Honor Bound: *Southern Honor and the Mexican War.

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HONOR BOUND: SOUTHERN HONOR AND THE MEXICAN WAR

A Dissertation

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Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
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requirements for the degree of
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in

The Department of History

by

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Abstract

This dissertation examines how concepts of honor, and its adjunct, republicanism, influenced both the perceptions and actions of southerners during the Mexican-American War of 1846-1848 and the period immediately thereafter. It is meant to illustrate the important, and heretofore overlooked, role that notions of honor played both for those southerners who participated in the war and those who stayed at home.

The dissertation is thematic rather than chronologic in organization and consists of three chapters. The first chapter examines the attitudes of southerners of both genders towards the Mexican War. It contends that they united in defining the conflict through the lens of honor. Southern concepts of honor impelled the white men of the South to volunteer and the women of the section to support them.

The second chapter addresses the manner in which the politics of honor directed southern political responses to the Mexican War. It argues that President James K. Polk's war message of May 11, 1846, which presented the war as an honorable endeavor, played a crucial role in defining the direction that the political debate over the question of the war would take in the region. Following the lead of the President, southern Democrats' explanation and defense of the war was shaped by the language of honor and shame. In turn, the powerful cultural symbolism of offended honor muted the dissent of southern Whigs and Calhounites.

The final chapter examines southerners' perceptions of General Zachary Taylor, the quintessential hero of the Mexican War. It contends that Taylor, because of his
military exploits and republican character, became, for a short time, the South's most
honored man. It argues that many southerners came to view Taylor as a perfect
republican statesman, a man above party, a second George Washington. As such, they
expected President Taylor to reconcile the interests of all parts of the Union through
disinterested, just, and wise leadership. It concludes that Taylor's failure to achieve
national harmony shook southerners' faith in the model of "national" republican
leadership that he represented.
On Tuesday, November 23, 1847, Zachary Taylor received word that his request for leave, submitted in early October, had been granted. Three days later, the General, his staff, servants, and Old Whitey, his famed war-horse, boarded the small side-wheeler *Monmouth* at Brazos Island and sailed for New Orleans. Taylor looked forward to returning to the United States for he had not seen his family in more than two years and he knew that they were awaiting his arrival. Favorable seas blessed the *Monmouth*’s voyage and she took only seventy-four hours to arrive at the South West Pass of the Mississippi River. There, with celebratory “discharges of cannon and display of flags,” the *Monmouth* met the *Mary Kingsland*, a larger steamship specially chartered by New Orleans’ municipal authorities. For the passengers and crew of the *Mary Kingsland*, the arrival of the *Monmouth* must have given them cause to release emotions built up during three expectant days and nights spent in the Pass waiting for the General’s arrival. As those onboard the *Mary Kingsland* applauded enthusiastically, Taylor’s party transferred to the vessel for the last leg of the trip. Once on board, he learned of the plans for his reception from the Committee of the Councils, a group composed of leading citizens from the Crescent City. The passage up the river itself

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1Brainerd Dyer, *Zachary Taylor* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1946), 255. Dyer relates that “General Taylor welcomed his leave, not only because of the opportunity it afforded him to join his family, but also because he greatly desired to give personal attention to his plantation which had suffered severely in the heavy Mississippi floods of recent years.”

2*New Orleans Picayune*, December 1, 1847.
resembled a Roman Triumph and was but a taste of things to come. According to one observer, "every ship from the bar to the pilot station mustered its hands and cheered a welcome. The flags of every nation were hoisted from the shipping and the air was rent with huzzas of welcome for the illustrious soldier." From both shores of the great river came plaudits as each plantation turned out "its quota." After a brief, jubilant stop at the plantation of his old friend and cotton factor, Colonel Maunsell White, both ships continued on to New Orleans. Taylor landed at Jackson Barracks near the Chalmette battlefield late in the evening and withdrew to the company of his family. Here the General took his ease for two days, interrupted only by groups of the curious and adoring who arrived on steamships which made regular runs from the city to the Barracks. The sixty-three-year-old Taylor would need his rest, for although he realized that his military victories helped make him a popular figure back home, he was unprepared for the tremendous reception that expectant New Orleanians had in store for him.  

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In response to the invitation of the Mayor of New Orleans, A. D. Crossman, to participate in ceremonies honoring him, Taylor wrote that, "I cannot but be deeply
The Crescent City prepared exhaustively for its hero’s arrival. Workers constructed a spectacular triumphal arch to serve as the centerpiece of the celebration in the Place d'Armes (now Jackson Square). The finished structure was quite impressive. At least one observer declared it “equal to the colossal structure of the same kind at Paris, at the Barriere de l'Etoile.” The arch was sixty feet in height and forty feet in width, boasted a wood frame covered so thickly with evergreen boughs “as to form a solid mass of verdure,” and possessed a large central passage with two smaller flanking ones in the Roman style. Words spelled in large gold letters decorated the facade and sides of the structure, Welcome and Buena Vista facing the river, Monterrey toward the Cathedral, and Resaca de la Palma and Palo Alto on either side. Surmounting the monument was “a splendid gold eagle, holding in its bill a crown of laurel,” and a large sensible to this unexpected token of respect and affection of the people of New Orleans.” (Italics added for emphasis) New Orleans Picayune, December 2, 1847; New Orleans Commercial Bulletin, December 2, 1847; New Orleans Commercial Times, December 2, 1847.

The afore-mentioned biographies of Taylor represent the best modern scholarly works on the subject. There are others which vary widely in quality by Oliver Otis Howard (1892), Silas Bent McKinley and Silas Bent (1946), and Edwin P. Hoyt (1966). K. Jack Bauer’s Zachary Taylor contains an excellent “Essay on Sources.” (329-38)

6 The description of the triumphal arch is drawn from the following sources: New Orleans Daily Delta, December 4, 1847; New Orleans Picayune, December 4, 1847; New Orleans Commercial Times, December 4, 1847; New Orleans Daily Bee, December 4, 1847; New Orleans Commercial Bulletin, December 4, 1847. See especially, New Orleans Daily Delta, December 12, 1847, for an engraved picture of the structure.

7 New Orleans Commercial Times, December 4, 1847.

8 New Orleans Picayune, December 4, 1847.
Star-Spangled Banner atop a towering flagpole. New Orleanians had indeed created an altar worthy of a republican hero, whether ancient or modern. Local worthies also planned a ceremonially procession that would trace its way through the Vieux Carre, past the Taylor party’s new lodgings at the Saint Charles Hotel and back to Canal Street. More than fifty units would participate in the parade, including almost all the officials of the national, state, and municipal governments present in New Orleans. Foreign dignitaries and “distinguished strangers” were also encouraged to take part. Private volunteer military formations of the city, as well as groups like the New Orleans Fire Department and the Sons of Temperance, spent the days leading up to the great event polishing and cleaning their finery. A religious ceremony at the Saint Louis Cathedral would consecrate the proceedings; the Picayune reported that the Church would throw “over the jubilations of the occasion the solemnities of a divine recognition.” Citizens prepared fireworks, illuminations, and artillery for a pyrotechnic tribute to Old Rough and Ready. City officials asked commercial shipping along the waterfront to be ready to salute the General with flags and huzzas as he passed on the Mary Kingsland on the morning of the reception. Perhaps the ultimate example of frenzied civic-mindedness was one citizen’s offer to ignite his fine home “in order to make a splendid bonfire” in

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9New Orleans Daily Delta, December 4, 1847.

10For the plan of the procession and the general preparations for the Hero’s arrival see, New Orleans Picayune, December 2, 1847, December 3, 1847; New Orleans Commercial Times, December 2, 1847, December 3, 1847; New Orleans Daily Bee, December 2, 1847; New Orleans Commercial Bulletin, December 1, 1847, December 2, 1847; New Orleans Daily Delta, December 3, 1847.

11New Orleans Picayune, December 5, 1847.
homage to the returning paladin. New Orleans possessed a well-deserved reputation for knowing how to celebrate special occasions; the reception for the returning hero would do nothing to detract from that distinction. As one newspaper editor put it, "On this day, a greater jubilee will be held by all ranks, than has ever occurred here, except on two memorable occasions, when Lafayette and Jackson ... held all eyes spellbound, in recollection of their brilliant deeds."\[13\]

The morning of the great event, Friday, December 3, dawned crisp and clear; "the very heavens it seemed smiled upon the grand pageant" to come.\[14\] By nine in the morning, the levees, public squares, balconies, and rooftops along the New Orleans waterfront teemed with excited people. One estimate put the figure at forty thousand spectators in the area around the Place d'Armes alone; all who reported the event commented on the crush of people wherever the General made an appearance.\[15\] On this day, "the Old Thunderer of Buena Vista" would have "to stand a crossfire of

\[12\] *New Orleans Commercial Bulletin*, December 3, 1847. The editor of the *Bulletin* added that "This is what we call going the whole figure for the old Hero." The *New Orleans Commercial Times* also picked up on the story in its December 4 issue.

\[13\] *New Orleans Commercial Times*, December 3, 1847.

\[14\] *New Orleans Picayune*, December 4, 1847.


\[15\] *New Orleans Picayune*, December 4, 1847.
congratulations, welcomes and outpourings of popular enthusiasm, that were far more resistless and overwhelming than the onslaught of a million of Mexicans."\(^{16}\) With the Committee of Arrangements and Lehmann's brass band on board, the *Mary Kingsland* landed at Jackson Barracks at ten to pick up the city's distinguished guest. According to the correspondent of the *Delta*, the General seemed the very model of the unassuming republican hero dressed as he was "in his usual plain and rather well-worn undress uniform, simple glazed cap, and ... brigadier's sword."\(^{17}\) Another reporter made note of "the modest and retiring nature [of the hero] that scarcely appreciates its own excellence, and thinks that in rendering unspeakable service to the country, it but fulfills the natural duties of a citizen."\(^{18}\) Taylor's countenance matched his wardrobe, and was, as one paper described it, "the index of his manly character."\(^{19}\) He wore "that good-natured, honest, and yet determined expression" which characterized "a face in which symmetry and comeliness are not sought after and therefore not missed."\(^{20}\) The modest appearance and bearing of Old Rough and Ready stood out even more among the notables dressed in their best clothing that assembled to escort him. Taylor boarded the vessel between ten-thirty and eleven with the brass band's renditions of *Hail Columbia* and *Hail to the Chief*, and the applause of a gathered crowd ringing in his

\(^{16}\) *New Orleans Daily Bee*, December 4, 1847.

\(^{17}\) *New Orleans Daily Delta*, December 4, 1847.

\(^{18}\) *New Orleans Daily Bee*, December 4, 1847.

\(^{19}\) *Ibid.*, December 6, 1847.

\(^{20}\) *New Orleans Daily Delta*, December 4, 1847.
ears. The *Mary Kingsland* shoved off and began a tour of the New Orleans waterfront. One after another, steamers bedecked in red, white, and blue, and packed with cheering spectators rounded about and fell into the *Mary Kingsland*’s wake: first, *Missouri*, then *Convoy, Majestic, Caledonia, Somerville, Panther, Colonel Clay, Gretna, St. Louis, Old Hickory*, and *Patrick Henry.*\(^{21}\) Eventually, “the stupendous and magnificent ship” *America*, a packet of eleven hundred tons, was pushed into line by two pilot steamers “with her gay bunting floating from every yard and spar.”\(^{22}\) The *Mary Kingsland* and her consorts sailed close to the east shore to give all a view of the lead ship’s precious cargo and to receive salutes from commercial shipping docked along the gentle crescent that composed New Orleans’ port. Sailors from all nations scaled rigging, stood on yards, and cheered lustily as the old hero swept past. The crescendo of sound intensified as the line of vessels approached the center of the city. Volleys of cannon fire crashed from each municipality, church bells pealed, and the masses of humanity that packed “every house-top, every ship’s mast, every steamboat, every elevation ... reckless of all danger in their eagerness to catch a glance of the veteran warrior” screamed with delight.\(^{23}\) The republican hero on the *Mary Kingsland*’s top deck returned this acclaim by removing his simple hat and waving it in

\(^{21}\)Those who wished to take part in the waterborne parade paid between twenty-five cents and one dollar for a round trip ticket. New Orleans *Daily Delta*, December 4, 1847; *New Orleans Picayune*, December 3, 1847, December 4, 1847.

\(^{22}\)New Orleans *Daily Delta*, December 4, 1847.

\(^{23}\)Ibid.
acknowledgment. After steaming up the river as far as the crowded Lafayette Square, the *Mary Kingsland* came about and steered toward the *Place d'Armes*.

Around half past twelve, Taylor's vessel docked at the wharf next to the *Place d'Armes* “amid a salvo of artillery, strains of patriotic music from the bands, and shouts of welcome again and again reiterated, so that the air seemed in continual vibration with the echo of vocal sound.”

As the General set foot on shore, the swarm of well-wishers surged forward and overran the military escort that lined the route from the steamship to the triumphal arch in the middle of the square. With the joyous crowd milling around him, Taylor and his party slowly made their way to the central passage of the arch where the Mayor and civil authorities of New Orleans waited for them. Here, a contingent of Old Rough and Ready's honor guard, the immaculately attired Crescent Hussars of Colonel Walton's company, encircled him, thus providing enough space in which to conduct the official welcoming ceremonies. The Mayor greeted the hero with a short laudatory speech, and Taylor's modest reply of thanks was equally brief. Again, the cannon roared and again, applause filled the square.

The formal welcome completed, the Mayor, with some difficulty, ushered the General through the multitude and to the entrance of Saint Louis Cathedral. The *Picayune* reported that, “No sooner were the doors [to the Cathedral] thrown open than the edifice was crowded to its utmost capacity; it was but the work of an instant.”

Bishop Blane and his clergy draped “in rich pontifical robes” stood at the altar of the

24 *New Orleans Commercial Times*, December 4, 1847.

25 *New Orleans Picayune*, December 4, 1847.
church. As the General entered the Cathedral, a choir sang an anthem and, later, priests chanted *Te Deum*. When Taylor reached the foot of the altar, the Bishop bestowed God’s blessing on the achievements of the hero. He praised Taylor for “acknowledging, as you now do, that it is God alone who dispenses victories, according to the unsearchable designs of His all-wise providence.” The Bishop also commended the General for exhibiting other “Christian-like sentiments,” such as “moderation and magnanimity,” which “have shown to the world that the present war never was intended, on our part, as a war of conquest or destruction.” One may wonder what Taylor, never a particularly religious man, thought of being cast as the recipient of the divine imprimatur. With the conclusion of the religious rites, Old Rough and Ready left the Cathedral by a side door.

Outside the crowd anxiously awaited the honored guest’s reappearance and the start of the procession that would take him through the city’s decorated streets. In the days prior to the parade, local papers speculated on whether or not Taylor would ride his famous warhorse, Old Whitey. The consensus was that the procession just would not be the same without the visiting icon being mounted on the white horse that he rode at Buena Vista. Taylor did not disappoint.

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26 *New Orleans Picayune*, December 5, 1847.

27 *New Orleans Commercial Bulletin*, December 6, 1847.

28 *Ibid*.

29 No record of Taylor’s personal thoughts of the ceremonies at the Cathedral exists.
After exiting the cathedral, he mounted Old Whitey and followed an honor guard of calvary and infantry which led the march through the city. On his right and slightly behind rode Governor Johnson of Louisiana, and as a support on Taylor’s left rode Major General Lewis. Behind them more than fifty units filed into place as the column began moving on its over two mile route. Progress was slow because as one observer explained, “The almost interminable line ... was frequently compelled to halt on account of the immense crowds of people who filled all the main streets, and every cross-street or avenue running into them.”

Each balcony along the course of the parade was also full. Everyone in New Orleans, it seemed, wanted to see the old hero. Some were not satisfied with simply viewing their famous guest. The enthusiastic masses often engulfed the General and his mount, giving rise to fears for his safety.

Old Whitey often suffered the indignity of having hairs pulled from his mane and tail as the most exuberant of the spectators strove to gain a souvenir of the event. The next day, the *Picayune* would report “that Old Whitey’s personal beauty is a good deal impaired.”

One eyewitness related that “it would be impossible ... to detail all the forms by which the popular feeling sought to express itself.”

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30 New Orleans *Daily Delta*, December 4, 1847.

31 Such was the excitement of the crowd that correspondents of several papers expressed surprise that no one was seriously injured during the parade. Also street crime seems to have decreased on the day of the reception. See for example, *New Orleans Picayune*, December 4, 1847; *New Orleans Courier*, December 4, 1847; *New Orleans Commercial Bulletin*, December 4, 1847; *New Orleans Commercial Times*, December 4, 1847.

32 New Orleans *Picayune*, December 4, 1847.

33 New Orleans *Daily Delta*, December 4, 1847.
stood out. Major Hufty, a shop-owner on Camp Street, began firing salutes from a brass cannon from the third floor of his store as the procession crossed Canal Street. He kept up the barrage until the head of the column passed Poydras Street, a distance of five blocks. To give further effect to his fire, the Major inscribed "A little more grape, Capt. Bragg" over the entrance to his store "in conspicuous characters." When Taylor arrived at the Saint Charles Hotel, he dismounted and reviewed the rest of the procession from the portico of the building. After the end of the column passed by, Old Rough and Ready stepped forward and addressed a few words of thanks to the assembled host. He then retired inside "amidst shouts and cheers, which seemed to shake the very foundation of the noble pile within whose walls he is now entertained as the city's guest."

If the General expected a moment's respite from the day's activities when he entered the Hotel, he was sadly mistaken for within many of the most respectable ladies of New Orleans awaited his presence. As Taylor walked to the meeting place in the Ladies' Parlor, he could not have helped noticing the various transparencies with which the Hotel was decorated. In front of the Gentlemen's drawing-room was a transparent image of the General "in the old brown coat" inscribed with the quote, "I have no

\[34\text{Ibid. The quote refers to a command that Taylor is supposed to have issued to Captain Braxton Bragg at the battle of Buena Vista. The phrase became synonymous with Taylor's style of command as represented in the press back home. Hamilton reports the actual command was somewhat different, "Well, double-shot your guns and give 'em hell." Hamilton, }\textit{Zachary Taylor}, \textit{I, 240.}\]

\[35\text{New Orleans Picayune, December 4, 1847.} \]
reinforcements to give you, but Major Bliss and I will support you!"36 Another rested
before the Ladies’ Parlor inscribed with the motto “A little more grape, Capt. Bragg!”37
Other parts of the building were also decorated in a similar manner. After greeting the
female well-wishers, Governor Johnson called on the General. As this session went on
the sun began to set and the time for evening’s festivities approached. Outside, the city
was illuminated in the hero’s honor; while inside, the staff of the Hotel, under the
direction of Messrs. Mudge and Wilson, prepared for an honorary dinner for almost
three hundred invited guests.

Between six and seven, the grand dinner, sponsored by the Corporation of the
City of New Orleans, began. As the guests filled the commodious dining room, they
were greeted with a sight that “might well call forth a eulogy from an epicure and
admiration from the most distinguished chef de cuisine. Three long spacious tables,
loaded with every luxury which the market could afford and sparkling with glasses,
while the aroma from rich wines, tempered with the odor of sweet flowers, filled the air,
made a sight that could not prove ungrateful to the most uncompromising
campaigner.”38 The General sat in a place of honor at a round table flanked by the
Governor and Mayor. The favored guests consumed much food and presented many
toasts. Among the regular toasts were ones memorializing the memory of Washington,
the heroes of the Revolution, and the patriots who died in Mexico. The highlight of the

36 Ibid.
37 Ibid.
38 Ibid.
banquet, however, was the third toast delivered, one to Zachary Taylor followed by the band’s rendition of *Hail to the Chief*. The *Bee*’s correspondent reported that, “upon the announcement of the third toast, a storm of hurrahs and shouts arose that made the glasses dance upon the board, and shook the very flooring.”

For many, the festivities in the Saint Charles’ dining room went on late into the night, but at a relatively early hour Old Rough and Ready left to go on a tour of New Orleans’ three theaters.

As the General rode to the first of the three theaters he would visit that night, the Saint Charles, he probably saw the completion of fireworks displays given in tribute to him in various public squares around the city. After watching the second act of *The Giselle* at the Saint Charles Theater, Taylor threw the beautiful French dancer, Mademoiselle Dimier, a bouquet. To a roar of approval from the audience, the dancer picked the finest of the bouquets thrown to her on the stage and presented it to the old hero in return. The next theater on his tour was the American. Here, as before, the audience greeted Taylor with applause as the orchestra serenaded him. The last theater on his circuit was the Orleans. *Taylor’s March*, played by the band, announced his arrival in the Orleans and brought the by now anticipated response, a wild ovation. Undoubtedly tired following the nonstop day of excitement, Taylor retired to his quarters after watching the first act of *La Dame Blanche* and some vaudeville.

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39 *New Orleans Daily Bee*, December 4, 1847.

The following day, Saturday, December 4, the festivities continued, although at a less vigorous pace. Early in the morning, the General began receiving visitors, both friends and citizens, in his drawing-room at the Saint Charles Hotel. The Courier reported that the old hero’s suite was “constantly crowded” throughout the morning.41 Around ten o’clock, Taylor reviewed a painting of himself during the battle of Resaca de la Palma by Messrs. Chatillion and Develle and pronounced it “perfectly correct.”42 He then went back to the Saint Charles where more well-wishers awaited. The high point of the day was the presentation of a sword to Old Rough and Ready at one o’clock in the Gentlemen’s Drawing Room of the Hotel.43 The Louisiana Legislature voted the sword the winter before to honor Taylor’s victories at Palo Alto and Resaca de la Palma, and commissioned the work from Ames and Company of Springfield, Massachusetts.44 The tempered steel blade was inscribed with the Latin phrase, “Bis vincit qui se vincit in victoria”—“He conquers twice, who conquers himself in victory.”45 Appropriate symbols of the American republic and the state of Louisiana

41 *New Orleans Courier*, December 4, 1847.

42 *Ibid*.

43 On the presentation of the sword see, *New Orleans Commercial Bulletin*, December 6, 1847, December 8, 1847; *New Orleans Commercial Times*, December 6, 1847; *New Orleans Picayune*, December 5, 1847; *New Orleans Daily Delta*, December 5, 1847; *New Orleans Daily Bee*, December 5, 1847.

44 Both the *New Orleans Commercial Bulletin* and *Daily Delta* published descriptions of the sword which was on display at Hyde and Goodrich an Chartres Street. *New Orleans Commercial Bulletin*, December 1, 1847; *New Orleans Daily Delta*, December 1, 1847.

45 *New Orleans Commercial Bulletin*, December 1, 1847.
decorated the hilt, scabbard, pommel, and guard of the weapon. The pommel represented “the cocked hat of the Revolution” and exemplified a symbolic connection between the General and the Revolutionary heroes of the Republic. Governor Johnson of Louisiana gave a brief oration before presenting the handsome sword to its emotional recipient. After a brief reply, the old general chatted with most of those in attendance, then retired. Taylor spent the remains of the day receiving visitors in his quarters.

New Orleans produced yet another resounding tribute during the departure of the Hero of Buena Vista. Sometime before nine on Sunday morning, a legion of admirers congregated in front of the Saint Charles Hotel and waited for the General to appear. Taylor emerged to an ovation and joined the Mayor and Recorders of the city in a fine carriage. Lehmann’s brass band then led a cavalcade of carriages and local citizens to the wharf where the steamboat Missouri was docked. One observer described the Missouri as a “floating palace,” a vessel of suitable stature for its esteemed passenger. New Orleans’ “most respectable citizens” crowded her decks

46 Ibid.

47 For the departure of Taylor from New Orleans see, New Orleans Commercial Times, December 4, 1847, December 6, 1847; New Orleans Picayune, December 5, 1847; New Orleans Commercial Bulletin, December 4, 1847, December 6, 1847; New Orleans Daily Delta, December 5, 1847, December 7, 1847; New Orleans Daily Bee, December 4, 1847, December 6, 1847; New Orleans Courier, December 6, 1847; Hamilton, Zachary Taylor, 1, 254.

48 Taylor left on Missouri, whose captain graciously offered transportation up river gratis. Of course, the promise of a sold out vessel with the future President on board might have had something to do with this offer.

49 New Orleans Daily Delta, December 7, 1847.
hoping to personally take leave of the city's distinguished guest.\textsuperscript{50} As the vessel pulled from shore, over a dozen cheers were given though only three were called for. Above the yelling voices boomed a final salute, fired by the artillery of Major Gally's battalion located in the \textit{Place d'Armes}.\textsuperscript{51} As the \textit{Missouri} turned upstream, the crescendo of sound subsided, its echoes passing "far away o'er the bosom of the Mississippi."\textsuperscript{52}

The celebration of Zachary Taylor's return did not end at New Orleans. His progress up the river also became a kind of triumphal procession.\textsuperscript{53} Ladies and gentlemen lined the banks of the Mississippi north of Crescent City. Small coteries shouted greetings and acclamations from "every village and cottage."\textsuperscript{54} The \textit{Missouri} overtook the steamers \textit{Majestic} and \textit{Pride of the West} on its way toward Baton Rouge. Once the passengers on the packed decks recognized the General, they "made the welkin ring with their loud hurrahs."\textsuperscript{55} Farther up the river, \textit{Missouri} stopped for a short while at the plantation of Thomas May. Here, a moving moment took place. Probably following the example of their exuberant father, Mr. May's small children added "their

\textsuperscript{50}\textit{New Orleans Commercial Bulletin}, December 6, 1847.

\textsuperscript{51}Major Gally was himself a veteran of the Mexican War.

\textsuperscript{52}\textit{New Orleans Commercial Bulletin}, December 6, 1847.

\textsuperscript{53}The New Orleans \textit{Daily Delta} of December 7, 1847 carries extensive coverage of the trip up the river to Baton Rouge, especially the reception at Donaldsonville. No papers from Donaldsonville were found covering the period of Taylor's reception. See also, Hamilton, \textit{Zachary Taylor}, I, 254.

\textsuperscript{54}\textit{New Orleans Daily Delta}, December 7, 1847.

\textsuperscript{55}\textit{Ibid.} The original phrase read "welkin king." As this was obviously a typographical error, I have taken the liberty of correcting the text for clarity's sake.
little voices” and waved “their little caps in a perfect ecstasy of juvenile enthusiasm.”

As the vessel approached Donaldsonville at half past four, a symphony of cannon serenaded a welcome and the Stars and Stripes flew from almost every place that a flag staff could be erected. The Daily Delta reported that “even the negroes seemed to catch the general enthusiasm, and might be seen collected in dark groups on the banks, singing out their merry song of rejoicing on the return of ‘old Massa Rough and Ready’.”

The reception at Donaldsonville resembled the one at New Orleans in perfect miniature, and “like all miniatures, was really more beautiful and interesting.”

After docking, the Mayor greeted Taylor with an appropriate speech to the applause of the army of well-wishers, some of whom had traveled from as far away as Attakapas and Lafourche. A procession then formed which escorted the guest of honor to the house of Judge Nicholls where a “brilliant array of beauty had been assembled to greet him.”

Hoping to kiss his cheek or to touch his hand, the joyous hostesses pressed in upon him so that for a brief moment there was concern for the warrior’s safety.

According to the Daily Delta, however, the General “maintained himself against the severe pressure ... with a constancy worthy of the hero of a hundred fights.” The women of Donaldsonville then escorted Taylor to the ballroom where a great feast lay

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56 Ibid.
57 Ibid.
58 Ibid.
59 Ibid.
60 Ibid.
waiting. After a brief repast during which many toasts were raised, the procession reformed and delivered the old hero back to the boat. Just before dark, the Missouri shoved off to the shouts of a euphoric crowd and headed north to where yet another group of revelers waited in ambush for the First General of the Republic.

All day Sunday, citizens in Baton Rouge waited expectantly to discover when the General would arrive so that they might give him a proper salute. Many stayed awake to greet the Missouri as she approached Baton Rouge around eleven in the evening. As the vessel closed in on the landing, the thunderous reports of artillery from the Arsenal and Captain Menard’s battery shook those who had gone home earlier from “the ‘slumbering chains’ of Morpheus.” A joyful crowd cheered their hero as he came ashore. Here the General was among friends and neighbors, and his greeting, if less spectacular than that of New Orleans, was probably more meaningful to the old soldier. He would repeatedly be on the verge of weeping during the celebration in his hometown. The multitude, though excited, did not keep Taylor long, and soon he and his family were slumbering in their home at the Garrison.

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62 Baton Rouge Democratic Advocate, December 8, 1847.

63 In humorous testament to the devotion of Baton Rougians to their hometown hero, the Baton Rouge Gazette of December 18, 1847 published an advertisement in French announcing the opening of the “Cafe de ‘Rough and Ready,’” a French restaurant.
The following day at noon, salvos of cannon announced the beginning of the official welcoming ceremonies. Hundreds of residents from Baton Rouge and surrounding parishes, “many of them old friends and acquaintances of the General,” formed a procession and marched to the Taylor residence.64 Old Rough and Ready met the parade in front of his home to the applause of the delighted crowd. Then D. D. Avery, a local worthy, stepped forward and gave a speech of welcome, undistinguished in every way but brevity.65 Taylor mixed with the host in the easy, unassuming way that was his nature. The procession then reformed, circled the residence several times, while cheering the hero “three times three.”66 Nor was Old Whitey forgotten; three yells were raised for the old warhorse, grazing in a pasture close by. The procession marched back to the center of town and dispersed until time for the torchlight parade scheduled for that evening. The evening was clear and calm. Taylor himself led the glowing column along the principal streets of the city illuminated in his honor. The parade made slow progress for its leader “occasionally waited to converse with the citizens in passing, to the infinite delight of old and young of every grade.”67 The same observer noted that in true republican fashion “triumphs and honours have not altered and can never affect in the slightest degree the warmth and affection of this great and good man to his fellow human beings”; Zachary Taylor seemed Cincinnatus

64Ibid.

65Both the Democratic Advocate and the Baton Rouge Gazette reprinted the text of Avery’s speech.

66Baton Rouge Democratic Advocate, December 8, 1847.

67Baton Rouge Gazette, December 11, 1847.
reincarnated. The procession eventually wound its way back to the hero's home
where he bid all good night.

Celebrations honoring Taylor on his return did not end with his arrival in Baton
Rouge. The General began receiving invitations to attend other formal ceremonies
around the country almost as soon as he set foot in his hometown. He acceded to a
request, tendered in person by a committee of respected Natchez gentlemen, to sojourn
to that town later in the month.69 Other invitations came from as far away as New
York, however, in keeping with the General's desire to remain near home these were
gracefully turned down.70 Except for periodic visits to his plantation up river and the
trip to Natchez, Old Zack would spend most of the next thirteen months in Cincinnatus-
like repose at the "old Spanish cottage" on the military reservation near Baton Rouge.71

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68 Ibid.

69 On the Taylor's visit to Natchez see, Semi-Weekly Natchez Courier, December
12, 1847, December 24, 1847.

70 New Orleans Commercial Bulletin, December 12, 1847. The Baton Rouge
Democratic Advocate of December 8 reported that, "We learn that the General will
depart in a few days, for his farm, up the river, but will shortly return, and spend the
most of his time with his family." On Taylor's life as a plantation owner, see Hamilton,
Zachary Taylor, II, 30-37; Dyer, Zachary Taylor, 255-64.

71 Hamilton, Zachary Taylor, I, 254.
Introduction

The ancient ethic [of honor] was the cement that held regional culture together.¹

Cohesion can scarcely exist among an aggregate of people unless they share some objective characteristics. Classic criteria are common descent (or ethnic affinities), common language, common religion, and most intangible of all, common customs and beliefs. But these features alone will not produce cohesion unless those who share them also share a consciousness of what they have in common, unless they attach a distinctive value to what is being shared, and unless they feel identified with one another by the sharing. . . . [I]n fact, strong regional loyalties exist within many nations, and they existed in other areas besides the South. There was nothing inherently incompatible between regional loyalties and national loyalties.²

[L]oyalty to the nation must exist in the individual not as a unique or exclusive allegiance, but as an attachment concurrent with other forms of group loyalty—to family, to church, to school, and to the individual’s native region. Since it exists concurrently, it must also . . . partake of the nature of these other forms of loyalty.³

Historians generally recognize that exuberant nationalism burst forth after the 1820s as a powerful force in American thought and culture. Americans shared the sense that their nation was different from any that preceded it. Thus antebellum efforts to define the nation revolved around the ideas that a unique social, economic, and spatial openness marked American society and that God assigned the United States a special mission, a destiny, to fulfill.⁴ On the eve of the Mexican War, southerners, like their brethren in other sections of the country, were imbued with this sense of a divinely

¹Bertram Wyatt-Brown, Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982 ), xvi.


⁴For a recent synthesis of scholarship on the idea of Manifest Destiny, see Anders Stephanson, Manifest Destiny: American Expansion and the Empire of Right (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995).
ordained national destiny. Like other Americans, they too took pride in the nation's history.

The period of explosive territorial growth in the later 1840s marks the zenith of this expansive antebellum nationalism. It also marks the beginning of an increasingly heated debate over the extension of slavery into the territories that at its core was an argument over what America was and should become. The Mexican War and the question of the disposition of any territory gained from the war rest at the center of this decisive period in American history. Traditionally, historians have addressed the Mexican war in three ways—first as an expression of that strain of American nationalism referred to as Manifest Destiny, second as a political event that presented the young nation with both opportunities and perils, and finally as the original example of American imperial expansion through military means. Robert W. Johannsen's magisterial To the Halls of the Montezumas: The Mexican War in the American Imagination differs significantly from most histories of the war in that he deals with the war primarily as a lens through which to examine the culture and attitudes of mid-century Americans. Although I find Johannsen's innovative "cultural" approach to the Mexican War appealing, he, like most other historians, discusses the war, its

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antecedents and results in terms of the country as a whole. More rare are studies of
sections or individual states and the war. In fact, only three substantial monographs
focus on the South, and these only on the states of South Carolina and Kentucky. I
believe that the historiography of the Mexican War typically focuses too much on
illuminating or creating an image of an American experience. This dissertation
attempts to fill this void by considering the South, as a region, and the Mexican War.

The central question of the dissertation is—What did the Mexican War mean to
southerners in the mid-19th century? Although at first glance this question may seem
simple, any answer rests in the very nature and character of the mid-century South
itself. This dissertation addresses some of the ways in which southerners perceived the
war, themselves, their section, and the nation at this vital time in American history. The
war forced southerners to examine who they were. Bound up in this attempt at self-
definition is the belief that southerners, as David Potter asserts, were at the same time
both southern and American. Certainly, tensions existed between these two group
loyalties during the 1830s and 40s as manifested during the Gag Rule and Texas
annexation debates, but they became most apparent only after the Wilmot Proviso
controversy began to heat up in December, 1846. That issue, Chaplain Morrison and

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6Ernest M. Lander, Jr., Reluctant Imperialists: Calhoun, The South Carolinians,
and the Mexican War (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980); James W.
Gettys, Jr., "To Conquer a Peace": South Carolina and the Mexican War" (Ph.D.
dissertation, University of South Carolina, 1973); Damon Ralph Eubank, "Kentucky in
the Mexican War: Public Responses, 1846-1848" (Ph.D. dissertation, Mississippi State
University, 1989).

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others have argued, resonated on many levels in southern minds. Thus we are confronted with the paradox of a nation fighting two wars at once—a military one against a foreign enemy, which has traditionally lessened internal conflict, and an equally ferocious one on the political front at home. This state of affairs forced many southerners to begin to address just what being an American meant and to begin to calculate the value of the Union. Consequently, it appears that the South emerged from the war with a decided lack of boundless confidence in the bright future of the Republic. Many attempted to reconcile their patriotic love of the Union of their fathers and their desire to settle the sectional dispute over slavery in the territories by creating a republican hero in the mold of George Washington, who was by this time a mythic icon above party, interest, and section. A Washington was needed to heal the self-inflicted wounds of the country. That hero was Zachary Taylor, a creation of the Mexican War. Taylor, at least as the mythic image of him was understood, represented a turning back to ideals of virtuous, disinterested republicanism and offered an avenue toward understanding what southerners thought were the problems of their age. On another level, southerners felt comfortable with Taylor’s “southern” credentials. Of course, this perception would change with time, for Taylor, like Washington himself, could not satisfy all interests once he took the oath of office. The failure of this republican hero to


8Johannsen argues that Americans emerged from the war with unbounded confidence about the future of the Republic. The war experience fulfilled and affirmed the republican promise and mission of the country. I agree with much of this interpretation, but would stress that underneath the celebrations for returning volunteers rested profound worries about the future of the Republic.
solve the problems confronting the nation caused a general questioning of the ideals that he represented. It should, then, not surprise us that a succession of weak presidents who stood for little followed in his wake.

Southerners’ reactions to and ideas about the war also reveal much about their “worldview” in the anthropological sense of this term. A folk culture of honor dominated the manner in which southerners perceived their world and also informed their perceptions of the Mexican War.9 Indeed, southern concepts of honor and its adjunct republicanism impelled the white men of the region to fight and the women of the region to support them. Perceptions of the war as one to vindicate national honor squelched dissent within the South and made the position of southern Whigs especially difficult where the war issue was concerned. Concepts of honor also informed the manner in which southerners thought that the war should be conducted. Honor and the firm belief in the republican justice of their cause led them to advocate increasingly severe methods by which to chastise the recalcitrant Mexicans, a story that would be told in even more bloody terms in the 1860s. But in the Mexican War, the southern culture of honor served the nation. Fame, the reward of honorable conduct in war, was the goal of every volunteer. Among fame’s benefits were inclusion among the ranks of

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9Over thirty years ago, historian David Potter suggested that a distinctive “folk culture” explained the exceptionalism of the South. Although Potter did not refer to a southern culture of honor in his work, his idea jibes well with the growing crop of southern historians who view honor as fundamentally defining antebellum southern society. Potter, The South and the Sectional Conflict, 16. See also, Daniel Walker Howe, The Political Culture of the American Whigs (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 238-239.
honorable men back home and, frequently, proffers of public tokens of the esteem such as elective office.

While not the only influence upon the mind of the South where the Mexican War was concerned, honor caused the conflict to hold a special meaning in the South. No matter what the focus—politics, state or national issues, or merely an individual decision to join the war effort—one part of the story of the South's Mexican War starts with the heart.
Chapter I

“Bound by all the ties of honor:” Honor, Southerners, and the Mexican War

There is every inducement that should accentuate man, to stand by your country. ... Your honor, and every thing that is prized by honorable minds, is involved. -- TO THE VOLUNTEERS OF DAVIDSON COUNTY, November 25, 1846

In this I am not ... alone by a desire for fame, I believe it my duty to risk my life in defense of my country. But I should be differently made and constituted from other men if in the discharge of my duty I had no desire to act in such a manner as would confer honour upon myself and those whom I hold most dear in life. ... This I may be unable to effect, I may be destined to die unknown and unhonoured. That depends upon a wise and overriding Providence; but this much you may depend upon my sister, I will do nothing which will have a stain upon my name. -- Lt. J. B. Moragne to Mary Elizabeth Moragne, January 24, 1847

During the summer of 1847, Chesley Sheldon Coffey, an officer in the Second Regiment of Mississippi Volunteers in Mexico, wrote to his brother that “I am Bound by all the ties of honor to the Sirvis [sic] of my Country.” Coffey was not the only

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1 Portions of this chapter were presented at the Eighteenth Annual Mid-America Conference on History, Topeka, Kansas, September 12-14, 1996 and the Annual Meeting of the Mississippi Historical Society, Jackson, Mississippi, February 27-March 1, 1997, and appear in Gregory S. Hospodor, “‘Bound by all the ties of honor:’ Southern Honor, the Mississippians, and the Mexican War,” Journal of Mississippi History LXI(3) (Spring 1999): 1-28.


3 Lt. J. B. Moragne to Mary Elizabeth Moragne, January 24, 1847, Mary Elizabeth Moragne Papers, University of South Carolina, South Caroliniana Library.

southerner who associated concepts of "honor" with the Mexican War. The war did not occur in a vacuum. Southerners' reactions to it reveal important aspects of the cultural milieu in which they lived. Indeed, their attitudes toward the war illuminate more than just narrow issue-related opinions, they speak to the very mind of the antebellum South itself. The culture of honor, a distinctive regional trait, helped define


how southerners comprehended and reacted to the Mexican War. This cultural trait or system deeply influenced how southerners of both genders interpreted the war.

Southern concepts of honor impelled the white men of the South to volunteer and the women of the section to support them. Although as political partisans white male southerners would express differences in their interpretations of the Mexican War, as private citizens, they united in defining the conflict through the lens of honor. The code of honor tied the collective manhood of the South to support of the war effort.  


In his dissertation, “Kentucky in the Mexican War: Public Responses, 1846-1848,” Damon Eubank points to honor as an important influence upon the minds of antebellum Kentuckians where the question of the Mexican War was concerned. See especially, Chapter Four, “A Time to Gain Honor: Kentucky Soldiers in The Mexican War,” pp. 68-96. Our interpretations as to the influence of “Southern honor” differ in significant ways. Eubank does not see honor as the encompassing influence that I do. For example, he believes that the goal of gaining a reputation that would benefit a volunteer in the political arena was unrelated to honor. My belief is that the desire to attain any public position was, as a manifestation of public esteem, intimately related to the southern culture of honor.
was not the only cultural component to influence the minds of southerners on the question of the Mexican War; it was, however, one of the most important.8

A brief definition of the term "southern honor" seems in order. According to historian Edward Ayers, honor is "a system of beliefs within which a person has exactly as much worth as others confer upon him."9 Put another way, in a culture of honor a person's self-image mirrors the reputation that the community ascribes to him. Only adult white males were entitled to honor in the antebellum South, and even they had to prove themselves worthy of honor through acts of courage and scrupulous conduct. The man of honor demanded to be treated as an equal and craved public affirmations of the esteem in which others held him. To fail to respond to an insult offered by a social equal was to admit cowardice and to suffer public humiliation. Responses to offenses against honor took varying forms among the different classes of southern society, but all had one thing in common—they involved acts of physical courage, either violence or implicit threats of violence. Only by demonstrating a willingness to risk life itself to protect his reputation could a man prove himself an honorable man. The ethic of honor influenced more than just personal relationships; it applied to group affiliations as well.

8 Wider national traits such as Manifest Destiny and romantic patriotism, among others, also played important roles in determining Mississipians' perceptions of the Mexican War. In-depth discussion of these influences, however, rests beyond the scope of this dissertation. For example, see Johannsen, To the Halls of the Montezumas, passim.

Honor was defined not just by a man's actions but also by the company he kept. For example, the disgrace or triumph of one member of a militia unit, local literary club, or family affected the other members of that group. Thus for southerners the ties of group loyalty directly impacted personal honor. In short, an honorable man had a stake in the communal honor of the associations to which he belonged. When the importance of southern concepts of honor are understood, southerners' perceptions of the Mexican War become clearer.10


Although southern newspapers gave Mexican affairs some attention in late 1845 and early 1846, most editors reserved comment prior to the opening of hostilities. Instead, they and their readers trained their eyes on the Oregon dispute with Great Britain. Prior to the Mexican government’s refusal to recognize John Slidell’s mission, newspapers which did comment on Mexican-American relations demonstrated a distinct tendency to disparage the possibility of war with Mexico, although the occasional jingoistic outburst could also be heard.11 It appeared reasonable that a nation

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11In 1845, the Mexican Minister of Foreign Affairs invited the United States to send a “commissioner” to adjust issues between the two countries. President Polk responded by dispatching John Slidell to Mexico in November, 1845. Although Slidell was intrusted with full powers to treat with the Mexican government, his appointment read “Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary.” For the Mexican government to have accepted Slidell’s credentials as Minister Plenipotentiary would have implied that regular diplomatic relations with the United States had reopened. Political conditions in Mexico dictated that an American “Minister” could not be accepted. Thus, Slidell returned to the United States. Many American perceived this as both an indignity and a breach of faith. On political conditions in Mexico and Slidell’s mission, see Pedro Santoni, Mexicans at Arms: Puro Federalists and the Politics of War, 1845-1848 (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1996), 38-40, 95,107-08; Donald Frazier, ed., The United States and Mexico at War: Nineteenth-Century Expansionism and Conflict (New York: Macmillan Reference, 1998), 129, 131-32. On attitudes in the United States, see Buck, “Virginia and the Mexican War,” 20-23; B. H. Gilley, “Polk’s War” and the Louisiana Press,” Louisiana History, 20:1 (1979): 6-7; Lander, Reluctant imperialists, 1-6. For an opposing point of view, see Smith, The War with Mexico, Vol.
that had been defeated by a small band of transplanted Americans in the 1830s would scarcely attempt to take on the entire United States in the 1840s.\textsuperscript{12} Despite the provocation of the annexation of Texas, the subsequent withdrawal of the Mexican ambassador from Washington, and threats of war, most southerners, if their newspapers are a reflection of their thought, simply could not believe that Mexico would hazard a war with the United States. “We are decidedly of the opinion that we will have no war,” wrote a Mississippi Whig editor in May, 1845.\textsuperscript{13} Mexico, claimed the \textit{Richmond Enquirer} during the July of 1845, “must feel conscious of its own excessive weakness.”\textsuperscript{14} Similarly, the \textit{Richmond Whig} confidently asserted two months later that, “Our own decided belief is, that there will be no war.”\textsuperscript{15} The only way that Mexico would fight, the editor of the \textit{Whig} went on, was if Britain formed a military alliance with her against the United States. Only a powerful ally could stimulate Mexico “to take steps which of her own accord, she never will … take.”\textsuperscript{16} Indeed, many papers hailed the appointment of John Slidell as Minister Plenipotentiary to Mexico as an

\textsuperscript{12}For example, the February 5, 1846 edition of \textit{New Orleans Picayune} claimed that Mexico had not yet attacked the United States over the annexation of Texas because of internal political instability.

\textsuperscript{13} \textit{Yazoo City Whig}, May 23, 1845.

\textsuperscript{14} \textit{Richmond Enquirer}, July 7, 1845.

\textsuperscript{15} \textit{Richmond Whig}, September 3, 1845. See also, \textit{Richmond Whig}, April 30, 1845, August 15, 1845.

\textsuperscript{16} \textit{Ibid}.
indication of the probable peaceful resolution of the diplomatic dispute.\textsuperscript{17} In February, editor Frederick Symmes of the Pendleton, South Carolina \textit{Messenger} hoped that war could still be “honorably” avoided.\textsuperscript{18} Most editors, however, considered that Mexico’s final rejection of Slidell’s mission constituted a gross national insult which deserved chastisement. In early April, 1846, both the \textit{Richmond Whig} and the Democratic \textit{Richmond Enquirer} editorialized that Mexico was worthy of a good thrashing.\textsuperscript{19} In South Carolina, several papers echoed the sentiments of the Abbeville \textit{Banner} which asked: “And why should we tamely submit to her insults? ... As for the result of a war with imbecile Mexico, who for a moment would fear it?”\textsuperscript{20} In Louisiana where ambivalence about the possibility of war with Mexico had heretofore existed, the news of Slidell’s rejection resulted in several non-partisan pro-war rallies.\textsuperscript{21} By April, 1846, many in the South were gradually warming to the idea of war with Mexico.

On the morning of April 25, 1846, Mexican troops ambushed a patrol of American dragoons just north of the Rio Grande near Matamoros, Mexico. The next

\textsuperscript{17}See, Buck, “Virginia and the Mexican War,” 22.

\textsuperscript{18}Pendleton \textit{Messenger}, February 13, 1846, quoted in Lander, \textit{Reluctant Imperialists}, 2. Lander notes that at least three other papers in South Carolina shared Symmes sentiment.

