

■ “The South in Danger”

Date: September 25, 1844

Author: Democratic Association of Washington, D.C.

Genre: Speech

Summary Overview

During the 1840s, sectional animosity between northern and southern states began to increase at a feverish pitch. Much of this animosity revolved around the place of slavery in the expanding United States and the controversy over the annexation of Texas threatened to expose rifts that many thought had been healed with the Missouri compromise of the early 1820s. This document, “The South in Danger” emerged during the presidential campaign of 1844 and was an attempt to exploit those sectional fears and animosity in order to split southern members of the Whig party from their northern comrades, ensuring defeat for Whig candidate Henry Clay and victory for the Democrat, James K. Polk. The anonymous address—suspected to have been written and distributed by Robert J. Walker, a U.S. Senator from Mississippi and supporter of Texas annexation—attempts to link the Whig party in the northern states and Henry Clay to the Abolitionist movement. Opponents of slavery, by the mid-1840s, were moving away from moderate proposals to eliminate slavery gradually or relocate freed slaves to Africa and were, instead, demanding immediate emancipation for slaves and an end to the institution of slavery.

Defining Moment

In 1836, American-born residents in Texas rose up in rebellion against the government of Mexico, eventually establishing the independent Republic of Texas. Soon afterward, the Texas government expressed an interest in becoming part of the United States through a process called *annexation*. American politicians, however, were leery of upsetting the careful balance of slave-states and free-states that had been the rule since the Missouri Compromise of 1820. As slave owners streamed into Texas, the issue of annexing the region became a political nightmare. President Martin van Buren avoided the issue but his successor John Tyler (who became President when William Henry Harrison died after only a month

in office) brought the issue to the forefront, calling for annexation as a way to create supporting southern states in the hope of running on his own for the presidency in 1844. Letters between Tyler and Secretary of State John Calhoun, however, leaked to newspapers. This letter presented the Texas annexation in terms of bolstering and extending the institution of slavery in the United States. This drew outrage from many in free states and Tyler’s presidential hopes evaporated.

In his place, Democrats floated the idea of running former President Martin Van Buren. Van Buren and Whig party candidate Henry Clay agree to jointly denounce the immediate annexation of Texas, claiming that it might instigate a war with Mexico (which disputed Texas’s independent status). The push for annexation in southern states, however, proved too powerful and Van Buren was denied the Democratic nomination in favor of Tennessee’s James K. Polk, a staunch expansionist whose platform called not only for the annexation of Texas but also the expansion of American control of the “Oregon Country” in the Pacific Northwest as a way of getting northern Democrats to support his candidacy. The campaign became a referendum on national expansion and, for northern abolitionists, a concern that national expansion carried with it a danger that the institution of slavery would expand as well. The perceived danger was so great, that Abolitionists established their own political party, the Liberty Party, running Kentucky abolitionist James G. Birney as its presidential candidate. The Whig party found itself in a situation where it had to maintain unity between its northern and southern wings. The document below expressly attempts to exploit that northern–southern divide in the party.

Author Biography

This address, from the Democratic Association of Washington, D.C., is not attributed to a particular author, although the chair and secretary of the organization are

listed at the end. One edition of this talk contained an afterword by Willis Green, the chair of the National Whig committee in which he argues that the address was authored by Robert J. Walker, at the time serving as a U.S. Senator from Mississippi. His evidence for argument is that Walker was found to be carrying copies of the address, with the intention “to circulate it only in the South, and to prevent, if possible, its appearance in the North.” Green asserts that Walker is promoting the address in the South, and denouncing it in the North as being a forgery. Regardless of the truth of Green’s conspiracy theory, the contents of the address do match well with Walker’s political views. In the Senate, Walker was a vocal supporter of the An-

nexation of Texas, first introducing a measure to bring it into the union as early as 1837. Walker also feared that the failure to absorb Texas into the United States would open the door for Great Britain to take the territory as part of its empire, spelling doom for the United States. Walker, as we see in the address, was a strong defender of slavery but he also opposed the importation of new slaves and supported gradual, eventual emancipation. For someone with Walker’s views, the radicalism of the Abolitionist movement in the north threatened to undermine national stability.

While the authorship of this document is clouded in mystery, it fits well with Walker’s fears and anxieties over a possible Whig victory in 1844.

HISTORICAL DOCUMENT

THE SOUTH IN DANGER
 READ BEFORE YOU VOTE.
 ADDRESS OF THE DEMOCRATIC ASSOCIATION
 OF WASHINGTON, D.C.

