FOUR STUDIES OF DISUNITY:
ROBERT BARNWELL RHETT, JEFFERSON DAVIS,
JOHN BELL, AND JOHN C. BRECKINRIDGE

THESIS
FOR THE

DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS
IN LIBERAL ARTS AND SCIENCES

COLLEGE OF LIBERAL ARTS AND SCIENCES
UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS
URBANA, ILLINOIS
1981
UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS

20 May, 1961

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From Tidewater Virginia to the Rio Grande and from the Everglades to the Ohio River, fifteen states composed the American South by 1860. Although diverse in geography, the South displayed remarkable homogeneity in its social, economic, and political composition.

Each state recognized slavery as an economic resource, and this characteristic, more than any other, shaped their society in the ante-bellum period; indeed, the peculiar institution symbolized to white Southerners their entire way of life. To the slaveholder, the peculiar institution provided a necessary input in a labor intensive, agricultural economy; to the non-slaveholder, the peculiar institution provided an improved economic and social status.

The planter represented the upper-class of this society; their values and politics were dominant and their position most envied. In "The Cult of Chivalry," Rollin G. Osterweis discussed the image and self-image of this Southern aristocracy: "The plantation of the pre-Civil War South was the counterpart of the medieval manor. The planter was the repository of social dignity, of judicial power, of political leadership, for his neighborhood, in quite the same fashion as the eighteenth-century English squire whom he strove to emulate. Both were survivals of the feudal tradition. The presence of the Negro slaves, however, gave an added intensity
Yet, the basis of Southern agriculture and of the Southern economy was the small slaveholder, who planted, and the yeoman farmer. Avery O. Craven described this class in *The Growth of Southern Nationalism*: "They were . . . plain country folk, members of evangelical churches, neighborly, provincial, eager to own land, hospitable, proud and independent. They had inherited the county system of local government and with it a strong bent toward politics and things military."²

In the immediate ante-bellum years, this Southern society withdrew into itself to protect its institutions, primarily slavery, from external threats. Emory Thomas stated in *The Confederate Nation*: "During the middle third of the nineteenth century, Southerners began to close their minds to alternatives to their 'way of life;' they celebrated and sanctified the status quo and prepared to defend and extend it against threats real or imagined. In this process interests and institutions became ideals and goals. Questions about the Southern way of life became moral questions, and compromises of the Southern life style became concessions of virtue and righteousness."³

The prosperity of Southern agriculture and the relatively closed nature of the society weakened the impetus to industrialize. By 1860, the South reflected this lack of economic development; within the United States, it represented only twenty-five
percent of all wealth, nineteen percent of all factories, and thirty-four percent of all railroad track mileage. As a result, the South was a commercial and industrial dependent of the North.

In addition, the South viewed itself as a minority political interest within the Union. In 1789, the South had occupied thirty seats in the United States House of Representatives or forty-six percent of the total; yet, by 1860, the South occupied eighty-five seats in the House of Representatives or only thirty-five percent of the total. Moreover, in the Compromise of 1850, the South lost its equal status within the United States Senate. Undoubtedly, this perception, among Southerners, exacerbated the region's reaction to the election of a Republican president.

These social, economic, and political factors characterized the South, in 1860-1861, when eleven states of the region seceded from the Union. Yet, it is impossible to regard these states in this period as a monolithic South, rather individual attitudes and area interests result in a variety of responses to the same stimuli. Consequently, a study of the secession movement, through the lives of four men and through the histories of four states, each representative of a much broader configuration, has provided the opportunity to compare and to contrast the personalities and environments which effected disunion.
To study the life of Robert Barnwell Rhett is to study the politics of secession in South Carolina. Yet, in a larger sense, it is to study the conception and development of the secession movement in the South, as well.

Robert Barnwell Rhett was born on 21 December, 1800, in Beaufort, South Carolina. He was the eighth of fifteen children born to James and Marianna Gough Smith. Rhett's ancestors included three former governors of South Carolina and a former governor-general of the Bahama Islands. During Rhett's youth his uncle, Benjamin Smith, was Governor of North Carolina. In addition, Rhett was distantly related to Abigail Smith Adams, and thus, to a congressional foe, John Quincy Adams. In 1837, an act of the South Carolina legislature changed the family name from Smith to Rhett, in honor of another famous ancestor, Colonel William Rhett.

During his childhood the Smiths moved to Brunswick County, North Carolina, where his father owned a rice plantation. Rhett (called "Barnwell") remained in Beaufort with his grandmother until the age of seventeen. There, he attended Beaufort College. Upon her death, Rhett rejoined the family, only to return to South Carolina with the failure of the plantation. Economic misfortune would plague the family throughout Rhett's life.
At the age of nineteen, Rhett moved to Charleston to read law. Two years later, he settled in the community of Coosawhatchie, in the Beaufort district, to practice. In 1823, he left Coosawhatchie for Walterboro, in the Colleton district, to practice with R. W. Barnwell, a cousin and a future United States Senator. The law firm was immediately a success.

Established in Walterboro, Rhett married, in 1824, Elizabeth Washington Burnet, seventeen years of age and an orphan, who shared with Rhett the happiest years of his life. Mrs. Elsie Rhett Lewis, a daughter of the union, wrote of her father in this period: "He was six feet in height, with a rather small and beautifully shaped head, blue-gray eyes, beautiful teeth, and a most charming smile and delightful laugh. In his youth he must have been very gay and full of fun, he always enjoyed a good joke very much and told one capitaly. His temperament was nervous and mercurial, he was quick in movement and quick-tempered, but entirely self-controlled." 1

South Carolina in the 1820's was a society enduring social and economic changes within a static political structure. The economic depression, which resulted from the financial crisis of 1819, continued. As a result, many whites left South Carolina for the richer lands opening in the West. In the decade between 1820 and 1830, the white population of South Carolina grew by approximately twenty thousand (8.4%) while the black population
Crew by approximately fifty-eight thousand (22.0%). This rate of growth in the slave population compounded the racial fears already present, which had resulted from the Compromise of 1820, a slave insurrection in 1822, the Negro Seamen's Act, and the colonization movement.

Despite the liberal trend of Jacksonian America, the political structure continued to give disproportionate representation to Lowcountry planters throughout the ante-bellum period. In this way the seaboard parish region maintained effective control of the legislature, and consequently, of the state. Qualified voters chose only their representatives to Columbia, who, in turn, elected the governor, senators, and presidential electors. This control was greatly aided by the intermarriages of the planter class.

Throughout the 1820's, South Carolina politics were split between Judge William Smith and his followers, who supported Crawford of Georgia for the presidency, and John C. Calhoun and his followers, who supported Calhoun for the presidency. Initially, this split between Smith and Calhoun involved personalities, but in 1825, the South Carolina legislature passed resolutions denying congressional authority for internal improvements and for a protective tariff. The leader of this "Revolution of 1825" was Judge Smith. In this manner the "states' rights" Smith broke sharply with the "nationalist" Calhoun.
1826, the legislature elected Smith to the United States Senate. Calhoun soon converted to the states' rights position.

In the Fall of 1826, Saint Bartholomew's parish in the Colleton district elected Rhett to the lower house of the state legislature. True to his style, he immediately gained the attention of the legislature and of the state with his successful efforts to amend the state constitution and to impeach an intemperate state judge. As a candidate for office he had supported the Jackson-Calhoun alliance, but with the increased duties in the Tariff of 1828 he became critical of government policy. Democratic leaders temporarily checked opposition to the tariff in the South Carolina with pleas for party unity; the "peace" lasted for three weeks.5

On 12 June, 1828, Rhett organized a meeting, in Walterboro, which adopted two resolutions, calling upon Governor Taylor to summon immediately the legislature and upon the people of South Carolina to resist the tariff. Rhett warned at the meeting: "But if you are doubtful of yourselves, if you are not prepared to follow up your principles wherever they may lead, to their very last consequence—if you love life better than honor—prefer ease to perilous liberty and glory, awake not! stir not!—impotent resistance will add vengeance to your ruin. Live in smiling peace with your insatiable oppressors, and die with the noble consolation, that your submissive patience will survive
triumphant your beggary and despair." Although there was no response to the resolutions, Rhett's crusade of thirty-two years to insure the equal status of South Carolina within the Union had begun.

The new Jackson Administration failed to quiet the opposition of South Carolinians, who objected to the Tariff of 1828 with constitutional and economic arguments. Within the state there emerged three distinct political groups: Unionists, Nullifiers, and Southern Nationalists. Rhett quickly became "the greatest of all the fire-eaters," who, as leader of the Southern Nationalists, favored nullification and independence. These Southern Nationalists were largely, though by no means exclusively, upcountry individuals, who, because of a more precarious economic position, were more strongly anti-tariff than those in the parishes. Yet, Rhett, at this time, did not consider himself, technically, a disunionist; he believed that the Union, when confronted with secession, would be reconciled on terms favorable to South Carolina. Indeed, until the secession crisis of 1850-1851, Rhett maintained this paradoxical stance on the Union: the formation of an independent Southern nation to force the federal government into submission.

Reelected to a third term in November, 1830, Rhett presented to the legislature a resolution, which called for a state convention, believing it to be the only means of expressing state sovereignty,
to redress violations of South Carolina's rights. The resolution failed. Yet, the Nullifiers were successful in defeating the reelection bid of Judge Smith, who had refused to endorse nullification.

Throughout the period 1830-1832, the position of the Nullifiers and of the Southern Nationalists, especially Rhett's, improved; the economic dislocation, which the tariff had seemingly imposed, strengthened the resolve of South Carolinians for action; States' Rights and Free Trade Associations were organized throughout South Carolina; at Walterboro, a group of Rhett's constituents resolved that their allegiance to the United States was conditional upon the terms of the Constitution; Rhett himself gained a valuable personal ally in his brother-in-law, John A. Stuart, who became editor of the Charleston Mercury. 9

Robert Barnwell Rhett opened the campaign of 1832 with a radical Fourth of July address, delivering it in his own Colleton district. Rhett stated: "If we are satisfied that there is no hope for us but in resistance, what matters it that one should call it constitutional and the other revolutionary? If the resistance and redress it brings may be made consistent with the existence of the Constitution and the Union (which we believe) will not all agree that it will be desirable? Why then, not cooperate in the mode of resistance we propose, for the accomplishment of
THE END WE ALL DESIRE; SINCE, IF THE WORST COMES TO THE WORST, IT IS BUT NAKED RESISTANCE WITHOUT LEGAL AUTHORITY,—IT IS AT LAST BUT REVOLUTION—REVOLUTION!" HE CONCLUDED: "[AND IF] IN THE MADNESS OF TYRANNY DRUNK WITH DOMINATION, HERE ON THE FREE SOIL OF CAROLINA, THE FIRE AND THE SWORD OF WAR ARE TO BE BROUGHT TO OUR DWELLINGS, WHY, THEN, SIR, I SAY, LET THEM COME." 10

M ost Nullifiers received the address in sympathy with its statements, but Calhoun and other nullification leaders disclaimed the speech, sensing it to be too extreme and militant. Although Rhett had been a member of the committee which had formally issued Calhoun's South Carolina Exposition and Protest, in 1828, he continued to pursue his own independent course. Although this example of Rhett's extreme position demonstrated that he was not yet under Calhoun's legalistic influence, Rhett clearly voiced majority opinion within the state.

The 1832 elections gave the Nullifiers a two-thirds majority in the state legislature. Governor Hamilton immediately summoned the legislature to a special session, which voted to call a sovereign convention of the State of South Carolina. Rhett was a delegate to the convention, but he missed the proceedings due to an illness. In an "Address to the People of South Carolina," the convention stated: "A fresh understanding of the bargain we deem absolutely necessary." It concluded, ominously: "Do your duty to your country, and leave the consequences to God." By an act
of the sovereign State of South Carolina, the Tariff of 1832 was null, void, and inoperative within the state. 11

South Carolina was alone against the federal government; no other state joined this resistance to national authority. President Jackson countered with the Nullification Proclamation and with a "Force Bill" from the Congress. Interestingly, there is evidence to suggest Rhett's participation in a plot to seize the federal arsenal at Augusta, at this time. Yet, to what degree Rhett participated or the plot matured remained a mystery as one of the conspirators, by openly discussing the plan, effectively thwarted any attempt. A compromise tariff relieved the state from the potential of armed conflict. 12

Rhett did attend the second session of the convention, which met to withdraw the Nullification ordinance, though he remained unrepentant. In a speech delivered to the convention in March, 1833, Rhett inquired: "Sir, if a Confederacy of the Southern States could now be obtained, should we not deem it a happy termination—happy beyond expectation, of our long struggle for our rights against oppression?" More importantly, Rhett was among the first to link the states' rights struggle against the tariff with abolitionism: "A people, owning slaves, are mad, or worse than mad, who do not hold their destinies in their own hands. Do we not bear the insolent assumption of our rulers, that slave labour shall not come into competition with free? Nor is it our Northern
brethren alone—the whole world is in arms against your institutions. Every stride of this Government over your rights, brings it nearer and nearer to your peculiar policy." The convention was "startled and shocked" by the speech, which was universally condemned. Obviously, Rhett's preoccupation with states' rights, beyond the immediate tariff issue, led him to a logical induction, in which he identified the powers of a government to tax disproportionately a state, through a revenue tariff, with the powers of a government to regulate state institutions.

Rhett resigned from the legislature, in 1833, when he became Attorney General of South Carolina. As Attorney General, Rhett was unsuccessful in defending the final act of the nullification convention; the Court of Appeals struck down the new oath for state officials, which offered allegiance only to South Carolina, implying mere obedience to the federal government.

Rhett was despondent at the results of the nullification movement, declaring to his former Colleton constituents: "At length the struggle for your rights is suspended..." He sought solace in religion; a revival, sweeping the state, deeply influenced Rhett in this period and for the remainder of his life. While serving as Attorney General he helped to organize a new Episcopal congregation in Charleston, managed the Charleston Bible Society, and served as an officer of the Young Men's Temperance Society and of the Charleston Port Society, the latter
promoting the gospel among seamen. Rhett also was a member of the Society for the Advancement of Learning and of an organization attempting to revive the Southern Review. 15

As Rhett turned inward after the nullification crisis, so the South began to assess its own situation. For the first time, Southerners questioned the value of the Union; there was an increasing awareness of the declining political and economic position of the South vis-à-vis the North within the Union. John McCardell in The Idea of a Southern Nation writes of the attendant psychological reaction: "The image of a genteel, noncompetitive way of life, where old families ruled, old values were retained, loyal slaves performed their happy tasks, and culture and chivalry abounded, was the offspring of nullification." 16

In the Spring of 1836, a group of Rhett's friends in Beaufort and Colleton districts urged him to run for a seat in Congress. Rhett defeated the incumbent by approximately one hundred votes out of approximately one thousand votes cast.

The financial crisis of 1837, which nearly bankrupted Rhett, first brought the new congressman to Washington for a special session called by President Van Buren. In addition, it was at this time that the Calhoun faction, to which Rhett identified himself, rejoined the Democratic party in return for two pledges: a "gas" rule on abolitionist petitions to Congress and a reduction in the tariff. 17 Nevertheless, Calhoun surprised South
Carolinians by his support for Van Buren's sub-treasury plan. Rhett followed Calhoun's lead, justifying his support for the controversial bill in a speech before the House on 25 June, 1838: "Sir, the 'lawlessness' of South Carolina will not have been in vain, if it has brought to light that great truth, which lies at the foundation of our Union—that this is a Government of opinion, and not force, and ought therefore to be so administered, as to conciliate the affections of all, by superintending the general interests of all, without infringing upon the sectional interests of any portion of the confederacy. By such a course alone, can the Union be preserved, or be worth preserving." 18

To his personal status as Calhoun's new spokesman in the House, Rhett added the influence of his family, with Stuart remaining at the Mercury and with brothers James and Albert in the state legislature. The position of the family in South Carolina, especially in consideration for their extremist politics, prompted some to refer to the state as "Rhettsylvania." 19

In Congress, the idea of "permanent protection" for the South against federal encroachments continued to obsess Rhett; he proposed a constitutional amendment denying Congress the power to abolish slavery in Washington, extending the Missouri Compromise line of thirty-six degrees, thirty minutes to all future territorial acquisitions, and resolving to prohibit future discussions of slavery in Congress. The alternative to this plan was
dissidence. Clearly, these expressions indicated that Rhett remained in the vanguard of the states' rights movement. Such a blunt statement by a member of Congress regarding terms of fidelity to the Union created a sensation in South Carolina and in the nation. Rhett, however, continued to maintain that with demands backed by a firm resolve to secede, the federal government would be forced to yield. In this sentiment, he again expressed a desire to remain within the Union, but under recognized guarantees, which, he believed, had become necessary with the perceived violations of the Constitution by the federal government. The failure of this proposal among Southern congressional leaders left a lasting impression on Rhett against future efforts for Southern cooperation. Yet, the South did not consider its institutions so endangered as to force certain demands on the federal government.