\textsuperscript{19}Buck, “Virginia and the Mexican War,” 22.

\textsuperscript{20}Abbeville \textit{Banner}, February 13, 1846, quoted in Lander, \textit{Reluctant Imperialists}, 3.

day General Zachary Taylor hastened reports of the action to Washington. During the following three weeks, news of the opening of hostilities raced across the nation, generating what was commonly referred to as the “war fever.”

In early May, an Alabama woman described the feeling in Mobile, stating, “We are in the midst of great excitement. The War Fever is raging with vast fury. ... I have never seen such efforts to animate the slumbering ‘War Dogs.’” Likewise, a citizen of New Orleans observed that every steamship brought crowds of volunteers which led him to believe that the “popular current of the will of the masses of the mighty valley of the Mississippi will sweep every thing along ... until the national honor is vindicated.”

Word of the opening of hostilities on the Rio Grande finally reached Washington on the evening of Saturday, May 9, 1846. The following day, President James K. Polk, assisted by members of his cabinet, drafted a war message. This message, delivered to Congress on May 11 and widely reprinted in the press, defined the conflict in terms that any southern man of honor could immediately understand. In it, the President stressed the honorable conduct of the United States in all dealings with Mexico, argued that war

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23[anon. woman from Mobile, Alabama] to Rebecca Gibson Smallwood, May 16, 1846, Wright-Harris Papers, Duke University, Special Collections Department, William R. Perkins Library.

existed “by act of Mexico herself,” and called on Americans “to vindicate with decision
the honor, the rights and the interests of our country.”

Southern men responded to the President’s summons with fervor. Across the
region, intense competition characterized the volunteer mania in the Spring of 1846. In Virginia, one company, organized by a Richmond Whig, volunteered before the
President had even issued a requisition for troops to Governor William Smith. Thirty thousand men answered a call for about three thousand volunteers in Tennessee,
necessitating a drawing to determine which companies would go to Mexico; a lottery
was also required in North Carolina. Texans quickly responded to each of the eleven
federal calls and requisitions for volunteers, the first of which was made as early as the

25 James D. Richardson, comp., A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of
the Presidents, 1789-1902, vol. 4 (Washington, D.C.: Bureau of national Literature and
Art, 1903), 442. For a more complete discussion of the President’s war message see
Chapter 2.

26 For the number of volunteers from each state, see Jenkins Garrett, The
Mexican-American War of 1846-1848: A Bibliography of the Holdings of the Libraries
of the University of Texas at Arlington, ed. Katherine R. Goodwin (College Station:
Texas A&M University Press, 1995), 624-637. The fourteen slave states (Alabama,
Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, Missouri,
North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia) provided 47,639 of the
73,532 men who volunteered (64.8%). The eleven states which later seceded provided
34,426 men (46.7%).

27 Richmond Enquirer, May 26, 1846, Wallace, “First Regiment of Virginia
Volunteers,” 46. Governor William Owsley of Kentucky accepted the services of
volunteer companies “in anticipation of a call from Washington.” William Owsley,
quoted in Chronicles of the Gringos, 9.

28 Smith, War with Mexico, 195; White, Governors of Tennessee, 162. North
Carolina Standard, July 8, 1846.
summer of 1845. So many companies applied for selection to the First Regiment of Mississippi Volunteers that some had to be turned away. The same was true in Kentucky, where 105 companies offered their services when only thirty were called for. Many southerners did not wait to be called by their respective state governments


30 In her thesis, Lynda Lasswell asserts that 17,000 Mississippians began to converge on the Vicksburg muster point. This assertion appears dubious, but the point is well taken. Many more men were willing to volunteer than were actually called. Lasswell, "The First Regiment of Mississippi Infantry," 9. In May, 1846, John Quitman estimated that five thousand volunteers could easily have been raised in the state. John A. Quitman to Hon. Jacob Thompson, R. W. Roberts, Jefferson Davis, and Stephen Adams, May 22, 1846, reprinted in the Jackson Mississippian, June 3, 1846; Vicksburg Sentinel and Expositor, June 2, 1846. See also Papers of Jefferson Davis, vol. 2, 608-610. The exact number of Mississippians who fought in the Mexican War is difficult to assess. Some citizens joined volunteer units from other states. Others joined the Regiment of United States Voltigeurs and Foot Riflemen which was recruited, at least in part, in Mississippi. According to Bruce Winders' detailed order of battle approximately 2,484 Mississippians enlisted in the volunteer units drawn from the state: two regiments of infantry and an infantry battalion. Included in Winder's figure are the 61 men of Captain William R. Shivor's Claibourne Guards, which served as an independent company of volunteer infantry. We may, then, consider the above figure as a conservative estimate of the number of Mississippians who fought in the war. Winders, "Mr. Polk's Army," 258, 307-310.

The Natchez Fencibles were one of the unlucky companies, and they raised an outcry that did not die down for several weeks. One can trace the controversy over the rejection of the Natchez Fencibles in the Mississippi Free Trader and Natchez Gazette, June 20, July 4, July 9, July 14, July 28, 1846, the Vicksburg Tri-Weekly Whig, June 6, July 2, 1846, and the Yazoo [City] Democrat, July 1, 1846. They were not alone; at least one other Mississippi volunteer unit, the Jefferson Troop, expressed its frustration through resolutions circulated through the state press. Mississippi Free Trader and Natchez Gazette, June 9, 1846.

31 Eubank, "Kentucky in the Mexican War," 4-18.
and either went to New Orleans to enlist individually or formed complete companies that enrolled in volunteer regiments from other states.\textsuperscript{32}

As the war progressed, more troops were called from the South. Some papers noted that the number of men stepping forward was not as great as it had been in the spring of 1846. Southern states, however, met their quotas, although the atmosphere was less intensely competitive than before. In Kentucky, where 105 companies answered a call for thirty in 1846, only thirty-two presented themselves to fill twenty slots in 1847.\textsuperscript{33} In November 1847, Georgian Columbus Palmore would still encourage

\textsuperscript{32}For example, see Mississippi Free Trader and Natchez Gazette, May 9, May 12, May 21, May 26, July 21, 1846; Chance, Jefferson Davis' s Mexican War Regiment, 10; Winders, "Mr. Polk's Army," 308, Dunbar Rowland, Military History of Mississippi, 1803-1898; Taken from the Official and Statistical Register of the State of Mississippi, 1908 (Spartanburg, South Carolina: Reprint Company, 1978), 19. The "Sparrow Volunteers," a company raised in Natchez and named in honor of General Sparrow of Concordia Parish, Louisiana, enrolled in the "Montezuma" Regiment of Louisiana Volunteers (Company E, Forth Regiment of Louisiana Volunteers). Spurned in their attempt to join the First Mississippi Regiment, the Natchez Fencibles may also have served in a Louisiana Regiment. Both companies apparently served for only three months as their parent units were part of General Gaines' unauthorized call up of volunteers from Louisiana. As historian Joseph Chance has noted, "three months service ... [gave volunteers] just about enough time to reach south Texas and draw a few days rations."(Chance, 10) Another Mississippi unit, the Claiborne Volunteers, ventured to the Rio Grande where they served with the First Regiment of Texas Foot as Company K. After three months service, this regiment disbanded, but eighty-two volunteers commanded by Captain William Shivors re-enlisted as an independent company. The company was attached to the Forth United States Infantry and fought with this unit at the battle of Monterrey. Another company of Mississippi volunteers, commanded by Captain J. A. Talbot, arrived in New Orleans on May 22. They were evidently raised from the eastern portion of the state for they arrived via Mobile, Alabama.

\textsuperscript{33}Eubank, "Kentucky in the Mexican War," 22-23.
his brother to join him "and let us go on to Mexico." Following the second call for volunteers another observer bristled at "the unworthy insinuation that all our patriotism and chivalry has departed." Many volunteers feared that the "laurels" would all be gone by the time they arrived in Mexico. Indeed, Zachary Taylor advised his former son-in-law Jefferson Davis in July 1847 that the war in northern Mexico would henceforth be "of the guerilla character where little of reputation can be gained." This assessment was correct for no major action took place in northern Mexico while most of the second-call regiments were in the field. Furthermore, it would have been exceptional if the war mania had remained at the same fever pitch attained in the spring and summer of 1846 throughout the conflict.

Accounting for over forty thousand southerners’ motivations for joining up is problematic at best. However, one thing is certain—southern concepts of honor played a role for many. As companies with names like the Virginia Rangers, the Fannin Avengers, and the Natchez Fencibles vied with each other in the rush to the flag,

34Columbus Palmore to William C. Palmore, November 17, 1847, George Palmore Papers, Virginia Historical Society.
35Jackson Mississippian, December 8, 1846.
overlapping loyalties reinforced the seductive invitation to defend the national honor.\textsuperscript{38}

More than just the nation's honor was at stake, for many southerners clearly understood that the honor of their states and localities, even their personal honor was involved. The editor of the \textit{Natchez Courier} believed that Mississippi's volunteers went to Mexico because "their country called them, and bright honor held out its dazzling reward for the brave."\textsuperscript{39} At a Florence, Alabama, meeting for the purpose of raising a company of volunteers, an orator "gained considerable reputation" when, after haranguing the crowd of two thousand about the outrages committed by Mexico and the duties of citizenship, he "boldly stepped forward as a volunteer."\textsuperscript{40} This action, an observer, noted "had the proper effect," and the company roster was soon filled.

Volunteers like William Estes from Brandon, Mississippi, summed up the eagerness of many to prove their manhood in the conflict with Mexico when he exclaimed "turn us

\textsuperscript{38}The interconnected nature of group loyalties can be seen in the example of the First Mississippi Regiment. The regiment mustered into federal service and marched under the national flag but was recruited in Mississippi and retained the state's name in its official designation. Furthermore, the Regiment's companies were formed in towns and counties in the state and, hence, retained a distinctive local air. For the organization of the First Mississippi Regiment, see Chance, \textit{Jefferson Davis's Mexican War Regiment}, 8-21, 135-175. On the intersection of national, state, and local loyalties, see Johannsen, \textit{To the Halls of the Montezumas}, 62-67; David Potter, \textit{The South and the Sectional Conflict} (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1968); \textit{idem}, \textit{The Impending Crisis, 1848-1861}, completed and edited by Don E. Ferenbacher (New York: Harper and Row, 1976). Johannsen notes the role that "state pride," "state loyalty," and "honor" played in the consciousness of Americans during the Mexican War. Johannsen, however, places less emphasis on these factors than I do here.

\textsuperscript{39}\textit{Semi-Weekly Natchez Courier}, May 11, 1847.

\textsuperscript{40}M.C. Gallaway to George S. Houston, May 29, 1846, George S. Houston Papers, Duke University, Special Collections Department, William R. Perkins Library.
loose on that country." South Carolina volunteer Joseph Abney advised a friend that
"I could not resist my impulses, and I offered my own services. ... Being a young man,
I should have felt stained, I should have felt dishonored, if I had not volunteered to
fight." Likewise, Mississippi volunteer Captain Gholson felt "bound in honor, bound
as a man to come." Arkansan George Morrison joined up because his state militia
unit, the Little Rock Guards, offered their services to the governor of the state. To
have backed out would have meant dishonor. One South Carolinian believed that the
family name had been diminished because his brother did not go off to Mexico; H. H.
Townes lectured his sibling: "I wish you had volunteered. Mother ought to have made
you volunteer. I will always regret our family was not represented in the army of
Mexico." Volunteer John Quitman perhaps best summed up the multifaceted
motivations of southern volunteers as men who wished "to serve their country, confer
honor on their ... State, and win laurels for their own fame."

41Quoted in Chance, Jefferson Davis's Mexican War Regiment, 8.
42J. Abney to Armistead Burt, June 6, 1846. Armistead Burt Papers, Duke
University, Special Collections Department, William R. Perkins Library.
43Capt. Gholson, quoted in The Mexican War Journal of Captain Franklin
44George S. Morrison to Elvira D. Morrison, March 3, 1847, reprinted in George
S. Morrison, "Letter from Mexico by George S. Morrison, a Member of Capt. Albert
45H. H. Townes to Brother, December 14, 1846, Townes Family Papers,
University of South Carolina, South Caroliniana Library.
46John A. Quitman to Hon. Jacob Thompson, R. W. Roberts, Jefferson Davis,
and Stephen Adams, May 22, 1846, reprinted in the Jackson Mississippian, June 3,
1846; Vicksburg Sentinel and Expositor, June 2, 1846.
It is not surprising that few southern white men could resist the powerful cultural resonance of this summons to defend the nation's honor. On a personal level, no man of honor could tolerate a verbal, much less a physical assault on his manhood without retribution. Why then on a national level should the nation decline to respond to, as Polk put it, the shedding of "American blood on the American soil?" For southern white males, the Mexican challenge to the country's honor could not go unanswered. Tennessee governor Aaron Venable Brown spoke for many when he said that the war "could not have been avoided without a sacrifice of national honor, dignity and character." One southern newspaper quoted from the fifth annual presidential message of Virginian George Washington: "If we desire to avoid insult, we must be ready to repel it." The editor of the *Yazoo Democrat* drew a direct comparison between private and national affairs of honor when he argued that "submission whether as regards individuals or nations provokes insult and aggression." He went on to ask

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47 Richardson, *Messages*, 442.


49 *The North Carolina Standard*, June 6, 1846.

50 *Yazoo [City] Democrat*, May 6, 1846. See also, *ibid.*, May 13, 1846; *Jackson Mississippian*, May 13, 1846
his readers to "look to individuals in their private transactions ... to discern the same well established principle."\textsuperscript{51} In South Carolina, John Dudley asked the audience at the Bennettsville Lyceum, "Are we to allow our honor to be trampled upon and all this done by poor degraded Mexico?"\textsuperscript{52} As a North Carolina editor put it, "Character is as important to states as it is to individuals; and the glory of the state is the common property of its citizens."\textsuperscript{53} John Breckenridge expressed the same sentiment more directly when he said that the Kentucky volunteers "felt that the public honor was their own."\textsuperscript{54} For many southerners then, the reputation of the Republic was at stake. Mexico's actions demanded an aggressive response to prevent further encroachments on American honor by Mexico or any other country. Thus it was the duty of every honorable man to respond to the call to arms or, as one observer put it, "to yield up their lives as a sacrifice for their country's honor."\textsuperscript{55}

\textsuperscript{51}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{52}"Speech on whether the Mexican War is justified or not in the affirmative—Speech for the Bennettsville Lyceum at its second meeting on the question—Is the war with Mexico justifiable on the part of the United States? John G. Dudley,"[1846], John D. Dudley Papers, University of South Carolina, South Caroliniana Library.

\textsuperscript{53}Motto of the Fayetteville \textit{North Carolinian}, May 16, 1846. The motto quoted above appears on every issue of the paper from 1846 to 1848.

\textsuperscript{54}John C. Breckenridge, \textit{An Address on the Occasion of the Burial of the Kentucky Volunteers, who fell at Buena Vista; delivered at Frankfort, on Tuesday, the 20th of July, 1847, by John C. Breckenridge; with remarks by the Rev. John H. Brown, on the same occasion} (Lexington, KY: Observer and Reporter Office, 1847), 10.

\textsuperscript{55}\textit{Semi-Weekly Natchez Courier}, August 6, 1847.
Southerners also realized that the volunteer regiments that carried the names of their states bore the reputations of those states as well. Following the battle of Buena Vista, Charles Dabney, a Mississippian attending the College of William and Mary, wrote to his father Thomas, “after this battle we may all be proud to say that we are Mississippians ... Her glory has cost her much, but to have lost her honor would have been an expense far greater.”\textsuperscript{56} Similarly, West Pointer Ambrose Powell Hill informed his parents that: “There is one regiment ... on which I would stake my life and that is the one from dear old Virginia. I would fight for its honor and reputation as soon as I would for my own.”\textsuperscript{57} Tennessee’s governor encouraged the men of the “Volunteer State” to bear “the time-honored standard of Tennessee to the field of battle and glory ... [and] never permit it to be lowered in the face of the enemy, whilst your regiment has one soldier left to hold it proudly in the breeze.”\textsuperscript{58} Josiah Pender, a volunteer from North Carolina, explained that the men in his regiment “came to do honor to her [North Carolina] and we will sacrifice our lives on that altar.”\textsuperscript{59} A broadside published by the

\textsuperscript{56}Charles Dabney to Thomas Dabney, April 9, 1847, \textit{Memorials of a Southern Planter by Susan Dabney Smedes}, ed. Fletcher M. Green (1887: reprint, Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1981), 114-115. The \textit{Semi-Weekly Natchez Courier} of May 11, 1847 noted “the First Regiment of Mississippi Rifles has honored the State: let the State honor them!” R. M. Gaines believed that the fame of the First Mississippi Regiment was “the property of the country, but especially of the state which has sent them forth in battle.” \textit{Semi-Weekly Natchez Courier}, June 15, 1847.


\textsuperscript{58}White, \textit{Governors of Tennessee}, 126.

\textsuperscript{59}Quoted in Smith and Judah, \textit{Chronicles of the Gringos}, 431. For similar sentiments see also, \textit{Tri-Weekly Nashville Union}, May 16, June 2, 1846; \textit{Nashville Daily Union}, May 17, July 26, 1846.
headquarters of the Palmetto Regiment called on "the patriotic and spirited citizens of our old State, to step forward at her call to vindicate her ancient honor, and discharge their obligations to our common country."\textsuperscript{60}

In a world where reputation counted, one's position within the military hierarchy meant a great deal. The higher the rank, so the logic of southern honor ran, the greater the distinction. Consequently, competition for both elected and appointed positions in volunteer regiments reflected the vigorous political atmosphere of late-Jacksonian America. Rampant partisanship was the order of the day. Sometimes the commander of a volunteer unit, when elected, reflected the political loyalties of the rank and file. For example, Jefferson Davis, a rising star in the Mississippi Democratic Party, received an offer of the colonelcy of the First Mississippi Rifles from its rank and file, which supposedly reflected Mississippi's status as a Democratic stronghold. When an office was filled by appointment, as was the case for the field commanders of the First North Carolina Regiment, controversy often flared. Here, Governor William A. Graham, a Whig, chose two of the party faithful, Robert T. Paine and John A. Fagg, for the highest billets in the regiment.\textsuperscript{61} Democrats constituted the majority of the unit and voiced vehement protest.\textsuperscript{62} One company raised in Mecklenburg County by Democrat Green W. Caldwell refused to report, stating that if "Cols. Paine and Fagg want men to

\textsuperscript{60}"Copy of printed instructions from the Regt. HQ," November 23, 1846, Nathaniel Ridley Eaves Papers, University of South Carolina, South Caroliniana Library.


\textsuperscript{62}\textit{Ibid.}, 29-32.
command, they will have to get them elsewhere than in Mecklenburg." Partisan controversy continued to swirl around the issue and contributed to the fact that the North Carolina Regiment was never completely filled. Political maneuvering was not limited only to the field-grade positions. On December 26, 1846, Governor Smith advised Virginian James Lawson Kemper that being a gentleman he ought not to enlist as a private. Kemper confided his response to his diary: "The truth is this. Richmond folks think no one but a rowdy would join as a private. This galled me cruelly and made me anxious to occupy some post reputed to be respectable." After considerable politicking, Kemper gained his "respectable" post, an appointment as a captain in the First Virginia Regiment. Kemper was not unique in this respect.

By answering the call to arms and fighting valiantly in their country's cause, male Mississippians symbolically joined that most honorable of groups, the Revolutionary fathers of the Republic. In short, they proved themselves worthy of their republican heritage. In a speech to returning volunteers from Carroll County, Mississippi in 1847, Francis Marion Aldridge expounded on this link:

It was by deeds of gallantry that our liberty was won, it must be by deeds of gallantry and self sacrifice that our liberty shall be maintained—Hence he who falls in his Country's cause becomes so identified with that liberty that they seem to the closest inspection to be one and the same—The one must live or die with the other— ...

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63 Mecklenburg Jeffersonian quoted in Ibid., 31.

64 Diary entry for January 1, 1847, James Lawson Kemper Diary, Virginia Historical Society.

65 Ibid.
Wrapped in the silvery garments of fame they [the honored dead] are martialed [sic] by Washington.\(^66\)

Volunteer Chatham Roberdeau Wheat agreed. He wrote to a friend that he believed that after they had died in battle “and when our comrades on earth should prove triumphant—we would, with Washington & the heroes that have gone before, hang out our banners from the battlements of Heaven.”\(^67\) George Langford encouraged his brothers “to fight for the maintenance of those rights which have been consecrated by the blood of our revolutionary fathers … [and] never disgrace the standard of your country.”\(^68\) One of George’s brothers, Sergeant Joseph Langford would join the Founding Fathers in the hereafter at the battle of Buena Vista on February 23, 1847.\(^69\)

An Alabama woman also perceived that the spirit of the Founding generation was alive in the volunteers: “There is a company now here from Montgomery who are so eager for the fight that they have sent a messenger to Gen. Gaines, to say they will go to war without pay, and are willing to be killed without any compensation whatever! … There

\(^66\) Manuscript address to the returning volunteers of Carroll County [1847], Francis Marion Aldridge Papers, Folder 15, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson, Mississippi.

\(^67\) C. H. Wheat to George Maney, May 15, 1846, John Kimberly Papers, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Library, Southern Historical Collection; also quoted in Chronicles of the Gringos, 1.

\(^68\) George N. Langford, Jr. to Joseph H. and William R. Langford, undated [c. May-June, 1846], reprinted in the Jackson Mississippian, June 10, 1846.

\(^69\) Rowland, Military History of Mississippi, 27.
speaks the noble spirit of our forefathers!!”70 The editor of the Natchez Courier noted that the First Mississippi Regiment reminded him “of the times of our revolutionary ancestors.”71 He went on to explain that, “such men could not have sprung from any other stock.”72 These southerners were not alone in making the symbolic connection between the volunteers and their Revolutionary heritage. For southerners, it seemed natural to associate the volunteers, the contemporary heroes of the age, with the Revolutionary heroes of the Republic. The American Revolution loomed large in their historical frame of reference; it supplied them with the ideological substance of their beliefs and also their symbols and allusions.73 In a very real sense, southerners fought and thought during the Mexican War era with their ideological fathers looking over their shoulders.

70 [anon. woman from Mobile, Alabama] to Rebecca Gibson Smallwood, May 16, 1846, Wright-Harris Papers, Duke University, Special Collections Department, William R. Perkins Library.

71 Semi-Weekly Natchez Courier, June 6, 1847.

72 Ibid.

Southerners shared a republican conviction that those who fought for their country were worthy of the highest share of human praise. Put another way, just as it was the duty of white southern males to defend the honor of their nation, state, and community, it was also the duty of those who stayed behind to exalt the sacrifice made in their behalf. Richard Henry Stanton clearly understood this when he exclaimed in a speech at Maysville, Kentucky that: "He who devotes himself to danger and to death in the defense of national rights and national honor, is a hero of the noblest order, entitled to the highest share of human praise." Similarly, John Campbell wrote to his nephew in Mexico that: "Some are prepared as you will find on your return to your native land to bind your victorious brows with the wreaths of military glory and to shout your praises in every section of our great & powerful country." Volunteer Thomas Sumrall's uncle encouraged him to "win a laurel that may perhaps smooth your path through life ... from the good wishes and respect of all good people." George Langford wrote to his brothers Joseph and William who were members of the Jackson Fencibles, that "your conduct as steady upright men, and as brave soldiers, will give you a passport to honor and promotion." South Carolinian Nathaniel Ridley Eaves

74Richard Henry Stanton, Speech of Richard H. Stanton, Esq., In Defense of the Mexican War: delivered at the War Meeting, Maysville, Saturday, December 18, 1847 (Maysville, KY: Kentucky Flag Office, 1848), 1.

75John Campbell to Col. Wm. B. Campbell, August 4, 1846, Campbell Family Papers, Duke University, Special Collections Department, William R. Perkins Library.

76T. L. Sumrall to Thomas S. Sumrall, May 19, 1846, reprinted in the Jackson Mississippian, May 27, 1846.

77George N. Langford, Jr. to Joseph H. and William R. Langford, undated [c. May-June, 1846], reprinted in the Jackson Mississippian, June 10, 1846.
received several letters that attested to the belief that his military service would be rewarded. In a May 1847 letter, Governor David Johnson wrote, “you [Eaves] will have your reward. Our people over and all take the deepest interest in all the privations and sufferings of our gallant Palmetto Regiment and will receive all our sons on their return with open arms. Old Chester will not forget her own.”

C. D. Melton advised Eaves that at two different barbeques “you were toasted among the regular toasts, in terms highly complementary to you, and evidence of the good intention of your District to remunerate you with such substantial honor as may be in their power to gain.” If your service, another correspondent asked Eaves, “does not entitle a man to the highest gift of his State—what can he do to give him such honours?”

Finally, R. G. M. Dunovant told Eaves that when asked “if I think the State will recompense you for your trials and sufferings by making you Governor or sending you to Congress. I tell you then that I think She will.”

An obsession with post-war public affirmations of esteem like those promised Eaves drove many men into the ranks. Southern men perceived that in valiantly defending the honor of their country they could win lasting individual fame. Volunteers

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78 Governor David Johnson to Nathaniel Ridley Eaves, May 15, 1847, Nathaniel Ridley Eaves Papers, University of South Carolina, South Caroliniana Library.

79 C. D. Melton to Nathaniel Ridley Eaves, July 18, 1847, Nathaniel Ridley Eaves Papers, University of South Carolina, South Caroliniana Library.

80 J. T. Walker to Nathaniel Ridley Eaves, March 21, 1848, Nathaniel Ridley Eaves Papers, University of South Carolina, South Caroliniana Library.

81 R. G. M. Dunovant to Nathaniel Ridley Eaves, February 26, 1848, Nathaniel Ridley Eaves Papers, University of South Carolina, South Caroliniana Library.
were passionately self-interested men, but, like many of their Revolutionary forefathers, the quest for fame on the battlefield enabled them to transmute "the leaden desire for self-aggrandizement and personal reward into a golden concern for public service."\textsuperscript{82} Men of honor prided their reputation above all things and the war seemed to offer ample opportunity for its enhancement. In an August 1847 letter to Lt. Colonel Dickinson of the Palmetto Regiment, South Carolinian J. M Desanping summed up the rewards to be expected from military service: "It will add to your reputation ... [M]ake yourself a man of value to the community in which you live by making yourself useful to them, & them proud of you, & then you command the sources of wealth and honor. The state expects much from you."\textsuperscript{83} Dickinson, who at one time was heard to exclaim "I want a place in the picture near the flashing of the guns," died of wounds received at the battle of Churubusco before receiving Desanping's letter.\textsuperscript{84} In death, Dickinson, however, received the laurels that he went to Mexico to earn. After the Palmetto State had his body along with that of Colonel Pierce M. Butler shipped home in sealed lead coffins, over three thousand people attended the official funeral ceremonies held in front of the

\footnotesize\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{82}Douglass Adair, \textit{Fame and the Founding Fathers: Essays by Douglass Adair. Edited by Trevor Colbourn, with a Personal Memoir by Caroline Robbins and a Bibliographic Essay by Robert E. Shalhope} (New York: Norton, 1974), 24. See especially, Chapter One, "Fame and the Founding Fathers."
\item \textsuperscript{83}J. M. Desanping to James Polk Dickenson, August 15, 1847, John F. H. Claiborne Collection, Volume A, Letters A-G, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson, Mississippi.
\item \textsuperscript{84}Meyer, \textit{South Carolina in the Mexican War}, 17, 211.
\end{itemize}

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State House in Columbia on January 18, 1848.\textsuperscript{85} Other volunteers were more fortunate.

One reason that Mississippian John Anthony Quitman went to war was because he sought, as he called it, "the bubble reputation at the cannon's mouth."\textsuperscript{86} Throughout the war, Quitman, who rose to the rank of Major General and military governor, obsessed over how his actions were regarded in his home state. He advised his daughter, Louisa, "to keep every paper which speaks in praise or blame of me—so that I can see them when I get home."\textsuperscript{87} Quitman had reason to be satisfied with his treatment in the press as evidenced by this quote from a Natchez paper, "[h]e has nobly upheld the honor of his country ... he has honored our State by his heroic feats of arms—then as

\textsuperscript{85}\textit{Ibid.}, 125-26.

\textsuperscript{86}Quoted in Robert E. May, "John A. Quitman and the Southern Martial Spirit," \textit{Journal of Mississippi History} 41 (1979): 169. Quitman was not original in his remarks. See William Shakespeare's \textit{As You Like It}, Act II, Scene vii, lines 152-153. Quitman’s reasons for joining the army are complex. Undoubtedly enhancement of his reputation played a major role, but other tenets of honorable conduct also influenced him to participate in the conflict. See also John A. Quitman to Eliza Quitman, October 10, 1846, Quitman Family Papers, SHC. On John A. Quitman’s participation in the Mexican War, see Robert E. May, \textit{John A. Quitman: Old South Crusader} (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985), 147-215. I am indebted to Robert E. May who I recently discovered has come to many of the same conclusions that I have about John Quitman in relation to the concept of southern honor. See Robert E. May, "John A. Quitman and the Real Enemy in the Mexican War," unpublished paper delivered at the Annual Meeting of the Mississippi Historical Society, Jackson, Mississippi, February 27 - March 1, 1997.

\textsuperscript{87}John A. Quitman to Louisa Quitman, November 28, 1846, Quitman Family Papers, SHC. Quitman and his daughter maintained a running correspondence in which she kept him apprized of his reputation in Mississippi. For example, Louisa wrote in 1847, "I have had great consolation in your promotion, which was highly deserved I know, it is much talked of here and everyone seems pleased at it. Mother has been addressed as 'Mrs. Major General' and a young gentleman told me the other day, that he considered it equivalent to another plantation." (Louisa to John A. Quitman, May 19, 1847, Quitman Family Papers, SHC) See also Louisa Quitman to John A. Quitman, July 7, August 2, October 17, 1847, Quitman Family Papers, SHC.
Mississippians let us all unite in paying him a fit testimonial upon his arrival." In 1849, the citizens of the state presented Quitman with the office of governor as confirmation of his reputation as a distinguished man of honor.

Jefferson Davis also clearly understood the connection between fame won on the battlefield and public office. He reluctantly resigned his position in the House of Representatives to lead the First Mississippi Regiment in the Mexican War. While on his way to join the regiment he was to command, he wrote to his sister that "I will return with a reputation over which you will rejoice." Later, after winning "chaplet[s] of fame ... enough for any man's ambition" on the battlefields of Monterrey and Buena Vista, Davis too would be awarded high public office—that of United States Senator from the state of Mississippi. Both Quitman and Davis understood that Mississippians

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88 Semi-Weekly Natchez Courier, November 16, 1847; also quoted in Brent, "Mississippi and the Mexican War," 211. See also Semi-Weekly Natchez Courier, November 30, 1847.

89 On Jefferson Davis's participation in the Mexican War, see William C. Davis, Jefferson Davis, 127-167; idem, "The Road to the "V"": Jefferson Davis, the Mexican War, and the Making of a President," unpublished paper delivered at the Annual Meeting of the Mississippi Historical Society, Jackson, Mississippi, February 27-March 1, 1997; Lasswell, "The First Regiment of Mississippi Infantry in the Mexican War and Letters of Jefferson Davis Concerning the War"; Chance, Jefferson Davis's Mexican War Regiment, passim; Winders, "The Role of the Mississippi Volunteers in Northern Mexico, 1846-1848."

90 Jefferson Davis to Lucinda Farrar Davis Stamps, July 8, 1846, Papers of Jefferson Davis, vol. 2, 695. See also "To the People of Mississippi," Vicksburg Sentinel and Expositor, July 21, 1846, reprinted in ibid., vol. 3, 3-9. Davis won the election as colonel of the First Mississippi Regiment on the second ballot with a majority of 147. On the election of the field officers of the First Mississippi, see Rowland, Military History of Mississippi, 21.

91 Semi-Weekly Natchez Courier, April 30, 1847.
demanded that their political leaders be honorable men. According to Reuben Davis, antebellum Mississippians “might be ignorant of many things, careless and indifferent about many more, but where honor and honesty were concerned, the great heart of the masses beat true and fearless. Any man who aspired to lead them must be above reproach.”

Laurels gained in battle were, however, no guarantee of success in the public arena. Lt. Colonel Alexander McClung, who’s star blazed for a brief time as brightly as Jefferson Davis’s, was unable to translate his fame as a fearless citizen-soldier into public office. In 1847, McClung, an outspoken Whig, ran for the office of congressman in the Second District of Mississippi. During the campaign McClung, who was still on crutches due to a severe wound received at Monterrey, fully expected to defeat his Democratic rival based on his war record. But McClung was not just a war hero. His reputation also bore the stain of blood for he was a noted and feared duelist, variously nicknamed “The Black Rose of the South” and “Death’s Ramrod.” Violence in defense of honor could be carried too far in the Old South and McClung’s reputation as a dangerous man probably contributed to his defeat in the election.

92 Reuben Davis, Recollections, 112; also quoted in Wyatt-Brown, Southern Honor, 69.

effort at gaining this manifestation of public esteem, the bitterly disappointed McClung began a tragic downward spiral that ended with his suicide in a Jackson hotel in 1855.94

Southern volunteers expected to fight once they arrived in Mexico. The goal of battle was to prove one's manhood as well as one's right to be considered an honorable man. If a veteran came home with "an honorable scratch," as the relative of one volunteer defined a non-fatal wound that served as a permanent badge of honor, so much the better.95 Reuben Davis related the strange story of one volunteer who was "absolutely heart-broken because a bullet failed to hit him" during the battle of Monterrey.96 As his regiment prepared to assault Mexican fortifications in Central Mexico, Tennessean William Campbell wrote to his uncle: "We shall have a hot day tomorrow and many lives will be lost. I can only say that I will not ... tarnish the fair

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95Louisa Quitman to John A. Quitman, May 19, 1847, Quitman Family Papers, SHC. On "honorable wounds," see the Semi-Weekly Natchez Courier, June 15, 1847; Arthur Middleton Manigault to Henry Manigault, April 9, 1847, reprinted in Robert A. Law, cont., "A Letter from Vera Cruz in 1847." Southwestern Historical Quarterly 18(2) (1914), 218.

96Reuben Davis, Recollections of Mississippi and Mississippians (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1889), 213.
name of our family." Perhaps the ultimate example of the conviction that regimental performance and personal honor were joined occurred on the battlefield at Buena Vista. At the height of the battle, Alexander Blackburn Bradford, the major of the First Mississippi Regiment, became hysterical because he thought that the regiment had disgraced itself. He was heard to shout, "Shoot me! ... Ah, kill me!—the Mississippi Regiment has run and I'll be damned if I want to live another minute." One southern volunteer's uncle described the honorable conduct expected of his nephew. "Be not imprudent to rush into certain destruction, but be ever with the foremost. ... But be sure never to be the last getting into a fight, nor the first out of it." He then reminded him "that one brave man can put ten cowards to flight." Similarly, Kentuckian William H. Daniel's experiences at the battle of Buena Vista taught him "that it is not a large force and fast shooting that gains victory but men that will stand iron and led without flinching ... and are willin to sacrifice ther lives for ther countrys cause. [sic]"


99 T. L. Sumrall to Thomas S. Sumrall, May 19, 1846, reprinted in the Jackson *Mississippian*, May 27, 1846.

100 *Ibid.*

Monterrey, Joseph Davis Howell complained, "there was no room for a man in our regiment to distinguish himself every man fought well and bravely, ... like incarnate devils."\textsuperscript{102} At least, Howell had a chance to distinguish himself on the field of battle.

After missing the battle of Monterrey, Sydenham Moore, an officer in the First Alabama Regiment, lamented, "I deeply regret that I could not have been there to bear an humble part in that battle. I would have given any thing in the world to have been there," for it was "when there was fighting to be done ... [that there was] any chance for gaining glory or honor."\textsuperscript{103}

The influence of honor manifested itself in the camps of the volunteers as well as on the battlefield. Many took an inordinate pride in the reputation of their units. A private in the First Mississippi Regiment proudly reported that observers in Texas believed the unit "to be the most orderly, quiet and best drilled regiment."\textsuperscript{104} The interrelation of group and individual reputation is further exemplified by the recruiting notice of the Second Mississippi Regiment which informed prospective volunteers that

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\textsuperscript{102} Joseph Davis Howell to Mother, September 9, 1846, Folder 2, William Burr Howell and Family Papers, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson, Mississippi.

\textsuperscript{103} Entries for September 28 and 2, 1846, Sydenham Moore Diary, Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, Alabama. See also, Sydenham Moore to Amanda Moore, September 6, 1846, Sydenham Moore Papers, Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, Alabama; Matthew Williams to Nathaniel Ridley Eaves July 21, 1847, Nathaniel Ridley Eaves Papers, University of South Carolina, South Caroliniana Library.

\textsuperscript{104} Joseph Davis Howell quoted in Laswell, "The First Regiment of Mississippi Infantry," 14.
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“No person of bad character need apply.” This regimental pride sometimes led to fights with erstwhile allies. Alabama volunteer Stephen Nunnelee described a confrontation between his company and a group of “drinking Georgians” over a footbridge that the Alabama boys had constructed over a river. It seems that the Georgians did not want to get their feet wet and, hence, attempted to force their way past the sentinel on duty. Soon a large crowd of Georgians and Alabamians confronted each other across the river and a “row became imminent.” An Alabama officer formed a company in line of battle to resist the threatened onslaught of their fellow volunteers. Seeing this, the Georgians dispersed. Honor had been served; the chivalry of Alabama still held their bridge.

No matter what the hardship, most southern volunteers believed that once they joined the army, if they left before their tour of duty was over it would cast aspersion on their names. Because his wife was gravely ill and he wanted to be by her side, William Campbell considered resigning his commission as colonel of the First Tennessee Regiment. What prevented him, however, was, as he put it, “I could not get out of this

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business with honor." F. G. Norman believed that: "A man in civil office can resign it at pleasure and not tarnish his reputation. But to go into the army and resign and come home before the war is closed would be to destroy his reputation and disgrace himself." Although Alabama volunteer Sydenham Moore advised his wife Amanda that he was so homesick that he often thought of his children playing on the front lawn while they watched from the porch, his honor demanded that he stay in Mexico. Palmetto private Nathaniel Ridley Eaves, who had been a major in the South Carolina militia before the war, regretted that he "had come so far to fight such a miserable pitiful and worthless race of people," but he too stayed because it was expected of him.

The southern obsession with honor revealed its darker side during the Mexican War. For example, a Pennsylvania volunteer noted in his diary that: "A South Carolina man this morning shot himself. For some trifling offense he has been confined in the guard house over night. He was so mortified at the disgrace that he committed suicide." The quest for "laurels" also meant that the atmosphere in the southern


109 F. G. Norman to George S. Houston, February 14, 1847, George S. Houston Papers, Duke University, Special Collections Department, William R. Perkins Library.


111 Nathaniel Ridley Eaves to Melton and Alexander, June 3, 1847, Nathaniel Ridley Eaves Papers, University of South Carolina, South Caroliniana Library.

volunteer units was highly competitive, even dangerous, since perceived affronts to honor might lead to conflict and sometimes duels. William Rogers, a member of the First Mississippi Regiment, complained that he was "tired of turmoil and strife—at least individual strife—there is much of it here. The strife of two great armies there is something grand but in individual contentions there is nothing save the disgusting." Rogers participated in the very "individual strife" he so lamented. Rodgers was concerned that his commander, Jefferson Davis, had done him some "injustice" in his official report on the battle of Monterrey. If so, he confided to his diary, "he [Davis] must give me satisfaction." Another southern volunteer worried that his friend Captain Shivers, "a man just from a hard fought field of three days blood and battle [and] ... covered with laurels," was "destined ... to die [in a duel] by the hand of his countryman!" Fortunately the threatened duel never came off. At least one that was fatal to both participants, however, did. Lieutenants Munford and Mahan of the First Virginia Regiment fought a duel with muskets over what Mahan considered a disrespectful remark.

114 Ibid., 266.
115 Ibid.
116 Smith, Mexican War Journal of Captain Franklin Smith, 43.
117 For a description of the duel, see "Typescript Extract of a letter written on July 4, 1847 from Mrs. George Wythe Munford to her husband ...," Munford-Ellis Family Papers, Duke University, Special Collections Department, William R. Perkins Library. This duel was eventually to cause an inquiry by the U. S. Congress.
At war's end, southerners welcomed their Mexican War volunteers home with open hearts and arms. They gave freely of the honor that was their's to bestow.

Tennessean John Campbell wrote to his sister of Nashville's plans to honor the First Tennessee Regiment upon their return from Mexico; "A great barbeque is to be given, speeches made, the Town to be illuminated, the hills to be lighted up with fires and every thing else done to show respect to the volunteers." 118 In Charleston, a diarist noted:

It was a day of rejoicing throughout the city—Bells ringing, Flags flying. The entire military were out. Swords were presented the Cols. Of the Regiment, and officers of the Charleston Company. ... A grand Dinner was given in the Park. In [the] afternoon a "Regatta took place at Point Garden"—and at night a Grand Torch light Procession marched through the principle streets to the Gardens where a splendid display of Fire Works took place. 119

An Alabama volunteer claimed that the men of his company "were given an old time Barbecue, where thousands broke bread with us." 120 It was everything he had hoped for.

The interpretation of the Mexican War as an affront to American honor contributed to a prevailing belief that it must be vigorously prosecuted. Indeed, some

118 John Campbell to Betsy [sister], May 28, 1847, Campbell Family Papers, Duke University, Special Collections Department, William R. Perkins Library. For a description of the reception for Davis and the First Mississippi Regiment, see Semi-Weekly Natchez Courier, June 15, 1847; for John Quitman, see Semi-Weekly Natchez Courier, November 30, 1847.

119 Robert Rowland Diary, entry of July 28, 1848, quoted in Smith, Chronicles of the Gringos, 450.

southerners believed, as one editor put it, the war must "be waged [against Mexico] with all the violence and terror which usually characterizes it. This is the only method by which Mexico can be brought to a sense of her weakness, and a permanent peace attained."121 Southerners, however, did not perceive the Mexican War as a symbolic duel between two social equals.122 The Mexican people were viewed neither as racial equals nor as honorable opponents.123 For the United States not to respond to the Mexican attack on the Rio Grande, however, would cast doubt on the bravery of the collective manhood of the nation before the eyes of the world. Mississippian John Quitman clearly understood this when he wrote from Mexico that, "a slow inactive …

121 Yazoo [City] Democrat, October 21, 1846. For similar sentiments, see the Yazoo City Whig, December 4, 1846; Semi-Weekly Natchez Courier, May 14, 1847; Carrollton Mississippi Democrat, January 6, 1847; Jackson Mississippian, October 10, 1846; John A. Quitman to Eliza Quitman, August 14, 1846, February 27, 1847, Quitman Family Papers, SHC. D. Hayden to Robert John Walker, May 17, 1846, Robert John Walker Papers, Library of Congress.

122 In the Old South dueling could only occur between two "gentleman." Indeed, to engage in an affair of honor with an individual was an implicit recognition of his status as a social equal. When a social inferior gave offense to an honorable man, the latter often responded with violence—a caning, horsewhipping, or the like, but not with an invitation to meet on the field of honor. On the cultural meaning of the duel in the Old South, see Greenberg, Masters and Statesmen, 23-4; idem, Honor and Slavery, 3-23; Wyatt-Brown, Southern Honor, 57, 166-167, 350-361, 400.

123 See Reginald Horsman, Race and Manifest Destiny: The Origins of American Racial Anglo-Saxonism (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 208-28; Thomas R. Hietala, Manifest Design: Anxious Aggrandizement in Late Jacksonian America (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), 132-172. On occasion however, southerners did attribute similar motivations to the Mexicans. For example, John Campbell wrote to his nephew in Mexico that: "We expect to hear soon of a tremendous fight at Monterey. I presume the Mexicans will make a desperate effort there to regain their lost reputation." John Campbell to William B. Campbell, August 4, 1846, Campbell Family Papers, Duke University, Special Collections Department, William R. Perkins Library.
policy of conducting the war ... would forever disgrace it [the United States]. Unless we terminate the war triumphantly, we shall be the scorn of the nations of Europe."

Thus, to many southerners, the point of hostilities was to crush the Mexican will to resist and to make them submit as quickly as possible. But Mexico proved a more feisty opponent than expected and the war dragged on. Many southerners began to call for a more vigorous military strategy in order to force a surrender. As the editor of the *Yazoo Democrat* put it,

> The people ... demand that the war be waged with increased vigor—the chastisement of the insolent, perfidious Mexico be inflicted with increased severity—that if she still persist[s] in her stubbornness, our cannon shall thunder at the very gates and our flag wave on the heights of her capitol.

"The Mexicans," wrote another southerner, "neither love nor respect us—all we can do is make them fear us. ... This being the case we should not hesitate to burn the towns or to use any means of destruction."

The cultural resonance of the call to defend offended honor also offers a compelling explanation for why the South developed no significant organized

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125 *Yazoo [City] Democrat*, October 10, 1846. See also, *Yazoo [City] Democrat* [Mississippi], May 28, October 21, 1846, January 26, 1847; *Mississippi Democrat* [Carrollton] October 28, 1846, January 6, 1847; *Arkansas State Democrat* [Little Rock], December 24, 1847; *Wilmington Journal* [North Carolina] January 14, 1848; *North Carolina Standard* [Raleigh], October 6, 1847.

opposition to the war.\textsuperscript{127} Simply put, no southerner publically expressed pacifist sentiment. There was no southern Theodore Parker, a man Emerson called "the Savonarola of the transcendentalists," who advised a packed house at the Boston Melodeon that "non-resistance ... is the stoutest kind of combat, demanding all the manhood of a man."\textsuperscript{128} In the South, organized religion, the well-spring of pacifist reform in the North, remained generally ambivalent about the Mexican War. Although southern clerics rarely commented on the Mexican War, when they did they expressed a decidedly more bellicose attitude than their northern colleagues.\textsuperscript{129} For example, South Carolina divine Edwin Cater criticized the "spirit of Pseudo-philanthropy, has sprung up in certain sections, distinguished for nothing more, than for its fierce and warlike denunciations of all wars."\textsuperscript{130} Cater observed, "an attentive survey of the whole scope

\textsuperscript{127}On dissent and the Mexican War, see John H. Schroeder, \textit{Mr. Polk's War: American Opposition and Dissent, 1846-1848} (Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1973), and Frederick Merk, "Dissent in the Mexican War," in Samuel Eliot Morison, Frederick Merk, and Frank Freidel, \textit{Dissent in Three American Wars} (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970), 33-63. Both authors agree that outside of political discourse dissent was virtually non-existent in the South.

\textsuperscript{128}Theodore Parker, \textit{Sermons on War by Theodore Parker; comprising 'A Sermon of War,' 'Speech Delivered at the Anti-War Meeting,' 'A Sermon of the Mexican War' from The Collected Works of Theodore Parker, edited by Frances P. Cobbe} (1863; reprint, New York: Garland, 1973), 4.

\textsuperscript{129}Clayton Sumner Ellsworth, "The American Churches and the Mexican War," \textit{American Historical Review} 45 (1940): 301-46, concisely describes the opinions of the major denominations and agrees with this assessment.

\textsuperscript{130}Edwin Cater, \textit{Funeral Oration delivered on the occasion of the interment of the remains of Lieut. James R. Clark, of the Fairfield Volunteers. by Rev. Edwin Cater} (Columbia, SC: I.C. Morgan, 1848), 10.
of the Bible teaching upon this subject would lead us to a very different conclusion.”

