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THE POLITICAL GEOGRAPHY OF SOUTHERN JACKSONISM

BY THOMAS P. ABERNETHY

The forces of democracy which shaped the Jackson movement have appeared to be so obvious as not to require close analysis. This would seem to be especially the case with the South where the cause originated and acquired its first impetus. Even here, however, the situation was far from being as simple as it appeared to be.

In any attempt to survey the factors which gave rise and direction to the crusade, it is necessary to stress the fact that the Southern population was not made up predominantly of aristocratic planters and poor whites, but of small-scale, middle class slave-owners and yeoman farmers of sturdy and self-respecting stock. Nevertheless, the slaveholding and non-slaveholding populations were, to a considerable extent, segregated; and their interests were fundamentally different. The slaveholders predominated generally in all that country lying along the south Atlantic and Gulf coasts which was drained by navigable streams, in the valley of the Mississippi as high as Memphis, and in the blue-grass country of Tennessee and Kentucky. The non-slaveholders predominated in the poorer and more inaccessible country lying outside these areas.

Geographically speaking, the slaveholders may be divided into three groups. Among those living in the older Atlantic seaboard states of Virginia, North Carolina, and South Carolina, local feeling was strong, and the state rights school was well entrenched. In the tier of states from Georgia to Louisiana which comprised the Lower South, state rights elements existed, but nationalistic feeling was much stronger than in the older commonwealths. Finally, Tennessee and Kentucky were still stronger in their nationalism, for they had looked to the Federal government for protection against the Indians in their early years, had come in more recent times to need Federal aid in the improvement of transportation facilities, and their interest in slavery was comparatively weak.

Likewise, the non-slaveholders can be divided into three groups. Those who lived in contact with the slaveholders came under their influence and accepted their leadership. Of those who lived in the back country, some were almost completely isolated in an economic way; others lived on or near highways and in or near commercial towns such as Knoxville and Lynchburg. Neither of these last-named groups had much interest in slavery, but the latter had an interest in internal improvements which did not affect the former.

Such was the complexion of the area in which the Jackson movement of the South took shape. During the period of the "Virginia dynasty," the Republican party established an undisputed sway in all this region. The election of 1824 brought this period of unanimity to a close and saw the beginnings of a movement which was soon to divide the South into two hostile camps. Of the candidates in that fateful election, Crawford was looked upon as representing state rights sentiment, while Jackson, Adams, Clay, and Calhoun were all nationalists. The Jackson-Calhoun ticket, however, had certain advantages over the others. Calhoun had the more consistent record of the two for progressive nationalism, but Jackson's military reputation and his western background gave him a strong influence among certain classes. The importance of these factors was brought out by the results of the election. In the frontier states of the Southwest, Jackson's popularity as an Indian fighter and military hero was such as to give his cause some of the aspects of a popular uprising. It was here that the disastrous effects of the panic of 1819 had been felt most keenly, and the democratic movement which grew out of this catastrophe turned to "Old Hickory" as its natural leader.¹ Thus class feeling was involved, and the conservative elements in the population took the other side. Immigrant planters from the seaboard settlements of the South Atlantic states gave Crawford a certain following, and merchants and newspaper editors from New England gave Adams considerable strength in the commercial centers of the region. This anti-Jackson vote came from the slaveholding areas.²

¹T. P. Abernethy, "Andrew Jackson and the Rise of Southwestern Democracy," *American Historical Review*, XXXIII, 66-67; R. M. McElroy, *Kentucky in the Nation's History* (New York, 1909), pp. 385-396.

²In the election of 1824, the votes of South Carolina, Georgia, and Louisiana were cast by the legislature. In Tennessee and Kentucky the vote was by districts. Practically complete returns by counties for Virginia, North Carolina, Alabama, and Mississippi have been collected from newspapers.

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There was, therefore, in the Southwest, an alignment established which was based upon social distinctions more than upon political differences, and this fact was to become even more obvious in the future.

In the Atlantic states the situation was different. Here Jackson's reputation as a nationalist was relatively more important than his reputation as an Indian fighter, his combination with Calhoun looming large in this section. The planter element in Georgia, North Carolina, and Virginia supported Crawford, while Jackson's votes in the last two states came from commercial as well as from frontier counties.³ Thus in this section political questions were more important than social feeling in determining the alignment.