Reelected with near unanimous support in 1838, Rhett used his influence with the Van Buren Administration, gained by managing the sub-treasury bill in the previous Congress, to revise the tariff. Although the effort was unsuccessful, it did not alter Rhett's support for Van Buren's reelection. Consequently, the Whig victory in 1840 was a disaster for Rhett; he lost his personal influence with the President as well as his legislative influence in the impending tariff review. Rhett tempered his frustration with a desire to avoid another nullification crisis, which,
he believed, was doomed to fail, again. Both attitudes found expression upon the floor of the House of Representatives: "Sir, I fear the principle of a protective tariff far more than I regard its pecuniary oppressions. It is utterly inconsistent in principle with our free institutions; and must eventuate, if adopted as a policy of our country, in their entire overthrow." Alter-
nately, Rhett stated that "next to the sacred book of God, the Constitution of the United States is the most perfect paper ever seen in the universe." Finally, the Tariff of 1842, which kept tariff schedules at their 1839 levels, found much support, even within the Democratic party.

Rhett's support for Calhoun's legislative programs and presi-
dential ambitions was soon repaid. In 1842, Rhett lost his bid to fill Calhoun's senate seat, vacated to pursue the presidency. In addition, the reapportionment of the state endangered Rhett's House seat through a combination of two, previously separate, congressional districts. Calhoun, who wielded influence throughout the state, endorsed Rhett in his reelection bid against another incumbent, Representative S. W. Trotti. Rhett defeated his opponent by approximately eight hundred votes out of approximately three thousand votes cast. Also, Calhoun made Rhett the editor of the Washington Spectator, a Calhoun organ. Yet the Calhoun-Rhett combination dissolved when Van Burens emerged, albeit temporarily, as the front-runner for the 1844 Democratic
Presidential nomination, and Rhett continued to agitate for tariff reform.

Although the least successful of the four major efforts to assert states' rights in South Carolina, the Bluffton Movement demonstrated the frustration and anger that many South Carolinians felt after the failure of the nullification.

On 27 June, 1844, the Mercury published a letter by Rhett in which he proposed a state convention for May, 1845, unless Congress revised the tariff. Rhett believed that action was imperative; and another resistance movement emerged. On 31 July, 1844, Rhett spoke at a dinner in Bluffton, South Carolina, where he again called for a state convention and separate state action against the tariff. In the next six weeks, Rhett delivered ten similar speeches throughout his congressional district. On 7 August, the Mercury endorsed the Bluffton Movement, including a warning previously sounded in March, 1833: "Go on, we must and will. We must make fight on this outer wall of the tariff where the issue can be made at once against federal usurpation, if we would defend successfully our slave-holding institutions. If we wait until abolition brings on the direct issue, it will be fatally too late." Whigs and Unionist Democrats accused Rhett of promoting disunion. In the end, the Bluffton Movement gained widespread acceptance only within Rhett's congressional district.

Robert Barnwell Rhett devoted his last years in Congress to
the admission of Texas and to the recognition of slave property rights in the Territories. To assure a power balance in the Congress, he supported the proposals of Representative Milton Brown of Tennessee to admit Texas, to extend the Missouri Compromise line, and to partition the new territory "into four or five states." During the Mexican War, Rhett became the Polk Administration's strongest supporter in Congress. To critics of the war effort, Rhett stated that the Congress did not possess "a right to prescribe, limit and determine the objects and purposes of the war...."

After the war, Rhett urged the expansion of slavery into the new territories. He believed that the states were "co-sovereigns" of the Territories, with the federal government only an agent of the states. Consequently, the property rights of slave-owners were equal to the property rights of all others. To those who feared a confrontation with the North because of this expansion, Rhett stated: "Stern experience has written with a finger of scorn in every line of its progress, timid counsels can only lead to disaster, ruin, and disgrace."

Ironically, as Rhett prepared to retire from Congress, there appeared a group of Southern congressional Democrats, who united to oppose the threat of Northern power. In the winter of 1848-1849, Calhoun, over the signature of forty-seven Southern members of Congress, issued the "Southern Address," which denounced: inter-
ference with the capture of runaway slaves, agitation against the peculiar institution, resistance to equal property rights in the Territories, and disruption of slavery in the District of Columbia. The consequences of Northern aggression were emancipation and a race war. The fact that Southern Wraps refused to endorse the "Southern Address" reinforced Rhett's belief concerning the futility of Southern cooperation.

The grievances stated in the "Southern Address" moved South Carolina to near secession. Local meetings endorsed Calhoun's remarks and many areas formed their own Southern Rights Association or Committee of Safety and Correspondence. In May, 1849, representatives of the latter met in Columbia to organize the Central State Committee of Vigilance and Safety. The Central State Committee immediately endorsed Governor Seabrook's efforts to unite Southern governors. On 7 December, 1849, the state legislature called for the election of delegates to a Southern convention and for the governor to summon the legislature in the event of the passage of the Wilmot Proviso.

The Mississippi legislature had issued the call for a Southern convention. In response, delegates from Virginia, South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, Tennessee, Arkansas, and Texas convened on 3 June, 1850, in Nashville. Yet, the situation had changed between the call for the convention and the convocation of the convention. The efforts for conciliation
within the Congress, which would be known as the Compromise of 1850, greatly diminished the impetus for action in Nashville. As a result, the tone of the convention was mute; the ardent secessionists, most of whom favored cooperation, wished neither to alienate the Border States nor to aid Southern Whigs by the identification of the Democratic party with disunionism. This moderation was upset by Robert Barnwell Rhett, who resolved: "That the Union of the States is a union of equal and independent sovereignties, and that the powers delegated to the federal government can be resumed by the several states, whenever it may seem to them proper and necessary." Furthermore, in his "Address to the People of the Southern States," issued by the convention, Rhett argued against the proposals in the Compromise of 1850, correctly noting that a fugitive slave law was unenforceable.

The inconclusive Nashville convention had not diminished Rhett's ardor for action. When he returned to Charleston, he delivered the most radical appeal yet for disunion: "Smaller states have before us struggled successfully, for their independence and freedom against far greater odds; and if it must be, we can make one brave, long, last, desperate struggle, for our rights and honor, ere the black pall of tyranny is stretched over the bier of our dead liberties. To meet death a little sooner or a little later, can be of consequence to very few of us; whilst duty performed, may remain in its effect to many generations, and a
FAIR FAME, LIVE FOREVER, LOOKING TO THAT UNDYING REPUTATION WHICH
HAS EVER FOLLOWED EVERY PEOPLE WHO HAVE DARED ALL TO PRESERVE
THEIR LIBERTIES, AND HAVE CONQUERED OR PERISHED IN THEIR DEFENCE;
INSTEAD OF SHRINKING, WE MIGHT PANT FOR THE TRIAL WHICH SHALL
ISOLATE SOUTH CAROLINA IN THIS GREAT CONFLICT." 33 HERE RHETT
cROSSED THE THRESHOLD; HE ADVOCATED SECESSION WITHOUT REGARD TO
ITS POSSIBLE INFLUENCE ON FEDERAL POLICY OR TO A SUBSEQUENT REUNI-
FICATION BETWEEN SOUTH CAROLINA AND THE UNION. RHETT WAS NOW,
TRULY, A SOUTHERN NATIONALIST. FORMER CONGRESSIONAL COLLEAGUES,
NEWSPAPER EDITORS, AND POLITICAL OPPONENTS DENOUNCED THE ADDRESS,
BUT RHETT CONTINUED TO PRESS FOR RESISTANCE. FOR EXAMPLE, IN
MACON, GEORGIA, RHETT AND WILLIAM YANCY MET WITH APPROXIMATELY
EIGHT HUNDRED FIRE-EATERS. IN HIS SPEECH, RHETT CALLED FOR THE
SECESSION OF GEORGIA, SOUTH CAROLINA, ALABAMA, AND MISSISSIPPI,
FOLLOWED BY THE OTHER SOUTHERN STATES AND BY NEW MEXICO, UTAH AND
CALIFORNIA; ALL OF THESE STATES AND TERRITORIES, ACCORDING TO
RHETT, SHARED COMMON INTERESTS. 34

THE ELECTIONS FOR THE SOUTH CAROLINA LEGISLATURE, IN 1850,
GAVE A MAJORITY TO THE SECESSIONISTS, WHO, IN TURN, ELECTED RHETT
to FILL CALHOUN'S SENATE SEAT, VACATED BY DEATH. MORE IMPORTANT-
LY, THE LEGISLATURE CALLED FOR THE ELECTION OF DELEGATES TO A STATE
CONVENTION AND OF DELEGATES TO A SOUTHERN CONGRESS, THE LATTER A
PROPOSAL OF THE NASHVILLE CONVENTION. THE SECESSIONISTS WON CON-
TROL OF THE CONVENTION, WHICH WAS TO ASSEMBLE AFTER THE SOUTHERN
congress or at the call of the legislature.

Yet, by July, 1851, the secessionists' unity began to disintegrate. It was increasingly apparent that South Carolina would not be joined by another state in a resistance effort; cooperationists began to withhold their unqualified support for disunion. In addition, unionist elements joined cooperationists to form a united block against the "Rhett" party. Both sides looked to the October, 1851, election of delegates to the Southern congress as a test of their political strength within the state. Symbolic of the declining position of the "Rhett" party, their leader became ill near the end of the campaign, and left for Europe to improve his health. The cooperationists defeated the "Rhett" party, with 25,045 votes and 17,710 votes, respectively.35

Though not a delegate, Rhett returned to South Carolina for the convention in April, 1852. Repudiated in a caucus of the "Rhett" party, he had no influence over the proceedings. For Rhett, the only positive achievement of the convention was the passage of a report, which declared the right of a state to secede. Yet, this was only formal recognition of a long held belief. With this new conservatism evinced at the convention, Rhett no longer considered himself a "proper representative" of South Carolina; in May, 1852, he resigned his seat in the United States Senate.

Rhett retired to his plantation and to a Charleston law
practice. After years of deep indebtedness, a Rhett fortune began to accumulate. He soon purchased a Georgia plantation, increasing his total number of slaves to 190. In December, 1852, his wife died. He would later marry Catharine Herbert Dent. 36

For the next several years, Rhett remained on the periphery of politics. In 1856, he offered himself as a candidate for governor, fearing a betrayal of the South by Buchanan. The next year, Rhett was nominated to fill Senator Butler's seat in Congress, vacated by death; his bid was unsuccessful. In 1858, he attended a Southern commercial convention at Montgomery, which brought many Southern radicals together for the first time since the Nashville convention, though to no affect. These years of private activity were brought to an end with his purchase of the remaining interest in the Mercury and with the installation of his son, Robert Barnwell Rhett, Jr., as its editor.

The Mercury immediately initiated a new editorial policy; to affirm ties with cooperationists, to support the Buchanan Administration, and to endorse South Carolina's participation in the 1860 Democratic national convention. In this effort, Rhett successfully attempted to identify himself with majority opinion, and subsequently, to gain political power within the state. Although his tone moderated, his goals remained the same. He repeatedly asserted that any Republican administration in Washington threatened the institutions of South Carolina. Therefore,
The state must resist the election of a Republican president. Rhett demonstrated with these statements that he had learned from his experiences in 1851; he purposely failed to endorse a mode of resistance (i.e., separate state action or cooperation). 37

In October, 1859, Rhett urged the state legislature to adopt a "bill of rights" for the South. The Democratic party must accept this expression of Southern rights or lose South Carolina's support in the electoral college to a favorite son candidate. In either instance the state would withdraw its congressional delegation should its candidate lose. The legislature ignored the proposal. 38

John Brown's raid, however, shocked South Carolinians into action, and provided Rhett with a receptive audience for his message of resistance. Patrols increased in size and in number; slaveowners strictly enforced the black codes, "vigilance" committees investigated strangers, opened mail, and arrested suspected abolitionists regardless of proof. 39

Steven A. Channing correctly noted in Crisis of Fear the attitude among many Southerners that "abolitionism was boldly thrusting itself into the slaveholding community, indeed, into the very home and family of every white man, woman and child." 40

This shift in attitudes among South Carolinians enabled Rhett to pursue further his own radical sentiments. A three point plan replaced his call for a bill of rights. Fearing a
diminution of reaction to the Brown raid, Rhett favored immediate measures: to arm South Carolina, to refuse participation in the Charleston convention, and to pledge opposition to any candidate advocating Douglas' "squatter sovereignty."41

When the legislature convened in November, 1859, there was sharp division among its members concerning the state's response. Christopher Memminger, after several weeks of debate, offered to the lower house a series of compromise resolutions. These resolutions, adopted with a preamble, constituted South Carolina's official response to the Brown raid. The legislature resolved: to call for a Southern convention, to appropriate one hundred thousand dollars for military expenditures, to appoint an officer with authority over such money, and to send a commissioner to Virginia, urging that state's participation in a Southern convention. Virginia refused to join a convention movement, which effectively thwarted efforts at cooperation.42

In the spring of 1860, William Yancey supplanted Rhett as the South's foremost fire-eater. Yancey's "Alabama platform" denied to the Congress and to the territorial legislatures any right to restrict slavery. Moreover, the Alabama delegation was bound to withdraw from the convention unless the party incorporated such a plank into the national platform. Other Southern delegations supported the Alabama effort.

Rhett, meanwhile, continued to oppose participation in the
Charleston convention, fearing a compromise platform and Stephen A. Douglas' nomination. Rhett vigorously opposed Douglas' "squatter sovereignty," which had cost the South, in Rhett's opinion, two additional slave states, Kansas and California. In fact, Rhett distrusted the entire spectrum of Northern political opinion from radical Republicans to conservative Democrats, the latter considered to be "the very rear-guard of abolitionism." Rhett believed all Northerners to be, in varying degrees, abolitionists.

Yet, he clearly understood the key to secession: a split within the Democratic party. Should efforts at compromise fail in Charleston, Southern delegations would unite to form a factional party around which the South would rally to support its own presidential candidate, and later, to oppose the inevitable Republican victor. Rhett was correct.

The desire among secessionists in South Carolina to boycott the Charleston convention left the National Democrats in control of the delegate selection process. Consequently, the state's delegation opposed the "Alabama platform," favoring instead a reaffirmation of the 1856 Cincinnati platform. The secessionists distrusted this "Convention" party, believing its members to be spoils' men and Douglas sympathizers.

When a majority of the South Carolina delegation walked out of the Charleston convention, Rhett credited the state's
DISPLAY OF COOPERATION TO THE INFLUENCE OF A LARGE NUMBER OF SECESSIONISTS IN CHARLESTON. IN FACT, THE SOUTHERN DELEGATIONS HAD LEFT THE CONVENTION TO PROTEST THE PLATFORM, THE "ALABAMA" EFFORT HAVING FAILED AS RHETT PREDICTED, NOT TO FORM A NEW PARTY. FURTHERMORE, THESE DELEGATIONS INTENDED TO MEET NOT ONLY AT RICHMOND, BUT ALSO AT THE NATIONAL CONVENTION, ADJOURNED TO BALTIMORE, THEREAFTER. 46 NEVERTHELESS, LARGE CROWDS OF SECESSIONISTS, WITH NEWS OF THE CHARLESTON WALK OUT, CHEERED FOR AN "INDEPENDENT SOUTHERN NATION," AND REMOVED TO THE OFFICES OF THE MERCURY TO SERENADE RHETT.