Thomas Smyth, advised the graduating class at the Citadel in 1847 “that war is inevitable, not only as a result of the divine counsel, but as a means in order to an ultimate end.” Smyth explained that because God had sanctioned wars “to revenge some injuries offered to the nation, to punish some insults, or to defend ... allies” in the Old Testament, “war then is honorable.” Indeed, he declared that “W a r i s P u n i s h m e n t” for those nations who forget God. Finally, like Cater, Smyth asserted that the pacifist reform movement in the North was deluded. Of course, not all southern ministers were as belligerent as Cater and Smyth. In an 1846 sermon, Presbyterian John Leyburn came as close as any southern pastor to a public denunciation of war. “In the present state of the world it [war] may be necessary; but it is at best an evil necessity,” Leyburn counseled his congregation.

\[^{131}\text{Ibid.}\]


\[^{133}\text{Ibid., 366, 369. For similar sentiments, see Rev. William T. Hamilton, Address Delivered at the Government Street Church, 4.}\]

\[^{134}\text{Ibid., 365, 353.}\]

\[^{135}\text{Ibid., 367-68.}\]

\[^{136}\text{John Leyburn, National Mercies, Sins, and Duties. A Discourse preached to the congregation of the Presbyterian Church, Petersburg, Virginia, On the Sabbath Morning, July 5th, 1846 (Petersburg, Virginia: n.p., 1846), 19.}\]
Southern women, in their public roles at least, also interpreted the war through the lens of honor. Although masculine conventions of honor excluded women from participating directly in the conflict, upper class white women nevertheless influenced this aspect of male culture in important ways.\footnote{137} A traditional, rigidly biologic, understanding of manhood and womanhood in the Old South dictated that women could not fight in battle. On the home front, however, women played a key role in how the Mexican War and those who fought in it were perceived. "Respectable" southern women were more than just an audience who cheered on the "chivalry" of the South as it marched off to and returned from the war. Like Drusilla, a character in William Faulkner's *The Unvanquished*, southern women did not just sanction violence in defense of honor, they often actively encouraged it.\footnote{138} Of course, unlike Bayard Sartoris, the men of the South did not go to their fateful confrontation in Mexico


unarmed. In private however, many women expressed reservations about the war in general and their male loved ones' participation in it.

Women in the Old South were viewed as the paragons of moral and republican virtue in society. Hence, the public approval of women provided essential moral justification for men to participate in the hostilities. But the influence of women extended beyond their role as society’s moral conscience, their public support of the war tended to reinforce traditional gender roles—the masculine, honorable warrior-protector and the feminine, patriotic and self-sacrificing republican woman. In a Forth of July speech given before the Mississippi legislature in 1846, a male orator expressed the prevailing conception of the role of women in relation to the Mexican War:

139Unfortunately, the story of southern women’s reactions to the Mexican War remains to be written. Only one scholarly work examines American women’s experiences relative to the Mexican War, Peggy Mullarkey Cashion’s “Women and the Mexican War, 1846-1848” (M. A. thesis, University of Texas at Arlington, 1990). According to Cashion, much of what has been written on women and the Mexican War “can be labeled ‘pulp history.’” (pg. 8) In her thesis, Cashion interprets the experiences of Mexican War-era women through Barbara Welter’s concept of “the cult of true womanhood,” now over thirty years old. However, she does support the notion that, at least, some women defended male honor (pg. 87-88). Generally though, Cashion concludes that most American women did not support the war (pg. 89). Historians, however, have begun to examine the important role played by southern women during the American Civil War. The works that I found most helpful are: Drew Gilpin Faust, Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); idem, “Altars of Sacrifice: Confederate Women and the Narratives of War,” in Divided Houses: Gender and the Civil War, eds. Catherine Clinton and Nina Silber (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 171-199; George C. Rable, Civil Wars: Women and the Crisis of Southern Nationalism (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989); idem, “‘Missing in Action’: Women of the Confederacy,” in Divided Houses: Gender and the Civil War, 134-146; Catherine Clinton, Tara Revisited: Women, War, and the Plantation Myth (New York: Abbeville Press, 1995). On women and republicanism, see Linda K. Kerber, Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America (1980; reprint, New York: Norton, 1986).
Ladies: if it be true that you govern the world, that you possess a ruling influence upon men, then you are omnipotent, then a great duty devolves upon you, then you are the Guardian Angels of our Republican liberties. Prove yourselves worthy of the unbounded confidence this unlimited power reposes in you. Smile upon prudent valour, frown upon dastard fear. Let the coward and the traitor to his country find no solace in your company, and he will soon be brought to rights ... Show yourselves to be worthy of our mothers, of our Revolutionist heroines, of our patriotic dames.  

It appears reasonable to conclude that, had women publically opposed the war, which was never a real possibility, or withheld their blessing, a more probable alternative, the image of the Mexican War in the South would have been drastically different.

Women demonstrated their support for the Mexican War in many ways. They often organized community functions to support the volunteers.  

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140 Manuscript address given before the state legislature of Mississippi by Eugene A. Kennedy in 1846 to commemorate the 70th anniversary of American Independence, Miscellaneous Manuscript Collection, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson, Mississippi, 25-26. For similar sentiments, see “The Pilgrim Mothers” in the Vicksburg Tri-Weekly Whig, June 6, 1846; Yazoo [City] Democrat, November 24, December 14, 1846.


142 Typescript copy of an undated article [c. 1846] describing the farewell celebration for the Raymond Fencibles, Miscellaneous Manuscripts Collection, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson, Mississippi.
would carry into battle. Such presentations were usually accompanied by brief orations that reaffirmed the dominant interpretation of the Mexican War as an honorable endeavor. After delivering a banner from the ladies of Jackson to the Mississippi State Fencibles, a Jackson volunteer company in the First Mississippi Regiment, Fanny Mayrant explained that:

An insult has been offered to the American Union ... Mexico, and through Mexico, all the world must be taught that the American Flag is not to be assailed with impunity—they must be made to know that the soil of Freedom is sacred, and that the hostile tread of an invading foe will meet with a chastisement commensurate with the dignity of a nation that acknowledges no superior. Volunteers, you have gallantly tendered your aid to inflict upon Mexico, the punishment her treachery so richly deserves. You have resolved to go forth, to battle in the cause of your country, and to peril your lives in the vindication of her honor and the promotion of her glory. In doing so, you sever for a while, the ties of affection that bind you to your homes—you leave behind you, those whose hands cannot participate in your patriotic struggle, but whose hearts will ever be with you, and whose prayers for your success, will daily and fervently ascend to the God of battles.\footnote{\textit{Vicksburg Tri-Weekly Whig}, June 25, 1846. For other departure and flag presentation ceremonies, see \textit{Yazoo City Whig}, May 22, June 6, 1846; Bloom, “With the American Army into Mexico,” 27; Entry for May 26, 1846, Sydenham Moore Diary, Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, Alabama.}

Mayrant was not alone in presenting an image of militant, one could say Spartan, womanhood. As one newspaper related, “Every mail brings us the eloquence of American women, in valedictory addresses to departing Volunteers ... Let us read no longer the classic pages of Grecian history; the conduct of American women has given
Louisa Quitman chaffed at her forced inactivity; she wrote to her father John in Mexico that "I very often quarrel with Fate, for having placed me among the weaker portion of human kind and frequently threaten to run off, join the army and offer myself as your aide." Kate McCarthy, representing the women of Columbus, Mississippi, presented the Lowndes Guards with a banner inscribed with the belligerent motto, "Victory or Death." When asked at a banquet if she was worried about her husband's safety in Mexico, Eliza Quitman responded, "I would rather be the widow of a man who had fallen fighting in the battles of his country, than the wife of a living coward."

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144 Originally printed in the Paulding True Democrat, reprinted in the Mississippi Free Trader and Natchez Gazette, June 20, 1846. For similar sentiments, see [John Blount Robertson], Reminiscences of a Campaign in Mexico by a Member of "The Bloody First." Preceded by a short Sketch of the History and Condition of Mexico from her own Revolution down to the War with the United States (Nashville: John York, 1849), 65.

145 Louisa Quitman to John A. Quitman, May 2, 1847, Quitman Papers, SHC. Louisa's "threat" to join the army was a radical one. If she had carried through on it and been discovered, she would probably have been considered an "unsexed" woman because she had broken with her established gender role in southern society. Significantly, Louisa expressed her fantasy of joining the volunteers in private, while maintaining a public image in conformity with the traditional gender role. The editor of the Free Trader considered the occasion of a woman crossing gender lines worthy of attention. For example see the article, "An Unsexed Woman," in the Mississippi Free Trader and Natchez Gazette, May 15, 1846.

146 Love, A Southern Lacrimosa, 1.

147 Quoted in Brent, "Mississippi and the Mexican War," 202. An Indiana volunteer's wife shared similar sentiments. After hearing of the dishonorable rout of the Third Indiana Regiment at Buena Vista, Captain Thomas Ware Gibson's wife stated that she would rather see her husband "face the enemy head on and be killed" than run away like a coward. Cashion, "Women and the Mexican War," 91. See also, ibid., 92.
read: "Weeping in solitude for the fallen brave is better than the presence of men too timid to strike for their country."\textsuperscript{148} The powerful cultural resonance of traditional gender roles inspired the militant rhetoric of women like Eliza Quitman, Fanny Mayrant, and the members of the Nashville Female Academy, which in turn helped limit public dissent within the South.

In private, however, many women were less fervent in their support for the war. The public guise of the Spartan woman often falls away in descriptions of the private life of southern Mexican War era women.\textsuperscript{149} A young South Carolina woman confided to a correspondent: "Ah how my heart sickens when I reflect on that war and the feeling is always kept first in my mind as we have the portrait of five of our brave boys that have fallen there."\textsuperscript{150} Another young southern woman, Lucy Ruggles, wrote that she feared so much for her brother's safety that "I dread to look in a newspaper [for news from Mexico] yet I grasp them with utmost eagerness."\textsuperscript{151} Later, after a male friend said "that he was afraid that my brother would not have another opportunity to distinguish himself [in battle]," Ruggles replied, "I hope he will not."\textsuperscript{152}

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\textsuperscript{148}[Robertson], Reminiscences of a Campaign in Mexico, 65.
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\textsuperscript{149}Cashion agrees with this assessment. See Cashion, "Women and the Mexican War," 92-97.
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\textsuperscript{150}Anna C. Maybin to William S. Johnson, April 7, 1848, William S. Johnson Papers, University of South Carolina, South Caroliniana Library.
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\textsuperscript{151}Lucy Ruggles Diary, quoted in Cashion, "Women and the Mexican War," 59.
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\textsuperscript{152}\textit{Ibid.}, 93.
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Virginian Jubal Early, his sister declared: “... if we can only forget the cannon shots! But we will only think of the laurels our dear brother is to win.”

The patriotic and bellicose public stance of women masked deeper worries about the war’s potential to damage the welfare of their families. While husbands, sons, and fathers might prove their honorable manhood in Mexico, they could also lose their lives. Thus, the decision of married men to join the volunteers often caused conflict between domestic partners. Georgian Howell Cobb, a booster of the Mexican War from the start, wrote to his wife Mary Ann that “I prefer to do the fighting myself and leave them [his children] a peaceful legacy.” She disparaged his plans to resign his seat in Congress and join the army. Cobb did not volunteer, in part because of his wife’s wishes and because male friends and relations convinced him that he could better serve the war effort if he stayed in Congress. Diarist Franklin Smith reported that one volunteer’s decision to join the war effort caused marital discord. According to Smith, Captain Gholson’s wife never for a moment repined or complained at any thing since their marriage until he took this step [volunteering]—and ... during their lives he never crossed or opposed her wishes in any thing of any moment until he came on this expedition—And when he left her weeping and prognosticating evil it almost broke his heart.

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153 For similar sentiments, see E. J. Woods [sister] to Jubal Early, January 10, 1847, Jubal Anderson Early Papers, Library of Congress.


155 Smith, Mexican War Journal, 67.
Gholson, however, felt bound by honor to join the volunteers. He was, wrote Smith, "one of the first to declare himself in this county in favour of the annexation of Texas and to pledge himself if war came to step forward in the service of the country and if need be offer up his life and humble fortunes in defense of her rights." \(^{156}\) Gholson "endeavoured to impress this view of the subject on his wife's mind but to no purpose." \(^{157}\) Smith then solemnly added that, "This story is in the main applicable to hundreds now in Mexico." \(^{158}\) Likewise, Varina Howell Davis told her husband, Jefferson Davis, that she was unhappy with his decision to join Mississippi's volunteers. \(^{159}\) Davis encouraged her not to lament his service publically and wrote, "my love for you placed my happiness in your keeping, our vows have placed my hono[r] and respectability in the same hands." \(^{160}\) The implication here is that for Varina to act publically in any way other than that of a supportive and patriotic wife could injure her husband's honor. \(^{161}\) Alabama volunteer Sydenham Moore agreed; he advised his

\(^{156}\)Ibid.

\(^{157}\)Ibid., 67-68.

\(^{158}\)Ibid., 68.

\(^{159}\)Varina Banks Howell Davis to Margaret K. Howell, June 6, 1846, Papers of Jefferson Davis, vol. 2, 641-644.


\(^{161}\)Varina's later life, during which she actively worked to protect her husband's reputation, suggests that she learned this lesson well.
brooding wife that all who "witness this gloom and despondency, ... [will] naturally say, what a cruel being her husband must have been to have left his wife prey to such feelings."162

Mothers too often wished that their sons would not go off to Mexico but often did the best they could to live with it. Volunteer Joseph McNeir's brother wrote, "Your course has been a matter of great grief to Mother—but she has struggled hard, and has to some degree become reconciled to it."163 Virginian Fletcher Archer's mother wished he had not left for Mexico and worried that he might fall from the path of righteousness so far from home. She wrote "let not your heart forget to cherish, and beat in unison with the spirit of God, who will certainly guide you in the way of all Truth."164 Franklin Smith reported that the mother of one volunteer "had done all she could to persuade him not to come but when she found she could not she resigned herself to it and the last word[s] she said to him were to stand firm and fight like a man!"165 This woman clearly understood the demands that the close association of courage, honor, and manhood placed upon her son. She also recognized that the masculine ideals which impelled her

162Sydenham Moore to Amanda Moore, November 10, 1846, Sydenham Moore Papers, Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, Alabama. See also Entry for May 27, 1846, Sydenham Moore Diary, Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, Alabama.

163Thomas S. McNeir to Joseph K. McNeir, June 20, 1846, McNeir Family Papers, University of Virginia Library.

164P. Archer [mother] to Fletcher Harris Archer, July 8, 1847, Fletcher Harris Archer Papers, Duke University, Special Collections Department, William R. Perkins Library.

165Smith, Mexican War Journal, 171.
son to embark on a dangerous adventure also threatened the well-being of the household she was obliged to protect.

Other women also recognized that masculine honor could cause the men in their lives to act recklessly. Eliza Quitman may have publically wished to be married to a dead hero over a live coward, but privately she advised her husband not to expose himself unnecessarily. "Do not be too valiant," she wrote, "I shall think none the worse of you for obeying my commands. Return to us the first opportunity you have of releasing yourself honorably."\(^{166}\) Later a despondent Eliza would ask, "where is the glory for which you are fighting?"\(^{167}\) Apparently, W. T. H. Walker's wife, Molly, shared Eliza Quitman's concerns, for he advised her: "Don't be too alarmed for my safety. We go with too large a force to expect a hard fight."\(^{168}\) Molly must have suspected that her husband might still act with reckless bravery because he added, "I am sorry that we go with such a large force for it will spoil all the sport."\(^{169}\) North Carolinian James Slades' wife wrote to him from New Orleans: "you have been very

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\(^{166}\)Eliza Quitman to John A. Quitman, July 12, 1846, Quitman Papers, SHC. See also Eliza Quitman to John A. Quitman, November 1, 1846, Quitman Family Papers, SHC.

\(^{167}\)Eliza Quitman to John A. Quitman, September 2, 1847, Quitman Papers, SHC.

\(^{168}\)W. T. H. Walker to Molly [Wife] [typescript, pg. 68], February 19, 1847, W. T. H. Walker Papers, Duke University, Special Collections Department, William R. Perkins Library.

\(^{169}\)Ibid.
imprudent since you have been in Mexico venturing your life in battle ... this will render me miserable and unhappy until you return."170

At the war's end the tension between the private domestic concerns of southern women and the public demands of male honor remained unresolved because the conflict was victoriously brief and required only a relatively small commitment of manpower. The friction between these aspects of male and female culture would reappear during the great war that lay in the nation's future, a war that touched almost every southerner and was neither short nor victorious.

For southerners, the Mexican-American War of 1846-1848 was more than just a war to affirm republicanism, Manifest Destiny, or any other national system of values. Although the cultural framework of southern honor can not explain all the ways in which southerners perceived the conflict it comprises an important element of the story. Southern concepts of honor limited dissent within the region and impelled white males to rally enthusiastically to the national standard and white women to support them. Historians can not ignore the fact that southerners, both at home and in the field, consistently say that the Mexican War was fought, at least in part, for honor's sake. The powerful cultural resonance of the call to defend the nation's offended honor served to unify the South's citizens in support of the war. Southerners' perceptions of the Mexican War often had little to do with the real causes of the conflict and everything to do with how they defined themselves.

170 "Cataline" to James Slade, November 11, 1847, William Slade Papers, Duke University, Special Collections Department, William R. Perkins Library.
Chapter II

The South, the Mexican War, and the Politics of Honor

We ought above all to prosecute it until we vindicate our honor and make ourselves respected. In no other way could we secure our liberties. Let us longer refrain to do anything under the idea of magnanimous forbearance, and we shall be considered a pusillanimous nation—a nation of cowards. A nation in that situation would not long preserve its liberties. ... The way to preserve this liberty and our territory from being despoiled, is to carry the war beyond our boundaries, as the best mode of preventing the enemy from coming within them. ... [N]ot only expel these marauders from this side of the Rio Grande, but ... pursue them into the very interior of Mexico, and ... never cease until the objects ... were accomplished. ... [S]uch was the action ... demanded by our honor and patriotism. – Remarks of Representative George Dromgoole of Virginia as reported in The Congressional Globe, May 19, 1846.

[The Whigs] felt quite as deep an interest in the national honor, and quite as much pride in the national dignity, as the chairman of the Committee on Foreign Affairs; yet they were unwilling, though at the expense of being charged with a want of patriotism, to be placed in a false position. They were not willing to assume the fact, without evidence, that a state of war between the United States and Mexico did actually exist. – Remarks of Senator Willie P. Mangum of North Carolina as reported in The Congressional Globe, May 12, 1846.

[I]t is not an “unjust, unconstitutional, and damnable war,” or one that could have been avoided with honor. It was forced upon us by a perverse and besotted nation—a nation without capacity to know what is right, and if she had, has not the sense of propriety to do it. Everything that a magnanimous nation, conscious of its power, could do, has been done by the United States to obtain peace. We have implored Mexico for the sake of humanity, for her own sake, to abstain from this appeal to arms. ... How have we been met? By insult and defiance. Nothing but war would do her. Let her have it, then, to her heart’s content. If she is so lost to all sense of justice and reason, as not to be, for humanity’s sake and her own, begged into a peace, the sole alternative is left us to thrash her into it. – Representative John H. Harmanson of Louisiana, February 12, 1847.


Congressional Globe, 29th Congress, 1st Session, 1846, 842.

Ibid., 796.

Appendix to the Congressional Globe, 29th Congress, 2nd Session, 1847, 358.

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Politically speaking, April 1846 had been a good month for President James Knox Polk. To the intense Tennessean's quiet delight and the applause of the rank and file Democrats who elected him, both houses of Congress finally voted on April 23 to terminate the 1827 convention with Great Britain that provided for the joint occupation of the Oregon country. Five days later, the chief executive sealed the notice of termination with the Great Seal of the United States and sent it on its way to Queen Victoria. By this time, however, Polk's well-organized mind had already focused on other policy goals, namely the acquisition of Upper California from Mexico. During a cabinet meeting on April 25, Polk explained that it was now time to "take redress for the injuries done us into our own hands" because negotiations with Mexico had broken down and the United States "had forborne until forbearance was no longer a virtue or patriotic." Significantly, he wrote in his diary that "in my opinion we must treat all nations, great or small, strong or weak, alike." The world, he knew, was watching and must be shown that America was a country to be taken seriously. The president's Oregon policy evidenced a predilection for aggressive diplomacy. Thus none who attended the meeting were surprised when Polk suggested that he should urge Congress to declare war on Mexico. The president, however, did not have the unanimous support

5 Typical of many southern Democratic papers, the Wilmington Journal praised the president for placing country "in a position whereby she will be able in case of emergency, to defend her rights, honor and integrity" relative to the disputed Oregon territory. Wilmington Journal [North Carolina], April 3, 1846.


7 Ibid.
of either his cabinet advisors or key Democrats in Congress for this course of action.

As late as May 9, the Secretary of the Navy, George Bancroft, continued to oppose recommending that Congress declare war, at least until after Mexico had committed a belligerent act. Earlier in April, powerful Senate Democrats, John C. Calhoun and Thomas Hart Benton, had privately advised the president to delay dealing with Mexico until the Oregon question had been settled. It appeared that the political battle over a declaration of war on a peaceful sister republic might be even more contentious than the one just contested over Oregon. Polk need not have worried, for events on the Rio Grande moved the nation irreversibly toward war. What the president did not know during his April 25 cabinet meeting was that earlier that morning Mexican troops had ambushed a patrol of American dragoons just north of the river near Matamoros, Mexico. Zachary Taylor, the commanding officer of the United States forces on the Rio Grande, immediately sent word of the opening of hostilities to Washington. This news reached Polk on the evening of Saturday, May 9 and galvanized him to action. The following day, the president, assisted by members of his cabinet, drafted a war message which was delivered to Congress the following Monday morning by his private secretary.8

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The message articulated the president's interpretation of the causes of war in the strongest possible terms. Polk reminded Congress that in a previous message he had examined the subjects of the March, 1845 suspension of formal diplomatic relations between the United States and Mexico and "the long continued and unredressed wrongs and injuries committed by the Mexican Government" on American citizens.\(^9\) Since that time, Polk argued that he harbored a sincere desire "to establish peace with Mexico, on liberal and honorable terms, ... to regulate and adjust our boundary, and the other causes of difference with that Power."\(^10\) Furthermore, "every expression that could tend to inflame the people of Mexico, or defeat or delay a pacific result, was carefully avoided."\(^11\)

The fruit of Polk's amicable intentions and an invitation from the Mexican Minister of Foreign Affairs was the dispatch of John Slidell to Mexico in November, 1845. Slidell "was intrusted with full powers to adjust both the questions of the Texas boundary and of indemnification of our citizens."\(^12\) However, the government of Jose Joaquin de Herrera had refused to accredit Slidell upon what Polk called "the most frivolous of pretexts."\(^13\) Slidell's appointment read "Envoy Extraordinary and Minister

\(^9\)\textit{Congressional Globe}, 29\textsuperscript{th} Congress, 1\textsuperscript{st} Session, 1846, 782. Polk had covered the state of Anglo-Mexican relations in his message to Twenty-ninth Congress at the opening of the session.

\(^10\)\textit{Ibid.}

\(^11\)\textit{Ibid.}

\(^12\)\textit{Ibid.}

\(^13\)\textit{Ibid.}
Plenipotentiary," but the Mexican government had only agreed to accept a
commissioner, a lesser office.\textsuperscript{14} Despite the military revolution that "subverted" the
Mexican constitution and replaced President Herrera with General Mariano Paredes y
Arrillaga, Polk contended that he remained "determined to leave no effort untried to
affect an amicable adjustment with Mexico."\textsuperscript{15} Thus, he ordered Slidell to present his
credentials to the Paredes' government. Again rebuffed, "[n]othing, therefore,
remained for our Envoy but to demand his passports, and return to his own country."\textsuperscript{16}
The rejection of Slidell, Polk asserted, constituted not only an "indignity" but "a
manifest breach of faith."\textsuperscript{17} Furthermore, the Slidell mission had demonstrated the
United States' willingness "to listen to any reasonable terms " that the Mexican
government might suggest, but the latter "refused all negotiation, and have made no
proposition of any kind."\textsuperscript{18}

The president then changed tacks to consider events in Texas. After the
beginning of the current session of Congress, Polk sent an army to Corpus Christi on

\textsuperscript{14}For the Mexican government to have accepted Slidell's credentials as Minister
Plenipotentiary would have implied that regular diplomatic relations with the United
States had reopened. Political conditions in Mexico dictated that an American
"Minister" could not be accepted. On political conditions in Mexico and Slidell's
mission, see Pedro Santoni, \textit{Mexicans at Arms: Puro Federalists and the Politics of

\textsuperscript{15}\textit{Congressional Globe}, 29\textsuperscript{th} Congress, 1\textsuperscript{st} Session, 1846, 783.

\textsuperscript{16}\textit{Ibid}.

\textsuperscript{17}\textit{Ibid}.

\textsuperscript{18}\textit{Ibid}.
the Nueces River "upon the earnest appeal of both Congress and the convention of Texas."19 Mexico's threats of invasion "solely because Texas had determined ... to annex herself to our Union" made it "plainly our duty to extend our protection over her citizens and soil."20 Only after Texas officially became part of the United States and it also became clear that Slidell's mission was a failure did Polk order the army to the north bank of the Rio Grande.21 He explained: "This river—which is the southwestern boundary of the State of Texas—is an exposed frontier."22 In obvious anticipation of objections to his definition of the proper boundary of Texas, an issue that Congress had explicitly left undecided in the treaty of annexation, the president asserted that the border was established by a December 1836 act of the Texas legislature and recognized by Congress through their provision of a revenue officer for the region in December 1845. Military logic also dictated the move to the Rio Grande: "From this quarter invasion was threatened; upon it ... are the proper stations for the protecting forces of the Government."23 Still, Polk contended that the advance of troops to the Rio Grande was not a belligerent act because he had instructed General Zachary Taylor "to abstain from all aggressive acts towards Mexico, or Mexican citizens, and to regard the

19Ibid.

20Ibid.

21In his message, Polk called the Rio Grande the Del Norte, as that river was also known. The United States officially annexed Texas in December, 1845.

22Congressional Globe, 29th Congress, 1st Session, 1846, 783.

23Ibid.
relations between that Republic and the United States as peaceful."\(^{24}\) While Polk's army of peaceful intent prudently erected fortifications, sited cannon, and established depots north of the river, the drums of war beat in the Mexican camp. On April 12, the commanding general of the Mexican forces at Matamoros advised General Taylor that he must break up his camp within twenty-four hours and retire beyond the Nueces or "arms, and arms alone, must decide the question."\(^{25}\) On April 24, the Mexican commander informed Taylor that "he considered hostilities commenced, and should prosecute them."\(^{26}\) On that same day, Mexican forces attacked a party of sixty-three American dragoons, killing or wounding sixteen and capturing the rest. Mexico, the president implied, had willfully bloodied the nose of the United States; what he did not mention, of course, was his belief that it was now time to deal militarily with the Mexican problem, even had there been no news of hostilities from the Rio Grande.\(^{27}\)

Polk then analyzed the reasons for the current state of affairs with Mexico and proposed a course of action. He admitted that he and his presidential predecessors had made a mistake in dealing with Mexico:

Our forbearance has gone to such an extreme as to be mistaken in its character. Had we acted with vigor in repelling the insults and redressing the injuries inflicted by Mexico ..., we should doubtless have

\(^{24}\)Ibid.  
\(^{25}\)Ibid.  
\(^{26}\)Ibid.  
\(^{27}\)Polk, *The Diary of James K. Polk During his Presidency, 1845 to 1849*, Vol. 1, 384-85. In a cabinet meeting on Saturday, May 9, Polk suggested that he deliver a war message to Congress despite the fact that he had no reports of the opening of hostilities on the Rio Grande.
escaped all the difficulties in which we are now involved. Instead of this, however, we have been exerting our best efforts to propitiate her good will.\(^{28}\)

Even before the recent attack on American troops, Polk proclaimed that “the cup of forbearance had been exhausted.”\(^{29}\) But Mexico had gone further and committed the ultimate outrage, she “has invaded our territory, and shed American blood on the American soil.”\(^{30}\) The president concluded: “Now war exists, and, not withstanding all our efforts to avoid it, exists by the act of Mexico herself, we are called upon by every consideration of duty and patriotism, to vindicate, with decision, the honor, the rights, and the interests of our country.”\(^{31}\) Polk then solicited Congress “to recognize the existence of war, and to place at the disposition of the Executive the means of prosecuting the war with vigor, and thus hastening the restoration of peace.”\(^{32}\) This necessary, yet unsought war, Polk implied, would be fought with a sword in one hand and an olive branch in the other.

Polk’s war message established the basic political position that the Democratic Party would defend throughout the Mexican War, and, because it followed on the heels of the electrifying news from Taylor’s army, it served as the touchstone for any debate on the war. As such, the message played a crucial role in defining the direction that the

\(^{28}\) Congressional Globe, 29th Congress, 1st Session, 1846, 783.

\(^{29}\) Ibid.

\(^{30}\) Ibid.

\(^{31}\) Ibid.

\(^{32}\) Ibid.
political debate over the question of the war would take. Any opponent of the war with Mexico had to come to terms with the logic of the president’s argument. Polk clearly argued that the political and military clash with Mexico threatened “the honor, the rights, and the interests” of the United States. Unfortunately, historians eager to assess blame for the Mexican War’s origins have most often focused on only two parts of the president’s war message, the rights and interests of the competing nations, when exploring the question of the Mexican War. They give little attention to the third part of the president’s call to arms, the nation’s injured honor, except as a rationalization of what they perceive as his real motive, territorial expansion.33 That Polk specifically

33For example, see Pletcher, *The Diplomacy of Annexation: Texas, Oregon, and the Mexican War*, 1-5, 576-85, passim. Pletcher’s work, which constitutes the most exhaustive study of diplomacy during Polk’s presidency, emphasizes a “realist” approach in examining the Mexican War. Thus, the goal of any administration’s foreign policy should be to secure the “country’s best interests in the most efficient and the safest manner possible.” (Page 5) Pletcher argues that the reason for the war was territorial aggrandizement. Indeed, he assumes that given the tenor of the times further westward expansion was inevitable. Given this viewpoint, nothing that the Mexican War achieved necessitated bloodshed. Indeed, Polk’s blustering foreign policy brought on a needless war because a “gradualist” manner of acquiring new territory existed that might have taken longer but cost less blood and treasure. For Pletcher, then, the Mexican War was simply a war of aggression on the part of the United States to grab territory. He assesses Polk’s honorific statements as propaganda.

Similarly, in *Mr. Polk’s War: American Opposition and Dissent, 1846-1848* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1973), John H. Schroder argues that “Polk’s was a militant policy designed not to resolve outstanding issues like the claims question, but rather to use this dispute to achieve his territorial objectives, whatever the cost. If Mexico would not peacefully acquiesce in Polk’s demands, then war would be the alternative.” (Page 8) Again, Polk’s message is treated as mere propaganda “to win the support of Congress and the country.” (Page 11)

In a far less moderate manner, Glenn W. Price in his *Origins of the War with Mexico: The Polk-Stockton Intrigue* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1967) accuses Polk of instigating the war by secretly plotting to draw the nation into conflict. For him, the interest of the United States in expanding constituted the primary reason for the war. Polk was “a clumsy amateur” who “sought to initiate a war by proxy in order to achieve his ends.” (Pg. 171) American rights were not threatened and discussion of honorable
linked the honor, rights, and interests of the United States together bears more attention than it has heretofore received.\textsuperscript{34} To southerners, who were gravely earnest when matters of honor were at stake, the argument that Mexico had insulted the honor of the United States held special meaning. Indeed, the significance of the concept of honor had powerful implications for the Mexican War as a political issue in the South. Led by their president from Tennessee, southern Democrats, with the notable exception of John C. Calhoun and a few of his disciples, consistently argued in both national and local forums that the country's honor, as well as its rights and interests, demanded that war be waged against Mexico. The form that the Democrats' explanation and defense of the war took, their script if you will, was shaped by the language of honor and intentions was mere propaganda and American hubris.

This dissertation makes no attempt to assign blame for the advent of the war. Rather, it focuses on southerners' perceptions of and reactions to the war and what these reveal about southern culture at a specific point in history. There is no doubt that land hunger, or "manifest destiny," played a role in bringing on the war. But to only consider the war in terms of territorial aggrandizement runs the danger of oversimplifying what the war meant to contemporary Americans.

shame. In turn, the powerful cultural symbolism of offended honor muted the dissent of
southern Whigs and Calhounites.35

According to Ruben Davis, antebellum Mississippians “might be ignorant of
many things, careless and indifferent about many more, but where honor and honesty
were concerned, the great heart of the masses beat true and fearless. Any man who
aspired to lead them must be above reproach.”36 Mississippi politico Albert Gallatin
Brown also understood that “the one standard of social merit” in the South was
“unsullied reputation.”37 Governor James Henry Hammond of South Carolina seconded
these opinions when he said that “[r]eputation is everything.”38 These men understood
that honor, or reputation, mattered to the southern electorate. As political insiders, they
knew that honorable status was the first thing that southern voters looked for in

35For assessments of the relative stances of southern Whig and Democrats on the
Mexican War issue that supports my own, see William J. Cooper, Jr., The South and the
Politics of Slavery, 1828-1856 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978),
226-29, 232-33; idem, Liberty and Slavery: Southern Politics to 1860 (New York:
Knopf, 1983), 216-17. Cooper argues that the popularity of the war in the South muted
southern Whig and Calhounite opposition. Where his interpretation and mine diverge,
however, is on how the politics of honor directed the political debate over the war in the
South. It must be added that Cooper’s works do not focus on the Mexican War as a
discrete issue. Rather, he addresses the Mexican War in passing, focusing instead on the
effects that the related territorial issue had on the major parties in the South.

36Ruben Davis, Recollections of Mississippi and Mississippians (Boston:
Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1889), 112.

37Quoted in Bertram Wyatt-Brown, Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the
Old South (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 46.

38Quoted in Bertram Wyatt-Brown, Yankee Saints and Southern Sinners (Baton
Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985), 188.
potential political leaders. In short, southern political life may be characterized, in the words of one historian, as "a people's timocracy," or, more prosaically, a white man's democracy in which concepts of honor played a central role. Consequently, first gaining, and then at least maintaining, or preferably enhancing, one's reputation weighed heavily upon southern politicians of the day. Ironically, although often masters of men, southern politicos were themselves slaves to public opinion.

Newspaper editors, who were all closely tied to a political party, and politicians of the South jealously guarded their reputations. They were the most likely participants in duels, the quintessential institution of the southern culture of honor. It was no accident that Andrew Jackson was both a noted duelist and a son of the South. Nor was it an accident that dueling remained a vital custom in the antebellum South long after it had died out north of Mason and Dixon's line. Political oratory, one purpose of which was to enhance the reputation of the speaker, also remained a central facet of antebellum southern political life longer than it did in the North. Of course it is impossible to demonstrate with absolute certainty that honor meant more to southern


politicians than it did to northern ones.\textsuperscript{42} However, the culture of honor certainly appears to have been more compatible with the rhythms of southern political life than it was in the North; southern cultural practices certainly suggest as much. By its very nature, political life is a drama played out on the most public of stages and in the South the rules of honor governed all political theatrics. In one well-known incident, South Carolinian Preston Brooks justified his vicious caning of Charles Sumner of Massachusetts on the floor of the United States Senate in 1856 on the grounds that Sumner had offended his personal, family, state, and regional honor.\textsuperscript{43} White southerners agreed and roundly applauded Brooks' actions. Honor also played a role in the way that southern politicians argued issues, especially in a national forum. The language of sectional politics, at least as practiced by southern politicians, was rife with the language of honor. For instance, slavery, territorial issues and secession were political topics that southerners discussed and processed through the lens of honor. In

\textsuperscript{42}Historians have argued that ideas of honor were at odds with the prevailing religious sentiment in the North which emphasized dignity or individualism. One could point to the proliferation of "perfectionist" reform movements in the North in the latter part of the antebellum era, movements which had limited effect on the South, as one example of this difference. See, Edward L. Ayers, \textit{Vengeance and Justice: Crime and Punishment in the Nineteenth-Century American South} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984); Peter L. Berger, Brigitte Berger, and Hansfried Kellner, \textit{The Homeless Mind: Modernization and Consciousness} (New York: Random House, 1973), 83-96; Edward L. Ayers, "Honor," in \textit{Encyclopedia of Southern Culture}, ed. Charles Reagan Wilson and William Ferris (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 1483-1484.  

short, honor permeated the political culture of the slave South as surely as it did white southerner's more personal social relations.

To say that honor significantly influenced both the conduct and tenor of southern political life in the antebellum era, however, is not enough. Reputation among one's peers is a matter of perspective. Acclaimed virtues in one culture may very well be social taboos in another. Thus, in order to perceive how honor influenced southern political life, we must also understand what values southerners looked for in a political leader. Put another way, what were the roots of a successful politician's public esteem? In the quest for honorable political leaders, antebellum southerners searched for men who embodied a group of political values most often described by historians as republican. According to historian Kenneth Greenberg,

[W]hatever form it [republicanism] took [in the South], always at its heart was a fear of power, especially the power of government. Governments, according to this republican ideology, were established in order to protect the liberty of the people. But governments were also a major threat to liberty because people in power tended to want to accumulate more power. ... [E]ach political leader was expected to be a statesman, independent of all influences other than a reasoned devotion to the good of the whole. But the ultimate protection for a republican government lay in the virtue and independence of the people. Only the people—free of the corrupting influences of luxury and dependence, frugal, industrious, temperate, devoted to simple pleasures, ever watchful of the abuse of power—only the people could protect fragile republican government.44

This was republicanism in theory, and, although the reality of political life often fell short of this ideal, white southerners, both voters and candidates, cherished these notions just the same. It is hardly a new discovery that honor and republicanism colored the political life of the antebellum South. Historians have long recognized that these two facets of southern life combined in complex ways that can only be hinted at here. In the South, the core value of republicanism—the sanctity of liberty—manifested itself in many ways. Characteristically, white southern males obsessively guarded their personal reputations and rights against violation. In a similar manner, southern politicians were also expected to secure the rights, institutions, and the reputation of the nation, the state, and the communities they represented. Of course, southern politicians' interpretations of just how to fulfill these obligations differed, and their differences of opinion formed a cornerstone of political debate. Not only did southern voters expect those who would lead them to be virtuous members of the republican faithful, but men of talent and character as well. In their elected officials, southerners prized gentility, an occasionally tempestuous marriage of affability, learnedness, and piety which marked its possessor as a gentleman.45 A gentleman, claimed one southern author, was:

the man who is raised above the vulgar by his conduct and manners. ... [H]e can, on all occasions, restrain the gratification of his own wishes, if he sees it gives pain to others. Strict in adherence to his own word, and to truth, and faithful to the slightest appointments, whilst in every instance he gives others their due, he expects them to be punctually paid to him. Uneasy under insult, he never bullies, and never pushes a quarrel

45On the concept of gentility, see Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, 88-114. See also,
beyond what is absolutely due to his honor. In short, he is just, honorable, and moderate.⁴⁶

In this sense, the southern ideal comes closest to the modern usage of the word honorable as meaning respectable behavior, although antebellum southern notions of gentility never equaled the Victorian righteousness of the late-nineteenth century. The ideal antebellum southern statesman, then, should combine selfless devotion to the common good and a jealous regard for both his own and the community's rights and liberties with peerless talent and gentlemanly deportment.⁴⁷ With hindsight, we realize that this sublime creature, the southern statesman, could only exist in the imagination of white southerners. Nonetheless, many tried to emulate this ideal, at least publically—their honor, not to mention their political success, demanded it.

The pervasive influence of honor and its adjunct, republicanism, on southern political life dramatically affected the manner in which the Mexican War was debated in the political arena. Indeed, it is difficult to find any aspect of the political debate over the war among southerners that was not touched by the entwining tentacles of honor. To avoid "dishonor" in the eyes of their constituents, southern politicians' public stances were limited by the white South's notions of acceptable behavior. Although often at odds where the issue of the Mexican War was concerned, southern


Democrats and Whigs applied the same "honorable" rules of behavior and thinking as related to their personal lives to this political conflict. Thus, honor and republicanism both limited and directed the public responses to the Mexican War of southern members of both parties. In short, within the political culture of the antebellum South, the tenets of honor and republicanism determined the range of plausible political stances that could be taken. This was perhaps more true for the Mexican War than any other issue of political debate save slavery. Similarly framed honor-based arguments were increasingly becoming a staple of the southern political scene during the 1840s, especially those calculated to arouse the South against perceived encroachments of northern political power on southern rights and institutions.48 However, the concept of honor as it applied to southern political life abounded with ambiguities. On one hand, southerners claimed that honor demanded an immediate and vigorous defense of the reputation and rights of both an individual and the community. On the other hand, they also viewed moderation, coolness under duress, prudence and self-restraint as honorable traits.49 Southerners considered political arguments based upon either of the aforementioned groups of ideals "honorable" and both would appear, in one form or another, in the political controversy over the Mexican War. The political debate over the war, however, was not merely a conflict of principles waged by disinterested


49See Wyatt-Brown, *Yankee Saints and Southern Sinners*, 186-87.
politicians motivated by the central ideals of their political culture; most southern Whigs and Democrats were also anxious to defend and increase the privileges and power of their particular interest groups. Dissenting Calhounite Democrats and southern Whigs were, however, caught in a most difficult position, for they had to come up with a stance that did not surrender the war issue to the Democrats, while at the same time not appearing to be disloyal or dishonorable. Seen in this light, the political debate between the southern Democratic and Whig parties over the Mexican War was not an aberration, nor was it specific to this event in the nation’s history. Instead, the portrayal of the Mexican War as an “honorable” conflict fits into the mainstream of the antebellum political history of the South.

Because most newspapers focused on the ongoing negotiations with Great Britain over Oregon in the spring of 1846, news of the opening of hostilities on the Rio Grande rolled like a sudden thunderstorm across the nation. Reprints of the president’s war message followed quickly on its heels. Polk’s message struck the first blow in what was to soon to become a bitter partisan battle over the Mexican War in both the South and the country at large. Southern Democrats within Congress and back at home, with the exception of John C. Calhoun and a few of his followers, consistently reiterated the main points of the president’s war message of May 11. It was a drumbeat they would keep up for the entire war. The war, southern Democrats and their president claimed, was a just and honorable conflict. Indeed, one southern Democratic editor went beyond mere vindication of the war when he affirmed that “there never was a
more righteous war than this." Implicit in Polk’s war message and the various defenses of it by his supporters was a theory of just warfare that linked the honor, interest and rights of the nation together. The question of the justice of the war revolved around notions whether or not warfare, and specifically this war, constituted honorable behavior for the Republic. As “the Model Republic,” Americans believed that their nation should be held to a higher standard. Americans also considered the political party in power as caretakers of the nation’s precious republican heritage, as well as its rights and interests. Thus, the majority party, in this case the Democrats, who controlled the Presidency and both houses of Congress, would be held accountable for the actions of the Republic. For Democrats, it was absolutely essential that the justice of the war with Mexico, a war begun under the leadership of a Democratic president, be established beyond dispute. The continued electoral success of the party, not to mention the reputation of the Republic, demanded it.

It was no accident that the president’s message resembled in its form and logic a justification for an affair of honor. Although Polk himself never fought a duel, he was nevertheless intimately familiar with the code of honor as it was practiced in the Old South. In an incident caused by an accusation of drunkenness, Polk’s younger brother,

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50 Mississippi Free Trader and Natchez Gazette, May 7, 1846. The Free Trader and Natchez Gazette was a Democratic paper.

51 For an example of the use of the exact phrase, “the Model Republic,” see Arkansas State Democrat [Little Rock], April 7, 1848.

Bill, shot and killed a man on the main street of Columbia, Tennessee, in 1838.<sup>53</sup> Frequent violence also characterized the rough and tumble nature of Tennessee politics. It was a place where a Methodist minister turned newspaper editor, “Parson” William G. Brownlow, could be in the pulpit one day and shot in a brawl or suffer a clubbing the next.<sup>54</sup> In this respect, the Volunteer State resembled others in the region. As a prominent figure in the bitter partisan battles of his day, Polk certainly knew that political disputes might easily turn to violence. Polk’s interaction with the code of honor was not confined to his home state of Tennessee. On more than one occasion his political enemies in the nation’s capital plotted unsuccessfully to maneuver him onto the dueling ground. In perhaps the most prominent example, hot-blooded Virginia congressman Henry A. Wise regularly insulted Polk during his term as Speaker of the House.<sup>55</sup> Rather than accept the call to the field of honor, however, Polk treated the insults of his many verbal attackers with silent contempt. It seems that only his most

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<sup>54</sup>Brownlow’s *Whig* was, according to historian Charles Sellers, “the most vicious newspaper in this era of vicious newspapers.” Sellers, *James K. Polk: Jacksonian*, 424. On this remarkable man, see also E. Merton Coulter, *William G. Brownlow: Fighting Parson of the Southern Highlands* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1937; reprint, Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1971). In 1848, Brownlow suffered a severe clubbing by an unknown assailant, possibly a man whom he branded a deserter in the Mexican War. (Coulter, 43-44) In another incident, he received a bullet in the leg during a brawl with the editor of a Democratic paper in Jonesboro, Tennessee. (Coulter, 39-40) These were not the only incidents of violence during Brownlow’s career.

virulent enemies ever questioned his personal courage. Indeed, Andrew Jackson, never one to shy away from a fight, praised Polk for ignoring the barbs of his assailants.\textsuperscript{56} His actions demonstrate that, at least for himself, Polk disdained violence for the resolution of conflict, preferring instead rhetorical sparring over flying fists or lead. It is perhaps ironic that a man who preferred peaceful resolution of conflict in his personal life, authored a message that justified a war, as the Whig’s claimed his war, upon the basis of honor.\textsuperscript{57}

The practical appeal of the Democratic interpretation of the Mexican War in the South rested firmly upon its accordance with the sensibilities of the individual southern man of honor. Concern for defending the honor of the nation against the insults of an enemy was no mere romantic fancy. The explanation of the war as involving national honor touched a sensitive chord in southern life, where matters of honor were occasionally of deadly concern. For white male southerners, personal honor was something to be jealously guarded. Without honor, a man suffered social death. Consequently, it took little imagination on the part of white southerners to appreciate the logic of Polk’s argument. For example, the editor of the \textit{Yazoo Democrat}, a Mississippi Democratic newspaper, succinctly related the same tenets of honor that governed individual conduct to the nation at large.

\textsuperscript{56}McCormac, \textit{James K. Polk}, 129.

\textsuperscript{57}Polk was not the sole author of the war message. James Buchanan of Pennsylvania and George Bancroft of Massachusetts also contributed their input. However, Polk, a notorious micro-manager, had the final say over the text of the message.
It is a principle which is well established among mankind—clearly demonstrated in all their transactions—that, submission whether as regards individuals or nations provokes insult and aggression. Study the history of nations ... and the truth of the same principle is evident. It is true that peace, a dishonorable peace, has been frequently the result of submission. Yet it was but temporary, though purchased at so great a sacrifice. New encroachments would soon follow—concessions more unreasonable than the first would be demanded, and at last the party that had submitted to a sacrifice of their rights on the altar of ambition, and for the 'sake of peace,' were compelled to resort to arms enervated, and shorn of their strength. The cloud of war slumbered in the distance only to gather contents still more destructive, and to scatter them over the earth with redoubled fury.

