Strictly Sectionalism?:

A Reexamination of the Annexation Debates

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Abstract:

The annexation of Texas has been considered an intensely sectional controversy that helped accelerate the political, social, and class divisions that resulted in the American Civil War. Scholars have concluded that annexation formed one of the key stepping stones on this road to disunion and have virtually ignored the critical part that three Whig senators' cross-party votes played in the ultimate political resolution.

What caused these unusual cross-party votes? Can sectionalism alone adequately explain their motivation? This paper opens a reexamination of the annexation of Texas with the twin objectives of posing a new interpretation for the controversy and simultaneously explaining why three Whig senators crossed party lines to approve such a momentous territorial addition. While slavery and territorial expansion remained important to the debates, the final deciding votes hinged on economic factors, particularly the impact on the price of cotton. Three Whig senators chose pocketbook over party, launching both Texas and the United States on entirely new trajectories.

Introduction

Each summer, mid-nineteenth-century Washington D.C. political and social elites sought refuge from the sultry summer humidity in Western Virginia's mountains. One popular gathering spot, the Red Sulphur Inn, often hosted political and social gatherings, where sensory experiences such as tastes, speeches, sounds, and shoulder-slapping touch formed a community and communicated political and social meaning to enthusiastic participants. In 1844, a central political question animated these meetings: should the Republic of Texas be joined to the United States?

At such a meeting at the Red Sulphur in August that year, a speaker named James Mason of nearby Winchester angrily denounced a recent vote by the United States Senate to reject a Treaty of Annexation that had been agreed with the Republic of Texas. Hidden in the audience that night sat one of those U. S. Senators, Henry Johnson of Louisiana. Obviously irritated by the implied criticism, Johnson surprised everyone, rose, and "demanded the speaker's authority". He went on to justify his no vote on principle and attempted to explain his fellow Senators' votes as motivated by principle as well.[324] The fact that only six months later Johnson would reverse this stance and cast one of the three deciding votes for annexation remained unknown to that night's audience. This incident demonstrates how a confluence of passionate antebellum politics coupled with constituent pressure intensified debates about Texas. It also sets the stage for a new analysis of the issue, its resolution, and an explanation for why three Whigs cast cross-party votes to finally approve annexation.

[324] Senator Henry S. Johnson had just voted no in June with the Senate majority to reject President John Tyler's negotiated annexation treaty with Texas, ostensibly over the constitutionality of the treaty method, but his sensitivity to the criticism reflected his concern for how his pro-annexation Louisiana constituents would view his vote. Ultimately, he would prove to become one of the three dissident Whigs who tipped the balance and approved the measure in February 1845, discussed in detail further in this article.

The annexation of Texas has generally been considered an intensely sectional controversy that helped accelerate the political, social, and class divisions that resulted in the American Civil War.[325] Analyzing the heated political conflict and the deciding, cross-party votes cast by three Southern Whig Senators complicates the predominant sectional/partisan view of this pivotal issue. This new framing shows that conflicting economic interpretations of the effects of the Texas acquisition caused the deciding split leading to the incredibly narrow and controversial final U. S. Senate approval of annexation. The continent-defining question culminated with members of the monied, business class landing on alternate visions of how the addition of the vast, fertile cotton and sugar growing area would affect Southern land values and commodity prices.

This article will first characterize the political atmosphere surrounding the public discussion of the Texas issue and the 1844 Presidential election. Further, by delving beneath the surface of the much-discussed sweeping themes of sectionalism, slavery, and territorial expansion that previous scholars have used to characterize this period, a new economic explanation emerges as the final deciding factor in the crucial Senate votes approving the annexation. Finally, evaluating cotton pricing data from the years following annexation can determine which economic view proved more prescient. This reexamination of a critical inflection point in American and Texan history utilizes newspaper records, private documents from archives, congressional speeches, and both political and sensory analysis techniques to shed new light on this complex and divisive topic.

Background

To understand the significance of the implications surrounding the potential addition of Texas to the United States, we need to understand the developments that took place in the

[325] For excellent scholarship examining annexation see works by Michael F. Holt, Joel Sibley, Amy Greenberg, David Pletcher, and Justin Smith, all listed in the bibliography and referenced various times in this paper.

preceding decades. Anglo growth in Mexican Texas led to tension with Mexico and eventually open warfare, famously winning Texas its independence between 1835 and 1836. Almost immediately, groups inside Texas and in the U. S. actively lobbied for annexation. Both President Andrew Jackson and his successor Martin Van Buren carefully considered annexation but opted not to provoke Mexico by pursuing it. Jackson did, however, acquiesce to a formal recognition of the Texas Republic's independence.[326]

As the new Texan Republic struggled both economically and militarily through its first few years, the prospect of annexation lingered in the background as a potential solution and endpoint. Ongoing and intermittent open clashes with Mexico – which never formally recognized the independence of its former colony—coupled with active frontier conflict with raiding Native American tribesmen, left Texas insecure and politically vulnerable. At the same time, Southern white planters seeking fertile land fueled a vigorous immigration. Texas captivated the American imagination with an outsized, almost mythical appeal, vast economic potential, and rebellious reputation. This fascination and lure translated into a series of highly contentious political conflicts, exacerbated American partisan competition, and caused international tension not only with Mexico but European powers as well.