RHETT NOW MOVED TO CONTROL THE SOUTH CAROLINA DELEGATION TO RICHMOND; UNLIKE OTHERS, HE HOPEd TO FOUND A SOUTHERN POLITICAL PARTY. AFTER A BITTER FIGHT WITH THE "CONVENTION" PARTY, THE SECESSIONISTS EMERGED VICTORIOUS IN THE DELEGATE SELECTION PROCESS FOR RICHMOND, AND ELECTED RHETT TO LEAD THE DELEGATION.

ON 11 JUNE, 1860, THE SOUTHERN DELEGATIONS CONVENED IN RICHMOND ONLY TO ADJOURN UNTIL AFTER THE BALTIMORE CONVENTION. THE SOUTH CAROLINA DELEGATION WITH A FEW OTHER DISSIDENTS REMAINED IN RICHMOND. YET, RHETT'S PROPHESY WAS FULFILLED; THE SOUTHERN DELEGATIONS AGAIN WALKED OUT OF THE DEMOCRATIC NATIONAL CONVENTION TO NOMINATE THEIR OWN CANDIDATE, JOHN C. BRECKINRIDGE, AND TO RATIFY THEIR OWN PLATFORM. UNLIKE RHETT, THESE SOUTHERNERS DID NOT ANTICIPATE DISUNION, BUT EXPECTED BY THEIR ACTIONS TO THROW THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION INTO THE UNITED STATES
House of Representatives. 47

The Mercury enthusiastically endorsed this Southern Demo-
ocratic party: "The only party in the South, standing simply on
the sectional rights of the South, and opposed to the sectional
policy of Black Republicanism in the North, is the party which
supports Breckinridge and Lane for the presidency; and this
party commands the immense majority of the Southern people." 48
In addition, the newspaper increasingly called into question the
motives of opponents: "We do not wish to judge others harshly,
but it does appear to us that no one in the South can love or
reverence the Union as it exists, but one who is at heart an
Abolitionist." 49

By October, it was clear to all that the election was to
Lincoln. The Mercury began to warn of the consequences for the
South: a new protective tariff, more abolitionist agitation in
the "Frontier States," more acts of violence in the South simi-
lar to John Brown's raid, and a decline in the value of real
estate and of slaves. In addition, the Mercury continued to
call for resistance, urging immediate action after the election:
"Before Messrs. Lincoln and Hamlin can be installed in Washington
as President and Vice-President of the United States, the South-
ern States can dissolve peaceably (we know what we say) their
Union with the North. Mr. Lincoln and his Abolition cohorts,
will have no South to reign over. Their game would be blocked."
The foundation of their organization would be taken away; and, left to the tender mercies of a baffled, furious and troubled North, they would be cursed and crushed, as the flagitious cause of the disasters around them. But if we submit, and do not dissolve our union with the North, we make the triumph of our abolition enemies complete, and enable them to consolidate and wield the power of the North, for our destruction. 50

Rhett and the Mercury were not alone. While Rhett warned the state of the consequences awaiting the South, citizens throughout South Carolina founded chapters of "Minute Men for the Defense of Southern Rights," which organized into infantry and cavalry units. Each member of the "Minute Men" paid a one dollar initiation fee and promised to march on Washington with a rifle and a pistol to prevent Lincoln's inauguration. Patrols, originally organized to protect whites from slave insurrections, began military preparations, wearing blue cockades. In addition, the "1860 Association" published secessionist literature, and urged military preparation, fearing social, political, and economic chaos with a Republican administration in Washington. 51

On 8 October, 1860, South Carolina elected a legislature, which again split between advocates of separate state action and advocates of cooperation. In addition, some wish to impose guidelines on the legislature concerning the grounds for secession. Unlike 1851, there existed no Unionist faction
WITHIN THE STATE; INDEED MANY FORMER OPPONENTS OF SECESSION HAD BECOME RADICALS.

WITH NEWS OF LINCOLN'S VICTORY, EVENTS PRESSED THE SECESSION MOVEMENT TO A CONSUMMATION. ON 7 NOVEMBER, 1860, UNITED STATES DISTRICT JUDGE ANDREW GORDON MAGRATH AND UNITED STATES DISTRICT ATTORNEY JAMES CONNER, THE TWO HIGHEST FEDERAL APPOINTEES IN SOUTH CAROLINA, RESIGNED. THREE DAYS LATER, UNITED STATES SENATOR JAMES CHESNUT RESIGNED. BUSINESS INTERESTS, ESPECIALLY THOSE IN CHARLESTON, SURPRISED THE STATE WITH THEIR STRONG ENDORSEMENTS OF SECESSION. MARY BOYKIN CHESNUT, WIFE OF THE SENATOR, REPORTED A CONVERSATION IN HER DIARY, WHICH WAS REPRESENTATIVE OF PUBLIC OPINION WITHIN THE STATE: "THE DIE IS CAST; NO MORE VAIN REGRETS; BAD FOREBODINGS ARE USELESS; THE STAKE IS LIFE OR DEATH." 52

RHETT NOW BROKE HIS SELF-IMPOSED SILENCE; HE FAVORED A STATE CONVENTION, TO CONVENE IMMEDIATELY, AND SEPARATE STATE ACTION. HE BELIEVED THAT SUCH A COURSE WAS HIGHLY ADVANTAGEOUS FOR SOUTH CAROLINA: TO USE THE RECENT HARVEST AS A WEAPON AGAINST THE NORTH, TO MINIMIZE UNCERTAINTY AMONG "COMMERCIAL AND FINANCIAL INTERESTS OF THE SOUTH," TO INSPIRE OTHER SOUTHERN STATES, TO AVOID THE REPUBLICAN ADMINISTRATION, AND TO PRESENT A FAIT ACCOMPLI TO THE CONGRESS AND PRESIDENT. HE ALSO WISHED TO ACT BEFORE ANY ABATEMENT OF THE PRESENT FERVOR. ROBERT BARNWELL RHETT, JR., IN THE UPPER HOUSE OF THE LEGISLATURE, AND EDMUND
Rhett, in the Lower House, sponsored a bill to convene immediately a sovereign state convention. The effort failed.

The upper house finally agreed to call a state convention for 15 January, 1861, ostensibly to provide time for more discussion of secession. In fact, cooperationists won this delay to await the actions of other states. Yet, the evening before the lower house was to act, popular sentiment intervened. The "Minute Men" in Columbia and the "1860 Association" in Charleston met to demand immediate secession. Simultaneously, word arrived that Senator Toombs of Georgia had resigned and that the Governor of Georgia had called for a convention to act on secession. This news eased the fear of cooperationists, and prompted the lower house to propose a state convention for 17 December, 1860. The upper house agreed to the new date.

Robert Barnwell Rhett suddenly emerged as a folk-hero. Admirers reprinted and circulated old speeches; portraits of Rhett were on display; Newberry, South Carolina established a Rhett Guard. The New York Evening Post reported: "This is his hour of triumph, and the triumph is more properly and peculiarly his than that of any other man now living."

The secessionists moved to control the convention. They secured from many candidates, standing for election to the convention, a pledge to support immediate secession through separate state action. Also, the Mercury published, daily, the response
of candidates to two questions: as a delegate will you favor secession? and will you oppose future reconstruction with non-slaveholding states? Although there were conservative South Carolinians, who opposed secession, they failed to organize any serious challenge to the secessionists. 56

South Carolinians' hope for peaceful disunion rose with President Buchanan's Fourth Annual Message to Congress, issued on 3 December, 1860. In the address, Buchanan stated his position on the question of federal coercion after state secession: "The fact is that our Union rests upon public opinion, and can never be cemented by the blood of its citizens shed in civil war. If it can not live in the affections of the people, it must one day perish. Congress possesses many means of preserving it by conciliation, but the sword was not placed in their hand to preserve it by force." 57

As the convention approached, public support for separate state action intensified to an unprecedented level. Mary Boykin Chesnutt confided to her diary: "Everywhere that I have been people have been complaining bitterly of slow and lukewarm political leaders." 58 Rhett, however, was adamant as ever. The Mercury simplified the secession movement to a rhetorical question: "Suppose one man should deliberately violate a compact with another man, every year, for thirty years, and then should give him notice that he intended to kill him—what would be thought of
THE MANKIND OR THE WISDOM OF THE POOR OPPRESSED DEVIL, SHOULD HE GO TO HIS OPPRESSOR, AND SEE HIM 'ONCE MORE' TO OBTAIN THE 'GUARANTIES OF THE CONSTITUTION' WITH HIM?" IN ADDITION, RHETT RIDICULIZED OPPONENTS OF IMMEDIATE SECESSION: "ALTHOUGH YOU SEE YOUR ENEMY LOAD HIS RIFLE WITH THE DECLARED PURPOSE OF TAKING YOUR LIFE, YOU ARE TO WAIT, AS A WISE EXPEDIENT OF DEFENSE, UNTIL HE MAKES THE 'OVERT ACT'—SHOOTS YOU." 59

On 17 December, 1860, 160 delegates met in Columbia to convene a sovereign convention of South Carolina. A survey of the delegates revealed prominence, wealth, an agricultural orientation, and an overwhelming interest in slavery. The convention included four former and three future governors of South Carolina, four former United States senators, five former United States representatives, four college presidents, and two railroad presidents. The average wealth of the delegation was $35,349.31 in real property and $68,704.55 in personal property. The convention included forty-eight farmers (28.4%), thirty-three planters (19.5%), thirty-three lawyers (19.5%), twelve physicians (7.1%), six judges (3.6%), five ministers (3.0%), four merchants (2.4%), and three teachers (1.8%). The remaining twenty-five delegates (14.7%) were split among other occupations. Finally, the convention shared a common interest in slavery. In all, 153 delegates (90.5%) owned slaves, with 104 delegates (61.5%) classified as large slaveholders, owning twenty or more slaves. 60
Due to a smallpox epidemic in Columbia, the convention removed to Charleston, reconvening on 18 December, 1860. The president of the convention appointed Rhett to a committee of seven, authorized to frame a secession ordinance for the state. On 20 December, 1860, the convention voted 169-0 to approve the Ordinance of Secession. That evening, Robert Barnwell Rhett affixed his name to the official proclamation, which withdrew South Carolina from the United States of America, and created the Independent State of South Carolina.

Robert Barnwell Rhett succeeded in his effort of thirty-two years to challenge, effectively, the authority of the federal government. Yet, the victory was by no means his alone. Throughout his life, Rhett was an extremist, even relative to South Carolina; however, secession did occur, when in 1860, there was popular support for radical means. Consequently, to consider Rhett's significance to the secession movement in South Carolina and to the secession impulse throughout the South in 1860, one must analyze Rhett's contributions toward the creation of the popular reaction to Abraham Lincoln's election.

Rhett was revolutionary in the pattern of the American Revolution of 1776. He acted to overthrow a political structure, which sought to undermine his conception of the status quo. To Rhett, the North had forsaken the restrictions imposed by the
Constitution, and moved to thwart Southern interests on the issues of the protective tariff, of internal improvements, of property rights in the Territories, and ultimately of property rights in the states.

Rhett was undoubtedly influenced by his environment. His father was a planter in North Carolina. In addition, Rhett spent his youth in the Beaufort district, an area of dense slave concentration. In his political career, he represented this agriculturally oriented and heavily slave populated area. Indeed, by 1860, eighty-five (85%) percent of the Beaufort district's population was in slavery. Moreover, Rhett identified himself with these agricultural and slave interests as the owner of two plantations, and these two interests dominated the secession convention in South Carolina.

Yet, Rhett was not a bucolic provincial; he was educated in the arts and in law; he was a philanthropist with his time and with his money; he lived in the cosmopolitan port city of Charleston; and he served in the United States Congress with former President John Quincy Adams, and with future Presidents Polk, Fillmore, Pierce, and Lincoln. As a result, it is impossible to level any charge at Rhett, which involves his ignorance of the political structure or of various social, political, and economic interpretations.

Rhett's major contribution to the secession movement in
South Carolina was his willingness to advance his beliefs through actions: in 1828, he broke the politically motivated silence on the tariff issue; in 1832, he campaigned ardently for nullification; in 1844, he initiated the Bluffton Movement; in 1851, he led the radical party for control of the state delegation to the proposed Southern congress; and in 1860, he contributed through control of the delegation to the Richmond convention, through the influential Charleston Mercury, and through his presence at the secession convention to the successful effort to dissolve the Union.

Rhett's efforts to aid the secession movement in South Carolina are of special importance. The state was the first to opt for secession. Rhett's contributions helped to create popular opinion which translated Lincoln's victory into a direct threat to the state. Mary Scrogam noted in The Peacable Americans of 1860-1861: "It is apparent that the people of South Carolina were the only people of any of the Southern states who thought that the election of Lincoln was sufficient cause in itself for breaking the bonds of Union." Therefore, the action of South Carolina marked the precedent for the other Southern states to follow. Yet, had South Carolina, acknowledged to be the most radical slave state, agreed to await the action of other Southern states, as the cooperationists urged, the South may have balked at the secession movement. Consequently, the
victory of the advocates for separate state action in South Carolina may have had the most profound implications for the entire South in 1860-1861.

To summarize, Robert Barnwell Rhett neither created nor exploited the secession movement. Rather, he used his position as a private citizen, state legislator, congressman, senator, and newspaper publisher to advance his political beliefs. He was not concerned with the popularity of his opinions, but with their acceptance. In the most concise expression of his beliefs, Rhett stated: "I am a State Rights man. I am disposed to regard with great jealousy every power exercised by this Government; and to require, in every case, that it shall be shown, either by express grant, or by necessary implication, that the power claimed is clearly given by the Constitution."

By 20 December, 1860, South Carolina had endured four major efforts to assert states' rights. The nullification effort ended in a humiliating failure. The Bluffton Movement was localized largely in the seacoast parishes. In 1851, a lack of Southern unity split the secession movement within the state. Finally, it was the perceived threat of a Republican presidency, which brought on secession. The split within the Democratic party, favored by Rhett, insured Lincoln's victory, and the consequent election of a secessionist legislature and the near unanimous public support operated to achieve the inexorable consummation.
JEFFERSON DAVIS

JEFFERSON DAVIS, who assumed the mantle of John C. Calhoun, was the chief spokesman for Southern rights, in general, and for slave interests, in particular, during the last years of the ante-bellum period. In addition, Davis advocated resistance to the election of a Republican president. Yet, in the crisis of 1860–1861, he was a counsel of moderation, who sought the maintenance of the slave states within the Union.

JEFFERSON DAVIS was born on 3 June, 1808, in rural Christian (now, Todd) County, Kentucky. He was the youngest of ten children born to Samuel and Jane Cook Davis. Davis' father was a prosperous farmer and the owner of twelve slaves, though not a member of the aristocracy, which dominated Southern society.¹

When Davis was two years of age, the family moved to Bayou Teche, Louisiana, but shortly thereafter, moved again to settle in Woodville, Mississippi. Although the family was of Baptist persuasion, Davis attended the College of Saint Thomas Aquinas, a Roman Catholic institution, near Springfield, Kentucky, for his early preparatory training. At the age of ten, he returned to Mississippi, attending, briefly, Jefferson College, near Natchez, and the Academy of Wilkinson County, near his home. In 1821, Davis enrolled in Transylvania University, the most prestigious institution of higher learning in the West at that time.²
Three years later, Davis' brother, Joseph, secured for him an appointment to West Point. Although he wanted to finish his undergraduate education at Transylvania University and to continue in law, Davis accepted the appointment in appreciation for the financial support, provided by his elder brother. At the academy, he was not an exemplary cadet; on two occasions Davis faced expulsion for intemperance, and he regularly violated other regulations; he finally was graduated in the bottom third of his class.

After West Point, Davis entered the regular army. For the next several years, he served in obscure military outposts along the Indian frontier: Forts Winnebago and Crawford in the Michigan Territory and Forts Gibson and Jackson in the Arkansas Territory. At Fort Crawford, Davis met Sarah Knox Taylor, the daughter of his commanding officer, Colonel Zachary Taylor. Over the objections of Taylor, Davis married the Colonel's daughter and retired from the army to his own plantation, Brierfield, given him by Joseph. Yet, after less than three months of wedlock, Sarah Taylor Davis died.

