired off messages to both Beauregard and officials in Richmond requesting reinforcements. Having given up on securing the transfer of his entire brigade, he now concentrated on retaining the services of his old regiment, and requested the transfer of the Sixteenth Georgia.[86]

After taking these preliminary steps, Cobb moved on to Florida. On December 9, he reached Tallahassee. There, he consulted with Governor John Milton and General Joseph Finegan, commander of the District of East Florida. While in the Florida capital, Cobb received and accepted an invitation to address the state legislature. In his

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[86] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, December 3, 1862, Howell Cobb Papers; Official Records, Series One, XIV, 696-698.

subsequent remarks, he vowed to hold and defend all the territory in his district.[87]

Whatever promises Cobb might make in rousing speeches, it quickly became apparent that he faced a nearly impossible task should the enemy make a concerted effort in Middle Florida. There was no unit organization larger than a company in the entire district. These units occupied such a long and isolated front that it often took two weeks for messages to travel back and forth between them and Quincy. In practical terms, Captain James Barrow wrote, "the force now present amounts merely to a picket -- to warn us when to leave." Nevertheless, he expressed confidence that given time by the Yankees, and adequate resources by the Confederates, Cobb could provide the district with an adequate defense.[88]

Reports of disloyal activities by citizens within his district further complicated Cobb's task. One correspondent complained that in many Florida communities conscription officers could not compel draftees to report for service without military assistance. Another warned of a band of deserters in Alabama who had sworn not to serve the Confederacy again. Cobb also received several communications

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[87] Florida House Journal, 1862, p. 235, cited in Montgomery, Howell Cobb's Confederate Career, p. 80.

[88] James Barrow to John A. Cobb, December 7, 1862, Howell Cobb Papers; Official Records, Series One, XIV, 702-704.

informing him that Union soldiers had taken up positions guarding the approaches to the town of Apalachicola, and that visiting Yankees were accorded a warm welcome by many citizens. He saw an opportunity to make an example of Apalachicola, and perhaps dissuade others in his district from similar acts of treason. Consequently, he ordered that mail deliveries to the town be cut off, and restricted passage in and out of the area. His actions drew a howl of protest from residents of Apalachicola who protested being punished for the sins of their neighbors. Cobb refused to relent. He urged the wisdom of occupying the town with Confederate forces, but the lack of needed troops prompted Beauregard to reject his plan. Throughout his tenure in Middle Florida, Cobb never had more than a few hundred men with which to guard this vital sector from Yankee incursions.[89]

Despite these obstacles, Cobb undertook his assignment with vigor. Following an initial survey of conditions, he reported to Beauregard that he needed at least 5,000 troops to garrison the district adequately. He proposed to raise this force either by calling upon the governors of Florida,

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[89] R. W. Echols to Howell Cobb, March 10, 1863; S. Rogers to Howell Cobb, March 12, 1863; Thomas Orman to Howell Cobb, December 20, 1862; Clinton Thigpin to Howell Cobb, December 21; December 22, 1862; W. K. Simmonds to Howell Cobb, December 22, 1862; Citizens of Apalachicola to Howell Cobb, December 23, 1862, Howell Cobb Papers; Official Records, Series One, XIV, p. 735; Montgomery, Howell Cobb's Confederate Career, pp. 84-85.

Georgia, and Alabama to fill a quota, or by simply announcing that he would accept units raised for service in the district. In order to hasten this process, Cobb momentarily abandoned his objections to the conscription laws. Instead, he proposed that he be given authority to call up men subject to conscription for service in his district. Beauregard endorsed Cobb's proposal, and sent it on to Richmond. After some discussion over details, Confederate authorities approved his plan. To Cobb's disappointment, however, the war department declined to let him have the Sixteenth for service with his new command. The needs of the Army of Northern Virginia were such that veteran troops could not be detailed away from the main theater of the war.[90]

Having secured permission to implement his plan, Cobb wasted no time in getting men under arms. In January, he issued a proclamation declaring his authorization to accept into Confederate service "companies, battalions, or regiments" composed of men living in the Middle District of Florida and southwest Georgia. He further declared his authority to accept all persons "whether subject to conscription or not." As an incentive to volunteer he noted that each man would receive a bounty of fifty dollars, and

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[90] Official Records, Series One, LII, 271-273, 276-277; Series One, XIV, 702-705, 737-739; Series One, XXVIII, part 2, 190, 214, 272, 451-455; Howell Cobb to Public, January, 1863; John A. Cobb to Lucy B. Cobb, January 20, 1863, Howell Cobb Papers; Montgomery, Howell Cobb's Confederate Career, pp. 84-86.

the units thus formed would be granted the privilege of electing their own officers. He offered added incentive with his observation that this current recruiting effort represented the last chance that able-bodied men would have to serve in volunteer units officered by men of their own choosing. Those who declined to volunteer were to be immediately enrolled as conscripts. Although his recruiting efforts produced fewer troops than he had hoped, by spring he proudly reported that he had raised a regiment and a battalion. Despite their relatively brief time in the field, he added, these new units would soon be among the best drilled in the entire army.[91]

Cobb's recruiting drive significantly increased the number of troops available for service in his district. By the time he left Middle Florida in the fall of 1863, the number of troops under his command stood at about 3,500. Nevertheless, manpower remained in critically short supply. This rendered it impossible for Cobb to guard his district closely. Consequently, he had no choice but to disperse his men in small units and rely upon their vigorous action to counter Yankee incursions. Skirmishes at Saint Andrew's Bay and Ocklockonnee Bay proved the potential effectiveness of such a strategy in repelling small scale raids. In both instances Cobb's troops drove off federal raiding parties,

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[91] Howell Cobb to Public, January, 1863; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, February 18, 1863; Howell Cobb to James A. Seddon, May 14, 1863, Howell Cobb Papers.

inflicting heavy casualties while suffering almost no losses. Fortunately for Cobb and the Confederacy, the Union forces did not test his strategy with large scale movements.[92]

As Browne had predicted, Cobb found that his duties in Middle Florida involved more than purely military concerns. In March, he took an active part in meetings designed to provide charitable relief for refugees driven from their homes by the Yankees. He also visited Tallahassee to address a meeting of local cotton growers. Unfounded rumors of an early peace, he observed, "had run the people mad on the subject of planting cotton." This state of affairs caused Cobb great anxiety, and he relayed his concerns to his listeners. Unable to export their cotton because of the Union blockade, and aware of the South's greater need for food and fodder to sustain both civilians and soldiers, many southern planters -- including the Cobb-Lamar family -- had given over the production of cotton in favor of foodstuffs. Even with these extraordinary efforts, he warned, the South had found it "difficult to feed the army and support the country." Should the South now abandon its focus on raising corn and hogs because of false hopes for peace, "starvation and ruin would be upon us." He took pleasure in reporting that his efforts had produced "a most happy effect ... and many left the meeting to go home and give new directions

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[92] Official Records, Series One, XIV, 230-231; Series One, XXVIII, part 2, 2, 249, 272, 482-483; Montgomery, Howell Cobb's Confederate Career, pp. 88-89.

about their crops." He scheduled other meetings with a similar purpose. Cobb considered these efforts essential, and predicted that failure to counter the popular mood would result in "hard times next season."[93]

Whatever the difficulties and frustrations inherent in his new command, service in Middle Florida had many compensations. Although required to make regular tours of his outposts, the relative permanence of his headquarters in Quincy insured that he seldom suffered the discomforts of cold camps and short rations. Not only could he supply his own table with abundant and varied fare, he also found it relatively easy to procure citrus fruits and the like for shipment to family members in Georgia.[94]

Quincy offered other benefits as well. Because of its security from any sudden Yankee attack, Cobb felt safe in urging Mary Ann to bring the children there to join him. Mary Ann agreed to make the move if he insisted, but pleaded that he not insist. She expressed profound anxiety about exposing her young ones to the dangerous fevers indigenous to the area. Despite his disappointment, Cobb acquiesced to her entreaties and agreed that she need not make the move.[95]

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[93] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, March 9, 1863; March 13, 1863, Howell Cobb Papers.

[94] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, March 9, 1863; June 22, 1863, ibid.

[95] Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, January 18, 1863; January 28, 1863, ibid.

Although denied the pleasure of having his family with him, Cobb did not suffer for a social life in Quincy. The home of Rhoda Waller Kilcrease became a favorite haven for both the General and members of his staff. A wealthy, attractive, well-educated widow, with a gift for conversation, "Mrs. Kilcrease" became the subject of almost constant reports back to Georgia. Not surprisingly, Mary Ann soon registered displeasure at her husband's frequent attendance on another woman. How, she inquired, "do you and your nearest neighbor spend your evenings,___? .... You often fall asleep in your arm chair -- or in the lounge -- while I am talking to you. I am curious to know how she keeps you awake. I would like to learn the gentle art." With bitter irony she noted that at least his conversation with a remarkable lady would not have the detrimental effect on his manners that his company with men had exerted during the Peninsula Campaign. Recalling how "I was grievously shocked by the grossness of yr. speech, all from having only men for your associates," she expressed hope that when he returned from Florida he might speak "entirely in poetry."[96]

Mary Ann had little to fear from her husband's attentions to the young widow, however, because Mrs. Kilcrease soon pledged to marry Cobb's popular adjutant, James Barrow. Cobb attempted to ease his wife's mind with assurances that her concerns were groundless, but continued

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[96] Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, March 1, 1863, ibid.

to dote on his neighbor. John A. best described the nature of service in Florida during a visit to Quincy when he wrote that "service here is much different than in Virginia, it is more like holiday ... than work."[97]

Yet, even amid the "holiday" atmosphere of the Quincy headquarters, Cobb could not escape the harsh aspects of reality. Only days after taking over his new command, dispatches arrived bearing news of brother Tom's death while commanding a brigade at the Battle of Fredericksburg in Virginia. In January, he learned of the death of his sister-in-law, Mary Athena Cobb Two months later he received sad tidings of the death of his toddler son, Tom. These blows struck the Cobbs hard. One family member resignedly observed that "there seems to be no end to the misfortunes in our family & they are coming so regularly that when one goes I cannot help asking ... 'who next?'." For his own part, Cobb confessed to his grieving mother that "in these days of sorrow" he saw no hope for relief save through divine assistance.[98]

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[97] John A. Cobb to Lucy B. Cobb, March 3, 1863, ibid.; Coulter, Lost Generation, pp. 89-90.

[98] James M. Smythe to Howell Cobb, December 17, 1962, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, p. 609; S. M. Whitner to Howell Cobb, January 11, 1863; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, March 18, 1863; John A. Cobb to Lamar Cobb, March 22, 1863, Howell Cobb Papers; Howell Cobb to Sarah Rootes Cobb, January 16, 1863, Henry Rootes Jackson Scrapbook, Georgia Department of Archives and History, Atlanta, Georgia.

Even as Cobb struggled to cope with his public duties and private grief, he also found it necessary to console Mary Ann. Through nearly two years of war, she had comported herself as the epitome of southern womanhood. Since the earliest days of the struggle, as a director of the Soldiers' Aid Society, she had committed considerable effort to provide troops in the field with necessary supplies and small luxuries. Despite intense anxiety about the well-being of her own menfolk, she had directed only contempt at those women who labored to keep their relatives out of the army. Women such as herself, she declared, "who had been called upon to bear the heat and burden of the day, can have no patience, towards those who still cling to their husbands, their sons, as if any better than their neighbors."[99]

Now, driven nearly to distraction by the death of so many family members, Mary Ann sank into a slough of physical and mental torment. Plagued by a profound sense of guilt which arose from the conviction that her baby might still be alive had she moved to Quincy per Cobb's request, she constantly lashed herself with reproach. Writing to her husband, she complained that "I almost wish ... I could go

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[99] Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, July 26, 1861; August 12, 1861; September 18, 1861; October 13, 1861; John A. Cobb to Howell Cobb, August 19, 1861, Howell Cobb Papers; Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, Jr., August 18, 1861, Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collection.

where I could not hear the name of Quincy. Remorse eats my very soul at its sound."[100]

Relatives, fearful about Mary Ann's condition, pleaded with Cobb to return home if only for a few days. They reported that she was afflicted with chills, and expressed worry that her mind might be affected. Cobb secured fifteen days of leave from General Beauregard, but his presence produced little improvement. Following his return to Florida, Mary Ann experienced severe mood swings that prompted her to doubt her own sanity. She subjected Cobb to intense outbursts of both reproach and affection. In early July, she admitted that "had I penned all that has passed through my mind ... you would despise me and believe that my heart has closed against you. It seems ... it is turning against all I ever loved. Those I love the best are the greatest source of torture to me. Is this not incipient lunacy?" Yet five days later she begged him to quit the army and return home for "if you die life will be a blank to me .... I am sad -- sad -- A frenzy almost seizes me when I think of you being fatally ill." Although Mary Ann gradually recovered, the healing process took many months.[101]

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[100] Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, June 7, 1863, Howell Cobb Papers.

[101] Lamar Cobb to Howell Cobb, April, 1863; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, April 8, 1863; Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, May 4, 1863; July 3, 1863; July 8, 1863, ibid.

VI

During Cobb's tenure in Middle Florida, his success at raising troops and administering his district apparently impressed the Davis administration. In early May, Secretary of War James A. Seddon requested that Cobb come to Richmond to assume the critical duties of Quartermaster General for the Confederate Army. Cobb voiced gratitude for the offer, but declined. Declaring that "I am now higher than my merits entitle me to go," he expressed certainty that "I have neither the knowledge nor the experience to take charge of so important a bureau in the midst of war .... I know enough of that place to know that I could not discharge its duties satisfactorily to myself -- or the country."[102]

Cobb also felt compelled to acknowledge that personal reasons influenced his refusal. Mary Ann was in the midst of her agony over the family's "recent and repeated afflictions." He did not know when he might be summoned to her side. He added that "I have spent only eight days with her in the last six months, and indeed only six weeks in two years." Now, his post lay only two days from home and "the consciousness that I can at a moment's warning be with her is a great relief both to her and to me."[103]

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[102] James A. Seddon to Howell Cobb, May 5, 1863; Howell Cobb to James A. Seddon, May 14, 1863, ibid.

[103] Howell Cobb to James A. Seddon, May 14, 1863, ibid.

Cobb had other reasons for declining Seddon's offer, however, which he chose not to reveal. Cobb's private correspondence reflected a sense of isolation within the Confederate war effort. His doubts about the effectiveness and fairness of the Davis administration had not decreased since leaving Virginia. He complained that the president had interfered with the organization of his staff for wholly petty reasons. Even worse, Davis had summarily rejected his proposal to fortify Columbus and create a new military district in southwest Georgia. Describing the city as critical to Confederate success, he raged that "Mr. Davis, at Richmond knows better than we, who are here what should be done, and ... relies upon his own wisdom to direct & control matters." He bitterly observed that the many disasters befalling the South should have "taught Mr. Davis that he is not infallible, but it seems otherwise."[104]

Cobb held an even lower opinion of the Confederate Congress. In March, he complained to William M. Browne that Congress "will stay & howl & ... misrepresent the people." His attitude toward the legislature sank lower in May, when Congress enacted a law subjecting plantation overseers to conscription unless their employers paid a special tax. Damning the law as "folly & stupidity," he growled that "every good citizen, should swear never to vote for a member

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[104] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, May 15, 1863; August 7, 1863; August 17, 1863; August 28, 1863; August 31, 1863, ibid.

of this Congress who voted for that bill." He immediately fired off a letter of protest to Davis urging the president to block implementation of the offensive legislation. When Davis offered nothing more than a promise to refer the matter to the secretary of war, Cobb gave up. He advised John A. to pay the tax even though it represented "an outrage upon the men in the army." Nothing better, he concluded, "could be expected from such a set as the late Congress."[105]

Whatever his doubts about the Confederate government, Cobb never joined in the activities of those in open opposition to the national authorities. His longstanding hostility to Joe Brown and his supporters had not weakened, despite his frustration with President Davis and Congress. He viewed Brown's efforts to frustrate Confederate policies as treason. Nevertheless, he refused to challenge Brown in the gubernatorial race in 1863. Brown's opponents pleaded with Cobb to oppose his bid for reelection, and one insisted that "you will not decline a service which your state so greatly needs." Yet, Cobb did decline -- just as he had declined the job with the Davis administration.[106]

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[105] William M. Browne to Howell Cobb, March 4, 1863; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, May 13, 1863; Burton N. Harrison to Howell Cobb, June 29, 1863; Howell Cobb to John A. Cobb, July 6, 1863, ibid.; Howell Cobb to Alexander H. Stephens, September 1, 1863, Alexander H. Stephens Papers, Library of Congress, Washington D.C.

[106] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, March 16, 1863; J. R.(?) to Howell Cobb, June 28, 1863; D. A. Vason to Howell Cobb, June 4, 1863; John C. Whitner to Howell Cobb, June 8, 1863, Howell Cobb Papers.

While prepared to contribute to the Confederate cause with the products of his family's plantations and with his own military service, Cobb felt no desire to be part of a national administration in which he had no confidence. Nor did he wish to undertake the onerous burdens of the governor's office, or risk political defeat at the hands of Joe Brown -- one of the few men he truly despised. Lacking any real faith in either state or national authorities, Cobb preferred to serve out the balance of the war in Middle Florida.

Mary Ann encouraged him in this course. She agreed that Davis, Congress, and Brown all had cast aside good sense in formulating their war policies, but warned him against taking action. As an individual, she noted, he could accomplish nothing. As part of a group striving to counter failed government policies, he might inadvertently precipitate a disastrous civil war within the Confederacy. Thus, she said, he must bide his time and wait for power to pass from the hands of current leaders. Until then, she concluded, "the tide is set against ... reason and justice."[107]

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[107] Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, August 24, 1863, ibid.

Chapter Twenty-One

"The Revolution Is ... At An End"

Cobb's desire to remain in his quiet backwater district soon fell victim to the demands of the war. In early September, he travelled to Atlanta on army business. While there, he received orders transferring him from Middle Florida to command of Georgia state troops being raised by Governor Joseph E. Brown. Distressed by this unexpected development, he noted that "if the president had done his very best to place me in the most unpleasant position possible he could not have succeeded better." He complained that besides necessitating cooperation with Governor Brown, the transfer placed him under the command of General Braxton Bragg, "for whom I have no respect." Yet, whatever his personal preferences, he vowed to "submit without murmur or complaint."[1]

Despite his misgivings, Cobb undertook his new assignment with a determination to do the best job possible. Initially, it appeared that many of his concerns had been groundless. He met with Governor Brown shortly after receiving notice of his transfer, and reported to his superiors in Richmond that the governor had "manifested every

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[1] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, September 9, 1863, Howell Cobb Papers, Felix Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia (Hereafter: Howell Cobb Papers).

disposition in his power to aid me ... and I have no doubt there will be cordial cooperation between the State and Confederate authorities." Although Cobb certainly knew enough of Brown's previous record to doubt his own optimistic assessment, he apparently hoped that the threat of massive Union forces poised in Tennessee might produce the patriotic cooperation which he predicted.[2]

The rapid influx of state troops into camps around Atlanta further eased Cobb's doubts about his new assignment. In mid-September, he reported that he had 2,500 troops armed and organized, with another 1,000 organized but without weapons. He predicted that he would need equipment for these men, as well as armaments for another 4,500. By month's end, he reported that the Georgia State Guard now had 5,000 troops in the field.[3]

Even as Cobb undertook his new responsibilities, he received the additional good news of his promotion to the rank of Major General. None other than Confederate Vice-president Alexander Stephens had acted as his champion. Stephens and Cobb disagreed on every major issue confronting the Confederacy, and the vice-president had recently

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[2] Howell Cobb to Samuel Cooper, September 14, 1863, Letter Books, Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collection, Felix Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia (Hereafter: Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collection).

[3] Howell Cobb to Jefferson Davis, September 19, 1863; Howell Cobb to Samuel Cooper, September 28, 1863, Letter Books, ibid.

denounced Cobb's private musing that the country required a dictator as repugnant and "unwise." Nevertheless, he recognized that Cobb's personal popularity in Georgia might prove critical in organizing the state's defense. In a telegraph to President Davis from his home in Crawford, he insisted that Cobb's presence might prove especially important because "our state troops would ... follow him across the [state] Line if needs be."[4]

Cobb had little time, however, to relish either his promotion or his early success in organizing the state troops. The militia muster rolls for Georgia indicated that some 15,000 men should be available for military service. Yet, he warned the government not to expect more than 10,000 troops when it called out the state's entire force. He attributed this manpower shortfall to policies implemented by Governor Brown and to draft resisters. Loath to antagonize the governor, Cobb hastened to add that he believed Brown's policy of detailing men essential to state operations a wise one. He also offered assurances that efforts had begun to force draft resisters into the army.[5]

Other considerations further limited the value of Cobb's state troops. Again, Brown's policies contributed to the

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[4] Howell Cobb to Samuel Cooper, September 19, 1863, Letter Books, ibid.; Alexander H. Stephens to (?), September 15, 1863, Jefferson Davis Papers, Special Collections Library, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina.

[5] Howell Cobb to Samuel Cooper, September 28, 1863, Letter Books, Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collection.

difficulties. The governor had publicly established the size of companies for service in the state troops at forty men. Although considerably below the accepted rate of one hundred men per company, Cobb confessed that he felt compelled to accept the smaller units. He justified his decision on the grounds that any effort to reorganize these small companies would only produce disaffection among the troops and give "mortal offense to the Governor, who seems to be making every effort to respond efficiently to the call of the President." Brown also insisted that the state law allowing volunteer companies to elect their officers be implemented for the state troops. Cobb condemned the practice, but urged Confederate authorities to acquiesce as the best way to avoid needless conflict with the governor.[6]

Cobb faced additional complications from the practice of allowing state troops to establish the territorial boundaries of their service. Although the Confederate Congress had authorized the practice, Cobb complained that such restrictions made it difficult to organize companies into regiments. Thus far he had succeeded in convincing most companies to waive their self-imposed territorial boundaries through personal appeals. Nevertheless, he pressed the government to abolish this destructive system.[7]

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[6] Howell Cobb to Samuel Cooper, September 28, 1863; September 29, 1863; Letter Books, ibid.

[7] Howell Cobb to Samuel Cooper, September 28, 1863, Letter Books, ibid.

Despite Cobb's efforts, these difficulties insured that the Georgia State Guard never became an effective military force. After an initial burst of patriotic enthusiasm, members of State Guard units began to refuse assignments outside the territorial limits they had prescribed for themselves. The rapid deterioration of relations between Cobb and Governor Brown exacerbated matters. When the Davis administration rejected Cobb's suggestion and refused to allow State Guard units to elect their own officers, the governor promptly informed Cobb that he intended to ignore the presidential decision. Cobb initially responded with an expression of regret that Brown had determined on a policy certain to produce conflict with Confederate authorities and "destroy the efficiency of the State Guard." Brown's persistence in the matter led to a sharp rebuke from Cobb who condemned any course designed to produce "disorder and confusion." Thereafter, relations between the governor and the commander of the State Guard assumed a cold and hostile tone.[8]

The most serious element working to deprive the Georgia State Guard of efficiency, however, derived from its temporary nature. Cobb perceived this weakness early on. Within weeks of assuming command, he warned that reliance on sixty day enlistments for service in temporary units

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[8] Howell Cobb to W. W. Mackall, October 3, 1863; October 16, 1863; Howell Cobb to Joseph E. Brown, October 18, 1863; October 30, 1863, Letter Books, ibid.

represented the worst possible use of already limited manpower. By the time men had been organized into units, issued arms, and transported to the point of danger, most of their time in service had expired. Thereupon, the men went home and their units ceased to exist. Should an emergency force their recall to duty, the entire organizational process must be repeated. Cobb urged that this problem be corrected by making the companies and regiments of the State Guard permanent reserve organizations. The Davis administration, while favorably inclined toward this idea, noted that existing laws prohibited the adoption of his proposal.[9]

Convinced that the creation of a permanent reserve corps represented the only viable solution, Cobb drew up a bill designed to remove the legal obstacles to his proposed force. Delay in passage of the bill by Congress, he warned, "is attended with the greatest danger." He declared that "the best service a patriot could render his country, would be to

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[9] Howell Cobb to Samuel Cooper, September 28, 1863; Howell Cobb to A. H. Kenan, November 30, 1863, Letter Books; James A. Seddon to Howell Cobb, February 12, 1864, ibid.; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, February 15, 1864, Howell Cobb Papers; Horace Montgomery, Howell Cobb's Confederate Career (Tuscaloosa: Confederate Publishing Company, Inc., 1959), p. 109; The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies, 128 vols. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), Series Four, III, 14, 42.

induce that body to remain in session day & night until the army bill is passed."[10]

Even as Cobb struggled to preserve his command, he received urgent messages from General Bragg to forward as many troops as possible to the Army of Tennessee. Anticipating a major battle at any moment, Cobb enthusiastically complied. Bragg's subsequent defeat at Chattanooga in late November produced consternation in Georgia, the likely target of future Union offensives. Cobb soon departed for Richmond. He went with the purpose of convincing the Davis administration to make adequate provisions for the defense of his state.[11]

Upon arriving in the capital, he immediately began pleading with President Davis to reinforce the Army of Tennessee. He further urged that Bragg be replaced by General Robert E. Lee. Cobb proved convincing enough that Davis called Lee to Richmond for consultations, but the proposed transfer went no further. Unable to sway Davis and Lee to this idea, he argued for the appointment of General Joseph E. Johnston as Bragg's replacement. Here he encountered greater success. Shortly after proposing

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[10] Howell Cobb to James A. Seddon, January 4, 1864, Letter Books, Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collection; Montgomery, Howell Cobb's Confederate Career, p. 109.

[11] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, November 25, 1863; November 27, 1863; Howell Cobb to James A. Seddon, December 4, 1863, Howell Cobb Papers.

Johnston's appointment, he learned that the general had been ordered to take command of Bragg's force.[12]

Cobb voiced pleasant surprise at the warm reception given him by both Davis and Seddon. Besides receiving a "very cordial invitation" to visit the Davis home, he reported that "the President and Secretary of War both manifest not only a willingness, but a desire to comply with my wishes."[13]

While in Richmond, Cobb saw things that worried him a great deal. Bothered by the absence of an overall Confederate military strategy, he proposed a conference between Davis, Lee, Johnston, and Beauregard to devise a unified plan of operations for the coming year. Cobb's effort reflected a clear understanding of the South's most pressing problems. He confided his purpose to Mary Ann, saying, "if this can be done, the effect will be to bring about confidence and cordial cooperation between the President and these generals. The truth is that the time has come when we must put forth all our strength and energies and push this war to a conclusion." His effort to coax the

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[12] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, December 10; December 15; December 17, 1863, ibid.

[13] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, December 10, 1863, ibid.

administration into a coherent strategy, however, failed to produce any results.[14]

Even worse, he found that relations between the president and Congress had deteriorated since February, 1862. He described this internal hostility as "most unfortunate for the country," and labored to convince the president's opponents that "it is no time now to discuss points of difference." Rather, he declared, "patriotism and policy ... demand that the President should be sustained ... in fighting the revolution." These efforts to encourage unity within the national government proved no more successful than his attempts to mastermind harmony between the president and his generals.[15]

Cobb returned to Georgia with a sense of despair. In an unusually blunt letter to Alexander Stephens, a man he no longer especially trusted, Cobb revealed the depth of his frustration. "What is wanting in Richmond," he complained, "is '<u>brains</u>.'" Although he reported that Congress was not "as bad as I expected," he felt it suffered from "a lamentable want of ... good common sense." Nevertheless, Cobb's trip to Richmond apparently convinced him that Davis represented the South's best hope. Thereafter, he comported

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[14] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, December 15, 1863, <u>ibid</u>.; Montgomery, <u>Howell Cobb's Confederate Career</u>, p. 107.

[15] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, December 10, 1863, Howell Cobb Papers; Montgomery, <u>Howell Cobb's Confederate Career</u>, p. 107.

himself as a supporter of the administration -- albeit a reluctant one.[16]

II

By late January, it became clear that Congress would not enact the necessary legislation in time to preserve Cobb's existing command. With justification, he felt certain that congressional bungling had cost the Confederacy the services of an 8,000 man army. Frustration over flawed policy stung all the more because the impending demise of the Georgia State Guard would leave him without an assignment. He expected to be ordered back into the field, but could not predict whether in north Georgia or Virginia. Professing that "my only ambition is to serve the country," he vowed to "be content" where ever the government might send him.[17]

While supervising the dissolution of his command, Cobb could not turn his mind from the bigger issues of Confederate strategy. On January 11, he outlined an elaborate plan for regaining the strategic initiative in the West. The operations of the Army of Tennessee, he insisted, represented "the vital point of the revolution." He warned that it would not be sufficient for that critical army merely to hold its

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[16] Howell Cobb to Alexander H. Stephens, January 2, 1864, Ulrich Bonnell Phillips, ed., The Correspondence of Robert Toombs, Alexander H. Stephens, and Howell Cobb (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1913), p. 631.

