

CHAPTER XXIV

THE ELECTION OF POLK

IF the members of Tyler's cabinet wished for ratification, they showed very little wisdom in sending to the Senate a treaty for the annexation of Texas just at the beginning of a presidential campaign. If, however, popular discussion was what they wanted, they could not have chosen better. Ratification was certain to be made a party question, with the Whigs solidly against the administration, and every man who spoke in the Senate was certain to do so with his thoughts on the nominating conventions and the November elections. That Calhoun wished the treaty ratified for its own sake cannot be doubted; but Tyler may have been less single-minded. He did not yet despair of a re-election.

The treaty came before the Senate deeply discredited. It was not only the work of two unpopular men—a President without a party and a Secretary of State who had constituted himself “the sleepless guardian of Slavery”—but the announcement that a treaty was about to be concluded had been badly received by the public. Long before Henderson, the special agent of Texas, arrived in Washington the American newspapers had published more or less accurate accounts of the supposed secret action of the Texan Congress in appropriating money for a special envoy to the United States, and of Henderson's appointment to that post.

The Texan chargé d'affaires wrote home of the results of these indiscretions with a certain incoherence and exasperation which were easily explicable.

“This information,” he reported, “has roused the whole opposition and who now daily pour forth the vials of its wrath upon the contemplated treaty. Why all these matters should be communi-

cated to Genl Murphy and otherwise made public in Texas and to be heralded throughout this country by the newspapers and yet I receive no information from your Department concerning it, is most remarkable. . . .

“The delay which has attended the action on this matter has had an injurious tendency. Our friends here, in New York and else where urge the importance of an early action if an action is contemplated *at all*. . . .

“Four of the New York papers are out in favor of annexation, viz. The ‘Herald’ ‘The Republic’ The ‘Courier and Enquirer’ and the Journal of Commerce.”¹

On the day before Van Zandt wrote, the rumors of annexation had produced in Wall Street the result which unexpected reports of possible foreign complications always have produced.

“Stocks fell; United States six-per-cents fell four per cent; men looked alarmed, and shook their heads in fearful doubt. A war with Mexico would be the immediate consequence of this measure, and privateers would be fitted out in the Mexican ports of the Gulf of Mexico, to prey upon the immense commerce of the United States, having themselves little or nothing to risk in return.”²

The terrified gentlemen who were selling stocks so freely from a fear of Mexican privateers were probably not very familiar with the way in which the Texan navy, with its few ill-found schooners, had controlled the Gulf. There could be no question of the adequacy of the American navy for that task.

The excitement in Wall Street was short-lived, but the newspapers continued the discussion by publishing at portentous length the views of men whose opinions were likely to carry weight in the country. The first of these was Andrew Jackson.

Early in the year 1843 Gilmer, of Virginia, then a member of the House of Representatives, had published a letter over his own signature in which he had expressed himself very strongly in favor of annexation. A few days later

¹ Van Zandt to Jones, March 20, 1844; *Tex. Dip. Corr.*, II, 263.

² Tuckerman, *Diary of Philip Hone*, II, 209.

Aaron V. Brown, of Tennessee, also a member of the House, sent a copy of Gilmer's letter to General Jackson, with a request for an expression of his opinion on the subject. Brown was himself in favor of annexation, but feared that Tyler was too weak politically to carry such a measure through, and he thought that a strong expression from Jackson might be useful in arousing or sustaining the administration in making such a movement.

What was Brown's motive? Benton, in his *Thirty Years' View*,¹ declared that Brown was merely a tool in the hands of Gilmer, whose purpose and hope it was to get Jackson to express himself as favorable to annexation, and at the same time to induce Van Buren to express himself against it, and then to produce Jackson's letter at the proper moment, so as to defeat Van Buren's nomination for the presidency in 1844. But this intrigue was a little too complete and elaborate to have been fully thought out more than a year in advance, and Brown himself in the House of Representatives denied strongly that he had acted in a "vicarious" character or that his action had the slightest reference to the presidential election, then nearly two years off.

Jackson's letter in reply to Brown was dated February 13, 1843, and was evidently written without consultation with any one. He began by making an extremely foolish statement, inspired by his intense hatred for John Quincy Adams.