The psychological impact on Davis was severe; for the next eight years he remained, largely in seclusion, at Brierfield. Yet, the effects of this tragic circumstance outlasted the self-imposed exile from society. Hudson Strode wrote in Jefferson Davis: "Learning to bear his grief brought a stoicism to his character that was later to be translated by those who did not
understand or like him into disdainful coolness."5

These years, alone, more than any other, prepared Davis for his future. He studied, daily, in the family library at Hurricane, Joseph's plantation, which adjoined Brierfield. He read the classics, the scriptures, and contemporary utopian philosophers. In addition, Davis became a leading planter and the BEAU IDEAL of the Southern slaveholder; by 1860, he maintained a plantation of eighteen hundred acres with 113 slaves. Most notably, Davis' slaves were well fed, clothed and housed, with a hospital, staffed by European physicians, at their disposal. He ended his seclusion in 1843, when he met Varina Howell, who became his second wife.6

During the early 1840s, Davis became intensely interested in politics and in government. In 1843, he was an unsuccessful Democratic candidate for the state legislature. The next year, he served as a member of the electoral college in support of James Folk. In 1845, he again sought elective office as a candidate for Congress. Throughout the canvass, he advocated the annexation of Texas, the occupation of Oregon to fifty-four degrees, forty minutes, free trade, and a revenue tariff; and he opposed internal improvements and another national bank. On 4 November, 1845, he was elected to the Twenty-ninth Congress.7

Davis had little time to enjoy his new position in the national legislature. In May, 1846, the First Mississippi Rifles elected Davis as their colonel. In Mexico, he served with distinction
at Monterrey and at Buena Vista, where he received a wound. For his service, President Polk appointed Davis to the rank of brigadier general in the volunteers; yet with extraordinary fidelity to the doctrine of states' rights, Davis refused the commission to serve as a general officer. In short, he believed that the President was unable to appoint officers in a Mississippi detachment. 8

Upon his return, the state legislature elected Davis, the congressman and war hero, to the United States Senate. During this period, the Congress was debating the status of slavery with regard to the ceded territories.

In August, 1846, David Wilmot, an anti-slavery Democrat from Pennsylvania, had moved to amend a war appropriation bill to exclude the peculiar institution from any land, which the United States was to secure from Mexico in a peace settlement. This proposal, which seemed to wrest from the slaveholders any possibility of expansion, was vigorously denounced by most Southerners, inside and outside of Congress. They responded with the argument that all citizens were free to enter the Territories with their property and that neither the Congress nor territorial legislatures were able to exclude slavery in lands, which the states held in joint trust.

When California ratified a state constitution, which prohibited slavery, and presented itself for admission to the Union,

IN HIS REMARKS BEFORE THE SENATE, DAVIS OPPOSED THE COMPROMISE, IN GENERAL, AND THE ADMISSION OF CALIFORNIA, IN PARTICULAR; HE ARGUED THAT IT WAS NECESSARY FOR CALIFORNIA TO DEVELOP, FIRST, AS A TERRITORY, REGARDLESS OF ANY GEOGRAPHIC OR CLIMATIC PREDISPOSITION TO BECOME A FREE OR SLAVE STATE. IN ADDITION, DAVIS STATED THAT TO FOREGO A PERIOD OF TERRITORIAL GOVERNMENT, AS CLAY PROPOSED, WAS TO BAR, EFFECTIVELY, THE INTRODUCTION OF SLAVERY INTO ANY FUTURE STATES; WITHOUT THE SECURITY OF TERRITORIAL STATUS, SLAVE-HOLDERS WERE UNLIKELY TO MIGRATE WITH THEIR HUMAN PROPERTY. HE REMARKED: "I AM ONE OF THOSE WHO HAVE UNFORMLY AVOWED THE DOCTRINE THAT THE PEOPLE, IN FORMING A STATE CONSTITUTION, HAVE A RIGHT TO DETERMINE FOR THEMSELVES WHETHER THEY WILL HAVE SLAVERY OR NOT. I AM WILLING TO FOLLOW THAT DOCTRINE TO ANY CONCLUSION TO WHICH IT MAY LEAD. BUT, SIR, THE DOCTRINE DOES NOT CARRY WITH IT THE RIGHT OF EVERY BAND OF WANDERING MEN IN ANY SECTION OF COUNTRY, WHO MAY CHOOSE TO ASSEMBLE TOGETHER AND ADOPT A SO-CALLED
CONSTITUTION, TO BIND US TO RECOGNIZE ITS VALIDITY AND THEIR SOVEREIGNTY."9

When Congress approved this Compromise of 1850, Davis denounced the legislation as an infringement on Southern rights. Even the Fugitive Slave Act, which Congress had passed as a concession to the South, was "a dead letter in any state when the popular opinion is opposed to such rendition." As a result, Davis took a defiant stand against the Compromise. He favored a state convention to consider Mississippi's response, preparations for the defense of the state, and a convention of slave states to assert the South's equal status in the Territories.10 Yet, Davis did not advocate secession, rather a spirit of regional appreciation and development: "[W]e should build up manufactories in the South, encourage and sustain our own mechanics, patronize our merchants who purchase their stocks of Southern men, in Southern ports, educate the youth of the country, in Southern schools, and under the tutition of good States' Rights teachers; in short in every employment, select the right sort of men--men imbued with the spirit of patriotism and devotion to the constitutional rights and interests of the South."11

Indeed, Davis spoke of the general attitude within Mississippi. In May, 1849, several prominent citizens had met in Jackson, the state capital, to protest any exclusion of slavery within the Territories and to call for a state convention to address the issue.
In October, 1849, this convention met, and subsequently, condemned the Congress for its failure to resolve the sectional crisis, and called on the slave states to convene a Southern convention in Nashville. The state legislature officially sanctioned the Nashville convention when it appointed delegates to represent Mississippi, and provided money to cover their expenses.

In response to the passage of the Compromise of 1850, Governor Quitman called for a special session of the state legislature. On 18 November, 1850, the legislature convened to authorize the election of delegates to and the convocation of a state convention, which was to express the sovereign will of Mississippians on the issues of the sectional controversy. Meanwhile, Senator Henry Foote, Davis' colleague, who had supported Clay's proposals in Congress, met with pro-Compromise elements to condemn efforts within the state toward disunion. The actions of Quitman and of Foote divided the state, politically; the Democratic and Whig parties disappeared while most former Democrats and states' rights Whigs formed the Southern Rights party (or, Democratic States' Rights party) with Quitman, and most former Whigs and national Democrats formed the Union party with Foote.

The Southern Rights party and the Union party nominated Quitman and Foote, respectively, for the governorship in 1851. Yet, this showdown between the two protagonists never occurred; in September, 1851, Mississippians cast 28,402 votes to 21,241...
votes in favor of Unionist delegates to the state's "sovereign" convention. Quitman, repudiated by this vote, quit the race.\footnote{15}

Although Davis had no desire to be Governor, he resigned his seat in the Senate to accept the nomination, forsaken by Quitman, as his duty to the party. In his canvass of the state, Davis campaigned against the Compromise, though it was now clear through the convention vote that Mississippians approved of the settlement. Davis lost to Foote by 999 votes, and retired to Brierfield.\footnote{16}

On 10 November, 1851, "ninety-three delegates from fifty-six counties convened in Jackson to adopt resolutions, which reflected this dominant Unionist sentiment. The delegates resolved: "That, in the opinion of this Convention, the people of Mississippi, in a spirit of conciliation and compromise, have maturely considered the action of Congress ... and whilst they do not entirely approve, will abide by it as a permanent adjustment of this sectional controversy, so long as the same in all it features shall be faithfully adhered to and enforced."\footnote{17}

The resistance movement by November, 1851, had collapsed. Georgia and Alabama's acceptance of the Compromise left only South Carolina as a potential and insufficient ally. In addition, the general prosperity of the nation and a widespread belief concerning the finality of the sectional controversy offered Mississippians hope for the future.\footnote{18} Yet, the crisis established a
precedence for mobilization; numerous communities had called meetings to discuss the issues; citizens had formed chapters of the Southern Rights Association; leaders of the movement had organized a state committee to orchestrate efforts against perceived encroachments on states' rights. Clearly, Mississippians had responded to the crisis of 1850 with resolve. 19

In the Fall of 1852, Davis again participated in a Democratic canvass of the state; the two national parties had reemerged within Mississippi. He spoke in behalf of Franklin Pierce, the party's presidential nominee, and advocated a strict construction of the Constitution, states' rights, free trade, and a transcontinental railroad. In appreciation for his efforts, the new President asked Davis to join his cabinet. With great reluctance, Davis accepted the invitation, and became Secretary of War.

During the next four years, Davis was an active member of the administration, within his own department and within the entire executive branch. As Secretary of War, he undertook a variety of labors: to increase soldiers' pay, to expand the size of the military, to improve the medical corps, to implement new tactics, and to introduce new weapons. 20 As an adviser to Pierce, Davis consulted with the President on foreign policy, as well. He was primarily responsible for the appointment of Pierre Soule, an ardent expansionist, as Minister to Spain, and
of John Y. Mason, a staunch defender of the peculiar institution, as Minister to France. These two American diplomats, with James Buchanan, Minister to England, met in Ostend, Belgium to consider the implementation of administration plans to annex Cuba to the United States. The Ostend Manifesto, a diplomatic blunder, which resulted, demanded Cuba from Spain in return for 120 million dollars; otherwise, the United States was to seize the island. The public reaction to the manifesto was a shock for Davis, who had sought to add more slave territory to the United States, and for Pierce, whom the abolitionists now labelled as a tool of the South.21

On Sunday, 22 January, 1854, Stephen A. Douglas and a group of Southern members of Congress met with Davis to request by means of his influence a meeting with Pierce, who traditionally refused to discuss governmental and political business on the Christian Sabbath. They sought to gain the approval of the chief executive and the titular head of the Democratic party for legislation to organize the Kansas and Nebraska Territories and to repeal the restrictions on slavery in that area, imposed by the Missouri Compromise. Davis favored such a proposal to facilitate migration without regard to sectional interests, and consequently, approached the President on the matter. Although he preferred a Supreme Court decision to specific legislation, the President agreed to the repeal. Indeed, Clement Eaton in Jefferson Davis
asserted that the Secretary of War secured Pierce's approval even before the President met with Douglas and the Southerners.

Undoubtedly, no one involved in the formulation of this measure foresaw the consequences of the Kansas-Nebraska Act: the destruction of the Whig party, the formation of the Republican party, and the civil war in Kansas. Moreover, the Kansas-Nebraska Act reintroduced the question, which Davis had addressed during the Compromise of 1850, as previously noted, and which finally split the Democracy in the campaign of 1860: Douglas and most Northern Democrats argued that the citizens of a territory were able to determine the legal status of slavery, prior to statehood, while Davis and most Southern Democrats argued that the residents of a territory were unable to determine the legal status of slavery, until statehood. Essentially, Douglas permitted expressions of sovereign will within a territorial possession; Davis restricted expressions of sovereign will to the several states.

The Mississippi legislature returned Davis to his former seat in the United States Senate, this term to begin on the expiration of the Pierce Administration in March, 1857. In Congress, Davis became the chief spokesman of Southern interests, especially on the slavery issue: "Though the defense of African slavery (thus it is commonly called) is left to the South, the North are jointly benefited by it. Deduct from their trade and manufactures all which is dependent upon the products of slave labor, their
Prosperity would fade, and poverty would come upon them 'as one that travaileth.'24

During the debate over the admission of Kansas under the Lecompton Constitution, which permitted slavery, Davis strongly supported the proposal as an administrative measure while he denounced the efforts of various emigration societies within the North, which had promoted the settlement of the Territory, exclusively, by citizens from the free states. He remarked: "Had you made no political war upon us, had you observed the principles of our Confederacy as States, that the people of each State were to take care of their domestic affairs, or, in the language of the Kansas bill, to be left perfectly free to form and regulate their institutions in their own way, then, I say, within the limits of each State the population there would have gone on to attend to their own affairs, and have had little regard to whether this species of property or any other was held in any other portion of the Union. You have made it a political war. We are on the defensive. How far are you to push us?"25 Finally, the Congress demanded another vote by the residents of Kansas on the Lecompton Constitution; residents of the Territory rejected the instrument, decisively.

In the summer of 1858, Davis toured New England to recover from a serious ailment. Throughout the region, crowds warmly received the Mississippi Senator, and Davis certainly replied,
in kind. He made an obvious effort to seek common ground with Northeastern Democrats, even to the point of an extraordinary statement: "If the inhabitants of any territory should refuse to enact such laws and police regulations as would give security to their property or to his, it would be rendered more or less valueless, in proportion to the difficulty of holding it without such protection. In the case of property in the labor of man, or what is usually called slave property, the insecurity would be so great that the owner could not ordinarily retain it. Therefore, though the right would remain, the remedy being withheld, it would follow that the owner would be practically debarred by the circumstances of the case, from taking slave property into a territory where the sense of the inhabitants was opposed to its introduction."26 In short, Davis, the champion of Southern interests, acknowledged, in part, the validity of the Freeport Doctrine, which permitted through local non-action what the Supreme Court had denied to the national legislature and what Davis, himself, had denied to the territorial legislatures: the ability to restrict slave property in the Territories.27 Not surprisingly, most Southerners, especially Southern Nationalists, like Rhett, objected to these remarks.

Typical of his nature, Davis went on the defensive, when he encountered this criticism; as he had sought conciliation in the North, so he pursued the opposite course in Mississippi. In
November, 1858, Davis encouraged the state legislature to establish an armory for the manufacture and for the repair of weapons, to expand the network of railroads, and to improve the levee system; he concluded: "[T] will give to our conduct the character of earnestness of which mere paper declarations have somewhat deprived us . . . ."28 In the Summer of 1859, he boldly pronounced that the fate of the Union was in the hands of the electorate; to Davis, the inauguration of a Republican president, in 1861, was an intolerable possibility: "To you would be presented the question, will you allow the constitutional Union to be changed into the despotism of a majority, will you become the subjects of a hostile Government, or will you, outside of the Union, assert the equality, the liberty and sovereignty to which you were born? For myself, I say, . . . let the Union be dissolved."29

Davis successfully reestablished his position as the chief spokesman for the South when he introduced into the Senate his "Resolutions on the Relations of the States." These "Davis Resolutions" refuted that part of the Freeport Doctrine with which he disagreed. In short, Davis argued that neither the Congress nor the territorial legislatures possessed the authority to restrict, directly or indirectly, the property rights of slaveholders. Moreover, he demanded congressional enforcement of property rights in the event of a judicial or executive initiative to deny such rights.30
Many Republicans and Democrats objected to the Resolutions; the former claimed that Davis sought to impose a federal slave code on the Territories, while several Democrats, including some Southerners, criticized the measures as an attempt to disrupt the party and to prevent the nomination of Stephen A. Douglas, who had originally expounded the Freeport Doctrine. In fact, Davis did hope to thwart Douglas' nomination, but he did not favor any split within the Democratic party. 31

Indeed, Davis sent Congressman L. Q. C. Lamar to the Democratic National Convention at Charleston as his personal envoy in an attempt to dissuade any delegations from a walkout. Davis personally favored the nomination of a presidential candidate, who was acceptable to Northerners and to Southerners, without a party platform to divide the convention. Despite these efforts, several Southern delegations did walkout when the convention failed to adopt the Alabama Platform, an article which closely resembled the Davis Resolutions. Importantly, some historians have blamed Davis for the disruption of the party largely because of this parallel. Yet, even with the adoption of an objectionable platform, Davis continued to counsel moderation; he urged the return of Southern delegations to the convention in an effort to block the nomination of Douglas. 32 Clearly, Davis sought to oppose Douglas, not to destroy the party, and the ascription of the walkout to the Davis Resolutions, asserted by Clement Eaton,
ignored the formulation of the Alabama Platform, which preceded it. 33

After the second walkout, which occurred in Baltimore, the Democrats selected two presidential nominees; Stephen A. Douglas, the choice predominantly of Northern Democrats, and John C. Breckinridge, the choice predominantly of Southern Democrats. In addition, Northern conservatives and Southern opposition leaders had nominated John Bell on a Constitutional Union ticket. Davis, alarmed at the prospect of a Republican victory, sought to unify these three campaigns into a single effort. Both Breckinridge and Bell agreed to withdraw in favor of a compromise candidate with the provision that Douglas also quit the race. Yet, he refused; Douglas believed that his supporters were unwilling to back any other candidate, besides, perhaps, Lincoln. Thereafter, Davis returned to Mississippi. During the canvass, which followed, he was the only prominent member of the Breckinridge campaign within the state, who did not advocate secession when Lincoln became the certain winner. 34 Indeed, Breckinridge defeated Bell and Douglas in Mississippi with 40,797 votes (59.0%), 25,240 votes (36.2%), and 3,283 votes (4.8%), respectively; Lincoln won the presidency. 35

After the election, Davis continued to pursue a moderate course. On 10 November, 1860, he expressed in a letter to Robert Barnwell Rhett, Jr. no personal inclination toward
secession, a marked contrast to his position in 1859. On 22 November, 1860, Davis urged the Governor, J. J. Pettus, to forego a call for immediate secession in his address to a special session of the state legislature. Finally, he advised President Buchanan, who had sought his counsel, to resist appeals for the reinforcement of military installations in the South, and thereby, to prevent the outbreak of armed conflict. In short, Davis was working to prevent disunion; indeed, he believed that the consequence of secession was civil war. 36

Although events in Mississippi and in the nation's capital led Davis to acknowledge by mid-December the inevitability of secession, he remained an advocate of conciliation and of compromise. As a member of the Senate Committee of Thirteen, called to consider a solution to the crisis, Davis supported the Crittenden Compromise, which extended the Missouri Compromise line through the Territories, again. Nevertheless, he formally cast his vote against the measure when it failed to receive the support of the Republicans on the panel. Also, within the committee, Davis suggested the adoption of a congressional resolution to recognize, officially, slaves, as property, in an attempt to settle, permanently, their legal status within the United States. This proposal failed, too. 37

When the Committee of Thirteen was unable to agree on a compromise, Davis came to favor secession. Thereafter, he took a
leading role in the movement within the Congress; a conference of
senators from the Deep South appointed Davis to a committee of
three, whose purpose was to promote disunion and to organize a
Southern confederacy. In addition to these duties, Davis pur-
chased rifles for the State of Mississippi on the orders of
Governor Pettus.  

