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THE REVOLUTION IN THE NEW YORK PARTY SYSTEM, 1854-1856

by

MARK L. BERGER

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate
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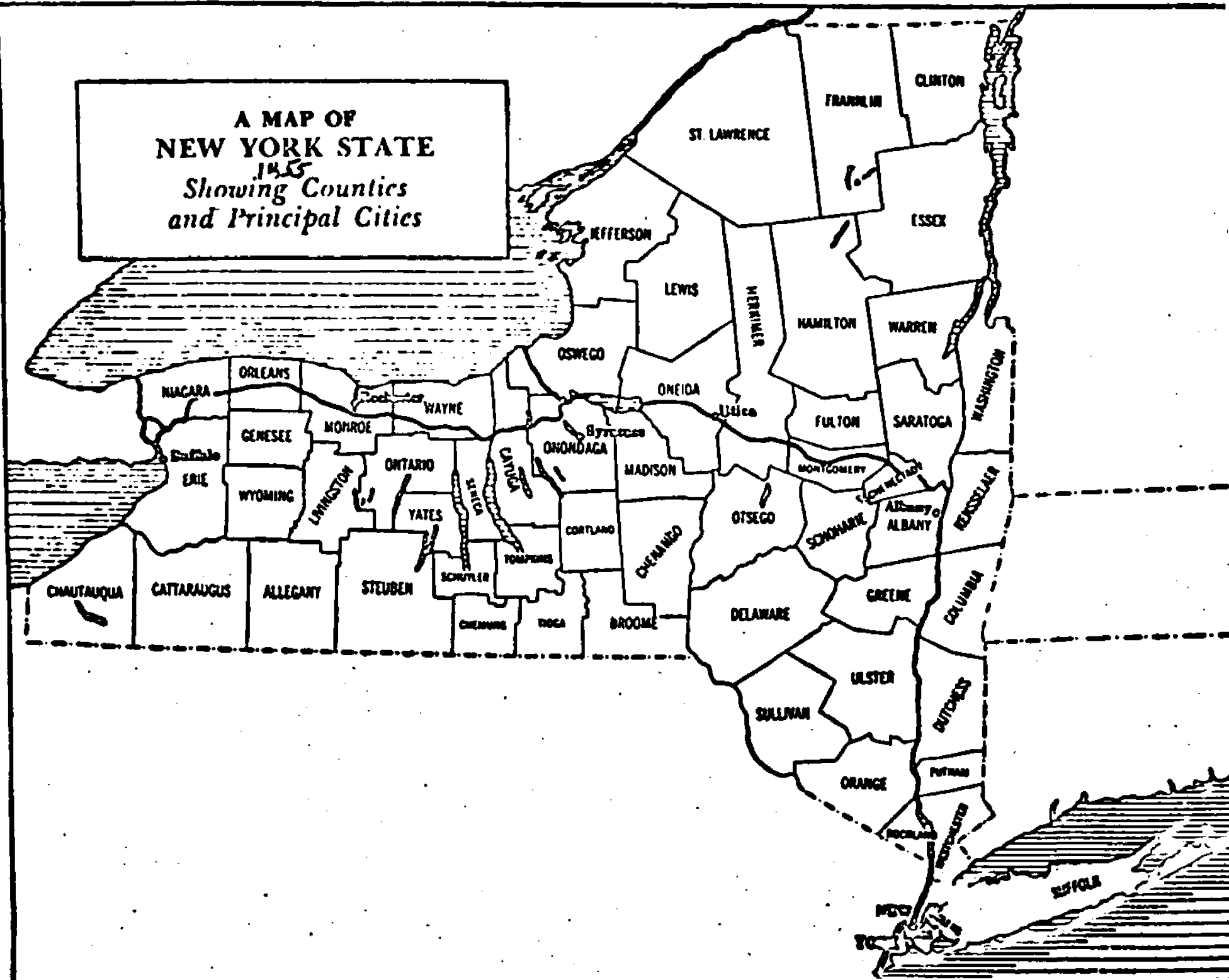
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abbreviations Used In Footnotes and Bibliography.....	iii
Introduction.....	1
Chapter	
1 The General Situation.....	8
2 The Softs.....	39
3 The Hards.....	57
4 The Saratoga Convention.....	76
5 The Softs Acquiesce in Nebraska.....	102
6 Political Wizardry.....	120
7 An Indecisive Election.....	142
8 The Know-Nothings and Slavery.....	171
9 Fusion.....	193
10 The Hards and the Softs in 1855.....	216
11 The Election of 1855.....	232
12 The Cincinnati Convention.....	252
13 The Decline of Know-Nothingism.....	276
14 The Republican Triumph.....	311
Conclusion.....	361
Appendix.....	368
Bibliography.....	371

Abbreviations used in Footnotes and Bibliography

AHR	<u>American Historical Review</u>
AmQ	<u>American Quarterly</u>
CU	Columbia University
HSPa	Historical Society of Pennsylvania
JAH	<u>Journal of American History</u>
JNH	<u>Journal of Negro History</u>
JSH	<u>Journal of Southern History</u>
LC	Library of Congress
MVHR	<u>Mississippi Valley Historical Review</u>
NEQ	<u>New England Quarterly</u>
NYH	<u>New York History</u>
NYHS	New York Historical Society
NYHSQ	<u>New York Historical Society Quarterly</u>
NYPL	New York Public Library
NYSL	New York State Library
PU	Princeton University
SAQ	<u>South Atlantic Quarterly</u>
SUNY (Oswego)	State University of New York at Oswego
URL	University of Rochester Library
YU	Yale University

**A MAP OF
NEW YORK STATE**
*Showing Counties
and Principal Cities*



INTRODUCTION

Since the adoption of the federal Constitution, only three national party systems, each consisting of two dominant political organizations, have been in existence. The first party system originated in the early years of the Republic during the struggles between Federalists and Jeffersonians; it lasted for approximately two decades. The second party system emerged in the early 1830's as a consequence of the conflict between the partisans of Andrew Jackson, the Democrats, and his opponents, the Whigs; it, too, survived for about twenty years.