"Soon after my election, in 1829," he said, "it was made known to me by Mr. Erwin, formerly our minister at the Court of Madrid, that whilst at that Court he had laid the foundation of a treaty with Spain for the cession of the Floridas and the settlement of the boundary of Louisiana, fixing the western limit of the latter at the Rio Grande, agreeably to the understanding of France; that he had written home to our government for powers to complete and sign this negotiation; but that, instead of receiving such authority, the negotiation was taken out of his hands and transferred to Washington, and a new treaty was there concluded, by which the Sabine, and not the Rio Grande, was recognized and established as the boundary of Louisiana."

Jackson went on to say that when he found these statements were true, he was filled with astonishment at the sur-

¹II, 581-591.

render by Monroe's administration. He had thought, "with the ancient Romans, that it was right never to cede any land or boundary of the republic, but always to add to it by honorable treaty, thus extending the area of freedom." It was in accordance with this feeling that he had entered upon the unsuccessful negotiation for the retrocession of Texas. In a military point of view he considered it most important to the United States to be in possession of that territory, and he drew a picture of the probable course of a war with Great Britain—two armies moving from Canada and Texas, respectively; the negroes excited to insurrection; servile war raging through the whole South and West, and ruin and havoc spreading from the Lakes to the Gulf of Mexico. The question, he declared, was full of interest also as it affected the domestic relations of the United States, and as it might bear upon those with Mexico; but he believed annexation to be essential as lessening the probabilities of future collision with foreign powers.¹

This strange production bore clear marks of Jackson's failing powers. It was impossible that Erving (the Erwin of Jackson's letter) should have made the statements which Jackson attributed to him, for there was nothing in Erving's correspondence with the State Department which even remotely suggested the possibility of Spain's being willing to concede the line of the Rio Grande. Moreover, Jackson's memory must have played him false, for he had explicitly written to Monroe in 1819 that he did not regard Texas as important from a military stand-point.²

Brown, to whom the letter was addressed, did not make any public use of it for more than a year after it was received. In March, 1844, at about the time of Calhoun's appointment as Secretary of State, the letter was published in the

¹Parton, *Jackson*, III, 658-660.

²The despatches from George W. Erving, as minister to Spain in 1817 and subsequent years, were sent to Congress in response to a call from the House of Representatives on June 14, 1844. The instructions to him were sent the next session. On October 7, 1844, John Quincy Adams made a very violent speech to a "Young Men's Whig Club," in which he discussed the whole subject, denounced Jackson and Erving, and predicted "a foreign, civil, servile and Indian war," if annexation were carried through.

Richmond *Enquirer*, with the date changed from 1843 to 1844, whether by accident or with the intention to deceive was never fully ascertained. The matter, however, was not important, because Jackson had written a second letter, reaffirming his views, and at the same time expressing his regard for and confidence in Van Buren, which he said no difference of opinion on the subject of Texas could change.

Soon after the annexation treaty was sent to the Senate letters upon the subject were published from the leading presidential candidates of the two parties. As it happened, they appeared in print on the same day, which was probably a mere coincidence, although there was a somewhat general belief that the authors, who were on friendly personal terms, had agreed that the subject of Texas should be kept out of the presidential campaign.¹ It is probable that both men were unwilling to bring any new issues into the campaign. Van Buren's point of view is not so clear, but Clay was vigorously asserting that with the "old Whig policies"—the tariff, the bank, and internal improvements—success in 1844 was well assured. Writing to his friend and supporter, Crittenden, on December 5, 1843, on the subject of the annexation of Texas, he said that he had refused to announce his opinion because he did not think it right unnecessarily to present new questions to the public, as those which were already before it were sufficiently important and numerous.

That politicians could at their pleasure determine what questions were to form the issues of a campaign was a curious delusion which Clay was by no means the only man to entertain, and he very naively denounced Tyler for meddling in the matter.

"Nor do I think it right to allow Mr. Tyler, for his own selfish purposes, to introduce an exciting topic, and add to the other subjects of contention which exist in the country. . . . Considered as a practical question, every man must be perfectly convinced that no treaty, stipulating the annexation of Texas, can secure for its ratification a constitutional majority in the Senate. Why, then, present

¹ Schurz, *Clay*, II, 243. The author seems to think that there was good ground for the belief.

the question? It is manifest that it is for no other than the wicked purpose to produce discord and prostration in the nation."