In 1844, U. S. President John Tyler seized upon the Texas enthusiasm to attempt to reinvigorate his failing presidential administration by negotiating an annexation treaty with Texas. Texan President Sam Houston recognized the great advantage this treaty promised but shrewdly pursued other options as well, including a potential British-brokered Mexican formal recognition coupled with a British trade agreement. Tyler's negotiated treaty was rejected by the U. S. Senate in June 1844, vaulting the Texas issue to the forefront of that year's presidential election

[326] For a detailed discussion of Texas, Mexico, and early attempts to achieve annexation see Smith's first chapter, "The Beginnings of the Annexation Question" in Justin Harvey Smith, *The Annexation of Texas* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1919).

campaign between pro-annexation Democrat James K. Polk and the lukewarm equivocating Whig Henry Clay. Widely seen as an endorsement for annexation, Polk's victory created the political opening for the outgoing Tyler to raise annexation with Congress.[327] The resulting contentious debates, bitter partisan battle between Whigs and Democrats, and narrowly decided vote form the backdrop for this analysis.

The Whig party descended from the same Jeffersonian Republican parent as their Democratic arch-rivals yet emphasized a more muscular central government that promoted banking, protective tariffs, and internal infrastructure improvements. Whigs remained committed to activist government, commercial interests, banks, and especially a protective tariff. Democrats, on the other hand, completely unlike the modern party of the same name, aggressively opposed government power, and decried government intervention in economics, finance, and infrastructure: they viewed government as a tool for the upper-class elites and consistently advocated for the "common man". Democrats, however, ironically supported vigorous government military action, especially for territorial expansion. More land provided increased opportunities for everyday citizens to better themselves and their families, they reasoned. This key attraction of the annexation potential bolstered nationwide Democratic support.[328] The 1840s two-party system and the study of party origins is well travelled scholarly ground, yet one notes an economic underpinning to both sides and a natural concern for putting food on the table, common to rich, poor, Northerner, Southerner, slaveholder, or abolitionist alike.

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[327] See Holt's *Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party* and Joel Sibley's *Storm over Texas* for the narrow deciding vote count in New York tipping the balance to the Democrats. For a fascinating look inside the political dynamics of 1844, see Greenberg's *A Wicked War*. Amy S. Greenberg, *A Wicked War : Polk, Clay, Lincoln, and the 1846 U.S. invasion of Mexico*, 1st ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012).

[328] Holt's *Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party* provides a digestible summary of the origins of the Whig party. A succinct summary of the ideological positions of, and differences between the 1840s Whigs and Democrats is contained in Horace Greeley, "The Grounds Of Difference Between The Contending Parties," *The Whig Almanac and United States Register* (1843), https://archive.org/details/whigalmanacunite1843amer/page/n7/mode/2up?q=grounds+.

Sources also show that the potential for adding vast swathes of cheap, fertile land remained shadowed by the major fear that annexing Texas would trigger a war with Mexico. The Texas Republic and Mexico continued in an active state of war that was never settled until after Mexico's defeat by the U. S. in 1848.[329] Whigs particularly feared the potential war scenario; Democrats, following the spirit, if not always the tempered actions, of their inspirational icon Andrew Jackson, often assumed a more bellicose tone and postured with increasing bravado for an opposite conclusion.[330]

While hawkish Democrats discussed relations with Mexico, Whigs feared annexation's implications for relations with Great Britain much more. Great Britain's sophisticated diplomatic and trade leaders had successfully maneuvered their two largest cotton suppliers, the Southern U. S. and the Republic of Texas, into a continuing competition to sell to the largest world market. The British, ever prioritizing their own commercial interests, sought to keep the two supply sources separated into competing camps. Annexation alarmed them, so they actively schemed to thwart any potential combination to maintain a self-sovereign Texan Republic.

These British schemes bore fruit as two or more complicated social, political, and economic projects that included a variety of offers designed to entice Texas away from Annexation. Supposedly secret, many conditions and elements of these plans became public knowledge and were widely reported on, especially inside Texas, including the potential for abolishing slavery in return for remuneration for planters and British support for a permanent Mexican recognition of Texas. These promises hinged on a commitment by Texas to remain

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[329] For accounts of the ongoing Texan / Mexican warfare, especially the busy year 1842, see Sam W. Haynes, *Unsettled Land: From Revolution to Republic, the Struggle for Texas*, 1 ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2022). 318-320.
[330] For excellent scholarship about the causes and progress of the Mexican War, please see Guardino and Greenberg's books. Most modern scholars agree that while the annexation of Texas placed Mexican / American tensions at high alert, the actual war was purposefully instigated on Polk's orders by American troop movements near the disputed Texas / Mexico border. Peter Guardino, *The Dead March: A History of the Mexican-American War* (Harvard University Press, 2017).; and Greenberg, *A Wicked War : Polk, Clay, Lincoln, and the 1846 U.S. invasion of Mexico*.

independent of the U. S. and as a firm cotton supplier to Britain. While monied interests in the American South dreaded the potential impact such a mass manumission would create, Texan President Anson Jones felt so confident in an improved negotiating position that he wrote, "all eyes are now strained towards the U. S. to see what the Senate will do [to move on annexation] … in a few weeks they may all be turned to England and France. I am satisfied we will do very well in either event which may happen."[331] In fact, Texas shrewdly worked negotiations on both fronts, with the Mexican government in cooperation with Britain, and separately with the Tyler administration. By 1845 both options solidified into firm proposals, one from the U. S. to accept proposed annexation, the other European-brokered permanent peace and official recognition by Mexico. Texan President Anson Jones publicly presented both options to the Texan legislature, and later to the entire voting public, to choose "the alternative of Annexation or Independence"[332]. As we now know, both the Texan government and voting populace overwhelmingly chose annexation.[333]

Previous Frames of Analysis and Literature Review

Scholars have situated annexation within three primary analytical frameworks, viewing the debates and controversy primarily as a sectional conflict centered on slavery, a Whig/Democratic partisan conflict, or an international relations bombshell involving up to five different nations (Texas, the U. S., Great Britain, France, and Mexico). To a large extent, all of these factors were important in shaping this very complex set of issues.