Look to individuals in their private transactions ... to discern the same well established principle. If a man is not tenacious of his rights, and with the fear of ‘difficulties’ ever before his eyes, quietly submits to unjust encroachments in one instance, it is afterwards expected and even demanded that he should continue to pursue this policy. The final result is, the occurrence of the very event which he so much dreaded. On the contrary the man, who ‘knows his rights and knowing, dare maintain’ is permitted to enjoy them unmolested, and is free from those misfortunes which a craven, cowardly, temporizing course of conduct begets.\footnote{Yazoo [City] Democrat [Mississippi], May 6, 1846.}

One week later, this same editor continued that “begging peace upon bended knees begets not only dishonor, but calls forth the heaviest blows.”\footnote{Yazoo [City] Democrat [Mississippi], May 13, 1846.} Few other southern Democrats felt compelled to make clear the precise equation between individual and national honor. They simply made the argument that the nation’s honor was threatened and trusted their readers or listeners to make the obvious connection. One might disagree that the offenses committed by Mexico warranted a resort to arms, as most southern Whigs and some Calhounites did, but the coherence and power of the Democratic explanation of the reason for the war rested on the firm base of a common set of southern cultural values that made it difficult to deny.
Antebellum southerners, and other Americans too for that matter, often related issues of national concern to an individual frame of reference; they personalized their nation's history. Doing so helped them to understand complex issues, even if it ran the risk of oversimplifying them. Thus, "How should we act as a nation?" often became "How would I, as an individual, act if presented with the same situation?"

Antebellum Americans, then, often equated their personal moral conscience with that of the nation at large. This is what Colonel Benjamin Taylor meant when he instructed the Arkansas State Democratic Convention in 1848 that "nations stood somewhat in relation to each other that individuals stand to one another." Taylor continued, "I think, when the conduct of either becomes insufferable, he should be flogged and pay for the trouble of whipping him." Missouri Democrat Leonard H. Sims claimed that "individual character portrays in its true light national character." In a similar manner, Antebellum Americans are not alone in this behavior. Contemporary Americans also often react emotionally to sensational events in the nation's foreign affairs. Witness the emotional outpouring over the Iran Hostage Crisis in the late 1970s or the vengeful outrage over the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941. In both instances, regular Americans did not examine these events with detached reserve, they took them personally.


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Arkansas State Democrat [Little Rock], January 21, 1848. The quotation is drawn from a reprint of Taylor's speech before the Convention on January 4, 1848 at Little Rock. On the interconnection between the nation, the state and the individual, see also "The Merchant,—His Character, Position, Duties," *DeBow's Review*, Vol. 3:2 (February, 1847): 95.

Arkansas State Democrat [Little Rock], January 21, 1848.

Congressional Globe, 29th Congress, 1st Session, 1846, 822.
one writer in a southern newspaper asked in 1846, "What are nations but large congregations of individuals?" He reasoned that the same laws should apply to both. In 1838, South Carolina governor John Lyde Wilson applied the same manner of thinking when he noted a close connection between a nation's and an individual's right of appealing to arms. In his rule book on dueling, Wilson wrote, "If an oppressed nation has a right to appeal to arms in defence of its liberty and the happiness of its people, there can be no argument used in support of such an appeal, which will not apply with equal force to individuals." In a general sense, then, many southerners believed that the reputation of the nation reflected upon themselves as individuals.

If the experience of living in a culture defined by honor formed the primary basis for both the form and appeal of the southern Democratic justification of the war, there were also other sources from which they drew. For those so inclined, the classics contained a definition of what constituted just warfare. Greek and Roman classics formed the foundation of ethics for many educated southerners. Classical literature constituted the core of southern college and academy curriculums, and was frequently referred to in southern literary journals. Southern apologists for slavery also used ancient texts to support their arguments. So too was easy reference to Plato, Homer,

64Yazoo [City] Democrat [Mississippi], August 26, 1846. The article from which the quotation is drawn was probably copied from another paper, a common practice during this period.

65Ibid.

Cicero, or other classical authors one of the outward signs of gentlely status. Most educated southerners were not, however, classical scholars in any meaningful sense of the term. Indeed, although a basic knowledge of catchwords and maxims drawn from the classics enhanced one’s prestige in the community, a devotion to the life of the mind went against the grain of the culture of honor in the South. Notwithstanding the fact that the region did produce men like Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, erudition never challenged the primacy of a reputation for manliness as a measure of a man’s honor in the Old South. Still, many southerners believed that the classics of Greece and Republican Rome held moral truths, truths sanctified both by time and the acclaim of their forefathers.

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What southerners found when they referred to the wisdom of the classics on the subject of warfare was a justification strongly based on the premise of honor. The Greeks believed that, in the words of one historian of the origins of warfare in the West, “any wrong could provide a legitimate excuse for war. Wrongs might include insults as well as injuries.” In Homer’s widely-read *Iliad* for example, the reason for the Greek expedition to Troy, which forms the background of the work, was an insult—the abduction of Helen, the wife of the Spartan king Menelaus, by Paris, a Trojan prince. For Plato and Aristotle, armed conflict was an inevitable evil. In *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle argued that states “make war that we may have peace.” In *Rhetorica ad Alexandrum*, he wrote that one pretext for making war was “when we have been the


70 Dawson, *The Origins of Western Warfare*, 72.


victim of aggression, [then] we must take vengeance on those who have wronged us."

The Roman classics also supported the idea that a war fought in defense of honor was just. In De Re Publica, Cicero maintained that "a war is never undertaken by the Ideal state, except in defence of its honour or its safety." Conversely, Cicero wrote that "those wars are unjust which are undertaken without provocation."

Southerners need not look to the ancient past, however, for an example of a just war fought, at least in part, for honor's sake. The nationalist War Hawk faction in Congress, whose most prominent members were Henry Clay and John C. Calhoun, consistently hammered home the idea that the honor of the Republic demanded that war be declared against Britain in 1812. Typically, Calhoun used arguments very similar to those of President Polk and his supporters to justify America's involvement in the earlier war. In 1811, Calhoun replied to John Randolph's words of caution about

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73 Aristotle, Rhetorica ad Alexandrum, 1425a10-12, quoted in Christopher, The Ethics of War and Peace, 10.

74 Marcus Tullius Cicero, De Re Publica, Book III, Chapter XXIII, 34, in Clinton Walker Keyes, trans., Cicero, Vol XVI, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1928), 211. Southerners sometimes referred to more modern authors' books on international law that built upon the classics, such as Hugo Grotius and Emmerich von Vattel. For example, see Appendix to the Congressional Globe, 29th Congress, 2nd Session, 1846-1847, 396; The Papers of Andrew Johnson, Volume I, 1822-1851, 207, 558, 563. Whig William Cabell Rives criticized Polk for using Vattel and Grotius to justify the war. See Richmond Whig, July 14, 1848.

75 Ibid.

fighting against the British, words that Calhoun equated with meek submission, by
asserting that the nation “is never safe but under the shield of honor.”77 Calhoun
enumerated the impressment of American seamen and the violation of American trade
among the wrongs perpetrated by Great Britain. “These rights,” he asserted in 1811,
“are essentially attacked, and war is the only means of redress.”78 The United States, he
maintained, was “bound in honor and interest to resist.”79 Although inclined to peace,
Calhoun believed that Americans were possessed of a natural “sense of independence
and honor ... that disdains tame submission to wrongs.”80 Despite the fact that United
States had declared war on Great Britain first, Calhoun contended that the War of 1812
was a defensive war, which he defined as a war “to repel insult, injury or oppression.”81
In terms that any man of honor would understand, Calhoun maintained that war was the
only alternative left to the nation because:

Wrongs submitted to produce contrary effects in the oppressor and the
oppressed. The first wrong, by universal law of our nature, is most easily
resisted. ... Let that be submitted to; let the consequent debasement and
loss of national honor be felt, and nothing but the grinding hand of
oppression can force resistance. ... In submission then there is no

77 Calhoun quoted in Bertram Wyatt-Brown, Southern Honor: Ethics and
Behavior in the Old South (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 38.

78 “Speech on the Report of the Foreign Relations Committee,” December 12,
(Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1959), 77.

79 Ibid., 80.

80 Ibid., 77.

81 “Speech on the Dangers of ‘Factious Opposition,’” January 15, 1814, The
Papers of John C. Calhoun: Vol. 1, 190.
remedy; our honor lost; our commerce under the control of the oppressor.82

For Calhoun, then, the honor, the interests and, indeed, the very existence of the Republic demanded that it fight against Great Britain.83 Andrew Jackson echoed Calhoun's sentiments in an 1812 speech to Tennessee's volunteers: we are "going to fight for the reestablishment of our national character [sic]."84 The "hour of national vengeance," he roared, had arrived.85 In 1848, an Arkansas Democrat noted the connection between the earlier war and the one with Mexico: "In 1812 we went to war with Great Britain, one of the mighty powers of the earth . . . . Compare the causes in the two cases. It seems to me that the list of aggressions is longer on the side of Mexico."86

Whatever their inspiration, Democrats in the House and Senate demonstrated overwhelming support for the president's honor-based interpretation of the road to war. In early May 1846 in the House of Representatives, Kentucky Democrat Linn Boyd proposed an amendment to a bill providing fifty thousand volunteers and ten million


84 Andrew Jackson to the volunteers, March 7, 1812, quoted in Remini, Henry Clay, 88.

85 Ibid.

86 Arkansas State Democrat [Little Rock], January 21, 1848.
dollars for the war that paraphrased the president’s war message. Thus, the vote on Boyd’s amendment served as a benchmark of the level of support for Polk’s war message. Southern Representatives overwhelmingly ratified the amendment. Thirty-nine of fifty-one southern Democrats and nine of twenty-one southern Whigs voted yea. The only significant defections from the Democratic camp were the Virginia,  

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87 Boyd’s amendment attached a preamble to the bill that stated “Where as by the act of the Republic of Mexico a state of war exists between that government and the United States” Congressional Globe, 29th Congress, 1st Session, 1846, 792.

88 House voting returns from Congressional Globe, 29th Congress, 1st Session, 1846, 794.

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South Carolina, and Alabama supporters of John C. Calhoun. Notably, no southern representative voted against the appropriation bill in its amended form, which passed the House 174 to 14.\(^8\) In the Senate, Democratic support for the president was equally strong. Only two southern Democrats, South Carolinians John C. Calhoun and George McDuffie, voted to strike out Boyd's preamble of the bill reported from the House; eleven southern Democratic senators voted against the motion.\(^9\) In contrast to the House though, only one southern Whig, Spencer Jarnagin of Tennessee, voted with the Democratic majority. The end result, however, was the same as it had been in the

\[\text{Congressional Globe, 29th Congress, 1st Session, 1846, 795.}\]

\[\text{Senate voting returns from Congressional Globe, 29th Congress, 1st Session, 1846, 803.}\]

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House—the appropriation bill with Boyd's preamble attached passed by an overwhelming margin.\footnote{The appropriation bill passed the Senate 40 to 2, with three abstentions and one "ay, except the preamble." \textit{Congressional Globe}, 29\textsuperscript{th} Congress, 1\textsuperscript{st} Session, 1846, 804.} Once again, no southerner voted against the amended bill, although Whig John Berrien of Georgia and Calhoun abstained, and Kentucky Whig John Crittenden voted "ay, except the preamble."

In their arguments in support of the Mexican War, southern Democratic congressmen mimicked the president by emphasizing that the nation's honor demanded that the war with Mexico be prosecuted.\footnote{For the debate in the House in May, 1846, see \textit{Congressional Globe}, 29\textsuperscript{th} Congress, 1\textsuperscript{st} Session, 1846, 791-95. For the debate in the Senate, see \textit{Congressional Globe}, 29\textsuperscript{th} Congress, 1\textsuperscript{st} Session, 1846, 782-88, 795-804. For an excellent overview of the entire Congressional debate on the Mexican War issue, see John H. Schroeder, \textit{Mr. Polk's War: American Opposition and Dissent, 1846-1848} (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1973), 3-32, 63-88, 149-59. Schroeder is sympathetic to the opposition and perhaps overstates the depth of disaffection with the war among southern politicians.} On May 12, Senator Sam Houston of Texas spoke of Mexico's "indignities ... [to] the American flag," not to mention her invasion of American territory, as indicative of a state of war between the two countries.\footnote{\textit{Congressional Globe}, 29\textsuperscript{th} Congress, 1\textsuperscript{st} Session, 1846, 798.} "Injury having been inflicted by Mexico," Houston proclaimed, "she ought to be punished."\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}} If Congress failed to act, he continued: "Perhaps the next intelligence received would be that advantage had been taken of our inactivity, and some new outrage perpetrated more seriously involving the national honor and dignity than any
which had yet reached our ears."\textsuperscript{95} Likewise, Virginia Senator George Pennybacker also clearly understood that the honor of the country was at stake. Pennybacker argued that a vigorous response to Mexican outrages "shall furnish a lesson to the world with an example which will be profitably remembered hereafter."\textsuperscript{96} He for one was happy to give "the president the necessary power to vindicate the country, and defend its honor."\textsuperscript{97} Similarly in the House, Georgian Hugh Haralson declared:

the blood of our people shed upon the Rio Grande ... cries aloud upon us for prompt, speedy, definite action—action which shall show in a manner not to be misunderstood that we intend to maintain all our rights, and that we will take redress for the invasion of our territory and the blood of American citizens, shed on American soil.\textsuperscript{98}

Haralson, Pennybacker, and Houston were far from alone in their assertions that honor demanded that Mexico be chastised for her action. Their refrain would frequently echo from the mouths of southern Democrats in the halls of Congress during the next two years.\textsuperscript{99}

Although southern Democrats in Congress were the most consistent in justifying the Mexican War upon ideas of honor, political arguments based upon the defense of

\textsuperscript{95}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{96}Ibid., 800.

\textsuperscript{97}Ibid., 801.

\textsuperscript{98}Ibid., 793.

\textsuperscript{99}For a few examples, see ibid., 801-802, 822, 835, 842-43, 877, 880, 909, 980-82, 1106; Appendix to the Congressional Globe, 29th Congress, 1st Session, 1846, 803-806, 864-67; 902-903, 908-12, 950-52, 1101-02; Appendix to the Congressional Globe, 29th Congress, 2nd Session, 1846-1847, 163-66, 219-23, 358-60, 378.
national honor were not unique to the southern wing of the party. A few northern Democrats demonstrated that they too believed that the national honor was at stake in the war with Mexico. For example, Representative Cornelius Darragh of Pittsburgh believed that "the honor and rights of the country" were at risk and "should be sustained." Darragh claimed that "he would be ever ready to go as far as he that went farthest to protect the honor of the country." The hawkish Senator William Allen of Ohio also clearly understood that the reputation—the honor—of the country mattered and was threatened in the conflict with Mexico. He asserted that "the opinions of mankind," and not "steel," "constituted the chief power in modern times." Allen called upon his colleagues in the Senate to provide "for the defence of our country and the vindication of our honor." He then explained why:

If we meet this act of aggression promptly, vigorously, energetically, ... we shall furnish a lesson to the world which will profitably remembered hereafter. But if we spend our time in useless discussion, ... we shall exhibit councils and conduct whose effects will impress themselves upon many a chapter of our future history. Our institutions have no admirers among the monarchial and aristocratic governments of the Old World. ... We have but one safe course before us. ... Let us enter the Mexican

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100 The contention that southern Democrats were more consistent than their northern colleagues in their use of honor-based arguments is based on an admittedly impressionistic reading of the *Congressional Globe* for the 29th Congress, 1st and 2nd Sessions and the 30th Congress, 1st Session. During the Mexican War, two Yankees, James Buchanan of Pennsylvania and George Bancroft of Massachusetts, helped President Polk compose his honor-based war message of May 11.

101 *Congressional Globe*, 29th Congress, 1st Session, 1846, 809.


territory, and conquer a peace at the point of the bayonet. ... [I]f delayed, there will be other parties than Mexico who will soon mingle themselves in this affair; and the consequences may be felt throughout the civilized world. 105

In a similar vein, Senator Lewis Cass of Michigan maintained that “our course is plain and honorable before the world” and that “if we make half war and half peace ... we will dishonor ourselves forever in the eyes of mankind.” 106

Southern Democrats outside of Washington, as well as those within, reiterated the themes of the president’s message with spirit. In a May 9, 1846 proclamation to the citizens of his state, Arkansas governor Thomas S. Drew affirmed: “War has commenced— ... we shall ... avenge that blood [which has been shed upon the Rio Grande] and inflict a just and summary punishment upon the foe.” 107 Similarly, the *Wilmington Journal* asserted:

The eventful hour has at last arrived when the retributive hand of justice shall and must be raised—when the accumulated wrongs and insults of years must and shall be avenged by the American people. The blood of our slaughtered brethren crimsoning the banks of the Rio Grande is even

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107 Proclamation of governor Thomas S. Drew in *Arkansas Banner* [Little Rock], May 13, 1846. In the same issue of this newspaper, the editor called upon Zachary Taylor’s army to “vindicate the rights of our country, and prove the prowess of our arms.” For similar sentiments, *Arkansas State Democrat* [Little Rock], November 20, 1846, January 21, March 31, 1848; *Arkansas Democrat* [Little Rock], July 3, 1846; *Yazoo* [City] *Democrat*, May 6, May 13, October 21, 1846, February 9, 1947; [Carrollton] *Mississippi Democrat*, December 30, 1846, January 6, January 27, 1847; *Mississippi Free Trader and Natchez Gazette*, May 7, May 9, May 28, 1846; [Jackson] *Mississippian*, June 10, September 16, 1846, January 8, January 22, March 26, July 16, August 6, 1847, February 4, March 31, 1848.
now appealing to their brethren throughout the Union, to rise in their
might and take summary vengeance on perfidious Mexico. The spirit of
our murdered fellow countrymen are even now stalking throughout the
land, and beckoning on their brethren from one end of the Union to the
other, to avenge their names. For one, we say, that the United States
should make a final settlement of the reckoning with Mexico.108

The Wytheville Republican and Virginia Constitutionalist exclaimed, “Forbearance
with this distracted nation has ceased to be a virtue. Let her feel, and at once, the
chastising hand which requireth nought but what [is] right and submits to nothing
wrong.”109 In Raleigh, an editor succinctly wrote that, “Blood has been shed upon
American soil, and that blood must be signally avenged.”110 Early in 1847, The South
Carolinian explained: “The president must be sustained, for honest men of both
political parties are opening their eyes to the necessity of striking an effective blow at
once–of fighting out the war, as well for the honor of the nation, as for punishment for
Mexican faithlessness.”111 In a speech before the Arkansas Democratic State
Convention in January 1848, Matthew Ward recapitulated the president’s argument and

108 Wilmington Journal [North Carolina], May 15, 1846. See also, Wilmington
Journal [North Carolina], May 29, November 6, 1846.

109 [Wytheville] Republican and Virginia Constitutionalist, May 16, 1846,
quoted in Buck, “Virginia and the Mexican War,” 25. See also, ibid., 32; Richmond
Enquirer, April 6, September 27, 1847.

110 [Raleigh] North Carolina Standard, May 20, 1846. See also, [Raleigh] North
Carolina Standard, May 13, June 3, 10, 1846, January 26, 1848.

111 The South Carolinian [Columbia], January 16, 1847, quoted in James W.
Gettys, Jr., “‘To Conquer a Peace’: South Carolina and the Mexican War” (Ph.D.
dissertation, University of South Carolina, 1973), 156. For similar sentiments, see
“Speech on whether the Mexican War is justified or not in the affirmative–Speech for
the Bennettsville Lyceum at its second meeting on the question–Is the war with Mexico
justifiable on the part of the United States? John G. Dudley,”[1846], John D. Dudley
Papers, University of South Carolina, South Caroliniana Library.
then asked if it was right for American citizens to weigh anything "against the sanctity of American honor."\textsuperscript{112}

Democrats played upon a general belief that threats to the perpetuity of the Republic existed beyond its borders. Many southerners accepted that European monarchies, especially Great Britain, still eyed the young Republic with envy.\textsuperscript{113} If the United States was to take its rightful place among the leading nations of the earth, it must be willing to protect its rights and interests from encroachment with the blood of its sons. Indeed, the very survival of the Republic depended upon foreign powers’ knowledge that the country would stand up for its rights. In international affairs, as in personal relations, reputation mattered. President Polk himself understood this. In early 1846, he confided to his diary:

\begin{quote}
the only way to treat John Bull was to look him straight in the eye; that I considered a bold & firm course on our part the pacific one; that if
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{112}"Speech of Matthew H. Ward in the Democratic State Convention, Little Rock January 4, 1848," reprinted in Arkansas State Democrat [Little Rock], January 14, 1848

\textsuperscript{113}In his Manifest Design: Anxious Aggrandizement in Late Jacksonian America (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), Thomas R. Hietala argues that anglophobia was a persistent anxiety in antebellum America, especially among Democrats. This fear of Britain was one among many that drove America’s expansionist impulse. One need not accept Hietala’s argument in its entirety to agree that Americans did indeed fear British interference in their affairs. (Pgs. 20, 58-59, 71, 88-89, 142-145). For a few examples of southern anglophobia, see James H. Hammond, "Message to the Senate and House of Representatives of the State of South Carolina, Nov. 26, 1844," in Selections from the Letters and Speeches of the Hon. James H. Hammond of South Carolina (New York: John F. Trow, 1866; reprint Spartanburg, SC: Reprint Company, 1978), 99; Louis Wigfall to Armistead Burt, April 7, 1846 (typescript), Armistead Burt Papers, Duke University, Special Collections Department, William R. Perkins Library; John Cunningham, Abbeville CH, May 24 1846 to Armistead Burt, Armistead Burt Papers, Duke University, Special Collections Department, William R. Perkins Library.
Congress faltered or hesitated in their course, John Bull would immediately become arrogant and more grasping in his demands; and that such had been the history of the English Nation in all their contests for the last two hundred years.  

Similarly, the editor of the *North Carolina Standard* evoked the words of George Washington: “If we desire to avoid insult, we must be able to repel it. If we desire to secure peace, one of the most powerful instruments of our rising prosperity, *it must be known that we are at all times ready for war.*”¹¹⁵ The same editor thought that America’s willingness to fight Mexico taught “European despots … to admire America, and [now] the whole world bows in respect to the excellence of her institutions.”¹¹⁶ South Carolina Democrat Benjamin F. Perry maintained that the war proved to Europeans that an American “is as much alive to the National honor as he is to making money.”¹¹⁷ The *Yazoo Democrat* affirmed that through American actions in Mexico “European powers will be taught that our government is firmly pledged to reject their interference in our affairs come in whatever shape it may.”¹¹⁸ Likewise, the


¹¹⁶*ibid.*, July 22, 1846. See also, *ibid*, May 13, 1846; *Wilmington Journal* [North Carolina], May 22, 29, 1846, July 16, 1847.

¹¹⁷“Benjamin F. Perry’s speech following the victories of Buena Vista and Cerro Gordo,” quoted in Gettys, “To Conquer a Peace,” 62. See also H. A. Jones to A. Townes [typescript], May 27, 1846 Townes Family Papers, University of South Carolina, South Caroliniana Library.

¹¹⁸*Yazoo* [City] *Democrat* [Mississippi], July 15, 1846. See also *ibid.*, October 7, 1846; *Mississippi Free Trader and Natchez Gazette*, May 23, 1846.
Arkansas Democrat claimed that a victory over Mexico “will place our government in a proud position in the eyes of the whole civilized world.”

Southern Democrats desired a free hand to wage their honorable war. Hence, they painted their Whig opponents as both disloyal and dishonorable. Put another way, Democrats endeavored to shame their opponents into supporting, or at least acquiescing to, President Polk’s war policy. In his December 8, 1846 annual message, Polk himself argued that the Whigs’ vigorous criticism provided “aid and comfort” to the Mexicans. In his diary, the president also characterized the Whigs as “Federalists,” a reference both to the 1813 accusation that Connecticut Federalists had displayed blue lights to a British blockading squadron to thwart Steven Decatur’s attempt to slip out of New London, and to the treasonous Hartford Convention of 1814. The president was not alone in making this connection. Southern Democrats mercilessly beat the theme of the Whigs as present-day Federalists into the ground. For example, the Mississippi Free

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119 *Arkansas Democrat* [Little Rock], October 16, 1846. See also, *ibid.*, October 9, 1846; *Arkansas State Democrat* [Little Rock] August 20, 1847.


121 Polk, *The Diary of James K. Polk During his Presidency, 1845 to 1849*, Vol. 2, 348, 368-69. On the “blue light” affair, see Hickey, *The War of 1812*, 257, 259. Disaffected New England Federalists met in Hartford, Connecticut, in late 1814. Representatives from five New England states discussed their grievances against the Madison administration and the War of 1812. The delegates produced a document that contained a long list complaints and also asserted the right of a state “to interpose its authority” to protect its citizens against unconstitutional federal laws. Peace with England and news of Andrew Jackson’s victory at New Orleans were announced as a committee from the convention was on its way to Washington to present the message to Congress. Hence, the Federalist Party gained a reputation as traitors. The event proved the final nail in the coffin of the national party on the American political scene.
Trader and Natchez Gazette maintained, “These men ... are a very few degrees removed from the traitors and the blue lights of the last war, and deserve to be closely watched.” \(^1\) In 1846, a North Carolina newspaper affirmed that the Whig leadership “are identical in feelings and principles with the Blue Light Federalists of 1812.” \(^2\) Two years later in answer to the question “Why Can’t We Have Peace?” this same paper concluded that it was because of the aid and comfort provided to the Mexicans by Federalist Whigs. \(^3\) The Standard, another North Carolina Democratic paper, variously styled its Whig opponents as “Tories,” “Prophets of Evil,” “Mexican Whigs,” “Massachusetts Federalists,” “Federal Whigs,” and, finally the ever popular, “Federalists” in articles that graced its pages. \(^4\) Typically, the editor of Standard hoped that the Whig opposition would “be scourged and whipped into everlasting silence and disgrace” for its seditious criticism of the president’s war policy. \(^5\) In Arkansas, the State Democrat claimed that in “the record-book of Time, ... the bright halo that will

\(^1\) Mississippi Free Trader and Natchez Gazette, May 28, 1846. For other examples in Mississippi, see ibid., May 30, June 18, 1846; Yazoo [City] Democrat, May 6, 1846, February 9, 1847; [Carrollton] Mississippi Democrat, December 30, 1846; August 18, 1847.

\(^2\) Wilmington Journal [North Carolina], July 10, 1846.

\(^3\) Wilmington Journal [North Carolina], February 18, 1848. For variations on this theme, see ibid., May 29, July 10, November 6, 1846, February 5, July 9, August 13, October 15, 1847.

\(^4\) Raleigh] North Carolina Standard, November 17, 1847, December 9, 1846, February 3, 1847, November 4, 1846. See also, ibid. May 20, June 3, 10, July 22, 1846, January 27, February 10, March 10, 24, August 18, September 15, 22, October 20, November 3, 1847, January 12, 1848.

\(^5\) Ibid., May 27, 1846.
surround the record of the glorious achievements of our soldiers in a foreign land, will
render more distinct the black traces that record the traitorous conduct of those who
fought against them and their country at home.” The author did not need to add to
whom he was referring, so common had the Whig as traitor refrain become. At least
one southern Democrat believed the rhetoric in his party’s newspapers. Alabamian E.
A. O’Neal wrote to a friend in Washington, “You have traitors in Congress, as well as
we have among us. But the masses … will put their mark on them.”

Although, for the most part, the president was able to wage the war in manner
he desired, Democrats proved unable to ride the tidal wave of patriotic sentiment
aroused by the war to political dominance. The mid-term elections of 1846 proved a
disaster for southern Democrats. Even accounting for the five seats in the House lost
due to reapportionment in the slaveholding states, the Whigs gained ten seats in the
region. Democrats’ accusations of disloyalty, cowardice, or partisan feeling had simply
failed to stick. Of the twelve Calhounites in the House who had voted against Boyd’s
amendment in May 1846, only four did not return to their seats when the Thirtieth
Congress convened on December 6, 1847—three were from Virginia, Edmund W.
Hubard, James A. Seddon, and Robert M. T. Hunter, and the other William Lowndes

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127E.A. O’Neal to George Smith Houston, May 25, 1846, George Smith Houston
Papers, Duke University, Special Collections Department, William R. Perkins Library.
Yancey came from Alabama.\textsuperscript{128} Their absence had nothing to do with their vote against the president’s interpretation of the war as embodied in the Boyd amendment. Hubard, Seddon, and Yancey declined to run, while Hunter became part of Virginia’s senate delegation.\textsuperscript{129} Of the twelve southern Whigs who voted nay on the Boyd amendment, five did not retain their seats—Garrett Davis, Henry Grider, John H. McHenry of Kentucky, Alfred Dockery of North Carolina, and Edwin Hickman Ewing of Tennessee.\textsuperscript{130} Significantly, only McHenry was a candidate for re-election, and he withdrew for unknown reasons prior to election day.\textsuperscript{131}

Not all Democrats adhered to the administration’s line with regard to the Mexican War. The national party itself was not a monolithic entity that marched in lockstep behind its president. In the North, the supporters of Martin Van Buren were angry over the loss of their faction’s dominant position in the Democratic Party. The


\textsuperscript{129}Jacob, \textit{Biographical Dictionary of the United States Congress}, 1787, 1222, 1236, 2094. Yancey resigned his seat on September 1, 1846 because he had lost faith in the national Democratic party. Draughton, “William Lowndes Yancey,” 167-68. On Hunter and his election to the Senate, see Buck, “Virginia and the Mexican War,” 52-55.

\textsuperscript{130}Jacob, \textit{Biographical Dictionary of the United States Congress}, 877, 979, 1095, 1468.

\textsuperscript{131}\textit{Ibid.}
Van Burenites inability to achieve 54° 40’ as the boundary line in the Oregon dispute, their lack of control over the party machinery during Texas’ annexation, and Polk’s replacement of the Van Buren-leaning Washington Globe with the Washington Union, edited by ardent administration partisan Thomas Richie, as the party’s official organ manifested just how far they had fallen. The so-called Wilmot Proviso, proposed by a former administration supporter who had gradually gravitated into the camp of the Van Buren dissidents, was, in part, the fruit of this schism in the Democratic Party. The South too had its Democratic dissidents. John C. Calhoun and his small coterie of conservative Democratic disciples, who prized their political independence and were governed by informal personal political relationships, frequently bucked national party control. Consequently, it is no surprise that Calhoun himself proved less than enthusiastic about the war with Mexico. However, as historian William Cooper puts it, Calhoun, “the one notable defector from the party,” “was conspicuous in his loneliness.” Some individuals who initially publically supported his critique of the


133 Ibid., 16-18.


135 Cooper, Liberty and Slavery, 215.
Mexican War, like Congressmen Isaac Holmes, Robert Barnwell Rhett, and William Lowndes Yancey, eventually abandoned his leadership on the war issue and supported the administration's position. Calhoun, however, was never totally alone in his views on the war, although occasionally it must have seemed that way. There were those steadfast individuals who agreed with Calhoun's position, although they often demonstrated their support in private letters rather than public proclamations. And there were always a few papers in his home state that could be counted on to back him. Still, the story of the Calhounites' attitudes toward the Mexican War is basically the story of one man, John C. Calhoun.

Southern politics of honor constrained the course of Calhoun and those who might support him on the Mexican War issue. Calhoun's stance on the war evidenced a certain amount of ambivalence—the seductive appeal of the call to defend the nation's injured honor, on one hand, versus a concern that the results of the war boded ill for both the country and the South on the other. Calhoun manifested this ambivalence when he wrote that he desired "the peace of the country, as long as it can be done

136 On Rhett, see Lander, Reluctant Imperialists, 6, 7, 8, 30, 158, 167. On Holmes, see ibid., 6, 7, 9, 30, 159-60. On Yancey, see Congressional Globe, 29th Congress, 1st Session, 1846, 794; Appendix to the Congressional Globe, 29th Congress, 1st Session, 1846, 950-952.

137 See Thomas G. Key to Armistead Burt, June 15, 1846, Armistead Burt Papers, Duke University, Special Collections Department, William R. Perkins Library; James Gadsen to J. Edward Calhoun, October 29, 1846, James Gadsen Papers, University of South Carolina, South Caroliniana Library; P. M. Butler to Buford T. Watts, September 21, 1846, Buford T. Watts Papers, University of South Carolina, South Caroliniana Library.
consistently with honor”\textsuperscript{138} Like others who would disapprove of the war after the fact, he discovered that criticizing an existing war was an entirely different and more difficult proposition than preventing a hypothetical one. Calhoun and some of his compatriots thought that the war with Mexico was a needless one fraught with danger for both the South and the Republic. Yet they also agreed that national honor demanded that the war, once commenced, be materially sustained and waged to a victorious conclusion. South Carolina Senator Andrew Butler perhaps best summed up the dilemma facing the Calhounite wing of the Democratic Party when he admitted, “we are certainly in a difficult position. . . . if we quit the war, it will apparently be with dishonor. If we go on it must end in mischief. The truth is, we are like a shepherd who has got the wolf by the ears! It is hazardous to let go—it is worse to hold on.”\textsuperscript{139} In many ways, Calhoun’s course resembled that of the Whig party in the South. Indeed, outside of a small circle of loyal Democratic adherents, Calhoun found support for his position from an unexpected quarter—southern Whigs. The Democratic press in the South castigated Calhoun for his occasionally vocal criticism of the mainstream party line on the Mexican War. He was essentially read out of the party.

Calhoun’s previously described position on the War of 1812 demonstrates that he certainly understood Polk’s call to defend the national honor against Mexico, even if he did not agree with it. Indeed, the young Calhoun would most likely have stood in the front rank of the defenders of the Mexican War, rather than in the ranks of the


\textsuperscript{139}\textit{Congressional Globe}, 29\textsuperscript{th} Congress, 2\textsuperscript{nd} Session, February 18, 1847, 450.
opposition. Calhoun’s experience during the War of 1812 changed him in at least one important respect. The war that he had played a leading role in instigating had almost ruined the country. According to historian David Niven, this realization caused Calhoun to take a “defensive posture on public policy that controlled his reaction to the rapidly changing political, social, and economic environment after the War of 1812.”

This defensive, cautious posture dominated Calhoun’s thought on the Mexican War.

By early 1846, Calhoun perceived that war with Mexico was possible, but this was not his first concern. His primary interest, as well as that of many southerners, was the peaceful settlement of the Oregon question that was fast approaching a crisis. He worried that war with Mexico would at least hinder the ongoing negotiations with Great Britain and possibly lead to war with her. Thus, he informed his son-in-law, Thomas G. Clemson, “I was desirous of settling the Oregon question as speedily as possible.” Calhoun believed that the Polk administration had bungled the handling of

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140 Niven, *Calhoun and the Price of Union*, xv.


142 Other southerners shared Calhoun’s concerns. For example, see T. H. Pope to Armistead Burt, February 2, 1846, Armistead Burt Papers, Duke University, Special Collections Department, William R. Perkins Library. Pope wrote: “Our voices are still for peace. I mean an honorable peace. And we entirely approve Mr. Calhoun’s policy on the Oregon question.”

143 John C. Calhoun to Thomas G. Clemson, January 29, 1846, Jameson, “Calhoun Correspondence,” 681.
foreign affairs by pursuing a needlessly bellicose policy. When Polk took him into his confidence in two meetings on April 18 and May 3, 1846, Calhoun advised him that the United States would have little difficulty in adjusting issues with Mexico once the Oregon dispute was settled. Indeed, Calhoun argued that Great Britain might even help overcome the stalemate in Mexican-American foreign relations. The South Carolina senator, Polk confided in his diary, expressed “a decided aversion to a war with Mexico if it could be avoided consistently with the honour of the country.” On both occasions, the president depreciated Calhoun’s advice, saying that he was determined to take some action on Mexican affairs before the end of the current session of Congress regardless of the disposition of the Oregon question. For Calhoun, the interests of the United States would be best served by dealing first with Great Britain, the most threatening of the two potential belligerents. Indeed, he would later reflect that had his instinct to preserve peace with Great Britain not been greater than that to preserve peace with Mexico he would have attempted to stop Taylor’s march to the Rio Grande. When Whig congressmen, toying with the idea of proposing a restraining motion against Taylor’s advance, approached Calhoun for support in early 1846, he rebuffed

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144 Wiltse, John C. Calhoun: Sectionalist, 278; Calhoun to Thomas G. Clemson, April 25, 1846, in Jameson, “Calhoun Correspondence,” 688-89.

145 Ibid., 337-338.

146 Polk, Diary, I, 375.

them, claiming that he did not wish to jeopardize his efforts to convince the Polk administration to compromise on Oregon. As it was, Calhoun, like so many future opponents of the war, did little to prevent the opening of hostilities.

Calhoun still harbored doubts about the advisability of war with Mexico when the president’s war message arrived in Congress on May 11. Polk’s message did nothing to change his mind. Calhoun saw few benefits in fighting Mexico and many dangers. Privately, Calhoun deplored Polk’s actions because he feared that Britain now would be hesitant to settle the Oregon dispute, that some European power would support Mexico in a war with the United States, and that the war would ruin of American trade. Publically, Calhoun stood firmly behind the Constitution, objecting to the president’s claim that war existed. He argued that there was a constitutional distinction between “hostilities” and “war,” a distinction that Polk’s message artfully blurred. Calhoun asserted, “There may be invasion without war, and the president is

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148 K. Jack Bauer, *The Mexican War, 1846-1848* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1974), 27. Calhoun himself put a rather different spin on this incident. He claimed that it was he who approached the Whigs about opposing Taylor’s march to the Rio Grande because he was unable to oppose it publically himself. John C. Calhoun to Andrew Pickens Calhoun, May 29, 1846, Jameson, “Calhoun Correspondence,” 693. Initially, Calhoun believed that he would control the Polk administration. Indeed, he crushed the vocal Robert Barnwell Rhett’s opposition to Polk as the “catspaw” of the northern Democracy, the so-called Bluffton Movement, to this end. However, Calhoun was quickly disabused of this view, although he still harbored hopes that he could still exercise some influence over the administration’s course. See Niven, *Calhoun and the Price of Union*, 280-81, 288-90; Wiltse, *John C. Calhoun: Sectionalist*, 276-78; Gettys, “‘To Conquer a Peace,’” 27.

authorized to repel invasion. But … it is for us [the Senate] to determine whether war shall be declared or not.”\textsuperscript{150} He then declared that he was willing to “do all that the Constitution, and patriotism, and the honor of my country, may require,” but he desired time to carefully consider the question commensurate with the dignity of the Senate.\textsuperscript{151}

On May 12, the House of Representative reported a bill to the Senate “for the prosecution of the existing war” with Mexico. Calhoun proclaimed that he had no objection to voting for supplies for Taylor’s army on the Rio Grande, but that he was unprepared to vote for what amounted to a declaration of war without taking some time to consider such a serious question. After all, the documents which accompanied the president’s message and supposedly supported its conclusions were not yet in the possession of the Senate.\textsuperscript{152} Later, during the debate over the bill, Calhoun’s compatriot, the elderly George McDuffie, also objected to the preamble to the bill which formally confirmed the existence of war.\textsuperscript{153} When the question of striking out the preamble was put to a vote, Calhoun and McDuffie were the only southern Democrats to break with the administration.\textsuperscript{154} In any case, the measure to strike out the preamble was defeated by a margin of five votes, twenty-five yeas to twenty nays. When the

\textsuperscript{150}Congressional Globe, 29\textsuperscript{th} Congress, 1\textsuperscript{st} Session, May 11, 1846, 784. The quotation is from Calhoun’s remarks on the day that the Polk’s war message was delivered to Congress. See also, Congressional Globe, 29\textsuperscript{th} Congress, 1\textsuperscript{st} Session, 785, 795.\textsuperscript{154}.

\textsuperscript{151}Ibid., 784.

\textsuperscript{152}Congressional Globe, 29\textsuperscript{th} Congress, 1\textsuperscript{st} Session, May 12, 1846, 795.

\textsuperscript{153}Ibid., 799.

\textsuperscript{154}Ibid., 803.

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appropriation with its objectionable preamble came up for final approval, Calhoun sat in stoney silence, while McDuffie abandoned him and voted yea. Calhoun's obstructionist stance on the war won him the admiration of Whigs and the contempt of Democratic Party stalwarts. On the floor of the House of Representatives, South Carolinians Isaac E. Holmes and Robert Barnwell Rhett echoed Calhoun’s call for prudent deliberation and a division of the question of war from that of repelling a Mexican invasion. They too stood on the constitutional distinction between hostilities and war and met with equal lack of success. The appropriation bill with the amendment attached that asserted that war existed between the United States and Mexico passed the House by a huge margin—174-14. Significantly, Rhett, Holmes, and every other Calhounite voted in the affirmative. The reasons for this are clear. Most southerners approved of the war and thought of it as an honorable conflict. For any southern politician to have voted against a war perceived in such a way would have left him open to public castigation and disgrace. Even Calhoun’s abstention constituted a radical action. Had he not possessed a well-earned and formidable reputation as an able defender of southern rights, his political career would probably have been over. In short, Calhoun could afford to chart a relatively independent course while men of lesser stature could not.

155 John C. Calhoun to Andrew Pickens Calhoun, May 14, 1846, in Jameson, “Calhoun Correspondence,” 691. Calhoun advised his confederates in the House of the course that they should pursue.

156 Congressional Globe, 29th Congress, 1st Session, May 12, 1846, 792-94.
Calhoun’s abstention on the war bill led to widespread criticism, even within his home state. South Carolinian Joseph Abney advised fellow Carolinian and erstwhile Calhounite Armistead Burt:

Our people here love Mr. Calhoun as they would a father, and it is especially the case in this part of the state—his voice sounds here “like a prophet’s word,” and almost any explanation with regard to the positions he has taken will satisfy every one of them. … But as much as I admire Mr. Calhoun … if he were to oppose the prosecution of the war now it has commenced, I would condemn him with all the power I have.157

Similarly, Louis Wigfall warned Burt, “if you … think there is no serious opposition to Mr. Calhoun you are laboring under a mistake. The ‘Advertiser’ is to be made the organ of the party and Polk and patriotism is the tune that is to be played on it.”158 Even Francis W. Pickens, a Calhoun relation, obliquely criticized him at a meeting called to raise volunteers in Edgefield by proposing five resolutions that supported Polk’s interpretation of the causes of the war.159 One attendee of the meeting thought that Pickens acted as he had because he “supposed that Mr. Calhoun’s popularity and influence would be prostrated by his refusing to vote for the declaration of war.”160

157 J. Abney to Armistead Burt, Edgefield CH, June 6, 1846, Armistead Burt Papers, Duke University, Special Collections Department, William R. Perkins Library.

158 Louis Wigfall to Armistead Burt, July 7, 1846, Armistead Burt Papers, Duke University, Special Collections Department, William R. Perkins Library.

159 Lander, Reluctant Imperialists, 15-16. Pickens purpose, at least in part, was to garner favor with the president. See Francis W. Pickens to James K. Polk, October 31, 1847, Francis Wilkinson Pickens Papers, Duke University, Special Collections Department, William R. Perkins Library.

160 J. Abney to Armistead Burt, July 23, 1846, Armistead Burt Papers, Duke University, Special Collections Department, William R. Perkins Library.
Albion Chase, the editor of the *Southern Banner* in Athens, Georgia, confided to Democratic stalwart Howell Cobb, "Mr. Calhoun, I see, is getting farther and farther off. ... I think I shall have to read him out [of the party] before long."  

Another Cobb correspondent wrote, "Mr. Calhoun has killed himself about here as far as Democratic support goes. I have not heard the first Democrat sustain his course on the war bill."  

Alabama Democrat E. A O’Neal wondered, "Is Calhoun deranged, or what evil spirit has beset him? He is ruined forever and so are the other Mexicans in Congress."  

Calhoun’s popularity fell as a result of his stance on the war, but he was by no means prostrated. He did, however, prudently allow the furor over his abstention to subside by making no public pronouncements on the administration's policy and the Mexican War from the time Congress recessed in August 1846 until February 8, 1847 when he rose to make his views known in the Senate. In the interim, he lost none of his conviction that "the war might have been easily avoided, & that it had its origin in an unconstitutional stretch of power on the part of the executive."  

Calhoun, however, was no pacifist. He wrote, "However much opposed to the declaration of war and the

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162 William Hope Hull to Howell Cobb, May 22, 1846, in *ibid.*, 79.  

163 E.A. O’Neal to George Smith Houston, May 25, 1846, George Smith Houston Papers, Duke University, Special Collections Department, William R. Perkins Library.  

164 John C. Calhoun to Wilson Lumpkin, December 13, 1846, John Caldwell Calhoun Papers, Duke University, Special Collections Department, William R. Perkins Library.
policy that led to it, I shall give my support to bring it to a speedy and satisfactory termination." In other words, his dissent had limits that were dictated, whether he realized it or not, by the culture of honor in which he lived. Thus in his February speech, he proposed a policy that rested in a middle ground between total disengagement and total war. Calhoun argued that the stated goals of the administration were to repel invasion, to establish the Rio Grande as the southern boundary of Texas, and to secure indemnity for the claims American citizens had against the Mexican Government. All three goals, he maintained, had been achieved. The first two through victories won by American arms and the final one because the United States now held land worth far more than the claim amount. He then proposed that the army withdraw to a defensive line. This, he said, would bring the war to an end "with the least sacrifice of men and money, and with the least hazard of disastrous consequences and loss of standing and reputation to the country." He too was concerned with protecting the honor of the country but differed with Polk and his supporters as to how this was to be achieved.

Calhoun’s “defensive line” speech generated immediate criticism from administration Democrats, for it cut against the grain of their interpretation of the war.

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165 Ibid. See also John C. Calhoun to James Edward Calhoun January 16, 1847, John Caldwell Calhoun Papers, Duke University, Special Collections Department, William R. Perkins Library.

166 For the text of Calhoun’s speech, see “Speech on the War with Mexico,” February 9, 1847, in Clyde N. Wilson and Shirley Bright Cook, eds., The Papers of John C. Calhoun, Volume XXIV, 1846-1847 (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1998), 115-33.

167 Ibid., 116.
A war in defense of honor demanded Mexican surrender, not American withdrawal, which looked like meek submission. In a style reminiscent of Democratic attacks on the Whigs, the *Mississippi Democrat*, asserted that Calhoun's plan must give comfort to Santa Anna and "will [if enacted] render hostilities interminable, with no prospect of peace."\(^\text{168}\) Faithless Mexico would respect no line drawn on a map, the *Democrat* continued, and must be thrashed into submission.\(^\text{169}\) In a similar manner, Alabama Democrat F. G. Norman reasoned:

Calhoun ... would fall back upon his "masterly inactivity" principle, and leave our arms to languish and perish under the influence of two or three fruitless and barren victories. Victories glorious and brilliant enough to be sure, but utterly fruitless as it regards the prime purposes of the War, indemnity for past injuries and respect and security for the future. Mexico herself will never respect us unless we now do, what I doubt not she expects us to do, whip her into terms, and the world will despise us for our inefficiency and will laugh to scorn our boasted prowess. There is as I conceive but two alternatives before us, one is to go ahead and do what we set out to do, and the other is ingloriously to retreat and sue for an inglorious and disgraceful peace, more disastrous in its consequences to us than a ten years war.\(^\text{170}\)

Another Alabamian, James E. Sanders, stated, "Mr. Calhoun's motions have failed to meet with the approbation of a large part of the chivalry here. The common sense of the

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\(^{168}\) *Mississippi Democrat* [Carrollton], March 3, 1847. See also, *Arkansas State Democrat* [Little Rock], February 26, 1847.