[17] Howell Cobb to James A. Seddon, January 9, 1864, Letter Books, Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collection; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, January 20; January 30; February 4, 1864, Howell Cobb Papers.

ground. Rather, it must strive to recover Tennessee and then advance into Kentucky. This strategy, he declared, "is the true policy for the spring campaign -- and in my judgement -- the only one that presents any hope for the successful termination of the war."[18]

Cobb argued that the Confederacy possessed no viable alternative to his plan. The loss of territory to invading Union forces had robbed the South of much of its productive capacity. He warned that the army "cannot be fed six months more," unless the Confederacy could find some way to "replenish our granaries." A successful Tennessee campaign seemed the most feasible solution to this problem. In addition, retaking Tennessee offered the prospect of alleviating the South's current manpower shortage. He estimated that the Confederacy might enlist 30,000 troops in Tennessee. More importantly, victory in Tennessee would send a vital signal that Confederate defeat was not imminent. "We must," he vigorously asserted, "satisfy our own people as well as the enemy & Europe of our capacity to continue the war."[19]

Having described the reasons why the South should make its primary effort in the West, Cobb also offered arguments against any renewed Confederate move against Pennsylvania.

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[18] Howell Cobb to Jefferson Davis, January 11, 1864, Letter Books, Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collection.

[19] Ibid.

Any attempt to enter Pennsylvania, he predicted, would serve only to "enhance Northern determination & recruitment, & help the Republicans in the coming election." He further warned that the Confederacy lacked the necessary resources to mount an invasion in the East "unless it yields even more of its own territory." Such a loss, he feared, would "promote a sense of hopelessness among the people."[20]

Cobb estimated that the Confederacy needed an army of 100,000 men for the reconquest of Tennessee. He noted that Generals Johnston and Longstreet commanded 52,000 troops. He recommended that these two forces be united into a single command. He suggested various means for procuring the balance of the army. By employing slaves in all military uses "for which they are suited," he predicted that several thousand white troops might be freed for service at the front. He also temporarily abandoned his opposition to the Conscription Acts and observed that an even more rigorous conscript law would further enlarge the pool of available manpower. These new forces, combined with detachments from the commands of Lee and Beauregard, ought to provide the troops needed for a Tennessee campaign.[21]

If these troops proved inadequate, Cobb did not hesitate to demand that "every point should be hazarded to accomplish this main essential success." What, he queried, "is

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[20] Ibid.

[21] Ibid.

Charleston, or Savannah and all the coast worth to us, compared to the country which would thus be recovered?" He went further, adding the admonition, "indeed if the question has to be decided between Richmond & Tennessee, can there be a doubt that Richmond itself should be sacrificed?"[22]

Cobb made no guarantees regarding the success of such a strategic gamble. Yet he concluded that without desperate measures, he could see no future "other than the gradual wasting of our resources -- the constant abandonment of more and more territory -- and the final loss of the cause."[23]

Although Confederate authorities did reinforce Johnston's army, they never seriously considered implementation of Cobb's bold proposal. Following the fall of Atlanta in September, 1864, General John B. Hood did make a desperate stab into Tennessee. Despite having far fewer troops and supplies than Cobb had proposed in January, Hood succeeded in producing severe anxiety among Union commanders before being routed at Nashville. Had the attempt been made earlier, with a larger army and under a commander less rash than Hood, the results might have been more favorable to the South. At any rate, the commander of the Georgia State Guard clearly appreciated the Confederacy's decreasing capacity to

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[22] Ibid.

[23] Ibid.

sustain the war effort, and foresaw with distressing accuracy the future course of the South's revolution.[24]

III

By February, 1864, the Georgia State Guard had ceased to exist. Perhaps in anticipation that Congress would soon enact Cobb's reserve corps legislation, Confederate authorities made no immediate move to give him a new post. General Beauregard proposed that he be given command of a department encompassing two Florida districts, but the war department declined its approval. Somewhat at loose ends, Cobb embarked on a speaking tour designed to encourage a renewal of popular support for the war effort in Georgia. Only recently, he had suggested that President Davis encourage reliable men to undertake such efforts to build popular support for the war effort.[25]

In speech after speech the unemployed general castigated the Confederacy's internal enemies. He damned speculators who exploited the South's material shortages as "extortioners." He acknowledged that popular prejudice

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[24] Stanley F. Horne, The Decisive Battle of Nashville (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1956), pp. v-xiii; Montgomery, Howell Cobb's Confederate Career, pp. 108-109.

[25] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, February 4, 1864; February 15, 1864; February 23, 1864, Howell Cobb Papers; Howell Cobb to Jefferson Davis, January 18, 1864, Keith Morton Read Collection, Felix Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia (Hereafter: Read Collection); Official Records, Series One, XXXV, Part 1, 581.

frequently attributed extortionate speculation to Jews, but asserted that "we have many uncircumcised Jews among us." With barely concealed threat, he suggested that "all of them should be circumcised." Cobb also condemned men who wrongly shirked their public obligation by avoiding conscription. Nor did those who had fulfilled the letter of Confederate law entirely escape criticism. Cobb warned his audiences that mere compliance with minimum requirements would fall short of Confederate needs. The people must do more to insure their liberty and independence.[26]

Besides seeking to arouse the people to greater efforts, Cobb hoped to counter the anti-administration policies of Governor Brown. He knew that Brown had sought to play upon class divisions within the Confederacy by claiming that "had it not been for him the '<u>slaveholders</u>' at home would have starved the wives and children of the soldiers." In a bid to counter such claims, Cobb insisted that "no soldier's wife had ever gone from [his] door empty handed." Family members soon advised him, however, to avoid making such strong statements in counties where he owned plantations. Some women, determined to test Cobb's claims, already had arrived at the plantations demanding food. John A. reported that he had provided them with bacon, but refused to give them syrup.

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[26] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, February 4, 1864; February 15, 1864; February 23, 1864, Howell Cobb Papers; Athens <u>Southern Banner</u>, September 30, 1863; January 27; February 10, 1864; Montgomery, <u>Howell Cobb's Confederate Career</u>, p. 112.

He had also rejected their request that they be allowed to purchase syrup from the plantation slaves. For all Cobb's good intentions -- on this point at least -- the clear illustration that Cobb family slaves ate better than the families of soldiers in the field probably helped Brown's cause more than the administration's.[27]

Despite such minor disappointments, Cobb received evidence that his speeches did produce good effects. Henry Jackson described a Cobb speech at the Savannah theater as a "grand success." He declared that "our people, wrapt up in their own selfish pleasures, had been long needing some substantial common sense, such as Cousin Howell gave them." Jackson predicted that Cobb's remarks had especially benefited the "speculators and extortioners" by so clearly revealing the "results of their ... villainous proceedings." Following a speech in Athens, Cobb learned that his remarks had inspired citizens to contribute $1,300 to the Ladies Voluntary Association. Even better, he heard that many pro-Brown men had been converted to the administration camp.[28]

Cobb's speaking tour proved personally rejuvenating. He wrote to Mary Ann that many admirers had paid him the

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[27] Pope Barrow to Howell Cobb, June 27, 1863; Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, January 22, 1864; John A. Cobb to Howell Cobb, January 23, 1864, Howell Cobb Papers.

[28] Henry R. Jackson to "Cousin Marian," March 23, 1864; Paulina Thomas to Howell Cobb, April 1, 1864, ibid.

"equivocal compliment" that he "could do the country more service in this way than in the army." He felt compelled to confess that "I rather incline to the same opinion myself." Public response to his speeches renewed his faith in eventual victory. Declaring that "I feel more & more buoyant every day," he insisted that the country still held enough men and provisions to meet the approaching crisis. If state and national leaders could only "be induced to unite freely and cordially in the work of arousing all the people to a sense of their duty, I should be encouraged to hope & believe that the war could be successfully ended during the present year."[29]

Cobb's hopes that the leaders of the Confederacy might unite in common cause against the Yankees quickly dissipated in the reality of Southern politics. In February, at President Davis' request, the Confederate Congress enacted two controversial pieces of legislation. The first, a new and more stringent conscription act, included provisions for the creation of a permanent reserve corps in each state. The second piece of legislation authorized the president to suspend the writ of habeas corpus if necessary to battle disloyalty. Although the government justified both acts as essential to the war effort, administration opponents

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[29] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, January 9, 1864; January 30, 1864; February 4, 1864, ibid; Howell Cobb to Jefferson Davis, January 18, 1864, Read Collection.

throughout the Confederacy raised a howl of protest. No where was that howl louder than in Georgia.[30]

Governor Brown and the Stephens brothers determined to force a showdown with the national government on issues of individual liberty and state rights. In addition, the trio had begun to explore the possibility of a negotiated peace settlement with the North. The three men met to discuss strategy at Linton Stephens' home in Sparta, Georgia. They agreed that Brown should summon a special session of the legislature, and use the opportunity to make a vigorous assault on administration policies even as he professed unyielding loyalty to the Confederate cause. Linton Stephens planned to introduce resolutions condemning the suspension of habeas corpus and demanding that every future Confederate military victory be followed by peace offers to the North.[31]

Cobb received immediate warning of these plans. James A. Nisbet informed him that "the legislature is to be convened in special session & ... Stephens & Co. will no doubt put Joe Brown up to some factious issue with the ... Govt." Nisbet predicted that "the point of attack will be the suspension of the Habeas Corpus." He begged Cobb to

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[30] James M. McPherson, Battle Cry of Freedom, The Civil War Era (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 692-694; Thomas E. Schott, Alexander H. Stephens of Georgia, A Biography (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), pp. 397-411.

[31] Schott, Alexander H. Stephens, pp. 397-411.

employ all his popular influence to frustrate this conspiracy.[32]

As planned, the Georgia legislature assembled in special session on March 10. Brown and Linton Stephens soon realized that they faced a difficult task. Most legislators opposed the recent acts of Congress, but manifested a profound reluctance to take a public stand which might hinder the war effort. Cobb and other supporters of the Davis administration, present to address the legislature and lobby individual members, encouraged them in this course.[33]

Brown struggled to counter their influence by personally working the chamber floor. When the force of his logic failed to convince members, the governor sought to buy votes by selling cotton cards at prices far below market value and allowing legislators to exchange up to $200 in Confederate notes for more valuable state money. When these efforts failed, Brown summoned Alexander Stephens to Milledgeville to address the recalcitrant assembly.[34]

Although Stephens' speech placed him in open opposition to the Confederate government, it too failed to sway a majority of the legislators. Ultimately, Brown broke their will by threatening to call the members into another special

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[32] James A. Nisbet to Howell Cobb, February 28, 1864, Howell Cobb Papers.

[33] Schott, Alexander H. Stephens, pp. 404-411.

[34] Ibid.

session as soon as the current session ended. Lest its vote for the Stephens' resolutions be construed as disloyalty to either the president or the cause, the legislature attached resolutions expressing confidence in both.[35]

Cobb and other administration supporters attempted to counter Brown's success by encouraging Georgia units in Confederate service to draft resolutions condemning the governor's policies. Not to be out done, Brown forwarded copies of his own and Stephens' speeches to local officials throughout the Confederacy and to company officers of Georgia troops in the field. Ultimately, Cobb could only voice disgust at the governor's activities. The Northern press, he raged, "are publishing Gov Brown's message in full & upon the strength of it, are urging their people to strike a final blow whilst we are torn & divided." He mourned that "thousands of our brave men in the field, must pay with their blood, the price of this man's treason."[36]

IV

Whatever his personal distaste for Brown, Cobb soon found himself in a position requiring cooperation with the governor. On March 30, Confederate authorities designated him commander of the Georgia Reserve Corps with orders to

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[35] Ibid.

[36] Joseph E. Brown to Alexander H. Stephens, April 5; April 12, 1864, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, pp. 639-641; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, April 4, 1864, Howell Cobb Papers.

establish his new headquarters at Macon. The new conscript legislation authorized him to recruit his command from seventeen year old boys and men between the ages of forty-five and fifty. Hoping to avoid disruption of the South's productive capacity, the war department instructed Cobb to permit his troops to remain at their civilian pursuits as much as possible. With the exception of units needed to provide guards for the Confederate prison at Andersonville or as special details, the government ordered him use the reserves as "minute men to meet emergencies."[37]

Cobb found himself embroiled in controversy over the Georgia Reserve Corps almost immediately. Not surprisingly, Governor Brown assumed the role of chief adversary. Brown had long battled with the national government over control of Georgia troops. He did not relish the creation of a new independent Confederate command within the boundaries of his state. He protested that the reserve corps would disrupt the functioning of the state militia which he commanded. Utilizing authority granted him in the conscription legislation to exempt men essential to the operation of state government from service in the reserves, Brown issued a proclamation exempting even the most minor state and local

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[37] J. Withers to Howell Cobb, March 30, 1864; General Order #28, April 7, 1864; James A. Seddon to Howell Cobb, May 20, 1864, Howell Cobb Papers.

officials. He incorporated these men into a new militia organization.[38]

Cobb recognized Brown's motives. Within days of assuming command in Macon, he predicted that Brown's Exemption Proclamation must significantly reduce the number of men available for service in the reserves. Two months later, he noted that Brown had more than 5,000 militia troops in Atlanta to help repel William T. Sherman's advancing armies. Cobb complained that virtually all of these men would have been subject to service in his command, save for Brown's wholesale exemptions. He observed that their current presence in the field proved they did not fill essential positions in the state. Yet, he confessed, the conscription act had made Brown's action legal, and he saw no way to block it.[39]

Despite their past differences, Cobb appealed to the governor's patriotism in a bid to secure withdrawal of the proclamation. Noting that "we are pressed on all sides by the overwhelming numbers of the enemy," he expressed certainty that "your Excellency desires to place in the

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[38] Howell Cobb to Samuel Cooper, April 28, 1864; June 6, 1864; Howell Cobb to Jefferson Davis, July 7, 1864, Letter Books, Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collection; Howell Cobb to Joseph E. Brown, April 21, 1864; Joseph E. Brown to Howell Cobb, May 5, 1864, Joseph E. Brown Papers, Felix Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia (Hereafter: Brown Papers).

[39] Howell Cobb to Samuel Cooper, April 28; June 6, 1864; Howell Cobb to Jefferson Davis, July 7, 1864, Letter Books, Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collection.

military service of the country all ... whose presence at home is not required for any state service." He conceded that the state legislature had enacted resolutions requiring the governor to exempt all state and local officials, but offered assurances that the governor need not fear offending the legislature. The law enacted by Congress had placed responsibility for exemptions with the governors, not the legislatures. Thus, if Brown desired to force men into the ranks who had sought shelter in unnecessary civil posts, he possessed all needed authority to do so.[40]

Brown promptly responded to Cobb's appeal in terms designed to disabuse him of hopes for cooperation. The governor began with the accusation that Cobb had "fallen into the error now so common among Confederate officers that the states derive their powers and the people of the states their rights ... from the will of Congress." Instead, he declared that the Confederate Congress lacked any power to authorize him to override the will of the state legislature.[41]

Not content to justify his course with state rights arguments, Brown also contended that misguided attempts to enforce the conscript laws threatened to disrupt the productive capacity of the state. Such disruption, he claimed, might well produce famine and privation during the

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[40] Howell Cobb to Joseph E. Brown, April 21, 1864, Brown Papers.

[41] Joseph E. Brown to Howell Cobb, May 5, 1864, ibid.

coming winter. Couching his case in egalitarian terms, he complained that only those men who lacked the requisite twenty slaves needed to avoid conscription suffered from the overly enthusiastic activities of enrolling officers. The governor suggested that in many instances the people had intentionally elected conscripts to local office as a means of community defense. Through these elections the people managed to insure that enough able-bodied men remained to provide the women, children, and elderly with adequate supplies. Brown professed no desire to violate either the will of the legislature or the people.[42]

Brown believed that much of Cobb's argument stemmed from anger over his success during the special session of the legislature. In letters to Alexander Stephens, Brown mused that Cobb "is now a little more under the control of his passions than his judgement." He reported rumors that Cobb had "denounced me on the R.R. car between Macon and ... [Atlanta] ... as a traitor, a Tory; [and] said I ought to be hung and would be soon." Cobb's appeal for cooperation provided the governor with an opportunity to retaliate, and he took it.[43]

Brown agreed with Cobb's assertion that the South desperately needed to maximize it military manpower, but

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[42] Ibid.

[43] Joseph E. Brown to Alexander H. Stephens, April 5, 1864, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, pp. 639-640.

sourly reminded the general that "the state had a militia organization ... which has been much disorganized and crippled ... to form your command." Going further, Brown voiced thinly veiled criticism at the nature of military service being done by Cobb and other members of his family. He suggested that many of the complaints being directed at the state government originated with "the almost countless swarms of Confederate officers, agents, and detailed men, who as the favorites of power have obtained safe and comfortable positions in the rear." These shirkers, he maintained, far outnumbered all the protected state officials, and might be found in "every city, town, backwoods village, Railroad car, and hotel in the state." There, he complained, they "engaged in attention to their private business and speculations, or in earnest industrious efforts to manage and control the politics of the state, while their fellow soldiers are required to meet the enemy on the battlefield." The chief difference between these men and the state officials they criticized, Brown insisted, "is ... that the state officers are exempt from the fatigues and dangers of the battlefield without drawing pay from the [Confederate] government."[44]

Cobb recognized the implications of Brown's letter. He now abandoned any pretense of civility, and responded to the governor's arguments and insults in like tone. Admitting his

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[44] Joseph E. Brown to Howell Cobb, May 5, 1864, Brown Papers.

regret that Brown showed so little inclination to cooperate with those who sought to preserve the Confederacy, he expressed surprise at the governor's "labored argument ... in justification of the course of those ... seeking the evasion of duty, under the cover of State Commissions."[45]

Cobb bluntly accused Brown of dissembling and deceit. The governor, he said, had officially certified to Confederate authorities his intention to comply fully with the Conscription Act. Nevertheless, he had employed every means at his command to hinder and frustrate its implementation. Cobb charged that the true nature of Brown's intentions were now clear. He meant to "comply with the law _in form_, and nullify it _in substance_." While the governor might justify his policy "_in law_," Cobb felt certain he could never justify it "_in morals_."[46]

Cobb condemned Brown's efforts to shift responsibility for his actions to the resolutions passed by the legislature. The general insisted that the members never intended to protect unnecessary government officials from military service. Brown should not now attempt to "place upon that body the odium ... of withholding ... sinecure officials from the Army." Besides, he asked, if Brown objected to the act of the legislature, why had he not employed his "favorite resort to the veto power?" His failure to utilize this tool

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[45] Howell Cobb to Joseph E. Brown, May 12, 1864, _ibid_.

[46] _Ibid_.

forced the conclusion that he sanctioned "this wholesale exemption of sinecure officers."[47]

The general also defended the creation of the Georgia Reserve Corps. He rejected Brown's complaint that the transfer of the state militia to Confederate service had produced disorganization within its ranks. The process merely involved a shift in control from Brown to President Davis. The governor, Cobb mocked, clearly operated on the assumption that his personal direction had produced some special effectiveness among these troops. With biting sarcasm, he noted that "you will find few, if any, to agree with you." Perhaps Governor Brown should heed the will of the legislature on this point with the same vigor that he had shown regarding exemptions, for that body had ignored Brown's protests and endorsed the militia transfer. The action of the legislature, Cobb gloated, reflected "a very general, if not universal, concurrence" in preferring Davis to Brown.[48]

Launching his own personal attack, Cobb maintained that Brown pursued his false policies because he had never experienced the hazards of combat or the privations of rigorous campaigning. While it might be true that some Confederate officers serving in rear areas did dedicate themselves to selfish activities, Cobb forcefully argued that most sought only to fulfill essential duties to which they

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[47] Ibid.

[48] Ibid.

had been assigned -- often against their own desires. The true difference between these men and "your sinecure officials," he argued, had nothing to do with pay. Rather, the Confederate officers criticized by Brown had "seen service in the field and have borne the heat and burthen of the war in the past." For a time at least, they had "endured the privations of the camp and encountered the dangers of the battlefield." Moreover, they might be recalled to these dangers and hardships at any moment. Brown's officials, on the other hand, had "from the beginning enjoyed the same quiet and security from danger, which have fallen to the lot of your Excellency."[49]

Brown subsequently manifested a willingness to continue the rancorous exchange. He denounced Cobb as a coward and military incompetent sent home to Georgia because he could not be entrusted "with a command in the front which required some qualification for the position." Thus, Brown charged, "while your fellow Generals were in front of the enemy," Cobb had utilized his "command in the REAR" for purposes of political intrigue and personal gain. The governor went so far as to dredge up memories of Cobb's financial struggles from twenty years before.[50]

Throughout his long public career, Cobb had never before engaged in such a personally hostile exchange. Although he

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[49] Ibid.

[50] Joseph E. Brown to Howell Cobb, May 20, 1864, ibid.

had often battled other men in the political arena, his personal relations with opponents had almost always been civil if not actually cordial. The Cobb-Brown feud, however, rested on too solid a foundation of mutual hate to be so easily controlled.

Cobb responded to Brown's renewed assaults with cold fury. He brusquely dismissed the governor, declaring that "I am not disposed to consume time upon the irrelevant topics which you have dragged into the discussion, especially as you have lost sight of the practical questions involved." Yet, having dismissed the governor's irrelevant attacks, Cobb responded in kind. He condemned the governor as a liar and self-aggrandizer who claimed the glory of sacrifices made by all Georgians for himself. He suggested that the vehemence of Brown's language hinted at "a man who has lost his temper," but professed himself willing to forgive this "in one who has so many graver offenses to atone for."[51]

Cobb also accused Brown of cowardice. Noting that the governor had hastened to offer him his services as a volunteer aid following his transfer to Georgia, he questioned why Brown had "never so honored [me] as long as [I] was in the enemy's presence." The timing of Brown's offer of service, he asserted, "is a significant illustration of the direction which your ambition takes in time of war." As to his previous financial embarrassments, Cobb expressed

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[51] Howell Cobb to Joseph E. Brown, May 23, 1864, ibid.

his complete willingness to leave Brown "to the full enjoyment of all the pleasure which a low and grovelling mind derives from the repetition of stale and malicious slanders." Such activity, he concluded, was "eminently suited to one of your tastes and instincts." When Brown replied to these insults, Cobb terminated the correspondence with the comment that "this communication and the author are alike, unworthy of further notice."[52]

Governor Brown did not represent the only obstacle to the successful creation of the Georgia Reserve Corps. Brigadier General Henry R. Jackson, Cobb's second in command, groused that his recruiting efforts appeared doomed to failure. He reported that public "demoralization" far exceeded his expectations. He attributed this deplorable situation to the actions of local Confederate officials. He maintained that "the corruption & inefficiency of enrolling officers, & medical boards," combined with "the agency of Confederate officers & employers in procuring details for friends & favorites ... thwart all our efforts."[53]

The activities of other Confederate officials further complicated Cobb's already difficult task. President Davis and the war department often provided ambiguous directions. They urged him to exert the "utmost activity and energy ...

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[52] Ibid.; Joseph E. Brown to Howell Cobb, May 30, 1864, Letter Books, Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collection.

[53] Henry Jackson to Howell Cobb, May 21, 1864, Howell Cobb Papers; Official Records, Series Four, III, 1049-1050.

in collecting and organizing the Reserves and hurrying them into position." Yet even as they assured him that "we are at the crisis of our fortunes & want every man," they simultaneously offered reminders that "it is proper to interfere as little as possible with the productive industry in charge of the reserves."[54]

The administration further complicated Cobb's task by authorizing the creation of a cavalry regiment to assist the Conscript Service. He vigorously protested this decision. He warned that raising an independent command to work with the conscript officers would hinder his own recruiting efforts and heighten the difficulties already created by Governor Brown. Pressing his superiors to abandon their plan, he proposed that all available men and material be concentrated in the regular reserve force. Whenever the conscript office required the assistance of troops, let them be requisitioned from his command.[55]

Local Confederate commanders added to Cobb's burdens. In June, he received orders to assign temporarily troops under Henry Jackson to forces commanded by Lafayette McLaws at Savannah. When McLaws moved to assign Jackson's troops to other officers, Cobb raised a forceful protest. McLaws,

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[54] James A. Seddon to Howell Cobb, May 14, 1864; May 20, 1864, Howell Cobb Papers.

[55] Howell Cobb to James A. Seddon, June 7, 1864, Letter Books, Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collection; Official Records, Series Four, III, 1049-1050.

he growled, appeared to operate on the assumption that "my duty consists in organizing the Reserve Corps, to be turned over to your command and that it no longer continues under my orders." Probably recalling McLaws' insults following the Maryland Campaign, Cobb accused the general of attempting to reduce him to the position of "Enrolling Officer, nothing more, nothing less." Arguing that such duty better suited the Commandant of Conscripts than a major general, Cobb insisted that he must either retain ultimate authority over his troops or give up his post. Although Confederate authorities eventually resolved these issues to his satisfaction, the disputes hindered the organization of the reserve corps.[56]

Despite the many obstacles, Cobb did succeed in forming his unit. Within two months of taking command, he had the equivalent of five small regiments in the field acting as guards at Andersonville and defending critical points in the state. In addition, he continued efforts to organize men into companies for local defense. Still, the old men and boys who constituted these units could hardly be described as effective soldiers. The most reliable men found it easy to secure "details" which freed them from virtually all

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[56] Henry Jackson to Howell Cobb, June 27, 1864, Howell Cobb Papers; Howell Cobb to Lafayette McLaws, July 5, 1864, Letter Books; J. S. Preston to Howell Cobb, September 26, 1864, Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collection; Official Records, Series Four, III, 1049-1050; Montgomery, Howell Cobb's Confederate Career, pp. 116-117.

requirements for service in the field. The balance avidly sought similar assignments and felt sorely put upon when denied.[57]

Cobb's inability to raise sufficient numbers of troops to allow for frequent furloughs further eroded morale within the reserve corps. On occasion, resentment among the troops produced near mutinous situations. During the early morning hours of July 9, he received a frantic message from the commandant at Andersonville warning that several reserve soldiers had deserted, while others threatened to depart for home immediately. Cobb must forward reinforcements immediately or risk the escape of all the Yankee prisoners. Lacking any troops to send, Cobb hastened to the scene himself. He found considerable dissatisfaction among the troops, but felt certain their threats reflected nothing more than a bid to extort more furlough time. Unable to provide material relief, Cobb resorted to patriotic exhortations and then returned to Macon. Although confident that he left "both officers and men perfectly content," he took the precaution of securing promises for a brigade from the Army of Tennessee should such prove necessary for holding the prison.[58]

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[57] Henry R. Jackson to Howell Cobb, May 21, 1864, Howell Cobb Papers; Montgomery, Howell Cobb's Confederate Career, pp.120-121.

[58] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, July 11, 1864; John Bell Hood to Howell Cobb, July 18, 1864, Howell Cobb Papers.

V

Even as Cobb struggled to overcome the difficulties that beset him on every side, the war continued its grinding course. During the spring of 1864, General Sherman launched his invasion of Georgia. General Johnston's Army of Tennessee opposed him. Heavily outnumbered, the Confederates could hinder but not stop Sherman's advance on Atlanta. Following a visit to Johnston's headquarters in June, Cobb acknowledged the extent of the danger confronting his state and the Confederacy. Still, his confidence in Johnston's ability to salvage victory remained unshaken. He assured Mary Ann that Johnston "intends to make a decided stand at Atlanta, and I believe it will be a successful one."[59]

Nevertheless, Cobb began to take quiet steps to remove his family and property beyond the immediate reach of the Yankees. Public expectations in Athens fueled his efforts. Mary Ann informed her husband of repeated rumors of Union raiding parties advancing on the town. She also related a general impression that "your house will be burnt." Neighbors offered to hold the family's furniture and valuables in a bid to protect them from depredation. Mary Ann declined these offers from fear that such efforts might lead to Yankee vengeance on family benefactors.[60]

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[59] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, June 14, 1864; July 14, 1864, ibid.

[60] John A. Cobb to Lucy B. Cobb, April 18, 1864; Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, June 18, 1864; June 22, 1864; August

Throughout the spring and summer of 1864, Cobb and Mary Ann debated whether to evacuate their possessions or leave them to the "chances of war." Mary Ann noted with some regret that if she were the wife of a private citizen, she could simply remain in her home. She possessed, she said, "dignity and delicacy enough to know how to act under circumstances which I cannot control -- however annoying or humiliating they may be." Yet, because she was his wife, she admitted "I am afraid of the Vandals." She assured her husband that if flight proved necessary, "[I will] avoid danger by running as quick as the most cowardly."[61]

Cobb confessed himself baffled. Virtually all Georgia now lay vulnerable to raids, and he questioned the safety of any specific location. He observed that Athens held more than enough men to repel any "mere raid." If they adopted proper organization and manifested a real determination to fight, then only a major assault could hope to carry the town. Yet, he complained that he felt "very little confidence in men who have resorted to all kinds of subterfuges to stay at home, and no confidence at all in those who wont even do their duty in their home organizations." He recommended that she pack their most cherished possessions, and hold herself and the children

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3, 1864, ibid.