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[331] Anson Jones, Letter to Washington D. Miller, May 3, 1844 R4-7-2, Washington Daniel Miller Papers, Texas State Archives.
[332] "President Jones' Message Independence or Annexation," *Texas National Register* (Washington, Texas), June 19, 1845.
[333] Vote tallies of the Oct 13 Referendum, tallied on Nov 10, 1845 – For: 4,254; Against: 267. "Ratification of Texas Annexation, 1845 Vote Totals," 2024, https://www.tsl.texas.gov/ref/abouttx/annexation/voters.html.

Earlier works, exemplified by Justin Smith's *Annexation of Texas* and David Pletcher's *Diplomacy of Annexation*, placed Texas as a centerpiece of dynamic international relations considerations.[334] By its very nature, the annexation issue comprised a complicated international relations issue; this was essentially a merger of two nations, albeit of vastly unequal population size. Both Smith and Pletcher have accurately evaluated the international dimensions and the implications for relations with Mexico and Great Britain. The Mexican issue caused a great deal of consternation at the time; Mexico continued to regard Texas as its own soil, and American acquisition, however accomplished, would (and did) imperil its relationship with the U. S. Sam Haynes adds to this body of work, showing how Americans' fears of Britain as both a recent foe and the world's pre-eminent military power shaped political debate, especially about Texas.[335] While these studies have rightly focused on political and military implications, they have not emphasized potential economic and trade issues and the impact on trade relations with the Southern planters' main buyer.

Beginning in the 1990s, preeminent scholars of the antebellum period William Freehling, Michael Holt, and Joel Silby ably framed the Texas debates as stepping stones on an inexorable march toward Civil War.[336] Their foundational work underpins most current antebellum scholarship utilizing detailed analyses of party dynamics at local, state, and national levels. Much

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[334] Smith, *The Annexation of Texas*., Justin H. Smith, "The Mexican Recognition of Texas," *The American Historical Review* 16, no. 1 (1910)., David M. Pletcher, *The Diplomacy of Annexation; Texas, Oregon, and the Mexican War* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1973).

[335] David Pletcher's *The Diplomacy of Annexation* documents the complicated processes for acquiring Texas and Oregon and focuses on the international relations implications, given the unsettled boundary conflict of the Pacific northwest. Pletcher, *The Diplomacy of Annexation; Texas, Oregon, and the Mexican War*., Sam Haynes' "Anglophobia and the Annexation of Texas" provided a more modern refocus on the fraught tensions and American fear of British military might. Sam W. Haynes, "Anglophobia and The Annexation of Texas," *Manifest Destiny and Empire: American Antebellum Expansionism* (1997). Haynes, "Anglophobia and The Annexation of Texas.", Justin Smith's *The Annexation of Texas* remains a comprehensive "play by play" account especially recounting the details of the congressional debates. Smith, *The Annexation of Texas*.

[336] William W. Freehling, *The Road To Disunion Vol 1: Secessionists At Bay* (Oxford University Press, 1990). Michael F. Holt, *The Rise and Fall of The American Whig Party: Jacksonian Politics and the Onset of the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999). Joel H Silbey, *Storm Over Texas: The Annexation Controversy and the Road to Civil War* (Oxford University Press, 2005).

of what we now know about Whigs and Democrats stems from their works, including the complicated interweaving of sectionalism and slavery concerns into regional and national politics. Texas' nebulous western boundaries and the potential division of Texas into multiple states proved highly polarizing and cemented slavery and sectionalism as essential elements of the controversy.[337] While Silbey and Holt attribute the Texas votes to partisan and sectional differences, Freehling illuminates the congressional discussions of Texas as a potential "outlet" for diluting slavery across more territory, maintaining the institution while alleviating pressure from abolitionists. Other more recent works by Andrew Torget and Alice Baumgartner have added a transnational view, showing how the cotton economy and slavery underpinned economic and social tensions resulting in the political and sectional conflicts.[338] Their addition of economic considerations helps build the background for this study.

Most historians have pictured antebellum politics in a two-party framework; however, new scholarship has challenged the prevalence of this bipolar dynamic. Historians Rachel Shelden and Erik Alexander argue that fluidity, not statism, dominated nineteenth-century American politics.[339] "Dismantling the Party System" demonstrates that decentralized and regional interests influenced political orientation as much as traditional top-down party platforms. By illuminating regional micro-fissures inside the presumed monolithic national party structure, their work helps to create a pathway for my analysis of an economic split within the Southern Whigs. Still, it appears overly ambitious to consign the entire two-party model to the intellectual trash heap. Evidence does not suggest that the dissenting Whigs intended their cross-party votes as a rebellion against

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[337] Freehling, *The Road To Disunion Vol 1: Secessionists At Bay*. These debates were extensively chronicled in the Congressional Globe records for both House and Senate in January and February 1845.
[338] Alice Baumgartner, *South to Freedom : Runaway Slaves to Mexico and The Road to The Civil War* (New York: Basic Books, 2020). Andrew J. Torget, *Seeds of Empire: Cotton, Slavery, and the Transformation of the Texas Borderlands, 1800-1850* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2015).
[339] Erik B. Alexander Rachel A. Shelden, "Dismantling the Party System: Party Fluidity and the Mechanisms of Nineteenth- Century U.S. Politics " *The Journal of American History* (December 2023).

the party or towards forming a new party; indeed, each remained with the Whigs after this vote. Another explanation is needed.