\(^{169}\) *Mississippi Democrat* [Carrollton], March 3, 1847.

\(^{170}\) F. G. Norman to George Smith Houston, February 22, 1847, George Smith Houston Papers, Duke University, Special Collections Department, William R. Perkins Library.
people will not let them."171 James Henry Hammond simply wrote, "Calhoun has cut his throat this time."172

By January 1848, the explosive sectional controversy over whether or not slavery would be allowed into any territory acquired from Mexico as an indemnity led Calhoun to believe that an immediate end to the war was essential for the continued health of the Republic. He also worried about growing sentiment to annex all of Mexico, a country inhabited by a race that he considered unsuited to republican government.173 In a January 4 speech, Calhoun complained that the president had yet to conquer an honorable peace and reiterated his defensive line plan.174 The line, of course, would be drawn well north of the most populous areas of Mexico. After almost two years of war, many southerners were now willing to at least discuss the merits of

171James E. Sanders to George Smith Houston, February 19, 1847, George Smith Houston Papers, Duke University, Special Collections Department, William R. Perkins Library.


174Congressional Globe, 30th Congress, 1st Session, 96-100.
Calhoun’s ideas and some shared his concerns. The reaction of administration supporters, however, was both immediate and belligerent. The editor of the *Wilmington Journal* spoke for many Democratic regulars when he argued:

we cannot for a moment believe that the withdrawal of our troops to a certain line would facilitate the object that Mr. C. aims at—peace. We are now in possession of a very large number of the principle fortresses of the enemy, and to retreat to a line would, in our opinion, not only protract the war, but it would evidently prevent us from reaping any other advantages which might be derived from a vigorous prosecution of the war until Mexico shall sue for peace. ... If Mexico will not treat for peace under the present circumstances, it is not likely she will appreciate the withdrawal of our troops as an act of magnanimous forbearance towards here.—Haughty, selfish, and obstinate, she would most probably construe our magnanimity into cowardice and inability to carry on the war. ... If the Mexicans won’t deal justly with us, we must make them feel the power of our mighty strength, and bring them to terms, by giving them a decent flogging, and keep it up until they appreciate the forbearance and magnanimity we have heretofore extended to them. ... We believe there are stout hearts enough in Congress to sustain the administration in a vigorous prosecution of the war. The Mexicans must be made to feel the terrors of an oppressive war. They have never yet felt our power. We have been entirely to lenient with them. They have not the soul to appreciate our kindness, and we must whip sense into them. Then we will have peace; and not before.

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175 See Lander, *Reluctant Imperialists*, 163; John C. Calhoun to Wilson Lumpkin, January 8, 1848, John Caldwell Calhoun Papers, Duke University, Special Collections Department, William R. Perkins Library; George McDuffie to Armistead Burt, January 13, 1848, George McDuffie Papers, Duke University, Special Collections Department, William R. Perkins Library; H. W. Conner to Armistead Burt, January 26, 1848, Armistead Burt Papers, Duke University, Special Collections Department, William R. Perkins Library; Paul Quattlebaum to Armistead Burt, February 14, 1848, Armistead Burt Papers, Duke University, Special Collections Department, William R. Perkins Library. Calhounite A. P. Butler supported the senior Senator from South Carolina in a January 17 speech in which he presented a modified version of Calhoun’s plan.

176 *Wilmington Journal* [North Carolina], January 14 1848.
Likewise, South Carolina Congressman and one-time Calhoun supporter A. D. Sims denounced Calhoun's defensive-line plan and called for "a vigorous prosecution" of the war. Fellow Carolinian James Henry Hammond also believed that Mexico still deserved "a thorough drubbing." A war fought in defense of honor, administration Democrats continued to argue in 1848, had to be waged to the bitter end. To them, Mexican submission was the only acceptable result.

The arrival of Trist's treaty in mid-February rendered discussion of Calhoun's plan moot. Like most southerners, Calhoun greeted its arrival in the Senate with approbation. He also correctly predicted its ratification. Back in South Carolina, Calhoun supporter H. H. Townes expressed a near universal sentiment "We are delighted that the Senate has ratified the treaty. ... Almost any treaty which will enable us to end the war would be a good one for the country." Similarly, an administration paper declared the treaty "honorable and satisfactory" evidence of Mexico's submission.

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177 Sims quoted in Lander, Reluctant Imperialists, 168.

178 Hammond quoted in ibid.

179 John C. Calhoun to Col A. P. Calhoun, February 23, 1848, John Caldwell Calhoun Papers, Duke University, Special Collections Department, William R. Perkins Library.

180 H. H. Townes to Armistead Burt, March 14, 1848, Armistead Burt Papers, Duke University, Special Collections Department, William R. Perkins Library.

181 Richmond Enquirer, March 13, 1848. See also, Arkansas State Democrat [Little Rock], March 3, 1848.
Although it pleased southerners that the Republic had manfully vindicated its honor in the war with Mexico before the eyes of the world, political issues raised by the war produced anxieties caused them to hope for an end to political and sectional acrimony. They looked for a leader who, like the Fathers of the Republic, embodied the republican values of virtue, honor, wisdom and disinterest to unite a nation torn by political conflict. The times, it seemed, called for an honorable republican statesman of the first order to guide the troubled ship of state. Fortunately, such a man, many believed, had been revealed on the battlefields of Monterrey and Buena Vista. That man was Zachary Taylor.
Chapter III

Washington Redux: Zachary Taylor in the Southern Imagination

THE GENIUS OF AMERICA, with modest pride, may come forward and say, "The centuries of the old world have gloried in their heroes and learned men: I may hope to profit by their example: Greece had a Solon, a Cimon and Epaminondas, and Aristides, and her Demosthenes: Rome in her ancient glory had her Caesars, a Vespasion, a Cato, and Cincinnatus—a Titus and a Cicero: And in modern days her Innocents, her Gregorys, and her Clements—Persia, her Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes: Arabia, her Mahomet: Macedon, her Phillip and Alexander: France, her Charlemaign, her Othos, her Henry 4th and Louis 14th: Spain her Charles 5th and her Gasca: Germany, her Joseph the 2nd: Prussia, her Frederick: Sweden, her Charles the 12th: And England, her Edwards and Henrys—her Newton, her Marlboro, her Chatham and her Wolfe:—Illustrious Names!—the envy and the emulation of the ambitious, or the wise; the boast of their countries; and in them be ye happy, if you can say of them as I can of mine—The deeds of his public and private life withstand the strictest scrutiny of the most jealous eye; and his integrity, like a mountain, repulses and overthrows suspicion: Uniformly just and proper—virtuously great and exceptionally good: A General, sublimely victorious, descending from the piety of human authority, to a private station,—and from a private station, unanimously elected the Sovereign of an enlightened, a free, and a jealous people, without opposition, without distrust, and without envy,—Such is my son: the true model for emulation, and a just example of future heroes. — Pennsylvania Gazette, March, 1791.

The great resemblance between Washington and Taylor, in many important features of character, has been the subject of frequent comment. In solid and practical wisdom—in the remarkable combination of courage and prudence—in self-possession amid the most agitating scenes—in stern determination when threatened by formidable difficulties—in moderation and humanity—Gen. Taylor exhibits a counterpart of the heroic character of the great founder of the American Republic. But the parallel does not stop here. Both have occupied the same position in regard to the Presidency—not courting it; in fact, preferring the quiet of domestic life to all the honors of Executive station, and only consenting to accept that station at the earnest, importunate and imperative call of the country. What a scorching satire is it upon the degeneracy of the times, and the decline of the primitive spirit of patriotism.—Jonesborough Whig and Independent Monitor, August 4, 1847.

In Natchez, the morning of Wednesday, December 22, 1847 dawned "beautiful, calm and clear—the skies were bright—the air balmy, and the sun shone in unclouded

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1 Portions of this chapter were presented at the Nineteenth Annual Mid-America Conference on History, Stillwater, Oklahoma, September 11-13, 1997.

brilliance.' At around eight o'clock, the steamboat *Natchez* glided gracefully to the landing at Natchez-under-the-Hill as she had innumerable times before. From the bluffs above, thirteen cannon, two of which were recently acquired trophies of war, belched forth a smoky welcome and marked this occasion as something special, for the *Natchez* bore the hero of the hour, General Zachary Taylor, to a reception that the city had prepared in his honor. Hundreds of excited citizens from the city and the surrounding counties pressed aboard the steamboat hoping "to obtain a hearty grasp of his hand and to behold his countenance." Some wore beautiful badges of sky blue satin engraved with an equestrian image of Old Rough and Ready and the mottoes "Major Gen. Zachary Taylor, the Hero of Fort Harrison, Palo Alto, Resaca de la Palma, Monterrey, Buena Vista" and "A little more grape. Capt. Bragg!" In time, the Committee of Reception and an honor guard composed of the Natchez Guards, Natchez Cadets, and the Adams Light Guards brought order to the proceedings and escorted the general and his companions, Major William Bliss and Captain Robert Garnett, up Main Street to the Institute Hall. Along the way exuberant onlookers who lined the street and filled every window cheered wildly. After touring the Institute, Taylor and his party

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3 *Semi-Weekly Natchez Courier*, December 24, 1847. The account of Old Rough and Ready's visit to Natchez is drawn from the December 24 issue of the *Courier* unless otherwise noted. For reports of the preparations for the reception of General Taylor, see the *Semi-Weekly Natchez Courier*, December 3, 10, 14, 16, 1847.

4 Two of the cannon were brought back to Natchez by Major General John Quitman as trophies of war. *Semi-Weekly Natchez Courier*, November 30, 1847.


6 For a description of the badges, see *ibid.*, December 3, 1847.
emerged and mounted a raised platform as five hundred students from the Natchez Free School serenaded the general with a triumphal ode. A young woman placed a wreath of flowers, the republican laurel of fame, on the old hero's head to the roaring applause of the crowd. The procession reformed and marched to the City Hotel where Mayor Stockman called for quiet and officially welcomed Old Rough and Ready to the city. The general responded in kind which elicited yet another rousing ovation from the assembled throng. Shortly thereafter, several members of the Committee of Reception conducted Taylor into the City Hotel where he held "levees" of citizens for several hours. Both "ladies and gentlemen" and "many an honest working man had an opportunity of taking him by the hand" and talking with him. At three o'clock the main event of the day took place, "a sumptuous banquet" complete with the requisite battery of toasts in honor of the city's guest. After the dinner, Taylor continued to meet with admiring citizens into the evening which he passed in specially prepared apartments in Mansion House. The next day at one in the afternoon, a large and enthusiastic crowd escorted the general to the city landing where he boarded the steamer Alhambra for the passage back to Baton Rouge. As the Alhambra pulled from shore, thousands cheered and the cannon on the bluff fired a final thunderous salute.

At first glance, Taylor's reception resembled those previously staged in Natchez to honor Jefferson Davis and his First Mississippi Regiment in June 1847, and John A. Quitman in November 1847. All featured large crowds, a parade, patriotic speeches,

7Ibid., December 24, 1847.

8Ibid.
and a dinner followed by laudatory toasts.\textsuperscript{9} During each reception citizens applauded the bravery and military exploits of the guests of honor, affirmed their heroes' status as honorable men and worthy citizens, and basked in the glory that their feats reflected upon the nation, the state, and the city.\textsuperscript{10} Although similar in these respects, the earlier receptions differed from the one honoring Taylor in meaningful ways. One observer noted the unequaled enthusiasm exhibited by the citizens of Natchez in “the heart-warm, throbbing welcome” for Taylor which distinguished “the proudest gala day ever known in our ancient city.”\textsuperscript{11} Indeed, an editor trumpeted, “the very Devil himself, turned out, in arms, to do him honor!”\textsuperscript{12} Of more significance than the fever pitch of excitement was the association of Old Rough and Ready with character traits that went beyond those that he exhibited on the battlefield. Shortly before the reception, John Anthony Quitman, a Democratic stalwart and a distinguished war hero in his own right, declared that “the private virtues, and the patriotism of General Taylor, … [deserved] the highest commendation of his countrymen, and [were] only, if at all, surpassed by his brilliant achievements as a military chief.”\textsuperscript{13} Mayor Stockman praised “the illustrious

\textsuperscript{9}For a description of the reception for Davis and the First Mississippi Regiment, see \textit{ibid.}, June 15, 1847; for John Quitman, see \textit{ibid.}, November 30, 1847.

\textsuperscript{10}It is interesting to note that some Mississippians attempted to claim Taylor as one of their own, a tenuous claim at best. See the article, “Gen. Taylor A Mississippian,” in \textit{ibid.}, November 5, 1847. For similar sentiments, see \textit{ibid.}, December 24, 1847.

\textsuperscript{11}\textit{ibid.}, December 24, 1847.

\textsuperscript{12}\textit{ibid.}

\textsuperscript{13}\textit{ibid.}, December 10, 1847.
hero, who has shed such undying lustre not only upon our military renown, but upon our civic national character."\textsuperscript{14} A toast raised during the formal dinner for Taylor maintained that "the love and gratitude of the American people are inexhaustible. They honor and revere in him the attributes that sanctify their veneration for Washington."\textsuperscript{15} Another toast asserted that, like Washington, "[h]e gained his victories in the field for his country and not for a party."\textsuperscript{16} Symbols, as well as words, clearly expressed the ideas that Zachary Taylor was not merely a victorious military chieftain and that he was worthy of association with George Washington, the most celebrated icon in the nation's pantheon of republican heroes. For instance, the site of the formal honorary dinner, the spacious dining room at the City Hotel, "was handsomely decorated with flags and with portraits of the Father of his Country and of the distinguished guest."\textsuperscript{17} These exceptional characteristics of the Natchez celebration for Taylor suggest that important differences existed in citizens' perceptions of their honored guest as well. Where Jefferson Davis, John A. Quitman, and other Mississippi volunteers were viewed as worthy stewards of the military and patriotic legacy bequeathed to them by their Revolutionary fathers, Zachary Taylor represented more—he was the living

\textsuperscript{14}Ibid., December 24, 1847.

\textsuperscript{15}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{16}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{17}Ibid.
embodiment of older Revolutionary virtues. Taylor was extraordinary in this respect. Contemporaries believed that all heroes of the Mexican War were praiseworthy and honorable men, but they were still men of the present age, an age when the values and the creative achievements of the Founders were increasingly viewed as being under siege. Self-interest, it seemed, now dominated the nation’s social and political life.

Taylor stood first among the heroes of the Mexican War then, not because he was more valiant in battle or more patriotic, but because, as one resident of Natchez commented after meeting Old Rough and Ready, he appeared “somewhat out of conceit with the

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Johannsen argues that the opportunity to serve in the Mexican War linked the volunteers to their Revolutionary forefathers and provided the country with a new stock of heroes. Like Johannsen, Eubank argues that the opportunity to defend one’s country offered Kentuckians the chance to “link themselves to their heroic ancestors.” (Eubank, 68) Furthermore, Johannsen emphasizes that the hero-worship of the Republic’s warriors strengthened the confidence of the citizenry in themselves as a nation; put another way, the heroes of the Mexican War proved that the nation was worthy of its forefathers. Many Americans undoubtedly thought that the American heroes of the Mexican War proved that their generation were worthy stewards of the Revolutionary inheritance. Underneath the celebrations and hero-worship, however, there also rested ever increasing doubts about the perpetuity of the Republic. The equation of Taylor with Washington, then, also served other roles during the increasingly late 1840s. To many, Taylor’s image as a ‘throwback’ to the legendary age of the Founders reproached the self-interested generation of his day and served as a pillar of stability in an increasingly tempestuous political climate.
railroad 'progressiveness' of the present age.'" In short, Old Zack embodied time-honored values that contemporaries believed were in woefully short supply.

The citizenry of Natchez was not alone in their adulation of Zachary Taylor. Indeed, a visit by Old Rough and Ready to any town was a cause for celebration during the period between his return from Mexico and his inauguration as president in 1848. New Orleans, Baton Rouge, and Donaldsonville in Louisiana staged memorable celebrations honoring the hero upon his return from Mexico in December 1847. Festive receptions also marked the president-elect's journey to Washington for his inauguration in 1848. Jubilant swarms of well-wishers greeted the general at every stop—at Vicksburg, Memphis, Nashville, Louisville, Frankfort, Wheeling, and smaller towns along his route to the capital city. But Old Zack need not be present for citizens to stage public galas in his honor. Across the South, citizens built bonfires, participated in parades, and held public meetings and dinners to celebrate the achievements and virtues of the idol of the hour. Publishers capitalized on the popular lust for images of, and information about, the quintessential American hero of the Mexican War by printing a flood of books, pamphlets, newspaper and magazine articles, engravings, songs, and plays which described, both literally and figuratively, the actions and character of the general. On a more prosaic level, Zachary Taylor vied with George Washington as the

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19 Semi-Weekly Natchez Courier, December 14, 1847.

most popular subject for designers of whiskey bottles.21 Citizens named their counties, towns, and children in his honor.22 College boys translated “Rough and Ready” into the Latin, *durus et semper paratus*.23 At various times, members of both political parties and self-proclaimed independents proposed the general as a candidate for president without consulting him or even possessing knowledge of his political inclinations. All of these are popular reflections of Taylor’s heroic standing. Closer examination of these manifestations of public esteem reveals much about how southerners perceived Zachary Taylor and, by implication, much about themselves.

Through organized communal events, printed media, even private letters and stories, southerners, and other Americans too for that matter, created what may best be

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described as a “mythical” Zachary Taylor.\textsuperscript{24} Fact, exaggeration, and, to a lesser extent, falsehood mixed in the southern imagination where Old Rough and Ready was concerned. Historian Marcus Cunliffe has argued that Americans constructed an image of George Washington in which the great man’s “real merits were enlarged and distorted into unreal attitudes.”\textsuperscript{25} The same may be said of the popular perception of Zachary Taylor in the South. Both the “historical” Zachary Taylor and George Washington deserved admiration for they possessed many praiseworthy qualities, but the minds-eye image that contemporaries created of both men more aptly expressed the convictions and virtues that Americans held most dear than an accurate portrayal of either hero.

\textsuperscript{24}A definition of the concepts of “myth,” “symbol, and “tradition” as I use them here seems in order. According to historian Henry Nash Smith, myth and symbol are words used “to designate larger and smaller units of the same kind of thing, namely an intellectual construction that fuses concept and emotion into an image.” Myths and symbols need not accurately reflect empirical fact; indeed, “they exist on a different plane.” The symbols and myths that I discuss here are, like Nash’s, “collective representations rather than the products of a single mind.” (Henry Nash Smith, \textit{Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth} (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1950), vii.) Myths and symbols are the building blocks, so to speak, of tradition. As such, myths and symbols often overlap with tradition. The major difference between the concepts is that traditions require transmission, usually by word of mouth or practice, from generation to generation, whereas a myth and a symbol can have a meaning specific to a time and place. See also, Paul K. Longmore, \textit{The Invention of George Washington} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), ix, 202-11, \textit{passim}. For an in-depth discussion of the meaning and differences between myth and tradition in an American context, see Michael Kammen, \textit{Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture} (New York: Knopf, 1991), 25-32, \textit{passim}.

As is the case with such ethereal things as the mind of the South, little is sharply distinct. This does not mean, however, that there was not a discernable pattern in southerners' conception of the heroic image of Zachary Taylor. Indeed, by 1848 a coherent impression of what kind of man Zachary Taylor was had developed in the South. Just what that image was, what it meant, why it arose, and why it passed away when it did compose the themes of this chapter. The conventional interpretation advanced by historians is that southerners came to view Taylor, a slaveholder and fellow southerner, as both a military hero and a defender of the rights of the South, that Taylor was, in the words of one historian, a "Slavepower warrior." Taylor, so the argument goes, was able to win the presidential election in 1848 because of his broad appeal as a military hero and his sectional appeal as a "pro-slavery" candidate in the South. Thus Taylor's road to the presidency mirrors the growing sectional political divides so apparent following the proposal of the Wilmot Proviso of 1846. But to view the phenomenon of Zachary Taylor's rise to heroic and political prominence only in the


27For an alternative view, see Michael F. Holt, "Winding Roads to Recovery: The Whig Party from 1844 to 1848" in idem, Political Parties and American Political Development from the Age of Jackson to the Age of Lincoln (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), 192-236. Holt argues that Taylor's nomination by the Whigs did not represent a wholesale abandonment of traditional Whig political principles.
light of a sectional conflict that we know ended in civil war is to ignore an important part of the story. The fact that many southerners, and Americans in general, chose to compare Zachary Taylor favorably with the Father of the Republic bears more significance than is generally granted by historians. Taylor stood for more than just martial heroism or slaveholders’ interests. As Kentuckian John C. Breckinridge put it in 1847, “Zachary Taylor ... [is] a model of true greatness.” Of course, not all white southerners viewed Zachary Taylor as a model American hero. Indeed, the very idea of a singular southern image of Zachary Taylor, much less “a mind of the South,” can only exist in the imagination. Nor was the heroic image of Zachary Taylor an exclusive product of the South. A regional focus, however, may reveal aspects of Taylor’s image that might otherwise be overlooked. In addition, viewing the “mythical” Taylor from the South, as it were, presents an interesting avenue toward understanding important aspects of the way that southerners viewed their world in the late 1840s. Taylor could and did represent different things to different people, depending upon which elements of the image attracted them most. Indeed, white southerners of all political persuasions and social statuses found Zachary Taylor such an appealing icon precisely because the mythic image of the man contained a host of meanings which resonated on many levels.

What made Zachary Taylor unique in the pantheon of American heroes of the Mexican War was the portrayal of him as a paragon of republican virtue, a throwback to

the golden age of the Republic—George Washington returned. As Robert W. Johannsen has argued, “it was to George Washington that Taylor was most often compared. Their lives, it was said, were parallel, their characteristics similar; indeed, to his generation Taylor seemed the ‘inheritor’ of Washington’s virtues.”

In equating Taylor with Washington, southerners grafted Zachary Taylor onto a widely known and accepted model of heroic leadership. Many agreed with Louisiana Senator Solomon Downs that Taylor was both a hero and a statesman cast in the mold of “the first and the greatest of his predecessors,” George Washington. Southerners regularly compared Zachary Taylor to Washington, the copybook hero of their youth. Just as often, however, the relationship between Old Rough and Ready and the American Cincinnatus rested on an unspoken level, communicated with symbols and allusions. In either case, the virtues that southerners attributed to Taylor were those they revered in the traditional image of Washington.

The mythical Taylor that southerners constructed did not exist in a vacuum, nor did the image arise when it did by accident. The attribution of the virtues of Washington to Taylor served a real social purpose in the late-1840s. According to historian Michael Kammen, Americans tend to use the Washington image most often during moments of “historical indirection,” which are “critical or transitional times in

29 Johannsen, To the Halls of the Montezumas, 115.

American life” when “national values ... [need] to be defined or redefined.” The period from 1846, when Taylor burst into the nation’s consciousness, to 1850, when he died in office, was just such a period of crisis. A rising tide of sectional acrimony that hindsight tells us led to a cataclysmic civil war characterized the 1840s and 1850s. That southerners associated Washington with Old Rough and Ready suggests that many perceived the need for a hero who embodied the values of disinterested republicanism. It should not surprise us that southerners chose to create and follow a modern day Cincinnatus for their historical memory provided them with a time-honored model of heroic leadership which comforted them during the crisis in national affairs that confronted them. A return to the founding values of the Republic seemed to provide an answer to the sectional strife that afflicted the nation during the late 1840s. Put another way, southerners perceived that they needed a heroic republican statesman, a man above interest and party, a Washington, to guide them through both their country’s and their section’s time of trial.

As a symbol of unity and stability, Zachary Taylor differed from the greatest military hero turned politician in the nation’s recent past, Andrew Jackson. Although his fame was sometimes compared with Jackson’s, Taylor’s personality was not equated in any meaningful way with that of Old Hickory. Both men were, as one newspaper put it, “men of action.” Like Jackson’s, Taylor’s mannerisms also

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33 *Richmond Whig*, March 1, 1848.
reflected the democratic bent of mid-century America. Because of his controversial political career, however, Jackson became a hero of another stripe. One cannot, for example, imagine Jackson's presidential campaigns or administration without an opponent, be it an idea like aristocracy or privilege, or an entity like the Bank of the United States. In contrast, Zachary Taylor, like Washington, was a symbol of unity, not interest. Many expected a Taylor administration to reconcile competing interest groups rather than represent one group of citizens in a struggle against another. Citizens perceived that corruption was the enemy against which both Taylor and Jackson were fighting. For Jackson however, corruption had a face and a name. Taylor on the other hand stood, in part, for a call to arms against a faceless degradation of the virtue of America herself.

Few southerners chose to view either Old Rough and Ready or Washington in either an exclusively national or sectional context. Loyalties need not conflict; they frequently reinforce each other. Indeed, both Washington and Zachary Taylor were the exclusive property of neither the section nor the nation. The perfect republican statesman, be he Washington or Taylor, was expected to be able to reconcile the interests of all parts of the Union through disinterested, just, and wise leadership. Like

34My thoughts on the interaction of nationalism and sectionalism have been deeply influenced by the writings of David Potter. In my view, one of Potter's most profound points is that historians need not judge loyalties as necessarily in conflict. Southerners could and did perceive themselves as Americans, southerners, and as citizens of their respective communities. Only when their interests appeared to diverge beyond all reconciliation from those of their brethren to the North did southerners break away from the Union. Even then in their minds, they were reaffirming what it meant to be an American. See David Potter, The South and the Sectional Conflict (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1968); David Potter, The Impending Crisis, 1848-1861.
Washington during his second term, Taylor would be unable to live up to such lofty and idealistic expectations. Southerners did judge Taylor a friend to their specific interests, but not necessarily because he was a fellow southerner and slave-owner. Taylor never committed himself openly to a pro-southern course of action before his election. In his role as a true republican statesman, however, many southerners expected Taylor to recognize the justice of their argument and then harmonize the dissenting voices of other sections with his actions in support of the southern position. Ironically, Taylor failed to endorse a “southern” stance precisely because he was a republican leader of the old school, a man who chose the interests of the whole over those of the few. In the increasingly radical political environment that the sectional conflict over the territories engendered, a “nation-first” stance could not be held. Even the most moderate southerners now demanded tangible concessions in return for an acquiescence to the admission of new free soil states carved from the territory acquired from Mexico. Taylor, however, would uncompromisingly defend his own plan for dealing with the divisive territorial issue. In doing so, he disappointed southerners’ expectations and shook their faith in the model of republican leadership that he represented. Hereafter, southerners would demand assurances from both their national parties and political leaders that they would defend the section’s interests first, rather than put their trust in resurrected national republican icons from their past.

“The present war,” observed one biographer of Zachary Taylor in 1847, “has … developed the fact that the people of this country have lost none of their ancient
predilection for the sturdy race of heroes." Indeed, the Mexican War occurred during what one scholar has characterized as "a century of hero-worship." Thomas Carlyle's *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* took the nation by storm in the early 1840's, evidencing the popularity of the subject matter. From Sir Walter Scott's Ivanhoe to Cooper's Leatherstocking, heroes also populated the romantic literature of the age. Few could avoid being caught up in the national mania for heroes. Although the last of the Founders had passed away long before the Mexican War, popular histories and patriotic celebrations served to keep the memory of the heroic age of the American Republic fresh and engendered a sense of nationalism and of pride in the nation. Through textbooks, the heroes of the Revolution, especially Washington, served as moral exemplars for the nation's children. The emphasis on the heroic heritage of the nation led to what one scholar has called "the personalization of history," the intimate connection that Americans felt with the heroes of their collective

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35 John Frost, *Life of Major General Zachary Taylor; with notices of the war in New Mexico, California, and in Southern Mexico; and biographical sketches of officers who have distinguished themselves in the war with Mexico* (New York: D. Appleton, 1847; Philadelphia: G. S. Appleton, 1847), 4.


past. This connection was far from passive. Citizens were expected to live up to the deeds and virtues of the heroic Founding generation. An author in a southern magazine explained that a true patriot “views the deeds of ‘the fathers’ as examples for imitation, as well as subjects for exaltation.” Because Americans were sure that the country was founded by heroes, the pursuit of immortal fame through heroic actions on behalf of the nation constituted a laudable ambition. “The consequence of this universal struggle for distinction is an unusual harvest of great men,” wrote one essayist in the *Southern Literary Messenger* in 1848. So prevalent was the nation’s obsession with the heroes and the heroic that one southern minister worried that Americans’ predilection for “this

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In discussing the character of Alexander Hamilton in the *Southern Literary Messenger*, J. G. Balwin, author of *Flush Times in Alabama*, felt the need to defend his subject from the charge of ambition. His argument supports the point that I’ve made here, that ambition, as long as it served the common good rather than self-interest, was a virtue. “His [Hamilton’s] ambition was a noble passion for glory: it was not a vulgar itching for temporary applause, nor a feverous thirst for power. He had a high ideal of true greatness and true fame, and a just and discriminating appreciation for his own capacity. He aspired to a name which should descend brighter down the stream of generations, which should entwine itself with the lettered glories of a free commonwealth.” J. G. Baldwin, “The Genius and Character of Alexander Hamilton,” *Southern Literary Messenger*, Vol. XXII no.5 (May 1856): 379. For similar sentiments, see Robert Saunders, “Baccalaureate Address: Delivered to the graduates of William and Mary College, in the College Chapel, 4th July, 1846,” *Southern Literary Messenger*, Vol. XII no. 9:9 (1846): 542.


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modern apotheosis of individuals" might provoke God's wrath because it attributed to
the flesh that which only Providence could bestow.43 Others worried that the
proliferation of heroes might diminish the meaning of the word. A southern pessimist
lamented in 1848 that "to be a hero is a very common affair—indeed, nothing but the
sublimation of simple rowdyism" and consequently "our galaxy of great men is
obscured."44 But most southerners, and other Americans too, were optimistic about the
bumper crop of heroes that the war with Mexico produced. Heroes, it seemed, were just
what the nation needed.

Just what is a hero? Although simply posed, the question is less easily answered
for it is in the realm of emotion that heroes are created. The transformation of any man
into a hero defies conclusive documentary explanation. We can outline the career of
the would-be hero. We can carefully describe how people lauded the hero in print, in
ceremony, and in person. We can trace the changes in the way that authors, editors, and
artists portrayed him. But the intensity of the feeling of the people of the time eludes
us. For example, heartfelt affection for Old Rough and Ready, rather than any profound
analytical insight into the state of the nation and a corresponding need for heroic
leadership, produced the raucous celebrations in Natchez and New Orleans in 1847. In
hindsight, the enthusiasm of the revelers seems somehow hollow. We can imagine the

43 A. B. Van Zandt, God's Voice to the Nation. A Sermon occasioned by the
death of Zachary Taylor, President of the United States. By Rev. A. B. Van Zandt,
Pastor of the Tabb Street Presbyterian Church, Petersburg, VA. (Petersburg, VA: J. A.
Gray, 1850), 14.

44 "J. B. D., "On the Causes of the Remarkable Increase of Great Men in this
Country, ...," 213.
cheers, the sound and smoke of the artillery salutes, and the enthusiasm of the crowd, but the emotion that drove people into an excited frenzy at the sight of General Taylor is lost to us. Nevertheless, a hero may best be understood as a human symbol of treasured virtues or concepts. Or, as one speaker at a Fourth of July celebration put it in 1855, "there are names of men ... which suggest to us ideas, in which the original terms are lost, or remembered only as incarnations, or embodiments of principles."^45

The meaning of the word hero depended, in the past as now, upon the context in which it was used. One thing seems clear. A hero was a man of action. The hero's actions did not necessarily require physical prowess; feats of intellectual courage or innovation could also be considered heroic. Indeed, although Noah Webster's 1852 *American Dictionary of the English Language* affirmed that "hero" most commonly meant a physically courageous man—"a man of distinguished valor, intrepidity, or enterprise in danger; as, a hero in arms"—the dictionary also asserted that a man of learned achievements may be accorded heroic qualities—"a great illustrious, extraordinary person; as, a hero in learning. (Little Used)."^46 An after-dinner conversation between Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton in 1791 perhaps best puts these nuances in the meaning of the word in the proper context. Jefferson, arguably the archetypical American son of the Age of Reason, reports that:

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The room being hung around with a collection of portraits of remarkable men, among them those of Bacon, Newton, and Locke. Hamilton asked me who they were. I told him they were my *trinity* of the *three greatest men* the world had ever produced. ... He [Hamilton] paused for some time. "The greatest man," he said, "that ever lived, was Julius Caesar."  

Jefferson would later ascribe this incident as evidence of Hamilton's dark designs to subvert the Republic, as Caesar did Republican Rome. Hamilton, however, reflected the more colloquial belief that heroes were men of physical as well as mental action. A southern author seconded Hamilton's assessment in 1848 when he wrote that "the valor of the hour ... may create such a fame, as its lustre will obscure, if not quench, all mere intellectual stars." Of course, the greatest of men possessed prodigious mental faculties and also engaged themselves in the public affairs of their times.

The most popular and influential theorist on the meaning and nature of heroism of the 1840's understood that great men combined intellectual prowess with an undeniable charisma that made them the leaders of their times. "Few writers of the age have taken a stronger hold on the public mind than [Thomas] Carlyle," proclaimed an essayist in the *Southern Quarterly Review* in 1848. Carlyle was a particularly important influence on southern intellectuals. The Scottish romantic's *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*, which appeared in 1841, exerted particular

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47 Quoted in Adair, *Fame and the Founding Fathers*, 13.


influence on many southerners' ideas about the nature of the hero. To Carlyle, the soul of history was the story of the great men who have lived and achieved exceptional things. Be he poet, prophet, general or king, Carlyle's hero rose to prominence, not because of distinguished birth or mere happenstance, but because nature had endowed him with true genius, a special insight into the direction that history would take. Only nature could endow a hero with the gift of genius, hence a hero was born, rather than created through any action of his own. It remained, however, for the would-be hero to develop his natural gifts through discipline and industry, or as Carlyle put it, "the Faculty to do." Echoing this sentiment, one southern literary journal trumpeted, "Genius and talent are the gifts of nature; to direct the one and cultivate the other, are


more properly the province of man. Upon the later depends their utility.”52 Thus armed
by nature with extraordinary gifts and a formidable work ethic, the hero confidently
acted to change the status quo. Carlyle measured the naturally charismatic leader,
variously called “the Commander over Men,” “King,” “Able-man,” or “Great Man,” as
the personification of the ultimate form of heroism.

[H]e to whose will our wills are to be subordinated, and loyally
surrender themselves, and find welfare in doing so, may be reckoned the
most important of Great Men. He is practically the summary for us of all
the various figures of Heroism; Priest, Teacher, whatsoever of earthly or
spiritual dignity we can fancy to reside in a man, embodies itself here, to
command over us, to furnish us with constant practical teaching, to tell
us for the day and hour what we are to do.53

The great man was a man of action and harbinger of the future, but he needed followers
to advance history. Only though diligent work and communion with nature could the
sincere hero be distinguished from the false. But once discovered, Carlyle’s message
was clear—the duty of less endowed contemporaries was hero-worship, “a searching out
of the good and great, and making them rulers of men.”54 For if one “found in any
country the Ablest Man that exists there; and raise[d] him to the supreme place, and
loyally reverence[d] him: you have a perfect government for that country.”55


54“Carlyle’s Works,” 86. See also, Carlyle, On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the
Heroic in History, 226.

Carlyle’s ideas reinforced southerners’ belief in the existence of a natural social hierarchy and also seemed ideally suited to the American Republic and the times. “Society,” as one essayist put it in 1848, “resembles a pyramid which is broad at the base, but gradually lessens as we approach the top, until one man crowns the summit. This is as true in life as it is unalterable in nature.”\textsuperscript{56} An author in the \textit{Southern Literary Messenger} was paraphrasing Carlyle when he asserted that “To be born great … is the destiny only of the gifted few. … Such men, instinctively, assume their natural position in society, and to obstruct their rise, were as vain an effort, as an attempt to fetter the expansive energies of the atmosphere.”\textsuperscript{57} In 1860 another southern writer put it more succinctly, “Man is naturally a hero-worshiper. We instinctively turn to a man who has the qualities of a leader.”\textsuperscript{58} To southerners, a hero should reside at the pinnacle of society to assure the preservation of republican liberty. “To a true republican,” argued one southern author:

\begin{quote}
the worship of the great, and good, and true, is a necessary requisite. In it chiefly consists the safety of his republican institutions, where the road
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{56}“Instability of Public Opinion,” \textit{Southern Literary Messenger}, Vol. XIV no. 6 (June 1848): 381.


\textsuperscript{58}“Procrustes Junior,” “Great Men, A Misfortune,” \textit{Southern Literary Messenger}, Vol. XXX no. 4 (April 1860): 310. Although acknowledging that Carlyle’s fundamental premise is correct, the author went on to praise “greatness of mind … [as] a kingly quality,” but lamented that it “produces slavishness of mind, and true abasement of spirit in others.” (Pg. 310) He encouraged his readers to think for themselves and advocated governance “by men of moderate powers, the first principle in governing being to see that you do no harm.” (Pg. 314) On the eve of civil war, it is clear that this gentleman had had quite enough of the nation’s contemporary “great men.”
to promotion is open to all. What other protection has he against the attacks of opponents, or the imbecility of incompetent friends? All must depend on the capacity of distinguishing merit, and elevating it to the guardianship of the many. The doctrine is altogether republican. In no other government can it have full sweep.59

Just as important for the continued existence of republican government however was a well-ordered social hierarchy arrayed beneath the great man. An editorialist in the *Southern Quarterly Review* suggested as much in 1850 when he wrote that “it is our firm conviction, that republican institutions can never be permanent unless slavery exists as a substrate of society.”60

Of course, one can be too dogmatic in assessing Carlyle’s influence on the South. Despite the popularity of Carlyle’s book in the region, the South was not inhabited with legions of Carlylian hero-worshipers. Although widely read, his ideas were often misunderstood. One southern critic described the finer points of Carlyle’s philosophy as “so abstract as to be unintelligible to the mass, and doubtful and semi-opaque to the few.”61 Another observed that, “To the careless reader, his works are apt to appear inmethodic, confused, nay, mere Sphinx enigmas.”62 Carlyle’s charismatic heroes were revolutionaries who overthrew traditional norms and replaced them with new ones thereby advancing the history of the world in an inevitable rhythm of


61 “Carlyle and Macaulay,” 476.

62 “Carlyle’s Works,” 98.
progress. Southerners' heroes, on the other hand, tended to be conservative ones, the defenders of traditional rights, values, and ideas.\textsuperscript{63} For example, southerners viewed the Revolution essentially as a movement to preserve threatened political liberty, rather than to create any radically new social order.\textsuperscript{64} Hence the bumper crop of heroes that this event produced and especially its foremost hero, George Washington, were viewed as orthodox defenders of an imperiled faith. Despite these qualifications, the fact remains that Carlyle's basic ideas—that true heroes are born, not made, and that the duty of man was to "worship" them—held broad appeal in the region.

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\textsuperscript{63}Carlyle's construction of the hero resembles that of Max Weber's "charismatic" hero. American heroes, especially antebellum Americans' greatest hero George Washington, tend to more closely resemble Weber's "patriarchal" hero. On Americans' conception of George Washington as a patriarchal rather than a charismatic hero, see Barry Schwartz, \textit{George Washington: The Making of an American Symbol}, 13, 44, 121, 193, \textit{passim}. For Weber's discussion of charismatic and patriarchal heroes, see Max Weber, \textit{Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology}, eds. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich, trans. Ephraim Fischhoff, Hans Gerth, et al., 3 vols. (New York: Bedminster Press, 1968), 1:241-5, 3:1111-9. "The patriarch benefits from devotion and authority as the bearer of norms, with the difference that these norms are not purposely established as are the laws and regulations of bureaucracy, but have been made inviolable from times out of mind. The bearer of charisma enjoys loyalty and authority by virtue of a mission believed to be embodied in him; this mission has not necessarily and not always been revolutionary, but in its most charismatic forms it has inverted all value hierarchies and overthrown custom, law and tradition. In contrast to the charismatic structure that arises out of the anxiety and enthusiasm of an extraordinary situation, patriarchal power serves the demands of everyday life and persists in its function, as everyday life itself, in spite of all changes of its concrete holder and environment." (Weber, 3:1117)
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\textsuperscript{64}On antebellum southerners' perception of the American Revolution as a conservative movement, see William Cabell Rives, "Discourse on the Uses and Importance of History, Illustrated by a Comparison of the American and French Revolutions, Delivered Before the Historical Department of the Society of the Alumni of the University of Virginia, 29\textsuperscript{th} June, 1847," reprinted in the \textit{Richmond Whig}, July 9, 1847.
\end{flushright}
Some heroes scored higher on an imagined ladder of heroic fame than others.\(^6\)\(^5\) For Thomas Carlyle, Oliver Cromwell represented the acme of heroic leadership. For Carlyle’s contemporaries in America however, George Washington was, as an article in the *Southern Literary Messenger* crowed in 1855, “the greatest of them all in all the elements of true good greatness.”\(^6\)\(^6\) Washington biographer Jared Sparks shared this sentiment; “the title of great man ought to be reserved for him, who cannot be charged with an indiscretion or a vice, who spent his life in establishing the independence, the glory, and the durable prosperity of his country, who succeeded in all that he undertook, and whose successes were never won at the expense of honor, justice, integrity, or by the sacrifice of a single principle.”\(^6\)\(^7\) Lonely indeed was the American who did not know who the most sublime of his countrymen was. Americans, claimed a Virginian in 1855, regarded George Washington with “an esteem and veneration such as no mortal man had ever awakened in us before.”\(^6\)\(^8\) There were other American heroes to be sure, but few merited comparison to the Founding Father of the American Republic. Little wonder when the man was frequently described in terms like these used in a toast at a

\(^{65}\)On notions on different degrees of heroic fame, see Adair, *Fame and the Founding Fathers*, 13-21; Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*, passim.

\(^{66}\)Burrows, “Address Before the Mount Vernon Association, July 4\(^{th}\), 1855,” 515-6. For Cromwell and Washington compared, see *Richmond Whig*, March 1, 1848.


Fourth of July dinner in Richmond: “The immortal Memory of George Washington: The light of his age, the pride of his country, and the glory of his species. The world never looked upon his equal, and never will behold his superior.”

George Washington’s indispensable role in the creation of the Republic assured that Americans would apotheosize him upon his death in 1799. By the 1840s, the

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69 Richmond Whig, July 13, 1847. See also, Richmond Whig, July 16, 1847; Richmond Enquirer, July 19, 1847; “To Whom Does Washington’s Glory Belong?” Southern Literary Messenger, IX no.10 (October, 1843): 588-9.


The works cited above constitute only a small sampling of the extensive literature on this subject. According to Barry Schwartz, “scores of Washington biographies have been written. The periodic literature is even more voluminous: Approximately 850 articles on Washington have been published since 1900 [as of 1987].” (Schwartz, George Washington, 211 (note 8).)

I have been particularly influenced in my thinking on Washington as a symbol by the work of Barry Schwartz. My conclusions on the symbolic significance of Taylor agree with many of Schwartz’s on Washington, although there are, of course, limits to which one may take the comparison of the two. See Schwartz, George Washington;
Founding Father had passed even further into legend. Through oratory and innumerable works of art, poetry, drama, fiction, and biography, Washington assumed a godlike status in American thought and culture.\(^7\) Stories and readers placed the image of the Father of the Country foremost in the recollections and associations of American youth; Washington, they informed them, was born with "an instinct of greatness" and lived his youth "as if it was intended for the eyes of the world."\(^7\) The Washington that Americans knew was no mere man; he was instead, as author James K. Paulding wrote in his *Life of Washington* in 1835, "the great landmark of his country; the pillar on which is recorded her claim to an equality with the illustrious nations of

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the world; the example to all succeeding generations." In a similar vein, Catherine Maria Sedgewick, the author of *The Linwoods*, confessed in 1835 that "whenever the writer has mentioned Washington, she has felt a sentiment resembling the awe of the pious Israelite when he approached the ark of the Lord." Antebellum Americans revered the memory of Washington in stone as well as with words. States and cities had no problem in displaying their reverence for Washington including the 1821 statue by Antonio Canova in Raleigh, a column erected in Baltimore in 1829, and a colossal equestrian statue in Richmond. In 1848, the Louisiana legislature approved a resolution to commission a statue of the Founding Father. On the Fourth of July, 1848, Americans consecrated the cornerstone of the Washington Monument in the nation's capital. A movement to preserve Mount Vernon as "the Mecca of Republicanism" swept over the nation in the 1850s. By the time of the Mexican War, Washington, *the* American hero, had long since overwhelmed Washington the man.

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76 Acts Passed at the Extra Session of the Second Legislature of the State of Louisiana, Held and Begun in the City of New Orleans, on the 4th Day of December, 1848 (New Orleans: Office of the Louisiana Courier, 1848), 46.

77 Kennedy, "Mount Vernon—A Pilgrimage," 53.
The mythic Washington was fraught with paradox. He was a national icon in a country whose professed republican ideals should have made it uncomfortable with the very idea of icons. Nevertheless, Washington’s image embodied those values that republican America most admired in itself. In a sense, Washington symbolized the nation and its citizens as Americans thought they should be. Americans, argued Beverley Wellford in a speech to a Mount Vernon preservation society, “came early to associate some of the best and purest feelings of our nature with the character and conduct of this our great countryman.” Thus, the copybook version of Washington’s character served as a well-known primer of both personal and political behavior. A participant at a Fourth of July celebration at Buchanan’s Springs, Virginia in 1850 advised his fellow merrymakers that the surest way to achieve “immortality [was to] imitate his virtues.” In a similar manner when Robert Saunders advised the graduating class of the College of William and Mary in 1846 to “establish an ideal of perfection, strive to approach it,” no one in his audience needed to be reminded of who the paragon of human perfection was. The imagined flawlessness of Washington’s character, however, set him apart even as it formed the basis of his renown. By becoming a symbol of republican perfection, the imitation of Washington’s character became an unattainable goal for any ordinary American. An author in the Southern

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78 Wellford, “Address Delivered Before the Ladies’ Mount Vernon Association, July 4, 1855,” 566.

79 Richmond Enquirer, July 9, 1850. Italics added by the author for emphasis. See also, Richmond Whig, July 16, 1847.

80 Saunders, “Baccalaureate Address: Delivered to the graduates of William and Mary College, in the College Chapel, 4th July, 1846,” 543.
Literary Messenger in 1860 wrote that “Washington ... stands serene and preeminent, unapproached and unequaled. ... He is, indeed, inimitable.”\textsuperscript{81} So awesome and untouchable had the legend of Washington become by the late antebellum period that for some it grew into, as Marcus Cunliffe so aptly puts it, “a myth of suffocating dullness, the victim of civic elephantiasis.”\textsuperscript{82} Regardless, most antebellum Americans continued to recite the catechism of republican citizenship as embodied in the mythic Father of the Republic.\textsuperscript{83}

Americans were convinced that Washington’s virtuous character accounted for his rise to fame. “Through ... his character [Washington] rose constantly in majesty, until he stood—as he now stands—the model of the perfect man and patriot for all ages,” wrote a literary critic in the Southern Quarterly Review in 1849.\textsuperscript{84} An author in a southern magazine in 1835 listed the personal traits for which the Founding Father was acclaimed in a style typical of the times:

His high sense of moral worth, and lofty aspirations of conscious greatness, looking out from behind the veil of genuine modesty and humility with which he delighted to shroud himself: the chivalrous and daring spirit ever champing on the curb of prudence, but never impatiently straining against it: the native fierceness of his temper, occasionally flashing through his habitual moderation and self-command; the promptitude and clearness of his conceptions, so modestly suggested, so patiently revised, so calmly reconsidered in all the intervals of action; all these qualities combined and harmonized by

\textsuperscript{81}“Procrustes Junior,” “Great Men, a Misfortune,”313.