[61] Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, June 18, 1864; June 22, 1864; July 11, 1864; July 29, 1864, ibid.

ready to evacuate at a moment's notice. In the meantime, he purchased a house in Americus to which his family might retreat during an emergency.[62]

The feared emergency came quickly. By mid-July, Sherman's host lay on the outskirts of Atlanta. President Davis, frustrated by what he considered Johnston's excessive caution, removed the popular general from command. He named General John Bell Hood as Johnston's successor. Hood had a reputation as a fighter and promptly launched a series of disastrous assaults on the Union lines.[63]

While appreciative of Hood's previous service, Cobb believed Davis had blundered in relieving Johnston. Following Johnston's removal, Cobb extended the hospitality of the family's Macon home to the general and his wife. Mary Ann too regretted Davis' decision. Aware of Cobb's increasing tendency to identify himself with administration polices, she warned him to beware support for this presidential action lest he be viewed as a Davis toady.[64]

For the only time in the correspondence of their married life, Cobb strongly rebuked his wife. Voicing outrage that

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[62] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, June 22, 1864; Howell Cobb, Jr. to Mary Ann Cobb, October 6, 1864, ibid.

[63] Steven E. Woodworth, Jefferson Davis and His Generals: The Failure of Confederate Command in the West (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1990), pp. 280-288.

[64] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, July 20, 1864; July 26, 1864, Howell Cobb Papers; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, July 22, 1864, Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collection.

"you thought it necessary to warn me against becoming a tool of Pres. Jeff Davis," he admonished her that "I am not conscious that it is in my nature to play that part to him or any body else." As proof of his independence, he asserted that "if I had been afraid of giving offense to Mr. Davis, I should not have asked [the Johnstons] to my house."[65]

Cobb had little time, however, to focus on the problems of Joe Johnston. Even as he struggled to sift through a host of rumors to determine the exact status of the Atlanta campaign, wide-ranging raids by Union cavalry forced him to concentrate on providing reserve corps units to hold key points. He manifested an intense anxiety about the security of southwest Georgia with its rich fields and Confederate installations.[66]

Cobb soon discovered that the activities of Governor Brown again emerged as a major obstacle to his success. Determined to defend Georgia, Brown labored to force men into the field. He issued proclamations ordering those exempted from Confederate service, as well as those detailed from the army into the ranks of the militia. In a peculiar reversal of roles, Cobb now protested that the governor's efforts had

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[65] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, July 26, 1864, Howell Cobb Papers.

[66] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, July 18, 1864; A. R. Lawton to Howell Cobb, July 27, 1864; F. A. Shoup to Howell Cobb, July 28, 1864, ibid.; Howell Cobb to Joseph E. Johnston, July 18, 1864; Howell Cobb to John B. Hood, July 28, 1864, Letter Books, Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collection.

denuded the southwest portion of the state of able-bodied men, including the overseers of his own plantations. He argued that this misguided policy raised a number of difficulties. Besides making it virtually impossible for him to provide needed garrisons, it threatened to jeopardize control over local slave populations and endanger the critical food supplies being produced in the area.[67]

In desperation, Cobb appealed directly to Richmond. The secretary of war offered little assistance. He noted that men exempted from Confederate service did fall within the legal control of the governor for militia duty. Although men detailed for special duty from the army bore no liability for militia service, Secretary Seddon urged Cobb to cooperate with Brown whenever possible. In highly cautious terms, he advised that "in regard to any classes of detailed men who in your judgement may be judiciously used with the militia it would be within your power to tolerate the call sanctioning it as an assignment to temporary duty." Within a matter of days, however, Seddon informed Cobb that, after further deliberation, President Davis "prefers that if [detailed men are] to be employed they should be in connection with the reserves alone and not with militia." Perhaps remembering Brown's previous obstructionist

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[67] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, July 16, 1864; James A. Seddon to Howell Cobb, July 16, 1864, Howell Cobb Papers; Howell Cobb to Joseph E. Johnston, July 18, 1864, Letter Books, Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collection.

activities, Seddon relayed the president's feeling that "if Gov. Brown insists on forcing a conflict the responsibility must rest upon him."[68]

Ironically, even as the president and secretary of war equivocated, Cobb received pleas from A. R. Lawton, Quartermaster-General of the Confederacy, to secure the restoration of exemptions for overseers and shoemakers in southwest Georgia. These men, Lawton declared, represented a vital element in the Confederate war effort and must not be removed from their current endeavors. He unnecessarily reminded Cobb that the South's ability to feed "two armies" hinged on the region's corn crop, and that the size of that crop hinged on the presence of plantation overseers. Moreover, Lawton observed, the course of the war threatened to curtail the production of shoes by shops in Atlanta, thus making the shops in Columbus the only hope for supplying Hood's men with footwear.[69]

Spurred by Lawton's request, Cobb sought assistance from General Hood. Complaining that "Gov. Brown will not listen to my counsel," he urged Hood to "interpose and save the country from the ruinous policy of Gov. Brown by directing the men necessary ... to be left at home." This appeal produced concrete results, as Hood immediately authorized him

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[68] James A. Seddon to Howell Cobb, July 16, 1864; July (?), 1864, Howell Cobb Papers.

[69] A. R. Lawton to Howell Cobb, July 27, 1864, ibid.

to retain the services of local militia stationed at Andersonville. Despite this small victory, the conflicting demands of state and national authorities for manpower proved a persistent problem for the balance of the war.[70]

Events soon proved the validity of Cobb's security concerns. On July 30, he learned of a Union cavalry force closing rapidly on Macon. Cobb prepared to repel the raiders. He commanded a mixed force of reserves, militia, and local men. With both Governor Brown and General Johnston on the scene, a potential for command disputes existed. Happily, Brown agreed to hand over command of his militia to the generals. Cobb, cognizant of Johnston's superior military skills, offered him command. Johnston declined the offer, however, and tendered his own services to Cobb. Impressed by the general's gracious behavior, Cobb declared that "he showed himself not only the General but the gentleman that I had always believed him to be."[71]

The Battle of East Macon proved little more than a skirmish. The raiders, commanded by General George Stoneman, attempted to force passage of the Ocmulgee River at Walnut Bridge, but Cobb had placed his troops carefully and "easily repulsed" the attempt. In his memoirs, Johnston attributed

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[70] Howell Cobb to John B. Hood, July 28, 1864, Letter Books, Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collection; F. A. Shoup to Howell Cobb, July 28, 1864, Howell Cobb Papers.

[71] Mary Ann Lamar Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, July 31, 1864; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, August 3, 1864, Howell Cobb Papers.

this easy success to Cobb's "courage and judicious disposition." Although neither side suffered heavy casualties, Cobb's victory at Macon turned the raiders from their objective and forced them back into the path of pursuing Confederate cavalry. These forces captured Stoneman and a large portion of his command.[72]

Despite Stoneman's defeat, Cobb noted that the marauding enemy cavalry had effected great destruction along their path. They had, he observed, "stole & robbed indiscriminately taking horses, mules, provisions, jewelry, & everything of that kind ... & what they could not carry away, they destroyed." He took some consolation from the absence of reports regarding "insults or outrages to white women" by the Yankees, but manifested horror at reports "of their outraging colored women in the presence of their mistresses."[73]

In the aftermath of the clash at Macon, Cobb again found others attempting to claim credit for his victory. He vented disgust upon learning that newspapers loyal to Governor Brown had exaggerated the chief executive's role, while reducing Johnston and himself to the status of observers. Noting that the papers said "that Genl Johnston & myself were on the

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[72] Ibid.; Joseph E. Johnston, Narrative of Military Operations, Directed, During the Late War Between the States (New York, 1874), pp. 369-370; Montgomery, Howell Cobb's Confederate Career, p. 122.

[73] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, August 3, 1864, Howell Cobb Papers.

field with Gov Brown," he snorted that the governor merely "did his duty in turning over his militia ... to me -- That is all that he did, & that was all he could do."[74]

As Cobb himself admitted, Confederate leaders had little time for such petty disputes. Throughout the month of August, Sherman tightened his grip around Atlanta. Nevertheless, Cobb remained hopeful that the city might be saved. All such hopes evaporated when Hood evacuated Atlanta on September 1. Although Cobb described Hood as a "failure," he did not blame the general for the defeat. He placed responsibility squarely on the Davis administration for removing Johnston. The loss of Atlanta represented "a terrible blunder of the administration, brought about by the prejudices of the President." He predicted that "Sherman will stop at Atlanta, fortify & make it a depot of supplies & then move on." With a deep sense of foreboding, he warned, "if Hood remains in command then it is no telling where he will stop."[75]

Sherman's victory at Atlanta prompted a vigorous albeit confused response from national and state authorities. On the day after Sherman took possession of the city, President Davis ordered Cobb to field "all available force however

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[74] Ibid.

[75] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, July 23, 1864; September 4, 1864, ibid.

organized & however employed." Success, he declared, rested entirely upon "prompt concentration" and "decided action."[76]

Within days, however, Governor Brown withdrew his militia forces from Confederate command and authorized the men to return home. Brown justified his course by arguing that the militia had been called out specifically for the defense of Atlanta. Many of the militiamen had left home on short notice in expectation of only being gone a few weeks. They had now been under arms for more than three months. Consequently, he felt compelled to allow them to go home, check on their families, and harvest the state's abundant "corn and sorghum" crop. Yet even as he temporarily withdrew desperately needed manpower from the army, Brown rebuffed overtures from Sherman for a separate peace between Georgia and the United States.[77]

Determined to intervene personally in the Georgia situation, President Davis headed South. He arrived in Macon on September 24. Over the next several days he and Cobb visited the army at Lovejoys Station and travelled over much of Georgia. At each stop the two men delivered speeches urging the people to persevere until independence had been won, and pleading with men absent from the army to return to

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[76] Jefferson Davis to Howell Cobb, September 3, 1864, ibid.

[77] William Tecumseh Sherman, Memoirs of General W. T. Sherman, edited by Charles Royster (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1990), pp. 612-615.

duty. Cobb must have listened to Davis' speeches with ambivalence, because the president publicly damned Governor Brown and General Johnston with equal vehemence.[78]

Although Davis' presence produced little in the way of concrete benefits for the Southern cause, it did contribute to an even tighter relationship between the president and the commander of the Georgia Reserve Corps. A clear signal of this improvement came a few weeks after the president returned to Richmond, when Secretary of State Judah P. Benjamin privately declared: "What a noble and glorious fellow Cobb is -- My respect, esteem and admiration for him constantly increases as his high qualities of both head & heart are developed in the progress of the war."[79]

Unable to provide much in the way of material assistance, President Davis did cooperate with his local commanders in devising a new strategy for the Army of Tennessee. Rather than attempting to block Sherman's further forward movement, the president and his generals agreed that Hood's force must move around the Union flank and attack Sherman's communications. Hopefully, the Union commander

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[78] Ibid., p. 616; Joseph E. Brown to Alexander H. Stephens, September 30; October 12, 1864, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, p. 653; John A. Cobb to Lucy B. Cobb, September 26, 1864; October 5, 1864, Howell Cobb Papers; William C. Davis, Jefferson Davis: The Man and His Hour (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), pp. 566-577.

[79] Judah P. Benjamin to William M. Browne, October 29, 1864, Howell Cobb Papers.

thus would be forced to turn back from Georgia, and pursue Hood into Tennessee.[80]

Davis also took steps to reorganize the Confederate command structure in the West. As part of this reorganization, Cobb received instructions to assume command of the District of Georgia and report to General P. G. T. Beauregard. His first major assignment involved organizing a demonstration against Atlanta by a combined force of reserves and militia. This movement was designed to disrupt Yankee efforts to drive Hood away from their supply lines. Because his newly expanded responsibilities precluded his permanent presence with the army, field command fell to Major General Gustavus W. Smith of the militia.[81]

The move against Atlanta proved abortive from the beginning. Cobb intended to send a cavalry brigade to cut the railroad north of Atlanta, while the balance of his force advanced on the city from the South. He hoped these simultaneous movements might prompt the Yankee garrison to abandon their prize. Failing that, he still hoped his

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[80] Woodworth, Jefferson Davis and His Generals, pp. 290-293.

[81] Official Records, Series One, XXXIX, part 1, 803-808; part 2, 880-881; John B. Hood to Howell Cobb, September 28, 1864, Howell Cobb Papers; Howell Cobb to Alfred Iverson, October 18, 1864, Letter Books, Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collection; Howell Cobb to Charles C. Jones, 1867, Charles Colcock Jones Collection, Special Collections Library, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina (Hereafter: C. C. Jones Collection).

actions would compel Sherman to reinforce the garrison, thus weakening the forces facing Hood.[82]

By early November, the plan lay in shambles. After initially agreeing to raid north of Atlanta, cavalry commander Beverly Robertson failed to carry out his mission. The disruption of Confederate railroads also contributed to failure. Unable to rely on their mounted forces, Cobb and Smith found themselves forced to utilize their infantry. On November 3, Cobb reported from Lovejoys Station that this change meant "we must now wait until we can get the infantry nearer to Atlanta before any thing can be done, and the infantry cannot be moved up until we can relay the railroad to this point." He explained that reliance on the railroad stemmed from the limited nature and "bad order" of other modes of transport.[83]

While awaiting the completion of these preparations, Cobb labored to discern the shape of future developments. He confessed that he could not comprehend either Sherman's intentions nor Atlanta's probable fate, but noted that the signs indicated a Yankee plan to "evacuate" the city. He

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[82] Howell Cobb to G. W. Brent, November 2, 1864, Letter Books, Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collection; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, November 3; November 7, 1864, Howell Cobb Papers.

[83] Howell Cobb to G. W. Brent, November 2, 1864, Letter Books, Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collection; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, November 3, 1864, Howell Cobb Papers.

reported rumors that Sherman had begun preparations to burn the city, but discounted them as preposterous.[84]

Sherman did not keep Cobb or the rest of the South waiting long to learn the nature of his intentions. On November 12, the Union commander severed his rail and telegraph connections with Tennessee, and ordered all his dispersed units to concentrate at Atlanta. By November 14, Sherman had completed his concentration. That night, he ordered Atlanta put to the torch. The next day he began his march to the sea.[85]

Sherman's activities at Atlanta produced a flurry of activity among his opponents. On November 11, General Hood ordered Cobb to begin the destruction of railroads running out of Atlanta. Then, in a series of messages between November 15 and 17, General Beauregard warned Cobb that Sherman had launched an offensive aiming for either Macon or Augusta. He ordered Cobb to make preparations for the defense of both places "to [the] last extremity," and authorized him to call upon Generals William Hardee and Richard Taylor for assistance. In the meantime, Cobb should use his forces for "cutting and blocking up dirt roads" as well as "removing or destroying supplies of all kinds in [Sherman's] front." A separate message instructed him to

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[84] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, November 7, 1864, Howell Cobb Papers.

[85] Sherman, The Memoirs of General W. T. Sherman, pp. 646-654.

carry out Hood's orders for the destruction of the railroads linking Atlanta with Augusta and Macon. Beauregard altered his strategy on November 17. He telegraphed Cobb to "adopt Fabian system. Dont run risk of losing your forces & guns to hold any one place or position. But harass enemy at all points." By way of inspiration, he pointed out that "Hannibal held [the] heart of Italy sixteen years & then was defeated."[86]

Already aware of Sherman's movements, the forces commanded by Cobb and Smith had begun falling back toward Macon on November 15. Cobb believed that Sherman meant to take Macon, and felt certain that"it requires every man that Confederate and State authorities can put in the field to meet this force." He voiced hope that reinforcements adequate to defeat Sherman would be forthcoming, but privately conceded to Mary Ann that "with our small force we can do but little to impede [Sherman's] progress."[87]

Cobb's troops reached Macon on November 18. Fully cognizant that Sherman could bring overwhelming force to bear against the city, he began making plans to evacuate. General

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[86] Official Records, Series One, XXXIX, part 3, 821, 911; Series One, XLIV, 54, 362-367, 861-863, 931-933; P. G. T. Beauregard to Howell Cobb, November 16, 1864; November 17, 1864, Howell Cobb Papers.

[87] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, November 16, 1864, Howell Cobb Papers; Howell Cobb to Robert Toombs, November 16, 1864, Telemon Cuyler Collection, Felix Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia.

Hardee reached Macon the next day, and assumed command. The Confederate leaders soon suspected that Sherman did not intend to make a major attack on Macon. When Yankee cavalry launched a "very feeble" demonstration against the city, and then moved on to rejoin Sherman at Milledgeville, their suspicions were confirmed. By November 24, Cobb correctly surmised that for the Union Army Savannah stood as its main objective.[88]

Cobb's concern for the security of his family complicated his military duties following the fall of Atlanta. In early November, Mary Ann urged him to release John A. from military service despite the current emergency. The family, she reported, had begun to encounter serious difficulties in procuring food. She said John A. "has staid long enough to prove his patriotism ... send him home to provide for us." Cobb promptly fulfilled this request.[89]

While basic subsistence represented a serious problem, Cobb continued to worry about the physical safety of his wife and children should they fall into enemy hands. In a bid to preclude such an occurrence, he had purchased a home in Americus. When Sherman began his march in mid-November, Cobb ordered Mary Ann to retreat to this haven. Due to the

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[88] Howell Cobb to Charles C. Jones, 1867, C. C. Jones Collection; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, November 19, 1864; November 24, 1864, Howell Cobb Papers.

[89] Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, November 5, 1864; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, November 7, 1864, Howell Cobb Papers.

destruction of the state's rail system, however, it proved impossible to move most of the family's possessions from Athens. Thus, Mary Ann reported from her new home that "it was bitter cold all night -- furious winds -- one pr of blankets apiece did not keep us warm -- ... still on pallets -- no washstands -- no bureaus ... but we have ... plenty to eat." She bitterly denounced these disruptions of her daily life, and declared, "I wish Sherman and the whole Yankee nation were in Guinea with every son and daughter of Ham. They would soon collapse into a hotter region without my soiling my lips with wishing them there." Cobb's concern for the well-being of his family was not entirely groundless. When Sherman learned that he had occupied Cobb's Hurricane plantation, he gleefully issued instructions that the place be freely looted and then destroyed. The Union commander declared this appropriate punishment for "one of the leading rebels of the South."[90]

Once Sherman's legions had passed Macon, Cobb dispatched his able-bodied troops to assist in the defense of Savannah, while he remained behind to fulfill the administrative duties of his district. For the most part these duties involved both the repair of damage done to the railroads during the recent campaign, and further efforts to hinder future Yankee movements. In a concession to the extensive damage done to

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[90] Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, November 10, 1864; November 22, 1864; ibid.; Sherman, The Memoirs of General W. T. Sherman, pp. 661-662.

Confederate communications by Sherman's passage, General Beauregard ordered Cobb to assume "direct administration of district Georgia without reference to army Head Quarters."[91]

VI

By January, 1865, even the normally optimistic Cobb found it impossible to deny the Confederacy's increasingly desperate plight. Early in the month he sent a candid assessment of affairs in Georgia directly to President Davis and Secretary of War Seddon. No one, he avowed, could fail to recognize the growing despondency among the people. Even worse, he warned, "gloom and despondency" fast were becoming open "disaffection and disloyalty" to the Southern cause. He attributed this unfortunate state of affairs to a variety of causes. Military defeat, unpopular government policies, and the base political activities of opponents to the Davis administration had all played important roles. Nonetheless, he yet hoped the situation might be retrieved.[92]

Cobb proposed a comprehensive program designed to achieve this goal. He argued that the first step towards the restoration of public confidence required a reorganization

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[91] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, November 24, 1864; G. W. Brent to Howell Cobb, December 3, 1864, P. G. T. Beauregard to Howell Cobb, December 17, 1864; December 30, 1864; W. J. Hardee to Howell Cobb, December 31, 1864, Howell Cobb Papers.

[92] Howell Cobb to Jefferson Davis, January 6, 1865, Howell Cobb Papers, Special Collections Library, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina (Hereafter: Howell Cobb Papers, DU); Howell Cobb to James A. Seddon, January 8, 1865, Letter Books, Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collection.

of the Confederate high command. General Hood must be removed from the Army of Tennessee. Although describing Hood as a "brave and gallant soldier," Cobb pointed out that "he has lost the confidence of the country." He again urged restoration of General Johnston to command as Hood's replacement. Johnston, he contended, possessed the confidence of both the people and the army. With Johnston commanding in Georgia, Beauregard in the Carolinas, and Lee in Virginia, he wrote, "you restore confidence and at once revive the hopes of the people."[93]

Cobb pleaded with President Davis to "popularize your administration." He believed that events left Davis few alternatives, and pleaded with the Confederate president to make concessions "to the strong convictions of ... an enlightened public opinion." He insisted that this did not mean yielding to mindless "popular clamor," but instead represented the abandonment of government policies already doomed to failure.[94]

Cobb denounced the conscription acts as examples of such policies. He had opposed them since their inception as counterproductive insults to public patriotism. Despite the failure of his previous protests to alter the conscription

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[93] Howell Cobb to Jefferson Davis, January 6, 1865, Howell Cobb Papers, DU; Howell Cobb to James A. Seddon, January 8, 1865, Letter Books, Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collection.

[94] Howell Cobb to Jefferson Davis, January 6, 1865, Howell Cobb Papers, DU; Howell Cobb to James A. Seddon, January 8, 1865, Letter Books, Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collection.

program, he felt duty-bound to press once more for a policy of the "broadest and most unrestricted system of volunteering." The people found the Conscription Acts so "odious," he declared, that conscript officers possessed no chance of forcing sufficient numbers of men into the ranks. Only by removing the spur of government intrusion could patriots be induced to join the army and deserters to return to it. Appeals to public responsibility, he concluded, must inspire greater patriotism than fear of an unenforceable law.[95]

On one critical point, however, Cobb warned the Davis administration not to deviate from established policies. He bluntly declared, "I think that the proposition to make soldiers of our slaves the most pernicious idea that has been suggested since the war began." He expressed "deep mortification and regret to see the name of that good and great man ... Genl. R. E. Lee given as authority for such a policy." Cobb offered vigorous arguments to support his opposition to arming slaves. Many of those whose faith in ultimate Confederate victory remained unshaken, would give way to despair in the face of such desperate measures.

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[95] Howell Cobb to Jefferson Davis, January 6, 1865, Howell Cobb Papers, DU; Howell Cobb to James A. Seddon, January 8, 1865, Letter Books, Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collection.

Personally, Cobb confessed, "my first hour of despondency will be the one in which that policy shall be adopted."[96]

He perceived other, more practical, difficulties as well. Declaring that "you can't keep black and white troops together," he predicted, "the moment you resort to negro soldiers, your white soldiers will be lost to you." Aware of support for slave enlistment within the army, he warned that many of those in uniform who favored black soldiers hoped that with the presence of slave units, "they will be permitted to retire." In short, the idea of "blacks in gray" represented "simply a proposition to fight the balance of the war with negro troops." Such, he contended, must spell disaster because "you can't trust negroes by themselves."[97]

Yet Cobb offered a more fundamental objection. In doing so he revealed how little his views had changed regarding slavery and secession despite four years of warfare and impending defeat. He recognized that the price of African-American military service must be emancipation. He asserted that "you cannot make soldiers of slaves, nor slaves of soldiers." More importantly, the South's desperate gamble of 1860-1861 made no sense if it should now destroy the very institution that inspired its revolution in the first place. Within the old Union the South had possessed all it desired

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[96] Howell Cobb to James A. Seddon, January 8, 1865, Letter Books, Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collection.

[97] Ibid.

except security for its peculiar institution. The South had seceded in hopes of gaining that security. The day that the Confederate government overturned slavery must mark "the beginning of the end of the revolution."[98]

Cobb went further. The entire system of Southern slavery rested upon a single foundation: the inherent inferiority of blacks to their white masters. They thus lacked those attributes which entitled them to participate in a free society of equals. Men capable of fighting for their freedom, and of asserting it by force of arms, were men unfitted to be slaves. Cobb defined the South's dilemma succinctly: "If slaves will make good soldiers, our whole theory of slaves is wrong." At this point in his argument, Cobb -- and in a broad sense the entire South -- stood at a critical juncture. The courageous and disciplined performance of black units fighting for freedom in the Union armies provided a clear answer to the problem posed by Cobb. Observable facts notwithstanding, Cobb reached the wrong conclusion, declaring: "they won't make soldiers. As a class they are wanting in every qualification of a soldier."[99]

That Cobb and many other Southerners should reach this conclusion is not surprising. Predictability, however, in no way decreased its tragic consequences. Nearly 250 years of Southern tradition rendered it virtually impossible for

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[98] Ibid.

[99] Ibid.

whites to perceive of blacks in anything other than a subservient position. Cobb recognized that abolition did not necessarily require social or civil equality for former slaves. He believed it entirely possible that slavery might be destroyed without upsetting the fundamental social structure of white supremacy. But he realized that if the South paid the price of its independence in the blood of black soldiers, little possibility existed for preserving the traditional social order. Black soldiers who killed white men to assert Southern liberty, could hardly be expected to refrain from assertions of their own liberty. Thus Cobb remonstrated with the Davis administration, "better by far to yield to the demands of England and France and abolish slavery and thereby purchase their aid, than to resort to this policy, which leads to ruin and subjugation." If the Confederacy stood determined to sacrifice slavery for independence, Cobb believed it must still strive to preserve the old order. In his mind, attempting less made no sense.[100]

Even as Cobb advised the administration on domestic and foreign policy, Davis and Seddon struggled to maximize the effectiveness of their limited military resources. On January 11, they ordered Cobb to shift his headquarters from Macon to Augusta. Fearing that Sherman might move upriver from Savannah to take Augusta, they hoped to improve the chances for a successful defense by locating the headquarters

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[100] Ibid.

of the Georgia Military District and the conscript office in the same place. Cobb immediately fired off a protest to Richmond. He pointed out that he had already ordered the conscript office moved to Macon. This, he argued, represented a better choice because the South might still find large numbers of recruits in southwest Georgia. More importantly, southwest Georgia now represented "the Grainery [sic] of the Confederacy." He believed he could better direct the defense of this vital region from Macon.[101]

Cobb had personal reasons for objecting to his transfer as well. Under the threat posed by Sherman's broadly deployed columns, Mary Ann and the children had fled to Americus in Sumter County. From Macon, Cobb could better insure their safety and assist John A. in directing plantation business. He recognized that a permanent relocation to Augusta spelled serious complications for his personal affairs. Cobb openly acknowledged these concerns to his superiors, but insisted they did not provide the underlying basis for his objections.[102]

Having registered his protests, Cobb departed for Augusta. He arrived on the evening of January 18, and took rooms at the Planters Hotel. He found an intolerable

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[101] Samuel Cooper to Howell Cobb, January 8, 1865, Howell Cobb Papers; Howell Cobb to Samuel Cooper, January 16, 1865, Howell Cobb Papers, DU.

[102] Howell Cobb to Samuel Cooper, January 16, 1865, Howell Cobb Papers, DU.

situation, and reported to Mary Ann that the Augusta lacked sufficient forces "to make a respectable picket line around the city." Even worse, the people demonstrated such persistent disloyalty that Cobb suggested "a little hanging would do much good." Everyone expected Sherman to attack; no one, including himself, believed a successful defense could be mounted. In anticipation of a retreat, Cobb terrified many citizens when he publicly urged the burning of cotton stored in the city's warehouses. When citizens complained that the flames might destroy Augusta, he responded "better that, than that Sherman should get the cotton .... If I am in command at the time the cotton is bound to burn."[103]

It quickly became clear, however, that Cobb would not be in command in Augusta. Responsibility for the city's defense fell to General D. H. Hill. Cobb now saw no reason for remaining in the city and began making plans to return to Macon. As he expected, he soon received orders to report back to his original headquarters.[104]

Back in Macon, Cobb focused on preparations for the defense of southwest Georgia. He learned that during his

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[103] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, January 19, 1865, Howell Cobb Papers.