There never was a period when the South was in so much danger as at this moment. To procure the Abolition vote for Henry Clay, we will show that the Whig party of the North, their leading presses, legislative bodies, and statesmen, have denounced the South, they have held up slavery as a crime, they have promised a speedy union to effect its overthrow with the Abolitionists, and have joined with them in holding up the South to obloquy and reproach. The means used by this new coalition are to represent the people of the South to their sister States and to the world as disgraced and degraded by the institution of slavery, and as unworthy of Christian communion and social intercourse. Already this demoniac feeling has dissolved the Methodist church, and other American churches are threatened with a similar fate. The object is to *taboo the South*, to render us infamous, to put the mark of Cain upon our forehead, and to deprive us of character first, as the means of despoiling us of our property afterwards. Men of the South, the effort is to disgrace and degrade you and your children forever. That such a party exists in the North, is conceded. They denounce you in their presses, petitions, and speeches, as man-stealers, as robbers, as flesh-jobbers, as slave-breeders, as convict criminals, as vile and infamous, as unworthy of Chris-

tian or social communion, and, finally, as existing only by sufferance as a part of the Union. Now if, as we shall demonstrate, the party which thus denounces the South is courted by the Whig party of the North, if they are assured, as we shall show, by the Whigs of the North, that their views are identical with those of the Abolitionists, that they are only using different means to accomplish the same object, and that the abolition of slavery will be more certainly effected by the election of Clay than that of Birney, surely you cannot continue united as a party with the Whigs of the North, who thus join with your enemies to disgrace and degrade you. If the leading Whig statesmen of the North denounce you as culprits and criminals, and, immediately succeeding this denunciation, these your avowed enemies are nominated and elected as Governors, as members of Congress and of the State Legislatures, by the Whig party of the North, can you continue united with such a party; and if you do, are not your own votes joined with those of your enemies in subjecting you to disgrace and degradation? But let us to the proof; and we extract from the National Intelligencer, republished in the Liberty Legion, the following address on the subject of Texas, by twenty-one members of Congress, *all* friends of Mr. Clay, *all* of whom, since their condemnation of you, have been sustained by the united vote of the Whigs of the North:

“We hesitate not to say, that annexation, effected by any act or proceeding of the Federal Government, or any of its departments, would be identical with dissolution. It would be a violation of our national compact, its objects, designs, and the great elementary principles which entered into its formation, of a character so deep und fundamental, and would be an attempt to eternize an institution and a power of a nature so unjust in themselves, so injurious to the interests and abhorrent to the feelings of the people of the free States, as, in our opinion, not only inevitably to result in a dissolution of the Union, but fully to justify it; and we not only assert that the people of the free States ‘ought not submit to it,’ but we say, with confidence, they would not submit to it. We know their present temper and spirit on this subject too well to believe for a moment that they would become *particeps criminis* in any such subtle contrivance for the irremediable perpetuation of an institution which the wisest and best men who formed our Federal Constitution, as well from the slave as well as the free States, *regarded as an evil and a curse*, soon to become extinct under the operation of laws to be passed prohibiting the slave trade, and the progressive influence of the principles of the Revolution.” . . .

Of the Whig members of Congress who signed this address, (for it was scorned and denounced by the Democrats,) each one was elected by the Whig party, each of them is still a Whig, an ardent friend of Henry Clay, and each of them has been sustained since this denunciation of the South by his Whig constituents of the North, thus endorsing these libels upon us and our institutions. These Whig members of Congress denounced slavery “as an evil and curse,” as an institution “unjust, injurious to the interests and *abhorrent* to the feelings of the people of the free States;” and, finally, they declared that the attempt to sustain it by the annexation of Texas would “fully justify a dissolution of the Union.” If these charges are true, they disgrace and degrade the South. Yet they were made by 21 leading Whig friends of Mr. Clay in Congress, and endorsed subsequently by their Whig constituents. Nearly all of the twenty-one members were

sustained for re-election by their Whig constituents, or those who did not return again to Congress they elevated to higher stations. . .