Between the election of 1824 and that of 1828, Van Buren threw his support to Jackson and this brought the state rights Crawford group into the General's camp. Adams was now the only opponent, and most Southerners were willing to vote for any Southern candidate, whatever his qualifications or the lack of them might be, in preference to Adams. There was therefore little or no opposition in most of the states, but in spite of this fact, the Jackson forces waged an aggressive campaign and brought out a vote far larger than that of the previous election. The commercial sections of Louisiana and Kentucky voted for the New Englander, but otherwise the South was almost solid for Jackson.⁴ The alliance with Van Buren had been followed by manifestations of anti-bank sentiment on the part of Jackson, and it seems clear that he was looked upon as the state rights candidate as opposed to Adams, the nationalist, in this campaign.

During his first administration, the General justified the hopes of the state rights school in his handling of the bank, internal improvement, and Indian removal questions. His attitude toward nullification struck many men as being inconsistent with state rights doctrines, but outside South Carolina the state rights school did not accept the theory of nullification. Men of this faith might, therefore, still support the President.

By 1832 all the main lines of Jacksonian policy had been marked out, but no new opposition had developed in the South outside South Carolina. In the election of this year the nationalist votes

²The term "commercial" is here applied to communities affected in any degree by the presence of trading towns or main routes of travel.

⁴Returns by counties for Louisiana and Kentucky collected from newspapers.

in Louisiana and Kentucky went to Clay as they had gone to Adams in 1828, but elsewhere the opposition was negligible.⁵

This situation, however, was not to continue. Before 1836 a strong opposition party had developed in the South. Jackson had, in the meantime, removed the deposits from the Bank of the United States and issued his nullification proclamation, but both these measures were in pursuance of policies already indicated before 1832. Not many men who opposed the bank and nullification quibbled over the President's choice of weapons in fighting them. The only important new factor in the situation was the candidacy of Martin Van Buren for the succession to the Presidency. The arch-Democrat now stood revealed as the Dictator; furthermore, Jackson's choice was not personally popular in the South. To men of matured opinions, the question of personalities was probably less important than questions of principle; but to the masses the personal appeal was, as it ever is, the strongest.

During Jackson's two administrations many Southern politicians and men of independent judgment had been alienated by his stand on the bank and on nullification, but the great masses were with the President and politicians are never fond of opposing a popular cause. They were forced to wait for their chance, and it came with the Van Buren candidacy. The people could now be weaned away from their hero, but this could be done only in sections where the opposition leaders lived in appreciable numbers. It was under these circumstances that the Whig party of the South came into existence.

The geographical distribution of the strength of this party is a matter of considerable importance. Some of the leaders of the opposition movement were of the state rights school, while others were of the nationalist, but regardless of their political opinions, most of them were of the conservative elements in the merchant and planter classes. Consequently, in the tier of states from Georgia to Louisiana, the Whig strength lay in the areas where the cotton planters and merchants predominated.⁶ They usually spoke of themselves as state rights Whigs and are commonly looked upon as extremists in that school. It was in these same areas, however, that the Adams vote had been strongest in 1824,

⁵Complete returns by counties for the election of 1832, published in *The Politician's Manual*, by Edwin Williams (New York, 1834).

⁶A. C. Cole, *The Whig Party in the South* (Washington, 1913). Maps give presidential vote by counties, 1836-1852.

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and outside Georgia, there was little sympathy for nullification to be found in this region.

The planters, living here upon the navigable rivers of the Gulf Coast, had no use for protective tariffs and comparatively little interest in internal improvements, but they were dependent upon banks for the marketing of their crops, and Jackson's stand upon the bank issue was naturally not popular among them. While their economic interests were thus divided as between the two parties, the stand of the Democrats was, on the whole, more favorable to them. They became Whigs largely for personal and social reasons; they disliked Jackson as an individual, and they disliked the democracy of the movement for which he stood.