In this view of the matter Clay thought it would be best to "pass it over in absolute silence," if that could be done; but he sketched for Crittenden, who was then in the Senate, the outlines of an argument to be used against any measure of annexation.¹

In spite of Clay's desire to keep silent on the subject of Texas, he was forced by the progress of events to declare himself before many months had passed. During the early months of 1844 he had made a long journey through the South. Everywhere he went he found the people greatly interested in the subject of Texas, and urgently demanding to know his opinion. For a long time he kept silence, but finally the signature of the treaty and the publication of Jackson's letter forced him to speak. On April 17, 1844, at Raleigh, North Carolina, he composed a letter for publication which he sent to Crittenden on the same day, after consulting the governor of North Carolina and other friends. Crittenden was told to consult with Alexander H. Stephens, of Georgia, and others, to whom Clay left the time of publication, with power also to make "slight modifications of its phraseology." Two days later Clay had come as far north as Petersburg, in Virginia, and he again wrote to Crittenden, expressing perfect confidence in the ground he had taken in the Raleigh letter, and explaining that he could not consent to suppress or unnecessarily delay the publication of it. He had left to his friends merely the question of deciding when it should appear, but he himself thought it should be within a week.²

In this Raleigh letter Clay began by expressing his astonishment at the information that a treaty of annexation had been actually concluded, and was to be submitted to the Senate for its consideration. In the first place, he held it "to be perfectly idle and ridiculous, if not dishonorable, to

¹ Clay to Crittenden, Dec. 5, 1843; Mrs. Coleman, *Life of Crittenden*, I, 207-208.

² *Ibid.*, I, 219.

talk of resuming our title to Texas, as if we had never parted with it." "We could no more," he said, "do that than Spain could resume Florida, France resume Louisiana, or Great Britain resume the thirteen colonies." Clay then went on to say that the signal success of the revolution in Texas was greatly aided, if not wholly achieved, by citizens of the United States who had migrated to Texas, and that this aid had been furnished in a manner and to an extent "which brought upon us some national reproach in the eyes of an impartial world." This, he thought, imposed the obligation of scrupulously avoiding the imputation of having instigated and aided the revolution with the ultimate view of "territorial aggrandizement." The recognition of the independence of Texas did not affect or impair the rights of Mexico. Under these circumstances, if the government of the United States were to acquire Texas it would acquire along with it the war between Mexico and Texas. Of that consequence there could not be a doubt; annexation and war with Mexico were identical.

Thus far Clay was following in substance the arguments presented by Forsyth when he refused the Texan proposals in 1837; but Clay presented a novel argument, which may at least be said to be doubtful, that inasmuch as annexation meant war with Mexico it was not competent to the treaty-making power to do what was equivalent to a declaration of war without consulting the other branch of Congress.

Clay then went on to assert that Texas ought not to be received into the Union, even with the assent of Mexico, because to do so would be "in decided opposition to the wishes of a considerable and respectable portion of the confederacy," and would introduce a new element of discord and distraction. The country, before acquiring further territory, might well pause to "people our vast wastes, develop our resources, prepare the means of defending what we possess, and augment our strong power, and greatness." As for annexing Texas in order to increase the power of the South, he believed nothing would be more unfortunate or fatal, and the adoption of such a principle would certainly menace

the existence of the Union. He thought, indeed, that the addition of Texas would weaken the South. As for the aims of Great Britain, Clay declared that he would regard it as the imperative duty of the government of the United States to oppose any design of colonizing or subjugating the country, but he believed that Great Britain had no such aims or purposes.¹

This letter, on the whole, was satisfactory to the Northern Whigs. It committed their leader fully against the chief measure of the detested Tyler administration, and there seemed to be nothing in it to offend the moderate opponents of slavery. To the South, however, so outspoken a declaration against annexation was by no means agreeable, although Clay, near the beginning of his letter, had taken pains to say that the question of annexation would appear in quite a different light if it were presented "without the loss of national character, without the hazard of foreign war, with the general concurrence of the Union, without any danger to the integrity of the nation and without giving an unreasonable price for Texas."

Van Buren's letter, which was dated April 20, 1844, from his country-place on the Hudson River, and was probably written in complete ignorance of Clay's letter, was on very similar lines although about three times as long. It was written in reply to a letter from a Mr. Hammet, a representative in Congress from Mississippi, who had asked Van Buren for an expression of his opinion with a view to determining the writer's course as a delegate in the approaching Democratic convention.