[104] Howell Cobb to Samuel Cooper, January 20, 1865; Samuel Cooper to Howell Cobb, January 26, 1865, ibid.; Howell Cobb, Jr. to Mary McKinley, January 20, 1865, E. Merton Coulter Collection, Felix Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia (Hereafter: Coulter Collection).

absence Brigadier General W. T. Wofford had been ordered into his district with an independent force designed to round up deserters. Cobb freely acknowledged the need for such a unit and praised Wofford's dedication to duty, but complained that the proliferation of independent commands within his district undermined his authority. The matter was not resolved until late March when Wofford finally came under Cobb's command. In the meantime, the two men cooperated in achieving their common purpose. In little more that a month, Wofford succeeded in forcing 3,000 deserters, absentees, and men liable to conscription into camp. Cobb labored to supply arms and supplies for this rapidly growing force.[105]

Yet these small successes could not reverse the tide of defeat. As public disaffection grew and the evidence of military helplessness became overwhelming, Cobb gave way to private despair. Writing to Mary Ann, he grieved "it makes ones heart sick to look at the remnant now left of the gallant army that Genl. Johnston had at Atlanta. Of the thirty five thousand men that Hood [had] in Tennessee, we cannot now count upon twelve thousand .... It is a picture from which I turn with a sad heart, all, all, the result of

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[105] Howell Cobb to James A. Seddon, February 1, 1865; Howell Cobb to Joseph E. Johnston, March 13, 1865, Letter Books, Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collection; Pope Barrow to Daniel Barrow, undated manuscript, David C. Barrow Papers, Felix Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia (Hereafter: Barrow Papers).

one great blunder, the removal of Joe Johnston. It is too late to correct the evil."[106]

Whatever Cobb's private doubts, he maintained a determined public face. He ordered officers under his command not to interfere with public meetings calling for peace. He reasoned that acts of treason could be punished later. For the moment, he desired to avoid actions "calculated to influence the public mind against the Confederate authorities." Cobb, however, showed less restraint when Governor Brown's bid to summon a "peace convention" failed in the legislature. Denouncing Brown as a "wretch," he gloated "I think Joe Brown's fire brand ... has been effectually put at rest." He could but wonder "how long are the people of Georgia to be cursed with this reprobate as their executive?" Unwilling to risk antagonizing the public by using the military to break up the peace movement, Cobb resorted to a strategy that had served him well in the past. He took to the stump, exhorting the people to resist despair and press on with their revolution.[107]

True believers responded favorably. Hope Hull offered encouragement from Athens. Praising Cobb's efforts "to save

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[106] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, February 6, 1865, Howell Cobb Papers.

[107] Howell Cobb to James A. Seddon, February 6, 1865, Letter Books, Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collection; Howell Cobb to David C. Barrow, February 25, 1865, Howell Cobb Papers.

our country from speedy ruin ... made imminent by brawling Demagogues," he assured the General that "all men of sense" wholeheartedly endorsed the sentiment expressed in his speech. Hull hoped the good effect of Cobb's efforts might be enhanced by the public actions of Governor Brown, Robert Toombs, and Linton Stephens. These men, Hull sarcastically observed, proclaim "'on with the Revolution'... yet they tell us that the Revolution is carrying us to perdition." Under the circumstances, Hull commented, "they might just as well say 'go on soldiers, you will certainly be whipped ... and if by good luck you should gain a victory, it will do you no good .... I tell you to go on with the Revolution but in truth you had better quit and go home .... Now if you choose to destroy yourselves my skirts are clear. I forewarned you.'"[108]

The Confederacy's decline, however, had passed the point at which inspiring words might help. Deserters and draft resisters became bolder. They operated in marauding bands, preying upon citizens and soldiers alike. Lacking sufficient forces to even garrison all critical points in his district, Cobb could do little. He met with citizens groups to discuss possible defensive measures. He also detached units to break up the worst bands, but in at least one instance the

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[108] Hope Hull to Howell Cobb, March 12, 1865, Howell Cobb Papers.

marauders ambushed and cut to pieces a pursuing reserve company.[109]

Union forces constantly increased the pressure on the collapsing Confederacy. By early February, Sherman's juggernaut had disrupted communications between Georgia and Richmond, and Cobb conceded that "it really seems Sherman is destined to go where he pleases." By the end of the month the threat of additional Union columns prompted General Richard Taylor to order Cobb to fortify and garrison Columbus and West Point. Cobb, who had been busily forwarding men and supplies to the forces confronting Sherman, reported that he had no units to send save some artillery. He requested troops from Taylor, and urged Governor Brown to make the militia available. Neither request produced the needed reinforcements. He also requested assistance from General Wofford, whose command was momentarily operating north of Atlanta. A lack of weapons, however, limited Wofford's capacity to render assistance. Cobb expressed regret that he could provide no weapons, but reported that every available gun -- "even guns with out ramrods" -- had been rushed to the Army of Tennessee."[110]

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[109] W. A. Thomas to Howell Cobb, January 18, 1865; William Harris to Howell Cobb, January 16, 1865; D. L. Clinch to Howell Cobb, April 4, 1865, ibid.; Montgomery, Howell Cobb's Confederate Career, pp. 130-131.

[110] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, February 9, 1865; Joseph E. Brown to Howell Cobb, February 28, 1865; Howell Cobb Papers; Howell Cobb to Joseph E. Brown, February 25, 1865; Howell Cobb to W. T. Wofford, February 25, 1865; March

Despite the impossibility of fulfilling every demand or meeting every threat, Cobb persisted in efforts to enhance the efficiency of his command. His repeated pleas for unity of command within his district finally bore fruit in late March when Johnston ordered him to assume command of the "Department of Tennessee and Georgia lately commanded by General Hood." In his pursuit of greater effectiveness, Cobb proved willing to engage in dealings of questionable legality. He received information of a man who held a large cargo of goods on the St. Mary's River -- "consisting ... of three hundred & fifty thousand pounds of bacon, fifty thousand pounds of coffee, five thousand pounds of tea, and other valuable stores" -- which he proposed to sell to the Confederacy in exchange for cotton. Declaring that he "would buy from Lincoln himself, whatever we need for our soldiers," Cobb urged both state and Confederate officials to consummate a deal. All declined.[111]

Although the ultimate fate of the cargo remains unclear, it appears that this prize proved too tantalizing for Cobb to let it slip away. He turned to his relative, Colonel Charles A. L. Lamar, for assistance -- the same Lamar whose slave smuggling had caused Cobb such headaches during his

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6, 1865, Letter Books, Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collection.

[111] Pope Barrow to David C. Barrow, undated manuscript, Barrow Papers; Howell Cobb to R. J. Moses, March 7, 1865; Howell Cobb to Sam Jones, March 7, 1865, Letter Books, Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collection.

service as Secretary of the Treasury. The two men had been reconciled when Cobb joined the ranks of secessionists, and Lamar now agreed to carry a boatload of cotton to Savannah under a flag of truce. The plan to trade cotton for supplies, however, nearly fell apart when a zealous Confederate officer, Captain M. Norman McDuffie, intercepted Lamar and seized the colonel, the boat, and the cotton. When McDuffie questioned Cobb about the nature of Lamar's mission, Cobb refused to provide an explanation. Instead, he denounced McDuffie's interference as being harmful to the public good and ordered him to release Lamar immediately.[112]

Dissatisfied with Cobb's response, McDuffie pressed for a substantive answer to his inquiry. Clearly discomfited by McDuffie's inquiries, Cobb finally attempted to close the matter with a detailed explanation. He repeated his earlier arguments that "the South should trade cotton with anyone ... even Lincoln ... for supplies needed by the army and the public." He pointed out that he had urged such a policy on the government "for months," but conceded that only government officials could decide these matters. Cobb insisted that the primary purpose of Lamar's mission had nothing to do with trading cotton. Rather, the transport of cotton had been an afterthought designed to defray the

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[112] Howell Cobb to M. Norman McDuffie, March 22, 1865; March 30, 1865; Letter Books, Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collection; M. Norman McDuffie to Howell Cobb, March 22, 1865; March 25, 1865; Samuel Cooper to Howell Cobb, March 31, 1865, Howell Cobb Papers.

expenses of the trip. Thus, he argued, his role in this affair conformed to procedures pursued by the government in similar circumstances. At any rate, Cobb now expressed his regret over the entire matter, "not because of any legal impropriety but rather, because it might give the appearance of impropriety." The day after Cobb offered his explanation, the Confederate government spared him further embarrassment by giving formal permission for the boat to proceed.[113]

VII

By the time Cobb had finally resolved the disputes regarding the limits of his authority, and the issues raised by Charlie Lamar's adventures, the war had entered its last days. In early April, the general threat from Union military forces began to assume a specific shape. A column commanded by General Edward R. S. Canby threatened Mobile, Alabama. A second force, commanded by General Frederick Steele, moved northward from Pensacola to place central Alabama at risk. Simultaneously, General James H. Wilson launched a column of more than 10,000 Union horsemen on a powerful raid into Alabama from Tennessee. Wilson's most likely objective appeared to be Selma. Should he succeed there, he would be

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[113] Howell Cobb to M. Norman McDuffie, March 22, 1865; March 30, 1865; Letter Books, Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collection; M. Norman McDuffie to Howell Cobb, March 22, 1865; March 25, 1865; Samuel Cooper to Howell Cobb, March 31, 1865, Howell Cobb Papers.

ideally located to move against Montgomery, and then to threaten western Georgia.[114]

The situation clearly required immediate action. On April 2, Wilson's cavalry descended on Selma. After a sharp fight, the city fell. Six days after Selma's capture, Johnston ordered Cobb to lead his meager forces into Alabama to assist officials in that state. Cobb took prompt steps to inform Governor Brown of the now desperate state of affairs. He urged the governor to authorize his use of the state militia outside the boundaries of Georgia. Brown granted Cobb's request. For the moment at least, the governor seemed more interested in fighting Yankees than in disputing with Confederate authorities.[115]

Cobb also renewed his pleas for assistance from Confederate authorities. He warned Davis that the Confederacy could not survive without the crops and military supplies being produced in southwest Georgia. Somehow, the government must make resources available for the defense of this vital region. Cobb assured the president that "the spirit of our people is better than you would have probably looked for,"

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[114] James Picket Jones, Yankee Blitzkrieg, Wilson's Raid Through Alabama and Georgia (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1976) pp.12-14, 51.

[115] Ibid., pp. 84-91; Howell Cobb to Richard Taylor, April 4, 1865; Howell Cobb to W. T. Wofford, April 9, 1865; Howell Cobb to Joseph E. Brown, April 9, 1865, Letter Books, Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collection; Montgomery, Howell Cobb's Confederate Career, pp. 130-131.

but Davis, already fleeing south after the fall of Richmond had no help to offer.[116]

Before actually leading his troops into Alabama, Cobb made a quick trip to Montgomery for consultation with Governor Thomas H. Watts. There he agreed to assume responsibility for the defense of the area lying east of Montgomery. He decided to focus his defensive efforts around Columbus. The town lay on the east bank of the Chattahoochee River, just inside the Georgia line. As a communications and war industries center, Columbus represented a certain target for Wilson's hard-riding raiders. Mayor T. G. Williams wrote to urge Cobb's utmost effort in the defense of his city. The general responded with a promise to do all in his power, but reminded the mayor that the military's chief concern must be the destruction of the invader rather than the defense of fixed points. When the desperate Williams suggested the use of armed slaves for the city's defense, Cobb repeated his previous objections. In forceful terms he declared, "I am utterly opposed to it and can only give it my sanction, when ordered to do so by higher authority." If the white people of the South, he asserted, would but do their duty, there

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[116] Howell Cobb to Jefferson Davis, April 8, 1865, Letter Books, Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collection.

would be no need "of making our negroes win our liberty for us."[117]

Even as Cobb labored to prepare for the defense of Columbus, Montgomery fell to Wilson's cavalry. This Union success sent a wave of Alabama refugees fleeing towards Columbus. With them they brought fear and panic, as the city could no longer hope that Mobile would prove the objective of the Union cavalry.[118]

For the defense of the city, Cobb had about 3,000 troops. Only a small percentage of these could be considered seasoned veterans. A few hundred more had acquired a fair knowledge of basic drill as members of the Georgia State Line, but lacked combat experience. The balance of the defenders consisted of county reserves and men detailed for factory work, who lacked any meaningful military experience.[119]

Yet the situation did not seem entirely hopeless. Since 1862, Confederate officials had labored to strengthen the city defenses. For a direct assault to succeed, the Union forces must first fight their way through two lines of fortifications west of the river and then force passage over

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[117] Howell Cobb to T. G. Williams, April 5, 1865; Howell Cobb to W. T. Wofford, April 9, 1865, ibid.; Montgomery, Howell Cobb's Confederate Career, p. 131; Jones, Yankee Blitzkrieg, pp. 127-134.

[118] Jones, Yankee Blitzkrieg, pp. 109-112.

[119] Ibid., pp. 132-133.

the bridges that led into the city. With luck and a vigorous defense, Cobb's second rate command might repel Wilson's veterans. Personally, the general felt some optimism, confiding to Mary Ann, "I ... shall give him fight at this place. If my men do their duty, he shall pay dearly for Columbus before he gets it."[120]

Union cavalry appeared on the hills west of the Chattahoochee in the early afternoon of April 16. Wilson intended to launch his attack immediately, but a momentary breakdown in communications forced delay. Loath to wait longer, Wilson resolved on a night attack. This maneuver caught the Confederates completely by surprise. Within minutes the defense collapsed. A mad dash through the darkness followed as both Confederate infantry and Union cavalry raced for the Chattahoochee bridges. In the confusion, two companies of Yankee horsemen passed within "ten steps" of Cobb, but failed to spot their potential prize. Charlie Lamar and Pope Barrow did not experience similar fortune. The fiery Lamar fell mortally wounded; Barrow found himself a prisoner of war. Unable to restore order among his terrified soldiers, Cobb and his staff collected a force of about 600 men and fell back on Macon.[121]

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[120] Ibid.; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, April 15, 1865, Howell Cobb Papers.

[121] Jones, Yankee Blitzkrieg, pp. 134-141; John A. Cobb to David C. Barrow, April 19, 1865, Barrow Papers; Montgomery, Howell Cobb's Confederate Career, p. 131.

During the retreat to Macon, Cobb must have recognized the impossibility of holding that point with his tiny force. Shortly after his arrival on April 19, he resolved to abandon the city the following night. The next morning, however, a telegram from General Beauregard arrived informing Cobb of Johnston's surrender to Sherman. The telegram also announced the signing of an armistice by the two men which required all forces to occupy "their present positions." Cobb took immediate steps to reduce the risk of needless casualties. He began withdrawing his troops from the city's fortifications and ordered the militia to disband. He also moved to open communications with Wilson. He selected General Felix Robertson, a West Point classmate of Wilson's, to head the truce party.[122]

Robertson's party encountered the lead elements of Wilson's column about twelve miles outside the city. This advance guard agreed to halt while Cobb's message went up the chain of command. When the message of a truce reached Colonel Robert Minty, commander of Wilson's leading brigade, he forwarded the message, but simultaneously informed Robertson and his party that they must surrender unconditionally or clear the road within five minutes. He

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[122] P. G. T. Beauregard to Howell Cobb, April 19, 1865, Howell Cobb Papers; Howell Cobb, Jr. to Mary McKinley, April 24, 1865, Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collection; Jones, Yankee Blitzkrieg, pp. 165-166.

ordered the advance guard to resume their approach to Macon as soon as the allotted time had elapsed.[123]

Rejecting Minty's harsh terms, the Robertson party fell back towards Macon. Rapidly advancing federals soon overtook the small group of Confederates and charged. In the skirmish which followed Robertson's tiny band was pushed all the way into the city. Warned moments before the enemy dashed into town, Cobb hastily organized a second truce party. Union officers on the scene again demanded an unconditional surrender. Recognizing the futility of resistance, Cobb bitterly denounced this violation of the truce, and surrendered "under protest." When Wilson arrived in the city, Cobb repeated his protest, but to no avail. Wilson insisted that the city was indeed captured, and Cobb and his men prisoners of war. Howell, Jr., himself a prisoner, summarized his feelings succinctly: "the Revolution is undoubtedly at an end ... I can never affiliate with the murderers of my uncles."[124]

VIII

Although a prisoner, Cobb still found it necessary to continue in his duties as a public official. He felt a deep responsibility for the well being of both his troops and the civilians living in his department. Wilson found Cobb very

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[123] Howell Cobb, Jr. to Mary McKinley, April 24, 1865, Howell Cobb Papers.

[124] Ibid.

cooperative. Cobb directed the Union forces to those places where they could find adequate forage for their horses and supplies for themselves. In exchange for this assistance, Wilson promised to pay for whatever his forces took. Cobb assured Mary Ann that he sought no personal benefit in these actions. He explained his motives, writing, "I cannot say how long I shall be detained here, as I have to see to it that all my command are taken care of before I can look to my own interest & comfort. Besides I have to stay, that I may protect the people & country, as far as I can from the depredations and impressments of the enemy." Lest anyone else misread his motives, Cobb publicly asserted to Wilson that he had been an original secessionist, and proudly declared that he had led -- not followed -- Georgia out of the Union.[125]

Perhaps a willingness to accept martyrdom underlay Cobb's defiant claims. Revolution that fails is rebellion, and rebellion is treason. No one could predict what revenge the North might demand of the South. It seems likely that Cobb believed it the duty of Southern leaders to interpose themselves between the North's wrath and the Southern people. If punishment must come, then let it fall upon his head.[126]

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[125] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, April 27, 1865, ibid.; Montgomery, Howell Cobb's Confederate Career, p. 132.

[126] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, April 27, 1865, Howell Cobb Papers; Montgomery, Howell Cobb's Confederate Career, p. 132.

Whatever Cobb's motives, Wilson clearly appreciated his prisoner's assistance in resolving the difficulties of moving from war to peace. Only days after the surrender, Cobb reported to Mary Ann that "our situation is as pleasant as it can be," and offered the assurance that "the conduct of Genl Wilson ... has been courteous and gentlemanly." Cobb went on to note that Wilson had promised to grant any request he made provided it did not require a violation of "his positive orders." Under such circumstances it proved an easy task for the two generals to negotiate lenient paroles for Cobb's troops.[127]

Despite his efforts in behalf of soldiers and civilians Cobb's own future remained uncertain. Nine days after his surrender, Wilson granted Cobb a parole. By mid-May "the General" had been reunited with his family in Athens. The family reunion proved short-lived, however. On May 23, Union officers arrived in Athens with orders to place Cobb under arrest. With great delicacy they conveyed news of their mission to Cobb's former staff officer, Pope Barrow and allowed him to inform the Cobb family. As a further courtesy, they placed no guards at the Cobb home. Instead

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[127] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, April 23, 1865; April 27, 1865; Howell Cobb to James Wilson, April 25, 1865, Howell Cobb Papers.

they merely informed "the General" that he should meet them at the railroad depot the next day.[128]

The news of Cobb's arrest stunned the family. Only Cobb appeared unaffected by the information. Lucy Barrow Cobb, wife of John A., marvelled at her father-in-law's calm demeanor: "the Genl. bears up under this new trial with his usual buoyancy & cheerfulness -- ever thoughtful, ever considerate of others .... Bless his noble soul! .... To the last he preserved his lightheartedness of manner though no doubt an aching heart was underneath it. His self control is really marvelous."[129]

Cobb's captors transported him to Atlanta. There he again received the liberty of the city after being instructed when to report back. He took advantage of this opportunity to visit with relatives and collect news. He dutifully relayed all that he learned back home. He also offered reassurances that the Yankees were treating him well, but regretfully informed Mary Ann that he knew no more about his possible future than he had before leaving Athens. He expected to be taken north by way of Chattanooga, and warned

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[128] Howell Cobb's Parole, April 29, 1865, Cobb Family Papers, Felix Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia; Lucy Barrow Cobb to John A. Cobb, May 23, 1865, Howell Cobb Papers.

[129] Lucy Barrow Cobb to John A. Cobb, May 23, 1865, Howell Cobb Papers.

that his letters might be infrequent for the immediate future.[130]

Five days later, while in Nashville, Cobb's captors released him with orders to return home. Cobb apparently owed his release to General Wilson's intercession with the president. He wasted no time in expressing his gratitude, and suggested that he visit Macon to confer with Wilson, "not in reference to any matter personal to myself, but on matters of public interest." Wilson, who valued Cobb's ongoing assistance with his supply problem, appears to have developed a sincere liking for the older man. He hastened to assure his former opponent that "I shall be glad to see you whenever you choose to visit Macon upon any matters of public or private interest." The war was over.[131]

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[130] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, May 25, 1865, ibid.

[131] Howell Cobb to James Wilson, June 4, 1865, ibid.

Chapter Twenty-Two

"In God's Own Good Time"

Cobb was fortunate that the threat of Yankee vengeance momentarily had passed. He had much family business to attend to. Although the Cobb-Lamar estates had survived the war intact, the upheavals of invasion and emancipation had left disorganization and uncertainty in their wake. With brother John gone and few public duties to distract him, most of the burdens of administering the family empire now fell directly onto Cobb's shoulders.[1]

He had not carried this responsibility since the 1840s. Never a task he enjoyed, its weight now bore heavily upon a man already worn out by wartime stress. Only fifty years old, he looked much older. Hair, brown in 1860, had gone gray by 1865. Heavy wrinkles lined his face above his long and grizzled beard. His hazel eyes no longer glimmered with their former constant mirth. His new duties gave him few opportunities to recover his strength or his spirits.[2]

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[1] John A. Cobb to Howell Cobb, June 29, 1865; July 10, 1865; J. D. Collin to Howell Cobb, July 9, 1865; July 31, 1865; Howell Cobb to John A. Cobb, July 12, 1865, Howell Cobb Papers, Felix Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia (Hereafter: Howell Cobb Papers).

[2] Howell Cobb's Parole, April 29, 1865, Cobb Family Papers, Felix Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia (Hereafter: Cobb Family Papers).

Almost immediately, Cobb found himself embroiled in an unpleasant confrontation with one of the Yankee conquerors. The dispute centered on brother John's Macon home. In early May, Cobb concluded a rental agreement with George Logan. Logan agreed to pay $50 per month for the house, as well as providing rooms for three of Lamar's former house servants. Shortly after Logan took possession of the house, however, Brigadier General John Craxton arrived. He expelled Logan and occupied the mansion. Logan's appeals to the general's superiors were rebuffed on the grounds that because the house had served as Cobb's military headquarters, it represented a prize of war available for military use.[3]

Back in Athens, Cobb hastily wrote to explain that the Lamar home had never served as anything other than a residence for himself and his family. True, he conceded, some members of his staff had taken rooms in the house, but they never conducted military business there. After some delays, Union officials ordered the house restored to Logan. Nevertheless, Craxton refused to vacate.[4]

Cobb renewed his arguments with Craxton's superiors. He especially complained of Craxton's blunt refusal to allow the removal from the house of items that had belonged to Lamar -- items much cherished by Mary Ann. Even worse, he

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[3] George Logan to Howell Cobb, May 1, 1865; Howell Cobb to J. B. Steedman, May 15, 1865, Howell Cobb Papers.

[4] Howell Cobb to J. B. Steedman, May 15, 1865; August 10, 1865; T. W. Whittle to Howell Cobb, August 3, 1865, ibid.

pointed out, the hard-hearted Craxton had expelled the three former slave women from their home without making any provision for their food or shelter. Cobb soon received word that Craxton would surrender the house provided he personally came to Macon to receive it. Yet upon Cobb's arrival the general declared that "he could not recollect [his promise] sufficiently to act upon it." When pressed by Cobb, Craxton admitted that his superiors had twice urged him to give up the residence. After a "cold and formal" interview, Craxton finally agreed to move "when he could make other arrangements." Cobb sarcastically observed that Craxton's promise "means in plain English he dont intend to give it up as long as he wants to keep it." Although he could report to Mary Ann that nothing was missing from the portion of the house he had been able to see, he concluded with the observation "have no doubt, we will miss enough when we get possession." Craxton did agree to pay the same rent called for in the agreement with Logan.[5]

The dispute over the house dragged on for another two months. Finally, General Wilson, who had been absent, returned. Cobb presented his case directly and received Wilson's promise that the house would be back in the family's possession the next day. Wilson ordered Craxton out

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[5] Howell Cobb to J. B. Steedman, August 27, 1865; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, September 6, 1865, Howell Cobb Papers; Receipt from United States Army, August 31, 1865, Cobb Family Papers.

immediately, and Cobb happily reported an end to the "occupation."[6]

Not all the family's business, however resulted in such happy or such definite endings. A major source of uncertainty focused on the evolving relationship with former slaves. Initially, the freedmen's response to emancipation appeared to confirm much that the Cobbs had long wanted to believe. In the closing days of the war and the first weeks of peace, family letters often rang with high praise for the loyalty and obedience of their newly freed bondmen and bondwomen. Writing while still a prisoner in Macon, Cobb proudly reported that "all of our negroes have remained with us and behaved very well." One servant, Gilbert, came in for special praise. Cobb described him as "more humble and attentive than ever," and declared: "I regard him the most faithful negro in the world and intend to treat him accordingly." More than a month later, Mary Ann echoed her husband's appraisal, observing that "our servants are behaving as well as I desire -- all attentive to business and prompt in obeying my commands." Like Cobb she too vowed that "I shall, as heretofore -- do a good part by those who may choose to stay with me."[7]

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[6] Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, September, 1865; John A. Cobb to Howell Cobb, October 23, 1865; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, October, 28, 1865, Howell Cobb Papers.

[7] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, April 27, 1865; John A. Cobb to Lucy Barrow Cobb, May 27, 1865; Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, May 30, 1865, ibid.

Although a few of the family's former slaves, such as the devoted Aggy, continued as before, most possessed a different agenda. The first signs that things might not be as harmonious as they seemed came in late June. John A. made a tour of the plantations and reported that all the freedmen had agreed to remain where they were for the time being. Nevertheless, he casually noted, "I find it is impossible for the overseers to control some of the Negroes without the whip & as every one else here is using it .... I have told ours to take it up again."[8]

It is unlikely that most of the freedmen ever felt the loyalty that the Cobbs perceived. Long and bitter experience had taught African-Americans to have little faith in any white man. While white men from the North might tell them they were free, a reasonable sense of caution dictated that the greatest security lay in exploring the parameters of freedom slowly. Besides, the Cobb-Lamar family had been relatively fair within the harsh strictures of slavery. Perhaps they would prove equally fair as managers within a free labor system. Whatever their reasons, John A.'s decision to implement old methods of discipline -- and similar decisions by whites all across the South -- provided

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[8] John A. Cobb to Howell Cobb, June 29, 1865; Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, January 17, 1866, ibid.

former slaves with clear warning that promised freedom would not come easily.[9]

Relations between the Cobbs and the freedmen deteriorated rapidly. By July, the overseers from the various plantations bombarded their employers with a constant refrain of their difficulties. J. D. Collins complained that the freedmen under his charge "refuse to work or obay [sic] orders [and] go off the plantation when ever they get reddy [sic]." To make matters worse, the plantation's food supplies were in large measure exhausted. Collins blamed this situation on the freedmen who had taken it upon themselves to slaughter every hog on the place "of enny [sic] size." Nathan Barwick reinforced Collins' complaint when he reported that "I have ... some negroes living it up pretending to be sick but I think its freedom sick and too lazy to work." With some confusion, he noted his inability to cope effectively with a freedman who was "impudent" and refused to work. He could but conclude, "if I was admitted to whip him I would know what to do." Everything had changed except the old ways of thinking.[10]

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[9] Eric Foner, Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877 (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1988), pp. 132-134.

[10] J. D. Collins to Howell Cobb, July 9, 1865; July 31, 1865; Nathan Barwick to John A. Cobb, August 20, 1865; Stancil Barwick to John A. Cobb, August 22, 1865; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, September 10, 1865; September 15, 1865, Howell Cobb Papers; T. J. Mount to John A. Cobb, August 27, 1865, Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collection, Felix Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia, Athens,

John A., who sought to alleviate the burdens on his father by continuing to act as his agent in plantation affairs, echoed these reports in letters to Cobb. The younger Cobb employed a carrot and stick approach in his efforts to induce the labor force to work harder, even as he attempted to reinforce the authority of the overseers. He verbally promised the freedmen better terms than most neighboring plantation owners offered, but simultaneously informed his operatives that their present mode of working did not suit him. Henceforth, he warned, "all that did not intend to work must leave." Moreover, he issued instructions that whenever a laborer refused to obey an order, or failed to work up to expectations, the overseers were to cease food allotments to the worker. If the worker refused to return to his duties, he was to be expelled from the plantation.[11]

John A. soon encountered an obstacle to his management techniques in the form of the Freedmen's Bureau. Although not as effective as it might have been in protecting the interests of former slaves, the Bureau did serve to impose some restrictions on the actions of plantation owners and overseers alike. Young Cobb acknowledged this early in the reconstruction process when he informed his father that, after dismissing one Walker from employment, he had

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Georgia (Hereafter: Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collection).