In his speech of 13th July, 1814, to the great Whig Syracuse Convention of New York, and received by them with unbounded applause, Governor Seward says to that portion present who were Abolitionists: “I have always behaved and trusted that the Whigs of America would come up to the ground you have so nobly assumed; not that I supposed or believed they would all at once, or from the same impulses, reach that ground; but that the progress of events would surely bring them there, and they would assume it cheerfully. That consummation has come. All that is dear to the Whigs of the United States, in regard to policy, to principle, and to administration, is now involved with your own favorite cause, in the present issue, upon the admission of Texas into the Union. You have now this great, generous, and triumphant party on the very ground to which you have invited them, and for not assuming which prematurely you have so often denounced them;” and he adds: “The security, the duration, the extension of slavery, all depend on the annexation of Texas. How, then, can any friend of emancipation vote for (Polk) the Texas candidate, or withhold his vote from (Clay) the Whig candidate, without exhibiting the mere caprice of faction.” Such are the open appeals of the Whigs of the North, through their meetings, presses, and leaders, to the Abolitionists, to vote for Mr. Clay, and overthrow slavery. . .

The *New York Tribune* of August contains the letter of John Quincy Adams, dated July 29, 1844, in which, speaking of what he calls “the slave mongering Texas treaty,” and the determination of England to abolish slavery in Texas and throughout the world, he says: “We are yet to learn with what ears the sound of the trumpet of slavery was listened to by the British Queen and her ministers. We are yet to learn whether the successor of Elizabeth on the throne of England, and her Burleighs and Walsinghams, upon hearing that their avowed purpose to promote universal emancipation and the extinction of slavery upon the earth is to be met by the man robbers of our own country with exterminating war, will, like craven cowards, turn their backs and flee, or eat their own words, or disclaim the purpose which they have avowed.” . . .

At the great Whig mass meeting at Springfield, Massachusetts. . . . Mr. Webster, the great Whig leader in the North, addressed the same meeting, and thus appealed directly to the Abolitionists in favor of Mr. Clay : “If the third party, as it is called, (*the Abolitionists!*) will but *unite with the Whigs* in defeating a measure which both alike condemn, then, indeed, the voice of Massachusetts will be heard throughout the Union.” “If there be one person belonging to that third party here, of him I would ask, what he intends to do in this crisis? If there be none, let me request each one of you who may know such a man, to put the question to him when you return home. No one can deny, that to vote for Mr. Polk is to vote for the annexation of Texas; or if he should deny, it is no less true. I tell you that if Polk is elected, annexation follows inevitably!” And Mr. Webster adds: “The great fundamental everlasting objection to the annexation of Texas is, that it is a scheme for the extension of the slavery of the African race.” But in a still later speech to the great Whig mass meeting at Boston Common, on the 19th September, 1844, Mr. Webster said: “There is no disguising it. It is either Polk and Texas, or neither Polk nor Texas. On the other side is Henry Clay. His opinions have been expressed on this subject of Texas.” “Well, then, gentlemen, I, for one, say that, under the present circumstances of the case, I give my vote heartily for Mr. Clay; and I say I give it, among other reasons, because he is pledged against Texas. With his opinions on mere incidental points I do not now mean to hold any controversy. I hold, unquestionably, that the annexation of Texas does tend and will tend to the existence and perpetuation of African slavery and the tyranny of race over race on this continent, and therefore I will not go for it.” “Henry Clay has said that he is against annexation unless it is called for by *the common consent of the country*, and that he is against Texas being made a new province, against the wishes of any *considerable number* of these States. Till then he holds himself bound to oppose annexation. Here is his pledge, and upon it I take my stand. He is a man of honor and truth, and will redeem his pledge. Yes, gentlemen, we take him at his word, and he dare not forfeit that word.” . . .

The Legislatures of the Whig States of Massachusetts and Vermont pass resolutions against the annexation of Texas upon the very strongest anti-slavery and Abolition

grounds, and Mr. Clay approves, endorses, adopts, and sustains them, by referring to these resolutions as a sufficient reason of itself against the annexation of Texas. The doctrine of the Whig Legislatures of the North is, that slavery is a crime and a disgrace, and that the slaveholding States are not fit associates for the free States of the North; and Mr. Clay adopts unequivocally these resolutions, by giving them as an insuperable objection to the annexation. And now how stands the case? By the last census, the North has 135 Representatives in Congress, and the South but 88, being a majority of 47 in favor of the North, which it still increases at every census.