\textsuperscript{82}Cunliffe, George Washington, 13.

\textsuperscript{83}Bryan, George Washington in American Literature, 1775-1865, 234-36.

\textsuperscript{84}“The Writings of George Washington ...,” Southern Quarterly Review Vol. 15 no. 29 (April 1849): 253.
honor, integrity, and a scrupulous regard to all the duties of public and private life; all made "to drink into one spirit" all "members, everyone of them in the same body," all working to the same end; diverse yet congruous.85

To these virtues most would have added piety, for, as one biographer put it, Washington "uniformly ascribed his successes to the beneficent agency of the Supreme Being."86 Washington was a model gentleman as the term was then understood—"He is not 'the man of birth,' but the man who is raised above the vulgar by his conduct and his manners."87 Americans' reverence for Washington's simple virtues of public-mindedness, moderation, firmness, and piety also stood as a testament to those attributes that they wished to avoid—self-indulgence, ambition, excess, licentiousness, and religious indifference.88 The mythic image of Washington, an icon from the past, persisted in the collective memories of the nation after his death despite an American obsession with progress and change because the Mexican War generation believed that Washington's example of republican citizenship was important. The very success of republican government depended upon the virtuous nature of its citizens. An essayist in


the January 1837 issue of the *Southern Literary Messenger* noted that "public virtue is the only true basis of republican government, ... it is impossible for ours to last without scrupulous integrity of motive, and perfect purity of conduct."\(^{89}\) By no other means could liberty be guaranteed. Thus by exalting the noble attributes of the great man's character and striving to imitate them, Americans created the blueprint of a lasting republic in their mind's eye.

In addition to serving as an exemplar for republican citizenship, George Washington was also an archetype for political leadership. Here too paradox reigned for Washington stood as the paradigm of what political leadership should be in a *republic*, a form of government hostile to the whole idea of powerful political leaders. Americans and Washington himself during his lifetime overcame this dilemma with the notion of a virtuous, yet reluctant leader. In the ideal, only a man of noble and disinterested character could be entrusted with political power in a republic because power wielded in selfish causes by talented men constituted a threat to liberty. An essayist on the topic of statesmanship in a republic echoed this sentiment: "the characteristics of the great statesman can only be attained with the acquisition of this ... most precious ingredient—*VIRTUE*. Take away virtue, and genius and learning are the greatest curses that could be inflicted upon mankind."\(^{90}\) The statesman, this same

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\(^{90}\) "Characteristics of a Statesman," 114. On statesmanship and the importance of virtue see also, *Richmond Whig*, May 26, 1848; Saunders, "Baccalaureate Address: Delivered to the graduates of William and Mary College, in the College Chapel, 4\(^{th}\) July, 1846," 544.
writer later asserted, is "an immolation of self, and an impersonation of country." In Washington who embodied the ideals of virtuous republican citizenship and whose very name, in the words orator Lansing Burrows, had "become a synonym of lofty disinterested patriotism," the young nation possessed a man in whom it could have faith. Americans believed that Washington accepted the mantle of leadership, not for self-aggrandizement, but for the greater good of his countrymen. Indeed, the Founding Father encouraged his countrymen to believe that a sense of duty alone kept him from retiring to his home at Mount Vernon. In this manner, Washington played the role of the hero in the Founding generation's favorite political morality tale, Cincinnatus, the legendary Roman farmer who reluctantly accepted dictatorial power in order to lead his country through a time of trial only to relinquish that power and return to the plow once the time of danger had passed. The example of Cincinnatus and his American

91 Characteristics of a Statesman, 128. On southern notions of statesmanship, see Greenberg, Masters and Statesmen, 3-22.


93 See Jonesborough Whig and Independent Monitor, August 4, 1847; Richmond Daily Whig, February 29, 1848.

94 According to The Oxford Classical Dictionary, Lucius Quinctius Cincinnatus was "an historical figure, although details of his career possibly were derived from popular poetry. In 458 B.C., according to tradition, when Minucius was besieged by the Aequi on Mt. Algidus, Cincinnatus was appointed dictator and dispatched to the rescue. He defeated the Aequi, freed Minucius, resigned his dictatorship after sixteen days, and returned to his farm on the Tiber." N. G. L. Hammond and H. H. Scullard, eds., The Oxford Classical Dictionary, 2nd edition (Oxford, Great Britain: Oxford University Press, 1970), 241.

counterpart still resonated in late antebellum America. For example, the statue and column erected in Baltimore in 1829 portrayed Washington at the triumphant height of republican virtue, as Cincinnatus resigning his military command. Like Cincinnatus and Washington, "a great man," asserted an author in 1860, "is truly greater in refraining from, rather than in exercising power." The Cincinnatus myth contained two lessons—first, that the statesman required virtue, consummate judgement, and moral courage to assure that he wielded power judiciously, and second, that the time when a republic needed a strong and virtuous leader most was at the very moment when it was threatened with destruction and was thus vulnerable to the exercise of capricious power from within. Properly wielded, power in itself did not necessarily constitute a threat and could accomplish, according to Virginian Robert Saunders, "great and high ends ... and, ... if properly directed, ... the happiness of the world." Saunders laid out a scenario when "the timid and the brave alike [will] look on all sides for aid to calm the furious element; and then will all those whose minds have been made the receptacles of garnered wisdom, be eagerly looked to as saviors of the State."

It is emphatically the age of progress—or rather, of movement. All things are upheaving, as by some all pervading force: the foundations of


96 "Procrustes Junior," "Great Men, a Misfortune," 314.

97 Saunders, "Baccalaureate Address: Delivered to the graduates of William and Mary College, in the College Chapel, 4th July, 1846," 542.

98 Ibid., 544.
existing communities are threatened—institutions, fixed and held sacred for centuries, are either uprooted or trembling—the elements of revolution, so long dormant and hidden from view, are now in ominous commotion and instinct with life—projects of change, which it was so long considered blasphemy to breathe, are familiar in the mouths of men as household words. ... Everything has become common-place; all things are in motion.

Contemporaries agreed with Saunders that such was the time for a supremely virtuous man, a Washington, a Cincinnatus, to lead the nation back to a republican ideal of stability and communal harmony.

Late antebellum southerners appear to have been especially concerned about the extent to which the nation had moved from that of the Founders. Many harbored a gnawing suspicion that somehow the republican experiment was heading in the wrong direction. In a style reminiscent of the jeremiads of the Puritans, southerners of the late 1840s and 1850s intoned against casting aside the virtuous principles of an earlier noble age. Their lamentations took many forms and embraced many causes, but they all agreed that public virtue, the safeguard of the republic, was dying. One author in the Southern Literary Messenger claimed that “Man has lost faith in the cardinal virtues; they land on his lips, but they find no place in his heart.” Virginian George Floyd wrote to his mother in 1845 that “selfishness ... is too prevailing in this land and in this Government. Reformation must come or our glorious Constitution must perish.”

99Ibid., 543.


101George R. C. Floyd to Latitia Floyd, April 17, 1845, John Warfield Johnston Papers, Duke University, Special Collections Department, William R. Perkins Library.

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Another Virginian, Beverly Wellford, noted in speech a decade later that "We live in troublous times. ... It has been a source of lamentation that of late years, our people have manifested an apparently increasing insensibility to the truths and traditions of the past." A southern poet observed simply in 1850 that "a fell spirit is abroad today" which threatened the very existence of the Republic. Traditional codes of honorable conduct, claimed a writer in 1848, were being cast aside and replaced by "an irreverence for character and reputation, which is manifested in an appalling degree." A book reviewer in the *Southern Quarterly Review* in 1851 asserted that contemporary Americans possessed a "tendency to absorption in gross material interests or coarse political excitements." Another author complained that "the whole force of the people, physical and intellectual, is chained to the service of private gain, or public aggrandizement. ... It may be worth while to look back upon the thoughts and deeds of men who trod the earth before us." Political rivalry, asserted one essayist, "has already filled our country with bitter heart-burnings and alarming commotions, and


what may be the result of the conflict baffles all human forecast." In a similar vein,

Mississippi planter Thomas Dabney's aged mother groaned:

> Only think of the changes in our country! I lived in days that wise patriots ruled. Such men as we have in high office now are not fit doorkeepers for them. In my day the suffrages of the people was a sure sign that the person voted for was worthy of the trust given him, and now it is only a sign that the people are corrupt, and chose one of their own sort to help them out in their corruption.

Despite their gloomy rhetoric, southerners were not content with the simple values and modest ambitions imposed by the republican ideals of the Founding generation. Americans of all sections were proud of the growth and prosperity of their young nation. Indeed, most played an active, if unconscious, role in the continuing development of the Republic. In pursuing their individual personal and economic goals, citizens created a country very different from that which their fathers had known.

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Nonetheless, fears that the Republic would perish, as one writer put it, "in consequence of a prosperity which is beyond ... [its] capacity to bear" remained real for many southerners.\textsuperscript{110}

Antebellum Americans used the myth of George Washington, America's greatest hero, as a talisman to ward off the effects of the perceived decline in public virtue. Invoking the mythic image of Washington served as a clarion call to return to the founding values of the Republic. The sponsors of the project to build a giant column honoring Washington in Baltimore claimed that the monument would serve to reverse "the decay of that public virtue which is the only solid and natural foundation of a free government."\textsuperscript{111} In a formal address at the ceremony marking the beginning of construction of the Washington Monument on July the Fourth, 1848, Congressman Robert Winthrop asked Americans to build a monument to the Founding Father in their own hearts so that the republic he constructed would "stand before the world in all its original strength and beauty."\textsuperscript{112}

\textsuperscript{110}See also, "Machiavel's Political Discourses Upon the First Decade of Livy," Southern Literary Messenger, Vol. 5, No. 12 (December, 1839): 823. The author suggests that Republican Romans knew, and so too should contemporary Americans, that "public affairs are usually neglected" in times of "the greatest prosperity." Thus, periods of prosperity were exactly the moments to be "more watchful than ever."


The American Cincinnatus, however, could also return as a living symbol to guide the nation through treacherous times. Zachary Taylor's rise to prominence represented, at least in part, Americans' desire to be led back to the righteous ways of the founding generation. The editor of the Tuscaloosa Independent Monitor thus spoke for many when he argued that:

> a fearful crisis threatening to involve the North and the South in geographical antagonism, (headed as it is by many of the master minds of the country, and aided by fierce faction and boding evil for the future,) requires a republican of the old school, free from the shackles and acrimony of party—one who has a fast hold on the heart of the nation—one whose counsels and acknowledged wisdom and disinterested patriotism can unite the republican brotherhood together—whose overwhelming popularity can break down all the factions that would destroy the constitution and dismember the Union. Such a man is 'Old Rough and Ready!' In fine, he is the man for the South, for the crisis, and for the nation.\footnote{Tuscaloosa Independent Monitor, November 30, 1847. See also Arkansas State Democrat, July 7, 1848; Tuscaloosa Independent Monitor, June 22, 1847; Huntsville, Alabama, Southern Advocate, July 30, August 30, December 4, 1847; Richmond Whig and Public Advertiser, July 9, July 23, 1847, January 18, February 29, 1848; Raleigh North Carolina Standard, September 1, 1847.}

When news of the glorious American victories at Palo Alto and Resaca de la Palma reached New Orleans on May 3, 1846, citizens of the Crescent City responded
with an explosion of patriotic enthusiasm. Sometime soon thereafter, E. G. W. Butler, a prominent resident of New Orleans touched by patriotic war fever, requested that General Nathaniel Gaines deliver a sacred heirloom to honor the hero of the hour, General Zachary Taylor. In doing so, Butler was probably the first American to make a symbolic association between Taylor and the Father of the Republic. General Gaines promptly complied with the request, dispatching a special messenger to Taylor’s headquarters on the Rio Grande. The courier found Old Rough and Ready encamped outside the town of Matamoros near the fields of his now-famous victories and delivered his singular burden, the military sash bequeathed to the youthful George Washington by British General Edward Braddock in 1755. Taylor, the courier later reported, carefully examined the large red silk sash which “glistened as brightly as if it had just come from the loom” except for the dark blood stains “of the hero who wore it.” Taylor then “broke the silent admiration [of the officers present], by saying that he would not receive the sash … [and] that he did not think that he should receive presents until the campaign … was finished.” With characteristic modesty, he went on to explain that children should not be named after living men, for he feared that “the


118 Ibid., 219.
thus honored might disgrace their [infant] namesakes." The officers present, however, pressed the issue. Taylor compromised by stating that he would store the sash in his military chest and "if he thought he deserved so great a compliment, at the end of the campaign, he would acknowledge the receipt." William Maxwell, the editor of the *Virginia Historical Register*, would note with irony in 1851 that then-President Zachary Taylor died on the ninety-fifth anniversary of Washington's receipt of the sash. Perhaps Maxwell and his readers perceived that July the ninth, 1850 was significant for more than just this macabre coincidence and that more than just a good man died on that muggy day in the nation's capital city on the Potomac.

Old Rough and Ready's victorious war record alone cannot explain the outpouring of affection that citizens showered upon him. Indeed based on a strictly professional military assessment, Winfield Scott, whose campaign from Vera Cruz to Mexico City stands even today as classic example of how to conduct an offensive military campaign, and not Taylor, should have emerged as the foremost hero of the war. Yet Americans of both the North and the South chose to anoint Taylor as the consummate hero of the Mexican War rather than any other military hero. What Taylor's war record did accomplish was to place his name before the public where Americans ascribed to him a whole range values that went beyond mere popular

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119 Ibid.

120 Ibid. For more on this incident, see Thomas Bangs Thorpe, *Our Army on the Rio Grande. Being a short account of the important events transpiring from the time of the removal of the "Army of Occupation" from Corpus Christi, to the surrender of Matamoros; ...* (Philadelphia: Carey and Hart, 1846), 161-62.

121 "Braddock's Sash," 219.
enthusiasm for a triumphant general. Nor was Old Rough and Ready’s image in the public’s imagination the creation of a political party, although he grudgingly entered the political arena. Indeed, members of both parties attempted to capitalize on Taylor’s popularity, and Democratic and Whig newspapers alike contributed to the creation of the image that voters were to find so appealing in 1848. It appears reasonable to assume that Taylor’s popularity was based on something other than military glory alone. Reflecting upon the departure of General Taylor from New Orleans, a correspondent for the Picayune suggested as much when he wrote that “he has received every form of grateful and affectionate acknowledgment of his great services and purity of character.”

For many, he became a kind of mythical figure, who represented, as all American heroes do, the society from which he came. One must delve, as one of Old Rough and Ready’s biographers puts it, “into the realm of mythological exaggeration, … [where] Zachary Taylor’s acts of bravery, simplicity, or kindness were magnified” in order to understand why Americans chose Taylor as the quintessential hero of the Mexican War.124

If not for the Mexican War Zachary Taylor would probably have lived out his days in obscurity. After accepting an appointment as a first lieutenant in the United


123 New Orleans Picayune, December 5, 1847. Italics added for emphasis.

States Army in 1808, Taylor embarked on a respectable military career.\textsuperscript{125} Taylor saw limited action in the War of 1812; his major achievement was to rally the demoralized garrison of Fort Harrison in present-day Indiana and to defend it from an Indian attack. In 1815, he resigned from the army in a dispute over whether or not he would be allowed to keep his brevet rank of major. His resignation proved brief; for in 1816 Taylor received the appointment of major of the Third Infantry from his second cousin President James Madison. As colonel of the First Infantry, Taylor participated in both the Black Hawk and the Seminole wars. In his only experience commanding a large force in battle before the Mexican War, Taylor led a thousand man force against four hundred Seminoles at the battle of Okeechobee during the Second Seminole War. Taylor’s generalship was tactically competent, if unimaginative. He relied upon his superiority in numbers in a frontal attack which drove the Seminole force from the field. For his actions, a grateful and relieved Van Buren administration promoted him brevet brigadier general. In Florida, Taylor also received the heartfelt appellation “Rough and Ready” from his troops for his willingness to share in their hardships. Active service, however, was more the exception than the rule in the antebellum army and Taylor spent the vast majority of his career as the commander of various military posts on the southwestern frontier of the United States.

In 1843, Taylor’s star began to rise when he replaced Brevet Brigadier General Matthew Arbuckle as commander of the First Military District and, later, garnered the assignment of commanding the fifteen-hundred man Army of Observation assembling

\textsuperscript{125}On Taylor’s military career prior to the battle of Palo Alto, see Bauer, \textit{Zachary Taylor}, 4-149; Hamilton, \textit{Zachary Taylor}, I, 33-180.
at Fort Jesup, Louisiana, just across the Sabine River from Texas. On May 29, 1845, President Polk ordered Taylor to move into Texas to a point near the Rio Grande. Old Rough and Ready changed the name of his force to the Army of Occupation and chose Corpus Christi at the mouth of the Nueces River as his base of operations. By July, Taylor had established his camp and over the next few months reinforcements began to trickle in. Taylor used his time at Corpus Christi well, training the troops under his command in the art of large scale battlefield maneuvers. The early months of 1846 found the sixty-two year old Taylor and his small army confronting a Mexican army along the lower Rio Grande.

Taylor’s popularity rested upon the solid base of military success. His early victories at Palo Alto and Resaca de la Palma in early May placed the heretofore obscure career Army officer in the public eye where he quickly became the leading hero of the nation’s first foreign war. That the press generally portrayed Taylor’s little army on the Rio Grande as being in grave danger of annihilation made the news of his triumphs all the more electrifying. Official recognition of his achievements followed quickly on the heels of the victories. Taylor was made a major general of the line on June 29, 1846; three weeks later Congress extended its thanks to him for services

126 Significantly, the small peacetime army had little opportunity to train in formations larger than the regimental level.


128 See Raleigh Register and North Carolina Gazette, May 15, 1846.
rendered.\textsuperscript{129} State legislatures across the South and throughout the nation voted ceremonial swords, cast medals, and added their resolutions of gratitude to that of the federal government. In June, official tokens of esteem began to flow to Taylor's camp.

Several weeks after the dual victories, two delegations of Louisiana gentlemen journeyed to Zachary Taylor's camp outside of Matamoros, Mexico. Taylor's fellow Louisianians feted the general with luxuries brought from New Orleans and delivered both their Legislature's acknowledgment of his great services and the news that a ceremonial sword commemorating his two victories would be presented to Old Rough and Ready upon his return to his adopted state.\textsuperscript{130}

The effusive praise that poured forth from governing bodies in the United States, however, paled in comparison to the response of the public to Taylor's victories. Citizens built bonfires, participated in parades, held public meetings, and rushed to enlist. In Mobile, one observer reported that "the war excitement here is almost without

\textsuperscript{129}For the debate relating to the resolutions to thank Taylor, see \textit{Congressional Globe}, 29\textsuperscript{th} Congress, 1\textsuperscript{st} Session (December 1, 1845 - August 10, 1846), 862, 867, 873-875, 877-880. On the resolution to present Taylor with a gold medal, see \textit{Congressional Globe}, 29\textsuperscript{th} Congress, 1\textsuperscript{st} Session (December 1, 1845 - August 10, 1846), 967. On resolutions of thanks to Taylor for the battles of Monterrey and Buena Vista, see \textit{Congressional Globe}, 29\textsuperscript{th} Congress, 2\textsuperscript{nd} Session (December 7, 1846 - March 3, 1847), 315-319, 431-432, 558. On other resolutions of thanks to Taylor, see \textit{Congressional Globe}, 30\textsuperscript{th} Congress, 1\textsuperscript{st} Session (December 6, 1847 - August 14, 1848), 363-368, 725-727.

\textsuperscript{130}On the resolution of thanks from the Louisiana Legislature, see \textit{Acts passed at the First Session of the First Legislature of the State of Louisiana, begun and held in the city of New Orleans, on the 9\textsuperscript{th} day of February, 1846} (New Orleans: W. Van Benthuysen and P. Besancon, 1846), 59. On the sword commissioned by the Louisiana Legislature, see \textit{Acts passed at the First Session of the First Legislature of the State of Louisiana, begun and held in the city of New Orleans, on the 9\textsuperscript{th} day of February, 1846} (New Orleans: W. Van Benthuysen and P. Besancon, 1846), 148.
bounds." In Raleigh, North Carolina, a mass gathering unanimously passed resolutions that hailed "with pride and joy the glorious tidings of... General Taylor and his gallant army on the Rio Del Norte." Their purpose in meeting, they said, was to prove "that Republics know how to reward valor." Old Rough and Ready, wrote one Virginian in early August, 1846, "is now the great favourite with the people of the US. ... All hail him as the great Washington of modern times." Male children were named in Taylor's honor even before much was known about him. At least one child was destined to go through life with the appellation "Rough and Ready." Taylor would not remain unknown for long, however. The nation's print media quickly moved to gratify the seemingly insatiable popular demand for information on both the war and the hero of the hour.

131 Tuscaloosa Independent Monitor, June 3, 1846.
132 Raleigh North Carolina Standard, May 27, 1846; Raleigh Register and North Carolina Gazette, May 29, 1846. For similar sentiments and meetings, see Tallahassee Florida Sentinel, May 26, 1846; New Orleans Daily Delta, May 5, May 21, May 26, 1846.
133 Raleigh North Carolina Standard, May 27, 1846; Raleigh Register and North Carolina Gazette, May 29, 1846.
134 John Campbell to William B. Campbell, August 4, 1846, Campbell Family Papers, Duke University, Special Collections Department, William R. Perkins Library.
135 Hamilton, Zachary Taylor, I:198.
Perceptive political leaders in both major parties quickly realized the potential of Taylor’s mass appeal as a candidate for office. Upon receiving news of the victories in Texas, Secretary of War William L. Marcy judged that Taylor would be a leading candidate for the presidency in 1848. Within three weeks of the battles, Whig kingpin Thurlow Weed went even further when he predicted that the general would be the next president. Whig leader John Campbell of Virginia prognosticated: “If Taylor is successful in the war with Mexico there is no human power that can prevent his election to the Presidency. ... If the war was to terminate now he would be the decided favourite with the great mass.” Party worthies were not the only ones who noticed Old Zack’s political appeal. Bipartisan groups of citizens began openly suggesting that Taylor was made of presidential material as early as June, 1846. As Taylor’s Whiggish leanings became apparent, the most rabid Democratic partisans, led

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138 Harriet A Weed, ed., *The Autobiography of Thurlow Weed* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1884), 571-572. See also, Hamilton, *Zachary Taylor: Soldier of the Republic*, 189-99. Weed, the editor of the Albany *Journal* and prominent Whig, made his prediction less than three weeks after the victories at Resaca de la Palma and Palo Alto. He conferred with Taylor’s brother, Lieutenant Colonel Joseph Taylor, on the subject. When questioned by his brother in relation to the matter, Taylor belittled the prospect, a response that was often repeated during the next several months.

139 John Campbell to William B. Campbell, August 4, 1846, Campbell Family Papers, Duke University, Special Collections Department, William R. Perkins Library.

140 Bauer, *Zachary Taylor*, 216.
by President Polk himself, became less effusive in their praise of the general.  

Criticism mounted especially after the negotiated armistice following the Taylor’s victory at Monterrey in September, which some Democrats perceived as too lenient. But fame once bestowed is not easily destroyed. So the administration, fearing the rising popularity of the thrice victorious hero, toyed with the idea of creating a Democratic “field marshal” and when this proved politically inexpedient gutted Taylor’s army by transferring most of his regular troops to the command of Winfield Scott who would soon land at Vera Cruz. This consigned Taylor to the defensive in northern Mexico and, so the Polk administration hoped, would mean that Taylor would share the laurels of any further American military success with others. The Whig press and some leading Democrats, like Jefferson Davis, came to Taylor’s defense. Indeed,

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142 For examples of the kind of resolutions that Taylor received in honor of his victories, see Adolf Layst, James Patton, Thomas B. Leefe to Zachary Taylor, February 23, 1847, Zachary Taylor Papers, Series 2, Library of Congress. Enclosed with the letter was a copy of the resolutions of the citizens of New Orleans dated February 17 honoring Taylor for his services. Even Democratic papers continued to publish resolutions honoring Taylor’s victories. See North Carolina Standard, June 6, 1847.

the attacks of what one southern Whig editor called "the carpet-knights and backstairs chivalry" only served to make Taylor's next victory more luminous.\textsuperscript{144}

The battle of Buena Vista in February, 1847 was the critical event which established Taylor's status as the foremost hero of the Mexican War. A Richmond Whig observed that the victory put Taylor "beyond the reach of the missiles of his [political] enemies 'in the rear.' They dare not assail."\textsuperscript{145} Stripped of most of its regulars and facing four to one odds, Old Rough and Ready's little army won the transcendent victory of the Mexican War. News of the victory electrified the South. Because the public saw Taylor as the architect of the miracle, his popularity reached epic proportions, leading one modern biographer to describe the phenomenon as "a military apotheosis."\textsuperscript{146} Taylor's reputation, one observer claimed, "is henceforth national property."\textsuperscript{147} Soon after learning of the battle, Georgia Democrat Edward Harden predicted that "nothing but death can prevent Taylor from being the next

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\footnote{\textsuperscript{144}Savannah Republican, January 28, 1847, quoted in Rayback, Free Soil, 39.}
\footnote{\textsuperscript{145}Richmond Whig, April 30, 1847}

\footnote{\textsuperscript{146}Hamilton, Zachary Taylor, I, 243. See also, Johannsen, To the Halls of the Montezumas, 92, 116-17; John Frost, Pictorial History of Mexico and the Mexican War: Comprising an account of the ancient Aztec empire, the conquest by Cortes, Mexico under the Spaniards, the Mexican revolution, the republic, the Texan war, and the recent war with the United States (Richmond, VA: Harold and Murray, 1848). Like most others, Frost perceived that the result of the battle was due to Taylor's leadership. "It was the commander's influence over their minds that wrought the soldiers to enthusiasm at the sight of the enemy, and nerved each soul during the terrible encounter." (Frost, pg. 385)}

\footnote{\textsuperscript{147}Richmond Whig, April 2, 1847.}
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President.”148 A South Carolinian wrote to North Carolina Whig Senator Willie
Mangum following the battle that “there is a charm about the miraculous escapes of
Taylor, that have fastened him with ‘hooks of steel’ upon the popular mind.”149 A
Mississippi volunteer in Mexico exclaimed, “Buena Vista is the greatest battle of
modern times, and Gen. Taylor the greatest hero.”150 In St. Martinville, Louisiana,
Catholic parishioners staged a Sunday parade to their church accompanied by martial
music. They chanted the Te Deum in a sanctuary draped with banners inscribed in gold
with the names of Buena Vista and other battles. As the ceremony progressed within,
artillery fired salutes outside.151 The North Carolina Standard, the state’s major
Democratic newspaper, reported that in Raleigh bells rang at sunrise, cannon fired a one
hundred gun salute, citizens paraded, and the city was illuminated in honor of the
victory. Colonel Yarbrough’s Hotel received special mention for its “singularly
beautiful” glowing display of “the name ‘Taylor.’”152 Significantly, as one historian of

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148Edward J. Harden to Howell Cobb, May 3, 1847, Correspondence of Robert
M. Toombs, Alexander H. Stephens, and Howell Cobb, ed. Ulrich B. Phillips,

149James E. Harvey to Willie P. Mangum, June 3, 1847, The Papers of Willie
Person Mangum, Vol. 5, ed. Henry Thomas Shanks (Raleigh: State Department of
Archives and History, 1956), 66.

150William P. Rogers to Mat [wife], March 2, 1847, in “The Diary and Letters of
William P. Rogers, 1846-1862,” 278.

151Clayton Sumner Ellsworth, “The American Churches and the Mexican War,”

152Raleigh North Carolina Standard, April 21, 1847.
American culture during Mexican War years has noted, the battle began on "Washington's birthday, a coincidence no American was allowed to forget."\textsuperscript{153}

For southerners, and other Americans too, the coupling of Taylor, the contemporary hero of the age, and Washington, the hero of the Republic, seemed natural. The American Revolution loomed large in their historical frame of reference; it supplied them with the ideological substance of their beliefs and also their symbols and allusions.\textsuperscript{154} As an essayist in the \textit{Southern Quarterly Review} wrote: "The American Revolution was, without question, one of the most important events in the history of mankind."\textsuperscript{155} At a celebration in 1848, a North Carolinian declared that the Forth of July was the "proudest [day] in the annals of our history."\textsuperscript{156} At another celebration, Virginian Garland Hanes proposed the toast: "The Heroes of the Revolution: May we

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\textsuperscript{153} Johannsen, \textit{To the Halls of the Montezumas}, 93.
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\textsuperscript{156} \textit{Charlotte Journal}, July 26, 1848.
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imitate them." During a speech in Tuscaloosa in 1846, Claudius Perkins asserted that, "The revolution of the American colonies ... was without a precedent or a subsequent parallel." Upon its "momentous events," Perkins went on, "were suspended the destiny of the animate world." All history, he suggested, led to and extended from the American Revolution. In a very real sense, then, southerners fought and thought during the Mexican War era with their ideological fathers looking over their shoulders.

In a study of the symbolic significance of George Washington, Barry Schwartz argues that the image of Washington reveals "the virtues which Americans wished to live up to. It also depicted, by implication, the vices they wished to avoid." When equated with the Father of the Republic, Zachary Taylor became the tangible symbol of the core political beliefs of the nation's civic religion. What, then, were the virtues that southerner's perceived in Washington and subsequently ascribed to Taylor? Foremost among them were the republican values of self-sacrifice, disinterestedness, moderation, resoluteness, self-control and piety. Rarely did individual southerners feel it necessary to explain exactly why they believed that Taylor was similar to Washington, but when they did, they frequently emphasized one or two of these virtues. The

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157 Richmond Whig, July 13, 1847.

158 Tuscaloosa Independent Monitor, July 14, 1846.

159 Ibid.

160 Schwartz, George Washington, 179.

161 Ibid., 180.
composite image that southerners created of Old Rough and Ready, however, closely resembles that of the "mythical" Father of the Republic. For many southerners, Taylor, like Washington, was "a mirror for republican culture."\textsuperscript{162} Taylor's nonpartisan stance and general public ambivalence toward the presidency manifested his disinterestedness. He proved that he possessed the virtues of self-sacrifice, resoluteness, and self-control on the battlefield.\textsuperscript{163} However, as the editor of the \textit{New Orleans National} declared, "General Taylor's civil qualifications far outshine those connected with his military history brilliant as it is." He then went on to describe the general as "a true Republican" typified by "purity of character," "prudence," "integrity," "marked simplicity of habits," and "singleness of purpose."\textsuperscript{164} During a mass in Taylor's honor in the Saint Louis Cathedral in New Orleans, Bishop Blane praised the old soldier's piety for "acknowledging, as you now do, that it is God alone who dispenses victories, according to the unsearchable designs of His all-wise providence."\textsuperscript{165} The Bishop also commended the general for exhibiting other "Christian-like sentiments," such as

\begin{footnotes}
\item[162] \textit{Ibid.}, 107. The phrase is the title of chapter four of Schwartz's book.
\item[164] \textit{New Orleans National} quoted in \textit{Baltimore Clipper}, June 18, 1847, quoted in Rayback, \textit{Free Soil}, 41. See also \textit{Richmond Whig}, March 3, May 26, 1848; Tuscaloosa \textit{Independent Monitor}, July 6, 1847.
\item[165] \textit{New Orleans Commercial Bulletin}, December 6, 1847. See also a reprint of Bishop Blaine's speech in the Huntsville \textit{Southern Advocate}, December 25, 1847.
\end{footnotes}
"moderation and magnanimity." Speaking on the occasion of Taylor's death, a southern congressman delineated Taylor's virtues; he described the late president as a "disinterested patriot," an "upright man," a "devoted father," and a "valuable citizen." Furthermore, "[h]is martial courage was set off and relieved by this group of civic virtues, as the brilliancy of the diamond is enhanced by the gems of softer ray by which it is encircled."

The newspapers, books, and periodicals that southerners read were filled with both explicit and veiled references to the Taylor as Washington image. Newspapermen and magazine editors were among the first to capitalize on the demand for news from the front. Zachary Taylor and the Mexican War, it seemed, made good copy. Advances in printing technology in the 1840s led to a proliferation of newspapers and magazines, hence competition to be the first to report breaking news from Mexico was intense. New Orleans' nine daily newspapers, for example, engaged in a particularly cutthroat race to report news from Mexico. Because of its location close to the

166 Ibid.
168 Ibid.
fighting, the New Orleans press served as a news clearing house for the nation. However, not all newspaper editors were content with reprinting stories from the New Orleans papers. One effort to satisfy the public's clamor for news teamed William S. King, editor of the Charleston Courier, with Moses Y. Beach of the New York Sun. These editors opened a pony express that outstripped the regular mails in delivering news from Mexico. Despite the high cost of seven hundred and fifty dollars a trip, the express was, according to one scholar of the Charleston press, "of immense pecuniary benefit to the proprietors" of the Courier. King and Beach were not alone in their innovative efforts to procure and, then, profit from the news.

The press during the late Jacksonian era was rampantly partisan. Not surprisingly then, Whig papers, many of which had seized upon the essentially apolitical, but Whiggish leaning Taylor as their candidate for president, frequently made explicit the relationship between Old Zack and the Founding Father. Typically, the Richmond Whig commented that: "Not unaptly, indeed, has he been likened to Washington, in the massive grandeur of his character." The New Orleans National asserted that, like Washington's, "General Taylor's civil qualifications far outshine those connected with his military history brilliant as it is. ... [H]e is a true Republican,

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172 Rayback, Free Soil, 40-41.

173 Richmond Whig, April 6, 1847. See also Tuscaloosa Independent Monitor, June 22, 1848; Richmond Whig, May 28, July 23, 1847, January 18, February 29, March 3, 1848.
an honest man."174 Certainly, partisan motives were partly responsible for the Whig appetite for comparing Taylor to Washington, but had the image not resonated with the reading public the association would have been short-lived. After the Polk-Taylor split in the Fall of 1846, Democratic papers often demonstrated a decided reluctance to lavish effusive praise directly on Taylor. They were, however, hesitant to attack Old Rough and Ready because he was the paramount hero of what was essentially a Democratic war. Indeed, many southern Democrats found Taylor an attractive potential candidate for the nation’s highest office. In nonpartisan meetings in Kentucky, Tennessee, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, North Carolina and Maryland, prominent Democrats joined the Taylor movement.175 In July, 1847, Henry Toole, a Democratic candidate for Congress, avowed "himself a Taylor man, out and out, without caring what his politics are" before a mass meeting held in front of the courthouse in Raleigh, North Carolina.176 Only through the strenuous efforts of Howell Cobb was the Georgia Democratic convention prevented from nominating Taylor as its candidate for president.177 Perhaps the greatest testament to the power of the Taylor as Washington likeness were the lamentations of rabid Democratic partisans. For example, one Georgia Democrat complained to Howell Cobb:

174 New Orleans National quoted in Baltimore Clipper, June 18, 1847, quoted in Rayback, Free Soil, 41.

175 Ibid., 41. See also, Raleigh Register and North Carolina Gazette, July 6, 1847.

176 Raleigh Register and North Carolina Gazette, July 6, 1847.

177 Rayback, Free Soil, 41-42.
The fool-idea constantly harped upon by the Whig press, of having a second Washington in the chair of state ... has begun to tell upon the public mind. Our Editors are much to blame in this matter. They seemed to have a sort of reverence for Taylor, ... and refused to lay hands on him.\footnote{Thomas W. Thomas to Howell Cobb, July 7, 1848, \textit{Correspondence of Robert M. Toombs, Alexander H. Stephens, and Howell Cobb}, 115.}

Taylor’s character was not only trumpeted in the partisan press. He was praised in literature, songs, engravings, and poetry which often also emphasized the connection between Taylor and the Founding Father.\footnote{Johannsen, \textit{To the Halls of the Montezumas}, 118.} In 1846, books, like C. Frank Powell’s \textit{Life of Major General Zachary Taylor} and the anonymous \textit{Life and Public Services of Gen. Zachary Taylor}, were hurriedly written and rushed into print.\footnote{C. Frank Powell, \textit{Life of Major General Zachary Taylor; with an account of his brilliant achievements on the Rio Grande and elsewhere, including the defence of Fort Harrison and the battle of Okee-Choo-bee. And sketches of the lives and the heroic acts of Maj. Ringold, Maj. Brown, Col. Cross, Capt. Montgomery, Capt. May, Lieut. Ridgely, Lieut. Blake, Capt. Walker, Lieut. Jordan, Capt. Lowd, and others; ... (New York: D. Appleton, 1846); Philadelphia: Geo. s. Appleton, 1846); [Anon.], \textit{Life and Public Services of General Z. Taylor: including a minute account of his defence of Fort Harrison in 1812, ... (New York: H. Long, 1846); Johannsen, \textit{To the Halls of the Montezumas}, 114-115.} These early works suffered at the hands of the critics, but began to answer the public’s demand for information on the nation’s new great hero. According to one southern literary critic:

Mr. C. Frank Powell, is not quite a Plutarch—but fortunately, Gen. Taylor ... will yet come out of the Dead Sea of Lives, Sketches, Anecdotes, Reminiscences, unanimous Resolutions, and monotonous Eulogies, that await him, with the same calm, unconquerable energy, that has made him a victor in his terrible battles. ... There is no tinsel—no
pretension—no flummery about him [Taylor]; but all is plain, solid and enduring manhood.181

In addition, these hastily written books helped to build Taylor's myth. Powell's book, for example, stressed that Taylor was "perfectly republican in his habits, associations, and dress, but gentlemanly in his demeanor."182 Powell supported these claims with anecdotes that described the general's most common attire, "a plain blue frock, jean pantaloons, and black cravat," living conditions, an unguarded tent that he shared with other officers, and the origin of the nickname "Rough and Ready" in the Florida while campaigning against the Seminoles.183 This book also provided its readers with one of the first, not to mention entirely inaccurate, pictorial views of the hero as a debonaire young general immaculately clad in a full dress uniform with telescope and sword.184

The trickle of Taylor biographies soon turned into a flood. Indeed, to some it seemed that every would-be writer must attempt a biography of Taylor.185

181 A review of "Life of major General Zachary Taylor; with an account of his brilliant achievements on the Rio Grande and elsewhere, including, &c., &c., &c. By C. Frank Powell. New York: D. Appleton & Co. 1846." Southern Quarterly Review, Vol. 11, No. 22 (April 1847): 508. The critic asserted that Powell wrote his book at the request of New York Whigs who hoped to claim him as one of their own. Indeed, Powell wrote that Taylor was not only a Whig, but that he also opposed the annexation of Texas. Still, this critic wrote admiringly of the subject of the book if not its author or its genesis.


183 Ibid., 27, 29.

184 Ibid., back cover.

185 Johannsen, To the Halls of the Montezumas, 115.
Jesse Fry's *A Life of Zachary Taylor*, John Frost's *Life of Major General Zachary Taylor*, the anonymous *Taylor and his Generals* appeared in 1847 and were typical of the non-political biographies published after 1846. These later works were more comprehensive in their treatment of the hero's life than earlier efforts, but still contributed to Taylor's image as a republican hero. The authors enumerated Taylor's sterling qualities in detail for eager readers. To Fry, Old Rough and Ready's character was "a perfect union of rare moral worth and mental power, assured by a physical temperament of the happiest mold." Furthermore, Taylor possessed "firm nerves ... ; quick perception, forecast, prudence, invention decision, independence, fortitude,

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186J. Reese Fry, *A Life of Zachary Taylor; comprising a narrative of events connected with his professional career* ... (Philadelphia: Grigg, Elliot, 1847); John Frost, *Life of Major General Zachary Taylor; with notices of the war in New Mexico, California, and in Southern Mexico; and biographical sketches of officers who have distinguished themselves in the war with Mexico* (New York: D. Appleton, 1847; Philadelphia: G. S. Appleton, 1847); [Anon.], *Taylor and His Generals, A Biography of Major-General Zachary Taylor; and sketches of the lives of General Worth, Wool, and Twiggs; with a full account of the various actions of their divisions in Mexico up to the present time; ...* (Philadelphia: E. H. Butler, 1847; New York: Burgess, Stringer, 1847). See also, [Anon.], *Life of General Taylor; embracing anecdotes illustrative of his character. Embellished with engravings* (Philadelphia: Lindsay and Blakiston, 1847); [Anon.], *A Sketch of the Life and Character of Gen. Taylor, the American Hero and People's Man; together with a concise history of the Mexican war; ...* (Boston: John. B. Hall, 1847); Fayette Robinson, *An account of the organization of the army of the United States; with biographies of distinguished officers of all grades* (Philadelphia: E. H. Butler, 1848); [Anon.], *General Taylor and his Staff; comprising memoirs of Generals Taylor, Worth, Wood, and Butler: Colonels May, Cross, Clay, Hardin, Yell, Hays, and other distinguished officers attached to General Taylor's army; interspersed with numerous anecdotes of the Mexican war, and personal adventures of the officers* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, Grambo, 1851). See also, "The Early Life of Zachary Taylor," *Planters Banner and Louisiana Agriculturist*, December 9, 1847.

integrity, … tireless industry … [and] genuine modesty.”\[188\] The frontispiece of Fry’s book now portrayed the hero in a more realistic straw hat and casual clothing. John Frost’s Life of Major General Zachary Taylor also illuminated the thoroughly republican nature of Old Zack. In words that echo Fry’s, Frost wrote of the hero’s “energy,” “firmness, presence of mind, … indomitable courage,” and “remarkably plain” habits and style of living.\[189\] Indeed, to Frost, even Taylor’s corpulence reminded him of the heroes of the Republic’s golden age—“His weight comes up to the standard of old revolutionary generals, most of whom exceeded two hundred pounds.”\[190\] To the author of Taylor and his Generals, “the character of General Taylor is best displayed by his actions in the present war. … But the military resources of … [his] character by no means comprise the whole of his merit.”\[191\] Like George Washington, the general combined “the highest order of genius as a commander … [with] the noblest virtues of man.”\[192\]

Other books and pamphlets contributed to Taylor’s image as a republican hero of the old school. Thomas Bangs Thorpe, a New Orleans newspaper reporter who wrote three books dealing with the Mexican War, immediately recognized and admired “the republican simplicity of the manners and character of Gen. Taylor” the first time

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188 Ibid.

189 Frost, Life of Major General Zachary Taylor, 264-66. On John Frost and the Mexican War, see Johannsen, To the Halls of the Montezumas, 260-61.

190 Frost, Life of Major General Zachary Taylor, 264.

191 Taylor and his Generals, 212-13.

192 Ibid., 213.
he met him in Matamoros in 1846.\(^{193}\) Although not focusing exclusively on Old Rough and Ready, Thorpe's first two books, *Our Army on the Rio Grande* (1846) and *Our Army at Monterrey* (1847), contained anecdotes that supported his initial assessment of the general. Thorpe's *The Taylor Anecdote Book* which appeared in 1848 was an attempt to capitalize on Taylor's presidential boom. It contained letters from and more stories about Old Rough and Ready, as well as a short biography, but put forth the same general theme, that of Taylor as a republican hero.\(^{194}\) "Rough and Ready Almanacs" appeared in almost every state in the Union. In addition to the useful information usually presented in such works, the *Mississippi Rough and Ready Almanac* which appeared in 1847 contained biographies and woodcuts of the heroes of the Mexican War.

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\(^{193}\) Thorpe, *Our Army on the Rio Grande*, 162. See also, *idem*, *Our Army at Monterrey*. Being a correct account of the proceedings and events which occurred to the "Army of Occupation" under the command of Major General Taylor, from the time of leaving Matamoros to the surrender of Monterrey. ... (Philadelphia: Carey and Hart, 1847); *idem*, *The Taylor anecdote book. Anecdotes and letters of Zachary Taylor. By Tom Owen, the Bee-Hunter*. ... (New York: D. Appleton, 1848; Philadelphia: Go. S. Appleton, 1848). On Thorpe and the Mexican War, see Johannsen, *To the Halls of the Montezumas*, 257-58.

\(^{194}\) Robert Johannsen suggests that there was another version of this book entitled *Anecdotes of General Taylor, and the Mexican War* which contained a few human interest stories on Taylor among its three hundred total. I have not been able to examine this work, but it seems probable that the Taylor stories are the same. See Johannsen, *To the Halls of the Montezumas*, 257.
War with special emphasis on General Taylor. In its short biography of the general, the *Almanac* listed a litany of republican and manly virtues which "mark him as a man who would have compared with the old Romans, and proved 'the noblest Roman of them all'—a man who should have taken place among our revolutionary fathers."

It is difficult to say with confidence just how many people in the South read these books. Two things are certain, however: they were cheap and widely available. Publishing houses in New York and Philadelphia led the way in the race for the reading public's money. Publishers, like Gregg, Elliot, and Company and E. H. Butler in Philadelphia and Burgess, Stringer, and Company and D. Appleton in New York, capitalized on advances in printing technology to mass produce monographs for wide distribution. Mass production lowered prices and placed the biographies within the reach of almost anyone. Powell's biography, for example, sold for only twenty-five cents which compares well with the approximately three cent cost of a daily newspaper.

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195 *A. Curtis & Co's Mississippi Rough and Ready Almanac, 1848* (Columbus, MS: Boot and Shoe Warehouse, no date given). See also, *Gen. Taylor's Rough and Ready Almanac, 1848* (Philadelphia: Turner and Fisher, 1847; New York: Turner and Fisher, 1847). The Taylor biography that appears in the Mississippi version of the *Almanac* is exactly the same as that of the one published in New York and Philadelphia. Obviously, the publisher of the Mississippi version copied it. Copying whole articles and even books was a common practice in these days before stringent literary copyright protection.

196 *Mississippi Rough and Ready Almanac*, no page number listed.

197 The number of publishers in five American cities in the years 1820-1852 were: New York, 345; Philadelphia, 198; Boston, 147; Baltimore, 32; Charleston, 15. Jay B. Hubbell, *The South in American Literature, 1607-1900* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1954), 363 (n. 19).
and six cent cost of a weekly. Other biographies cost as little as twelve and a half cents. The books entered the South through extensive and well-developed marketing networks. In antebellum Louisiana, for example, almost every town had at least one part-time bookseller who got most of his books from agents in New Orleans who represented large northern publishing houses. These booksellers did not just cater to town dwellers; they carried on a brisk mail-order business with rural planters as well. Northern publishers were often willing to sell their products to southern booksellers on consignment, which boosted sales. In addition, the practice of mailing free copies to southern newspaper editors ensured both that the reading public would be aware of the book and, in most cases, that the work received a favorable review. In contrast, southern publishers lacked these marketing networks and, consequently, a Virginian rarely saw a book printed in Charleston or vice versa.

198 D. and G. S. Appleton of New York and Philadelphia marketed Powell's Life of Major General Zachary Taylor as Number Four of Appleton's Library of Popular Reading. In soft cover, the work sold for twenty-five cents. The New Orleans Daily Delta sold for ten dollars a year, or roughly three cents an issue. The Milledgeville Federal Union, a weekly paper, sold for three dollars a year, or roughly six cents an issue.