The Final Vote: A Sensory and Political Experience

No one could have predicted that the heightened tension of extreme partisan politics, international attention, and national/international debate would eventually be decided by a handful of contentious votes in the United States Senate chambers. February 27, 1845, appeared to observers to be a typical chilly, drab mid-Atlantic region winter day. By ten-thirty that evening, the exhausted Senators finally held their last vote on the issue. According to multiple newspaper reports, the Senate galleries were still "crammed" with "an anxious and interested multitude" of spectators. After a loud, heated, even raucous long day of debates, the bill was ordered to a third and final reading. The final vote tallied 27 senators for, 25 senators against. The Joint Resolutions allowing the President to effectuate an annexation of Texas had passed. Even the senators themselves seemed stunned at the enormity of the decision; the final vote culminated in "a profound silence".[340]

The silence did not last long. The next days brought the news that three Whig Senators, John Henderson of Mississippi, William D. Merrick of Maryland, and Henry S. Johnson of Louisiana, had broken party ranks and voted with their Democratic opposition to approve the measure. The partisan and appalled Whig press accused the three of outright corruption, selling out their party, or even acting as traitors. With an understandably opposite and jubilant reaction, Democratic papers lauded them as heroes, and at Jacksonian celebratory gatherings even toasts

[340] "A Foreign State Annexed To The United States," Article, *Boston Atlas*, March 7, 1845, Gale.

were drunk in their honor; the "democracy of the nation" was "indebted to these courageous votes," one inebriated celebrant enthused.[341]

As news of the final resolution spread, the fact that the three decisive votes had crossed party lines shocked contemporary observers and reporters. The three Senators instantly became both heroes to their party opposition and villains to their party compatriots. While many modern scholars find it unsurprising that three Southern Whig politicians sided with the Southern viewpoint, this interpretation does not tell the whole tale. Simple sectional evaluation cannot explain why ten Southern Whigs voted *against* their Southern section to deny annexation. Neither can sectionalism alone explain why two of the three rebellious Southern Whigs had voted with their party against annexation as recently as eight months before. To add nuance and new dimensions to this analysis, we must return to the very foundation of the Whig party's principles. Economic issues, not merely sectional or partisan concerns, formed the final wedge that split the Southern Whigs and motivated the three to approve the resolution. At the end, the history-altering vote came down to two different interpretations of how the addition of Texas would affect the cotton economy. Whig senators Henderson, Johnson, and Merrick feared that rejection of annexation would lead Texas to consummate a rumored British / Texan alliance, leading to a significant commercial disadvantage for U. S. cotton. Opponents of annexation argued that the addition of such a large and fertile cotton-growing territory would so dramatically increase cotton supply that prices would collapse, severely damaging U. S. planters.

Historian Robert Holt argues that the Whigs formed a truly cross-sectional national party, whose adherence to national policies helped bridge the gap between North and South. We have ample evidence of this Whig national orientation; Southern Whigs voted with their Northern

[341] "Celebration of the Anniversary of General Jackson's Birth Day, and the Annexation of Texas," Article, *Mississippi Free Trader and Natchez Gazette*, 1845/03/18/ 1845, Gale.

Brethren on key national issues such as the Tariff and in support of banking. Annexation fit right into this pattern as well; Whigs were almost unanimously against territorial expansion (as discussed above). In early 1844, former Whig congressman John Botts of Virginia, who had remained nationally influential, addressed the New York Whigs who were gathered to celebrate Henry Clay's birthday. Botts' "forcible arguments in vindication of Whig policy" included speaking about "the restoration of the Currency, the establishment of a Protective Tariff, and Distribution of the proceeds of the Public Lands". He, however, opposed annexation of Texas in "the strongest terms", because it could lead to disunion. "He was not a Southern man with Northern feelings, but a Southern man with National feelings".[342] For the time being, Whig priorities remained unified across sections.[343]

The Southern Whigs also strongly supported the national Whig agenda, advocating for a high tariff to protect domestic manufacturing, further investment in transportation infrastructure, and a National Bank. This helps explain the preponderance of Southern Whigs (ten out of thirteen) voting against annexation and maintaining solidarity with their Northern compatriots.[344] The Southern Whigs had mostly remained united by their common concerns for their business prospects, yet as we shall see, also split on Texas implications for those prospects.

The decisive split between the Southern Whigs that determined the final vote came down to two interpretations of how the price of cotton, agricultural markets, and values of Southern lands would be affected. These two views were heavily influenced by recent lived experience of a depressed cotton market. Prices had remained low in the recent decade, and this

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[342] "Celebration Of Henry Clay's Birthday, and Mr. Botts' Speech," Article, *Cleveland Daily Herald*, 1844/04/17/ 1844, Gale.

[343] Holt further argues that the later decline of the cross-sectional Whig party in the early 1850s helped speed the process toward disunion. The Whig's successors, the Republicans, were primarily a Northern-only party and this increased the sectional tension in an already explosive political conflict.

[344] Charles Grier Sellers, "Who Were the Southern Whigs?," *The American Historical Review* 59, no. 2 (1954), https://doi.org/10.2307/1843625.

underperformance created great financial stress on planters across the country. Fear of a continued "depression" in land values and a "collapse" in prices formed a powerful motivator for opponents of annexation.[345]

Pricing fears also animated a second main view. Southern U. S. cotton competed directly with Texas cotton for market share with the world's largest buyer, Great Britain. While both competitors received the same basic prices for their products, either on the New York or London exchanges, their cost basis, and therefore their profit margins, of course, differed, although British import duty applied to both Texan and American cotton. Southern planters feared a nightmare scenario: one in which Texan cotton could be exported to Britain, duty-free. British machinations toward potential interference in Texas, as discussed above, led many, including our three dissident Whig Senators Johnson, Merrick, and Henderson, to conclude that a British / Texan political alliance would also include a commercial aspect: reduced or eliminated duties on imported Texan cotton. A reduction in Texan cost structure could allow them to undercut American sales prices while still retaining their current profit margins. This potential competitive disadvantage chilled some planters enough to strongly advocate beating Britain to the punch by annexing Texas first, precluding their nightmare scenario.