The Senate is still equally divided, but Wisconsin and Iowa are both to be admitted as free States; and if Florida were admitted at the same time, it would make a majority against us in the Senate. The only hope of South, then, is in the annexation of Texas, which would give the South a majority in the Senate, whilst the North maintained its preponderance in the House, and thus give effectual security to the South, and greatly tend to preserve and perpetuate the Union, which, with the growing spirit of abolition in the North, would be greatly endangered by giving to the North the unrestrained majority in both Houses of Congress. Even if Mr. Clay were not opposed to annexation, the whole Whig party of the North are, and their success would be the defeat of annexation, whatever the views of Mr. Clay might be. . . .

On the 2^d of June, 1836, he voted against the engrossment of the bill preventing the transmission of incendiary Abolition documents through the mail: and on the 8th June, 1836, he voted against the passage of that bill, so important to the safety of the South. . . . In his speech at Lexington, Ky., in September, 1836, printed under his own eye, in one of his friendly presses, the Lexington Intelligencer, and also printed in Niles’s Register of the 17th September 1836, Mr. Clay says: “I consider slavery as a curse—a curse to the master; a wrong, a grievous wrong to the slave. In the abstract it is all wrong, and no possible contingency can make it right.” . . . What stronger encouragement can Abolition ask than this? Men of the South, do you consider that you, as charged by Mr. Clay, are offering “a grievous wrong to the slave?” If so, write the irrevocable sentence of your own acknowledged guilt and self-degradation, by electing to the highest office in your gift the very man who has thus condemned,

rebuked, and denounced you. And when you have done the deed, and the rejoicing shouts of Vermont, and Massachusetts, and the other Whig States of the North, triumphant, by your aid, over your friends, the prostrate Democracy of the North, shall proclaim to you, in the language of your President, ABOLISH SLAVERY, which you yourselves will thus have declared “A GRIEVOUS WRONG TO THE SLAVE,” “AND NO POSSIBLE CONTINGENCY CAN MAKE IT RIGHT,” what will

be your answer, and how will you ESCAPE the sentence of your own self-condemnation? Reflect, then, Whigs of the South, our brethren and fellow-citizens, pause and consider well all the dreadful consequences, before you sink us all together into one common abyss of ruin and degradation.

JAMES TOWLES, *Chairman*.

C. P. SENGSTACK, *Secretary*.

Washington City, September 25, 1844.

GLOSSARY

craven: dishonorable, lacking courage

incendiary: designed to create or promote conflict

mark of Cain: From the Hebrew Bible, a permanent sign of wrong-doing and a warning to others

obloquy: public criticism or a verbal attack

particeps criminis: Latin, “partner in crime”; accomplice

Document Analysis

The speech begins by emphasizing that the current danger to the South is unprecedented. This danger stems from the Whig party’s apparent courting of northern Abolitionists. The author argues that Whig politicians and supporters have insulted the South by presenting slavery as a crime. Further, the Whigs are, the author claims, actively working with Abolitionists to “overthrow” the institution of slavery. The work of Abolitionists and their allies in the Whig Party go beyond simply denouncing slavery. Rather, these forces are attempting to “represent the people of the South to their sister States and to the world as disgraced and degraded by the institution of slavery,” meaning that they are trying to persuade voters in northern states that the people of the southern states have been fundamentally corrupted by the practice of owning slaves and, perhaps, are not truly equal to other Americans. Certainly, the author argues, this sentiment has begun to take hold, and he cites the split between northern and southern wings of the Methodist church and other churches as an example. The author speaks in some fairly extreme terms, warning of a plot to “taboo the South”—to render it completely unacceptable to decent people. This is part of a larger plot to “despoil” the people of the south of their property. The author then lays out

the argument that this view of the south, held by Abolitionists, is the same as the view held by the northern wing of the Whig party and that slavery will be attacked much more successfully upon the victory of the Whig candidate, Henry Clay, than if the Abolitionists’ Liberty Party candidate, James Birney, were elected. This long first paragraph ends by asking southern Whigs why they would remain supporters of a party whose northern members subject them “to disgrace and degradation” and launches into the remainder of the address, which focuses on the “proof” that the northern wing of the Whig party was allied to the abolitionist cause. Much of this evidence revolves around the Whigs’ position against the rapid annexation of Texas.

The first piece of evidence cited is a statement by members of Congress (“all friends of Henry Clay”). In this statement, the opponents of annexation argue that to absorb Texas would be “identical with dissolution” of the Union because it would perpetuate the institution of slavery. Citizens of the free states “would not submit” to such an annexation, since it would make them partners in crime with the slave owners. The statement also invokes the memory of the American founders (“the wisest and best men who formed our Federal Constitution”), explaining that they viewed slavery as evil and believed

it would fade away, as evidenced by the passage of laws against the slave trade. This statement was endorsed by twenty-one Whigs, the author argues, who were all either re-elected or received higher offices. Thus, both the Whig party and northern Whig voters agree with the equation of Texas annexation (and the extension of slavery) with the dissolution of the union as well as sharing the opinion of slavery as “evil.”