Van Buren fully admitted that annexation was desirable *per se*, and encouraged some hope that he might consent to it as a measure of self-defence rather than permit Texas to become a British dependency or the colony of any European power. He admitted also that Mexico might persist so long "in refusing to acknowledge the independence of Texas, and in destructive but fruitless efforts to reconquer that State," as to produce a general conviction of the neces-

¹ Colton's *Clay*, III, 25 *et seq.*

sity of annexation for the permanent welfare, if not absolute safety, of all concerned. But he declared that under existing circumstances he could not give his support to the scheme, even though assured that his re-election to the presidency depended upon it. The annexation of Texas, he thought, would draw after it a war with Mexico, which he did not think it would be expedient to attempt. "Could we hope," he said, "to stand perfectly justified in the eyes of mankind for entering into it; more especially if its commencement is to be preceded by the appropriation to our own uses of the territory, the sovereignty of which is in dispute between two nations, one of which we are to join in the struggle?"

In 1837, continued Van Buren, his administration had decided, after careful consideration, against annexation; the situation had not since changed; immediate annexation would place a weapon in the hands of those who looked upon Americans and American institutions with distrust and envious eyes, and would do us far more real and lasting injury than the new territory, however valuable, could repair; he was aware of the risks he ran with his Southern fellow-citizens in expressing these opinions, but the only qualification he would give was that if, after the subject had been fully discussed, Congress should favor annexation, he would yield to the popular will.

It may be assumed that both Clay and Van Buren were sincere in their declarations, but it is not perhaps going too far to suggest that their opinions would not have been expressed at this time and in this manner so strongly if it had not been for their mutual dislike of Tyler and the near approach of the presidential election. But the real question, which both Van Buren and Clay feared to inject into the campaign, was the question of the extension of slavery. If that was to be brought into the contest no man could foresee where the discussion might lead or what the consequences to the Union might be. Their concern for Mexican rights was therefore in a high degree exaggerated and unreal. Mexico, as was said by Tyler and his friends,

had lost Texas irrevocably—she had no better chance of regaining it than the Cherokees had of regaining their hunting-grounds in the heart of Georgia. Texas, it was argued, was free morally and legally to dispose of her own future, just as Mexico had been free to dispose of Texas while nominally at war with Spain, for Spain, until 1838, had proclaimed her unalterable purpose of reconquering the whole of Mexico; and yet, inasmuch as the whole world knew that she could never succeed, the assertion of Spanish rights had not led either Adams or Clay to hesitate a moment in bargaining, in 1825, for a cession of Texas.

The truth was that every one who considered the matter at all could see that tenderness for Mexican interests was not the real motive of the writers, and that the well-grounded fear of reopening the terribly dangerous discussion of slavery extension was at the bottom of the opposition of both Van Buren and Clay; and so, once again, slavery served, not to hasten, but to delay and to defeat temporarily the project of annexation.

That Van Buren courageously took his political life in his hand when he wrote is no doubt true. But it is also probably true that he believed a declaration of the Democratic convention in favor of annexation would so far imperil Democratic success in the North as to render a nomination upon that platform of no value. As for Clay, the Whig nomination was not a matter of doubt. There was no other Whig candidate. He ran no risk of losing the nomination, whatever he might say about Texas; and he seems to have thought that the only thing which could prevent his election would come through Tyler's administration acquiring popular support by carrying through a measure so conspicuous as the annexation of Texas.

Events turned out at first precisely as Clay had foreseen. The Whig convention met at Baltimore on the first of May, 1844, and sat but a single day. No other candidate than Henry Clay was mentioned, or even thought of, in connection with the nomination; nor was any consideration given to a declaration of principles. "Were it not that we have to

select a Vice-President," said Thurlow Weed, "there would be no need of a convention."¹ And therefore, after nominating Clay with noisy enthusiasm, and nominating Theodore Frelinghuysen, of New Jersey, for Vice-President, and adopting a short platform, the convention adjourned. Clay, in fact, was the whole platform. The formal paper which was adopted eulogized the candidates, and announced that the great principles of the Whig party would be maintained and advanced. What these principles were was then, for the first time, officially set forth.