199 John B. Hall of Boston sold its Sketch of the Life and Character of Gen. Taylor for twelve and a half cents.

200 Hubbell, The South in American Literature, 356-357. See also, Ibid., 363.

201 Ibid., 357.

202 Ibid., 363-364.
Southerners also lauded Taylor’s heroic and republican traits in song and verse. For example, “Hurrah for Old Zack!!,” a song which appeared in a May 1848 issue of the Tuscaloosa Independent Monitor, made up for its lack of musical distinction with its enthusiastic endorsement of the martial characteristics of strength, courage, and composure under fire that distinguished Taylor on Mexican battlefields. General Taylor’s Old Rough and Ready Songster and the very popular The Rough and Ready Songster, both published north of Mason and Dixon’s line but widely available South of it, also contained songs that praised Taylor’s martial prowess. In her Sketches in Prose and Verse Virginian Elizabeth Foote Cheves portrayed General Taylor as the embodiment of republican citizenship in war. In one poem, she wrote:

For thou! as Washington, didst lead
Victorious battle’s firm array;
As he, thou scornst the haughty sway
Of pride or pomp ...

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204 Tuscaloosa Independent Monitor, May 11, 1848. See also, “Old Zack Taylor,” Planter’s Banner and Louisiana Agriculturist, August 5, 1847; Johannsen, To the Halls of the Montezumas, 233-34, 36.

205 Ibid., 238.

In another poem, she styled Taylor an American Cincinnatus who fought "for honor and his native land" and gladly sheathed his sword when victorious. Louisianian Charles Didier Dreux echoed Cheves sentiments when he wrote of Taylor:

A great citizen, of heroes the model,
A rustic dweller of the fields,
Who flies to her flag when his country calls,
To there defend her children.208

Not all songs and poems dwelt on Taylor's image as a republican warrior-hero, but addressed what southerner's perceived as his other virtues. A 1848 song entitled "The Taylor Gathering" endorsed Old Rough and Ready's "no-partyism," his refusal to commit to either a Whig or Democratic platform, and also presented him as a defender of the Union against regional interest groups.209 More prosaic political motives, however, led to the publishing of the Old Zack Songster which appeared in the summer of 1848 to provide songs for the Taylor campaign for the presidency.210 Obvious partisan motives were also behind an April 1848 poem in the Richmond Whig which contrasted Taylor's "old Republican" integrity with what it claimed were the character

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207 Ibid., 211-13; quotation from page 211.

208 Extract of poem by Charles Didier Dreux, quoted in James J. A. Fortier, ed., General Zachary Taylor: The Louisiana President of the United States of America; Louisiana's Part in the War with Mexico (New Orleans: Louisiana State Museum, 1937), 25. For similar sentiments, see Tallahassee Florida Sentinel, August 8, 1848. A poem contained in this paper directly compared Taylor with "the God-like Washington."

209 Tuscaloosa Independent Monitor, February 3, 1848.

210 Johannsen, To the Halls of the Montezumas, 344, note 57.
weaknesses of various prominent Democrats. Whether politically motivated or not, the songs and poetry that dealt with General Taylor presented him as a hero cut from the best republican cloth.

Printed sources were not the only medium through which the symbolic link between Taylor and Washington was transmitted. During ritual occasions, such as Forth of July celebrations and mass events honoring victories and veterans of the Mexican War, southerners were told that Old Rough and Ready was worthy of comparison to George Washington. In the 1840s, Fourth of July celebrations were communal events characterized by patriotic orations followed by dinner and toasts. Here the link between the Revolutionary heritage of the Republic and the Mexican War was unmistakable. Across the South, citizens offered toasts in honor of the Father of the Republic, the Declaration of Independence, Taylor and other luminaries of the Mexican War. Frequently, participants made explicit identifications between Taylor and George Washington. For example at Oakland, Virginia, Edwin B. Jeffress proposed, “General Taylor, the Hero of the Mexican War: May he live to be elected to the highest office that this nation can give him, and prove to be another Washington.”

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211 Richmond Whig, April 21, 1848.

212 See Fayetteville [North Carolina] Observer, July 7, 1846; Tuscaloosa Independent Monitor, July 14, 1846; Raleigh Register and North Carolina Gazette, July 6, 1847; Little Rock Arkansas State Democrat, August 6, 1847; Planter's Banner and Louisiana Agriculturalist, January 13, 1848; Richmond Whig, July 13, July 16, 1847; Ashbel Smith, An Address delivered in the City of Galveston on the 22nd of February, 1848, the Anniversary of the Birth Day of Washington, and of the Battle of Buena Vista (Galveston, TX: W. Richardson, 1848).

213 Richmond Whig, July 20, 1847.
At another celebration in Dallas, North Carolina, R. G. McLean proposed "Gen. Z. Taylor—Actuated and animated by the same spirit that did our fathers in '76." During the Forth of July gala held by the Richmond Light Dragoons in 1847, Sergeant Gallaher offered: "Washington and Taylor: The first the Father of his Country; the latter now the favorite son." At the same party, Lieutenant Shephard submitted this toast: "Washington and Taylor: The first the Father of our National Liberty, the latter the able defender of our national rights." The preparations for the colossal December 1847 celebration that New Orleans threw in honor of Taylor demonstrated beyond a doubt that they considered him a republican hero. Anyone who participated in or read about the ceremonies honoring Taylor in New Orleans and Natchez could be left with no doubt that the citizenry of those cities viewed him as a true republican.

Many southerners also thought that Zachary Taylor’s appearance and mannerisms suited a republican of the old school. As befitted a republican warrior-hero, Taylor usually wore simple civilian clothes. The report of one soldier reprinted in an Alabama newspaper described the usual dress of the general in the field: "a pair of grey trowsers [sic], a dark vest, ... either a brown or speckled frock coat, ... black silk neckerchief, ... a white hat resembling in shape those worn by our boatmen, and a pair of common soldier’s shoes, not so much polished." Old Rough and Ready only wore

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214 Charlotte Journal, July 7, 1848.

215 Richmond Whig, July 13, 1847.

216 Ibid.

217 Huntsville Southern Advocate, August 30, 1847.
his full dress uniform once during the Mexican War during a somewhat comical meeting with the Navy's Commodore David Conner, a man with a notable preference for grand military attire.\textsuperscript{218} Taylor, it seems, did not want to offend the Commodore's sensibilities so he wore his dress uniform. Aware of Taylor's predilection for casual civilian garb, Conner wore a suit. After the rather uncomfortable meeting, the general apparently swore never to wear his dress uniform again. To a correspondent of the \textit{New Orleans Delta} who saw Taylor at the celebration held for him in New Orleans, the general seemed the very model of the unassuming republican hero dressed "in his usual plain and rather well-worn undress uniform, simple glazed cap, and ... brigadier's sword."\textsuperscript{219} The citizen-soldier's visage matched his wardrobe. Simply put, Taylor did not fit the model of the popular heroic romances of the day. Typically, a Mississippi volunteer who shared a glass of wine with the general wrote in his journal: "I could but look upon his kind expressive countenance and think to myself that he was nothing more than one of our plain country farmers."\textsuperscript{220} Although "better looking than the million of lithograph likenesses which stare you in the face at the shop windows and everywhere else," a South Carolinian thought Taylor bore the features of a "plain

\textsuperscript{218} \textit{Taylor and his Generals}, 75-77.

\textsuperscript{219} \textit{New Orleans Daily Delta}, December 4, 1847. For other impressions of Taylor's appearance at the New Orleans celebration for his arrival, see \textit{New Orleans Daily Bee}, December 4, December 6, 1847.

country gentleman."221 One young Virginia woman described him as a rather "indifferent specimen of the Lord of Creation."222 The simplicity of Taylor's manner, as well as that of his appearance, impressed itself upon those who met him. A popular biography of Taylor written by a veteran of the war observed: "There is a thorough republicanism in his sentiments and habits."223 The author, the "One-Legged Sergeant," followed this description with a series of supporting anecdotes.224 A Baton Rougean who met the general noted that in true republican fashion "triumphs and honours have not altered and can never affect in the slightest degree the warmth and affection of this great and good man to his fellow human beings."225 A Mississippian who journeyed to visit Old Rouge and Ready at his home in Baton Rouge noted his "iron ... will," "magnanimity of soul," "kindness of heart," and "old-fashioned, farmer-like hospitality."226 Like Washington, Zachary Taylor was an American Cincinnatus.

Cincinnatus returned to the plow after his victorious defense of Rome. Like Washington however, Zachary Taylor entered the cold world of practical politics. The public acclaim which followed his early victories elicited the attention of southern

221 Baton Rouge Gazette, February 5, 1848. See also, "Incidents on a Campaign [Diary 1847]," 13, Stephen Franklin Nunnelee Papers, Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, Alabama.

222 Quoted in Bauer, Zachary Taylor, 272.

223 A sketch of the Life and Character of Gen. Taylor, 12.

224 Ibid., 28-32.

225 Baton Rouge Gazette, December 11, 1847.

226 Semi-Weekly Natchez Courier, December 14, 1847.
Whigs, Democrats, and self-declared independents. The Battle of Buena Vista in February, 1847 transformed him from one of many potential candidates for the presidency in 1848 into the frontrunner in many eyes. But would he run? Was he a Democrat, a Whig, or an independent? Would he even consent to be nominated by one of the major parties? These questions remained to be answered in early 1847.

The Republic's political situation in 1847 was anything but tranquil. The controversy over the Wilmot Proviso, which proposed to restrict slavery from any new territory gained during the Mexican War, dominated the political councils of the nation. When first put forth in August, 1846, the Proviso elicited little comment around the South or elsewhere. But when the new Congress convened in December, Free Soil advocates resurrected it. During the early part of 1847, the debate over the fate of the Proviso raged with ever increasing fury and amidst heightening sectional tensions. Southerners of all political persuasions viewed the Proviso as both an insult to their region and a threat to the perpetuity of their peculiar institution. In a speech in the House, Georgian Robert Toombs announced that if the Proviso was enacted southerners "would be degraded, and unworthy of the name of American freeman ... in a Union where they must stand on the ground of inferiority." William Lowndes Yancey's "Alabama Platform" spoke for many when it declared that the Proviso was a


228 Quoted in William Y. Thompson, Robert Toombs of Georgia (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1966), 42.
“discrimination as degrading as it is injurious to the slaveholding states.” As Louisianian J. P. Benjamin put it in October, 1848, the territorial question, affects the South more than all other questions combined ... [F]or the North to lay claim to the whole this Territory, decreeing that Southern institutions should not be planted upon one foot of it is ... a reckless violation of a former agreement, a positive refusal to be guided by the constitution of the United States.

Into this supercharged political atmosphere stepped Old Zack. Indeed, the very fact that the Union faced a political crisis of monumental proportions accounted for much of his appeal as a potential chief magistrate. In their fear, many southerners would turn to Taylor as a symbol of stability and unity.

As befitted a republican of the old school and in keeping with his mythic image, Old Rough and Ready consistently denied any interest in becoming president. Except for short trips to places like Lafayette, Natchez and the Mississippi Gulf Coast, Taylor remained by his fireside in Cincinnatus-like repose and refused to campaign for the presidency after his return to the United States in late 1847. If his extant letters are any indication, he considered the presidency an obligation rather than an office to be pursued. These protestations, however, became less vehement over time. Taylor’s letters also make clear that his administration would be neither partisan nor sectional in attitude. In the summer of 1846, he wrote to one correspondent: “nor shall I ever be a

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229 Quoted in Bertram Wyatt-Brown, Yankee Saints and Southern Sinners (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985), 203.

candidate for the presidency, or would I have it, if tendered me without opposition."  

After the battle of Monterrey, however, his attitude had changed somewhat, probably because of the manner in which he had been treated by the Polk administration. In March, 1847, Taylor penned, "I am more satisfied that Scott, Marcy & Co. have been more anxious to break me down, than they have been to break down Santa Anna, & the Mexicans." By the summer of 1847, Taylor still asserted that "I have no aspirations in that way," but now he allowed that,

if the good people think my services important in that station and elect me, I will feel bound to serve them ... Should I ever occupy the White House, it must be by the spontaneous move of the people and by no act

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231 Zachary Taylor to R. C. Wood, June 30, 1846, Letters of Zachary Taylor from the Battle-Fields of the Mexican War (Rochester, NY: Genesee Press, 1908), 22. See also, Zachary Taylor to N. Young, July 18, 1846, Zachary Taylor Papers, series 2, Library of Congress. In this letter, he lectured: "My opinion has always been against the elevation of a military chief to that position. We must have a statesman able to control the people at home and elevate the credit of the country abroad."

232 On Taylor's political rise, see Hamilton, Zachary Taylor, II, 38-133. See also, Zachary Taylor to R. C. Wood, December 10, 1846, Letters of Zachary Taylor from the Battle-Fields of the Mexican War, 76.

of mine, so that I could go into the office untrammeled & be the chief
Magistrate of the nation and not of a party.\textsuperscript{234}

In another letter in August 1847, Taylor's Whiggish leanings also became apparent. He admitted that he had never voted in a presidential election, but if he had in 1844 it would have been for Henry Clay.\textsuperscript{235} In September, Taylor confided to R. C. Wood: "On the subject of the presidency between ourselves I do not care a fig about the office."\textsuperscript{236}

By the spring of 1848, he certainly was acting as if he gave a fig.\textsuperscript{237} In a widely reprinted letter to Kentucky tobacco farmer John S. Allison, Taylor courted Whig voters with the claim that, "I am a whig, but not an ultra whig."\textsuperscript{238} However, he left the door

\textsuperscript{234}Edward Delony to Thomas Ritchie, July 9, 1847, copy of letter from Zachary Taylor to Edward Delony, June 9, 1847, Ritchie-Harrison Papers, Special Collections, Earl Gregg Swem Library, Manuscripts and Rare Books Department, College of William and Mary. The letter was widely reprinted across the nation. See Huntsville Southern Advocate, August 27, 1847. See also, Zachary Taylor to R. C. Wood, June 23, 1847, Letters of Zachary Taylor from the Battle-Fields of the Mexican War, 110; Zachary Taylor to Jefferson Davis, August 16, 1847, Papers of Jefferson Davis, Vol. 3, 209, 212; Zachary Taylor to John J. Crittenden, May 15, 1847, John Crittenden Papers, Library of Congress.

\textsuperscript{235}Zachary Taylor to F. S. Bronson, August 10, 1847, reprinted in the Huntsville Southern Advocate, October 16, 1847. See also, Zachary Taylor to R. C. Wood, August 5, 1847, Letters of Zachary Taylor from the Battle-Fields of the Mexican War, 122.

\textsuperscript{236}Zachary Taylor to R. C. Wood, September 14, 1847, Letters of Zachary Taylor from the Battle-Fields of the Mexican War, 130. See also, Zachary Taylor to Jefferson Davis, September 18, 1847, Papers of Jefferson Davis, Vol. 3, 220.

\textsuperscript{237}See Zachary Taylor to John Crittenden, March 25, July 1, 1848, John Crittenden Papers, Library of Congress. In these letters, Taylor advised Crittenden that he would neither withdraw from the campaign in favor of Henry Clay, nor would he commit to serving only one term if elected.

\textsuperscript{238}Zachary Taylor to J. S. Allison, April 22, 1848, reprinted in Huntsville Southern Advocate, May 5, 1848. See also, Zachary Taylor to Jefferson Davis, February 16, 1848, April 20, 1848, Papers of Jefferson Davis, Vol. 3, 268-69, 304-6, 310; Niles National Register, Vol. LXXIV, September 27, 1848, 199-201.
open to those of other political persuasions by adding: ‘If elected I would not be the mere President of a party. I would endeavor to act independent of party domination.’\textsuperscript{239} Taylor meant what he said, for he never openly committed to the traditional issues that the Whigs held dear, namely a national bank, internal improvements, and a protective tariff. Significantly, he did not rule out the enactment of a Whig economic program either, for he said that he would both comply with the wishes of the people as expressed by their representatives in Congress and use the veto only in cases where legislation appeared unconstitutional. In other words, if Congress passed a Whig economic program Taylor would support it. In a second letter to John Allison produced for public consumption in September, 1848, he declared that ‘I would not be a partisan President.’\textsuperscript{240} Nor would he turn down Democratic support, if it were offered to him free of any restrictions. This letter appeared after Taylor had accepted the Whig nomination for president. At no time did he take a public stance on the great political issue of the day, the disposition of slavery in any land acquired during the war with Mexico.

As the November election approached, Old Rough and Ready was still firmly planted in the middle of the road, even if he leaned to the Whig side of it. The modern cynic could view, and some contemporaries did view, Taylor’s stance as being purposefully vague. However, he repeated the same beliefs both in public and in his

\textsuperscript{239} Zachary Taylor to J. S. Allison, April 22, 1848, reprinted in Huntsville \textit{Southern Advocate}, May 5, 1848.

\textsuperscript{240} Zachary Taylor to J. S. Allison, September 4, 1848, reprinted in \textit{Louisiana Planter's Banner and Louisiana Agriculturalist}, September 21, 1848.
private letters to friends. As a political outsider, Taylor appears not to have grasped the realities of party politics in the Jacksonian era. Political controversy during the Age of Jackson was not simply a battle of principles. Indeed, both southern Democrats and Whigs understood that Taylor's nonpartisan stance was rooted in traditional republican concerns over the baneful influence of faction on political life. But patronage was also at stake. Thus many antebellum politicos and their supporters had an intrenched self-interest in the electoral success or failure of their particular political party or faction. Taylor and some who supported him underestimated the strength of the ties that bound the Jacksonian political system together.²⁴¹ It seems as if the political dogma in vogue at the time of Taylor's youth had remained unchanged over the years to emerge when he was unexpectedly forced onto the political stage. In this sense, Zachary Taylor appears politically naive. Ideologically, he truly was a throwback to an earlier era.

Zachary Taylor thought that a decline in public virtue as manifested by party strife was one of the primary causes of the difficulties that confronted the nation. He wrote to Jefferson Davis, his former son-in-law, that:

No one can possible regret the violence of party or the unhappy effects of [the same] more than I do; it has besides other evils interrupted neighborhood intercourse, among people who had been raised together, & allways friends until party was carried to such great lengths. [sic]²⁴²

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²⁴¹In his magisterial The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party: Jacksonian Politics and the Onset of the Civil War (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), Michael F. Holt argues that "the cohesive force of interparty conflict held it [the Whig party] together." (pg. 331)

²⁴²Zachary Taylor to Jefferson Davis, September 18, 1847, Papers of Jefferson Davis, Vol. 3, 222.
In another letter, Taylor asserted "the love of party with many without there [sic] being aware of it, is stronger than the love of country."\(^\text{243}\) He believed that "the sages & heroes of the revolution ... who acted for their Country & not for themselves" had created as perfect a way of government as possible.\(^\text{244}\) It was up to the descendants of those first virtuous patriots "to transmit [it] whole and unimpaired from generation to generation, to the end of time."\(^\text{245}\) Taylor was not alone in his belief that the Union was sacrosanct. For example, Reverend Moses D. Hoge echoed Taylor's sentiments in a 1847 Forth of July oration in Richmond, Virginia; the Union, he said, was "bequeathed to this generation as a sacred trust for posterity."\(^\text{246}\) Likewise, in a circular to their constituents in 1849, southern congressmen Howell Cobb, Linn Boyd, Beverly Clarke, and John Lumpkin asserted: "This Union is the rock upon which the God of nations has built his political church."\(^\text{247}\) Reliance upon the Constitution and a return to the public-mindedness of the past were Taylor's prescriptions for the ills that plagued the Republic.\(^\text{248}\)

\(^{243}\)Zachary Taylor to R. C. Wood, February 18, 1848, *Letters of Zachary Taylor from the Battle-Fields of the Mexican War*, 153-54.

\(^{244}\)Zachary Taylor to Jefferson Davis, September 18, 1847, *Papers of Jefferson Davis*, Vol. 3, 222.

\(^{245}\)Ibid.

\(^{246}\)Richmond Whig, July 9, 1847.


Many southerners shared Taylor's belief that a self-interested devotion to party was the root cause of the nation's problems. North Carolina Whig Senator Willie Mangum, who initially supported Henry Clay's bid for the Whig presidential nomination, attributed the "spontaneous combustion" of Taylor's political star, in part, to "an unreflecting but a virtuous & laudable desire to lessen the fierceness of party Conflict." At a nonpartisan Taylor rally in Mobile, John J. Campbell asserted that "party distinctions and differences that have so long disturbed the peace of this country should find their termination." Citizens at a meeting in New Kent County, Virginia proclaimed "that the high state of party feeling, which has existed for the last twelve or fifteen years, has been deleterious both to our interests and to our social relations." North Carolinian James Graham lamented: "We have ultra Whigs, ultra Democrats here, and it seems to me, in both of them every vestige of Patriotism is lost in blind devotion to bigotry and to Party." Calhounite Joseph W. Lesesne recognized "the necessity of breaking to pieces the corrupt party combinations." In 1846, Georgian Wilson Lumpkin moaned: "All the political parties of the present day, have become

249 Willie P. Mangum to William A. Graham, January 23, 1848, Papers of Willie Person Mangum, Vol. 5, 94.

250 Tuscaloosa Independent Monitor, July 20, 1847.

251 Richmond Whig, May 25, 1847.


most awfully corrupt. ... [T]he leaders, ... are mere party men, regardless of the great interests of the country."\textsuperscript{254} In Baton Rouge, T. B. Thorpe wrote that at the funeral of the Republic: "I expect to be the only mourner, every one else, both Whigs and Democrats seem eager to apply the fatal torch."\textsuperscript{255}

If the problem was party strife, the solution appeared obvious—the election of a man above party, a second Washington, to guide the nation. That man was, of course, Zachary Taylor. As historian Michael Holt has claimed, "the attempt to portray Taylor as a nonpartisan, even anti-party, people's candidate eventually proved to be his campaign's most important aspect."\textsuperscript{256} An Alabama newspaper agreed. The basis of Taylor's popularity as a political candidate, affirmed the Independent Monitor, was that "there was nothing about his character that connected him with party hacks or party contests."\textsuperscript{257} Another Whig contender for the nomination, former Associate Supreme Court Justice John McLean of Ohio, also proclaimed himself a nonpartisan unity candidate, but McLean simply did not grasp the public's mind as Taylor had, especially in the South.\textsuperscript{258} Indeed, to all intents and purposes McLean's no-party stance is best understood as a keen assessment of the mood of the nation on the part of an ambitious

\textsuperscript{254}Wilson Lumpkin to John C. Calhoun, May 3, 1846, Correspondence Addressed to John C. Calhoun, 346-47. See also, Wilson Lumpkin to John C. Calhoun, August 27, 1847, ibid., 395.

\textsuperscript{255}Baton Rouge Gazette, July 7, 1847.

\textsuperscript{256}Holt, The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party, 270.

\textsuperscript{257}Tuscaloosa Independent Monitor, July 6, 1847.

politician rather than a heartfelt desire for reform on McLean's part. At any rate, southerners paid little attention to McLean's ramblings in Ohio. Their focus, or at least the focus of those who agreed that party strife must end for the sake of national salvation, was on Old Rough and Ready. It is difficult to assess just how many people were involved in the "No Party" movement for Taylor. What can be said is that almost every southern state appears to have been affected by it to some extent. Among the states of the Deep South only Texas, seemed immune to Taylor's no-party stance.\(^{259}\) New Orleans was a hotbed of no-party Taylor sentiment.\(^{260}\) In South Carolina, Democrat William Gilmore Simms urged the formation of "Taylor clubs."\(^{261}\) In a letter to James Henry Hammond, Simms colorfully affirmed that the general "will assist in breaking down the System, and in laying a host of selfish greybeards upon the shelf forever."\(^{262}\) Nonpartisan Taylor meetings occurred in Kentucky, Tennessee, Mississippi, Alabama, Louisiana, Virginia, North Carolina, Georgia, and South Carolina.\(^{263}\) Typically, at a nonpartisan Taylor rally held in Montgomery on November

\(^{259}\) Hamilton, Zachary Taylor, II, 108.

\(^{260}\) Dallas C. Dickey, Seargent S. Prentiss: Whig Orator of the Old South (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1946), 314-15.


\(^{262}\) William Gilmore Simms to James Henry Hammond, May 1, 1847, ibid, Vol. II, 311.

17, 1847, citizens expressed the hope that Old Rough and Ready could "break down the fearfully increasing spirit of faction." A Virginian wrote in 1847 that there are those "who contend that a fusion of parties [behind Zachary Taylor] would tend to break down that bitterness of party feeling which they say is well calculated to destroy not only political but social democracy." In December, 1847, the *North Carolina Standard*, a leading Democratic paper, made a point of denying that the general was a "*Henry Clay Whig.*" Taylor's no-party stance probably influenced more southerners than were willing to openly commit to him as an independent candidate.

The nonpartisan "Taylor as Washington" likeness held great appeal for many Calhounites too. As historian J. Mills Thornton has argued the Taylor image fit well with the "'Calhounites' own personal myth: the stern Roman virtue of some unbending Old Republican lifting America above the corruption of parties and the competition for spoils to the golden past when Calhoun had received the admiration of a nation rather than of one section only." Thus many Calhounites began to wonder if Taylor might

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264 huntsville Southern Advocate, December 12, 1847. For similar sentiments, see Planter's Banner and Louisiana Agriculturalist, July 6, July 18, 1848.

265 A. G. Southall to Thomas Ritchie, June 6, 1847, Ritchie-Harrison Papers, Special Collections, Earl Gregg Swem Library, Manuscripts and Rare Books Department, College of William and Mary.

266 North Carolina Standard, December 12, 1847.

be the hoped for Messiah. Calhoun, however, divined that at heart Taylor was a nationalist and, thus, the rights and interests of the South were at risk in a Taylor administration. Calhoun’s version of the ideal republican leader had a decidedly sectional twist. By the 1830’s, Calhoun had come to believe that slavery constituted an essential ingredient for republican government. Hence, the South’s peculiar institution must be protected in order to ensure the perpetuity of the Union. It followed that any candidate for chief magistrate should openly declare his position on the slavery issue and this Taylor refused to do. Many of Calhoun’s followers reluctantly agreed with his assessment of Taylor. As H. W. Conner explained to fellow Calhounite Armistead Burt in early 1848, “If we are to go for Genl. Taylor & it looks very much to me as if it may be our only alternative—it should be at a proper time & in a proper way.

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269 Hamilton, Zachary Taylor, II, 409.

It should be upon principles & a declaration of them.”271 Many of Calhoun’s followers, like Calhoun himself, eventually backed away from Taylor, in part because they feared that his position on the controversial Wilmot Proviso was not pro-southern enough, and in part because Taylor’s candidacy did not jibe well with their dream of a southern party.272 For Calhoun and his followers, the destruction of the national party system as it operated in the South was a worthy goal only if it was replaced by a southern party that unified the section in defense of its rights. With southerners united on issues of vital self-interest, the region could effectively exercise its increasingly limited electoral power both to protect its rights and to preserve the Union.273

Some southern Whigs idealistically endorsed Taylor’s nonpartisan, old republican stance. A group of Virginia Whigs led by William Cabell Rives gloried in Old Zack’s image as a throwback to the golden age of the Republic.274 In the words of a historian of the antebellum Whigs, Rives supporters “sought to replace the Whig party


273 My thoughts on Calhoun’s brand of Unionism are based, in part, on John Niven, John C. Calhoun and the Price of Union: A Biography (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988).

274 On Rives’ adherence to “old republican” ideas, see McCoy, The Last of the Fathers, 323-369. See also Rives’ speech to the ratification meeting in Albemarle, Virginia, reprinted in Richmond Whig, July 14, 1848.
with a new organization dedicated to the nonpartisan, republican principles they associated with Jefferson, Madison and Monroe.”\textsuperscript{275} In the state platform written at a convention in Lexington, Rives and his followers wrote: “The Whigs of Virginia recognize a recurrence to the original and better days of the Republic.”\textsuperscript{276} In Taylor’s hands, the government, they claimed, was sure to conform “to those republican landmarks” of the past.\textsuperscript{277} Likewise, the editor of the \textit{Savannah Republican}, a Georgia Whig newspaper, preferred “to sustain the hero even more strongly, because of his manly determination to ascend the Presidential chair with unfettered hands, as a freeman should.”\textsuperscript{278}

Of course, not all southerners felt the same way about party loyalty during the Jacksonian era as those described above. Many southern Whigs did not willingly rally behind the banner of Old Rough and Ready and even when they did support him it did not necessarily constitute a wholehearted acceptance of his nonpartisan stance.\textsuperscript{279} In their private letters, some Whigs expressed concerns about Taylor’s proposed candidacy. One concern was the traditional republican worry that a military man did...
not have the makings of a good president in a republic.\textsuperscript{280} For example, South Carolina Whig James E. Harvey fretted that Taylor’s popularity threatened “[the] evil of a military despotism.”\textsuperscript{281} In a similar manner, Mississippian Paul Barringer lamented, “I am sorry to think that we shall have a Military candidate for President. I should much prefer some other man.”\textsuperscript{282} However, the most prevalent fear among loyal southern Whigs was that Taylor was not enough of a party man. In March, 1848, a Mississippi Whig stated flatly: “I want no man unless he is Whig on the old issues, Bank, Tariff, Internal Improvements—Distribution.”\textsuperscript{283} Whig leader Willie Mangum wrote “I would not & will not vote for Gen: Taylor … No man ‘can ride on both sides of the sapling’ at one & the same time.”\textsuperscript{284} He continued that, “the dreamers in this Utopian experiment [Taylor’s candidacy], do not sufficiently consider the obstacles interposed by the State

\textsuperscript{280} For an alternative to the view that military men did not make good political leaders, see “A Civilian,” “Connection Between the Qualities of a Great Commander and a Great Statesman,” \textit{Southern Literary Messenger}, Vol. 14, no. 8 (August 1848): 504-506; Tuscaloosa \textit{Independent Monitor}, March 3, 1848.

\textsuperscript{281} James E. Hervey to Willie P. Mangum, June 3, 1847, \textit{Papers of Willie Person Mangum}, Vol. 5, 66. See also, \textit{Greensbourgh Patriot}, May 15, 1847.

\textsuperscript{282} Paul B. Barringer to Daniel M. Barringer, January 1, 1848, folder13, Daniel Moreau Barringer Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

\textsuperscript{283} Paul B. Barringer to Daniel M. Barringer, March 6, 1848, folder 13, Daniel Moreau Barringer Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

\textsuperscript{284} Willie P. Mangum to William A. Graham, January 23, 1848, \textit{Papers of Willie Person Mangum}, Vol. 5, 93.
of party."285 A few months later, Mangum explained simply that a "No-Party stand cannot be held."286 Like many Whig regulars, Mangum preferred Henry Clay, the party's traditional icon, to Zachary Taylor.287 Henry Clay remained popular among the rank and file, although most Whig leaders in the South, including Mangum himself, came to recognize that Clay stood little chance of being elected in 1848.288 Clay's reputation as a three-time loser did little to enhance his chances for a fourth run at the presidency. Georgia Whig Robert Toombs believed that although Clay still possessed the power to "ruin" the party he no longer "ruled" it as he once had.289 Even Taylor

285 *Ibid.* See also, Paul B. Barringer to Daniel M. Barringer, January 1, 1848, folder 13, Daniel Moreau Barringer Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.


289 Robert Toombs to James Thomas, April 16, 1848, *Correspondence of Robert M. Toombs, Alexander H. Stephens, and Howell Cobb*, 103-4. See also, Robert Toombs to James Thomas, May 1, 1848, *ibid.*, 104-5. Toombs attributed the gradual decrease in Clay's popularity in the South to the fact that he had "sold himself body and soul to the Northern Anti-slavery Whigs" in an effort to gain the Whig nomination. "His friends in Georgia," asserted Toombs, "will find themselves embarrassed before the campaign is half over." (Robert Toombs to James Thomas, April 16, 1848, *ibid.*, 104.) See also, D. L. Barringer to Daniel Moreau Barringer, May 22, 1848, Folder 13, Daniel Moreau Barringer Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina as Chapel Hill. Robert Remini also attributes Clay's decline in popularity, in part, to his stance on slavery, which angered southern Whigs and did not go far enough to satisfy many northern ones. (Remini, *Henry Clay*, 705-6.)
men, like Alexander Stephens and Robert Toombs, supported the general not because they wholeheartedly believed in his "no-party" ideas, but because they figured that, in part, they could use his candidacy as a lever to gain control of their state party organizations. Stephens and Toombs, however, were not motivated only by political motives. Others who climbed on the Taylor bandwagon were well aware of the patronage advantages to be gained if a Whig were elected. Some just thought he could win and, thus, save the nation from the supposed dangers of Locofocoism.290

Whig regulars were not the only ones to lament the strong no-party aspect of Taylor’s candidacy. Southern Democrats also recognized that Taylor was a man who could draw defectors from their own ranks. Typically, Virginia Democrat A. G. Southall wrote to the editor of the Polk administration’s newspaper, Thomas Ritchie, that “some distinguished leaders of our party” supported Taylor’s candidacy.291 If Taylor was elected, Southall foresaw “a fusion of parties,” a prospect that he did not view with glee.292

In the end, most southern Whigs agreed that Zachary Taylor possessed one crucial characteristic for a presidential candidate—popularity. Southern Whigs fully expected the nation’s foremost living hero to garner winning vote tallies come election


291A. G. Southall to Thomas Ritchie, June 6, 1847, Ritchie-Harrison Papers, Special Collections, Earl Gregg Swem Library, Manuscripts and Rare Books Department, College of William and Mary.

292Ibid.
day. In their quest for the aid of gunpowder to improve their chances in the presidential election however, southern Whigs did possess a ready alternative to Zachary Taylor—Winfield Scott. Scott possessed many attributes that appealed to Whig regulars—he was a war hero, he was a Virginian and hence could be counted on to gain votes in the South, and last but certainly not least he was also a good Whig. Scott did not, however, elicit the same response from the public as Taylor. Simply put, Old Rough and Ready was a man to be loved, while Scott was not. Both garnered laurels aplenty on the battlefields of the Mexican War, but Scott lacked Taylor's mass appeal. Scott was honored to be sure, but he never entered the consciousness of the public in quite the way that Taylor did.\(^293\) Alabama Whig Joseph Baldwin noted that:

"Somehow—why it is hard to say—Scott, although he has impressed the intellect, never has *daguerreotyped* himself, like Washington ... & Taylor, upon the popular heart."\(^294\)

William B. Campbell, who would become the victorious Whig candidate for governor of Tennessee after the war, aptly summed up the two men's differences in a letter home:

Taylor is the people's man ... Genl. Scott makes no such impression as old Rough and Ready. And Scott will be able to make no shew against Taylor. I like Genl. Scott very well, but he is a vary vain, and light man,

\(^{293}\)On Scott's liabilities as a presidential candidate, see Holt, *The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party*, 317-18.

but of great acquirements and genius, but too much effort to be agreeable
to be popular. ... [He] will never reach the Presidency, I predict. [sic]295

South Carolina Whig stalwart Waddy Thompson also noted Scott’s vanity and talent:
“what a strange combination his character presents of all that is finicking [sic] &
affected in manners with all that is gallant and wise in action.”296 After Scott’s
confinement of Taylor to a secondary role in Northern Mexico, a New Orleans Whig
wrote “that it will be set down to the score of jealousy.”297 Finally, the embarrassing
and well-publicized falling out between the Polk administration and Scott in the Spring
and Summer of 1846, the so-called “hasty plate of soup” affair, lingered in the public’s
consciousness and presented an avenue of attack that Democrats were sure to follow.298
Indeed, Mississippi Democrat Joseph Davis assessed Scott’s character and chances for
public office in words with which many southern Whigs would agree: “The selfishness

Campbell, of Tennessee, written to Governor David Campbell, of Virginia, 1846-1847,”
Tennessee Historical Magazine, 19:2 (1915): 161. See also, William Bowen Campbell
to David Campbell, March 29, 1847, ibid., 166.

296 Waddy Thompson to Willie P. Mangum, October, 29, 1847, Papers of Willie
Person Mangum, Vol. 5, 85.

297 E. J. Foster to Willie P. Mangum, February 8, 1847, ibid., 37.

298 When the war began, Scott, who had already begun his presidential campaign,
commenced to openly criticize the Polk administration. Polk believed that Scott’s
actions verged on insubordination. Polk then retracted an earlier offer to Scott of
command of the Army of Observation, news of which Scott claimed he received “as I
sat down to take a hasty plate of soup.” (Page 442) See Charles Sellars, James K. Polk:
also, Joseph G. Baldwin to George B. Saunders, June 12, 1848, in McMillian, ed.,
of Southern History, Vol. 25 (1959): 373. Baldwin realized that political liability that
this affair represented.
and vanity of Genl. Scott must ever detract from his merit . . . [H]e may win laurels but
. . . he is never to rise to distinction in civil life."

Due to the steadfast support of a large portion of the southern wing of the party, Taylor eventually won the Whig nomination at the national convention in the Summer of 1848. Whatever their private feelings, most southern Whigs jumped on the Taylor bandwagon and extolled his republican qualities. In response to Mississippi Democratic Senator Henry S. Foote’s assault on Taylor as “an ignorant, equivocating, electioneering character,” North Carolina Whig Senator Willie Mangum, who at one time swore he would never support Taylor, shot back “I . . . look out for a safe resting-place for the country and its great interests in this crisis of troubles and portentous change. I think I see safety in . . . General Taylor.” Later in the same speech, Mangum declared that Taylor possessed “virtue, . . . moderation, and . . . bravery” equal to that of George Washington. Likewise, Alabamian Joseph Baldwin, who once supported Henry Clay’s bid for the Whig nomination in 1848, asserted that Taylor was

299Joseph E. Davis to Jefferson Davis, May 13, 1847, Papers of Jefferson Davis, Vol. 3, 172. Significantly, Davis followed this tart assessment of Scott with the admission that he had “been anxious to know something of Genl. Taylor.”


302Ibid., 690.
no ordinary politician: “There is much that reminds us of Washington: ... his aim will be when in office to bring back the government to the simple track in which it was set by Washington & the earlier fathers.”

The Whig propaganda machine kicked into high gear in the months leading up to the election of 1848 and flooded the public with the image of Taylor as the model republican statesman both in print and at public meetings. *A Sketch of the Life and Public Services of Gen. Zachary Taylor, the People's Candidate for the Presidency* appeared in New Orleans in 1848 and was typical of the short political biographies distributed by southern Whigs. The pamphlet recounted the image that was by now familiar to southern readers in brief chapters with titles like “A Soldier by Profession, and Yet a Man of Peace,” “Morality and Temperance,” and “Modesty and Unassuming Manners.” In a chapter entitled “His Position Before the Country—His Resemblance to Washington,” the author argued that Old Rough and Ready “stands on elevated ground.”

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305 *A Sketch of the Life and Public Services of Gen. Zachary Taylor, the People's Candidate*, 20-23.

He knows no sectional feeling .... His heart is with the Union, and all his hopes and all his wishes are for its integrity and preservation. ... He is a Whig in principle ... but recognizes no other platform beyond a close observance of the Constitution, and an honest devotion to the best interests of the whole people. He is no partisan, and nothing will lead him to do a mean thing .... He ... is ... the child of the Republic.307

During 1848, the Richmond Whig produced a steady drumbeat of articles that emphasized Taylor’s Washington-like characteristics.308 In a July article comparing the relative virtues of the Democratic candidate for president, Lewis Cass of Michigan, with those of Taylor the Whig concluded that “General Taylor is a citizen soldier of acknowledged patriotism, purity and firmness ... and would if elected, secure to the country a mild, equitable and pacific policy.”309 In contrast, the Whig claimed that “Gen, Cass is ... a restless agitator, fond of intrigue and party excitement, of a bellicose disposition, and unsettled principles;—whose administration ... would be one of change and storm, of peril and distress.”310 In a speech before a ratification meeting for Taylor in Albemarle, Virginia, William Cabell Rives asserted that the general “is a Republican of the old school— of the school of Jefferson and Madison.”311 Rives hailed Taylor as “the nation’s destined deliverer, under Providence, from a long course of misrule.”312

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307Ibid.

308For example, see Richmond Whig, January, 14, 18, February 29, May 26, July 7, 1848.

309Richmond Whig, July 7, 1848.

310Ibid. For a similar assessment of Cass, see New Orleans Daily Crescent, June 1 1848.

311Richmond Whig, July 14, 1848.

312Ibid.
From Cass in contrast, "the country could expect nothing but a continuation of the same dangerous and fatal course" of executive usurpation of powers that rightly belonged to Congress.\footnote{Ibid.} In October, the \textit{Galveston Weekly News} published the text of a speech delivered by General Memacan Hunt in support of Taylor's candidacy. "Before God!" exclaimed Hunt, "I shall choose the man, who glories in the good old virtues of the times of Washington, who declares that he will model his administration after that of the father of his country, and who never fails to remind his visitors of the two greatest men America ever produced ... Washington ... and ... Benjamin Franklin."\footnote{\textit{Galveston Weekly News}, October 10, 1848.} At public meetings like the one organized by Whig newspaper editor Alexander Bullitt in New Orleans in June, 1848, speakers praised Old Rough and Ready as "a monument of patriotism and public service."\footnote{William Adams, "Louisiana and the Presidential Election of 1848," \textit{Louisiana History}, Vol. 4 (1963): 138.} At an Iberville Parish gathering, Louisiana Whig T. B. Townes crowed: "Gen. Taylor will be found as a civilian, to be as much like Washington as he is in judgement and humanity. ... [He] is yet to display greater judgement and greater ability as a chief magistrate, than he ever did as a commander in chief."\footnote{\textit{Baton Rouge Gazette}, September 30, 1848.}

Of course, Zachary Taylor's republican character was not the only issue of the presidential campaign of 1848. The ominous question of the disposition of slavery in the newly acquired Mexican territory loomed over the country during the summer and
fall of 1848. Joseph Rayback, who has written the most comprehensive study of the election of 1848, calls slavery “The Issue” of the campaign.\textsuperscript{317} Rayback is not alone. Indeed, it has become something of a truism of antebellum political history that the slavery controversy dominated the presidential race of 1848.\textsuperscript{318} Thus, historians have most often interpreted the campaign as one in which the question of which candidate best protected the region’s peculiar institution was of primary importance. Southern voters did indeed ask this question. Both southern Democrats and Whigs argued that half of the other party’s ticket was not safe on the slavery issue.\textsuperscript{319} In an aggressive style typical of each party’s newspapers, a November issue of the Whiggish \textit{Baton Rouge Gazette} asserted that “you cannot vote for William O. Butler [of Kentucky for vice-president] without voting for Cass the Abolitionist.”\textsuperscript{320} This same paper then advised the “Citizens of the South” to “rally to the support of Gen. Zachary Taylor. He is identified with your … rights and institutions. In his hands your interests will be safe.”\textsuperscript{321} Likewise, southern Democrats assaulted Taylor’s running mate, Millard Fillmore of New York, as a holder of anti-slavery feelings. In addition, they pointed


\textsuperscript{318}See note 25 in this chapter.


\textsuperscript{320}\textit{Baton Rouge Gazette}, November 11, 1848. See also, \textit{Baton Rouge Gazette}, October 11, 1848; \textit{Richmond Whig}, July 14, 1848.

\textsuperscript{321}\textit{Baton Rouge Gazette}, November 11, 1848.
out that Taylor himself never publically took a stand on the Proviso. They were right, for no matter how often the Whig press pointed out the general’s southern credentials as a substantial slaveholder and a long-time resident of the region, he remained a Sphinx-like enigma where the Proviso was concerned.

To some voters, Taylor’s supposed pro-southern leanings were undoubtedly the salient aspect of his appeal. This should not surprise us, for Old Zack possessed all by which southern society measured success—an unassailable reputation as a man of honor and large holdings of slaves and fertile land. South Carolinian William Gilmore Simms, for example, had no doubts as to the general’s attachment to the South’s interests, especially slavery. Simms asserted that: “it strikes me that the necessity for Taylor’s election grows more & more apparent. … [T]he vital matter is abolition.” In 1847, Beverly Tucker wrote to James Henry Hammond that Taylor was a “God-send” to the South. In a similar manner, the New Orleans Bee asserted that “the importance of placing at the head of the Government one whom from birth, association, and

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323 Holman Hamilton estimates Taylor’s estate as worth between $135,000 and $140,000. In the 1840s, Taylor possessed two plantations, Cyprus Grove and a another in West Feliciana Parish, a considerable stock and mortgage portfolio, warehouses and land in Louisville, Kentucky, slaves valued at over $50,000, and a large cash account in the bank of Maunsell White and Company. Hamilton, Zachary Taylor, II, 33.


conviction is identified with the South ... cannot fail to strike every candid mind."\textsuperscript{326}

The \textit{Florida Sentinel} succinctly argued: "Just as long as the Wilmot Proviso is an open question, WE ARE FOR A SOUTHERN MAN AND A SLAVEHOLDER FOR THE PRESIDENCY."\textsuperscript{327} General Taylor, declared the \textit{Savannah Republican}, "is a Southern man and a Slaveholder—one of ourselves."\textsuperscript{328} Southern voters, however, did not only consider the campaign of 1848 through the lens of sectionalism. Many were also deeply concerned about the health of the Republic. They perceived that the slavery controversy was but one reflection of a deeper problem, the degeneracy of the present generation of Americans. If the nation could only return to the golden days of its youth, a time of unity when the nation was led by patriotic and virtuous statesmen, perhaps the crisis of the present would pass. In the midst of the controversy over Texas' annexation in 1844, an author in the \textit{Southern Quarterly Review} wrote:

\begin{quote}
[W]e, a degenerate progeny, look up, and ... would rouse ourselves and countrymen by the recollections of brighter days. ... Be present, high and exalted examples of patriotic virtue,—be present, melancholy \textit{manes} of those who sealed their with their blood the compact of our freedom,—
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{326}\textit{New Orleans Bee} quoted in \textit{Pennsylvanian}, May 12, 1847, quoted in Rayback, \textit{Free Soil}, 42.

\textsuperscript{327}\textit{Florida Sentinel} quoted in \textit{Boston Times}, November 13, 1847, quoted in Rayback, \textit{Free Soil}, 42.

\textsuperscript{328}\textit{Savannah Republican}, September 13, 1848.
... be present, that we may be cheered, in these the days of direst need, by your glorious example.\textsuperscript{329}

Likewise, as the argument over the Wilmot Proviso raged in the Summer of 1847, a southern essayist asked:

The past is certain. Deeds of valor—great conceptions—high patriotism—penetrating sagacity—inflexible firmness—ardent enthusiasm for the rights of man—all these have been exhibited by the heroes of our antiquity; but who will ensure us against that fatal degeneracy, which has marked the history of the proudest empires on earth?\textsuperscript{330}

The theme of "wise and virtuous ancestors, degenerate and unworthy sons," as well as that of the defense of southern rights, frequently echoed across the South during the 1840s.\textsuperscript{331}

The creation and appeal of the "Taylor as Washington" likeness was not an accident. Southerners associated Washington, who had long been the foremost icon of the cult of the union, with General Taylor because they perceived that they needed a leader who embodied the values that Washington represented to lead them through both their nation's and their section's time of trial. Because of the power of the image of


\textsuperscript{331}McCoy, \textit{The Last of the Fathers}, 345.
Taylor as the republican savior of the nation, many southerners were content with their belief that somehow having a second Washington in the White House would resolve the problems confronting the nation to everyone's satisfaction. In addition, perhaps some southerners proved so willing to accept the Taylor image because it was inconceivable to them that Taylor as an old republican, a slaveholding man of honor, and a model of the best that the section could produce would ever do anything to hurt their common interests. The equation of Washington with Taylor was but one manifestation of a larger trend in the late 1840s and early 1850s to memorialize the Founding Father. These memorials in stone and print served as a clarion call to return to the old republican values for which Washington stood and to protect the Republic which he founded. Congress unanimously agreed on a program of commemoration for Washington on December 24, 1799. Almost half a century later in 1848, the nation finally began work on the Washington Monument in the nation’s capitol.