During the period 1854-1856, the nation experienced the most profound political upheaval in its history. These years witnessed the disintegration of the second party system and gave rise to the third and most enduring political order. In this brief span of time, the Whig party dissolved, so that ex-Whigs were left homeless; the Democratic party became committed to the course it kept until the Civil War; a new party, the Know-Nothing, enjoyed a brief triumph and then suffered a decline; and another upstart party, the Republican, arose to dominate the politics of the North.

These years of political revolution were filled with crises, with extraordinary tension, with unavoidable decisions. What generated this overpowering strain on the second party system? How did this stress operate to bring about a political transformation? What alternatives

were open to politicians and voters and how were choices made? In short, how resilient is the American party system at a time of seemingly insoluble crises? These are some of the questions which this study will seek to answer.

New York state provides the focus for this investigation. Because of her large and heterogeneous population, her geographical location and economic power, and the ambition and ability of her leaders, the Empire State affected the entire nation and so did her politics. In many respects the revolution in the New York party system was unique; however, similar developments occurred in most Northern states. The importance of New York's political history is matched by its complexity. A wide spectrum of partisan activity must be examined. The recently discovered correspondence of Millard Fillmore, which encompasses his career after his term as President, affords new insights; these papers have been especially valuable for gaining a more complete picture of the campaign of 1856.

By 1854, the New York Democratic party was decaying. It had endured more than ten years of factional strife, first between Barnburners and Hunkers and then between Soft Shells and Hard Shells. State-wide issues and competition for power among ambitious politicians were the original sources of contention; however, the intrusion of the slavery question into national politics aggravated

these local differences into unbridgeable chasms. The Barnburner bolt of 1848 and link up with the Free Soil party had left a legacy of bitterness too difficult to overcome. An uneasy truce was patched up in 1849, only to be broken with the development of the Hard Shell-Soft Shell¹ feud. Constant bickering between factional leaders inspired the disgust of many rank-and-file Democrats and weakened their allegiance to the party.

Other difficulties exerted a great strain on the New York Democratic party. The old Jacksonian rallying cries of opposition to national banking, tariffs, and internal improvements--which had proved so potent in the past--were obsolete; large numbers of Protestant, native born Democrats were attracted to causes such as temperance, anti-Catholicism, and nativism. These preoccupations threatened to alienate thousands of foreign born Democrats, mainly of Irish stock. A group of antislavery Barnburners had accepted the Compromise of 1850 with reluctance. Rebellious over Southern dominance of the national party, they eagerly looked for some way to revive the defiant spirit of 1848. All of these problems generated stress within the New York Democratic party and made it vulnerable to

¹The most detailed account of the schism and reunion of the Democratic party is Walter L. Ferree, "The New York Democracy, Division and Reunion, 1847-1852" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1953).

a strong shock, which could at last break weakened threads of loyalty.

The Whig party in New York also faced a crisis. Factionalism between radical Whigs piloted by William H. Seward and Thurlow Weed and conservatives or Silver Gray Whigs led by Millard Fillmore and Francis Granger racked the party. The slavery issue exacerbated this rift. Seward and Weed's antislavery pronouncements alarmed Silver Grays, who feared that agitation on this subject would destroy the North-South Whig alliance and endanger the Union itself. Economic motives also played a significant role: New York City's Whig merchants benefited from a lucrative trade² with the South and blanched at the thought of secession.

The Whig feud reached the breaking point over the Compromise of 1850. Radical Whigs backed Seward's policy of opposition to the Compromise; Silver Grays stood behind President Fillmore's efforts for sectional reconciliation. The struggle in Washington triggered a contest for control of the Whig party in New York. Ably led by Weed,

²See Philip S. Foner, Business & Slavery: The New York Merchants & the Irrepressible Conflict (Chapel Hill, 1941), ch. 1.

the radicals succeeded in keeping the reins of the state organization.³ Other problems created pressure within the party. Temperance and nativist sentiment spread rapidly in central and western New York, the area of greatest whig strength. Whigs divided sharply over how to deal with these potent new issues.

The stresses operating upon the New York Whig party took their toll. The canvass of 1851 started the downward slide. Whigs elected few state officers, lost control of the vital Canal Board, so necessary because of the patronage it provided, and forfeited their majority in the Senate; only the Assembly remained in whig hands. The election of the following year proved disastrous, not only in New York but nationally as well. At the state level, Whigs failed to secure a single office, and gave up their ascendancy in the Assembly. From the high point of thirty-two whig Congressmen in 1848, the total dropped to seventeen in 1850 and ten in 1852.⁴ The national result was even more alarming. Presidential nominee Winfield Scott

³The most detailed account of the Whig party during the years 1848-1852 is Aida DiPace Donald, "Prelude to Civil War: The Decline of the Whig Party in New York, 1848-1852" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Rochester, 1961).

⁴Whig (Tribune) Almanac, 1849, 1851, 1853.

carried only four states. Many Southern Whigs deserted him and voted for Franklin Pierce. They feared that if the Mexican war hero were elected, he would fall under the influence of Seward and Weed. The Silver Grays abandoned the party's nominee for the same reason.

To many Whigs, the campaign of 1852 signalized the death of their party as a national organization. Sectional tensions, they claimed, had overcome loyalties forged for nearly a generation.⁵ In New York, Whiggery survived and even managed to carry the 1853 election with a plurality. It did so because of the Hard Shell-Soft Shell split. But this respite could not hide the crippled condition of the party.

By 1854, both major parties in New York were in a condition of crisis. The second American party system depended upon the exclusion of slavery from political debate. When this condition could no longer be maintained,⁶ a hardening of sectional lines ensued. The growing tension

⁵Horace Greeley made no secret of the fact that this was his opinion. See, for example, the New York Tribune, November 20, 1854.

⁶One recent statement of this view has been made by Richard P. McCormick. He calls the whig and the Democratic parties "artificial," because they existed in spite of the sectional antagonisms present at the time. This shaky foundation of the political system explains the prominence of fiscal and economic issues in national campaigns, for they were "sectionally innocuous." Richard P. McCormick, The Second American Party System (Chapel Hill, 1966), p. 353.

in the national parties was transmitted to the state organizations; in New York, it magnified internal dissensions within each party and made unity impossible. Other problems operated to exert pressure on the old structure.