"These principles," the platform announced, "may be summed up as comprising: A well-regulated currency; a tariff for revenue to defray the necessary expenses of the Government, and discriminating with special reference to the protection of the domestic labor of the country; the distribution of the proceeds from the sales of the public lands; a single term for the Presidency; a reform of executive usurpations; and generally such an administration of the affairs of the country as shall impart to every branch of the public service the greatest practical efficiency, controlled by a well-regulated and wise economy."²

This was all. The question of a Bank of the United States, which had so agitated Congress three years before, had been dropped. Not a word was said in regard to the question of Texas, and not a word in regard to the question of slavery. A single term for the presidency and an amendment to the Constitution to deprive the President of the veto power were the only really definite features of the programme, and these were in themselves not calculated to fire the blood of the average American citizen.

The Democratic convention, which also met at Baltimore about four weeks later, dealt much more faithfully with the real questions which now began to interest and divide the American people. The chief uncertainty was as to the choice of a candidate. That Van Buren was far in the lead was unquestioned, but there was strong opposition to his re-nomination, which was strengthened by his attitude upon the annexation of Texas. President Tyler had sent his

¹ Barnes, *Life of Thurlow Weed*, II, 119.

² Stanwood's *History of the Presidency*, 220.

treaty to the Senate on April 22, and Van Buren's letter declaring himself against the treaty was published a month before the convention met. During this month many things happened, among them the publication by the Senate of the Texas treaty and all the accompanying documents, including Calhoun's appeal for the annexation of Texas as an essential means of protecting the institution of slavery. It was evidently the opinion of the Whig majority of the Senate that Calhoun had ruined himself and his party by these ill-judged utterances. Northern Democrats were very much of the same opinion.

"Calhoun," wrote one of them, "has committed a great blunder by vindicating slavery in his letter to Pakenham, and Van Buren a greater by publishing a letter against immediate annexation, when nearly all his adherents are committed, with most of the Democratic presses. Calhoun, with superior talents, is extremely sectional and southern. I cannot guess how Van Buren made such a blunder. I think they are both demolished—felo de se."¹

The Southern Democrats were naturally much more annoyed at Van Buren's statements than at Calhoun's, and many of the delegates who had been instructed in Van Buren's favor were at a great loss how to vote, in view of the changed condition of affairs. Jackson, writing privately on May 14, 1844, to Van Buren's closest political friend in New York, referred to the great excitement the Texas letter had created, which it was feared would be difficult to allay.

"Clay's letter," continued Jackson, "had prostrated him with the Whiggs in the South and West, and nine tenths of our population had declared in favour of Mr. V. Buren and annexation of Texas—when this, illfated, letter made its appearance, and fell upon the democracy like a thunderbolt. . . . You might as well, it appears to me, attempt to turn the current of the Mississippi, as to turn the democracy from the annexation of Texas."²

At the same time Jackson wrote a public letter to the Nashville *Union*, in which he reaffirmed the views expressed

¹ Meigs's *Life of C. J. Ingersoll*, 266.

² Jackson to Benjamin F. Butler (of New York), May 14, 1844; *Amer. Hist. Rev.*, XI, 833.

in his published letter to A. V. Brown, but defended Van Buren on the ground that he was not informed as to existing circumstances. "He has evidently prepared his letter from a knowledge only of the circumstances bearing on the subject as they existed at the close of his administration, without a view of the disclosures since made."¹ Van Buren might well have prayed to be delivered from such defenders as his old chief.

Calhoun shared Jackson's views as to the effect of Van Buren's letter. Writing to his daughter, he said:

"V. B's letter has completely prostrated him, and has brought forward a host of candidates in his place; Buchanan, Cass, Stuart, Johnson, who, with Tyler and V. B. himself, make six. . . . In the meantime, I stand aloof. I regard annexation to be a vital question. If lost now, it will be forever lost; and, if that, the South will be lost. . . . It is the all absorbing question, stronger even than the presidential. It is, indeed, under circumstances, the most important question, both for the South and the Union, ever agitated since the adoption of the Constitution."²

The most formidable opponent of the ex-President was General Lewis Cass, of Michigan, who had resigned his position as minister to France eighteen months before. He had been ever since a candidate for the presidency, and had declared himself early in May as decidedly in favor of annexation.³ There was, however, no sort of certainty as to the result. It was anybody's race, and it was perfectly possible that a dark horse might win.

The chairman of the Tennessee delegation reached Washington on the twenty-first of May, and wrote home the next day.

"We have," he reported, "been busily engaged examining into the condition of things here and though I had expected to find much confusion and excitement among our friends, yet I confess myself much surprised at the extent of the *distractions* and the bitterness of feeling

¹ Parton, *Jackson*, III, 661.