The evidence continues with selections from speeches, letters, or other statements by William Seward, John Quincy Adams, and Daniel Webster, all of whom were northerners and prominent Whigs. At that time Seward was governor of New York (and later Senator and Secretary of State under the Lincoln and Johnson administrations), Adams was a former President (and bitter enemy of Polk’s mentor, Andrew Jackson) as well as a member of Congress from Massachusetts, and Webster was a Senator from Massachusetts. The thrust of Seward’s speech—or, at least, the excerpt selected by the author—is that abolitionists can trust that the Whig party shares their ambitions for limiting the extension of slavery, tying that extension to the annexation of Texas. The author highlights Seward’s claim that anyone who favors the emancipation (freeing) of slaves must vote for Clay. Adams’s comments come from a letter to a New York newspaper in which he refers to the Texas annexation agreement as “slave mongering” and refers to British efforts (“the successor of Elizabeth” is a reference to Queen Victoria) to end slavery. The letter from Adams suggests that American efforts to expand slavery may lead to conflict with Britain. One could argue that the selection from Adams’s writings on the subject were specifically chosen to present Adams as almost hoping that Britain would intervene was specifically tailored to paint the abolition movement not only as a dispute between sections of the United States but, potentially, as an opportunity for foreign meddling in the nation’s political life. Walker, in non-anonymous writings, had expressed fear that if the United States did not annex Texas, Great Britain may attempt to colonize it, undermining the United States. Daniel Webster, is described addressing a Whig meeting in Massachusetts, supporting Henry Clay and urging supporters of the Abolitionist party to join forces with the Whigs, since both parties sought to prevent the annexation of Texas (“a measure which both alike condemn”).

Following these excerpts from prominent Whigs, Walker turns his attention to action the Whigs had taken in various states that Clay supported, such as resolutions from the Massachusetts and Vermont state governments

opposing annexation. This leads into a discussion of the balance of power in Congress at the Federal level. Walker argues that without the annexation of Texas, southern, slave-holding states would be in the minority in the Senate as well as the House of Representatives.

Walker’s address closes with more evidence that Clay opposes the interests of slave-owners and supports the radicalism of the Abolitionists, using his vote against measures to ban abolitionist materials from the mail as well as speeches in which he condemned slavery in the same harsh terms as the Abolitionists and northern Whigs like Webster and Seward. In the final sentences, Walker calls upon Whig party supporters in the south to consider whether or not they can support a candidate like Henry Clay, asserting that a Clay victory may sink the region “into one common abyss of ruin and degradation.”

Essential Themes

Polk won the election, receiving 170 electoral votes (with 138 needed to secure victory) but the popular vote was one of the closest of the nineteenth century, with Polk receiving 49.5%, Clay 48.1%, and Birney 2.3%. The presence of Birney, the Abolitionist, Liberty party candidate in addition to being a talking point in this address, has provided a great deal of fodder for historians and political scientists over the years. Birney received 15,812 votes in New York and 3632 votes in Michigan—mostly attributable to his very clear stance against the annexation of Texas. Despite what the address above claims, Clay was much less solid on this issue than Birney and in Michigan and—especially—New York, the support Birney received may have kept Clay from winning the presidency. The margins by which Polk won in those two states could have been overcome by Polk without Birney being on the ballot.

This address, in its attempts to drive a wedge between Whigs of the north and the south, provides an excellent illustration of the growing animosity between north and south—especially the increasing fear on the part of slavery’s supporters.

—Aaron Gulyas, MA

Bibliography and Additional Reading

- Borneman, Walter R. *Polk: The Man Who Transformed the Presidency and America*. New York: Random House, 2009.
- Holt, Michael F. *The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party: Jacksonian Politics and the Onset of Civil War*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- Presidential Election of 1844, A Resource Guide. Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/rr/program/bib/elections/election1844.html>.
- Remini, Robert. *Henry Clay: A Statesman for the Union*. New York: WW Norton, 1991.
- Silbey, Joel H. *Storm over Texas: The Annexation Controversy and the Road to Civil War*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.