The obsolescence of the issues which had formerly helped to define political parties made it easier to abandon past alignments. The demand for temperance legislation and nativist discriminations against foreigners and Catholics brought havoc to existing groupings. A general dissatisfaction with politics and politicians pervaded all levels of society. At any time a powerful jolt could destroy the whole structure and pave the way for a political revolution.

CHAPTER 1

The General Situation

At a time when the major parties were least able to cope with disruptive forces, they were subjected to major strains. The combined impact of the Kansas-Nebraska bill, the growth of the temperance movement, and the rise of a militant nativism destroyed the existing two party system and prepared the way for new alignments. To understand the transformations of parties in the Empire State, it is necessary to consider the origins of these disruptions, their interrelationship with each other, and their effect upon New Yorkers.

On January 4, 1854, Senator Stephen A. Douglas of Illinois introduced his bill for the organization of the Kansas-Nebraska territory. Although the bill underwent several changes before it explicitly repealed the Missouri Compromise, Douglas' first version had already accomplished this feat.¹ The New York Evening Post spotlighted this fact a day later when it printed its key passage: When the Nebraska territories were "admitted as a State or States, the said territory or any portion of the same,

¹Robert R. Russel has written that Douglas' first version effectively repealed the Missouri Compromise, although it did not explicitly do so: "In short, squatter sovereignty with the Missouri Compromise repealed would have about the same practical result as squatter sovereignty without repeal." Robert R. Russel, "The Issues in the Congressional Struggle over the Kansas-Nebraska Bill, 1854," JSH, XXIX (May, 1963), 19.

shall be received into the Union with or without slavery,
 as their constitution may prescribe at the time of admission...."²
 (my italics) Suddenly, the thirty year agreement which
 had forbidden slavery north of latitude 36 30' in the
 Louisiana Purchase stood in danger. When President Pierce
 appeared to support the bill, the tocsin sounded throughout
 the North.

Many historians have speculated on the reasons for
 Douglas' action.³ Whatever his motives--whether to grow wealthy
 through railroad construction, ingratiate himself with the
 South for future political gain, aid the re-election cam-
 paign of Missouri Senator David R. Atchison at the expense
 of Thomas Hart Benton, or solve the territorial problem
 permanently by speeding settlement of the West--Douglas
 opened a Pandora's box for the nation. The delicate sect-
 ional balance achieved after the Compromise of 1850 received
 a devastating blow. Tension within the national parties
 reached the breaking point; the repercussion of this strain
 were immediately felt in New York, where the political
 situation was thrown into chaos.

²New York Evening Post, January 5, 1854.

³A summary of the historiography of the Kansas-Ne-
 braska Act is contained in Roy F. Nichols, "The Kansas-Ne-
 braska Act: A Century of Historiography," MVHR, XLIII
 (September, 1956), 187-212.

The Northern response in opposition to the Kansas-Nebraska bill was almost unanimous. It constituted a remarkable example of a democratic mass movement. Citizens outraged by the news from Washington organized public protests to vent their indignation. Hundreds of meetings throughout the Northern states lent truth to Douglas' famous remark that he could ride from Boston to Chicago by the light of his burning effigies.⁴ These assemblies revealed the people's faith in their democratic institutions and in the efficacy of peaceful dissent. They also helped to seal the fate of the decaying major parties. Calls for these meetings sought to embrace all men "without distinction of party." Outmoded partisan differences were not to divide men on this vital issue. This spontaneous exhibition of anti-Nebraska feeling provided the foundation for the future Republican party.

New York had its full share of public remonstrance. The roll call of upstate towns and cities hosting these gatherings read like a gazeteer of the state--Rochester, Lockport, Skaneateles, Oswegatchie, Penn Yan, Baldwinsville, Auburn, Albion, Cherry Valley, Hornellsville, Randolph, Albany, Oswego. The columns of the New York Evening Post and the New York Tribune were filled with numerous short

⁴Allan Nevins, The Ordeal of the Union, Vol. II: A House Dividing 1852-1857 (New York, 1947), p. 333.

5
 notices of these proceedings. The legislature reflected the general indignation by passing resolutions condemning the bill and instructing the state's Congressmen to oppose it.
 6

There was no better indicator of the pervasiveness of wrath than New York City's strong reaction against the Nebraska bill. The center of conservatism in the state, the City had a long history of hostility to abolitionists and free soilers. This feeling was jointly rooted in the lucrative mercantile relationship the port enjoyed with the South⁷ and the Irish laborers' often violent hatred of free Negroes.⁸ This powerful though incongruous alliance between wealthy merchants and poor wage earners had long placed a damper on antislavery agitation.

The unified front of capital and labor seemed to break down over the Nebraska bill. Pillars of the business community, previously distinguished as zealous proponents of the Compromise of 1850, took a leading role to prevent

⁵For examples of these meetings and their resolutions, see the New York Evening Post, February 17, March 8, 25, May 31, 1854 and the New York Tribune, February 23, 28, March 17, 1854.

⁶Journal of the Assembly of the State of New York, 77th Session, pp. 281-285; Journal of the Senate of the State of New York, 77th Session, pp. 205-208.

⁷See Philip Foner, Business & Slavery, ch. 1.

⁸Nevins, Ordeal of the Union, Vol. II, pp. 328-330.

its passage. Commenting on the appearance of well known conservatives at a protest meeting, the New York Evening Post observed that it took "a strong sense of injury to engage these men in a controversy on a subject concerning which they so earnestly desire that the agitation shall cease."⁹ The New York Tribune noted the participation of the "most venerable, Union-loving, conservative portion of this community on four separate occasions to denounce as infamous and criminal the schemes of Pierce, Douglas and Co....."¹⁰

The humbler citizens of New York staged their own meetings. John P. Hale of New Hampshire, the presidential candidate of the Free Democrats in 1852, addressed a gathering of "mechanics."¹¹ He urged working men to preserve their heritage in Nebraska by preventing its loss to slave labor. The crowd responded enthusiastically to Hale's impassioned speech.¹² Only the Irish refused to partic-

⁹New York Evening Post, January 31, 1854.

¹⁰New York Tribune, March 15, 1854; Philip Foner, Business and Slavery, pp. 91-99.