[11] John A. Cobb to Howell Cobb, July 18, 1865, Howell Cobb Papers.

personally reported the incident to local federal authorities, "fearing [Walker] would report me to the Provost Marshall." Although the federal official initially approved John A.'s action, Collins soon reported that government officers had returned Walker with orders that he could not be dismissed unless the Cobbs reimbursed him for previous work. Collins, in keeping with John A.'s prior instructions, refused to pay. He again forced Walker off the plantation. Walker, however, was soon returned by the authorities, and Collins informed that he must be paid or continue as a Cobb employee.[12]

The Freedmen's Bureau intervened in plantation management on a larger scale as well. It forbade the much favored use of the lash as an incentive to labor with the observation that the right to exercise physical coercion had disappeared with slavery. In addition, the Bureau pursued its mandate to supervise the negotiation of labor contracts between plantation owners and freedmen.[13]

The Cobbs resisted the contract process at first. Their reasons for doing so are difficult to discern. They received consistent information from their overseers that the labor force on their plantations resented this reluctance to

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[12] John A. Cobb to Howell Cobb, July 18, 1865; J. D. Collins to Howell Cobb, July 31, 1865, ibid.

[13] J. D. Collins to Howell Cobb, July 31, 1865; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, September 15, 1865; September 19, 1865, ibid.; Foner, Reconstruction, pp. 161-162.

negotiate. The overseers also conveyed a firm belief that the freedmen's poor work habits reflected this resentment. T. J. Mount reported from Sumter County that "the negroes are getting very careless about their work. They seem to be dissatisfied because you have not come down & made a contract with them as others have done." Moreover, the overseers warned that competitors were attempting to convince Cobb workers that they would offer better financial arrangements. Even information that they could secure their labor needs for less than they had verbally promised to pay failed to move them to undertake negotiations. Overseer Stancil Barwick urged his employers to make written contracts. Most of the neighboring plantations, he said, had already complied with Bureau guidelines. As added incentive, he noted that "I think you will do well to do the same as it wood [sic] save you a great deal of money ... 10 bushels of corne [sic] an [sic] 100 pounds of meet [sic] is the hist [sic] iny [sic] negro gits [sic] an negros [sic] under 21 years old gits nothing an wimen [sic] with children gits nothing." Still the Cobbs refused to negotiate. It finally took a vigorous threat by Bureau officials to seize half of the year's crop for distribution to the freedmen before the Cobbs signed the required contracts.[14]

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[14] Stancil Barwick to John A. Cobb, August 22, 1865; August 30, 1865; Howell Cobb Papers; T. J. Mount to John A. Cobb, August 27, 1865, Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collection.

Family correspondence provides no clear clues to explain this obstinacy. Cobb certainly felt the pressure of his financial responsibilities and logically should have welcomed the chance to reduce his labor costs. Nor was he oblivious to the importance of maximizing his plantation production as the quickest way to restore the family fortune. He and John A. dedicated much of their correspondence during these months to the topic of marketing their agricultural produce. Both men carefully considered the financial implications of each sale. Thus it is likely that something more profound than economic interest motivated their refusal to negotiate.[15]

The key to the Cobbs' behavior probably lay in their own growing resentment towards their former slaves. Demands by the freedmen that the family negotiate to retain their services cut deeply. Such demands called the family's whole self-concept into question. Whatever the cruelties and inequities of the slave system, the Cobbs had never considered themselves cruel or unjust. They had taken great pride in their paternalistic dealings with their "black family," and had believed their benevolence appreciated. For former beneficiaries of their kindness now to imply that verbal commitments by family members lacked force -- for

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[15] John A. Cobb to Howell Cobb, July 10, 1865; July 18, 1865; March 24, 1865, April 5, 1866; July 5, 1866; January 8, 1867; February 3, 1867; November 19, 1867; December 16, 1857; December 17, 1867; June 23, 1868; January 31, 1868; Howell Cobb to John A. Cobb, July 12, 1865, Howell Cobb Papers.

former servants now to insist that the family negotiate with them on the footing of equals -- there could be no response other than bitterness and disdain. To be compelled to comply with these insulting demands by an outside agency merely added insult to injury.

Already embittered by the death of brother John during the war, Mary Ann proved most vitriolic in her denunciations of both the Bureau and former servants. Noting that "the freedman sum[med] up the annoyances" in her life, she declared that "were it not for the grace ... in my heart these poor benighted dupes & victims of New England fanaticism would make it the harbor of gall and wormwood." Abolitionists, she wailed, "have destroyed the negro and cotton in the Southern States at one blow." Mocking the North's foolish pursuit of an "ebony idol," she flatly stated that "I told you from the first that the freedman will not work -- the negro only works by compulsion. The freedmen according to the rules of the Bureau cannot be forced to work." Under the circumstances, she advised her husband that, as "no law of God or man can compel us to support them in idleness -- Let them go, and employ free white labor." Her bitterness did not abate quickly. More than two years later, she vowed "I shall cease to look for gentility and honesty in the negro race -- I am heartily tired of being their catspaw. Give me white servants .... I am ready to

turn my back upon the black race .... Let us have white servants."[16]

Cobb expressed his feelings in more sympathetic terms, but his attitude towards free black labor was scarcely more favorable than that of his wife. After personally negotiating the labor contracts for 1865 -- contracts which preserved as much as possible of the old slave regime -- he reported to Mary Ann that the freedmen working on the Sumter county plantations "are doing better than any other negroes in the neighborhood, or indeed any that I have seen or heard of." Nevertheless he saw little cause for optimism. "The serious trouble," he noted, "is that the negroes wont work as they used to do, and that in a great measure is the cause of the poor crops."[17]

A frustrated Cobb confided to Mary Ann that he had made no effort to negotiate contracts for the following year. He attributed this decision to the ambivalence he observed among the freedmen, saying, "the poor creatures dont know their own mind. It would be as hard to get them to agree to go away, as it would be to get them to stay." Rather than press the issue, he simply warned that they must make up their minds before he returned later in the year. He did take some consolation in the freedmen's "humble and obedient" demeanor,

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[16] Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, September 15, 1865; November 21, 1865; September 6, 1867; October 1, 1867, ibid.

[17] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, September 15, 1865, ibid.

but despaired over their attitude that freedom was useless if they now had to work just as hard as they did before emancipation. Such attitudes, he believed, derived additional strength from the widespread and persistent rumors that the government intended to confiscate the lands of former Confederates for distribution as homesteads to freedmen. He confessed that he saw no way for the family to thrive if it must rely on such indefinite prospects. He urged Mary Ann to impress upon their sons the necessity of training for careers that would enable them to earn their own way.[18]

During the course of the next two years, the issues of labor relations proved a persistent source of irritation and frustration for the Cobbs. Each season negotiations with the freedmen grew more rather than less complicated. The contracts for 1865, had committed the Cobbs to provide the work force with clothes, food, and medical care. In addition, they contracted to pay each "full hand" ten bushels of corn and one hundred pounds of pork at Christmas. The remaining workers were to receive their pay in proportion to their age and skill. In return, the operatives promised "faithfully to labor and do all the usual duties on the plantation."

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[18] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, September 15, 1865; Howell Cobb to Richard Taylor, December 8, 1865, ibid.

Failure to fulfill these requirements meant the forfeiture of the promised compensation.[19]

When Cobb returned to the plantations in December to make arrangements for the following year he discovered that his operatives demanded more. He learned from his overseers of the great reluctance manifested by the freedmen on every plantation to engage in the cultivation of cotton. Many African-Americans equated cotton production with slavery. Moreover, most recognized that, once harvested, cotton rapidly moved beyond the control of the laborer. Hence the likelihood of significant profit also disappeared. Consequently, many freedmen preferred to focus their efforts on the production of food crops, the use of which they retained. Cobb countered this reluctance with offers of a share of the cotton crop. Initially, he offered two acres of cotton per hand, but after consulting with the overseers, offered a quarter of the crop. He did so in the belief that "we will make more in the end by it -- as the whole crop will be better worked."[20]

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[19] Labor Contract, September 11, 1865; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, September 10, 1865; September 15, 1865; September 19, 1865; December, 1866; October 2, 1867; John A. Cobb to Howell Cobb, April 27, 1866; July 5, 1866; November 19, 1866; January 8, 1867; February 3, 1867; November 19, 1867; John A. Cobb to Lucy Barrow Cobb, December 3, 1866; January 1, 1867; John A. Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, February 14, 1867, ibid; Foner, Reconstruction, pp. 171-172.

[20] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, December 14, 1865; December, 1866; undated fragment, Howell Cobb Papers; Foner, Reconstruction, pp. 108, 172-175.

Despite this improved offer, Cobb still encountered difficulties in securing sufficient workers because many of the freedmen desired money wages rather than a share of the crop. Cobb enlisted the assistance of his sons in an effort to recruit laborers. Howell, Jr., seeking operatives in Macon, described his mission as "impossible." Every freedman he encountered insisted on at least $150 in wages for the year plus food and clothes. He expressed some hope that within a few days the influx of "hands" into the city might be sufficient to drive down their demands to reasonable levels. Lamar attempted to secure help in Athens, but without noteworthy success.[21]

Matters at the Hurricane Plantation in Baldwin County had deteriorated so far that Cobb declined to attempt its operation. Instead he rented it out, after making arrangements for the support "of [seven] old negroes" who had long served the family and were now too infirm to earn their own way. Eventually, the Cobbs did secure enough laborers, and by mid-March John A. reported that "everything is getting on well at the plantations. The hands are working about as well as when I was here before, but better satisfied -- Which ... is caused by the dissatisfaction of those who left."[22]

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[21] Howell Cobb, Jr., to Howell Cobb, January 3, 1866, Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collection.

[22] J. D. Collins to Howell Cobb, July 9, 1865; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, November 24, 1865; December 11, 1865; January 6, 1866; January 15, 1866; John A. Cobb to February 22, 1866; March 24, 1866, Howell Cobb Papers.

Nevertheless difficulties continued, and by August, Cobb decided to place the plantations on the market. No local buyer appeared, but he still hoped that some northern or English company might make the purchase as an investment. He acknowledged, however, that the large number of plantations already on the market had depressed prices. This circumstance, combined with the political uncertainties of the moment, made a sale unlikely.[23]

Late fall and early winter, 1866, did bring some cheering news. Despite all their doubts, the cotton crop proved much better than expected. John A. predicted that they would produce between 600-700 bales. As a bonus, he reported that the corn crop too exceeded expectations, and predicted "we will have plenty to do us for another year." Cobb, himself, commented that "the negroes seem to be well satisfied & so far as I have heard desire to remain another year." In a burst of enthusiasm, John A. boasted to his wife that he planned to work 200 hands and make 1,200 bales in the coming year.[24]

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[23] First National Bank of Macon to Howell Cobb, August 4, 1866; John A. Cobb to Howell Cobb, September 15, 1866; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, September 16, 1866; John A. Cobb to Lucy Barrow Cobb, December 3, 1866, ibid.; John A. Cobb to Lucy Barrow Cobb, January 1, 1867, Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collection.

[24] John A. Cobb to Howell Cobb, September 24, 1866; September 27, 1866; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, October 5, 1866; John A. Cobb to Lucy Barrow Cobb, October 10, 1866, Howell Cobb Papers.

Young Cobb's enthusiasm, however, soon crashed upon the realities of the new order. Shortly after making his bold assertion he wrote to his wife that, as yet, he had secured no contracts from the hands for the next year. He felt no immediate sense of alarm, believing the workers merely wanted to compare his offer to that of other planters in the area. Within a matter of weeks, however, he realized that he faced serious problems. Every freedman on one plantation refused to return. On the others no more than 100 of their present force agreed to return. He felt nothing but disgust, declaring "if I could quit the whole concern I would do it at once ... planting is a no go." He could but conclude that "we are in the power of the negro & will have to submit to their ideas on some subjects if we want to work them."[25]

The elder Cobb echoed his son's disappointment and for the first time a tone of bitterness similar to that of Mary Ann's crept into his words. Although he offered better terms than the year before to those who would stay -- a third of both the cotton and corn crops provided they fed and clothed themselves -- he believed they could not be satisfied. He poured forth his frustration to Mary Ann, complaining, "grant them one thing and they demand something more, and there is no telling where they would stop. The truth is I am

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[25] John A. Cobb to Lucy Barrow Cobb, November 19, 1866; December 3, 1866; January 8, 1867; February 3, 1867; February 14, 1867, ibid.; John A. Cobb to Lucy Barrow Cobb, January 1, 1867, Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collection.

thoroughly disgusted with free negro labor, and am determined that the next year shall close my planting operations with them."[26]

Earlier, Cobb had defended free blacks arguing that, while lazy, they lacked any inherent viciousness and had behaved better than whites might have expected. Now he doubted his previous arguments. Blacks, he warned, held "no feeling of gratitude in their nature. Let any man offer them some little thing of no real benefit to them, but which looks like a little more freedom, and they catch at it with avidity and would sacrifice their best friend without hesitation and without regret." As proof of his assertion, he noted that one of the hands who had deserted without warning was the son of two of the old slaves at the Hurricane whom the Cobbs still supported. Too thoroughly schooled in the old regime, Cobb could not comprehend that the freedman in question might believe that both he and his parents had paid in full for their present support by virtue of their previous servitude.[27]

True to his word, Cobb promptly implemented efforts to free himself of his reliance on free black labor. He and John A. began hiring white operatives to work their

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[26] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, December, 1866, Howell Cobb Papers.

[27] Howell Cobb to Richard Taylor, December 8, 1865; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, September 15, 1865; December 14, 1865; December, 1866, ibid.

plantations. John A., however, soon acknowledged the unsatisfactory nature of this arrangement, commenting that the class of whites willing to accept such work "are no more reliable than the general run of negroes." By the season's end he announced that he had cleared all their plantations of white laborers, and vowed "I will never have any more."[28]

Cobb also renewed his efforts to find northern buyers for the plantations. He consulted with northern friends and pleaded with them for assistance. Unfortunately, the situation had changed but little since the previous summer. They could offer little help. Frustrated, and rapidly becoming convinced that "this portion of the American vineyard [is] fast becoming uninhabitable to white people," he urged Mary Ann to consider moving to another state. He recommended Kentucky, describing it as a place "where southern sentiment still has control."[29]

All the Cobbs' efforts to free themselves from reliance upon free black labor failed. Unable to sell their holdings at anything near actual value, and utterly dissatisfied with white laborers, they could not escape the hateful necessity

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[28] John A. Cobb to Lucy Barrow Cobb, January 1, 1867, Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Papers; John A. Cobb to Howell Cobb, February 3, 1867; November 19, 1867; John A. Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, February 14, 1867; John A. Cobb to Lucy Barrow Cobb, January 4, 1868, Howell Cobb Papers.

[29] Howell Cobb to William W. Corcoran, May 8, 1868; May 25, 1868, William Wilson Corcoran Papers, Library of Congress, Washington D.C. (Hereafter: Corcoran Papers); Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, June 24, 1867, Howell Cobb Papers.

of bargaining with their former property. Ultimately, they could but concur with John A.'s hope that "capital will at some day not very far distant control labor & then ... I will make ... them pay for the trouble and humiliation they have put me to."[30]

II

Even as Cobb struggled with the complexities of the South's new free labor system, he also pursued the same advice he had given his sons regarding careers that would allow them to make their own way in life. In early September, 1865, he announced his intention to return to the practice of law so "that I have a support independent of [the negroes]." Before month's end he and cousin James Jackson had concluded an agreement to open an office in Macon. The firm opened for business in November, and although clients were slow to arrive, Cobb noted that there were many "nibbles." He predicted that ere long "we shall hang a big trout." By December, he proudly reported that by "constant attendance and close attention to business" the firm had already earned more than $700 in fees with good prospects for more to follow.[31]

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[30] John A. Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, February 14, 1867, Howell Cobb Papers.

[31] Horace Montgomery, Howell Cobb's Confederate Career (Tuscaloosa: Confederate Publishing Company, 1959), p. 132; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, September 10, 1865; September 15, 1865; September 22, 1865; October 28, 1865; November 5, 1865; November 24, 1865; December 7, 1865, Howell Cobb Papers.

The firm gained a much needed boost in early 1866, when Cobb became involved in a constitutional case regarding the legality of a stay law enacted by the state legislature. Designed to provide debt relief for hardpressed citizens and corporations, the law clearly violated the principles of strict constitutional construction. Despite his own experiences in the 1840s and the financial pressures he now felt, Cobb yet adhered to his faith in strict construction. Any interference with the enforcement of private contracts by the government, he believed, must retard the state's recovery from the war. What northern investor, he demanded, would risk his capital in a state which offered it no legal protection?[32]

Added incentive for victory came when Cobb learned that his opponent before the bar would be Joe Brown. There were even rumors that Brown had secretly enlisted the assistance of the Stephens brothers. This trio, correspondents warned, desired more than a debate over legal technicalities. They had endorsed this popular measure as part of a comprehensive strategy to win popular acclaim and secure control of the

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[32] Warner Akin to Howell Cobb, June 19, 1866; Howell Cobb, Jr., to Mary Ann Cobb, June 22, 1866; June 25, 1866, Howell Cobb Papers; C. Mildred Thompson, Reconstruction in Georgia: Economic, Social, Political, 1865-1872 (Atlanta: reprint, Cherokee Publishing Co., 1971), pp. 114-115; Foner, Reconstruction, p. 212.

state government for themselves and their friends. It lay in Cobb's power to frustrate this political chicanery.[33]

The case went before the state supreme court. Cobb logically and skillfully argued that the law represented an unwarranted intrusion by the government into private business concerns. He convinced the justices to declare the stay law unconstitutional. Cobb's efforts in the case won him many plaudits among the state's conservatives. Chief Justice Joseph Henry Lumpkin recalled that "never in all his experience at the Bar and on the Bench had he heard a finer argument than that of General Cobb." Howell, Jr., relayed a report of one enthusiastic supporter who proclaimed that "he had always considered Pa the politician and & Uncle Tom the Lawyer, but that there could be no superior argument than my father's on the stay law."[34]

By the spring of 1867, Cobb proudly reported a thriving business for the firm. Despite his strenuous efforts, however, money remained scarce. The collapse of cotton prices following an initial post-war boom meant that the plantations were lucky to break even. Most of the costs for family support came -- as Cobb had predicted -- from the law practice. This constant financial stress wore heavily. Not

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[33] Warner Akin to Howell Cobb, June 19, 1866, Howell Cobb Papers; Foner, Reconstruction, p. 212.

[34] Samuel Boykin, ed., A Memorial Volume of the Hon. Howell Cobb of Georgia (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1870), pp. 44-45; Howell Cobb, Jr., to Mary Ann Cobb, June 25, 1866; undated typescript, Howell Cobb Papers.

only did it continuously weigh on his mind, but also required that he constantly remain at the plantations, the law office, or travelling the court circuit. On his fifty-third birthday, Cobb could not refrain from giving voice to the depression which his constant service "at the oar" engendered. Unburdening himself to Mary Ann, he observed that "fifty two years ago, I set out on the unprofitable pilgrimage which finds me to day struggling with the adversities of life & more hopeless of the future than ever before."[35]

III

Following his release from custody in May, 1865, Cobb avoided making any public political statements for more than three years. Although he received many requests to deliver speeches, he declined them all. He privately explained that "it would not look well for a man to be making a speech with a rope around his neck. It looked too much like a 'gallows scene.' For the present, I shall leave such performances with those who have a taste for such things." Yet Cobb did not ignore political developments. Between the spring of 1865, and the summer of 1868, he kept a close eye on state and national politics. He maintained an extensive correspondence with friends in both the South and the North.

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[35] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, June 13, 1867; June 15, 1867; September 7, 1867; John A. Cobb to Howell Cobb, December 16, 1867; December 17, 1867; John A. Cobb to Lucy Barrow Cobb, December 24, 1867, Howell Cobb Papers.

In these private letters he felt no compunction about giving voice to his political opinions. He found much on which to comment.[36]

In the immediate aftermath of the war, he wasted no time in leaping to the defense of Jefferson Davis. Captured while attempting to reach the Trans-Mississippi Department of the Confederacy, Davis now languished in federal custody. Cobb entered the debate over Davis' future in July, after reading of Secretary of State William H. Seward's surprise that no southerners had appealed for clemency for the former

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[36] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, September 22, 1865; November 5, 1865; November 29, 1865; December 7, 1865; January 6, 1866; July 18, 1866; September 16, 1866; October 5, 1866; February 5, 1867; May 26, 1867; September 1, 1867; October 14, 1867; October 19, 1867; November 2, 1867; September 7, 1867; Howell Cobb to Richard Taylor, December 8, 1865; Howell Cobb to James Wilson, June 4, 1865; James Wilson to Howell Cobb, June 6, 1865; Howell Cobb to William H. Seward, July 15, 1865; J. D. Hood to Howell Cobb, August 31, 1865; Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, September 15, 1865; September 19, 1866; February 10, 1867; February 27, 1867; June 4, 1867; October 8, 1867; W. B. Johnston to Howell Cobb, September 27, 1865; John C. Whitner to Howell Cobb, November 8, 1865, January 27, 1868; William M. Browne to Howell Cobb, March 28, 1866; May 12, 1866; August 5, 1868; August 21, 1868; August 22, 1868; Jeremiah S. Black to Howell Cobb, May 20, 1866(?); September 23, 1867; April (?), 1868; Howell Cobb to Daniel Sickles, September 12, 1866; Daniel Sickles to Howell Cobb, October 7, 1866; B. H. Hill to Howell Cobb, September 22, 1866; John G. Westmoreland to Howell Cobb, June 26, 1867; Richard Taylor to Howell Cobb, September 8, 1867; Alexander H. Stephens to Howell Cobb, October 3, 1867; Howell Cobb to J. D. Hoover, January 14, 1865; J. D. Bright to Howell Cobb, May 17, 1868 ibid.; A. C. Niven to Howell Cobb, April 9, 1866, in Ulrich Bonnell Phillips, ed., Correspondence of Robert Toombs, Alexander H. Stephens, and Howell Cobb (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1911), pp. 679-681; Howell Cobb to William Wilson Corcoran, May 8, 1868; May 25, 1868, Corcoran Papers; Herschel V. Johnson to Howell Cobb, December(?) 12, 1867, Cobb Family Papers.

Confederate president. Cobb felt compelled to "disabuse" Seward of the notion that southerners viewed the issue of Davis' fate with indifference. Like most southerners, Cobb had often opposed policies implemented by the Davis administration. Yet better than many, he appreciated the tremendous obstacles faced by Davis during the war. Now in the reality of defeat, he refused to abandon his old chief.[37]

Writing directly to Seward, Cobb insisted that southern silence in no wise reflected indifference on the subject. He acknowledged the divisions within the South during the war over Davis policies. Still, he asserted, "all were agreed ... that Mr. Davis was true and faithful to the trust ... reposed in him; and in that view he retained the ... confidence ... of our people." Every item regarding Davis' fate, he noted, was greeted with "anxious interest ... [and] intensity of ... sympathy." The people stood silent "not from a feeling of indifference but from a conviction that they are powerless."[38]

Upon learning in late November that Davis had been delivered to Richmond for trial, Cobb predicted an early discharge of the prisoner. In anticipation of such a happy outcome, the Cobbs invited the Davis family "to come directly to our house & remain with us until they make other

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[37] Howell Cobb to William H. Seward, July 18, 1865, Howell Cobb Papers.

[38] Ibid.

arrangements for their future." Although Cobb's prediction proved wrong, Varina Davis welcomed the invitation and visited the Cobbs in the spring of 1866. Both before and after the visit, Varina and Mary Ann maintained a warm and sympathetic correspondence.[39]

When, by mid-summer, Davis still had not won release, Cobb voiced private outrage. He fumed that "when all is made known of Yankee ... effort[s] to crush the spirit, and take the life of our late chief, what a picture will it present for the contemplation of mankind." While Cobb might fulminate in private, he framed his efforts in Davis' behalf in more diplomatic terms.[40]

In attempting to win over his old friend and recent enemy, General Daniel E. Sickles of New York, Cobb outlined his views on proper reconstruction policy. He opened his appeal to Sickles with the assurance that "I approach you, not in my own behalf but for another whose claims upon a kind and generous heart appeal with more earnestness for friendly aid than my own case -- unpardoned and exposed to an unknown destiny as I am." Clemency for Davis, he suggested, represented hardheaded political wisdom. "Our war," he asserted, "is at an end ... with the results we make no issue

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[39] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, November 23, 1865; December 14, 1865; Leonora Clayton to Mary Ann Cobb, April 19, 1866; Varina Davis to Mary Ann Cobb, April 23, 1866, ibid.

[40] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, July 18, 1866, ibid.

-- we have accepted them and pledged our faith to abide by them. It is in the interest of all that the peace ... should be lasting, that the bitterness of the past should be forgotten .... I have no wish to revive anything that is past and gone." Yet Davis had become the "representative man" for the South. He bore no greater guilt for secession and war than did thousands of southerners -- than did Cobb himself. The Confederate president now suffered this long incarceration purely because of his "representative character." Let the "prison door" be opened, he vowed, and the depth of southern gratitude must hasten the nation down the road to "lasting peace based upon a sincere reconciliation."[41]

The federals finally released Davis on bond in May, 1867. An indictment continued to hang over his head for more than a year, but eventually federal officials abandoned their prosecution. There is no evidence that Cobb's efforts contributed to the prisoner's release, but Davis certainly appreciated his loyalty.[42]

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[41] Howell Cobb to Daniel E. Sickles, September 12, 1866, ibid.

[42] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, October 19, 1867; Varina Davis to Mary Ann Cobb, October 22, 1868, ibid.; Jefferson Davis to Mary Ann Cobb, October 2, 1888, Jefferson Davis Letter, Felix Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia; William C. Davis, Jefferson Davis, The Man and His Hour (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1991), pp. 651-659.

Although not himself a prisoner, Cobb found it easy to identify with Davis' difficulties. In late May, 1865, President Andrew Johnson issued a proclamation defining his policy regarding pardons for former Confederates. Johnson's proclamation excluded several classes of Confederates from the process of securing amnesty by simply taking an oath of future loyalty. Those excluded, however, did possess the opportunity of applying directly to the president for a special pardon.[43]

Disqualified from the simple oath-taking process, Cobb spent more than two months struggling over the decision of how to respond to the opportunity for a special pardon. Finally, and with great reluctance, he acknowledged the necessity of making an application. He confided to Mary Ann that "I can no longer postpone the bitter pill -- I must either make up my mind to starve or travel the road of humiliation." Still showing a touch of defiance, he assured her that nothing but concern for family could compel him to bow to this bitter necessity: "if it was myself & myself only that was involved ... I might do otherwise but as it is -- I have made up my mind to take the dose."[44]

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[43] Foner, Reconstruction, pp. 190-191; Hans L. Trefousse, Andrew Johnson, A Biography (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1989), pp. 216-229.

[44] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, September 22, 1865, Howell Cobb Papers.

In keeping with his decision, Cobb prepared an application which stated his case simply and forthrightly. He made no effort to downplay his prominent role in events of the past five years. He frankly admitted that Lincoln's election in 1860 had forcibly convinced him of the necessity for secession. Acting upon that conviction, he declared, "I was therefore a secessionist and am responsible to the extent of my vote and influence for the action of Georgia." After briefly outlining his service to the Confederacy, he described his attitudes concerning the recent war and the demise of slavery. He assured the president that following his surrender, "I regarded the war at an end -- and have acted upon that conviction ... [and] have since counselled an unconditional submission to the result of the war." As to slavery, he stated, "I have regarded [that institution] abolished -- and at an end -- and have urged upon our people, an abandonment of all ideas, looking to its restoration now or hereafter." He concluded his application with a vow that he had purposely refrained from swearing an oath of allegiance "until I had fully determined to keep & observe it in good faith."[45]

Initially, Cobb's chances of receiving a quick pardon appeared promising. Only two days after placing his application in the hands of federal officers, he received a

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[45] Howell Cobb to Andrew Johnson, September 25, 1865, Amnesty Papers, Georgia, Record Group 94, National Archives (Hereafter: Amnesty Papers).

letter from W. B. Johnston recounting a conversation with the president. When the president had asked about Cobb, Johnston answered that he desired a pardon but felt reluctant to submit an application without some guarantee of success. President Johnson had responded, "Tell him to make the application."[46]

These bright prospects soon faded. Even as Cobb's application made its way northward, charges surfaced that he had participated in the abuse of prisoners of war interned at Andersonville, Georgia. Cobb moved promptly to refute these accusations. He wrote directly to the president, saying, "you know me well enough, to know, that such conduct would be at war with every impulse of my heart." He outlined a more elaborate refutation in a letter to General Steedman. He declared "in the most emphatic manner that the imputations lately sought to be cast upon me, of unkindness to prisoners is both unjust and unfounded. I never spoke an unkind word -- much less did an unkind act to a prisoner ... but on repeated occasions, I supplied their wants from my own means -- such as clothing -- feeding -- and providing them with money." Nevertheless, these charges haunted Cobb for some time.[47]

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[46] W. B. Johnston to Howell Cobb, September 27, 1865, Howell Cobb Papers.