In Mississippi, the reaction against the election of Lincoln
had been immediate and widespread. On 26 November, 1860, the
state legislature convened to call for a convention in response
to the secession crisis. In the election of delegates to the
convention, advocates of immediate secession and of cooperation
with other Southern states easily defeated the Unionists, who had
neither an effective organization nor broad public support. Most
Unionist sentiment remained within Northern Mississippi, an area
of heavy slave population density.

On 7 January, 1861, one hundred delegates met in Jackson for
the Sovereign Convention of the State of Mississippi; they
reflected wealth (average value of real property $38,139.76;
average value of personal property $50,801.66), a personal inter-
est in the peculiar institution (eighty-five members or eighty-
five percent), and an agricultural (forty-two members or forty-
two percent) or professional (thirty-nine members or thirty-nine
percent) orientation. In all, Mississippians had elected sixty-
nine: sixty-nine Signists, nine Cooperationists, and twenty-one
On 9 January, the Committee of Fifteen, appointed to author the official instrument of disunion, reported to the convention an Ordinance of Secession, which the body then adopted in secret session. The State of Mississippi had dissolved its relationship with the United States of America.

Davis awaited official notification from the convention before he withdrew from the Congress. Previously, he had urged his colleagues from the Deep South to remain in the Senate until Lincoln assumed office; this offered the South an opportunity to thwart within the Congress any measures against their secession movement, and provided a means to protest, dramatically, the inauguration of the new President. When other Southern senators resigned, however, Davis dropped the proposal.

On 21 January, 1861, Davis retired from the Congress. In his final remarks before the Senate, Davis expressed, once again, his concern for the rights of the South: "[w]e but tread in the path of our fathers when we proclaim our independence, and take the hazard. This is done not in hostility to others, nor to injure any section of the country, nor even for our pecuniary benefit; but from the high and solemn motive of defending and protecting the rights we inherited, and which it is our sacred duty to transmit unshorn to our children."

In the secession crisis, Mississippi took a more immediate
and determined stand than Davis against the election of Lincoln. The response of Mississippians to the crisis of 1850 had provided a preview to their activities in 1860-1861; yet, unlike 1850, there existed no broad Unionist sentiment as public opinion had shifted decidedly in favor of independence. Undoubtedly, the territorial controversy through the mid and late 1850s had accentuated the state's predisposition, demonstrated in 1850, to resist.

Throughout his political career, the territorial issue obsessed Davis; in short, the recognition of slave property rights in the Territories symbolized the equal status of the South in the Union. To Davis, the efforts of the free-soil interests to exclude the peculiar institution were an assault on the constitutional rights of Mississippi, which held the Territories in joint trust with the other states.

In response, Davis identified himself with the Southern ultras. He rejected the Compromise of 1850 as an infringement on Southern rights. In 1854, he joined in support of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which offered the potential for another slave state. In 1858, he favored the adoption of the Lecompton Constitution, which made Kansas a slave state, though evidence existed to indicate that a majority of Kansans rejected the document. Finally, he warned Mississippians, in 1858-1859, that the election of a Republican president was justification for disunion.

Yet, Davis, when confronted with the real possibility of a
secession movement, moderated his extreme position. Although he continued to demand the recognition of Southern rights, through the Davis Resolutions, he worked to achieve party unity and sectional harmony during the campaign of 1860 and during its immediate aftermath. At the Charleston convention, he had sought to avoid the walkout, which led to the split in the party. After the Democrats had divided, Davis attempted to reunite the Douglas and Breckinridge factions and to halt the candidacy of John Bell. During the canvass in Mississippi, he refrained from any display of sentiment, which threatened disunion with the election of Lincoln. Finally, Davis counselled Governor Fettus and President Buchanan to pursue a moderate course in response to the secession crisis. Indeed, even when Davis had believed that disunion was inevitable, he worked for the passage of a compromise through the Committee of Thirteen. Only after these several efforts at conciliation, did Davis finally adopt secession as a solution to the sectional controversy.

Thereafter, he moved, determinedly, to dissolve the Union. Davis' membership on the committee of three, his efforts to procure rifles for Mississippi, and his plan to impeach a congressional response to secession demonstrated his full conversion to the movement.

In retrospect, Davis wrote of the secession crisis: "That signs of coming danger so visible, evidences of hostility so
UNMISTAKABLE, DISREGARD OF CONSTITUTIONAL OBLIGATIONS SO WANTON, TAUNTS AND JEERS SO BITTER AND INSULTING SHOULD SERVE TO INCREASE EXCITEMENT IN THE SOUTH WAS A CONSEQUENCE FLOWING AS MUCH FROM REASON AND PATRIOTISM AS FROM SENTIMENT. HE MUST HAVE BEEN IGNORANT OF HUMAN NATURE WHO DID NOT EXPECT SUCH A TREE TO BEAR FRUITS OF DISCORD AND DIVISION."
IV

JOHN BELL

Essentially, John Bell was an opportunistic politician. He entered Congress as a Jacksonian Democrat and departed from Congress as a Whig. As Secretary of War, he served as a Whig and then as a Democratic president. He identified himself, alternately, with the Whig, American, and Opposition movements during his Senate tenure. Finally, he was the standard-bearer of a political party, founded on the Constitution and on the Union; yet, he later joined the Southern secession movement. In each instance Bell sacrificed his political virtue to ambition.

John Bell was born on 18 February, 1796, in rural Davidson County, near Nashville, Tennessee. He was one of nine children born to Samuel and Margaret Edmiston Bell. Unlike many other men, who became the statesmen of the ante-bellum South, John Bell had neither a prominent ancestry nor family wealth; indeed, Bell's father was a blacksmith and small farmer.

After several years as a laborer in the family business, Bell enrolled in Cumberland College at the age of fourteen. Upon graduation, he acquired 120 acres, located near his boyhood home, from his father. Concurrent with his activities as a farmer, Bell began to read law. In October, 1816, the bar accepted Bell, who entered a law firm in Franklin, Tennessee.

On 4 July, 1817, Bell delivered the Independence Day oration
at a local celebration. The success of the address gained for
Bell a seat in the state senate. After an undistinguished term
in the legislature, he returned to his law practice.\(^2\)

In December, 1818, Bell married Sally Dickinson, an heiress
to thousands of acres in Tennessee and in Mississippi. From
Franklin, the couple moved to Murfreesboro, the new state capital,
in 1820. Shortly thereafter, they settled, permanently, in
Nashville.\(^3\)

In 1826, Bell reemerged in politics to run for a seat in Con-
gress. His opponent, Felix Grundy, was a former congressman and
notable jurist; more importantly, he was a personal friend of
Andrew Jackson, an idol to Tennesseans. To curry favor with
Jackson, and hence, with the voters, Bell proposed a constitu-
tional amendment to limit the term of a president and to end the
participation of the House of Representatives in the presidential
selection process with the lack of a majority in the electoral
college. Obviously, Bell was attempting to appeal to the strong
emotional reaction, which followed the triumph of the "unholy"
Adams-Clay alliance over Jackson in 1824. In addition, Bell also
favored internal improvements, a revenue tariff, and an end to the
"spoils" system. Although Jackson endorsed Grundy, Bell easily
won the seat in Congress.\(^4\)

In the national legislature, Bell pursued a moderate, politi-
cally expedient, course. He opposed efforts to reinvestigate
General Jackson's order to execute six Tennessee militiamen in the War of 1812, as well as efforts to investigate the Adams Administration for extravagance with the public treasury. In addition, he now opposed internal improvements, having assumed the position of General Jackson, who denied as a violation of the Constitution the appropriation of federal money for intrastate improvements; and he denounced the Tariff of 1828, though he did not ascribe to it the political or economic importance which motivated the reaction in South Carolina.  

When Jackson defeated Adams for the White House, Bell continued to seek the favor of "Old Hickory." As an advocate of a revenue tariff, he attacked the Tariff of 1832: "I assert that the effect of this system, even in the States most benefited by it, is to degrade and depress the mass of the people, which must always consist of laborers and operative mechanics. I reaffirm that its inevitable tendency is to depress the present poor below the condition to which, from the advantage of soil, climate, and a government free in form, they might aspire. By this system the poor are made poorer and the rich richer." Nevertheless, he voted for the Tariff of 1832 as an administration measure, despite the defections of forty-one fellow Democrats, who had shared his views.

Bell also opposed Jackson's "Force Bill" within the House Judiciary Committee, where he served as chairman. Yet, Bell
refused to submit a minority report, or otherwise, to oppose, publicly, the President on the issue. Indeed, Bell demanded a House vote on the measure to assure its success even after the compromise tariff had passed and over the strong objections of fellow Southerners who wished to spare South Carolina from further humiliation. Clearly, on both the tariff issue and the "Force Bill," Bell was unwilling to cross the popular Jackson, who controlled Tennessee politics during this period, despite his personal objections to the two measures. This tendency to place his personal advancement before his convictions was especially apparent in the Bank controversy. 7

In 1832, Bell was in debt to the Second Bank of the United States for fifty-three thousand dollars; Bell's brother and business partner, James, a member of the board of directors for the Nashville branch, was also deeply in debt to the institution. Consequently, the question of a new charter for the bank presented Bell with a dilemma: to follow Jackson and face financial dissolution or to join Nicholas Biddle, president of the bank, and seek the financial rewards, which were available to the friends of the institution. Throughout the period of 1832-1833, Bell refused, or more likely, was unable to decide his position. Finally, political considerations made the decision for him. 8

To replace Andrew Stevenson, who had resigned as Speaker of the House, Bell opposed James K. Polk, also a strong administration
man, and Richard H. Wilde, the choice of the Nullifiers. Through several ballots, Bell received the support of Whigs and of anti-administration Democrats, who favored a recharter. Finally, the Nullifiers, who feared collusion between Polk and Van Buren, Jackson’s heir apparent, joined to elect Bell as Speaker. In short, Bell was elected by his political opponents: the Whigs, anti-administration Democrats, and the Nullifiers. President Jackson condemned Bell as a traitor to the Democratic party. Joseph Howard Parks, a biographer of Bell, has suggested that President Jackson was correct; Bell was not an unwitting tool of the opposition.

Indeed, Bell immediately moved to consolidate his position as Speaker after the election. Alienated from the Jackson-Van Buren-Polk Democratic faction, Bell endorsed the recharter of the bank; this action confirmed to the President and to administration Democrats that Bell had traded his influence on the bank issue for the speakership, while it reassured supporters within the House of his good will.

To consolidate his position within Tennessee, Bell engineered a political masterstroke. After eight years with a man in the presidency, Tennesseans enjoyed their special patronage status as well as their state pride; therefore, Bell proposed that a Tennessean was to remain in the presidency. With other state political leaders, he encouraged the candidacy of Senator Hugh
Lawson White to oppose Van Buren. Obviously, Bell was now a leader of the anti-administration elements within the nation, but with the local popularity of White, he masked his disaffection within Tennessee. Indeed, the Bell-White alliance completely controlled Tennessee politics in 1836, with the Jackson-Van Buren-Polk faction defeated in their former stronghold. 12

Though Bell had won control of Tennessee politics, he soon lost his more valuable possession; in 1837, the House of Representatives, now under the strict control of administration Democrats, elected Polk to the Speakership. Two years later, Bell attempted to wrest the post from Polk, but he failed; Bell was never to regain his most prized political possession.

Meanwhile, Bell's first wife had died. Always ready to advance his own cause, he married a wealthy widow, Mrs. Jane Erwin Yeatman, whose assets totalled five hundred thousand dollars. This fortuitous marriage provided Bell with the economic resources to pay his debts, which were considerable, and to invest in various business ventures. 13

By 1840, John Bell had ceased to be an anti-administration Democrat; he was now an avowed Whig. Bell campaigned throughout Tennessee to elect William Henry Harrison, the party's nominee, and simultaneously, to defeat an old rival, President Martin Van Buren. With the Whig victory, Daniel Webster, a friend of Bell, secured for the Tennessean the post of Secretary of War.
After the death of Harrison, Bell remained in the cabinet of President Tyler. Yet, he resigned when Tyler, a "states' rights Democrat, turned Whig," vetoed prominent Whig legislation. In fact, it was more the influence of Henry Clay, the author of the legislation and the new leader of the party, who offered the hope of a position within a future Whig administration, than a desire to protest the actions of Tyler, which forced Bell to quit the government. This was another example of his ambition. 14

Bell returned to Nashville for his political retirement. In the next six years, he devoted himself to his law practice and to the management of his wife's iron and coal interests. In 1844, he campaigned within Tennessee for Clay, now the Whig presidential nominee. During the canvass, Bell advocated a protective tariff, internal improvements, another national bank, and the rejection of Texas' bid for annexation. Clearly, as Bell had previously linked his fortunes to Andrew Jackson, so Bell now tied his fortunes to Henry Clay. Yet, unlike other former Democrats, who had joined the Whig party, Bell's motive was his own political advancement. In the election, James Polk, Bell's old nemesis, defeated Clay and any hopes, which Bell may have entertained, of an immediate return to Washington. 15

In 1847, Bell again determined to reenter politics. He returned to the state legislature, where, due to the local interests of his colleagues, who were unable to reach a decision, he emerged
as a compromise candidate for a seat in the United States Senate. 16

Bell reentered Congress as the sectional controversy over
the Mexican War and over the expansion of slavery into the Territories began to assume an ominous tone. He was a strong critic
of the war effort, though the conflict was popular within Tennessee.
Moreover, he believed that any Mexican cession of land was to be a
curse for the domestic tranquility of the United States; Bell
told the Senate: "My advice is, stop the war! Flee the country
as you would a city doomed to destruction by fire from heaven!" 17

With the election of the last Whig president, Zachary Taylor,
Bell became a strong advocate of administration policy within the
Senate; this was of special importance during the crisis of 1850.
President Taylor, who wished to avoid a protracted national debate
on slavery in the ceded Territories, proposed the immediate ad-
mission to the Union of two new states, California and New Mexico;
the residents of the states, after their admission, were to deter-
mine the legal status of slavery within their respective boundaries.
In response, Henry Clay offered his alternative to settle all
instances of controversy on the slavery issue, including the
return of fugitive slaves, the slave trade in the District of
Columbia, and the land dispute between Texas and New Mexico.