¹¹The term mechanics included the following occupations: builders, plumbers, stonecutters, lime-dealers, contractors, plaster manufacturers, workers in granite, house movers, architects, lawyers, druggists, blacksmiths, etc. New York Evening Post, February 18, 20, 1854

¹²Ibid.

13

pate in the protest movement.

Even abolitionists received a cordial reception in the great port city, where only a short time before their lectures had been disrupted by rowdies. Wendell Phillips delivered an antislavery and disunion speech to a crowded and responsive audience.¹⁴ Other meetings and discussions followed. Remarking that the "mad dog" cry of abolitionist had apparently lost its power, the New York Tribune offered this explanation:

This great change has been wrought by the Nebraska bill, and as yet we are only at the beginning. Garrison, Phillips, and all their compeers, could not make so many Abolitionists and Disunionists in half a century as Pierce, Douglas, Badger and Clayton have made in three months. ¹⁵

Although it would be an exaggeration to say that the intensely partisan newspaper press of the state reacted to Douglas' bill "without distinction of party," they, nevertheless, displayed an amazing unity. The New York Tribune, since its inception a scathing critic of the

¹³John Mitchell, the editor of the Irish paper, the Citizen, professed his desire for a rich plantation in Alabama, well-stocked with Negro slaves. Horace Greeley feared that this avowal would only increase the popularity of Mitchell's journal. See the New York Tribune, January 14, 1854 and Horace Greeley to Alvan E. Bovay, March 7, 1854, quoted in Francis Curtis, The Republican Party, Vol. I (New York, 1904), pp. 174-177.

¹⁴New York Tribune, March 1, 1854.

¹⁵Ibid., May 12, 28, 1854.

"peculiar institution," led the attack among the Whig papers. Judging from the substantial increase in its subscription list, the Tribune's vitriolic editorials expressed the opinions of a great number of New Yorkers and middle-westerners.¹⁶ The Albany Evening Journal added the influential voice of Thurlow Weed, thereby setting the pattern for most Whig papers throughout the state.

The conservative Whig press of New York City followed in the wake of the merchants. Henry J. Raymond brought his New York Times into opposition the moment the final text of the Nebraska bill became available.¹⁷ He declared that passage of the measure would destroy the last vestige of Northern confidence in the South.¹⁸ Other generally cautious journals like the New York Commercial Advertiser and the New York Courier and Enquirer expressed themselves in similar terms.¹⁹

Newspapers with Silver Gray, anti-Seward leanings were also indignant. The New York Evening Mirror, taking

¹⁶The New York Tribune enjoyed an extensive circulation in central and western New York and throughout the Northwest. See Jeter A. Isely, Horace Greeley and the Republican Party 1853-1861 (Princeton, 1947), p. 53.

¹⁷Allan Nevins has commented that no journal surpassed the New York Times in moderation. Nevins, Ordeal of the Union, Vol. II, p. 111.

¹⁸New York Times, January 24, 1854.

¹⁹New York Courier and Enquirer, January 25, 1856; New York Evening Post, January 24, 1854.

its cue from its wealthy patrons, was "glad to see the same substantial, patriotic, and unselfish class of our citizens, who took a conspicuous part in the Castle Garden meeting of 1850 in favor of the Compromise, now moving to defeat an attempt to violate the plighted faith of the nation, by the passage of the Nebraska bill."²⁰ James and Erastus Brooks, editors of the pro-Fillmore New York Express, attacked the New York Journal of Commerce, one of the few papers defending Douglas.²¹ Upstate journals like the Buffalo Commercial Advertiser (Fillmore's organ) and the Albany State Register followed the lead of the Express.²²

Before Douglas had proceeded with his bill he had secured the written endorsement of President Pierce.²³ This fact did not deter the Soft Shell Democratic press from condemning the whole scheme. The New York Evening Post, edited by William Cullen Bryant and John Bigelow, led the revolt. Almost as bitter as the Tribune, this

²⁰New York Evening Mirror, quoted in the New York Evening Post, January 24, 1854.

²¹New York Evening Post, January 24, 1854; New York Journal of Commerce, January 7, 21, 1854; Erastus Brooks to James W. Beekman, February 12, 1854, Beekman Papers, NYHS.

²²New York Evening Post, February 14, 1854.

²³See below, pp. 64-65, for a discussion of Pierce's motivation.

free soil paper attacked Douglas and his adherents.²⁴

The Albany Atlas, generally considered the spokesman for Secretary of State William L. Marcy and the organ of the Softs, soon found itself involved in acrimonious exchanges with Pierce's Washington Union.²⁵ One of the Atlas' ed-

itors, Henry H. Van Dyck, wrote Marcy that a recent tour throughout the state had convinced him that "the feeling against repeal of the Missouri Compromise is nearly unanimous."²⁶ Heman J. Redfield, the recently confirmed Collector of the Port of New York, reported his mortification at the position taken by the city presses of the state, mentioning specifically the New York Evening Post, the Albany Atlas, and the Buffalo Republic. He intimated the necessity for purchasing a new paper in New York City to represent the Administration.²⁷ This confrontation between Soft Shell organs and the President boded ill for the future of the Democratic party in New York.

A few papers resisted the tide and supported the

²⁴New York Evening Post, January 6, February 7, 8, 13, 1854.

²⁵See below, pp. 41-43.

²⁶Henry H. Van Dyck to William L. Marcy, February 10, 1854, Marcy Papers, LC.

²⁷Heman J. Redfield to Marcy, February 27, 1854, Marcy Papers, LC.

Nebraska bill. The greatest number adhered to the Hard Shell Democratic faction, which consisted of politicians²⁸ most sympathetic with the Southern point of view. The New York Journal of Commerce, reflecting the sentiments of the most conservative merchants, also endorsed Repeal. It considered the commotion in the North as unnecessary and stirred up by demagogues; slavery, it averred, could never take root in Kansas because of the inhospitable climate.²⁹

The Protestant clergy greatly strengthened the anti-Nebraska cause.³⁰ Northern clergymen agreed that the repeal of the Missouri Compromise involved a moral as well as a political question; consequently, it demanded their attention. By taking prominent roles at protest meetings, ministers added significantly to the strain on the old party system. Henry Ward Beecher was only too glad to

²⁸See below, p. 59ff.