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332 For a similar assessment of southerners' view of Taylor's candidacy, albeit one focused on the Whigs, see Holt, *The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party*, 268-71.

333 Bryan, *George Washington in American Literature, 1775-1865*, 237, 239. Bryan argues that the contemporary American villains which Washington was invoked to fight were ideas, such as political factionalism, self-interest, and a creeping decline. For an alternative view, see Johanssen, *To the Halls of the Montezumas*, 302-12. Robert Johanssen argues that in 1848 Americans thought that “the republic appeared indestructible.”(Johanssen, *To the Halls of the Montezumas*, 310) Obviously, I differ with this opinion. Johanssen points out that there were those in both the North and South who eulogized the potential future of the Republic. Some, like William Gilmore Simms, who participated in the literary “Young America” movement were privately very worried about the direction in which the nation was heading.


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same year, Louisiana’s legislature voted to commission a statue of Washington. Virginia dedicated the cornerstone of an equestrian monument of Washington in Richmond on his birthday in 1850, a ceremony that Zachary Taylor attended. A movement to purchase and preserve Mount Vernon as a memorial began in the 1850s. The year 1847 marked the high point of publication of cheap paperbacked lives of Washington and Revolutionary thrillers.

A return to the founding values of the Republic seemed to many southerners an answer to the rising tide of sectional acrimony during the late 1840s. Taylor himself certainly viewed the matter in these terms. Although he initially believed that the Proviso was “a mere bugbear, ... a seven days wonder” proposed for political advantage by selfish politicians, Taylor came to understand the deep sectional

\[335\text{ Acts Passed at the Extra Session of the Second Legislature of the State of Louisiana, Held and Begun in the City of New Orleans, on the 4th Day of December, 1848 (New Orleans: Office of the Louisiana Courier, 1848), 46.}\]


antagonisms the Proviso unleashed. If elected, Taylor said that he would act like Washington where the slavery issue was concerned, that is in the best interests of the entire country:

While I would on the question of Slavery respect the opinions & feeling of the non Slave holding states ..., I would be equally careful that no encroachments will be made on the rights the citizens of the slave holding ...; let justice be don[e] to & in every part of the Country ... in accordance to the provisions of the Constitution, which seems to me to be the proper & only course to pursue ... to preserve the Union.

The editor of the Arkansas State Democrat spoke for many other southerners when he argued that:

Looking, then, at the eventful crisis in our nation’s history—the ominous issue involved in the Wilmot Proviso—the injurious results to our civil institutions from a continuation of bitter party spirit, and believing with the immortal Washington ‘that the common and continued mischiefs of the spirit of party are sufficient to make it the interest and duty of a wise people to discourage and restrain it,’ I have cast an anxious eye around among our distinguished countrymen for one to be placed at the helm of state to guide us in safety, who, rising far above all party strife, could be safely trusted to stand firm and unshaken by the guaranties of the constitution in the hour of trial—such an one I find in General Zachary Taylor, the candidate of the people and not of politicians.

In a similar manner, speakers at an Alabama Taylor rally pointed out “the duty of the South to sustain in this crisis, ... a Southern man of the old republican school and of

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340 Zachary Taylor to Jefferson Davis, August 16, 1847, ibid., 210.

341 Arkansas State Democrat, July 7, 1848. See also, Tuscaloosa Independent Monitor, June 22, 1847; Huntsville, Alabama, Southern Advocate, July 30, August 30, December 4, 1847; Richmond Whig, July 9, July 23, 1847, January 18, February 29, 1848; Raleigh North Carolina Standard, September 1, 1847.

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American feelings.” An nonpartisan committee of ten Alabamians issued a proclamation that stated:

It cannot be longer disguised that we are approaching a fearful crisis in our National affairs. ... The North is in the main against us. ... Some man who has never mingled in the strife and turmoil of partisan warfare–some man whose honesty and talents and patriotism cannot be gainsaid–some man at the mention of whose name the whole nation will rally–must be selected to fill the chief place in the Council of the nation. ... Need we point you to Zachary Taylor?

In May, 1848, a Tennessee Whig, who worried that the effect of the growing “spirit of Anti Slavery” upon the health of the Republic, wrote to his brother that, “I cannot divest myself of the opinion that for the sake of the union ... Gen. Taylor is the man for the times.” The editor of the Milledgeville Southern Recorder related that:

The country is surrounded with difficulties of the most serious nature–difficulties which in their settlement may shake the very foundations of institutions–may widen the alienation already existing to an unfortunate extent between the various sections of our country–difficulties, indeed, which must not only be met by the loftiest patriotism, and unshrinking firmness, but which ... will necessarily so invade the feelings, the prejudices, and the determinations of large sections and powerful masses, that it will require a pilot at the helm in whom all confide, and towards whom all entertain the affection, the love and veneration once felt by the whole people for George Washington, and now felt to an almost equal degree for Zachary Taylor, safely and

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344 D. L. Barringer to Daniel Moreau Barringer, May 22, 1848, Folder 13, Daniel Moreau Barringer Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina as Chapel Hill.
successfully to guide the ship of State, and steer her through the stormy billows into a quiet haven.\textsuperscript{345}

He then added that Zachary Taylor was popular in the South not only because of his republican character, but because he was also considered "the Southern candidate: identical with the South in all his feelings, interests, associations, and hopes."\textsuperscript{346} For many, then, Taylor's status as both a republican hero and an honored southerner addressed the dual concerns of protecting slaveholders' rights and preserving the Union.\textsuperscript{347} Historian Robert Shalhope has argued that Americans' "commitment to republicanism allowed them to continue to imagine themselves as members of a virtuous organic society long after the foundations of such a society had eroded."\textsuperscript{348}

The image that southerners created of Old Zack is one manifestation of this dissonance. In 1848, southerners' beliefs in republicanism and their conception of its champion, Zachary Taylor, possessed enough ambiguity to allow southerners to avoid making a choice between national and sectional interests. A second Washington, they knew,

\textsuperscript{345} Milledgeville Southern Recorder, December 10, 1847.

\textsuperscript{346} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{347} Historian Malcolm McMillian argues that southerners viewed Taylor either as a candidate who would protect the South from the Wilmot Proviso, or as a man who would transcend party and sectional lines to unify the nation. McMillian assumes that loyalty to the South and to the Union necessarily conflict. I differ with this view. In 1848, southerners could both love the Union and their section at the same time. Although some undoubtedly calculated the value of the Union, most southerners simply did not perceive the crisis in the nation's political affairs in this way. Preservation of both the Union and their rights within it dominated southerners' thinking on this matter. See, McMillian "Taylor's Presidential Campaign in Alabama, 1847-1848," 83.

could achieve the miracle of reconciling the irreconcilable, of bringing unity where competing interests now reigned. After all, their history books told them so.

On election day, the Republic anointed Zachary Taylor its next president. Proportionally, no region gave Taylor greater support than the South. In the eleven states that would eventually form the Confederacy plus Kentucky, voters cast almost seven hundred thousand votes, approximately forty-two thousand more than they had in 1844. Old Rough and Ready took six of twelve states, fifty-five of one hundred three available electoral votes, and fifty-two percent of the popular vote. These figures belie the magnitude of his victory. In every southern state, Taylor received a greater percentage of the vote than Whig paladin Henry Clay had against James K. Polk in 1844. The general brought Georgia and Louisiana back into the Whig fold and tallied

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349 For analysis of the election returns of the 1848 presidential election, see Rayback, *Free Soil*, 279-287.

350 Ibid., 280-81.

351 In the eleven states that would form the Confederacy plus Kentucky, southerners cast 690,843 votes. Taylor received 359,422 (52%) and Cass 331,421 (48%). Taylor took 6 of twelve states for 55 electoral votes. Cass received 48 electoral votes. The individual state vote totals for Taylor and Cass in the South were: (Taylor votes listed first) Virginia 45,265 (49.2%) 46,739 (50.8%); North Carolina 44,095 (55.2%) 35,810 (44.8%); South Carolina no vote tally, president electors appointed by the legislature, cast all electoral votes for Cass; Georgia 47,511 (51.8%) 44,792 (48.2%); Florida 4,081 (57.5%) 3,014 (42.5%); Kentucky 66,573 (57.7%) 48,792 (42.3%); Tennessee 64,239 (52.5%) 58,227 (47.5%); Alabama 30,482 (49.5%) 31,873 (50.5%); Mississippi 25,821 (49.3%) 26,550 (50.7%); Louisiana 18,487 (54.6%) 15,379 (45.4%); Arkansas 7,587 (44.9%) 9,301 (55.1%); Texas 5,281 (31.2%) 11,644 (68.8%). In 1844 Clay received 316,415 (48.8%) votes and Polk 332,203 (51.2%). Vote totals taken from Rayback, *Free Soil*, 280, 282.

352 This assertion does not apply to South Carolina, where the legislature appointed presidential electors, and, Texas and Florida, which were not states in 1844.
greater support in the traditionally Democratic strongholds of Mississippi and Alabama than any Whig presidential candidate ever had or would. Taylor's closest margin of victory was 3.6 percent in Georgia. In the other five states that went for Taylor, voters gave him majorities of at least five percent. He won by landslides in Kentucky and North Carolina, something that Henry Clay never did. Lewis Cass, on the other hand, registered impressive victories only in Arkansas and Texas and won Virginia, Alabama, and Mississippi by the skin of his teeth with an average victory margin of only 1.3 percent.

Clearly, the South had decided that Taylor was their man, but, even so, a question arises. If Zachary Taylor's image as an ideal republican leader, a second Washington come to save the nation, was as prevalent as I have suggested here, why didn't more than fifty-two percent of southern voters cast their ballot for him? The election of 1848 was not merely a referendum on Taylor's republican credentials. Simply put, when push came to shove party loyalty mattered more to most southern voters than anything else. Party regulars, argues historian Joseph Rayback, "voted for Taylor because he was the candidate of the Whig party and for Cass because he was the candidate of the Democratic party. They would have voted for any other candidate that the Whigs or Democrats might have nominated, regardless of character or principle."353 Old Rough and Ready gained the votes of a substantial number of southern Democratic

defectors to be sure, but overall the election returns manifested the continued strength
of the two-party system in the South.\textsuperscript{354} In 1848, the Whigs increased their vote totals
by over ten percent in the states that had participated in the 1844 election. Despite
Cass’s convincing defeat, the Democrats still retained over ninety-five percent of their
1844 total.

One need look no further than the example of Jefferson Davis to discover just
how strong the ties of party loyalty were. Davis served under Taylor during his entire
tour of duty in Mexico where he developed a close relationship with the old general. It
need not have turned out this way, for, years earlier, Davis married Taylor’s daughter,

\textsuperscript{354}Georgia Democrat Thomas W. Thomas noted that at a 1848 Forth of July
celebration: “Vinson Hubbard, heretofore considered a Democrat, offered a toast the
substance of which was that Gen. Taylor might be elected and fill the office as
Washington did. This looks dangerous.” After the election, another Georgia Democrat,
James Cooper, observed: “As to the turnout our expectations were realized, but
hundreds of democrats have come to the polls only to vote against us. ... The ranks and
file have rebelled by regiments, and yet we do not know and never shall know the
individual traitors.” Mississippi Democrat Francis Baldwin advised Jefferson Davis
that: “I am a democrat a whole democrat & nothing but a democrat. ... In the last
struggle [the election of 1848] upon a review of the whole-ground I felt bound to vote
for General Taylor. Even upon a strict party issue I would have voted against such a
model of human nature with reluctance & as between Taylor & Cass the former
occupying an independent and American position.” Thomas W. Thomas to Howell
Cobb, July 7, 1848, James F. Cooper to Howell Cobb, November 11, 1848, both in
Correspondence of Robert M. Toombs, Alexander H. Stephens, and Howell Cobb, 114-
15, 137; Francis G. Baldwin to Jefferson Davis, November 19, 1848, Papers of

Southern Whigs retained 110.6% of their vote from the 1844 election. Southern
Democrats retained 95.4% of their 1844 total. Southern Whig and Democratic voter
retention rates comparing the presidential elections of 1844 and 1848 at the state level
are as follows: (Whig percentage rates listed first; figures greater than 100% indicate a
net gain in votes) Virginia 104.7\%\textsuperscript{92.1}; North Carolina 104.7\%\textsuperscript{94.7}; Georgia
105.9\%\textsuperscript{94.3}; Kentucky 107\%\textsuperscript{91.7}; Tennessee 104.5\%\textsuperscript{95.4}; Alabama 120.7\%\textsuperscript{83.9};
Mississippi 113.8\%\textsuperscript{89.5}; Arkansas 121.7\%\textsuperscript{87.3}; Louisiana 111.9\%\textsuperscript{88.6}. State
retention data taken from Rayback, Free Soil, 286.
Sarah, against the general’s wishes, resigned from the army, and moved home to Mississippi where his young bride soon died of either malaria or yellow fever.\textsuperscript{355} Whatever animosity existed between the two men as a result appears to have been buried with Sarah. Davis, a prominent Democrat in Mississippi, made no secret of his “warm personal attachment” to the older man.\textsuperscript{356} In a public letter penned to the citizens of Concordia Parish in September, 1847, he praised “the purity, the generosity, and unostentatious magnanimity of his private character. His colossal greatness is presented in the garb of the strictest republican simplicity.”\textsuperscript{357} During 1848, Davis limited his participation in the presidential campaign because, as the Jackson Mississippian put it, “considerations of a private character.”\textsuperscript{358} In a September speech in Raymond, Mississippi, Davis, according to one report, spoke of Taylor “as one of the purest and noblest men the world had ever seen.”\textsuperscript{359} However, he added that the general “must be regarded as identified with the party which had nominated him, and that,


\textsuperscript{357}\textit{Ibid.}

\textsuperscript{358}Jackson \textit{Mississippian}, September 1, 1848, quoted in \textit{ibid.}, 374.

\textsuperscript{359}Vicksburg \textit{Tri-Weekly Whig}, September 26, 1848, article reprinted in \textit{ibid.}, 375.
therefore, he would be obliged to vote for Cass and Butler.” In a speech in Jackson later that month, Davis asserted that: “If any had inferred from the high opinion he had publically expressed of General Taylor … that he would abandon his political faith, … they had fallen into the error of confounding personal estimation with political alliance.” In short, Davis, like most southern Democrats, voted against Taylor because of allegiance to the Democratic party, despite recognizing and admiring his republican qualities.

Many southerners greeted Taylor’s election with jubilation. In November, 1848, Mississippi planter Thomas Dabney’s mother, who had known George Washington personally, believed that Taylor’s election was a sign that “our halcyon days are returning.” “General Taylor,” she wrote, “is a great man, and I hope he will honor the Presidency. It will not honor him, I think, after the scoundrels that preceded him.” Taylor Whig Alexander Stephens explained to his friend John Crittenden:

The real Taylor-men are all right, all disinterested. They look upon the late most glorious achievement as a public deliverance, and not a party victory with no other advantages but the acquisition of a few spoils for the faithful. They look for greater and higher objects—for reform in the

\[360\] Ibid.

\[361\] “Speech at Jackson, delivered September 23, 1848,” Jackson Mississippian, October 20, 1848, article reprinted in ibid., 382.

\[362\] Mrs. Macon to Thomas Dabney, November 25, 1848, reprinted in Susan Dabney Smedes, Memorials of a Southern Planter (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 1981), 118.

\[363\] Ibid., 119.
government, not bounties and rewards for partisan services. ... With his administration is to commence a new era in our history.364

The *National Intelligencer* predicted a quiet Congressional session in December, 1849. The nation, it reasoned, "was prepared for a tranquil reign by Rough and Ready."365

"The fourth of March, 1849," the Whiggish *Intelligencer* crowed, "will revive the heroic age of the Republic."366 In the *Southern Literary Messenger*, an observer who attended Taylor's inauguration hailed the fine weather of the day "as a felicitous augury" for the nation.367 By August however, Samuel J. Peters, Jr., a New Orleanian who had been exuberant when Taylor was inaugurated, lamented: "The whole United States was never in a worse condition than they are at the present moment. President Taylor is detested by all."368 Peters' reactions accurately reflect both the initial excitement and later disappointment that many southerners felt about Taylor's administration. Once in office Old Rough and Ready, no matter how disinterested he might be, confronted the same dilemma that George Washington experienced during his


second term: solving problems meant making difficult decisions that inevitably angered some segment of the population. In theory, disinterested republican political leadership, specifically leadership that placed the interests of the whole before those of oneself or of a faction, worked. The failure of President Taylor to solve the territorial question to their satisfaction forced southerners to recognize that in practice it did not.

If southerners thought that Zachary Taylor would be inclined to a pro-southern view where the territory acquired from Mexico was concerned they were sadly mistaken. Taylor took a position that was national rather than sectional in outlook. He wanted to allow the new territories of California and New Mexico to enter the Union as states directly without passing through a territorial stage. This position amounted to a de facto restriction of slavery to the areas in which it now existed because the sentiments of population of the territories were decidedly free soil. Taylor calculated that his proposal would not offend the South. Indeed, there was good cause for this belief, at least initially. In substance, the president's plan was not new—it resembled a bill proposed by Congressman William Preston of Virginia, which had garnered a

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degree of southern support prior to Taylor’s inauguration. In principle, Taylor’s plan embodied the spirit of “popular” or “squatter sovereignty,” which the Democrats had put forth as their solution to the territorial question during the 1848 campaign. The president’s goal in proposing the plan was to remove the slavery question from the halls of Congress as a cause of agitation and, thus, restore a semblance of political harmony to the nation. In a special message to Congress, the president stated his desire “to avoid any unnecessary controversy which can endanger or impair its [the Union’s] strength.” During 1849 and early 1850, Taylor worked tirelessly to prepare New Mexico and California for admission as states, even to the point of sending agents to advise the residents of these territories of his desire that they organize state governments and petition Congress for admission. Despite a rising tide of criticism,

371 Preston’s bill proposed the immediate admission of California. Northern congressmen, however, succeeded in attaching an amendment to the bill prohibiting slavery in the new state. The amended bill was defeated. Taylor, of course, proposed the immediate admission of both California and New Mexico. On Preston’s bill, see Cooper, The South and the Politics of Slavery, 272-73, 377-78.

372 Quoted in Hamilton, Zachary Taylor, II, 266.

373 Taylor dispatched Whig Representative T. Butler King of Georgia to California. King arrived in California on April 4, 1849. He promptly informed the Californians of Taylor’s intention to support any civil government that they formed and the state’s application for admission. Taylor and King both expected that California would adopt a free soil constitution. Their expectations were not disappointed, for California adopted a free soil constitution which went into effect in December, 1849. In New Mexico, Taylor worked through Indian Agent James S. Calhoun and Army Lieutenant Colonel George A. McCall to the same ends. There were, of course, other issues in play during 1849, including Deseret, the Texas boundary, the Texas debt, conflicting attitudes on fugitive slaves, Cuba, and slavery and the slave trade in the District of Columbia. Holman Hamilton, Prologue to Conflict: The Crisis and Compromise of 1850 (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1964), 16-17, 22, passim.
he steadfastly advocated the plan for two reasons. First, Taylor was a stubborn man once he had settled upon a course of action, a personality trait that most southerners lauded as “firmness” prior to his election. Second, Taylor’s confidence that his program would solve the sectional crisis never wavered. In short, he believed that he was right. The guiding light of Old Zack’s policy was simple—as he put it in a speech to the residents of Fredericksburg, Virginia in 1850, to “preserve the Union at all hazards.”374 If this meant offending southern sensibilities, so be it. In this sense, Zachary Taylor was what he had always claimed he would be if elected, the president of the country rather than a section. As Taylor’s presidency progressed, it became apparent that a disinterested leader who thought of the nation first was not what most southerners really wanted. In fact, events would prove that what southerners desired, although many did not realize it in 1848, was an advocate.

During the election of 1848, the question of whether national or sectional loyalty rested first in the hearts of southerners was not clearly posed. By the time, Old Rough and Ready became president, however, calculations of just how southerner’s loyalty to their nation, their section, and their state related to one another became increasingly difficult to avoid. During 1849 and 1850, both southern Whigs and

Democrats moved to more radical sectional stances on the territorial question. In doing so, they accurately reflected the changing mood of the South. Many southerners perceived the Proviso controversy, the December, 1848 resolution of the House of Representatives prohibiting the slave trade in the District of Columbia, and the growing reluctance of many northern states to return fugitive slaves or to protect slave property in transit as manifestations of a general anti-slavery resurgence. Although most realized that the Mexican Cession was not a profitable area for the expansion of slavery, the Proviso itself constituted an insult to the honor of the South. Thus, as historian Chaplain Morrison argues, "southern voters demanded ... a repudiation not of the

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letter but of the spirit of the Wilmot Proviso." Southern politicians became increasingly strident in their demands for some form of compensation for the admission of California as a sop to the offended honor of the region. The emotional appeals of Congressmen from both North and South of Mason and Dixon's line fed a crisis that grew as acute as any in the history of the Republic. As historian Holman Hamilton so aptly describes it:

It was a period of turmoil—of broken friendships, shattered alliances, parties split and factions chipped into cracked schismatic remnants. Members of Congress swung this way and that, from long-loved loyalties to new, untried ones. Indeed, they seemed like marionettes jerked by a master puppeteer!

In this supercharged political environment, southerners looked to Zachary Taylor, one of their own, to step to their defense. When Taylor did not answer the call they were obviously disappointed. Opponents subjected Zachary Taylor to few character attacks during the election of 1848, but once southerners assessed his position on the territorial question as inimical to their interests this "hands off" approach dramatically changed. The editor of the *Richmond Whig* thought that "no man within our recollection has been so abused and vilified." Few newspapers went as far as the *Richmond Enquirer* and

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376 Morrison, *Democratic Politics and Sectionalism*, 172.


379 *Richmond Whig*, July 16, 1850.
Charleston *Mercury* which openly accused Taylor of sectional apostasy.\(^3\) More common were comments like those of Representative James A. Seddon of Virginia which portrayed the president as well-intentioned, but naive and misguided: "For General Taylor ... I have respect and confidence. ... [But his] unsuspecting honesty has been practiced on—his generous confidence abused. ... Thank God, we have no traitors at the South."\(^4\) The implications of both of these kinds of criticism, however, were the same—Zachary Taylor was not a model statesman, nor was he a defender of the rights of the South. Just how far some southerners had traveled is indicated by the response of Georgian Alexander Stephens, an original Taylor man, to a question posed by Secretary of Navy William Preston—"Who will impeach him?" Preston asked. "I will if nobody else does?" Stephens said.\(^5\) In the face of mounting criticism, Taylor became increasingly combative and began to cast those who did not agree with his territorial plan as disunionists, even traitors. After a meeting with southern Whigs, Robert Toombs, Thomas Clingman, and Alexander Stephens, Taylor was irate. According to Thurlow Weed, Taylor asked him, "Did you meet those traitors?" When his three visitors threatened a dissolution of the Union, Taylor replied that "if they were taken in rebellion against the Union, he would hang them with less reluctance than he had hung


deserters and spies in Mexico." Actions such as this did little to help Taylor’s cause and made conciliation between the administration and the growing ranks of its southern opponents appear impossible. Most southerners rested in a middle ground between the stances of Taylor’s anti-extensionism and that of those southern firebrands who advocated northern acquiescence or secession. It short, most southerners favored, indeed demanded, some form of compromise on the issue. Eventually, many threw their support behind Henry Clay’s Omnibus bill, which Taylor opposed and threatened to veto. As the summer of 1850 approached, the country seemed no closer to solving its sectional dilemma.

The experience of Robert Toombs, a Georgia Whig who had worked tirelessly for Taylor’s advancement to the presidency since the early months of 1847, was characteristic of southern politicians during Taylor’s presidency. Initially, Toombs was optimistic about both the chances that sectional issues could be settled and Taylor’s willingness to defend the interests of the South while doing so. In a January, 1849 letter to Taylor confidant John Crittenden, Toombs expressed a desire “to settle it”—the slavery question—before Taylor’s inauguration through the adoption of William

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384 Ibid.

385 On the Compromise of 1850, see especially Hamilton, Prologue to Conflict: The Crisis and Compromise of 1850, passim.

386 On Toombs and Zachary Taylor, see Thompson, Robert Toombs, 46-50, 54-58, 60-68; Holt, The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party, 386-87, 389, 397, 403-4, 413, 468.
Preston’s California statehood proposal.⁸⁷ Toombs knew that “it [the West] cannot be a slave territory.”⁸⁸ As he put it, “we have only the point of honor to serve” in order to “rescue the country from all danger of agitation.”⁸⁹ Toombs confidently declared to Crittenden that he “did not expect that an administration which we had brought into power would do any act or permit any act to be done which it would become necessary for our [the South’s] safety to rebel at.”⁹⁰ Like most of his southern Whig brethren, Toombs opposed Calhoun’s “Southern Address,” which he characterized as “a miserable attempt to form a Southern party.”⁹¹ He informed a caucus of southern legislators that he “intended to stand by the government until it committed an overt act of aggression upon our rights.”⁹² Fifteen months later, Toombs position had radically

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³⁸⁹ Ibid.

³⁹⁰ Ibid., 336.

³⁹¹ Ibid. See also, Thompson, Robert Toombs, 52-53. Calhoun’s address recited the points at issue between the North and South, and called for southern unity to defend the rights of the region. For a summary and assessment of the address, see Charles M. Wiltse, John C. Calhoun: Sectionalist, 1840-1850 (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1951), 283-85. Wiltse emphasizes that Calhoun’s address was not an incendiary document, nor was it intended to be. In the highly charged environment of 1849, this assessment appears wrongheaded. Whatever Calhoun’s intentions, the “Southern Address” helped to bring the sectional controversy to a boil. For the text of the address and a list of southern congressmen who signed their approval, see Richard K. Crallé, ed., Reports and Public Letters of John C. Calhoun (1855; reprint New York: Russell and Russell, 1968), 290-313.

changed. He was now openly opposed to the administration and the admission of California as a state without some kind of compensation for the South.\textsuperscript{393} The position that Toombs defended in January, 1849 was no longer politically viable in 1850. Toombs lamented that the president, although "an honest and well-meaning man," "is in very bad hands," specifically those of anti-slavery man William Seward.\textsuperscript{394} Now Taylor, whom Toombs had once lauded as a model of the virtuous republican leader, seemed naive—"his inexperience in public affairs and want of knowledge of men, is daily practiced upon, and renders him particularly liable to imposition."\textsuperscript{395} Toombs advised Crittenden that Taylor had told him that he would sign the Wilmot Proviso if it passed Congress after which "my course became instantly fixed ... to oppose the proviso, even to the extent of a dissolution of the Union."\textsuperscript{396} "I have determined," he wrote, "to settle the question honorably to my own section."\textsuperscript{397} Toombs wrote that during meetings with Taylor he "urged upon him ... the abandonment of his policy and ... \footnotesize{\textsuperscript{393}In a stormy meeting with the president, Toombs and two other southern Whigs, Thomas Clingman and Alexander Stephens, urged Taylor to support the admission of California upon Henry Clay's terms. When Taylor refused, Toombs and his colleagues raised the specter of disunion. Just how far Toombs traveled from the days when he supported Taylor for the presidency is indicated by his vote in the House on July 6, 1850 to censure Taylor for the Galphin affair, a scandal involving members of his cabinet and an unsettled land claim dating back from before the Revolution. On the vote of censure, see Holt, \textit{The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party}, 519.}

\textsuperscript{394}Robert Toombs to John J. Crittenden, April 25, 1850, in \textit{The Life of John J. Crittenden}, 367.

\textsuperscript{395}\textit{Ibid}.

\textsuperscript{396}\textit{Ibid.}, 366.

\textsuperscript{397}\textit{Ibid}.
adoption of ... compromise measures." Toombs was willing to accept California statehood provided that the rest of the Mexican Cession was organized into territories upon the Democratic principle of popular sovereignty. He declared ominously that the South "will never take less." Although a moderate when compared to many southern firebrands, Toombs had, nonetheless, made an important transition during 1849 and early 1850. He had come to perceive a vigorous defense of southern rights against northern encroachments as the best protection for both the Union and the South.

Toombs break with Zachary Taylor, an unconditional Unionist, reflected a general perceptual change in the South about the region's relationship with other sections and the sanctity of the Union. Appeals to disinterested patriotism only worked if the citizenry of the nation was virtuous, that is committed to the common good of all

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398 Quoted in Hamilton, *Zachary Taylor*, II, 381.

399 Robert Toombs to John J. Crittenden, April 25, 1850, in *The Life of John J. Crittenden*, 367. Toombs wrote, "We are willing to admit California and pass territorial governments on the principle of McClemand's bill." At a meeting at Howell Cobb's house in Washington, Congressmen Toombs, Alexander Stephens, Cobb, Linn Boyd, John McCleland, William Richardson, and John Miller hatched the compromise plan to which Toombs referred. The plan "admitted California, reduced Texas' western boundaries in return for monetary compensation, and organized territorial governments in the rest of the [Mexican] Cession with the Democratic formula of popular sovereignty." Holt, *Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party*, 486. Toombs would eventually support Henry Clay's Omnibus Bill, the foundation of the Compromise of 1850.


401 See *Congressional Globe*, 31st Congress, 1st Session, February 27, 1850, 198-201.
citizens of the Republic. Increasingly, southerners began to have doubts about the
dehere of their northern brethren, who appeared irredeemably committed to a
democratic, read majoritarian, society. Conversely, they came to see the South as the
last refuge of the conservative constitutional republicanism of the Founders. For
example, an article entitled “The National Anniversary” which appeared the September
1850 issue of *Southern Quarterly Review* expounded on this theme. The author argued
that the South’s agrarian slave society acted as a bulwark against corruption. An agricultural society, the
author pointed out, “is always a conservative community; full of veneration, steadfast to

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402 Many historians recognize the persistent adherence of the antebellum South to
clear republican thought. For a few examples, see Greenberg, *Masters and Statesmen*;

403 “The National Anniversary,” *Southern Quarterly Review*, Vol. 18 (September
18 (September 1850): 191-232; Elwood Fisher, *Lecture on the North and the South
delivered before The Young Men’s Mercantile Library Association of Cincinnati, Ohio*
(Charleston, SC: A. J. Burke, 1849); Augustus Baldwin Longstreet, *The Wilmot Proviso
is Abolition, Aggressive, Revolutionary, and Subversive of the Constitution and its
Guarantees to the Slaveholding States; A Voice from the South; comprising letters from
Georgia to Massachusetts and to the Southern States with an appendix containing an
article from the Charleston Mercury on the Wilmot Proviso, together with the Fourth
Article of the Constitution, the law of Congress, the Nullification Law of Pennsylvania,
the resolutions of ten of the free states, the resolutions of Virginia, Georgia, and
Alabama, and Mr. Calhoun’s resolutions in the Senate of the United States.* (1847; 8th

old places and habits, suspicious of change." The North, on the other hand, was marked by the extension of the democratic principle, until no conservative influence is left to them. Government—property—rights—every thing is subjected to the capricious will of a dominant multitude. ... All sorts of religious, philosophical, and political abstractions have adopted the North as a natural home." What the southerners desired the North to do, contended the author, was to give them "justice, renew and respect the guaranties of the constitution, give us peace, cease to trespass on our rights, [and] yield us an equal share in the results of the Union." A concurrent transition occurred in what the image of George Washington meant, at least to some southerners. In a speech in the Senate during the height of the crisis of 1850, Henry Clay urged his countrymen to remember Washington's farewell warning against "indulging in a spirit of disunion." Five days later on January 29, 1850, Clay clutched a fragment from Washington's coffin as he beseeched his colleagues "to beware, to pause, to reflect before they lend themselves to any purposes which shall destroy that Union which was cemented by his [Washington's] exertions and example." Increasingly, there were those southerners, however, who did not

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405 Ibid., 190.

406 Ibid., 177.

407 Ibid., 189.


view Washington in this same light. By 1850, state’s rights men like John C. Calhoun
drew quite a different lesson from the life of Washington. In his last speech in the
Senate, Calhoun argued that far from being a man who valued unity at any cost,
Washington did not hesitate to draw his sword rather than to submit to oppression— “He
was one of us—a slaveholder and a planter. We have studied his history, and find
nothing in it to justify submission to wrong.”410 For Calhoun, Washington was no
longer a symbolic guardian of the Union, but a defender of the rights of a grievously
wronged minority. In this conception of the Washington image, the republican personal
traits were still there to be sure. But they were now employed for sectional purposes
rather than as a clarion call to rally around the flag of the Union. Others followed
Calhoun’s lead. The 1851 secession appeal of the William Lowndes Yancey-led
Southern Rights Convention asserted that “Washington was a rebel!”411 In a later
speech before the Mount Vernon Ladies Association in Richmond, Yancey reminded
his listeners that Washington’s life was dedicated to the “new-born, American
principle” that governments serve the governed, and that it was the people’s right and
duty to overthrow a government that did not fulfill its purpose.412 The sad day may yet
come, he continued, when the South may have to affirm these “mighty yet bloodstained

410Speech on the Slavery Question, Delivered in the Senate, March 4, 1850,”


412Quoted in Bryan, George Washington in American Literature, 80. For similar
sentiments, see “Gov. Wise’s Oration . . .,” Southern Literary Messenger, XXIII (July,
At the unveiling of the Virginia Washington Monument in 1858, poet James Barron Hope struck a similar note in his “Washington Memorial Ode.” In it, Hope proclaimed that if Virginians’ rights should be denied they would defend the heritage that Washington had bequeathed to them.

“There is a cloud of discontent and disaffection convening upon the Southern horizon which bodes no good for the Union,” wrote one Virginian in January, 1850. In the January issue of the Southern Literary Messenger, a poet similarly lamented:

Still a fell spirit is abroad to-day,
A blind fanaticism, which would wage
A war upon her [Columbia’s] rule, and cast away
The glorious promise of maturer age,
Forbear, rash zealots, your ignoble rage ...

In 1850, a southern minister advised his congregation, “since the adoption of the Federal Constitution there has not occurred in the history of this Republic, a period so fraught with peril, as the crisis through which we are now passing.” In Congress, determined anti-extension advocates of the president’s plan, resolute compromisers led by Henry Clay, and unyielding pro-slavery men squared off over the territories. Effectively, no...

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413 Quoted in Bryan, George Washington in American Literature, 80.


415 William W. Blackman to Lucian Minor, January 3, 1850, Box 4, Folder 47, Blackford Family Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.


417 Van Zandt, God’s Voice to the Nation, 10.
group possessed enough political power to force their particular stance on the issue through Congress. For his part, Taylor, who was convinced that his plan offered the only permanent solution to the question, threatened to veto any compromise proposal that crossed his desk. Although a majority in Congress probably favored compromise, it was apparent that there were not enough votes to override a presidential veto. Short of divine intervention, few could see a solution to the crisis given the existing political situation. With sectional tensions at a fever pitch and a deadlock in the halls of power, citizens gathered to celebrate the Republic’s birthday in 1850, and confronted the possibility that it might be the last as a united country. In the nation’s capital, Independence Day dawned hot and humid, the weather matching the prevailing political atmosphere. President Taylor attended Washington’s outdoor celebration. For two hours he sat in the hot sun at the base of the unfinished Washington Monument listening to various orations. Later, he walked the banks of the Potomac and then returned to the White House for supper. That evening, the president fell ill. Within days doctors pronounced a diagnosis, “cholera morbus” or, in modern parlance, acute gastroenteritis. Despite the best efforts of the attending physicians, the Hero of Buena Vista died on the night of July 9. In his last words, Taylor reflected upon the course of his administration: “I am about to die—I expect the summons soon—I have endeavored to

discharge all my official duties faithfully—I regret nothing, but am sorry that I am about to leave my friends.\footnote{19}

News of the president's death shocked the nation and set off an orgy of mourning in which the pre-inauguration images of Taylor as the nation's republican savior were briefly resurrected. Because, as one biographer puts it, Taylor was "the first president to die in office at the zenith of a crisis and when Congress was in session," the official funerary solemnities held to honor him were of an unprecedented scale.\footnote{20} In both houses of Congress, congressmen solemnly eulogized the late president and assiduously avoided passing judgement on the policies of his administration. Instead, they focused on the man and struck a common refrain—the nation had lost a republican hero of the first order at just the time when it needed one most. "On the luminous disc of his character no dark spots are perceptible," Louisiana Representative Charles M. Conrad said.\footnote{21} He continued:

\begin{quote}
At no period in our history ... was the executive chair surrounded by more difficulties than those which encompassed it when he was called upon to occupy it. Party spirit was still raging with unabated fury; a dark cloud was visible on the horizon which portended that a storm of unusual violence was approaching .... The tempest arose; and in the midst of the
\end{quote}


\footnote{20}Ibid., 393.

\footnote{21}Obituary Addresses delivered on the occasion of the Death of Zachary Taylor, 37. See also the similar comments of Representatives Hilliard of Alabama, Marshall of Kentucky, and Bayly of Louisiana in ibid., 53, 57-58, 64. See also, the comments of Senators Berrien and King of Georgia in Congressional Globe, 31st Congress, 1st Session, 1365. The eulogies were reprinted in the press. See Richmond Enquirer, July 16, 1850.
fury, while the vessel of state was tossed to and fro, and all eyes turned with a confidence not unmingled with anxiety on the pilot who, calm and collected, guided her course, that pilot was suddenly swept from the helm!\textsuperscript{422}

Old Rough and Ready's death inspired some of his political opponents to take up the cause of the Union, even if only for a short while. Louisiana Senator Solomon Downs, who had blasted Taylor's California policy in speech earlier in the year, beseeched his colleagues to "bury in the tomb of our departed President all sectional feelings and division, and unite, once more, in that spirit of cordial good will and brotherly love which united our forefathers in the earlier days of the Republic."\textsuperscript{423} Southern periodicals and newspapers bordered their columns in black mourning bands, and carried news of Taylor's death and descriptions of the ceremonies held in Washington.\textsuperscript{424} Southerners' comments on the death of Taylor often echoed those emanating from the halls of Congress. The \textit{New Orleans Bee} lamented the death of "the idol of the nation, distinguished alike for his purity of life and republican simplicity."\textsuperscript{425} A writer in the \textit{Southern Literary Messenger} wailed: "Another pillar of the crumbling temple has fallen! Out of a clear and unclouded sky, ... the bolt has

\textsuperscript{422} \textit{Obituary Addresses delivered on the occasion of the Death of Zachary Taylor}, 40.

\textsuperscript{423} \textit{Congressional Globe, 31st Congress, 1st Session}, 1363.

\textsuperscript{424} For example, see \textit{Richmond Enquirer}, July 12, 16, 19, 1850; \textit{Richmond Whig}, July 16, 1850; \textit{New Orleans Bee}, July 12, 13, 18, 22, 1850.

\textsuperscript{425} \textit{New Orleans Bee}, July 12, 1850.
descended, and stricken from the place of eminence the most illustrious of the land." 426 The *Richmond Whig* reflected that: "In the dangerous crisis impending over the country, there was no other to whom the whole people looked with so much confidence." 427 In an August 10 speech, Virginian Oliver P. Baldwin lauded Taylor’s republican character and mourned his death. 428 He then made an impassioned plea for the Union—the death of Taylor "warns us to bury sectional strife and hatred in his tomb, and cultivate contentment with our lot, and fraternal relations with each other, if we would not see the Republic follow its President to the grave." 429 In a sermon occasioned by the passing of the president, Presbyterian minister A.B. Van Zandt noted, "How fervent and frequent have been the aspirations of the past year, for a *Washington*, with his wise counsels and his steady hand, to guide our fortunes through the turmoil and strife of threatened revolution." 430 The reverend continued that the belief in Zachary Taylor as a Washington-like savior of the nation was misplaced, not because the late president was

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426 "General Zachary Taylor, President of the United States," *Southern Literary Messenger*, XVI, no. 9 (September, 1850): 530. See also, "Σ," "Dirge for the Funeral Solemnities of Zachary Taylor," in *ibid.*, 552.

427 *Richmond Whig*, July 16, 1850.

428 Oliver P. Baldwin, *Eulogy upon the life and character of General Zachary Taylor, delivered at the African Church, on the 10th of August, 1850* by Oliver P. Baldwin, Esq., senior editor of the *Richmond Republican* (Richmond: Peter D. Bernard, 1850), 6-7, 12-19.


not a great man, but because only Providence could redeem "the degenerate spirits of
... [the] descendants" of the founding generation.431

In July, 1850, the editor of the Richmond Enquirer asserted that "[t]he name of
the Hero of Palo Alto and Buena Vista will live as long as the name of the nation whose
standard he so often bore to victory and to glory."432 Contrary to this belief, however,
the memory of Taylor did not continue to glow brightly in hearts of his countrymen.
His memory like all public memories required commemoration to endure and this was
not to be.433 Congress authorized a Taylor medal to be cast and distributed among the
various departments of the government on August 10, 1850, and quickly moved on to
other pressing business.434 In the general's home state, his memory quickly lost the
meaning that it once possessed. Replicas of the medal that the state cast in Taylor's
honor began to be casually distributed to visiting celebrities, like "the Swedish
Nightingale," Jenny Lind, as mementoes of their visits to Louisiana.435 Why did

431 Ibid., 12. The sermon is based on a Isaiah II:22. "Cease ye from man, whose
breath is in his nostrils; for wherein is He to be accounted of?"

432 Richmond Enquirer, July 12, 1850.

433 Schwartz, George Washington, 194. If the literary output on a subject is any
indication of levels of interest, the Mexican War, like Zachary Taylor, quickly faded in
importance in the collective memory of the nation. According to the count of one
scholar, 24 books were published on the Mexican war in the 1850s, in the 1860s, only
four. Nineteen articles dealing with the war appeared in periodicals between 1850 and
1855, but from 1856 to 1865 only two. See Norman E. Tutorow, ed. and compiler, The
Mexican-American War: An Annotated Bibliography (Westport, CN: Greenwood Press,

434 Congressional Globe, 31st Congress, 1st Session, August 10, 1850, 1559.

435 Keith S. Hambrick, "The Swedish Nightingale in New Orleans: Jenny Lind's
Taylor's memory pass away so quickly? One reason is that Taylor, whom many had imagined as a republican leader modeled after George Washington, failed to solve the sectional crisis that confronted the nation. In the 1850s, sectional differences resisted the best efforts of the nation's statesmen to solve them and increasingly the expectation that disinterested republican political virtues would solve the problems of the day seemed naive. Hence, the image of Washington as symbol of a virtuous and unbreakable Union was by 1850 increasingly becoming an anachronism, at least in the South. To some the shabby condition of Washington's home and resting place suggested as much. The decrepit state of the Founding Father's tomb, lamented a female visitor to Mount Vernon, gave "little outward evidence of the respect and affection cherished for the memory of Washington. ... [S]hall the children of America allow the Father of their Liberties to sleep in a neglected grave?"436 The answer, at least in one sense, was yes.

With Abraham Lincoln’s election in 1860, the cup of forbearance once again overflowed. Southern fire-eaters had long claimed that the choice that confronted their region was between submission to the will of the northern majority within the Union or secession, between disgraceful acquiescence or manly assertion of their equality and rights. Now many in the South seemed prepared to listen. A mid-December manifesto adopted by a caucus of southern congressmen declared:

The argument is exhausted. All hope of relief in the Union ... is extinguished, and we trust the South will not be deceived by appearances or the pretense of new guarantees. In our judgement the Republicans are resolute in the purpose to grant nothing that will ... satisfy the South. We are satisfied that the honor, the safety, and the independence of the Southern people require the organization of a Southern Confederacy.¹

And so it was. By January 31, all the Deep South states except Texas had seceded. In early February, their representatives gathered in Montgomery to form the government of a new nation. As the young men of the city prepared to defend the honor of the South, forty-two members of the electoral college of the newly created Confederacy

met in the Alabama State Senate chamber on the Ninth to select a president. On the normally bare plaster walls of the senate chamber hung inspirational symbols of the past. No less than three depictions of George Washington, whom one reporter styled "the great prototype of American liberty"—no doubt thinking of John C. Calhoun's conception of the great man—were prominently displayed. The masterpiece, a Gilbert Stuart original, hung above Georgian Howell Cobb's desk as he presided over the proceedings. The southern veterans of the Revolutionary and Mexican Wars were not forgotten either. "Legendary inscriptions and reminiscences of the Palmetto Regiment" of Mexican War fame and a painting of General Francis Marion, the Revolution's legendary "Swamp Fox," served to remind the electors of the martial heritage of their region. In this setting, the they chose Jefferson Davis as the president of the Confederacy.

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3 The quotation is from a reporter for the Charleston Courier who wrote under the pen name "Sigma." Quoted in James P. Jones and William Warren Rogers, "Montgomery as the Confederate Capital: View of a New Nation," Alabama Historical Quarterly, Vol. 26:1 (Spring 1964): 11. See also, ibid., note 5, for a list of all the paintings in the senate chamber.

4 "Sigma," quoted in ibid.
Davis, a political moderate who by all accounts did not want the office, did not even attend the Montgomery convention.⁵ Like any successful public man in the South, Davis possessed a reputation as a man of honor who could be counted on to stand up for the interests of the region. Similar to Howell Cobb and Robert Toombs, the other main candidates for the presidency, Davis was an able politician of long experience. He had demonstrated a prowess for administration during his term as Franklin Pierce’s Secretary of War, but there were certainly other southerners as capable of efficient management as he. What set Davis apart was his status as the foremost living southern military hero by virtue of his exploits at Monterrey and, especially, his stand at Buena Vista against swarms of Mexican cavalry.⁶ His military reputation was important, for the new nation, like the one from which it sprang, seemed destined to be forged in war. No contemporary southerner appeared to possess the requisite social, civil, and military qualities for the chief magistrate of the Confederacy to the extent that Davis did. Although he was never compared to George Washington in the direct manner that Zachary Taylor was, it was no mere coincidence that Davis’ second inauguration as president took place at the base of the equestrian monument of Washington in

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⁵On January 30, Davis wrote to delegate about to attend the convention: “The post of Presdt. of the provisional government is one of great responsibility and difficulty. I have no confidence in my capacity to meet its requirements.” Quoted in William C. Davis, Jefferson Davis: The Man and His Hour (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1991), 297.

⁶For a similar assessment of the importance of Davis’ war record to his elevation to the Confederate presidency, see William C. Davis, “The Road to the “V”: Jefferson Davis, the Mexican War, and the Making of a President,” unpublished paper delivered at the Annual Meeting of the Mississippi Historical Society, Jackson, Mississippi, February 27- March 1, 1997.
Richmond's Capitol square on the Founding Father's birthday in 1861. Southerner's firm belief in the intertwined concepts of honor and republicanism which had served the United States so well in the war with Mexico, now served their own nation.
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Candidate: Gregory Scott Hospodor

Major Field: History

Title of Dissertation: Honor Bound: Southern Honor and the Mexican War

Approved:

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Major Professor and Chairman

Dean of the Graduate School

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May 12, 2000