[47] S. W. Ashe, The Trial and Death of Henry Wirz, With Other Matters Pertaining Thereto (Raleigh: E. M. Uzzel & Co., 1908), p. 23; Howell Cobb to J. B. Steedman, October, 11, 1865, Howell Cobb Papers; Howell Cobb to Andrew Johnson,

Located in Sumter County, the Andersonville Prison began operations in February, 1864. Designed to hold 10,000 prisoners, the actual number of inmates rapidly swelled to more than 30,000. During the prison's fourteen month history, nearly 13,000 prisoners died. This horrendous mortality rate stemmed from the collapse of the Confederate infrastructure, and from the Union strategy of refusing further prisoner of war exchanges.[48]

Following the surrender of Confederate forces in Georgia, Union officers arrested Captain Henry Wirz, commandant of the Andersonville Prison stockade. Transported to Washington, D.C., Wirz stood trial before a military tribunal. One charge specified that Wirz, Davis, Cobb ,and others had conspired " maliciously and ... in violation of the laws of war, ... to destroy the lives of a large number of federal prisoners." The trial began in August, 1865, and lasted three months. Although the Wirz case raised numerous questions of procedural fairness and fueled rumors of a Union conspiracy to destroy prominent Confederates, the court found him guilty and issued a death sentence.[49]

October 17, 1865, Amnesty Papers.

[48] Mildred Lewis Rutherford, Facts and Figures vs. Myth and Misrepresentation: Henry Wirz and the Andersonville Prison (Athens, 1921), pp. 10-11; William Marvel, Andersonville: The Last Depot (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1994), pp. ix-xi, 25-27.

[49] Ashe, Trial and Death of Henry Wirz, p. 23; Marvel, Andersonville, pp. 241-247; Rutherford, Henry Wirz and the Andersonville Prison, pp. 3-39.

Family records provide few clues as to Cobb's feelings regarding the charges against Wirz. Even before applying for a pardon, Cobb addressed a letter to Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton protesting Wirz's innocence. In early October, he received orders to report as witness in the Wirz trial. Eager to testify for the defense and hoping to press personally for his own pardon, he departed immediately. Upon arriving in Savannah, however, he found a telegram from the secretary of war revoking his summons. Disappointed, he returned home.[50]

Cobb's actions regarding the Wirz trial indicate that he clearly believed himself innocent of any wrong doing regarding the treatment of prisoners at Andersonville. His primary connection with the installation had involved prison security. Troops detached from his Georgia reserve force provided the prison's small guard garrison. From his headquarters in Macon, Cobb maintained a constant vigil for Union raiding parties moving towards Andersonville.[51]

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[50] Rutherford, Henry Wirz and the Andersonville Prison, pp. 15-16; J. B. Steedman to Howell Cobb, October 3, 1865; Henry R. Jackson to Howell Cobb, October 13, 1865, Howell Cobb Papers; Howell Cobb to Andrew Johnson, October 17, 1865, Amnesty Papers.

[51] James A. Seddon to Howell Cobb, May 18, 1864; John B. Winder to Howell Cobb, July 9, 1864; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, July 11, 1864; John B. Hood to Howell Cobb, July 18, 1864; G. Dawson to Howell Cobb, July 19, 1864; July 20, 1864; F. A. Shoup to Howell Cobb, July 28, 1864; William Hardee to Howell Cobb, December 22, 1864; Howell Cobb Papers; Howell Cobb to Samuel Cooper, May 5, 1864; Howell Cobb to T. Furlow, May 26, 1864; Howell Cobb to Joseph E. Johnston, July 18, 1864; Howell Cobb to James A. Seddon, August 13, 1864;

This is not to say, however, that Cobb possessed no knowledge of conditions at the prison. Within a few months of opening, complaints about Andersonville's operations began to surface. In May, 1864, Confederate authorities ordered Cobb to inspect the post and to report on both its condition and security needs. Although Cobb's daughter-in-law recalled him as saying that "it is not such a horrible, loathsome place, as it has been represented," his official report reflected real concern. He explained that 12,000 prisoners already occupied a stockade encompassing less than eighteen acres, and strongly urged that no more prisoners be sent to Andersonville. He recommended that a hospital be constructed outside the prison and warned that "the effect of increasing the number [of prisoners] within the present area, must be a terrific increase of sickness and death during the summer months." By way of emphasis, he noted that even the local Confederate garrison had no access to proper medical care. Expressing doubts that the local water supply could sustain a large increase in prisoners, he advised the construction of another prison elsewhere. As to security concerns, he called for a garrison of 1,200 infantry, a company of cavalry, and four artillery pieces. He also pressed for the

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August, 1864, Letter Book, Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collection; Marvel, Andersonville, pp. 50, 62-63, 64-65, 85, 152, 158-159, 216, 221.

construction of fortifications designed to deter Union raids.[52]

Cobb realized that the Confederacy possessed too few resources to sustain a large population of Union prisoners. In early June, he began to press for large scale prisoner exchanges. Aware that the Union high command had a adopted a policy of restricting prisoner exchanges, he nevertheless urged Confederate officials to find some way around the impasse. He noted several reasons for pursuing the matter. The large number of prisoners accumulating in Georgia, he observed, were "not only eating up our substance, but are withdrawing for their safekeeping [a] large force from the field and from agricultural interests." Warning that his department could neither supply nor guard such numbers, he privately proposed that the Confederacy identify all prisoners politically opposed to Lincoln and release them in time to participate in the North's presidential election. Such action, he declared, offered two advantages. Besides freeing the South from such a great burden, this humanitarian gesture would give the lie to all charges of Confederate cruelty to prisoners.[53]

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[52] Howell Cobb to Samuel Cooper, May 5, 1864; Howell Cobb to T. Furlow, May 26, 1864, Letter Book, Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collection; Horace Montgomery, Johnny Cobb: Confederate Aristocrat (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1964), pp. 62-63.

[53] Howell Cobb to James A. Seddon, June 6, 1864; August, 1864; September 9, 1864, Letter Books, Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collection.

Thereafter, military concerns raised by Sherman's Atlanta campaign and subsequent march to the sea dominated Cobb's time. He voiced no additional concern about the plight of Union prisoners until just before the war's end. In early 1865, General Grant, sensing impending victory, authorized the resumption of exchanges. Cobb moved quickly to make arrangements for handing over the Andersonville inmates to Union forces in Jacksonville, Florida. He complained bitterly when the enemy commander refused to authorize the transfer.[54]

Cobb never believed that he bore legal or moral culpability for the tragedy at Andersonville. Yet Andersonville certainly hindered his chances for a pardon. Some days after the Wirz execution, he received word from Washington of a statement by Secretary of State Seward that "the time had not yet come for me to be pardoned." Seward grouped Cobb with prominent southern leaders and indicated that his "time would come when Davis was pardoned."[55]

Despite his cognizance of the limited chances for prompt action on his application, Cobb continued to press his case. He enlisted the assistance of relatives and friends -- both

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[54] Howell Cobb to Joseph E. Brown, April 9, 1865, Letter Book, Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Papers; The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), Series Two, VIII, pp. 465, 470; Marvel, Andersonville, pp. 233-237.

[55] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, November 17, 1865; November 18, 1865, Howell Cobb Papers.

from the South and North. Individuals such as Henry Jackson and Jeremiah Black lobbied the president regularly in Cobb's behalf. President Johnson consistently professed warm feelings for his old associate, and promised to grant a pardon at the proper time. Keeping an eye on his political future, however, the president declined to say when the proper time might be.[56]

After more than a year, the president did agree to lift the travel restrictions imposed on Cobb by his parole. Cobb utilized his newly expanded freedom to travel to Washington with the intention of presenting his own case. Although family members feared for his safety, his reception in the capital assumed the character of an "ovation." Persons of all political persuasions greeted him warmly. Secretary of War Stanton, a man noted for his radical proclivities, volunteered to "second" Cobb's application. Supreme Court Chief Justice Salmon P. Chase entertained the Georgian for nearly eight hours. Chase promised that "he could get any of the radicals to recommend [Cobb's] pardon." While appreciative, Cobb resolved to avoid this avenue to his goal. He proudly reported to his family that the warm reception

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[56] Henry R. Jackson to Howell Cobb, October 13, 1865; November 6, 1865; George Hillyer to Howell Cobb, November 7, 1865; Jeremiah S. Black to Howell Cobb, May 20, 1866(?); September 23, 1867; April, 1868; Mary McKinley Cobb to "Dear Lute", March 6, 1867, ibid.; Jeremiah S. Black to Howell Cobb, April 20, 1867, E. Merton Coulter Collection, Felix Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia (Hereafter: Coulter Collection).

even extended to the city's hackmen. When a group of these cabbies spotted Cobb in the street, one exclaimed "'Faith and it is him!!'" as the entire group surrounded him. This reception, he noted, did much to ease his feeling of being "'a stranger in a strange land.'"[57]

The president also received Cobb in a friendly fashion. The two men had a lengthy interview, but Johnson still refused any definite commitment regarding a pardon. Johnson's demeanor convinced Cobb that the president too much feared the political consequences of pardoning such a prominent Confederate. Nevertheless, Johnson agreed to meet again in a few days. This planned interview did not occur. Johnson cancelled it, confiding to Black that "'he did not wish to see Cobb again because he did not like to tell him the truth, that he could do nothing for him.'" Mary Ann advised her husband to "abandon the fruitless and humiliating suit for pardon [and] come home." She urged him not to allow any concern for herself or their children to hinder his return because "we have one and all been party with you in the 'rebellion' (so called) heart, hand and soul, and we will share with you the danger and the disgrace." Reluctantly,

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[57] Andrew Johnson to Howell Cobb, January 7, 1867; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, February 5, 1867; Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, February 10, 1867; February 27, 1867; Mary McKinley Cobb to William McKinley, March 4, 1867; Mary McKinley Cobb to William McKinley, March 6, 1867, Howell Cobb Papers; Howell Cobb, Jr. to Lamar Cobb, February 20, 1867, Thomas Reade Rootes Cobb Papers, Felix Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia (Hereafter: T. R. R. Cobb Papers).

Cobb accepted her advice. Judge Black continued to pester Johnson at every opportunity, but without success. Johnson did not fulfill his promise to grant Cobb's pardon until mid-1868.[58]

While pursuing his pardon, Cobb maintained a close watch over the developing Reconstruction process. As the president and Congress grappled for dominance, Cobb concluded early on that Johnson represented the South's most powerful ally in the Reconstruction struggle. Whatever Cobb might think of Johnson's policy on pardons, he recognized the relative mildness of the president's program for restoring the southern states to the Union. He especially approved the president's refusal to require a social revolution in the South regarding race relations. He did not deviate from this view.[59]

In October, 1865, Georgia voters elected a state convention designed to bring the state into compliance with Johnson's program. This body repealed Georgia's secession

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[58] Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, February 27, 1867; Mary McKinley Cobb to William McKinley, March 4, 1867; Mary McKinley Cobb to William McKinley, March 6, 1867, Howell Cobb Papers; Howell Cobb, Jr. to Lamar Cobb, February 20, 1867, T. R. R. Cobb Papers.

[59] J. D. Hoover to Howell Cobb, August 31, 1865; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, December 7, 1865; September 16, 1866; September 1, 1867; Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, February 27, 1867; September, 1867; Jeremiah Black to Howell Cobb, September 23, 1867; April, 1868; Howell Cobb to J. D. Hoover, January 4, 1868, Howell Cobb Papers; A. C. Niven to Howell Cobb, April 9, 1866, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, pp. 679-681.

ordinance, abolished slavery, and repudiated the state's Confederate war debt. The next month, the state's voters again returned to the polls to elect a governor, congressmen, and a state legislature. Former Confederates dominated these elections. None of the congressmen elected could take the "iron-clad" test oath of past and future loyalty to the Union. Members of the legislature accented this ex-Confederate connection. They overrode the warnings of Unionist candidates for the Senate -- as well as the pleas of President Johnson -- and elected Alexander H. Stephens and Herschel V. Johnson to represent Georgia in the United States Senate.[60]

Cobb observed these proceedings with little comment. When the state legislature moved to abolish slavery, he sarcastically noted that "I think they will get the 'peculiar institution' thoroughly disposed of after a while. It has now been abolished by Congress, the President, war, state conventions, legislatures, etc. If all that don't kill it I should like to know what would?" Yet he clearly believed Georgia had made a good faith effort. He wrote that "Georgia is doing all she can to be restored to her constitutional status in the Union," and expressed profound regret "that the

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[60] Thompson, Reconstruction in Georgia, pp. 147-156.

good faith with which her people are acting is not appreciated at the north -- Confidence is of slow growth."[61]

Cobb failed to recognize any legitimate northern concerns about the South's persistence in electing its traditional leaders. He attributed all manifestations of suspicion or conflict to the ill-will of the radical wing of the Republican Party. He accused the Radicals of doing all in their power to frustrate the growth of confidence. When Congress assembled in December, 1865, and moved to deny seats to representatives from southern states reorganized under Johnson's Reconstruction program, Cobb took warning. He confided to Mary Ann that "if the movement of [Charles] Sumner in the Senate and Thad[deas] Stevens in the House foreshadow the future policy of the Govt. then indeed are our darkest days yet to come." The South's only hope, he declared, lay "in the willingness and ability of President Johnson to rescue [it] from the fate that bigotry, hatred and passion would bring."[62]

How ever much Johnson might be willing to sustain the South's constitutional claims, his ability to do so proved markedly deficient. He obstinately refused all efforts to compromise with his opponents. Standing rigidly upon a narrow interpretation of constitutional principle, he opted

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[61] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, December 7, 1865; Howell Cobb to Richard Taylor, December 8, 1865, Howell Cobb Papers.

[62] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, December 7, 1865, ibid.

to fight it out with presidential vetoes and public denunciations of his enemies. Both weapons proved more harmful to Johnson and the South that they ever did to the Radicals. Johnson's use of the veto -- especially against legitimate legislation designed to protect the civil and economic rights of African Americans -- drove conservative and moderate Republicans into the arms of their radical brethren. His public tirades against the Radicals struck many northerners as shrill and unpresidential. This sense that Johnson was demeaning his office pushed many more northern voters into the Radical camp. By late 1866, clear battle lines had been drawn: a relatively unified Republican party with a cadre of southern supporters opposed a coalition of northern Democrats and conservative white southerners led by Andrew Johnson. The Johnson coalition clung with decreasing hope to the presidential plan for restoring the Union. The Radical led Republicans rallied behind the much harsher plan outlined in the proposed Fourteenth Amendment.[63]

Cobb watched these developments with growing concern. Yet even as he deplored the course of events in the nation's capital, he appreciated the limitations on the South's ability to influence the Reconstruction debate. In March, 1866, he concluded that all true southerners should adopt his own policy of public silence. The congressional elections

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[63] Trefousse, Andrew Johnson, pp. 214-254; Foner, Reconstruction, pp. 176-227; 239-271.

of September, 1866, revealed the weakness of the Johnson coalition. Republicans swept to an overwhelming victory. Cobb reported that the news "has created a perfect panic among our people."[64]

Other Georgians began to urge a policy similar to that advocated by Cobb. Charles Jenkins, elected governor under Johnson's restoration plan, advised Georgia citizens to eschew political excitement. They should focus on rebuilding their shattered economy "whilst others rage and wrangle over ephemeral issues." Alexander H. Stephens equated the South to a prisoner of war. As such, it should await the decrees of the vengeful North in silence.[65]

Having won overwhelming control of Congress, the Republicans moved to implement their program. Embodied in a series of enactments adopted between March, 1867, and February,1868, congressional Reconstruction required the southern states to conform to several requirements before being readmitted to full participation in the Union. The Republican program overturned the state governments created by President Johnson and divided the South into five military

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[64] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, October 5, 1865; September 16, 1866; William M. Browne to Howell Cobb, March 28, 1866; Howell Cobb to J. D. Hoover, January 4, 1868, Howell Cobb Papers.

[65] Charles J. Jenkins to the Georgia Legislature, November 1, 1866, cited in Thompson, Reconstruction in Georgia, p. 164; Thomas E. Schott, Alexander H. Stephens of Georgia, A Biography (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), pp. 458-475.

districts, each commanded by a Union general. The Reconstruction Acts required the district commanders to supervise the registration of all eligible voters. This included all adult male African-Americans and all white adult males not excluded from political participation under the Fourteenth Amendment. When registration had been completed, the eligible voters were to elect state constitutional conventions. These conventions were to write new constitutions which included provisions for black suffrage. After the voters had ratified the new constitutions, state legislatures could be elected. When the legislatures assembled, the Reconstruction Acts required that they ratify the Fourteenth Amendment. Once a state had completed this process it could elect representatives to Congress.[66]

Cobb was in Washington lobbying for his pardon when Congress adopted the first of the Reconstruction Acts. Momentarily, family members in Georgia feared that he might fall victim to "bitter persecution" before he could escape the enemy capital. Although such fears proved groundless, Mary Ann correctly understood that events in the capital revealed just how little power President Johnson now retained. "Poor Andy," she grieved, "I fear he has no power

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[66] Foner, Reconstruction, pp. 271-280.

left .... He is only a 'figure head' to the Ship of State. Ornamental but wholly useless."[67]

Cobb had welcomed the adoption of his policy of public silence by other Georgia leaders. Just before passage of the first Reconstruction Act, however, former governor Brown issued a public letter urging his fellow citizens to comply with the law -- even to the point of accepting black suffrage. Brown's letter stunned most white Georgians and seemed certain to ruin him among the state's conservative white majority. Yet it also raised problems. Howell, Jr., writing to his father in Washington, offered a clear analysis of the impact of Brown's epistle: "Our only salvation on the do nothing policy -- was unity -- He has created a division of sentiment. His letter will lead Georgia ... to submission." Cobb shared his son's opinion.[68]

As the process of congressional Reconstruction advanced, the Cobbs looked on with a mixture of disgust and rage. Before the Radicals had taken control of Reconstruction Mary Ann had expressed regret that their actions served to hinder the re-establishment of friendly bonds of brotherhood between North and South. Those hopes now evaporated into hatred.

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[67] John C. Rutherford to Howell Cobb, March 20, 1867, in Phillips, Correspondence of Toombs, Stephens, and Cobb, pp. 685-686; Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, February 27, 1867, Howell Cobb Papers.

[68] Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, February 27, 1867; Howell Cobb, Jr., to Howell Cobb, March 3, 1867; Mary McKinley Cobb to William McKinley, March 4, 1867, Howell Cobb Papers.

Denouncing the Yankees as "our natural enemies," she professed, "I have no desire to heal the [breach]" and expressed the wish that these feelings "not die with me." She also began to suggest that her husband reconsider his own public reticence. She pressed him to "do all in your power for our noble old state -- publicly and privately as often as you have opportunity."[69]

Despite Mary Ann's urging, Cobb continued to maintain his role as quiet observer. He did take a low profile role in a dispute between the University of Georgia and the military officers enforcing the Reconstruction Acts, but declined to do more. Yet, he fully shared in Mary Ann's feelings, and after an all night meeting with his old college chum, Henry L. Benning, he confided to her that unless the immediate future witnessed the defeat of the Radicals, "we cannot see how the South can possibly remain inhabitable by white people."[70]

This last remark revealed much about the nature of the Cobb family's hostility to congressional Reconstruction. Just as they had found it virtually impossible to overcome their aversion to negotiating labor contracts with their

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[69] Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, September 19, 1866; June 4, 1867; June 28, 1867, ibid.

[70] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, August 12, 1867, Coulter Collection; Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, August 14, 1867; (?) Harris to Howell Cobb, August 23, 1867; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, September 1, 1867; William L. Mitchell to Howell Cobb, September 15, 1867, Howell Cobb Papers.

former slaves, they also found it impossible to envision a world in which former property might exist as political equals with former owners. Like most other white southerners they believed that political rights must ruin the value of African-Americans as laborers and social inferiors. When the elections for the state constitutional convention mandated by Congress occurred, Cobb denounced them as an "infamous farce." Personally disqualified from voting, he reported that most white voters throughout the state had refused to participate in this tyrannical exercise of congressional power. This demonstration of white unity, he thought, might impress the North with the South's determination to resist passively "the dishonor and degradation of tamely submitting to the infamy which radicalism had prepared for us." Should such be the case, he said, "it is to be hoped, that the day of our deliverance from yankee and negro supremacy is at hand." He reported with disdain that the overwhelming majority of their own employees had voted "the radical ticket."[71]

By January, 1868, he could maintain strict silence no longer. When invited to attend a national Democratic celebration, he poured forth his frustration in a nominally private letter to J. D. Hoover, chairman for the event. He refused to attend, but admitted that the invitation had

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[71] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, November 2, 1867, Howell Cobb Papers.

tempted him "to break a self-imposed silence on political questions which I have observed since the close of the war." Southern participation in a national festival, he wrote, "would be a cruel mockery, for which I ... have no heart." The people of the South, ruined by military defeat, now bore the burdens of political oppression which they had no power to resist. They had yielded in their bid for independence, surrendered their weapons, and returned home determined to accept again their role as citizens in a constitutional republic. Acting in good faith, southerners had expected to be restored to their rights and secure in their property.[72]

Such had not been the case. Instead of welcome, the South met demands for punishment and revenge by the North. Rather than accepting the South's acknowledgement that defeat had in fact left it in the Union, the North's leaders now insisted that "a successful war to keep us in the Union left us out of the Union." Pursuant to that claim, the North had imposed a series of unjust and unconstitutional policies on their captives. Unable to defend themselves, southerners had resorted to verbal protests and petitions for relief. Northerners, however, merely construed these as "the exhibition of disloyal sentiments," and made them the "pretext for renewed aggressive legislation." The worst abuse of the South thus far, he complained, arose from Republican insistence on a policy designed "to put the South

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[72] Howell Cobb to J. D. Hoover, January 4, 1868, ibid.

under negro supremacy." While hopeful that a Democratic victory in the presidential election of 1868 might free the South from its present burdens, until that happy day he could not celebrate.[73]

Despite his refusal to attend the Democratic festival, Cobb maintained a close watch over the national political arena. Although he hoped for a Democratic triumph in the presidential election of 1868, he became convinced that divisions within the Democratic Party over currency issues rendered a victory unlikely. By spring he began to warn southern Democrats that they must avoid all involvement in issues that threatened to disrupt the northern wing of the party. The South, he declared, could unite upon any platform and any candidate put forth by the national Democratic convention.[74]

He also issued similar warnings to northern members of the party. When writing to William W. Corcoran, he urged the cause of Democratic unity. He noted that Ulysses S. Grant appeared certain to win the Republican nomination. Grant, he said, seemed committed to the continuance of radical policies regarding the South. The only chance to save the nation and restore constitutional government lay in Democratic success. Convinced that most Americans opposed radicalism, he insisted that Republican success would derive

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[73] Ibid.

[74] Howell Cobb to William M. Browne, May 12, 1868, ibid.

more from "the folly of the democrats than the wisdom of [Republican] leaders." He offered assurances that the South felt great flexibility regarding platforms and candidates. He declared, "we want no better platform ... than antagonism to the destructive policy of our enemies." In keeping with this spirit of unity, he urged "let us first save the country and the constitution and then discuss questions of detail in the administration of the government."[75]

Having promised southern support for whatever candidate the Democrats nominated, Cobb then suggested that former president Millard Fillmore represented a wise choice for the party's nomination. He believed that Fillmore, as an old Whig, might draw more voters out of Republican ranks than any possible Democratic candidate. Cobb believed that many people with views similar to Fillmore's had drifted into the ranks of radicalism because they had nowhere else to go. Such voters "would recognize in Mr. Fillmore a safe statesman to save the country from anarchy and radical rule -- and would vote for him."[76]

Cobb continued his behind-the-scene activities, but persisted in his refusal to deliver any speeches before

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[75] Howell Cobb to William W. Corcoran, May 8, 1868; May 25, 1868, Corcoran Papers.

[76] Howell Cobb to William W. Corcoran, May 25, 1868, ibid.

receiving his pardon. The long-awaited pardon finally arrived that summer. He promptly took to the stump.[77]

Beginning in July he delivered a series of speeches across the state. He castigated the radicals and their southern allies, and urged Georgia's white voters to cast their ballots for the Democratic ticket of Horatio Seymour and Frank P. Blair. He denounced the Republican platform as an unholy instrument predicated on the principle "that a white man's Government shall be guaranteed to the people of the North, but that negroes are good enough for Georgia and the people of the South."[78]

Above all else, however, his speeches became a call to revival. Not a religious revival -- although he couched his call in a religious idiom -- but the revival of Georgia. He boldly defined "the work for every true Georgian." Their state had suffered much and been wounded deeply. "Her body," he cried, "is covered over with the evidence of these wounds and this suffering." No man could honestly plead ignorance of Georgia's condition. No matter what political path an individual had followed prior to this moment, he could now rally to the standard of patriotism just as a longtime sinner

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[77] Mary Ann Cobb to John A. Cobb, July 17, 1868; "Great Speech of General Howell Cobb," Atlanta, July 23, 1868; James Jackson to Howell Cobb, August 19, 1868; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, September 7, 1868; Clare de Graffenried to Mary Ann Cobb, September 9, 1868, Howell Cobb Papers.

[78] "Great Speech of General Howell Cobb," Atlanta, July 23, 1868, ibid.

might rally to the standard of the cross. He declared "the path is open; you are invited to tread it. On the one hand is darkness ... and continued ... oppression; and on the other is freedom, prosperity and peace .... Come one and all, and let us snatch the old banner from the dust, give it again to the breeze, and, if needs be, to the God of battles, and strike one more honest blow for constitutional liberty."[79]

IV

Cobb's return to the stump signalled his intention to reassert his leadership within Georgia politics. The state's conservative press welcomed his return, expressing satisfaction that this favorite son had at last resumed his proper political role. Georgia Republicans, of course, felt considerably less satisfaction at Cobb's return. No one resented his renewed political career more than Joe Brown.[80]

Cobb and Brown wasted no time in coming to verbal blows. Cobb castigated the former secessionist and current Republican as a man who crouched "at the feet of our enemies [and] declared that these good people of Georgia deserved the fate that had come upon them, of being put under the ban of negro supremacy." Cobb urged all true Georgians to "drive [him] from the pale of social and political society." In a voice dripping with sarcasm, he observed, "when I see a white

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[79] Ibid.

[80] Louisville Journal, clipping in William M. Browne to Howell Cobb, August 5, 1868, ibid.

man talking to Joe Brown and that class of men, a feeling of revulsion comes over me. I can't help it. But when I see them talking to a negro, I feel sorry for the negro."[81]

Brown responded in kind. He denounced Cobb as an original Union man who became the enemy of the government of the United States only when it became clear that he could not win the presidency. Since that time, he charged, Cobb had "sought to ruin what he could not rule." Brown insisted that he had no intention of responding to the assaults of a "blackguard." Referring to Cobb's appeal to the "God of battles," he declared: "I will not exchange epithets with a man who at the end of the war swore to support the Union ... and now again plots revolution, bloodshed, and carnage for its overthrow."[82]

Although Democrats had welcomed Cobb's resurgence, many feared that his vigorous rhetoric might hurt their cause. They had, in fact, felt special concern over his appeal to the "God of battles" and his call for "one more honest blow for constitutional liberty." They feared that their Republican opponents might use these words to stir up northern anxieties -- just as Brown was doing. A New York Democrat, writing anonymously, declared that Cobb's poorly

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[81] "Great Speech of General Howell Cobb," Atlanta, July 23, 1868, ibid.

[82] Speech of Joseph E. Brown, 1868, Joseph E. Brown Papers, Felix Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia.

timed and ill-considered remarks would loose the national Democratic ticket "50,000 votes." Radical Republicans, he said, had gained their most effective arguments from speeches such as those made by Cobb.[83]

Even some Georgia Democrats expressed anxiety over the meaning of Cobb's remarks. James Jackson, his legal partner, relayed these concerns and recommended that Cobb prepare a letter for publication to clarify that he did not envision a renewal of sectional warfare. Although Cobb did not write the recommended letter, he did authorize his friend and advisor, William M. Browne, to ease the concerns of northern Democrats. While in New York to raise funds for the presidential campaign in Georgia, Browne also labored to soothe anxiety about Cobb's public pronouncements. He soon reported that "the row about yr. speech is a tempest in a teapot."[84]

Despite the satisfactory outcome of Browne's mission, Cobb must have foreseen the provocative nature of his remarks. If so, why did he make them? He never intended that the Civil War be renewed. From the end of the war until his death he never wavered in his conviction that the South's military defeat had been complete and final. Yet he also

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[83] E. W. Warren to Howell Cobb, August 3, 1868; Anonymous to Howell Cobb, August 3, 1868; William E. Browne to Howell Cobb, August 5, 1868, Howell Cobb Papers.