²⁹New York Journal of Commerce, January 7, 21, February 3, 18, 1854.

³⁰Allan Nevins, discussing the influence of the clergy, wrote: "Though no scales exist to weigh such influence, the authority of the clergy was at this time [the 1850's] probably greater than ever before or since. Protestantism had more princes of learning and eloquence; rural traditions of piety were still strong; materialistic and laodicean corruptions had made little progress; and in thousands of communities, the minister's word was almost as potent as in old Cotton Mather's Massachusetts Bay." Nevins, Ordeal of the Union, Vol. II, p. 130. A similar assessment was made by Glyndon Van Deusen in "Why the Republican Party Came to Power" in The Crisis of the Union, 1860-1861, ed. by George H. Knowles, (New York, 1965), p. 7.

oblige an invitation to speak, and at a Brooklyn meeting the crowd enjoined clergymen in the audience to take places³¹ on the speaker's dais.

The mixture of antislavery agitation and religion in New York was not new. New Englanders who had migrated to central and western New York in great numbers during the early part of the nineteenth century dominated that area. They left homes and farms behind, but they carried their religious idealism with them. The 1820's and 1830's witnessed a remarkable outpouring of crusading zeal, giving the name of "Burned-over-region" or "infected district" to that portion of the state settled by New Englanders. Sparked by such spell binding evangelical ministers as Charles Grandison Finney, Theodore Dwight Weld, and the latter's thirty disciples, the people had been aroused to a high pitch of antislavery excitement. These men had preached that opposition to human bondage was incumbent upon truly pious men and women. The large number of anti-Nebraska protests revealed that this feeling was still³² powerful.

³¹New York Evening Post, February 20, March 17, 1854.

³²David M. Ellis, "The Yankee Invasion of New York, 1783-1850" NYH, XXXII (January, 1951), 3-17; Gilbert H. Barnes, The Anti-Slavery Impulse (New York, 1933), pp. 3-16, 79-87; Alice Felt Tyler, Freedom's Ferment: Phases of American Social History to 1860 (Minneapolis, 1944), pp. 489-499; Whitney Cross, The Burned-over District: The Social and Intellectual History of Enthusiastic Religion in Western New York, 1800-1850 (Ithaca, 1950), pp. 217-225.

The Nebraska struggle in Congress riveted the attention of New Yorkers for nearly six months. By dramatizing the issues involved, this extended conflict intensified the strain on the existing political order. The bill passed in the Senate on March 4, 1854,³³ but not before the upper chamber had witnessed one of the most acrimonious debates in its history. William H. Seward delivered a blistering attack, while the conservative Hamilton Fish, New York's other Whig Senator, silently opposed the measure.

With passage by the Senate, all eyes focused on the House. Here the bill experienced fluctuating fortunes, alternately encouraging its foes and then casting them into despair.³⁴ The press denounced the efforts of Douglas' floor manager, Representative William H. Richardson of Illinois, to rush the bill through the House without debate in the Committee of the Whole. They rejoiced when

³³Congressional Globe, 33 Congress, 1 Session, 520, 521, 550, 1321, 1324; Appendix, 788, 338-342, 550. The final division in the Senate, counting all who were paired and all who were absent but later indicated how they would have acted had they been present, was 41 to 17. Northern Democrats voted 15 for the bill, 5 against it; Southern Democrats, 15 for to 1 against (Sam Houston of Texas was the single Southern Democrat in opposition); Northern Whigs voted none for, 7 against; Southern Whigs voted 11 for, 2 against (John Bell of Tennessee and John Clayton of Delaware voted against); the two Free Soilers voted against (Salmon P. Chase of Ohio and Charles Sumner of Massachusetts). Russel, "Issues in the Congressional Struggle," 208-209.

³⁴New York Evening Post, April 27, May 9, 11, 1854; New York Tribune, April 27, May 8, 10, 13, 1854.

his plan failed.³⁵ Throughout the protracted legislative battle, a belief prevailed that Congress would respond to the protest movement--hence the consequent emphasis on public meetings and petitions.³⁶ Seward communicated to Weed Benton's opinion that the bill could be killed if enough demonstrations revealed its unpopularity.³⁷

Spring elections in New Hampshire, Connecticut, and Rhode Island added to the drama. President Pierce's native state was first, and (as it has done so often in its history) it accurately revealed public opinion. The Democrats suffered a sharp setback. Thurlow Weed, heartened by the result, wrote that "Nebraska has received a black eye if not a bloody nose in New Hampshire." He believed that if Connecticut followed suit, the bill could not pass.³⁸ The New York Tribune defied the House to pass the bill in the wake of the New Hampshire election.³⁹

³⁵See, for example, the New York Evening Post, February 6, 13, 27, 1854.

³⁶Ibid., February 13, 27, May 9, 1854.

³⁷William H. Seward to Thurlow Weed, January 8, 1854, Weed Papers, URL.

³⁸Weed to Hamilton Fish, March 21, 1854, Fish Papers, LC; Weed to George W. Patterson, March 31, 1854, Weed Papers, URL.

³⁹New York Tribune, March 17, 1854.

Democratic defeats in Connecticut and Rhode Island reinforced the pattern set in the first New England state.⁴⁰

Ignoring these signs of Northern opposition, Douglas and Pierce rallied their supporters. Stymied in the Committee of the Whole from March 21 to May 8, their bill suddenly moved from eighteenth to first on the agenda.⁴¹ The New York Tribune, pleading for more time, argued that Northern "mis-representatives" who aided Nebraska were not only false to their constituents but also to their professed ruling principle: "The men who are forcing the Nebraska question in the face of the popular demonstrations against it everywhere are guilty of treason against the very fundamental principle of popular sovereignty."⁴² This logic failed to persuade. After several stormy debates, capped by a thirty-six hour session, the House passed it on May 22, 1854 by a vote of 110 to 100.⁴³

The composition of the final division merits closer attention. Taking into account paired votes and all who were absent but subsequently indicated how they would

⁴⁰Ibid., April 7, 1854; New York Evening Post, June 28, 1854.

⁴¹New York Tribune, May 8, 1854; New York Evening Post, May 9, 1854; Roy F. Nichols, Franklin Pierce: Young Hickory of the Granite Hills (Philadelphia, 1931), pp. 337-338.