With a differing view of the potential impact, opponents of annexation anticipated market oversupply and a resulting depreciation of their lands. Even though Texas cotton would continue to be sold to Great Britain irrespective of whether Texas joined the U. S. or remained independent, some planters feared that annexation would stimulate both new settlement and increased capital investment into the State of Texas, leading to dramatic production increases. This supply surge could cripple prices, leading to calamitous financial impact across the South, greatly depreciating the value of Southern landholdings and ruining financial fortunes.

[345] Cotton pricing and past/future data are discussed later in this paper.

This oversupply fear filled contemporary correspondence, newspaper articles, and congressional speeches. Representative Thomas H. Bayly of Virginia, addressing the U. S. House in the January 1845 annexation debates, succinctly laid out these fears. Answering a previous speech by Rep. J. R. Ingersoll of Pennsylvania, Bayly stated: "the gentleman from Pennsylvania says that this is at present an overproduction of cotton … and that by annexation of Texas that overproduction will be increased." Interestingly, he goes on to state his counter to that fear, "by refusing to admit Texas we do not annihilate her; on the contrary, with a free trade treaty with England, the production of cotton there will be much more stimulated than if she is joined to us".[346] In the Senate, debate also focused on this production issue. Senator Archer of Virginia laid it out plainly; in the event of annexation, he stated, "A depression, and a great one, in the price of these [Southern] lands must be immediately experienced." He went on to state that a rush of small planters to this "new El Dorado" would even more dramatically increase Texas production, and the "market was already glutted".[347]

Even the most ardent Democratic advocate for annexation, Senator Robert J. Walker of Mississippi, acknowledged that his opponents were making this oversupply argument, although he concluded that the fears of a British / Texan trade alliance outweighed this.[348] Nor was cotton the only concern, but also the price of sugar. Annexation would, according to one editorial, "greatly depreciate the value of all lands in Louisiana, Arkansas, and Mississippi … destructive to the sugar interest".[349] The *Columbus Enquirer's* sarcastic article "Immediately or Sooner" pilloried the entire annexation project: "Are not the lands of Georgia and other States sufficiently depreciated in value, without leaving them rendered utterly valueless by this scheme of territorial

[346] "Debate on the Annexation of Texas," Article, *National Intelligencer*, 1845/01/11/ 1845, Gale.
[347] "Speech of Mr. Archer, of Virginia, Delivered in the Senate of the United States," Article, *National Intelligencer*, 1844/06/27/ 1844, Gale.
[348] "Letter of Mr. Walker, of Mississippi, Relative to the Annexation of Texas," Article, *New York Herald*, 1844/03/07/ 1844, Gale.
[349] "Texas and Louisiana," Editorial, *National Intelligencer*, 1844/04/06/ 1844, Gale.

aggrandizement?" This article goes on to imply that Southerners who advocated for annexation were "mad".[350]

One of the most vigorous opponents of annexation came from the pro-annexation Southern state of Louisiana, Senator Alexander Barrow.[351] The collegial and influential Senator was popular on both sides of the aisle, and his words carried weight.[352] Barrow opposed the measure both times it was the focus of debate in the U. S. Senate, at the June 1844 rejection of Tyler's treaty, and again at the final February 1845 vote, concentrating his arguments on the oversupply and price collapse fears. Annexation, he contended, "within three years would increase the growth of that staple [cotton] from thirty-five to fifty percent. Cotton growers now can barely live in Louisiana … the prices were so low that it was a losing business; but were prices likely to be raised by adding to the Union the finest cotton region in the world?"[353] For Barrow, at least, oversupply concern overrode the popularity of annexation in his home state. His fellow Louisianan Whig Senator Henry Johnson, as we will shortly discuss, came to the exact opposite conclusion.

As scholars such as Sam Haynes have noted, many American leaders were greatly alarmed by the national security implications of British interference in Texas.[354] Proponents of annexation additionally feared the potential commercial advantages an independent Texas might gain through

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[350] The Columbus Enquirer, "Immediately, or Sooner," Editorial, *Raleigh Register*, 1844/05/31/ 1844, Gale.
[351] We have evidence that the legislature of Louisiana wrote to its congressional representatives to ask them to support annexation: Resolutions of the Legislature of Louisiana : Relative to the Annexation of Texas to the United States, (Washington, D.C. 1845). As this paper also discusses, Barrow's fellow Whig Louisiana Senator, Henry Johnson, took the exact opposite position.
[352] Rachel A. Shelden, *Washington Brotherhood: Politics, Social Life, and the Coming of the Civil War* (University of North Carolina Press, 2013). 150.
[353] "Speech of Mr. Barrow, of Louisiana, on the Resolution for the Annexation of Texas," *National Intelligencer*, 27 Feb. 1845. Nineteenth Century American Newspapers.
[354] Scholars such as Holt, Haynes, Pletcher, and Llerena Friend have discussed the British involvement in Texas and its implications for annexation. These analyses mostly center on the slavery issue -- how British efforts to influence Texas towards abolition would impact the Southern state. Haynes and Pletcher also show the larger issue of global U. S. / British relations and the very real threat that U. S. leaders felt from hegemonic aspirations of the British global giant.