² Calhoun to Mrs. Clemson, May 10, 1844; *Amer. Hist. Assn. Rep.* 1899, II, 585.

³ McLaughlin's *Life of Cass*, 209.

which exists between the Van Buren and the disaffected portion of the party. This last party I am satisfied is daily gaining strength by the arrival of delegations from regions of the country which have been lost by V's letter. . . . The Democracy or rather the Delegates of the south west and west are making an extraordinary effort for Cass."¹

Two days later the same correspondent wrote that the trouble was increasing, that the anti-Van Buren party was becoming stronger; but that Cass's friends thought he would get the vote of Pennsylvania from Van Buren on the second ballot. The breach between the Van Buren and the anti-Van Buren parties, he thought, had become impassable, and they would never unite except upon some other man than Cass.²

In this agitating state of uncertainty the convention met. More than a day was consumed in effecting an organization and in discussing the question of the adoption of the two-thirds rule, which had governed the two previous national Democratic conventions. Many men who were unwilling openly to desert Van Buren were willing to vote for a rule which made his chances hopeless; and ultimately, at about noon of the second day of the convention, the two-thirds rule was adopted by a vote of 148 to 118. This sealed the fate of the leading candidate. On the first ballot Van Buren was 32 votes short of two-thirds. Upon the second ballot he fell below a majority; and during the remainder of the day he lost upon every ballot, while Cass came gradually to the front.

When the convention adjourned that evening George Bancroft, one of the delegates from Massachusetts, consulted his colleagues and the New York delegation, and suggested to them the nomination of James K. Polk, of Tennessee. Both agreed, as Bancroft later described it, that "Van Buren implacably detested the thought of Cass as a candidate, and that it would have been impossible for Cass, owing to Van Buren's hatred and jealousy, to carry the State of New York." Bancroft then suggested his plan to

¹ Gideon J. Pillow to Polk, May 22, 1844; *Amer. Hist. Rev.*, XI, 835.

² Same to same, May 24, 1844; *ibid.*, 837.

the delegation from Tennessee, "and they naturally accepted the name of Polk joyfully."¹ Polk's name had not, up to that time, been suggested as a possible candidate for the first place. He had been talked of in various parts of the country as a suitable Vice-President, but two days before the convention met his friend Pillow wrote: "You have more friends here than any man in the field and if your name had been brought before the country for the *first place* we would have had far more unanimity. . . . Things may take that turn yet. We of the South cannot bring *that matter* up. If it should be done by the North it will all work right."²

Writing again on the evening of the second day of the convention, Pillow described the extraordinary excitement which, he said, "had well-nigh got into a general pel-mell fight." The excitement was wholly ungovernable by the chair and the chances were for the nomination of Cass. Near the foot of the letter he added: "I have within the last few minutes received a proposition from a leading Delegate of the Pennsylvania and of Massachusetts to bring your name before the Convention for President." The next morning, on the first ballot, New Hampshire, quite unexpectedly to the majority of the delegates, gave its votes to Polk; and upon the next ballot New York withdrew the name of Van Buren in the interest of harmony, and cast its entire vote in Polk's favor. A "stampede" followed, which resulted in Polk's unanimous nomination, and thereupon Silas Wright was immediately nominated as Vice-President, to conciliate the Van Buren party. Wright, however, declined, protesting with some warmth that circumstances rendered it impossible for him to accept the nomination consistently with his sense of public duty and private obligations.³ The convention ended by nominating George M. Dallas, of Pennsylvania, after it had ascertained that Governor Fairfield, of Maine, was not to be counted on in favor of Texan annexation.

¹ Bancroft to Harris, Aug. 30, 1887; *ibid.*, 841, note.

² Pillow to Polk, May 25, 1844; *ibid.*, 839.

³ Jenkins's *Life of Silas Wright*, 148.

Before the nomination of Dallas for Vice-President was made the convention adopted a long and detailed platform, in which, besides naming their candidates and expressing their confidence, affection, respect, and regard for "their illustrious fellow citizen Martin Van Buren," and declaring their reliance upon the intelligence, patriotism, and discriminating justice of the American people, the resolutions adopted by the Democratic convention of 1840 were repeated word for word.