[84] James Jackson to Howell Cobb, August 10, 1868; August 19, 1868; William M. Browne to Howell Cobb, August 21, 1868, ibid.

recognized that a new struggle had begun. If the Confederacy had died, the South's -- and Cobb's -- determination to preserve white supremacy had not.[85]

Cobb sincerely believed the Radical Republicans' efforts to impose "negro suffrage" on the South represented an unprecedented threat to constitutional liberty in the United States. He also recognized the limited nature of southern influence in the national government. Realizing that the South could not significantly frustrate Republican programs at the national level, he concluded that it must obstruct Reconstruction policy at the state level. While Cobb recognized that purely political activities might produce some victories -- already John A., a member of the state house of representatives, was plotting the expulsion of African-Americans from the legislature -- he knew that something more was required for total victory. The Ku Klux Klan might well provide the margin of success. The Klan had begun organizing in Georgia in the spring and summer of 1868 -- at about the same time that Cobb renewed his political career. Cobb almost certainly knew of this organization and its purpose. It seems likely, therefore, that his martial

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[85] Howell Cobb to Daniel E. Sickles, September 12, 1866; Howell Cobb to J. D. Hoover, January 4, 1868, ibid.

words aimed at inspiring the Klan in its campaign of murder and intimidation.[86]

Unfortunately, Cobb's precise future course regarding both the Klan in particular and Reconstruction in general must forever remain a mystery. The constant grind of plantation management and legal practice, combined with his frustrating pursuit of a presidential pardon, had begun to exact a visible toll on his health. In the spring of 1868, he began to suffer from what appeared to be severe and chronic "dyspepsia." His physician, Dr. Jonathan Johnston, prescribed exercise and dietary restrictions as the best way to control his indigestion.[87]

Cobb took their advice seriously. He started horseback riding daily, and informed Mary Ann that "I am ... eating very little, and drinking none." Despite these efforts, he continued to suffer discomfort. By mid-June he began to express hope of finding time for a month's vacation.[88]

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[86] Howell Cobb to J. D. Hoover, January 4, 1868; "Great Speech of General Howell Cobb," Atlanta, July 23, 1868; John A. Cobb to (?) Hancock, August 10, 1868; John A. Cobb to Lucy Barrow Cobb, August 11, 1868; John A. Cobb to Howell Cobb, August 16, 1868, ibid.; Macon Georgia Weekly Telegraph, August 7, 1868; Thompson, Reconstruction in Georgia, pp. 361-362; Allen W. Trelease, White Terror: The Ku Klux Klan Conspiracy and Southern Reconstruction (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1971), pp. 73-79.

[87] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, June 10, 1868; June 18, 1868; John A. Cobb to Lucy Barrow Cobb, June 15, 1868; Mary Ann Cobb to John A. Cobb, July 17, 1868; Lucy Barrow Cobb to John A. Cobb, July 21, 1868, Howell Cobb Papers.

[88] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, June 10, 1868; Lucy Barrow Cobb to John A. Cobb, July 21, 1868, ibid.

The arrival of his pardon delayed his proposed holiday, however. Freed at last from the threat of the "gallows," Cobb felt compelled to add his voice to protests against Reconstruction policy. The effort carried a price. He found the demands of delivering long and energetic speeches in the Georgia summer heat exhausting. Following a speech to an audience of 400 crowded into the Athens town hall, Mary Ann reported: "he bore it well[,] some exhaustion, but little compared with that which followed his Atlanta speech. He is following Dr. J[ohnson]'s prescription."[89]

In September, Cobb and Mary Ann decided to make their long delayed visit to New York. Both needed a rest. Mary Ann's physical and mental health had been fragile for years. The strain and grief of the war years, followed by the uncertainties of the post-war period had often left her sick and anxious. The deaths of a cousin, Adah Jackson, and a close friend, Elizabeth Robb, in the winter of 1868 had added to her depression. Although Cobb insisted that concern for Mary Ann's health necessitated the trip, his own condition had not improved. James Jackson sent him a formula to relieve his symptoms. Jackson's added the assurance that a friend who had suffered a similar affliction -- "pain in the breast especially in walking" -- had been greatly relieved by this mixture of nitric acid, munatic acid, and sweetened

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[89] Mary Ann Cobb to John A. Cobb, July 17, 1868, ibid.

water, indicates that Cobb probably suffered from heart disease.[90]

Despite his exhaustion and almost constant physical discomfort, Cobb viewed his life with satisfaction as he prepared for his northern vacation. His three oldest sons were now married with children of their own. John A. had left behind the restlessness of his youth. Besides his role in managing the family plantations, he also had entered into a drugstore venture and been elected to the state legislature. Both Lamar and Howell, Jr. were practicing attorneys. Andrew, the youngest son, was preparing for admission to the University at R. W. McClellan's school where he was earning high marks. Meyon, his oldest daughter, had been a student at Mrs. E. E. Ford's Boarding School in Rome, Georgia for two years. Her parents believed that her studies there in arithmetic, French, German, and Latin virtually had satisfied her need for formal education. His middle daughter, Sarah, was following her own studies at a day school in Athens. Elizabeth, the youngest of the Cobb children, remained at home, a victim -- along with her

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[90] Mary Ann Cobb to Mary Ann Lamar Cobb, March 5, 1866; April 1, 1867; Howell Cobb, Jr. to Mary Ann Cobb, July 26, 1866; Lucy Barrow Cobb to Howell Cobb, August 28, 1866; Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, October 25, 1866; February 10, 1867; Jonathan M. Johnson to Howell Cobb, January 31, 1867; Howell Cobb, Jr. to Howell Cobb, March 3, 1867; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, April 1, 1867; February 1, 1868; J. C. Whitner to Howell Cobb, January 27, 1868; Sarah Wadley to Mary Ann Cobb, February 11, 1868; James Jackson to Howell Cobb, September 16, 1868, ibid.

brother Andrew -- of the "Base Ball fever" that had swept the country. On September 7, Cobb wrote: "Today I enter on my fifty fourth year -- a tolerable old man who has reached the summit of life's journey -- and must soon begin its descent." A few days later, he, Mary Ann, and Meyon departed for New York.[91]

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The trio enjoyed the change of pace offered by the big city. Mary Ann and Meyon spent their days wandering through shops and sightseeing. At night Cobb accompanied them to operas and plays. He also utilized his visit as an opportunity to consult with New York Democrats. He reported to his sons in Georgia that he believed Grant and the Republicans virtually unbeatable in the coming national elections. He admonished the boys to keep his opinions

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[91] Sarah Rootes Cobb to Howell Cobb, January 26, 1865; Olivia Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, March 23, 1865; March 1, 1868; Sarah Rootes Cobb to Howell Cobb, Jr., March 27, 1865; Mary Ann Cobb to Mary McKinley, May 14, 1865; Howell Cobb, Jr. to Mary Ann Cobb, February 7, 1866; April 25, 1866; July 26, 1866; Mary Ann Lamar Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, April 27, 1866; October 19, 1866; August 14, 1867; December 3, 1867; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, May 19, 1866; August 12, 1866; Mary McKinley Cobb to "Dear Lute," July 30, 1866; Howell Cobb, Jr. to Howell Cobb, August 18, 1866; Howell Cobb to Mrs. E. E. Ford, October 12, 1866; Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, October 14, 1866; Lucy Barrow Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, November 16, 1866; March 5, 1868; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, December 21, 1868; June 18, 1868; R. M. McClellan to Howell Cobb, February 2, 1867; Andrew Jackson Cobb to Elizabeth Cobb, April 13, 1867; Sarah M. Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, December 12, 1867; Lucy Barrow Cobb to John A. Cobb, January 3, 1868; Mary Ann Lamar Cobb to Howell Cobb, February 1, 1868; Mary Ann Cobb to John A. Cobb, May 29, 1867; Howell Cobb to John A. Cobb, September 14, 1868, ibid.

strictly to themselves as "an undue importance is attached to my opinions & if made known ... might do harm to our friends."[92]

After spending several days in the city, Cobb, Mary Ann, and Meyon travelled to Niagara Falls and Saratoga. They then returned to New York in preparation for their trip back home. During their stop in the city, they took rooms in the Fifth Avenue Hotel.[93]

On the morning of October 9, Episcopalian Bishop John W. Beckwith wandered into the hotel lobby. There he encountered an old friend and schoolmate, Colonel Joseph J. Williams of Florida. Williams, who had served on Cobb's staff during the war, informed Bishop Beckwith of Cobb's presence and urged him to meet with the "General." Williams believed this meeting desirable because Cobb had heard the Bishop preach a sermon in Macon which he found offensive, and which led him to reject affiliation with the Episcopal Church.[94]

Beckwith quickly agreed to seek out Cobb. The two men found him talking with some ladies. Cobb soon ended this conversation and joined Beckwith and Williams. At first their talk assumed a light tone. Beckwith later recalled

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[92] Howell Cobb to Howell Cobb, Jr., September 23, 1868, Coulter Collection.

[93] Ibid.

[94] Boykin, Memorial Volume, pp. 58-67.

that Cobb made a series of remarks which caused all three considerable mirth. Gradually their discussions took on a more serious air as the subject turned to religion.[95]

During the course of the past several years, religion had played an increasingly significant role in Cobb's life. Long interested in religion as an intellectual subject, he had been a regular attendant at a variety of churches throughout the 1840s and early 1850s. Religious matters did not assume an intensely personal quality for Cobb, however, until the death of his father in 1855. John Addison had suffered an agonizing death, but despite his own intense pain, the old man's chief deathbed concern had been his son's spiritual salvation. Neither distance nor time ever freed Cobb from the memory of his dying father's last wish. Grief and doubt left him with a spiritual agony which rivaled the physical pain experienced by John Addison in his final illness.[96]

Mary Ann offered her husband reassurance. She insisted that his agony represented a positive sign that "God is sounding your heart with a lighted candle." More importantly, she noted, "what God has begun, he will perfect .... He will carry on his glorious work of grace in your

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[95] Ibid., John W. Beckwith to Mr. Jackson, October 23, 1868, Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collection.

[96] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, December 2, 1855; December 4, 1855; December 8, 1855; December 10, 1855; December 13, 1855; January 1, 1856; January 9, 1856, Howell Cobb Papers.

heart, and in [God's] own good time, He will grant you sufficient grace ... to receive Christ as your savior."[97]

In the years that followed, Cobb's grief eased, but the desire for religious salvation remained a constant ache. Three years after his initial crisis, he confided to Mary Ann, "I have prayed to believe as you believe & feel as you feel -- love gratitude and faith in a savior." But as yet, he still felt only desire and frustration.[98]

Brother Tom and brother-in-law Williams Rutherford, Jr., both devout Christians, maintained a constant effort to push Cobb towards a religious commitment. Sarah supported these efforts and added her encouragement on a regular basis. Other family members participated in the campaign to save Cobb's soul with occasional warnings and pleas. Tom Cobb, writing in 1858, exemplified these appeals. He approached the subject with some reluctance, admitting, "that as my elder brother, I have always looked up to you, & reverenced you, & I believe I could approach the President himself, with less hesitancy to urge upon him, his souls salvation." Still, he believed himself compelled by "a sense of duty to you, to myself [and] to my God, to beg you, solemnly now, to consider this subject." With unintended prophesy he warned that "Death is a visitor who gives no formal notice of his

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[97] Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, December 9, 1855, ibid.

[98] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, June 30, 1859; July 4, 1859, ibid.

calls." Thus he pleaded with his brother to seek "Communion with God ... the great birthright of man."[99]

Despite family efforts, Cobb's doubts persisted, and as long as they remained he refused to make any profession of faith. He did outline the precise nature of his doubts to Tom. He freely acknowledged a belief in an all powerful God, whom he worshipped. He could not accept, however, that "'it was necessary that Jesus Christ should have suffered & and died'" for his salvation. Nor did he feel comfortable with doctrines regarding baptism and the other sacraments. Even worse, he confessed, whenever he contemplated the "Infinite Being," he felt "'the utter littleness of all around [him] & the effect is to depress [me] into a stupor as the only relief to [my] mind.'"[100]

Mary Ann appreciated the difficulty of Cobb's spiritual struggle. She pursued a cautious course on the subject. She often expressed hope and confidence that he would find salvation. Yet she usually avoided exerting any open pressure on religious subjects. On occasion, she even

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[99] Thomas Reade Rootes Cobb to Howell Cobb, November 4, 1857; March 5, 1858; September 8, 1858; November 13, 1858; November 30, 1858; Sarah Rootes Cobb to Howell Cobb, April 6, 1858; Williams Rutherford, Jr. to Mary Ann Cobb, July 23, 1858; December 25, 1867; Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, May 26, 1859; June 27, 1859; William L. Mitchell to Howell Cobb, August 2, 1861; Williams Rutherford, Jr. to Howell Cobb, August 17, 1867, ibid.; Thomas Reade Rootes Cobb to Howell Cobb, October 8, 1858, Coulter Collection.

[100] Howell Cobb to Thomas Reade Rootes Cobb, cited in Thomas Reade Rootes Cobb to Howell Cobb, November 30, 1858, Howell Cobb Papers.

interposed herself between her husband and overzealous relatives. When Williams Rutherford became too enthusiastic in his conversion attempts, she cut him off with an intense warning that he would "do harm." When her own son Lamar, himself a recent convert, began to pray aloud at church meetings for his father's salvation, she urged him to desist. She knew her husband well enough, she said, to recognize the negative impact of all such attempts at direct pressure. Cobb appreciated these efforts, assuring her that "you have understood my character better than others."[101]

Whatever his own doubts, Cobb took the religious life of his children seriously. Beginning in the spring of 1858, Athens and the surrounding communities experienced a potent religious revival which swept across denominational lines. Cobb's sons, Lamar and Howell, Jr., both made professions of faith. Like other family members, Cobb welcomed this development. He also experienced serious concerns when John A. not only remained untouched by the revival, but also evinced an unwillingness to attend church on a regular basis. He appealed to his oldest son to reconsider this attitude. Speaking as one who had passed through a similar experience, he conceded that his advice might seem questionable.

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[101] Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, December 9, 1855; May 26, 1859; June 27, 1859; September 7, 1862; Thomas Reade Rootes Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, April 9, 1858; Mary Ann Cobb to Williams Rutherford, Jr., August 5, 1858; Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, June 30, 1859; March 18, 1863; March 20, 1863; May 10, 1863; May 18, 1863; May 29, 1863, ibid.

Nevertheless, he insisted that he had long struggled "in a quiet way" to overcome such feelings. Now he had succeeded sufficiently that on any Sunday when he failed to attend church "I feel unpleasant & uncomfortable from a consciousness that something has gone wrong." He urged John A. to cultivate a similar feeling.[102]

The coming of the war and its attendant losses marked a critical juncture in Cobb's religious struggles. Fear that he might die in battle spurred Mary Ann to deviate from her usual practice and press religious matters directly on her husband. Following a spate of rumors that he had fallen in combat, she pleaded with him to accept the "cup of salvation." The deaths of John Lamar at Crampton's Gap and Tom Cobb at Fredricksburg further fueled her sense of urgency. "'Only believe,'" she tearfully begged, "and Heaven will be opened to you .... 'Only believe.' Jesus waits to receive every returning prodigal .... Listen to his voice." Playing upon Cobb's own grief, she reminded him "how ardently has the beloved Tom -- prayed for you -- how earnestly has he desired to <u>see</u> your salvation -- but like the patriarchs of old he has passed into glory without receiving the ... fruition of his hopes -- his prayers ... & tears -- but I

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[102] Sarah Rootes Cobb to Howell Cobb, April 6, 1858; Thomas Reade Rootes Cobb to Howell Cobb, April 9, 1858; Mary Ann Cobb to Lamar Cobb, April 11, 1858; Williams Rutherford, Jr. to Mary Ann Cobb, July 23, 1858; September 10, 1858; Howell Cobb to John A. Cobb, June 22, 1859; Mary Ann Cobb to John B. Lamar, September, 1860, <u>ibid</u>.

pray that his 'works' may follow him -- and that you will die a converted man."[103]

Cobb's desire for salvation and his grief left him vulnerable to such appeals. Seeking to ease his mother's anguish over the loss of her son, he urged her to find solace in her faith in "He alone -- who controls the destiny of all of us." Recalling the lesson he had learned at her knee as a boy, he offered the reminder that "our Heavenly Father deals with us -- not as we would have him to do -- but as in his good pleasure -- is best for us." They must all strive to accept this hard lesson: "as blow follows blow -- and we turn [from] this grave of our loved one -- but to open the grave of another -- we can but with hearts sunken in mournful sympathy -- lean upon that strong arm which can bear us up."[104]

His letters to Mary Ann, given an even sharper edge of grief by the death of their own young son Tom only weeks after that of the uncle for whom he had been named, also reflected this air of acceptance. In God's promises, he observed, Mary Ann possessed a "blessed hope" that "you and "your angel band -- who have gone before you shall again meet and be happy and blessed for ever more." Under the

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[103] Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb, September 7, 1862; December 16, 1862; January 18, 1863, ibid.

[104] Howell Cobb to Sarah Rootes Cobb, January 16, 1863, Henry Rootes Jackson Scrapbook, Georgia Department of Archives and History, Atlanta, Georgia.

circumstances, it was his "hourly prayer" that God might "prepare all of us, so dear to you -- and loved by you -- to join that happy throng."[105]

Both Sarah and Mary Ann found cause for hope in Cobb's words. Sarah related to Mary Ann how his letter "made the tears to flow." But, she added, "they were of joy as well as grief, for ... none but a truly converted soul could have penned such a letter, it fell like balm upon my lacerated heart." Mary Ann conveyed similar messages directly to her husband, saying, "your letters are a great comfort to me, and I am encouraged to believe that there is no obstacle between you and Church membership -- except that you may raise with your own humility ... Come -- Come quickly and put it not off too long lest you may be denied the privilege of acknowledging openly your Lord and Master."[106]

Despite these halting steps towards an open profession of faith, Cobb's doubts persisted, and he refused to make any definite religious commitment. In the aftermath of the war, Cobb's spiritual struggle continued. As had been the case previously, the death of a beloved family member pushed him further toward a profession of faith. On July 22, 1866, Sarah died after a long period of decline. She was spared many of the final agonies experienced by her husband. Cobb

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[105] Howell Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, March 20, 1863; April 3, 1863, Howell Cobb Papers.

[106] Sarah Rootes Cobb to Mary Ann Cobb, January 15, 1863; Mary Ann Cobb to Howell Cobb May 17, 1863, ibid.

recorded his impressions of her last moments, writing, "it was a mournful pleasure to see the Christian of nearly a half century go down into her grave without a fear or apprehension. To part with those she loved in this world was a sorrow. To go to her home in Heaven was a joy unspeakable. God grant that we too may be prepared when our summons shall come."[107]

In the months following Sarah's death Cobb began to consult others on his religious doubts with greater frequency. To Reverend E. W. Warren, pastor of the First Baptist Church of Macon, he confessed that "he did not believe in the divinity of Jesus Christ." Cobb explained to the minister that he could not comprehend the concept of the divine in the human, and not comprehending could not believe. Warren concluded that how ever much Cobb might admire Christianity and its potential to effect good, his doubts, if unrelieved, must prove fatal to Cobb's quest for salvation. He worked to assist Cobb in overcoming these doubts and approved of his consultations with others who might help him find his way. The minister later reported that the book, The Christ of History, finally convinced Cobb that he must strive to believe in the divinity of Christ rather than understand it.[108]

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[107] Howell Cobb to Howell Cobb, Jr., July 22, 1866, Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collection.

[108] Boykin, Memorial Volume, p. 125-139.

This conviction led Cobb to an intensive examination of the Gospels and an emotional private profession to Warren that he now accepted Christ as "the anointed Saviour of man." When Warren asked if Cobb also accepted Christ as his own savior, he replied, "I do sir." Although Cobb had now taken this critical step, he still declined to accept immediate baptism. He as yet harbored serious doubts regarding numerous Christian doctrines. Nevertheless, he resolved to suppress his doubts and promised to be baptized when Mary Ann and the children returned to Macon in the fall.[109]

Cobb's spiritual quest had carried him this far when he engaged Bishop Beckwith in conversation. Beckwith quickly corrected any misgivings he held regarding the Macon sermon. They then turned to more profound religious issues. It immediately became apparent that despite his work with Reverend Warren, Cobb's doubts about doctrinal matters led him to question his fitness for association with any church. Beckwith promptly asked him if he accepted the divinity of Christ and the terms of the Apostles' Creed. Cobb's emotional response to both questions reflected the intense agony which his long years of doubt had caused him. Beckwith sensed the Georgian's "agitation" as he "unburdened his heart." Convinced that Cobb now faced the "great trial of his life," the Bishop assured him that "he believed all ... any Church had a right to demand as necessary to membership."

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[109] Ibid.

He declared himself ready to accept Cobb into the church and administer the sacraments to him.[110]

At that moment the arrival of Mary Ann and Meyon interrupted their conversation. Eager to dispel any misconceptions he had given his wife regarding the Bishop's sermon, Cobb presented Beckwith to his family. As Mary Ann and Beckwith spoke, Cobb suddenly lifted his hand to his head. Moving to the stairway, he sat down heavily. Without speaking, he slumped to the floor.[111]

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[110] Ibid., p. 59-67.

[111] Ibid., p. 58.

Epilogue

October, 1868

Cobb's companions quickly carried him into a room adjoining the lobby and frantically sent for medical assistance. All efforts to revive the stricken man failed. Dr. R. D. Moore immediately telegraphed the sad news to the family that Cobb had died of "apoplexy." Athens and other Georgia communities went into mourning as word of Moore's telegram spread. Lamar Cobb departed that afternoon to accompany his mother and sister on their painful journey home with Cobb's body.[1]

Travelling first over the Washington and Richmond Railroad to Baltimore, and from there on the steamship San Salvador, the party arrived in Savannah on the morning of October 14. Quickly boarding a "special train," the mourners headed home to Athens, where they arrived that evening. A committee of 100 citizens met the train and accompanied the body to the town hall. There it lay in state on a stand covered with black velvet surrounded by walls draped in mourning. Local civic leaders provided an honor guard.

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[1] R. D. Moore to James Jackson, October 9, 1868; David C. Barrow to James Jackson, October 9, 1868, Howell Cobb Papers, Felix Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia (Hereafter: Howell Cobb Papers).

Although the metallic coffin remained unopened, hundreds of Georgians quietly filed past to pay their last respects.[2]

At three o'clock the next afternoon, pall-bearers placed the coffin in a "handsome hearse, drawn by four splendid horses." The hearse then took its place in an impressive procession consisting of ministers, Free Masons, the Cobb family, members of the Georgia bar, representatives of the University, literary societies, Odd Fellows, delegations from various Georgia towns, members of the press, and a throng of citizens. The procession made its way to the University chapel.[3]

Although reasonably large, the chapel rapidly filled to capacity, and many in attendance were forced to stand outside. The interior of the building had been appropriately decorated. As with the town hall, the walls had been draped with black cloth. The coffin, covered with "garlands of flowers," occupied a stand which had been "festooned gracefully with evergreen wreaths." Perhaps because Cobb never had actually joined a specific church, seven ministers from different denominations had been selected to participate in the service. They, along with attorneys from across the

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[2] R. D. Moore to Lamar Cobb, October 9, 1868, ibid.; Samuel Boykin, ed., A Memorial Volume of the Hon. Howell Cobb of Georgia (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1870), pp. 115-116, 119.

[3] Boykin, Memorial Volume, pp. 119-121; Augustus O. Bacon Diary, October 15, 1868, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, North Carolina (Hereafter: Bacon Diary).

state, occupied the platform at the front of the sanctuary. Cobb's family took seats close to the coffin. Mary Ann sat amid her children and grandchildren. Nearly crushed by inconsolable grief, she found it impossible to walk without assistance. The chapel, one observer recalled, "wore a most funereal aspect, and a sensation of irrepressible sadness and solemnity pervaded the vast assembly."[4]

A choir, singing a solemn requiem, opened the service. A scripture reading and a "short and fervent prayer" followed. Cobb's friend and spiritual confidant, the Reverend Warren, delivered the first sermon. Taking as his text "'know ye not that a prince and a great man has fallen this day in Israel?," he focused his remarks on Cobb's religious difficulties and their final happy resolution. Three other ministers then followed Warren to the pulpit and delivered sermons on related themes. Another prayer followed and then the entire congregation sang the hymn "Farewell to a Friend Departed" as the pall-bearers returned the coffin to the hearse.[5]

Because of the lateness of the hour and the size of the crowd, the funeral directors decided not to reform the procession for the short trip to the Oconee Hill Cemetery. Instead, those in attendance made their way to the cemetery

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[4] Boykin, Memorial Volume, pp. 121-122; Lucy Barrow Cobb to John A. Cobb, October 28, 1868, Howell Cobb Papers.

[5] Boykin, Memorial Volume, pp. 121-171.

as best they could in the faint autumn twilight. There, on a low bluff overlooking the Oconee River, the body was laid to rest. Reverend Warren read a short biblical passage and offered a brief prayer. With the sun sinking behind the horizon, the sad assemblage slowly dispersed. Beneath the bluff the rush of the Oconee echoed like the distant cheers of now forgotten crowds.[6]

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[6] Ibid., p. 171; Bacon Diary, October 15, 1868.

Bibliographic Essay

Primary Sources

Any study of Howell Cobb must begin with the various Cobb and Cobb-related collections at the University of Georgia. The Howell Cobb Papers in the Felix Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library represent the most important of these. This massive collection of more than 90,000 items includes materials ranging from the eighteenth to the twentieth century. While its contents regarding Cobb's political and military career are extensive and essential, letters and other documents relating to his family and financial life provide vital insights into Cobb as a student, son, husband, father, and friend. Letters between Cobb, Mary Ann, and John B. Lamar are particularly useful, because these three concealed so few of their feelings regarding events, problems, and individuals from one another.

The Hargrett Library's Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collection, while smaller and less comprehensive than the Howell Cobb Papers, nevertheless serves as a highly valuable supplement to the larger collection. Besides materials that fill in occasional gaps in the Howell Cobb Papers, the Cobb-Erwin-Lamar Collection includes the Cobb Letter Books which contain much of Cobb's official correspondence during his service in the Confederate Army as commander of the District of Middle Florida and with the Georgia state forces.

The Thomas Reade Rootes Cobb Papers, also in the Hargrett Library, include much useful material on secession and the first two years of the Civil War. Composed of edited typescripts of original letters destroyed at the behest of Thomas Cobb's widow, these papers provide crucial information and insights into the operations of the Confederate Provisional Congress and the political maneuvers behind the election of Jefferson Davis and Alexander H. Stephens to the top elective posts in the Confederacy. They are critical in tracing the rapid disaffection of much of the Cobb family -- including Howell -- from the Davis administration. This collection also contains important material on the military experiences of the Cobb family during the opening years of the war.

Other collections at the Felix Hargrett Library include useful material. The Joseph E. Brown Papers and the Joseph E. and Elizabeth G. Brown Papers illuminate the relationship between Cobb and Governor Brown from the 1850s until Cobb's death in 1868. Among other topics, the David C. Barrow Papers include several letters touching on Cobb's abortive bid for the presidency in 1860 and on the war years. Typescripts of the Georgia General Assembly Journal, the Georgia House Journal, and the Georgia Executive Council Minutes compiled by the Works Progress Administration, Writers' Project, contain records of the political service of John Cobbs. The E. Merton Coulter Collection, Felix

Hargrett Collection, Carr Collection, Keith Morton Read Collection, Joseph Henry Lumpkin Papers, Alexander H. Stephens-Howell Cobb Letters, and the Cobb Family Papers hold worthwhile documents as well.

The University of Georgia Archives include two documents essential to understanding Cobb's education. The Minutes of the Faculty, 1822-1836, trace Cobb's career at the University from admission to graduation, and includes the best record of events surrounding his expulsion and readmission. The Minutes of the Phi Kappa Society offer critical insight into Cobb's activities with an organization that played a critical role in his intellectual development.

There are several useful collections at the Georgia Department of Archives and History. The Henry Rootes Jackson Scrapbook contains numerous letters, newspaper clippings, and mementoes relating to the Cobb family. Materials in the scrapbook touching on the death of Thomas Cobb at Fredricksburg and subsequent family mourning are especially beneficial. The Thomas DeKalb Harris Family Papers include some useful items. Thomas DeKalb Harris held a variety of patronage posts in Washington D.C. during the 1840s and 1850s. From that vantage point he served as an operative and informant for Cobb. Although most of Harris' letters are found in the Howell Cobb Papers, a few letters touching on politics are located here. The James M. Spullock Papers are relatively more useful. This collection only contains a

handful of letters regarding Cobb's role in Georgia and national politics in the late 1850s and 1860, but their content is highly informative. Materials on Cobb's governorship are found in the Governor's Letter Book, 1847-1861, and the Executive Minutes of the State of Georgia. The "History of Service of Joseph White Woods, Soldier in the War Between the States, Written By Himself, After the War" which is included in the typescript volumes of the Confederate Diaries, Bible Records, War Records, and Letters, provides insights into the life of a private soldier serving under Cobb's command.