In Virginia and North Carolina the situation was almost the reverse of that which existed on the Gulf Coast. The old guard of the strict constructionist school in these two states, notably John Randolph and Nathaniel Macon, powerfully assisted by Thomas Ritchie, realized that Jackson represented their views more accurately than did the opposition, and they threw their strength to his support.⁷ The result of this was that, in spite of many desertions, such as that of John Tyler, they were able to carry the slave-owning Piedmont sections of their states for the Democrats. It was this area which had cast its weight against the adoption of the Federal Constitution in 1788,⁸ and it had supported Crawford solidly in 1824. Van Buren's relations with Ritchie and other leaders of the state rights school was an important factor in the transition which it now made to the Jackson stronghold.⁹

The party of state rights was also the party of the people, and the back country as well as the Piedmont of Virginia gave its votes predominantly to the Democracy. This left only the commercial areas of the Tidewater and of the interior to support the cause of the opposition. In North Carolina, however, the farmers of the back country, under the efficient leadership of Willie P. Mangum, took the opposite side from the planters and joined the Whigs. Sectional jealousy within the state contributed to the

⁷H. H. Simms, *The Rise of the Whigs in Virginia* (Richmond, 1929), p. 20.

⁸O. S. Libby, *The Geographical Distribution of the Vote of the Thirteen States on the Federal Constitution, 1787-8* (Madison, 1894), Plate 1.

⁹C. H. Ambler, *Thomas Ritchie* (Richmond, 1913), p. 107.

result.¹⁰ The alignment produced was exactly opposite to that which existed in the states of the Gulf Coast.

In Tennessee the situation was peculiar and illuminating. In spite of the restiveness of certain political leaders, the state accepted Jackson's bank and nullification policies almost without a murmur. The Van Buren candidacy, however, gave the disgruntled leaders their chance and they forthwith converted their commonwealth into a Whig stronghold. Their power lay in the back country commercial neighborhood of Knoxville, the bluegrass metropolis of Nashville, and the cotton-planting section surrounding Jackson and Memphis.¹¹ Thus all three types of Southern Whigs were combined in this state, while the isolated sections of the back country were Democratic. In Kentucky the popularity of Clay and the economic interests of the people were such that the Democrats were able to carry only some of the most remote sections.

Thus the partisan alignment established in the South was by no means uniform, being in some states exactly the reverse of that existing in others. The Lower South was strongly contrasted in this respect with the Carolinas and Virginia. The explanation is that the social phase of the Jackson movement predominated over the political in the former group, whereas the reverse is true of the latter.

Jackson may be classified as both a nationalist and a state rights man, yet the two principles, if not opposed, are at least inharmonious. The Northern wing of the Democratic party and its supporters in the backwoods of the South maintained the nationalist tradition, but the great body of the party in the South adopted sectional and state rights principles. Under slave-owner leadership it accepted slavery as the Southern cause and promoted sectional strife. This agitation was carried on more for political than for economic advantage.

The Southern Whigs, like the Northern Democrats, were true nationalists. Having in their ranks most of the wealthier slaveholders, who had much to lose and little to gain by a conflict over the extension of slavery, they adopted a moderate attitude on the

¹⁰H. M. Wagstaff, "State Rights and Political Parties in North Carolina, 1776-1861," *Johns Hopkins University Studies*, Series XXIV, nos. 7-8 (Baltimore, 1906), pp. 45-76.

¹¹T. P. Abernethy, "The Origin of the Whig Party in Tennessee," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, XII, pp. 517-518.

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¹²T. P. Abernethy, *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, XXIII.

question. They were sincere believers in the compromises of the Constitution and in the rights of slavery in the states. When they became convinced that the North was striking at slavery rather than merely at the extension of slavery, they ceased to be Whigs. Their attitude in the crisis depended upon their economic interest in the institution, and the situation in Tennessee is again illuminating. The cotton-planting Whigs of the Memphis area wished to secede with the states of the Lower South. Those of the grain and tobacco country about Nashville would not sanction secession until called upon to coerce sister states. The non-slaveholding Whigs of the Knoxville area took the side of the Union from the first.¹²

A majority of the Democrats lacked an economic interest in slavery, but the leaders were aggressive supporters of the institution, and the people generally followed the leaders. Yet in the more isolated parts of the back country where this leadership was weak, there was a tendency to resist secession. Andrew Johnson was the only conspicuous spokesman produced by this element, but it was widespread throughout the mountains and valleys of the Appalachian system and other regions similarly populated.

Thus while the Southern Whig party ceased to exist, Jackson's followers developed the secession movement and the chief opposition to that movement in the South. Jefferson Davis and Andrew Johnson were equally loyal Jacksonians.

¹²T. P. Abernethy, *The Evolution of a Frontier Democracy*, forthcoming, Chap. XXIII.