In addition, the platform declared against a distribution of the proceeds of public lands and against taking from the President the veto power which had "thrice saved the American people from the corrupt and tyrannical domination of the Bank of the United States." The platform finally declared—

"That our title to the whole of the territory of Oregon is clear and unquestionable; that no portion of the same ought to be ceded to England or to any other power; and that the re-occupation of Oregon and the re-annexation of Texas at the earliest practicable period are great American measures, which this Convention recommends to the cordial support of the Democracy of the Union."¹

James K. Polk, who had thus unexpectedly been placed in nomination, was another of those Scotch-Irish Presbyterians who have exerted so material an influence upon the fortunes of the United States. His family was long settled in North Carolina, and he himself was born in Mecklenburg County on November 2, 1795. His mother was Jane Knox, whose name indicates that she too was of uncompromising Scotch descent.

The Polk family in 1806, following the stream of Western migration, settled in Tennessee, where the future President attended school. He was subsequently graduated at the University of North Carolina, at the then rather unusually advanced age of twenty-three. He studied law in the office

¹ Stanwood's *History of the Presidency*, 215. For the history of the Oregon controversy, see Chapter XXVIII, Vol. II.

of Felix Grundy, of Nashville, became a follower and adherent of Andrew Jackson, entered actively, like his neighbors, into politics, became a member of the state legislature, and in 1825, when thirty years old, was elected to Congress, where he served continuously for fourteen years. When the Twenty-fourth Congress met in December, 1835, Polk was elected Speaker of the House of Representatives, a position he continued to hold through that and the Twenty-fifth Congress. During his whole term in Congress he had been a consistent and steady follower of Jackson and Van Buren. He was also a steady opponent of John Quincy Adams, both while Adams was President and when he sat in the House of Representatives.

In 1839 Polk's service in the House of Representatives came to an end, as he was elected governor of his state, a position he held for two years. He was defeated for re-election in the great Whig campaign of 1840, and again two years later; and when the spring of 1844 came he had been more than three years out of office. His name, however, was then beginning to be suggested as a possible candidate for Vice-President, and as such he was addressed by a committee of citizens of Cincinnati opposed to annexation, who inquired his views upon the Texas question. Similar letters had been sent to other prominent men of both political parties. Writing from Columbia, Tennessee, on April 22, almost at the same moment that Clay and Van Buren were expressing their opinions, Polk announced his in terms which had at least the merit of absolute frankness.

"I have no hesitation," he said, "in declaring that I am in favor of the immediate reannexation of Texas to the territory and government of the United States. I entertain no doubts as to the power or expediency of the reannexation. . . . These are my opinions; and without deeming it necessary to extend this letter, by assigning the many reasons which influence me in the conclusions to which I come, I regret to be compelled to differ so widely from the views expressed by yourselves, and the meeting of citizens of Cincinnati whom you represent."¹

¹ Jenkins's *Polk*, 120-123.

This letter, so different from those of Clay and Van Buren, must have had an important bearing on the action of the Democratic convention.

The first name signed to the letter to Polk was that of Salmon P. Chase, a young lawyer known for his activity in behalf of fugitive slaves, and for his zeal in organizing the Liberty party throughout the United States. The beginnings of this party dated back to the election of 1840, when a few men met at Albany and nominated for President James G. Birney, of Ohio, very much against the wishes of Garrison and the more pronounced anti-slavery advocates. The movement made no impression in that excited campaign; but in August, 1843, a national convention of the Liberty party was again held at Buffalo, and Birney was once more put in nomination for the presidency upon an anti-slavery platform, chiefly written by Chase.¹

Finally a fourth convention, if it could be so called—for it was really a mass-meeting of people from various parts of the country, representing nobody but themselves—was held in Baltimore on the same day as the Democratic convention, and it put in nomination John Tyler. The hall was decorated with banners bearing the inscription "Tyler and Texas." Tyler, as he subsequently related, had been advised by his friends to take his chances in the Democratic convention, but he had thought it impossible to do so. "If I suffered my name to be used in that Convention, then I become bound to sustain the nomination, even if Mr. Van Buren was the nominee. This could not be. I chose to run no hazard, but to raise the banner of Texas, and convoke my friends to sustain it."² The truth was that Tyler was infatuated with the notion that "the banner of Texas" would of itself suffice to rouse the country and carry its bearer triumphantly into the White House. His anxiety and eagerness for re-election were very manifest to those with whom he talked.³

¹ Schucker's *Chase*, 47, 69.

² Tyler's *Letters and Times of the Tylers*, II, 317.

³ Meigs's *Ingersoll*, 264-266.