Although Bell endorsed Taylor's proposals, he wished to offer
a compromise. Like Clay, Bell suggested the admission of California
as a free state; like Taylor, he suggested the admission of a second state, which was likely to opt for slavery, and thereby, was to continue the balance between slave and free states within the United States Senate. Bell, however, proposed that this new state be formed from a part of Texas; in this manner, he hoped to allay the concerns of free-soilers, who had objected to the formation of a slave state within the Mexican cession. This compromise effort failed to gain widespread support. 18

With the death of Taylor, the impetus behind his plan vanished. Bell moved to support Clay's proposals with the exception of the restriction on the slave trade within the District of Columbia. Unlike many other Southerners, Bell admitted the constitutional right of Congress to restrict, even to abolish, slavery in the Territories and in the District of Columbia, but he opposed such actions as an attack on property. Moreover, as a large slaveholder himself, Bell vigorously defended the role of slavery in American society and in world civilization. He stated: "[S]lavery, in every form in which it has existed from the primitive period of organized society—from its earliest and patriarchal form to this time, in every quarter of the globe—and all its results, even the magnificent results of African slavery in the United States, are declared to be against the law of nature. Though contributing in a hundred various forms and modes, through a period of thousands of years, to the amelioration of the condition of mankind generally;
Though sometimes abused and perverted, as all human institutions, even those of religion, are, still contributing to advance the cause of civilization; though, if you please, having its origin in individual cupidity, still mysteriously working out a general good; yet slavery, and all its beneficent results, is pronounced to be against the will of God, by those who claim a superior illumination upon the subject." 19

Within Tennessee, Democrats supported the Compromise of 1850 as a temporary solution to the sectional controversy, as they continued to seek Southern cooperation at the Nashville Convention. Tennessee Whigs strongly endorsed the measures as a permanent settlement, and on such a platform, they won the governorship and control of the state legislature in 1851. Yet, nationally, the Whigs were dividing with the formation of a Free-Soil faction in the North. 20

The Whig party in Tennessee began to disintegrate the next year. General Winfield Scott, the Whig presidential nominee in 1852, refused to endorse the Compromise, which had become the bulwark of the Tennessee party organization. Bell had supported President Fillmore for the nomination, and with great reluctance, switched to Scott. The Whigs managed to carry the state for their party, but Scott's candidacy had robbed them of a consensus on the issues. As a result, the Democrats regained the governorship and control of the state senate in 1853.
Bell once stated that "the repeal of the Missouri Compromise was the most unfortunate measure ever sanctioned by Congress." On 3 March, 1854, Bell attacked the proposed Kansas-Nebraska Act in a Senate speech; he argued the area was too sparsely populated to require a territorial government; any organization of Kansas-Nebraska was a violation of existing Indian treaties; the explicit repeal of the Missouri Compromise was an unnecessary agitation to Northern opinion; and slavery was unsuitable to the area. In addition, Bell specifically denounced the doctrine of "popular sovereignty," which was, to him, an open invitation for continuous warfare over the political composition of a territorial legislature. He voted against the measure.

Many Whigs, who had forsaken their party over the sectional controversy, joined the American, or Know-Nothing, party. This new movement, the political arm of the "Supreme Order of the Star-Spangled Banner," was a secret, nativist, protestant, political party, which achieved meteoric success throughout the nation in the mid-1850s. The ever astute Bell, having recognized the death of the Whig party, moved to identify with the Know-Nothings. Although he personally opposed its bigotry, and consequently, never officially joined the party, Bell endorsed the movement as the foundation for a future conservative party to replace the Whig organization; in 1856, he supported former President Fillmore, the American party nominee, for the presidency.
The sectional controversy erupted once again over the admission of Kansas under the Lecompton Constitution. Bell opposed the Lecompton Constitution as unrepresentative of the will of Kansans, especially in view of the questionable procedure which surrounded the formulation and adoption of the measure within the Territory. In addition, he opposed a compromise version of the legislation, the English bill, as it, too, failed to address what Bell perceived to be the fundamental flaw of the proposed state constitution: its lack of support within Kansas. This controversy within and about Kansas confirmed to Bell the validity of his earlier objections to "popular sovereignty;" he stated: "On the question whether Kansas shall be a free or a slave State, as a representative of southern interests, my preference, of course, is for a slave State. But, sir, if in a fair competition it must be so, let it be a free State; let it be retroceded to the Indians, the aboriginal occupants of the soil; let it become another Dead Sea, rather than continue the pestilent source of mortal disease to our system." Indeed, Kansans did defeat the Lecompton Constitution in a subsequent ratification vote.

With the dissolution of the Whig party and with the failure of the American party, Bell and other displaced Southerners, who refused to join the Democracy, formed "opposition" parties within their respective states. In January, 1859, opposition leaders in the Tennessee legislature met in a caucus to discuss the formation
OF A NEW, CONSERVATIVE POLITICAL PARTY TO OPPOSE THE REPUBLICANS IN THE NORTH, AND THE DEMOCRATS, NATIONALLY. IN ADDITION, THE CAUCUS PROPOSED BELL AS THEIR PRESIDENTIAL NOMINEE. 25

IN A SEPARATE EFFORT, SENATOR JOHN J. CRITTENDEN CONVENED A MEETING IN WASHINGTON OF SOUTHERN OPPOSITION LEADERS AND OF NOTABLE CONSERVATIVES IN CONGRESS; THE KENTUCKIAN PLEADED FOR A NEW NATIONAL PARTY OF WHIGS, KNOW-NOTHINGS, AND SYMPATHETIC DEMOCRATS, WHO FAVORED A SIMPLE PLATFORM OF SUPPORT FOR THE CONSTITUTION AND FOR THE UNION. ON 23 DECEMBER, 1859, REPRESENTATIVES OF THE WHIG AND KNOW-NOTHING PARTIES MET TO ISSUE A CALL FOR A CONVENTION OF THE NEW NATIONAL UNION PARTY, WHICH SUBSEQUENTLY BECAME THE CONSTITUTIONAL UNION PARTY. IN FEBRUARY, 1860, CRITTENDEN AND TWENTY-NINE OTHER CONSERVATIVE LEADERS MET TO ANNOUNCE, PUBLICLY, THE POLITICAL PRINCIPLES OF THEIR PARTY: TO REMOVE THE SLAVERY ISSUE FROM PARTY POLITICS, TO ENFORCE THE CONSTITUTION, TO UPHOLD THE UNION, AND TO RESPECT STATES' RIGHTS. OBVIOUSLY, THE PARTY LEADERS HAD ATTEMPTED TO ESTABLISH A BROAD POLITICAL BASE, ON WHICH NEARLY ALL AMERICANS WERE IN AGREEMENT. 26

MEANWHILE, BELL HAD LOST HIS SEAT IN THE UNITED STATES SENATE. WITH THE WHIG PARTY IN DISARRAY, THE DEMOCRATS HAD CAPTURED CONTROL OF THE TENNESSEE LEGISLATURE, AND CONSEQUENTLY, ELECTED A MEMBER OF THEIR OWN PARTY TO REPLACE BELL AT THE EXPIRATION OF HIS TERM IN MARCH, 1859. AS A RESULT OF HIS FORCED RETIREMENT AND OF HIS EVER PRESENT AMBITION, BELL WAS EAGER TO RECEIVE THE CONSTITUTIONAL
Union party's presidential nomination. Moreover, when Crittenden withdrew himself from consideration, Bell emerged as the front-runner for the nomination.

Delegates from twenty-four states convened in Baltimore on 9 May, 1860, for the national convention. The Constitutional Unionists nominated Bell for the Presidency and Edward Everett for the Vice-Presidency, and adopted a platform, which stated: "It is both the part of patriotism and of duty to recognize no political principle other than the Constitution of the Country, the Union of the States, and the Enforcement of the Law, and that, as representatives of the Constitutional Union men of the country, in National Convention assembled, we hereby pledge ourselves to maintain, protect, and defend, separately and unitedly, these great principles of public liberty and national safety, against all enemies, at home and abroad. . . ." 27

The convention had chosen Bell, primarily, to establish a national appeal. For Northerners, there was the candidate's congressional record, which included opposition to the Kansas-Nebraska Act and to the Lecompton constitution. For Southerners, there was Bell's own status as a slaveholder and as a fellow Southerner. Nevertheless, few delegates in Baltimore expected Bell to win the presidency, unless the election was thrown into the House of Representatives. 28

While Bell remained quietly at home, the Constitutional
Union party continued to focus on their nominee as the only "national" candidate; they hoped to establish for Bell a moderate image, between Breckinridge, whom they labelled as a secessionist, and Douglas, whom they portrayed as completely unreliable, and to become, thereby, the chief rival to Lincoln. Yet, Bell hoped to join his Democratic opponents in a fusion ticket throughout the North, and consequently, to combine their strength within the electoral college. Bell believed that he was to carry a near solid South, and with a proportional electoral vote in a few Northern states, that he was to win the election. 29

In the election of 1860, Bell received 588,879 popular votes and 39 electoral votes; he won a plurality in Virginia, Kentucky, and Tennessee. Bell ran a respectable second throughout the South, but a poor third and fourth in the free states. Within Tennessee, Bell defeated Breckinridge in traditionally Democratic East Tennessee and in traditionally Whig West Tennessee; yet, Breckinridge carried Bell's native Middle Tennessee. A breakdown of the vote within the state revealed Bell's victory over Breckinridge and Douglas with 69,274 votes (47.7%), 64,709 (44.5%), and 11,350 votes (7.8%), respectively. 30

Unlike the slave states of the Deep South, Tennessee was not initially disposed to resist the election of a Republican president. This was the result of several factors: a relatively small slave population, a mix of Northern and Southern ancestry, and a
strong two party system within the state. In addition, party leaders encouraged allegiance to the Union; indeed, Bell publicly announced his support for the new president as well as his opposition to secession, which he denounced as an assumed, not constitutional, right of the states. Bell also sought to dissipate the fear among Southerners of a Republican president; he declared that Southern interests were not endangered by a Republican administration, which failed to control the Congress and the Supreme Court. Nevertheless, many Tennesseans urged the Governor, Isham G. Harris, to call the legislature for a formal response to the question of Southern cooperation. On 7 December, 1860, Harris, who sympathized with the South, ordered the legislature to convene in a special session.

On 7 January, 1861, the legislature met. The one hundred members of the body reflected moderate wealth (average worth of real property, $12,065.28; average worth of personal property, $13,585.39), an economic interest in slavery (sixty-six members or 66.0%), and a widespread orientation toward agriculture (forty-two members or 42.0%) and toward the professions (thirty-four members or 34.0%). The legislature passed several resolutions, calling for the maintenance of peace, expressing its regrets about the current sectional crisis, and warning the federal government to resist efforts of coercion. More importantly, the legislature called for a vote by the citizens of Tennessee.
To consider the convocation of a state convention.

In the subsequent campaign, secessionists stressed the social, economic, and political relationships, which existed between Tennessee and the South; they emphasized the potential for abolition under a Republican administration, especially to poor whites, who feared a loss in their economic and social status with a large freedmen population. Alternately, Unionists, including Bell, urged adherence to the Constitution and to the Union; they maintained that Southern interests were safe within the United States under the Lincoln Administration. On 9 February, 1861, Tennesseans voted against a convention, with 57,798 ballots in favor of the measure and 69,675 ballots against the measure. Generally, the Bell voter of 1860 opposed the convention, while the Breckinridge voter of 1860 supported the convention as a means to achieve secession.

Although the mood within Tennessee was relatively calm after this vote, Bell and other Unionists believed that Tennessee's position within the Union was tenuous, at best; they continued to fear the consequences of any hostile action by the federal government against the South. As a result, Bell travelled to Washington, where he cautioned President Lincoln to avoid the use of force, or Tennessee was likely to join the secession movement. Indeed, with the bombardment of Fort Sumter and with Lincoln's call for troops, Tennessee, fearing a war against the South, moved toward
secession. The legislature immediately reconvened to organize an army, to appoint Governor Harris as the commander of state forces, to authorize the sale of war bonds, and to offer a Declaration of Independence for ratification. 37

Meanwhile, Unionist leaders, including Bell, met in Nashville to counsel moderation and neutrality. Here, Bell continued to assert that secession was unconstitutional. Five days later, on 23 April, he altered his position on disunion: Bell now urged Tennessee to join the Confederacy and to express the inherent "right" of men to overthrow an oppressive government. Joseph Howard Parks attributed this sudden change in attitude to two factors: Bell's indecisive and cautious temperament and his sudden realization concerning the inevitability of a conflict. Regardless of the motive, the former Constitutional Union candidate now linked his fortunes to the South. 38

Shortly thereafter, Tennessee entered "A Convention, Agreement, and Military League" with the Confederate States of America. To a majority within the state, who now supported resistance, the accomplishment of a military alliance with the Deep South, before an official separation from the United States, was acceptable; yet, to the remaining Unionists, especially in East Tennessee, where was not so important to the economy, the decision was unpopular. On 30 May, 1861, Unionist leaders in Tennessee, primarily East Tennessee, met in convention to denounce
the proposed Declaration of Independence and to resist, forcibly, if necessary, state secession. Clearly, Tennessee lacked the consensus, which characterized the secession movement in the Deep South. 39

On 8 June, 1861, Tennesseans cast 104,913 votes to 47,238 votes in favor of the proposed Declaration of Independence, which was tantamount to an ordinance of secession. Tennessee joined with the South, also. 40

Tennessee was typical of the states, Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Arkansas, which composed the second tier to secede from the Union. With Lincoln’s call for troops after Fort Sumter, these states, which had feared a war against the South with a Republican administration, joined the Deep South to protect their common institutions, namely slavery.

Specifically, Tennessee left the Union for three reasons: the persistent efforts of secessionists, the failure of peace between North and South, and the defection of the Whigs from the Union after Fort Sumter. 41 In addition, as noted above, Tennesseans identified their interests in slavery with the South. In the vote of June, 1861, East Tennesseans cast sixty-nine (69%) percent of their vote against the proposed Declaration of Independence; this region had a black to white ratio of 1:12. Middle Tennesseans cast twelve (12%) percent of their vote
against the proposed Declaration of Independence; this region had a black to white ratio of 1:3. West Tennesseans cast seventeen (17%) percent of their vote against the proposed Declaration of Independence; this region had a black to white ratio of 3:5. 42

John Bell experienced two, distinctly separate, political careers. Between 1827 and 1841, he moved from the populist, Jackson dominated, Democratic party to the nationalist, Clay dominated, Whig party. The major issues of the day concerned the abstract role of the federal government in economic development (e.g., internal improvements, the tariff, a national bank).

Between 1847 and 1861, Bell moved from this nationalist Whig party, and later, Constitutional Union party to the resistance movement within Tennessee. Now the major issues of the day concerned not the abstractions of a role, but the reality of power (e.g., congressional authority within the Territories). It was both a credit to his leadership, and more importantly, to his ability to sense the political attitudes of Tennesseans, that Bell reflected their sentiments in both transitions.

Yet, Bell was certainly an opportunistic politician. Jackson's influence on Tennessee politics made Bell a tool of "Old Hickory;" but, his election to the Speakership in the House of Representatives instantly converted him into an ally of the bank, and with time, into an advocate of a protective tariff,
and of internal improvements. Nevertheless, Kenneth McKellar, another biographer of Bell, stated: "At heart he was not a Whig, and never had been, and really never was one."43

During his Senate tenure, Bell continued to place ambition before personal convictions or his representation of Tennessee interests; essentially, Bell knew that because of his turn against Jackson, he was forever anathema to Tennessee Democrats, and therefore, was bound to uphold Whiggery. This explained, in part, his opposition to the Mexican War, the Kansas-Nebraska Act, and the Lecompton Constitution, positions which were contrary to majority opinion within Tennessee, but in agreement with those Whig leaders who were responsible for the election of a United States Senator within the state legislature. Moreover, in the secession crisis, where Joseph Howard Parks attributed Bell's conversion to resistance as the reaction of an indecisive and cautious man, who realized with time the inevitability of war, Bell seemingly awaited a demonstration of public reaction to Fort Sumter before his avowal of support for the South. Nevertheless, there were many individuals who opposed the Declaration of Independence, both before and after its ratification, and certainly this faction in opposition to resistance provided him with an effective base within the state to work against disunion, had he sustained his previous position to uphold the Constitution and the Union "against all enemies at home and abroad. . . ."44
Clearly, Bell was not an influential man during the secession crisis. After the dismal failure of the Constitutional Union party, he joined a majority of Tennesseans in opposition to secession. With the bombardment of Fort Sumter, and subsequently, with the call for troops within the Union, Bell first continued his support for the federal government before his rapid shift to an attitude of opposition when it became politically expedient. Certainly, in his service to the Union and to Tennessee, Bell was an ambitious man.
JOHN CABELL BRECKINRIDGE

John C. Breckinridge was the tragic figure of the secession crisis. Devoted to the Union, he served as Vice-President while the nation split. Dedicated to the Constitution, he served in the Congress while the government violated the civil liberties of its citizens. A decided advocate of state's rights, he broke with Kentucky when the state legislature voted to join the Union war effort against other states. In short, those political institutions, in which Breckinridge had placed faith, failed him.