⁴²New York Tribune, May 13, 1854.

⁴³New York Evening Post, May 23, 25, 1854.

have voted, the bill passed by 115 to 104. Northern Democrats divided equally, 44 for and 44 against; Southern Democrats, 57 for and 2 against. Northern Whigs voted none for and 45 against; Southern Whigs, 14 for and 7 against. The six Free Soilers voted in the negative. New York's delegation stood 23 against and 10 for. All 9 Whigs were opposed; they were joined by 13 Democrats and one Free Soiler. 10 Democrats voted to sustain the bill, and half of these came from New York City.⁴⁴

This vote destroyed the second American party system. Northern and Southern whigs, dividing along clear sectional lines, administered the coup de grace to their national organization. If the equal division of Northern Democrats is contrasted with the unanimity of their Southern brethren, it is apparent that the Democrats, too, had sustained a powerful blow.

In Washington, men were aware that the political situation had undergone a revolution. Observing the debate in the House, Preston King, a former Barnburner Congressman from St. Lawrence county, reported that caucuses were being held "on both sides in which the members meet as they are for and against the measure without other distinction of party." He noted that "as yet the demolition

⁴⁴Ibid.; Congressional Globe, 1 Session, 1254-55; Russel, "Issues in the Congressional Struggle," 209.

of party lines is confined to the repeal of the compromise-- but the conversation and opinion is pretty common and general--that past lines of party division will be obliterated with the Missouri line--if this bill passes."⁴⁵

Nebraska added a powerful new ingredient into the confusion of New York politics, but its long range impact remained uncertain. Men had declared their opposition to Nebraska, joined protest meetings, and flooded Congress with petitions. But what would they do next? Would they go beyond protest and take affirmative action? Would they seek to reverse the repeal of the Missouri Compromise? Would they form a new party for this purpose? Or, would they gradually forget the whole matter, grow complacent, and shift their attention to other issues? This last possibility loomed as a real danger to antislavery men. The Republican party was by no means inevitable, granting even the widespread and deeply felt wrath of the North. It must be remembered that Nebraska was not the only disruptive force operating upon the party system. The nativist and the temperance movements had also played a role in destroying the old political framework; the advocates of these causes would participate in the establishment

⁴⁵Preston King to Azariah Flagg, May 20, 1854, Flagg Papers, CU.

of any new partisan alignments. In 1854, no one could have predicted with certitude which issue would emerge as the paramount concern of the nation, or how many different parties would finally be established.

The temperance movement had deep roots in New York's history.⁴⁶ Like the antislavery cause, it derived its chief support in the Burned-over-region and its transplanted New Englanders. Evangelists preaching during the 1820's and 1830's included liquor along with slavery among the sins requiring eradication. The two evils were linked together by a logic which declared unremitting hostility to all kinds of human bondage--whether to a human or an alcoholic master.⁴⁷ Neal Dow of Portland, Maine, the leader of the temperance movement, testified to the fellowship between the workers in these two crusades:

The prohibitory movement received invaluable assistance from the distinctively anti-slavery element in the state that from 1842 to the organization of the Republican party in 1854 maintained a political organization in Maine known first as the Liberty party, and afterwards as the Free Soil...Most of the leaders in each reform were interested and active in both, exerting their influence to make the efforts for one contribute to the development of the other, as far as it could be done consistently and with prudence. To

⁴⁶For a general history of the temperance cause, see John A. Krout, The Origins of Prohibition (New York, 1967).

⁴⁷Cross, Burned-over District, pp. 211-216; Tyler, Freedom's Ferment, pp. 318-319.

this end the state and county gatherings of both agitations were generally held upon succeeding days, that those attending the one might more conveniently participate in the other. 48

Dow's observation would also apply in the Empire State, where similar cooperation was the rule.

During the first four decades of the nineteenth century, temperance advocates had refused to consider prohibitory legislation as a proper means of securing their goal. Confident in the ultimate success of their cause, they relied entirely on argument and example to make converts. Their movement progressed, but not rapidly enough for the impatient. Persuasion could be woefully frustrating: a man would acknowledge the evils of liquor one day and be found hopelessly drunk the next. As hope diminished in the efficacy of exhortation, reformers turned to coercive legislation. They reasoned that the powers of the state must be harnessed to help sinners help themselves. 49

When Neal Dow formed the Maine Temperance Union in 1837, he warned his associates that persuasion alone could not secure their object and that legislation would be necessary. He finally obtained his long sought goal, when on June 2, 1851, the Maine legislature passed a bill

⁴⁸Neal Dow, The Reminiscences of Neal Dow (Portland, 1890), pp. 306-307; For a modern scholar's view of the integral relationship between the antislavery and the temperance causes, see Louis Filler, The Crusade Against Slavery, 1830-1860 (New York, 1960), pp. 38-40.

⁴⁹Krout, Origins of Prohibition, pp. 303-304.

forbidding the manufacture or sale of intoxicating liquor within the state. This measure, subsequently known as the "Maine Law," became the model for similar prohibition⁵⁰ movements in other states.

Even before Dow's success, sentiment for restrictive legislation had been growing in New York. In 1850, the New York division of the Sons of Temperance, representing 26,500 contributing members, announced its intention to strive for a prohibitory law. At the same time, the Journal of the American Temperance Union called upon the legislature⁵¹ to cancel liquor licenses.

State Senator Myron H. Clark led the prohibitionist forces in the New York legislature. He represented the twenty-ninth district, which included Ontario and Livingston counties, an area deeply influenced by the religious idealism of New England immigrants. In 1852, Clark introduced a bill to suppress drinking houses and tippling shops, but it made little progress. Undaunted, restrictionists tried again the following year, this time imitating the provisions of the Maine Law. The Senate approved this measure by a vote of seventeen to thirteen; however, the

⁵⁰Ibid., pp. 283-296.

⁵¹John A. Krout, "The Maine-Law in New York Politics," Proceedings of the New York State Historical Association, XVIII (July, 1936), 262.