an alliance with Great Britain; this potential for a British – Texan trade alliance weighed on contemporary minds. One of James K. Polk's correspondents, a self-proclaimed Southern planter named Mr. Iveson L. Brookes, wrote at length railing against the Whigs' opposition to annexation. Blaming "the new system of Whiggery in which Clay, Adams, and Webster seem to be leaders" for "combining those measures which would fix upon the country Clay's American System, drive Texas to an alliance with England", he concluded that the alliance would "render our great Southern staple worthless".[355]

While arguing that by admitting Texas the cause of abolition would be served, the *N. Y. Courier* in March 1844 also summarized many Southerners' trade impact fears: "Texas in twenty years will grow all the cotton that Great Britain will require. She will admit British goods free of duty, and in return, Great Britain will exclude the cotton of the U. States unless we too receive her goods free".[356] The anti-Texas Whig *National Intelligencer* published a letter in June 1844 decrying potential "discrimination in the British market in favor of Texas cotton."[357] So widespread was the discussion that even in the north this topic raised eyebrows; the *New York Herald* portrayed an independent Texas as a weak "cats-paw" of England.[358]

Several sources went in depth on the potential impacts beyond king cotton. "Mr. Wilkins' Letter," published in the *Mountaineer* in April 1844, characterized a U. S. rejected Texas with no other option than to become a "commercial dependency" of Britain. This would set up a dangerous situation where American "flour, beef, pork … iron … glass" and other goods would

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[355] Cutler, *Correspondence of James K. Polk*. 381.
[356] "The N. Y. Courier & Enquirer, Gives The Following Reasons for Annexation," Article, *Mountaineer*, 1844/03/29/ 1844, Gale. This illustrates the wide dispersion of conversation on the British / Texas topic. As to annexation promoting abolition, the author argues that since the 1807 U. S. law prohibiting slave imports would now apply to Texas, the increasing labor needs of expansion there would require slave labor transfers from other states, reducing the number of slaves in the current U. S. Other sources also postulated that slaves would be sent towards Texas in event of annexation.
[357] "Debate on the Texas Treaty," Article, *National Intelligencer*, 1844/06/13/ 1844, Gale.
[358] Correspondence of the Herald, "Galveston," Article, *New York Herald*, 1844/05/27/ 1844, Gale.

be excluded from Texas, whose imports would remain primarily British.[359] Nevertheless, the main focus remained on impacts to cotton. Rejection of annexation would lead to "discriminating duties", Texas as a great "commercial rival", and so encouraging smuggling that even an "army of custom-house officers" could not prevent it.[360]

Now turning to the three dissident Southern Whigs and their economic justification for approving annexation against their party's wishes, we begin with Senator Henry S. Johnson of Louisiana. In 1844, Johnson was in the first year of his five-year term, and since he was not up for re-election for some time, he may have initially felt somewhat insulated from direct electoral consequences for his actions.[361] Elected as a Whig, with a career filled with anti-Jacksonian politics, his vote against Tyler's annexation treaty in June 1844 was unsurprising. Louisiana's other senator Alexander Barrow, also a fellow Whig, followed suit and voted no. The Congressional Globe did not record any speeches from Johnson during May or June 1844 on this topic, but according to *The Bloomington Herald*, Johnson had been predicted to number among the treaty's opponents.[362] Johnson was torn between the pro-annexation energy in Louisiana and the powerful pull of Whig national unity. He claimed that his no vote had been based on concerns about the constitutionality of the treaty mechanism used to merge with a foreign nation.[363] As we have seen by the incident at the Red Sulphur Inn, he had obviously been irritated by the resulting criticism.

By 1845, Johnson felt more emboldened to chart his own path and reveal his main concern, that of his business interests. In his Senate speech in February 1845, Johnson carefully analyzed several aspects of the economic arguments. First addressing Virginia Senator Archer's

[359] William Wilkins, "Mr. Wilkins' Letter," Article, *Mountaineer*, 1844/04/26/ 1844, Gale.
[360] "The Advantages of Annexation," Editorial, *Mississippian*, 1844/05/22/ 1844, Gale.
[361] Johnson had been elected in a special election in 1844 to replace the deceased incumbent senator. Johnson served a five-year term.
[362] "Expected Vote on Tyler Treaty," *Bloomington Herald, Indiana*, June 7, 1844.
[363] Other Senators were similarly and quite seriously concerned about this constitutionality question.

contention that annexation would be "ruinous to the sugar and cotton planters of Louisiana", Johnson countered by explaining that, himself a sugar and cotton planter and aligned in interest with "the planters of Louisiana", he "did not believe that annexation would produce the ruinous consequences". Instead, even though emigration of resources and slaves to a new Texas state might increase production and put price pressure on Southern planters, he feared a greater danger, that if

> "Texas be not annexed that she will enter into a treaty with England, by which her cotton would be received in British ports free of duties on condition that British goods to be received in Texas free of duties and whether such a treaty would not be injurious to the planters of Louisiana? [364]

While Johnson "deemed it proper to say that he concurred with the views expressed by the legislature of Louisiana in these resolutions", he had gravitated toward a serious business concern when making his final determination on the vote. Two episodes also reveal his extreme sensitivity to the views of his constituents: the incident at the Red Sulphur (described earlier) and a fascinating letter uncovered in the Briscoe archives in Austin.