John Cabell Breckinridge was born on 16 January, 1821, in Lexington, Kentucky. He was the only son of five children born to Joseph and Mary Smith Breckinridge. The child's forebears included John Witherspoon, a great-grandfather, who signed the Declaration of Independence, and John Breckinridge, a grandfather, who introduced the Kentucky Resolutions into the state legislature, and later, served as Thomas Jefferson's Attorney General.

Upon the death of his father, the family sent Breckinridge to live with his grandmother. At the age of ten, he began to attend the Kentucky Academy, a boarding school. Three years later, he enrolled in Danville Centre College. Graduated in 1838, with a Bachelor of Arts degree, Breckinridge moved to Princeton, New Jersey to pursue graduate studies at the then College of New Jersey. While in Princeton, he resided with an uncle, Robert
Breckinridge, who was a local pastor, and served as an agent for the American Colonization Society. After six months, Breckinridge returned to Lexington, a devout Christian and an emancipationist. Yet, he was also an advocate of states' rights; he believed that the power to emancipate resided only with the states and with the individual slaveholders. In Lexington, Breckinridge read law under the jurist and Whig politician, William Owsley. Desiring a more formal legal education, Breckinridge enrolled in Transylvania University; he received a Bachelor of Law degree in 1841.2

Unable to establish a successful practice, Breckinridge moved to Burlington, Iowa Territory. He believed that the West offered him and all Americans an opportunity to prosper. In Burlington, Breckinridge began to take an interest in politics, identifying with the Democratic party. After less than two years in the Iowa Territory, he returned to Kentucky to wed Mary Cyrene Burch. The couple settled in Lexington, where Breckinridge established another, more successful, law firm.3

In 1844, Breckinridge decided to forego, temporarily, the accumulation of wealth and to aid the Democratic party's presidential nominee. A "Polkat" with an influential name, Breckinridge campaigned for the ticket throughout Kentucky, advocating internal improvements, a revenue tariff, and territorial expansion. He did not offer, publicly, his views on slavery.4
Breckinridge returned to his law practice after the election until the outbreak of the Mexican War. Thereafter, William Owsley, now Governor of Kentucky, appointed him to serve with the Third Kentucky Volunteers, commissioned as a major. Breckinridge served in Mexico for approximately seven months, during the occupation of Mexico City. His most notable accomplishment in this period was membership in the Aztec Club.5

Due to his efforts on behalf of Lewis Cass, the Democratic presidential nominee in 1848, Breckinridge emerged as a recognized party leader within Kentucky. This led him toward a candidacy of his own. Using his family name, his military service record, and scattered Whig support, Breckinridge gained election to the Kentucky House of Representatives; he was the first Democrat that Fayette County sent to the state legislature.6 An account of his person and personality explained his appeal to the voters: "Breckinridge was . . . a big man physically. He stood six feet. His jet-black hair, large head, and long moustache gave him a commanding bearing, while his crisp, metallic voice marked him as one obviously born to lead. Wherever he went, his forceful, magnetic personality, dignified presence, and natural gift for oratory made him conspicuous."7

On 16 January, 1850, Breckinridge introduced several resolutions within the legislature in response to the political crisis concerning slavery. He proposed to instruct the state's

IN THESE RESOLUTIONS, BRECKINRIDGE DEFENDED THE PECULIAR INSTITUTION WITHIN THE BOUNDS OF THE SLAVE STATES, AS WELL AS WITHIN THE BOUNDS OF ALL LANDS, WHICH, HE BELIEVED, WERE AT THE DISPOSAL OF THE STATES, SLAVE AND FREE. MOREOVER, BRECKINRIDGE NOW PERSONALLY OPPOSED EFFORTS TO EMANCIPATE SLAVES BY STATE ABOLITION; HE FEARED THE ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL EFFECTS OF A LARGE FREEDOM POPULATION. Undoubtedly, the aftermath of the Mexican War, which brought the slavery issue to the forefront of American politics, forced this conversion regarding the desirability of emancipation on Breckinridge; indeed, he was now the owner of several slaves, himself.  

DUE TO FINANCIAL DIFFICULTIES, BRECKINRIDGE DID NOT SEEK REELECTION TO THE LEGISLATURE, THOUGH HE DID ACCEPT THE DEMOCRATIC NOMINATION FOR THE EIGHTH "ASHLAND" CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT OF
Kentucky, offered five months later. He defeated General Leslie Combs, the Whig candidate, by approximately eight hundred votes out of approximately eleven thousand votes cast, in a district with a large Whig majority. This victory testified not only to Breckinridge's abilities, both personal and political, but also to the decline of the Whigs, both statewide and nationally. 10

In Congress, Breckinridge immediately gained the favor and respect of his more senior colleagues with his studious inclinations. He determinedly avoided participation in House debates as a freshman congressman, preferring to observe the proceedings. The stature and skill, which resulted, were employed with great affect in his second term.

In January, 1854, Stephen A. Douglas, chairman of the Senate Committee on Territories, introduced a bill to organize the Nebraska Territory (later, the Kansas and Nebraska Territories) under the doctrine of "popular sovereignty." Many Southerners, including Breckinridge, favored such a measure because it circumvented the territorial restrictions on slavery, imposed by the Missouri Compromise. Yet, to insure the property rights of slaveholders in the Territories, north of thirty-six degrees, thirty minutes, they demanded an explicit repeal of the restriction within the bill. To gain their support, Douglas acceded to their proposal.

Of the repealers, Breckinridge maintained the closest ties
to the administration. Consequently, he approached President Pierce, seeking support for an explicit repeal. The President objected to such congressional action, preferring a Supreme Court decision, which, he believed, assured success to the repeaters. Breckinridge agreed to the plan; the Southern "ultras" refused. Breckinridge now seized the initiative; he organized a meeting, which included Douglas, Southern repeaters, and the President's closest ally within the government, Jefferson Davis, to discuss the repeal. Their subsequent meeting with the President resulted in a repeal amendment, authored by Pierce. Clearly, this was a great personal and political triumph for the Kentuckian.

Breckinridge participated in the congressional debates, which followed, but his direct influence on the measure receded. In his remarks to the House, Breckinridge chose to stress the rights of the individual over the prerogatives of the government: "Then, sir, neither the purpose nor effect of the bill is to legislate slavery into Nebraska and Kansas; but its effect is to sweep away this vestige of congressional dictation on this subject, to allow the free citizens of this Union to enter the common territory with the Constitution and the bill alone in their hands, and to remit the decision of their rights under both to the courts of the country." The Kansas-Nebraska Act passed the House of Representatives, and after Senate action, received
the President's signature. Alexander Stephens, a congressional observer of Breckinridge, stated: "Very few contributed more than he did in the House, to the Kansas—Nebraska legislation of 1854." Indeed, Breckinridge had acted out of a sense of duty to the country, to the Democratic party, and to the administration; he believed that to organize the Nebraska Territory, to maintain party unity, and to insure Southern support in Congress for the administration, the President had to accept a repeal.

Due to financial difficulties, Breckinridge did not seek a third term in the House of Representatives. He returned to Lexington and to his law practice, but continued to involve himself in politics. For the next year Breckinridge repeatedly denounced the influence of the American party within Kentucky, and the influence of the Republican party within the North; he believed the latter to be committed, ultimately, to complete abolition. As a result of his concern, the Democratic state convention elected Breckinridge to serve as a delegate at the Democratic National Convention in Cincinnati.

At the convention, Breckinridge supported President Pierce until the cause of his renomination seemed hopeless; thereafter, he voted for Douglas. Yet James Buchanan, a Pennsylvanian, emerged as the victor. For the vice-presidential nomination, William A. Richardson, chief of the Douglas effort in Cincinnati, recommended Breckinridge; as a gesture toward Douglas and the
South, Buchanan’s managers agreed. 16

Breckinridge led a quiet life as Vice-President. The administration ignored him; his only function within the executive branch was to host diplomats and heads of state, who visited Washington. In the Congress, Breckinridge limited himself to his official duties as President of the Senate; he believed that the role of the vice-president was to preside with impartiality, a rare quality in the Capitol at the time, and to withhold comment on the business before the body. Outside of his official capacity, Breckinridge endorsed the policies of the Buchanan Administration, including support for the Dred Scott decision and for the Lecompton Constitution. 17

In only one instance did Breckinridge use the chair to express his own sentiments. On 4 January, 1859, the Senate prepared to remove to the new Senate chamber. Breckinridge, as presiding officer, offered on the occasion a strong appeal for the Union; he stated: “These marble walls must molder into ruin; but the principles of constitutional liberty, guarded by wisdom and virtue, unlike material elements, do not decay. Let us devoutly trust that another Senate in another age shall bear to a new and larger chamber this Constitution, vigorous and inviolate, and that the last generation of posterity shall witness the deliberations of the representatives of American States still united, prosperous and free.” 18 The speech drew near
universal praise, and reflected Breckinridge’s ardent support for the Constitution and for the Union.

In the Winter of 1858-1859, Breckinridge began to consider, in earnest, his potential for the Democratic presidential nomination. He soon concluded that a united Southern base was necessary for his effort to succeed, and more importantly, that such a base was an impossibility. Consequently, he sought election to the United States Senate; in December, 1859, the Kentucky legislature elected Breckinridge to succeed Senator John J. Crittenden at the expiration of his term.

In the Spring of 1860, Breckinridge endorsed James Guthrie, a fellow Kentuckian, for the Democratic presidential nomination. Fearing a split within the state delegation, the Vice-President asked his own supporters to vote for Guthrie. On 1 May, and 2 May, 1860, the Charleston convention balloted. With the walk-out no candidate fell with the necessary two-thirds majority, and the convention adjourned to Baltimore.

On 4 May, 1860, the Vice-President, Senator Powell, and Governor Magoffin met to discuss Breckinridge’s position. The Vice-President felt honor bound to continue his support for Guthrie, but now, he imposed a qualification: if Guthrie should falter, Breckinridge would enter the race. 19

Such plans were needless. With another walk-out, Baltimore played host to two political conventions: the National Demo-
cratic party and the Constitutional Democratic party. The
former selected Stephn A. Douglas for the presidential nomina-
tion, and adopted a compromise plank on slave property in the
Territories, which stated that "during the existence of the
Territorial Governments the measure of restriction, whatever
it may be, imposed by the Federal Constitution on the power of
the Territorial Legislatures over the subject of domestic rela-
tions, as the same has been, or shall hereafter be finally de-
termined by the Supreme Court of the United States..."20

Although Breckinridge was not present for either convention,
the walk-out and subsequent formation of the Constitutional
Democratic party was of special significance for him. The Con-
stitutional Democrats, predominantly Southerners, adopted a plat-
form, which guaranteed the rights of all property in the Terri-
tories; it stated: "[I]t is the duty of the Federal Government,
in all its departments, to protect, when necessary, the rights of
persons and property in the Territories, and wherever else its
constitutional authority extends."21 With this position Breck-
inridge agreed.

Yet, the greatest factor, favoring Breckinridge at the con-
vention, was the perception among the delegates of his devotion
to the Union. Although he was an advocate of states' rights, a
doctrine traditionally associated with the South, Breckinridge
had never endorsed nullification or secession. Clearly, there
exists no better evidence to demonstrate the South's willingness to remain within the United States, in 1860, than his nomination. Only the extreme Southern Nationalists, like Rhett, supported Breckinridge to induce a revolution.

Breckinridge, aghast at the split within the only "national" party, decided to refuse the nomination. Yet, Jefferson Davis' proposal to force the withdrawal of Douglas and of Bell in favor of a unity candidate prompted Breckinridge to accept. Unfortunately for the Vice-President, neither Douglas nor Bell withdrew, and consequently, Breckinridge had to continue the campaign; he stated: "I trust I have the courage to lead a forlorn hope."22

Typical of this time, Breckinridge, the presidential candidate, remained, quietly, at home. His only major address of the canvass was in response to his political opponents, who falsely charged that the Kentuckian was a disunionist. Certainly, Breckinridge was susceptible to such an allegation as a large number of Southern Nationalists had endorsed his candidacy. Yet Breckinridge refused in this speech to repudiate the "ultras." In Breckinridge: Statesman, Soldier, Symbol, William C. Davis discussed the situation in which Breckinridge found himself as the Constitutional Democratic nominee: "An acceptance was a pledge; a trust accepted, even from disunionists, was a trust to be honored; and the loyalty and support received from friends,
Whatever their political stripe, could not be met with anything less than a full return. The very manly qualities which made him so engaging, so admirable, personally, now conspired against him. He was backed by men whose political views had once been the same as his, but which had now gone beyond him by far. 23

Breckinridge carried every state in the Deep South as well as Delaware, North Carolina, and Arkansas. In total, the Constitutional Democratic nominee received 849,781 popular votes (18.1%) and 72 electoral votes. Interestingly, Breckinridge captured nearly a third of his popular vote total within the free states. This reflected the sentiment of some Northerners to grant the South certain guarantees (e.g. property rights in the Territories). 24

In Kentucky, Bell defeated Breckinridge, Douglas and Lincoln with 66,068 votes (45.2%), 53,146 votes (36.3%), 25,641 votes (17.5%), and 1,365 votes (1.0%), respectively. 25 An analysis of the Kentucky vote indicated that the Breckinridge voter tended to be a rural Democrat, who lived within an area of relatively low slave population density. In contrast, the Bell voter tended to be a Whig, who lived within an area of relatively high slave population density or of relatively large commercial activity. In short, the Bell voter had more to lose, economically, than the Breckinridge voter from a disruption of the Union or from a civil war. 26
Although partisans sought from him a firm commitment for the Union or for secession, Breckinridge remained publicly silent after the election, favoring a "wait and see" attitude toward the new administration. Secretly, the Vice-President was advising Senator Crittenden on a series of proposals to stem the secession impulse, and with their implementation, to settle, finally, the controversy over slavery with several constitutional amendments. The proposals included: a reaffirmation of the Fugitive Slave Law, a guarantee of slave property within the District of Columbia, unless the states of Maryland and of Virginia were to abolish the peculiar institution, and to reestablish the Missouri Compromise line of thirty-six degrees, thirty minutes through the Territories, permitting slave property south of the line and forbidding slave property north of the line. Breckinridge favored the Crittenden Compromise as the last possible congressional effort to maintain the Union. 27

On 20 December, 1860, Breckinridge appointed a Senate Committee of Thirteen in an attempt to solve the secession crisis. True to his ideal of impartiality, the Vice-President selected a geographically and ideologically representative panel. That the committee was unable to agree on any resolution of the crisis, including the Crittenden Compromise, was a deciding factor in Breckinridge's hopes for the Union. On 6 January, 1861, Breckinridge broke his public silence, and called on the State of
Kentucky to Convene a Sovereign Convention. 28

Of the slave states south of the Ohio River, Kentucky faced a unique situation. Economically, the state maintained extensive trade with the North and with the South. Politically, Kentucky viewed itself as a Southern state and as a staunch advocate of states' rights, but it was also the home of two famous compromisers, Henry Clay and John J. Crittenden. In population Kentucky was the third largest state in the South, but contained a relatively small number of slaves and slaveholders. 29

In the winter of 1860-1861, Kentucky reflected, in microcosm, the polarization of political opinion within the United States. Members of the Constitutional Union (Bell) party and of the Democratic Union (Douglas) party met, separately, in convention to endorse the Crittenden Compromise and to condemn disunion. Meanwhile, secessionists organized local chapters of the Southern Rights Association to urge disunion. In addition, Unionists held large rallies to influence public opinion, while Southern Nationalists founded a secret organization, Knights of the Golden Circle, to foment rebellion. Nevertheless, the majority of Kentuckians adopted Breckinridge's "wait and see" attitude. 30