Assembly killed it by the small margin of two votes.⁵²

Encouraged by their near success, Maine Law advocates entered confidently into the fall campaign to capture the 1854 legislature. They followed the strategy of endorsing candidates from the two major parties rather than risk defeat as a separate organization. Their plan worked: although the canvass of 1853 appeared as a strong Whig victory, it concealed the victor's dependence on temperance support.⁵³

When the legislature convened in 1854, Clark insisted that promises made during the campaign be kept. The Senate passed a prohibition bill by a two-thirds majority, and two weeks later the Assembly concurred by a vote of seventy-eight to forty-two.⁵⁴ However in late March, Governor Horatio Seymour vetoed the bill. During the canvass of 1852, Seymour had hinted that he would approve a prohibitory law; but he refused to sign the measure set before him, because he deemed it unconstitutional.⁵⁵

The Governor's action aggravated the liquor question. Vowing to continue the struggle, temperance advocates

⁵²Ibid., p. 263.

⁵³Ibid., pp. 264-265.

⁵⁴Ibid., p. 265.

⁵⁵Seymour's veto is printed in Charles Z. Lincoln, ed., Messages from the Governors of New York State, Vol. 4 (Albany, 1909), p. 687 and the New York Evening Post, April 1, 1854.

began to concentrate their energies on the gubernatorial campaign of 1854. Nebraska now had a powerful new rival for the attention of the electorate.

In addition to its tie with antislavery feeling, the temperance cause was also allied to another strong movement--nativism. Among the motives influencing prohibitionists, there existed the desire to strike a blow at immigrants, especially the Irish Catholics, who were allegedly so fond of liquor. Although deeply resented by the foreign born, agitation for the Maine Law represented only an oblique way of demonstrating nativist sentiment. At this time, latent intolerance had given rise to a powerful new organization dedicated to discriminatory policies.

Mutual hostility between Catholics and Protestants was a heritage brought over from Great Britain. New Englanders whose Puritan ancestors had fled their mother country because they considered the Anglican Church tainted with "Romanism" were particularly responsive to anti-Catholic agitation. Since by the mid-nineteenth century over one-half of New Yorkers claimed descent from New Englanders, this made the state a potential seed ground for anti-Cath-

56

olic bigotry.

The migration of three million immigrants to the United States during the decade 1846-1855, of whom a great many were Catholic Germans and Irish, aggravated the pre-existing tendency toward religious intolerance. The relative percentages of immigrants to native born inhabitants in both the city and state of New York had their greatest increase in this ten year period. In 1845, 7.52% of the state's population had been born abroad; by 1855, this total had risen to 18.54%. In 1845, 16.14% of the City's population had been born abroad; by 1855, this figure had increased to 36.93%.⁵⁷

A portion of the crusading spirit which New Yorkers possessed in such abundance manifested itself in a desire to purify the nation from vestiges of privilege or "aristocracy." This aim appeared threatened by the new immigrant wave. The devotion of Catholics to a religious hierarchy with a foreign sovereign at its pinnacle seemed⁵⁸ incompatible with Democratic institutions. The newcomers'

⁵⁶Ellis, "Yankee Invasion of New York," 3-17.

⁵⁷United States Census, 1860, p. XIX; New York State Census, 1865, p. LXXXIX.

⁵⁸Alice F. Tyler makes the point that Democratic idealism spilled over into nativism in New York. Tyler, Freedom's Ferment, p. 351.

religion was not the only reason for animosity. The Irish, in particular, were excoriated for their poverty, clan-nishness, and alleged riotous behavior. All these factors combined to foster doubt in their suitability for American citizenship.

The Irish, however, had no doubts about their right to equality. Their eagerness sharpened by centuries of oppression in their native land, they were determined to exercise all their prerogatives. Wealthy Whig merchants, accustomed to the political control and the choice offices of New York City, were outraged when the Irish failed to show them deference. Hibernians expected rewards for their partisan zeal, and they obtained many plums in the City as well as the state. Disappointed office seekers played a major role in nativist agitation.

The accumulated grievances of New York City's native born crystallized into the American-Republican movement of 1844-1845. Appealing for aid from the native American rank-and-file of both parties, this organization charged the Democratic and the Whig leadership with pandering to naturalized citizens. It nominated a Whig, James Harper, a book publisher and a strong temperance advocate, for mayor in the April, 1844 election. Conservative Whigs sensed the trend and aided his campaign. Emboldened by Harper's victory, they urged a fusion ticket with the American-Republicans for the fall election. This, they

argued, would insure the success of the Henry Clay-Theodore Frelinghuysen ticket by riding the crest of nativist excitement.⁵⁹

Upstate Whigs led by the Seward, Weed, Greeley partnership had grave doubts about this course of action. They were reluctant to abandon their hope that they might eventually gain the support of naturalized citizens, a policy inaugurated when Seward made his proposal to subsidize parochial school education with state funds. Moreover, they perceived that nativism was a two edged sword; the conservative Whigs who sought to wield it were not only eager to cut down the Democrats, but might also turn it against Seward and his friends. Furthermore, it was feared that a nativist coalition, while politically advantageous in New York City, could wreck the party's chances in the state and the nation. Whigs would be accused of intolerance against Roman Catholics and lose thousands of votes.⁶⁰

Perhaps the urgency of carrying New York for Clay and the prospect of gaining a large number of Democratic votes overcame Seward's anxieties, for he consented to a Whig and American-Republican fusion ticket. Even Horace

⁵⁹Ira M. Leonard, "The Rise and Fall of the American-Republican Party in New York City, 1843-1845," NYHSQ, L (April, 1966), 166-168, 182.

⁶⁰Ibid., 181-182.

Greeley agreed to this policy. The coalition secured the success of the American-Republican candidates, but it did not help Clay. Democrats split their ticket, supporting the fusionists in local contests and returning to their own party's nominee for President, James K. Polk.⁶¹

The result confirmed Seward's premonitions. Now certain that prejudice polluted the progressive image which he had striven to give the Whig party and that fusion had defeated Clay, he turned to eradicate the nativist menace. The following year, the Whigs withdrew their support from the American-Republicans, and Harper's bid for re-election failed. Although the party lingered on for two more years, its strength was broken by the Whig defection.⁶²

These events influenced the reactions of Whig politicians toward the Know-Nothing movement of the 1850's. Seward, Weed, and Greeley refused to consider any affiliation with nativists. Many conservative Whigs, however, were angered by this decision; they had found anti-Catholic bigotry a powerful weapon against the Democrats and the Irish. This resentment widened the breach between the emergent radical and Silver Gray factions. The conservatives' alienation worsened when Seward supported the

⁶¹Ibid., 182-184.