Immediately after the fateful February 28 vote, on March 8, 1845, Johnson visited Mississippi Senator and ardent annexation supporter, Robert J. Walker. We have seen above that Walker functioned as one of Polk's key campaign lieutenants and one of the most active and vocal advocates of annexation. We do not know what exactly Johnson and Walker discussed in that meeting, but we have the brief letter Johnson wrote to Walker as a follow-up. Johnson wrote,

> "I enclose a copy of my remarks on the Texas question as prepared by myself. Will you be prepared to suggest, on a separate piece of paper, any alterations you may deem proper to any portion of the remarks, so as to make them correspond with what you may add on all the points addressed to in our conversation at your office today." [365]

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[364] Remarks of Mr. Johnson of Louisiana, In Senate, February 27, 1845 - On the House joint resolution for the annexation of Texas to the United States., (The Congressional Globe, 1845). Note this citation covers the subsequent quotes from this speech as well.

[365] Henry S. Johnson, Letter to Senator Robert J. Walker of Mississippi, March 8, 1845 Briscoe Center For American History, University of Texas, Austin.

Johnson wanted to conform his public remarks, which would be reported in his home state's local presses, to align with the Democratic official position in support of annexation. According to historian Rachel Shelden, Congressmen often annotated and revised their speeches after the fact to tailor them for written publication and distribution.[366] In this case, Johnson was concerned about how his views contrasted with those of his fellow Louisiana Whig Senator John Barrow, who had voiced emphatic opposition to annexation. In fact, had Barrow not so publicly and energetically opposed annexation, Johnson implied in his letter to Walker that "but for his [Barrow's] remarks I would not have said a word on the question."[367] Johnson was obviously concerned about the public fallout among his constituent Whig supporters who would have been very disappointed with his cross-party, pro-annexation vote. Additionally, in a floor speech preceding the final vote, Johnson alluded to "letters he had received from his friends in Louisiana, at the last session of Congress" -- obviously as a result of his vote against the Tyler treaty –to which he had replied that he expected that Texas "would ultimately be so annexed."[368] We can assume these letters were not classified as fan mail. We cannot know which influence weighed more heavily in Johnson's decision, constituent pressure or fear for his planting business, but we can see that in his final vote he determined that they coincided.

Henderson appears as the most straightforward and clear-cut case of the three cross-party voting Whigs. His previous "yes" vote for the Tyler treaty eight months before had placed him squarely outside the bounds of acceptable Whig behavior. This pro-Democratic vote, however,

[366] Shelden, *Washington Brotherhood: Politics, Social Life, and the Coming of the Civil War*. 30.
[367] Johnson, Letter to Senator Robert J. Walker of Mississippi.
[368] Remarks of Mr. Johnson of Louisiana, In Senate, February 27, 1845 - On the House joint resolution for the annexation of Texas to the United States., Short.

had done him no favors in the 1844 Senate election; he had been upended by his Democratic opponent, Jesse Speight, in an election defeat four days after the final February 28, 1845 vote.[369]

On the Senate floor in February 1845, Henderson began his speech with an evaluation of the merits and constitutionality of the method of annexation. In particular, he highlighted the potential economic threats from a British Texan potential economic alliance. "Can we of the South consent, if we may prevent it, that the nations of Europe shall have two markets for the procurement of this great staple [cotton] on our own shores and waters, over one of which we have no control?" He also called upon "northern manufacturers" to take note of the risks of losing a substantial Texan market to British control, in their "race of competition with England". Finally, he concluded by addressing the slavery issue, "but for the question of slavery, this measure would meet with but little opposition from several quarters where now most violently opposed."[370]

The limited evidence available indicates that Henderson considered the views of his pro-annexation Mississippian constituents, his business interests, and his animosity towards abolitionism when making his choice on the Texas issue. Having gone on record with his previous support for the measure, his consistency surprised no one. Reading between the lines, we can see how the confluence of the importance of slavery as an essential part of his commercial enterprise with his concern for the effect of territorial expansion on product supply motivated him to vote. A businessman to the core, Henderson chose what he considered to be self-interest over the gravitational pull of Whig national politics.

While adopting the prevailing Whig optimism preceding the vote, the March 1, 1845, edition of Washington, D.C.'s *Weekly Herald* reported that Senator William Merrick of Maryland

[369] "Bioguide, Jesse Speight," https://bioguide.congress.gov/search/bio/S000715.
[370] Speech of Mr. Henderson, Of Mississippi, in Senate, February 20, 1845, On The Resolution of the Annexation of Texas, (The Congressional Globe, 1845).

had "been instructed by the Legislature [of Maryland] to vote against annexation, and will obey. You may consider the resolution as defeated, and annexation at an end this session."[371] Little did the Whig-promoting editors know that literally only the day before their hopes had been dashed by Merrick's surprise "yes" to the joint resolutions approving annexation.

A native Marylander, fifty-one-year-old Merrick had served in the War of 1812, pursued a legal career, and held several state political positions before his election to the U. S. Senate in 1839.[372] In May 1844, Merrick had announced he would not seek reelection for his Senate seat.[373] This certainly set him up to be relatively free of political pressure, since he could operate with less concern for the political consequences of his votes. However, only a month later, he eschewed controversy and voted with his fellow Whigs to reject the Tyler Treaty. This vote matched the expectations in the popular press.[374] It appears that even though Merrick personally favored annexation, as shown by his decisive vote only eight months later, the headwinds against the measure in the June 1844 vote would have rendered a cross-party vote futile and damaging. Yet the winds were changing, at least dying down, and set the issue once again upon the precipice of a knife's edge.