The Southern Historical Collection at the University of North Carolina contains considerable Cobb material. The Jackson-Prince Papers contain many letters relating to the Cobb family and their numerous relatives. Besides some political material, this collection includes documents involving the wealth and financial disaster that overtook Cobb's maternal grandfather, Thomas Rootes, and his father, John Addison Cobb. It also holds letters on the courtship and marriage of John Addison and Sarah Rootes Cobb, and provides some insight into the story of "the orphan," Paulina. The John M. Berrien Papers contain valuable information on the rise and fall of the Constitutional Union party. While a letter from Cobb to James L. Orr in the Orr-Patterson Papers provides vital material on the dangers Cobb recognized in the Lecompton Crisis, letters from Cobb in the

William Porcher Miles Papers offer insights about his attitude toward his duties as secretary of the treasury and about the need for immediate secession. Correspondence in the Lafayette McLaws Papers demonstrates the contempt felt by McLaws early in the war for political generals -- especially Cobb. Other letters, written in the aftermath of the Maryland campaign, illustrate that McLaws' attitude regarding Cobb had not changed. The Augustus O. Bacon Diary relates the interesting -- but unverifiable -- story of Cobb's efforts to institute negotiations with George B. McClellan following Antietam. It also includes an excellent account of Cobb's funeral.

Several collections in the Special Collections Library at Duke University contain small but worthwhile amounts of Cobb papers. The Edward R. Harden Papers are most useful because of their materials regarding Cobb's approach to political patronage issues. One letter in the Feimster Papers hints at the passion and violence which attended voting during Cobb's gubernatorial election in 1851. Several letters in the Herschel V. Johnson Papers offer information on relations between Cobb and Johnson who acted as sometime allies and frequent rivals. Other letters in this collection reveal the difficulties confronted by Georgia supporters of Stephen A. Douglas between 1857 and 1860. A letter in the C. C. Jones Collection provides Cobb's recollection of the battle at East Macon. The Seaborn Jones Papers include

material on John Cobbs' financial ruin. Other collections used at the Duke library include the Alexander H. Stephens Papers, the Howell Cobb Papers, and the Robert Toombs Papers.

The Library of Congress contains several collections with small but valuable Cobb materials. The extensive Alexander H. Stephens Papers include letters touching on different parts of Cobb's career. The Franklin Pierce Papers hold several letters both supporting and opposing Cobb's struggle for readmission to leadership in the national Democracy during the mid-1850s. The Jeremiah S. Black Papers include letters relating to Cobb's tenure in the treasury department and relations between the cabinet and President James Buchanan. While the William L. Marcy Papers include some useful Cobb letters, the Marcy diaries are especially valuable for their biting critique of the Buchanan administration's patronage policies. The single most useful item in the Howell Cobb Papers is a letter from Cobb to T. Lomax which provides a thorough defense of the Buchanan administration's Kansas policy. Additional material on Buchanan's Kansas policy is located in the Robert J. Walker Papers and the Lewis Cass Papers. The Jefferson Davis and Family Papers provide commentary on Cobb's political difficulties in the 1850s. Evidence of growing northern frustration with the southern demands regarding the issue of slavery can be found in the James F. Simmons Papers. Cobb's efforts to frustrate attempts to revive the African slave

trade are illuminated in the Wanderer Papers which are part of the Black History Collection. The Martin Van Buren Papers, the James K. Polk Papers, and the Francis W. Pickens-Milledge Bonham Papers also contain scattered but useful items.

The National Archives holds two useful sets of material relating to Cobb. The Correspondence of the Secretary of the Treasury (Record Group 56.2.1) includes many documents duplicated in congressional records and many that focus on the minutiae of treasury department operations. This collection, however, also includes excellent material illustrating Cobb's determination to reduce both the size and expenses of government during his tenure as secretary of the treasury. The Amnesty Papers (Record Group 94) contain Cobb's application for a presidential pardon following the war, as well as his defense against charges that he had participated in the abuse of prisoners of war at Andersonville.

Other repositories also include useful collections. The James Buchanan Papers at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania contain materials relating to Cobb's political career from both the 1840s and 1850s. This collection is especially valuable for Cobb's role in the election of 1856 and his service as a member of Buchanan's cabinet. Although the Alexander H. Stephens Papers at the Manhattanville College of the Sacred Heart are less extensive than the

collection of Stephens Papers at the Library of Congress, they are more useful. This collection consists mainly of letters between Stephens and his brother Linton. Not only do these letters provide candid appraisals of politics in Georgia and at the national level -- and Cobb's role in both -- they also contain valuable information on Stephens' personal friendship with Cobb. The Robert W. Woodruff Library at Emory University holds collections of Alexander H. Stephens and Howell Cobb Papers that include a few useful letters.

Newspapers

The Athens Southern Banner represents the single most important newspaper cited in this work. Serving as Cobb's political organ, the Southern Banner worked to give the widest possible circulation to his positions while defending him from all attacks. In fulfilling its mission, the Banner copied articles and editorials from other newspapers across the country. Those which praised Cobb ran with the editor's blessing; those critical of Cobb generally ran in conjunction with an answering editorial defending him. The opposition press in Athens operated under a variety of names over the years: the Southern Whig, the Southern Herald, and the Southern Watchman. Like most Georgia newspapers, the Milledgeville Federal Union -- the state's most prominent Democratic newspaper -- both supported and opposed Cobb at

different points in his career. This situation also proved true of the state's leading Whig/Constitutional Union organ, the Milledgeville Southern Recorder. The Columbus Times, an ultra southern-rights organ, almost uniformly voiced hatred and contempt for Cobb. Other Georgia papers used include the Milledgeville Georgia Journal, the Macon Journal and Messenger, the Macon Georgia Telegraph, the Macon Georgia Citizen, the Sandersville Central Georgian, the Cassville Standard, the Savannah Republican, the Savannah Journal and Courier, and the Augusta Chronicle and Sentinel. The Louisville Gazette contained useful information on the activities of John Cobbs.

Various New York papers, including the Tribune, the Herald, and the New York Daily Times provide a national view of Cobb's role in the political struggles of the day. The Richmond Enquirer and Niles National Register serve a similar purpose. The September, 1849, issue of United States Magazine includes a favorable profile of Cobb's development as a legislator and his emergence as a leader of the Democratic party in Congress.

Government Documents

The Revolutionary Records of the State of Georgia, Allen D. Candler, compiler, three vols. (Atlanta: Franklin-Turner Co., 1908), contains information on the early Georgia land dealings of John Cobbs.

The Congressional Globe from the Twenty-Eighth through the Thirty-First Congresses and the Thirty-Fourth Congress are essential to an understanding of Cobb's congressional career. The Journal of the House of Representatives, Twenty-Eighth Congress, provides insight on Cobb's rapid development as a floor leader of House Democrats. The Covode Committee Report (House Reports, Thirty-Sixth Congress, First Session, Number 648, Serial 1071) contains testimony critical to understanding the Kansas crisis during the Buchanan administration. Cobb's reports on the financial condition of the country and his efforts to confront the Panic of 1857 are found in Senate Executive Documents (Thirty-Fifth Congress, First Session, Ex. Doc. #1, Serial 918; Thirty-Fifth Congress, Second Session, Ex. Doc. #2, Serial 979; Thirty-Sixth Congress, First Session, Ex. Doc. #3, Serial 1027) and House Executive Documents (Thirty-Sixth Congress, Second Session, Ex. Doc. # 2, Serial 1093).

The Debates and Proceedings of the Georgia Convention, 1850 (Milledgeville, 1850), traces the events surrounding Georgia's formal acceptance of the Compromise of 1850 and the adoption of the Georgia Platform. Acts of the General Assembly, 1851-1852 (Milledgeville, 1852) offers information on the activities of the legislature during Cobb's governorship.

Several government publications deal with Cobb's Civil War career. The first volume of the Journal of the Congress

of the Confederate States of America, 1861-1865, seven vols. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1904), is valuable for following Cobb's service as president of the Confederate Provisional Congress. The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies, 128 vols. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), contains vital information on Cobb's military service. Allen D. Candler, compiler, Confederate Records of the State of Georgia, six vols. (Atlanta: Franklin Printing and Publishing Company, 1909-1911) and James Matthews, ed., The Statutes at Large of the Provisional Government of the Confederate States of America from the Institution of the Government, February, 8, 1861 to Its Termination, February, 18, 1862, Inclusive (Richmond, 1864), also contain some useful information on this period of Cobb's life.

Published Letters, Memoirs, Diaries, and Contemporary Accounts

Of the several collections of published letters containing Cobb material, Ulrich Bonnell Phillips, ed., Correspondence of Robert Toombs, Alexander H. Stephens, and, Howell Cobb (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1913), proved most useful both for its content and because it permits the researcher simultaneously to trace the development of three prominent Georgians over the course of their careers. While not nearly so comprehensive, R. P.

Brooks, ed., "Howell Cobb Papers" in the Georgia Historical Quarterly, V (1921) and VI (1922), contains several valuable items.

The published letters of Cobb's contemporaries are also useful. Charles Henry Ambler, ed., Correspondence of Robert M. T. Hunter, 1826-1876 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1918), provides useful commentary on the patronage policies pursued by Cobb as secretary of the treasury and on relations between Buchanan and his cabinet. This volume also contains information on the issue of secession in the Upper South. J. Franklin Jameson, ed., Correspondence of John C. Calhoun (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1900), includes observations -- generally negative -- on the role of anti-Calhoun leaders such as Cobb and what Calhoun perceived as their betrayal of the South in favor of national political alliances. Robert W. Johannsen, ed., The Letters of Stephen A. Douglas (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1961), contains only limited Cobb material. What there is, however, proves very worthwhile. Most useful is the letter in which Douglas quotes Cobb's 1856 expression of support for the principles contained in the Freeport Doctrine of 1858. Richard H. Shryock, ed., Letters of Richard D. Arnold, M.D., 1808-1876 (Durham: The Sherman Press, 1929), includes a few letters related to Cobb's political activities in the 1850s.

Numerous memoirs provided small but vital pieces of information regarding Cobb and the Cobb family. John Quincy

Adams, Memoirs of John Quincy Adams, Comprising Portions of His Diary from 1795 to 1848, twelve vols. (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1877), edited by Charles Francis Adams, contains a dour commentary on Cobb's careful use of House rules to stifle a Whig measure. Virginia Clopton Clay's A Belle of the Fifties: Memoirs of Mrs. Clay of Alabama, Covering Political and Social Life in Washington and the South, 1853-1866 (London, 1905), offers valuable insight into Mary Ann's personality and role in Washington society during the Buchanan administration. She also touches on Cobb's standing as the administration's "jolly Falstaff." Mary B. Clayton, ed., Reminiscences of J. S. Black (St. Louis, 1887), provides some details regarding relations between Buchanan and his cabinet. Excellent commentary on the anxiety that gripped the Buchanan administration because of negative southern reactions to Governor Robert J. Walker's course in Kansas can be found in Henry Stuart Foote, Casket of Reminiscences (Washington: Chronicle Publishing Company, 1874). Alexander H. Stephens, A Constitutional View of the Late War Between the States: Its Causes, Character, Conduct, and Results, two vols. (Philadelphia: National Publishing Company, 1870), contains valuable information on Cobb's role in behind-the-scenes negotiations during the crisis of 1850, as well as material on the war years.

Robert Underwood Johnson and Clarence Clough Buel, eds., Battles and Leaders of the Civil War, four vols. (New York:

The Century Company, 1887), contains an account of the fighting at Crampton's Gap during the Maryland Campaign. William Tecumseh Sherman's The Memoirs of General W. T. Sherman, (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1990), edited by Charles Royster, includes information regarding abortive negotiations between Governor Joseph E. Brown and Sherman on the possibility of a separate peace between Georgia and the United States. It also contains Sherman's account of his personal supervision of the destruction of Cobb's Hurricane Plantation in Baldwin County. Joseph E. Johnston, Narrative of Military Operations, Directed, During the Late War Between the States (New York, 1879), reflects Johnston's appreciation for Cobb's support throughout the war. He is particularly complimentary of Cobb's handling of his troops during the skirmish at East Macon.

Two published diaries also proved of limited use. M. M. Quaife, ed., The Diary of James K. Polk, four vols. (Chicago, 1910), offers insight into Cobb's dilemma during Calhoun's southern unity movement in the late 1840s. The anxious hours spent by Cobb and other Confederate leaders while awaiting the outcome of First Manassas is detailed in J. B. Jones, A Rebel War Clerk's Diary at the Confederate States Capital, two vols. (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1866).

Along with Augustus Longstreet Hull's Annals of Athens Georgia, 1801-1901 (Athens: Banner Job Office, 1906), Henry Hull's Sketches From the Early History of Athens, Georgia, 1801-1825 (Athens, 1884), recounts in fair detail the environment within which Cobb spent his youth, as well as the contributions of the Cobb family to the local community. A good biographical sketch of Cobb, as well as accounts of his religious struggles, death, and funeral can be found in Samuel Boykin, ed., A Memorial Volume of the Honorable Howell Cobb of Georgia (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1870). R. H. Gillet, The Life and Times of Silas Wright, two vols. (Albany: The Argus Company, 1874), contains information on the presidential election of 1844.

Two letters, published as pamphlets, provide insights into the types of difficulties Cobb encountered during his political career. Stephen Dillaye's Letter to the Honorable Howell Cobb, Secretary of the Treasury (New York, 1858), illustrates the complexities of patronage administration Cobb faced as secretary of the treasury. Cobb's own Letter of Honorable Howell Cobb to the People of Georgia on the Present Condition of the Country (Washington, 1860), justified his embrace of secession in the aftermath of the election of 1860.

Biographical Directories

Several biographical directories served as worthwhile guides to the careers of men who influenced Cobb's life. These included Lucian Lamar Knight, ed., Reminiscences of Famous Georgians, two vols. (Atlanta, 1907), Horace Montgomery, ed., Georgians in Profile: Historical Essays in Honor of Ellis Merton Coulter (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1958), William J. Northen, ed., Men of Mark in Georgia, seven vols. (Atlanta: A. B. Caldwell, 1907-1912), and Kenneth Coleman and Charles Stephen Gurr, eds., Dictionary of Georgia Biography (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1983).

Secondary Sources

Several outstanding works on both southern and national history proved valuable in this study. Gordon S. Wood, The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1969), defines the republican ideology of the Revolutionary generation which Cobb struggled to perpetuate throughout his career. Bertram Wyatt-Brown, Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), explains the moral environment within which Cobb lived as a southerner. In both The South and the Politics of Slavery, 1828-1856 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978) and Liberty and Slavery, Southern Politics to 1860 (New York:

Alfred A. Knopf, 1983), William J. Cooper, Jr. demonstrates the inescapable demands placed on southern politicians operating within the context of the peculiar institution. William W. Freehling's The Road to Disunion: Secessionists at Bay, 1776-1854 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), reveals the internal divisions which fractured the South during the antebellum period -- divisions clearly visible in Cobb's Georgia. He also traces the process by which the South evolved toward secession. Arthur Charles Cole, The Whig Party in the South (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1914), provides valuable information on Cobb's chief political opponents during the first decade of his political life.

Studies focusing on Georgia proved equally useful. E. Merton Coulter, A Short History of Georgia (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1933) and Kenneth Coleman, A History of Georgia (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1977), provide solid surveys of Georgia's social, political, and economic development. Works such as "Cobb or Cobbs Family," William and Mary Quarterly, XIX (1910), Mrs. J. P. Wilhoit, History of Warren County, Georgia, 1793-1974 (Wilkes Publishing Co., 1976), and Marion Little Durden, A History of St. George Parish, Colony of Georgia, Jefferson County, State of Georgia (Swainsboro, Ga.: Magnolia Press, 1983), contain materials on Cobb's family history and that family's long record of contributions to their community.

Ernest C. Hynds' Antebellum Athens and Clarke County, Georgia (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1974), however, represents the most useful of the county histories. In addition to material on the role played by John Addison and Sarah Cobb in their community, it also incorporates an excellent description of the thriving community within which young Howell came of age.

Two studies, E. Merton Coulter, College Life in the Old South (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1951) and Thomas G. Dyer, The University of Georgia: A Bicentennial History, 1785-1985 (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1985), are essential to any understanding of Cobb's education. These works are supplemented by James McLachlan, "The Choice of Hercules: American Student Societies in the Early 19th Century," in Lawrence Stone, ed., Europe, Scotland and the United States from the Sixteenth to the Twentieth Century (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974).

In Georgia and State Rights, A Study of the Political History of Georgia from the Revolution to the Civil War, with Particular Regard to Federal Relations (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1902), Ulrich Bonnell Phillips unravels many of the intricacies of Georgia politics in a brief format. Richard Harrison Shryock, Georgia and the Union in 1850 (Durham: Duke University Press, 1926), examines politics in Georgia during the crisis of 1850 and immediately thereafter. Besides outstanding scholarship, this work also

includes a highly useful guide to Georgia newspapers, their editors, and political affiliations in its bibliography. John E. Simpson, "Prelude to Compromise: Howell Cobb and the House Speakership Battle of 1849," Georgia Historical Quarterly, LVIII (1974), R. P. Brooks, "Howell Cobb and the Crisis of 1850," The Mississippi Valley Historical Review, IV (1917), and Helen Ione Greene, "Politics in Georgia, 1853-1854: The Ordeal of Howell Cobb," Georgia Historical Quarterly, XXX (1946), explore the complex political dangers Cobb confronted during the first half of the 1850s.

Although no specific study deals with Cobb's governorship, aspects of his administration are covered in a number of sources. Thomas Payne Govan, "Banking and the Credit System in Georgia" (Ph.D. dissertation, Vanderbilt University, 1936) and Robert Neil Mathis, "Gazaway Bugg Lamar: A Southern Entrepreneur" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Georgia, 1968), examine the fiscal policies pursued by Cobb's administration. State railroad policy under Cobb is explored in Ulrich Bonnell Phillips, A History of Transportation in the Eastern Cotton Belt to 1860 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1908) and James Houston Johnston, Western and Atlantic Railroad of the State of Georgia (Atlanta, 1931). Dorothy Orr touches briefly on Cobb's limited impact on public education in A History of Education in Georgia (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1950).

Horace Montgomery's Cracker Parties (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1950), traces Georgia politics and Cobb's role in them during the decade of the 1850s. In "A Georgia Precedent for the Freeport Question," Journal of Southern History, XXIX (1962), Montgomery explores the question of the power of territorial legislatures to exclude slavery and its impact on the presidential election of 1856 in Georgia. He demonstrates the willingness of Cobbites Junius Hillyer and James Sledge to concede this authority to territorial legislatures two years before Stephen A. Douglas embraced an identical position during his debates with Abraham Lincoln, but fails to denote that Cobb adopted this same position while campaigning for James Buchanan in Pennsylvania. With this single exception, Montgomery's article "Georgia's Howell Cobb Stumps for James Buchanan in 1856," Pennsylvania History, XXIX (1962), offers an excellent account of Cobb's efforts on Buchanan's behalf.

Michael P. Johnson, Toward a Patriarchal Republic, The Secession of Georgia (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977), illuminates the revolutionary lengths to which secessionists such as Thomas Cobb and Governor Joseph E. Brown were prepared to go to carry out their program. Bruce W. Collins "Governor Joseph E. Brown, Economic Issues and Georgia's Road to Secession, 1857-1859," Georgia Historical Quarterly, LXXI (1987), is also valuable.

The most useful works on the national scene are David M. Potter, The Impending Crisis, 1848-1861 (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1976) and Allan Nevins, Ordeal of the Union, eight vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1947-1971). Although more limited in scope, other useful works include Peter Temin, The Jacksonian Economy (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1969), Joel H. Silbey, The Partisan Imperative, the Dynamics of American Politics Before the Civil War (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), Roy F. Nichols, The Democratic Machine, 1850-1854 (New York: Columbia University, 1923), Michael F. Holt The Political Crisis of the 1850s (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1978), Holman Hamilton, Prologue to Conflict, the Crisis and Compromise of 1850 (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1964), Mark W. Summers, The Plundering Generation: Corruption and the Crisis of the Union, 1849-1861 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), and William J. Cooper, Jr., Michael F. Holt, and John McCardell, eds., A Master's Due: Essays in Honor of David Herbert Donald (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985) Several articles dealing with the political crisis that gripped the nation between 1857 and 1860 contain valuable insights. These include Richard R. Stenberg, "An Unnoted Factor in the Buchanan-Douglas Feud," Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society, XXV (1933), Bruce W. Collins, "The Democrats' Electoral Fortunes During the Lecompton Crisis," Civil War History, XXIV (1978), and two

by David E. Meerse, "Origins of the Buchanan-Douglas Feud Reconsidered," Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society, LXVII (1974), and "Presidential Leadership, Suffrage Qualifications, and Kansas, 1857," Civil War History, XXIV (1978).

A variety of works are useful in understanding Cobb's service as a member of the Buchanan administration. While Kenneth M. Stampp, in America in 1857, A Nation on the Brink (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), concentrates on a single year, he nevertheless makes a significant contribution to understanding Cobb's role in the Lecompton crisis. In The Disruption of American Democracy (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1948), Roy F. Nichols takes a broader chronological perspective and provides valuable information on Cobb's role in both the Lecompton Crisis and the Panic of 1857. James L. Huston's The Panic of 1857 and the Coming of the Civil War (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987), however, provides the best treatment of Cobb's role in battling the economic crisis. Cobb's struggle against efforts to revive the African slave trade is detailed in Tom Henderson Wells, The Slave Ship Wanderer (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1967). Philip James Auchamspaugh, James Buchanan and His Cabinet on the Eve of Secession (Lancaster: Lancaster Press, 1926), is useful mainly because of the documents he reprints.

Cobb's activities during the Civil War are touched on in numerous works. By far the most useful of these is Horace Montgomery, Howell Cobb's Confederate Career (Tuscaloosa: Confederate Publishing Company, 1959). While less comprehensive, other works are also of help. James M. McPherson, Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), represents a highly readable survey of the period. Douglas Southall Freeman, Lee's Lieutenants, three vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1942-1944), surveys the command structure of the Army of Northern Virginia throughout the war and provides the best treatment of Cobb's service with that organization. An account of Cobb's involvement with prisoner exchange negotiations and the impact of his expression of southern resolve on George B. McClellan can be found in Richard Wheeler, Sword Over Richmond: An Eyewitness History of McClellan's Peninsula Campaign, (New York: The Fairfax Press, 1986). Stephen Sears, To the Gates of Richmond: The Peninsula Campaign (New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1992), contains an account of the fighting at Dam #1. In Jefferson Davis and His Generals: The Failure of Confederate Command in the West (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1990), Steven E. Woodworth recounts Cobb's efforts to bolster public support for the Confederacy even as the inability of the Confederate government to put together a winning team in the West doomed his efforts to failure. James Pickett Jones,

Yankee Blitzkrieg: Wilson's Raid Through Alabama and Georgia (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1976), details Cobb's futile efforts to defend Columbus and his subsequent surrender at Macon. A highly useful book in understanding the impact of the war on slavery and southern race relations is Clarence L. Mohr, On the Threshold of Freedom, Masters and Slaves in Civil War Georgia (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986).

Three works examine the issue of treatment of prisoners of war at Andersonville. S. W. Ashe, The Trial and Death of Henry Wirz, With Other Matters Pertaining Thereto (Raleigh, 1908), Mildred Lewis Rutherford, Facts and Figures vs. Myth and Misrepresentation: Henry Wirz and the Andersonville Prison (Athens, 1921), and William Marvel, Andersonville: The Last Depot (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), each conclude that the tragic circumstances surrounding the camp at Andersonville reflected more on the nature of the Civil War and the slow death of the Confederacy than any intentional abuse of the prisoners interned there.

Reconstruction in Georgia is examined thoroughly in C. Mildred Thompson, Reconstruction in Georgia: Economic, Social, and Political, 1865-1872 (1915; rpr. Atlanta: Cherokee Publishing Company, 1971). More recent interpretations of this period are Elizabeth S. Nathans, Losing the Peace: Georgia Republicans and Reconstruction, 1865-1871 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press,

1968) and Eric Foner, Reconstruction, America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1867 (New York: Harper & Row, 1988). Foner's treatment of the evolving relations between whites and freedmen closely reflects the experiences of the Cobbs and their former slaves. His survey of changing political relations in the South is also very useful. Allen W. Trelease, White Terror: The Ku Klux Klan Conspiracy and Southern Reconstruction (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), includes a valuable analysis of the emergence of the Ku Klux Klan in Georgia.

Despite the importance of Cobb's role in state and national politics between 1840 and 1865, he has been the subject of relatively little research. John Eddins Simpson's Howell Cobb and the Politics of Ambition (Chicago: Adams Press, 1973), is limited in scope and wrongly portrays Cobb as an individual whose overweening ambition drove him to betray his friends and ultimately his country. Moreover, Simpson's treatment of Cobb's family, business, and spiritual life is superficial. An earlier study of Cobb's career between 1840 and 1861, Zachary Taylor Johnson's The Political Policies of Howell Cobb (Nashville: George Peabody College, 1929), provides a brief but accurate account of Cobb's political life. The chief interpretative flaw in this work derives from the author's attribution of Cobb's embrace of secession to personal financial concerns.

Two other members of Cobb's immediate family have also received some attention from biographers. In two articles in the Georgia Historical Quarterly, XXIV (1940), "The Making of an Antebellum Lady -- Mrs. Howell Cobb" and "The Celebrated Mrs. Howell Cobb," Elizabeth Mays provides a thorough biographical sketch of Mary Ann Cobb's childhood, education, and adult life into the 1850s. She also includes excellent descriptions of the Cobb homes in Athens. Unfortunately, Mays does not delve into Mary Ann's numerous health problems. Horace Montgomery, Johnny Cobb: Confederate Aristocrat (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1964), traces Cobb's oldest son's activities during the war years.

Biographies of several Cobb contemporaries were very useful. None proved more so than Thomas E. Schott, Alexander H. Stephens of Georgia, A Biography (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), William B. McCash, Thomas R. R. Cobb, 1823-1862, The Making of a Southern Nationalist (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1985), and Robert W. Johannsen, Stephen A. Douglas (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973). Other biographies cited include: John Niven, John C. Calhoun and the Price of Union (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988); William C. Davis, Jefferson Davis: The Man and His Hour (New York: Harper Collins, 1991); Philip S. Klein, President James Buchanan (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1962); Caleb Carr, The Devil Soldier: The Story of Frederick

Townsend Ward (New York: Random House, 1992); E. Merton Coulter, Lost Generation: The Life and Death of James Barrow, C.S.A. (Tuscaloosa: Confederate Publishing Company, 1956); Drew Gilpen Faust, James Henry Hammond and the Old South: A Design for Mastery (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982); Percy Scott Flippin, Herschel V. Johnson of Georgia, State Rights Unionist (Richmond: Dietz Printing Company, 1931); William N. Brigance, Jeremiah Sullivan Black: Defender of the Constitution and the Ten Commandments (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1934); Charles Henry Ambler, Thomas Ritchie, A Study in Virginia Politics (Richmond: Bell Book & Stationary, 1913); Charles Sellers, James K. Polk, Continentalist, 1843-1846 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966); Robert V. Remini, Henry Clay, Statesman for the Union (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1991); James P. Shenton, Robert J. Walker, A Politician From Jackson to Lincoln (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961); E. Merton Coulter, William Montague Brown: Versatile Anglo-Irish American, 1833-1883 (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1967); Joseph H. Parks, Joseph E. Brown of Georgia (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977), and Hans L. Trefousse, Andrew Johnson, A Biography (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1989).

Vita

A native of Greensboro, North Carolina, born July 28, 1955, Randy L. Reid attended Western Carolina University where he received a Bachelor of Arts Degree in 1978. After working in sales, he entered the graduate program at the University of North Carolina, Greensboro in 1980. He received a Master of Arts Degree in history two years later. He then entered the doctorate program at Louisiana State University. Upon completing his course work at LSU, Reid moved to Athens, Georgia to do his dissertation research. He completed his doctorate in 1995. Reid continues to reside in Athens with his wife, Laura. He is chairman of the Humanities Department at Athens Academy.

DOCTORAL EXAMINATION AND DISSERTATION REPORT

Candidate: Randy L. Reid

Major Field: History

Title of Dissertation: Howell Cobb of Georgia
A Biography

Approved:

Major Professor and Chairman

Dean of the Graduate School

EXAMINING COMMITTEE:

Date of Examination:

May 15, 1995