On 17 January, 1861, the Kentucky Legislature convened in a special session to discuss the secession crisis. The 143 members of the legislature reflected moderate wealth (average value of real property: $12,123; average value of personal
PROPERTY: $10,190), A WIDE INTEREST IN SLAVERY (86 MEMBERS OR 60.1%), AND AN OVERWHELMING ORIENTATION TOWARD AGRICULTURE (62 MEMBERS OR 43.4%) AND THE PROFESSIONS (61 MEMBERS OR 42.7%). THE LEGISLATURE, DIVIDED ON THE ISSUE OF A SOVEREIGN CONVENTION, PASSED TWO RESOLUTIONS: TO INVITE A REUNIFICATION OF THE STATES AND TO WARN THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT AGAINST EFFORTS OF COERCION. THEREAFTER, THE LEGISLATURE WENT HOME. 31

Although he was not personally committed to secession, Breckinridge continued to call for a state convention to express the sovereign will of Kentuckians. In addition, he attempted to convene a Border State convention; Breckinridge hoped to present the Lincoln Administration with a series of demands from these several states. His goal was to avoid a civil war: either the South was to accept a peaceful reunification or the North was to recognize the Confederate States of America; otherwise, the Border States were to join the South or to become independent republics. 32 The bombardment of Fort Sumter completely altered these plans; the Breckinridge slate for election to the Border Slave State Convention, at Frankfort, withdrew. Breckinridge believed that reunification was now an impossibility. Consequently, Unionist elements represented Kentucky at the convention, where delegates from Kentucky, Missouri, and Tennessee affirmed support for the Crittenden Compromise. 33

With the outbreak of hostilities, Governor Magoffin tartly
refused President Lincoln's call for state troops. In addition, the legislature convened to appropriate one million dollars for the defense of the state, to appoint a "Military Board" for oversight of their defense preparations, and most importantly, to declare state neutrality in the conflict. On this vote, pro-neutralist legislators tended to represent relatively more wealthy districts, with a higher slave population density than the norm. The opposite was true of the anti-neutralist legislators, who tended to support secession. Obviously, there was a distinct parallel between the Bell voter in 1860, and the pro-neutralist legislator in 1861, as well as between the Breckinridge voter in 1860, and the anti-neutralist legislator in 1861.34

Breckinridge, who had counselled resistance to a war of coercion, returned to the Senate in July, 1861, for the special session of Congress. The Senator had reconciled himself to Kentucky's declaration of neutrality, and consequently, viewed neither his state nor himself as participants in the war effort. Not surprisingly, the Senate leadership immediately removed him from his seat on the Committee on Military Affairs.35

During the session, Breckinridge repeatedly denounced the war, especially the conduct of President Lincoln. On 16 July, 1861, in a speech against a "Joint Resolution to Approve and Confirm certain acts of the President of the United States for suppressing insurrection and rebellion ...", Breckinridge
stated: "These great and fundamental rights, sir, the sanctity of which is the measure of progress and of civilization, which have been carefully guarded and locked up in your Constitution, have been trampled under foot by military power here and hereabouts in the presence of the two houses of Congress; and yet, so great upon the one side is the passion of the hour, and so astonishing the stupid amazement of the other, that we receive it as natural, as right, as of course. We are rushing, and with rapid strides, from a constitutional government to a military despotism." He concluded: "Then, Mr. President, the Executive of the United States has assumed legislative powers. The Executive of the United States has assumed judicial powers. The executive power belongs to him by the Constitution. He has, therefore, concentrated in his own hands executive, legislative, and judicial powers, which, in every age of the world, has been the very definition of despotism, and exercises them to-day, while we sit in the Senate chamber, and the other branch of the legislative authority at the other end of the Capitol." 36

Yet, Kentuckians had shifted to the Union and to its cause. In June, Unionist candidates carried the state’s congressional elections. In August, Unionists defeated neutralists for control of the state legislature. Finally, a consensus was emerging.

On 13 September, 1861, the legislature demanded the withdrawal of a Confederate army detachment from Kentucky soil, but
did not request the withdrawal of a Union army detachment, which had followed the Confederates into Kentucky. General Leonidas Polk, P.A.C.S., citing the necessity of war, refused to vacate his fortifications. On 18 September, 1861, the legislature voted to expel Confederate forces from the state, and shortly thereafter, agreed to end its policy of armed neutrality. Kentucky had chosen the Union. 37

Breckinridge returned to Kentucky at the end of the special session. With the state now under Lincoln's military proclamation, Breckinridge was open to arrest and to imprisonment without charge. He knew, already, that the government suspected him of treason for his statements against the war and against the administration. Nevertheless, the Senator continued to denounce both of these at a series of "anti-Lincoln" picnics, which he had organized. On 19 September, one day after the suspension of state neutrality, a messenger warned Breckinridge of his imminent arrest by the Union Army. That night, he fled Lexington on horseback for the Virginia border. After a brief sojourn in the Old Dominion, Breckinridge joined a Confederate army detachment in Bowling Green, where, on 8 October, 1861, he resigned from the United States Senate. Breckinridge had chosen the Confederacy. 38

To understand the decision of Kentucky to join the Union effort and of Breckinridge to oppose it, one must review the
SOCIETY OF THE FORMER AND THE PRINCIPLES OF THE LATTER. 

Although Kentucky viewed itself as a Southern state, it differed, essentially, from the states within the Confederacy. Kentucky possessed neither a large slave population nor a large slave-holder class. As a result, Kentuckians did not fear that a Republican administration, imbued with radical abolitionist goals, threatened the social, economic, and political base of their society; indeed, state emancipation had received serious consideration from Kentucky's political leaders in the past. Consequently, after a period of indecision and of neutrality, Kentucky joined the war effort to preserve the social, economic, and political system, which it possessed, as the Deep South had seceded to preserve its society from a perceived threat.

Alternately, with his devotion to the Union and with his respect for authority, Breckinridge, who had sought compromise in the crisis of 1850, in the Kansas-Nebraska controversy, in the split within the Democratic party, and in the Crittenden proposals, was an unlikely revolutionary figure. Yet, by the Summer of 1861, he saw the Union, despoiled by the North, and the Constitution, forsaken through the war effort. Moreover, he viewed Kentucky, with its adoption of the Union cause, perverted in its exercise of state sovereignty.

Obviously, before the attack on Fort Sumter, Breckinridge was moving toward the Southern position; he advocated secession
In the event of a war of coercion. Yet, Breckinridge fought against the Union only after Kentucky had forsaken its role as a noncombatant. He had accepted the state's decision to remain neutral as a prerogative of sovereignty, but refused to participate in a war, which, to Breckinridge, violated the sovereignty of other states. In short, Kentucky commanded Breckinridge's obedience to neutrality, though it contradicted his political opinions, but did not command his obedience to participate in a perceived war of coercion, which contradicted his political principles.

Importantly, Breckinridge was not a traitor to the United States at the time of his escape. Although he had advocated secession as a future possibility, Breckinridge accepted Kentucky's decision to remain within the Union. Moreover, his efforts against the war and against the administration never exceeded the degree of opposition with which certain Whigs had objected to the Mexican War. Indeed, there existed no better example to illustrate violations of civil liberties, which Breckinridge had persistently denounced throughout the Summer of 1861, than the government's attempt to arrest him as a traitor.

To assess his contribution to the secession movement, one must define Breckinridge's influence within Kentucky and within the nation. Clearly, Breckinridge was never an unconditional advocate of disunion; he refused to endorse state secession
after the election of Lincoln and after the bombardment of Fort Sumter. Yet, Breckinridge also remained aloof from proposals in Congress to reunite the states, which included the submission of the South to the national government. Undoubtedly, this seemingly enigmatic position on secession wrested from Breckinridge any real influence during the secession crisis.

Nonetheless, Breckinridge remained consistent in his view of the Union throughout his life. He defended the supremacy of the states over the federal government, which, to Breckinridge, the founding fathers had strictly limited in authority. In the most concise expression of his views on the order of American government, Breckinridge stated: "The States are supreme as to all subjects not granted to the common Government. They establish their own institutions, at their own pleasure; they regulate within themselves all the relations of society; they are complete, self-sustaining, political communities; and they created the Federal Government, not to fix for them and their posterity the relations of society and the various elements that make up a complete social and political community, but to execute for the common good certain specified grants of power." With tragic consequences, Breckinridge remained true to this principle during the secession crisis.
VI
CONCLUSION

Robert Barnwell Rhett, Jefferson Davis, John Bell, and John C. Breckinridge represented four distinct attitudes toward disunion during the secession crisis of 1860-1861.

Robert Barnwell Rhett was an ideologue. He had advocated disunion as early as 1832 to redress perceived encroachments on the rights of South Carolina. Rhett remained active in state politics and in the Congress until the failure of a resistance movement in 1852. He reemerged, seven years later, to lead South Carolina into the secession crisis. Rhett was, as noted by a biographer, Laura A. White, the "Father of Secession."

Jefferson Davis was the sometime fire-eater turned Unionist. Davis maintained an extreme position on Southern rights until 1860, when he moved toward conciliation and compromise. These traits were apparent in his views on the Charleston convention and on the subsequent split of the Democratic party, during his participation in the Mississippi canvass for Breckinridge, and after the election, in his advice to Governor Pettus and to President Buchanan as well as in his position on the Senate Committee of Thirteen. Only with the failure of these efforts at peace did Davis join the secession movement.

John Bell, who differed from Rhett, Davis, and Breckinridge in his association with the Whig party, represented the position
of Tennesseans during the secession crisis. He sought to ignore the sectional controversy in the campaign of 1860 with his focus on the supremacy of the Constitution and of the Union. After the election of Lincoln, he endorsed the legitimacy of the new administration through strong, public statements. Yet, Bell joined the resistance movement after the incident at Fort Sumter and its immediate aftermath.

John C. Breckinridge, also, a candidate in the campaign of 1860, did not immediately endorse nor denounce the election of Lincoln. Rather, he worked, secretly, with John J. Crittenden to develop an acceptable compromise to the secession crisis. With the failure of the Senate Committee of Thirteen, Breckinridge favored the cooperation of Kentucky with other Border States in a united effort to maintain Southern rights inside or outside of the Union. Yet, after Fort Sumter, Breckinridge accepted armed neutrality as the sovereign will of his state. He fled Kentucky only when the government threatened to arrest him, the day after the legislature had formally joined the Union war effort.

There were important similarities and differences among the four men. Each of these individuals accepted the overthrow of the federal government. Rhett, Davis, and Breckinridge acknowledged as a constitutional prerogative of the sovereign states the right to secede from the Union. Bell considered the overthrow of the federal government as an inherent...
right, though not a constitutional right. Indeed, this reflected each man’s conception of the federal government. Again, Rhett, Davis, and Breckinridge agreed that the sovereignty of the Union resided in the states, which, through a grant of authority, acceded to the supremacy of the federal government under the Constitution, until, by the respective actions of the states, they assumed the status of independent republics. Alternately, Bell viewed the federal government as supreme in all instances, until the people, through revolution, were to establish another government.

Importantly, each man moved toward disunion from a different political orientation. Rhett was the ideologue who became a revolutionary; Davis was the advocate of compromise who became a secessionist; Bell was the Unionist who became a disunionist; and Breckinridge was the secessionist who became an advocate of neutrality. Thus, these men represented major components of Southern public opinion during the secession crisis. Eventually, each man accepted disunion when he viewed the interests of his particular state as irreconcilable with the interests of the Union.

Moreover, South Carolina, Mississippi, Tennessee, and Kentucky represented four distinct attitudes toward disunion during the secession crisis of 1860-1861.

South Carolinians, who had sustained three previous resistance efforts, voted on 8 October, 1860, to elect a secessionist oriented legislature in anticipation of a Lincoln victory. Yet this
LEGISLATURE OPTED FOR THE IMMEDIATE CONVOCATION OF A "SOVEREIGN" CONVENTION ONLY AFTER CONTINUED DEMONSTRATIONS OF PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR DISUNION. CLEARLY, THE PEOPLE OF SOUTH CAROLINA HAD EVIDENCED A NEAR UNANIMOUS DEMAND FOR SEPARATE STATE ACTION BEFORE THE LEGISLATURE ACTED TO SUMMON A CONVENTION. MORE IMPORTANTLY, HAD SOUTH CAROLINA, ACKNOWLEDGED TO BE THE MOST RADICAL SOUTHERN STATE, AWAITED THE ACTIONS OF OTHER STATES OR ENCOURAGED A SPIRIT OF COOPERATION WITHOUT ANY INDEPENDENT MOVE TOWARD DISUNION, THE SECESSIONIST IMPULSE MAY HAVE BEEN WITHOUT RESULT.

MISSISSIPPANIANS ALSO REACTED, SIMILARLY, TO THE ELECTION OF A REPUBLICAN PRESIDENT. THERE ALREADY EXISTED BROAD PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR DISUNION WHEN THE GOVERNOR CONVENED THE STATE LEGISLATURE TO RESPOND TO THE SECESSION CRISIS. YET, IN THE SUBSEQUENT STATE CONVENTION, THERE REMAINED COOPERATIONIST AND UNIONIST ELEMENTS, WHICH SOUGHT TO DELAY OR TO AVOID EFFORTS TOWARD DISUNION. NEVERTHELESS, THIS CONVENTION REFLECTED THE OVERWHELMING MAJORITY OF OPINION WITHIN THE STATE WHEN IT VOTED TO SECEDE.

TENNESSEANS RESPONDED WITH A COMPLETELY DIFFERENT ATTITUDE; THEY PERCEIVED NO THREAT TO THEIR STATE INSTITUTIONS OR TO THEIR DOMESTIC TRANQUILLITY WITH THE ELECTION OF A REPUBLICAN TO THE WHITE HOUSE. ALTHOUGH THERE EXISTED NO PUBLIC SUPPORT WITHIN THE STATE FOR ABRAHAM LINCOLN, THE CANDIDATE, TENNESSEANS ACCEPTED THE CONSTITUTIONAL ELECTION OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN TO BE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES. MOREOVER, THE CITIZENS OF TENNESSEE REJECTED IN A
GENERAL REFERENDUM THE CONVOCATION OF A "SOVEREIGN" STATE CONVENTION. IT WAS THE BOMBARDMENT OF FORT SUMTER, AND THE SUBSEQUENT CALL BY LINCOLN FOR TROOPS, WHICH MANIFESTED WITHIN TENNESSEE PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR DISUNION. YET, A RELATIVELY LARGE MINORITY REMAINED WITHIN THE STATE, WHICH OPPOSED ANY RESISTANCE TO THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT. CONSEQUENTLY, THERE NEVER EXISTED WITHIN TENNESSEE THE SAME BROAD PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR DISUNION, WHICH CHARACTERIZED THE DEEP SOUTH.


Thus, there were two secession impulses which swept the South in 1860-1861. South Carolina and Mississippi, the two states with
the heaviest slave population densities, led the Deep South, South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas, into disunion with the election of a Republican president, who, they feared, was to lead the abolitionist movement against their slave property. The second impulse, which followed the initial hostilities between Union and Confederate military forces, prompted the secession of another tier of states: Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Arkansas. These four states had resisted state secession after the election of Lincoln as unnecessary for the protection of their respective institutions, namely slavery. Yet, they each opted for disunion to counter what they perceived to be a war of coercion, an attempt to enforce the laws of the federal government upon several sovereign states, which no longer acknowledged their allegiance to the Union. Four other slave states, Delaware, Maryland, Kentucky, and Missouri, remained formally within the Union, though they engaged in the Union war effort with less than enthusiastic or unanimous support.

The most important factor in the secession crisis of 1860-1861, was that an overwhelming majority of Southerners came to view their interests as separate from the interests of the Union. First, in a response to the election of a Republican president, whom the Deep South feared as a threat to the status quo, and second in a response to the perceived war of coercion, which
seemingly confirmed the intent of the Republican administration to attack the South and its peculiar institution, eleven states seceded from the Union. In each instance, these states sought to overthrow the federal government, which, to them, had violated the spirit of the Union.
The South


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