Before the final 1845 vote, Polk's national victory provided enough momentum for annexation that Merrick felt free to voice his personal views. Speaking on the floor of the Senate, Merrick built his case with the economic argument decrying the dangers of a potential Texan-British alliance. "The great advantages that would be secured to our internal trade by our Union with Texas have been pointed out and are most obvious. The fatal reduction in the value of our greatest staple, cotton, that must happen if Texas shall not be united to us, but shall form that

[371] "Washington," *Weekly Herald* (New York, NY), March 1, 1845.
[372] "William D. Merrick," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Duhurst_Merrick.
[373] "Multiple News Items," *Mississippi Free Trader and Natchez Gazette* (Natchez, Mississippi), May 5, 1844.
[374] "Expected Vote on Tyler Treaty."

intimate and reciprocal commercial connection with England which she must, if we reject her, have also been pointed out. Texas would then supply the English market with cotton on terms, as to the duties levied on that article, which we cannot enjoy, and which, giving to her cotton-growers greater profits, would soon swell her productions." The slave-holder Merrick also railed against a "dark spirit of abolitionism" and passionately stated that he "Were this the last hour of my existence, or the latest breath I had to draw, I feel that I could not spend that time and breath better than by giving the vote I intend to give in favor of this joint resolution".[375] Merrick tied the economic risk and the economic risk of abolition of the main slave labor source together. Clearly, he had been thinking of his livelihood.

Senator R. J. Walker of Mississippi states, "Texas would then be our great rival in the cotton markets of the world, with two vast advantages … in sending to England her cotton free of duty, … and receiving manufactures of England, free of duty … these two causes combined would give the Texas cotton planters an advantage of at least 20 percent over the cotton planters of the Union," he concluded.[376] On the other side, most Whigs railed against the potential explosion in supply that they considered likely to follow acquisition of Texas, as American capital and resources, including more slave labor, were pumped into the promising new business market. It is remarkable that business, pricing, and supply arguments frequented the debates at taverns, barbecues, and in newspaper articles just as much as did the political and moral discussion of slavery. Whichever side the Southern Whigs landed on, and the majority did remain united with their Northern colleagues, financial concerns provided a primary motivation.

[375] Speech of Mr. Merrick, of Maryland, in Senate, February 21, 1845 - On the joint resolution from the Committee on Foreign Affairs, for the annexation of Texas., (The Congressional Globe, 1845).
[376] "Letter of Mr. Walker, of Mississippi, Relative to the Annexation of Texas."

Cotton Prices and Market 1840 - 1860

Cotton pricing data reinforces the validity of Southern planters' concerns about Texas land availability, tension with their primary market, Great Britain, and the resulting impact on their personal profits or losses. According to a U.S. Department of Agriculture report published in 1895 titled *Production and Price of Cotton For One Hundred Years*, the decade of the 1840s was a very trying time for planters. Prices hovered in the 3 or 4 cent per pound range from 1843 to 1848, with one exception of an increase in 1847 to 6.03 cents per pound. The report summarizes for the decade of the 1840s that

> "So far as prices are concerned this was the most remarkable decade in the history of cotton planting in this country. Not only were the lowest prices on record reached in the United States, but it was the longest known period of continuously low prices. It was remarkable also for unprecedently large crops, … and for the enormous accumulation of stocks in Great Britain, clearly indicating that production or supply had exceeded the demand."[377]

This dismal recent pricing experience clearly hovered over the debates about Texas, providing real-world context to the economic implications of the political question and heightened general anxiety that annexation could worsen the oversupply. Yet at the same time, the competitive advantages an independent Texas might achieve in negotiating a special trading agreement also weighed on American cotton suppliers' minds. Both concerns colored the debates and proved of particular concern for the Southern Whigs.

After annexation during the 1850s, however, prices rebounded, despite a gradually growing supply. The Watkins report states that during that decade planters enjoyed a period of "unexampled prosperity" and that "consumption increased greatly in Europe and America, keeping fair pace with the gradually increasing crops".[378] Texas really did not have as big an impact on world cotton prices or supplies as had been predicted. In 1849 Texas formed 2% of the

[377] James L. Watkins, Production and Price of Cotton For One Hundred Years, (Washington, D. C. 1895). 8.
[378] Watkins, Short Production and Price of Cotton For One Hundred Years. 10.

U. S. market supply at 58,073 bales. By 1859, Texas' share had grown to 10% at 2,866,938 bales, but prices had remained relatively stable over that period, at approximately 5 cents per pound. The report concludes that other factors, especially European demand, were much more definitive in impacting prices. Therefore, in retrospect, annexation did not have as dramatic an effect as either side had predicted, but clearly formed a very pertinent and potent issue for voters and politicians at the time.

Conclusion

The national and international debates around Texas had featured contentious issues including the expansion of territory, the availability of affordable land, proliferation of the polarizing institution of slavery, and future directions for one small and one large republic. After the cacophony of these raucous national and international debates, the "profound silence" in the Senate chamber after the final vote must have resonated more forcefully than the cannon fire from Capitol Hill that celebrated the news. Partisans of both sides had poured so much personal energy, engagement, activity, and belonging into this controversy that individuals felt a hollow, almost exhausted sensation at its resolution. For many opponents of annexation, that tiredness quickly turned to anger, especially at the three Southern Whig senators who voted with the Democrats. For others, dread formed, a growing concern for the American union's continuity. The celebratory cannon fire portended much more and threatened repeats of those sounds in the coming years ahead.

Ultimately, however, the answer to the question "was the Texas issue strictly a sectional one?" is no. While slavery, sectional rivalry, and partisan conflict played major parts in the epic drama, the final, deciding factor hinged on potential effects on the price of cotton. Three Whig

Senators chose pocketbook over party and launched the United States and Texas on an entirely new and merged trajectory.

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