⁶²Ibid., 184-191.

anti-Rent movement, but reached the breaking point over the militant antislavery stand of the Auburn statesman. Silver Grays looked back to the events of 1844-1845 and perceived that a nativist organization might be retooled into an engine of destruction for their former ally.

Political nativism failed to reach full stride in the 1840's, but organizations established in this decade paved the way for the Know-Nothings of the 1850's. In 1844, a secret fraternal society known as the Order of United Americans (or O.U.A.) appeared in New York City. Most of its original organizers were businessmen. This group, dedicating itself to nativist objectives, had a rapid growth and by 1851 it had fifty-three chapters.⁶³

When the Order engaged in politics, it reflected the views of its most influential members, conservative whigs. In 1848, it opposed Seward's elevation to the United States Senate, and two years later, it cooperated with the Union Safety Committee's effort to build support for the Compromise of 1850. This last activity unveiled an important new element in the developing nativist creed--a devotion to the Union.⁶⁴ This combination of anti-Catholicism, Unionism, and clandestine activity captured the imagination

⁶³ Thomas J. Curran, "The Know-Nothings of New York State" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, 1963), pp. 70-74.

⁶⁴ Ibid., pp. 74-82.

of Silver Gray Whigs. Here was a weapon tailored to their needs; if used carefully, it could thwart both abolitionism and Catholicism, deliver a crushing blow to Seward and his allies, and elevate conservatives to a position of power.

The reluctance of the O.U.A. to support Daniel Webster for President in 1852 caused many Silver Grays to gravitate toward a new organization, the Order of the Star Spangled Banner, which became better known as the Know-Nothings. Founded in the spring of 1850, this society also emphasized the need for secrecy. It sought to influence the nominations of the two major parties by endorsing only native born citizens for office. To prevent dissension, it eschewed the divisive issues of slavery and temperance. Almost defunct by 1852, it acquired a new lease on life from⁶⁵ the infusion of new blood.

Differences between the O.U.A. influx and the original members of the Star Spangled Banner group sapped its strength until these were resolved with the formation of

⁶⁵Ibid., pp. 83-89. When Silver Gray Whigs began to dominate the Know-Nothing organization is not precisely known. Robert J. Rayback writes that such Fillmore Whigs as Daniel Ullman, Daniel Barnard, and Erastus Brooks entered the Order following the canvass of 1853, and by May of 1854 they controlled it. Thomas J. Curran agrees substantially with Rayback, but believes Silver Gray strength to have longer antecedents: "It seems more likely that the Silver Grays were exercising some control in the Order prior to the election of 1853." See Ibid., p. 104 and Robert J. Rayback, Millard Fillmore: Biography of a President (Buffalo, 1959), p. 38.

the Grand Council on May 11, 1854. James W. Barker assumed the presidency of the Council as his reward for conciliating the rival factions. Barker, a wealthy dry goods merchant and a former Whig, earned recognition as an opponent of Seward when he joined the campaign of New York City businessmen to promote acceptance of the Compromise of 1850.⁶⁶

Barker quickly demonstrated his capacity, for the Know-Nothings enjoyed a phenomenal growth under his leadership. The Order spread rapidly throughout the state, but this failed to satisfy its leaders, whose ambitions were national. They had long harbored the dream of a new conservative party which would replace the Seward tainted Whig organization. They took a long stride toward their objective with the establishment of the first National Grand Council on June 14, 1854.⁶⁷ Barker was also selected president of this body. New York City nativism, strengthened by the pro-Union attitudes and political experience of the Silver Grays, would soon spread.

The remarkable appeal of Know-Nothingism was a product of many factors. Two recent events contributed to its expansion. The visit of the Papal Nuncio, Archbishop Gaetano Bedini, charged with the task of settling disputes regarding Church property, aroused bitter resentment. President Pierce's appointment of James Campbell of Penn-

⁶⁶Curran, "Know-Nothings of New York," p. 65; Robert R. Rowe, Dictionary of American Biography, 1964 edition, p. 605.

⁶⁷Curran, "Know-Nothings of New York," pp. 108-109.

sylvania, a Catholic, as Post-Master-General also aroused fears. Age old religious prejudice combined with concern over the country's capacity to absorb so many newcomers made its contribution. The uniqueness of the organization, the opportunity for camaraderie, and the paraphernalia⁶⁸ of exotic rituals, grips, and pass words enticed many. A fear that the slavery issue must be quieted lest it break up the Union motivated conservative Know-Nothings in the North and the South.

Another element in nativist strength was its integral relationship with other evangelical reform movements. It is noteworthy that the American-Republicans, although desiring to expand their power throughout the state, were⁶⁹ unsuccessful in northern, central, and western New York. Why did upstate men react so differently a decade later? Certainly, the superior organization of the Know-Nothings combined with their missionary zeal played an important role. But we must also remember the simultaneous growth of the

⁶⁸Louis D. Scisco placed great weight on the attractive novelty of a secret political organization in his explanation of nativist appeal in the rural counties of the state. Louis D. Scisco, Political Nativism in New York State (New York, 1901), p. 12. It is interesting that only a generation before, central and western New York had been aroused to a high pitch of fury against another secret organization, the Free Masons. See Tyler, Freedom's Ferment, pp. 351-358.

⁶⁹Curran, "Know-Nothings of New York," p. 62; Leonard, "Rise and Fall of the American-Republicans," pp. 181-182.

antislavery and temperance movements in 1854. These and nativism were often looked upon as a common cause, and, in the estimation of their adherents, they shared a common enemy. Many believed that before they could restrict slavery they must first overcome Irish immigrant opposition.⁷⁰

The effect of the Kansas-Nebraska Act and the temperance and nativist movements was to further disrupt the already decadent party system. The Whig organization dissolved under the strain and the Democratic party was damaged. The repercussions of these events left the New York political situation in chaos. Thousands of former Whigs and Democrats abandoned their old ties and were attracted to new alignments. Anti-Nebraska protests inspired an attempt to build a new fusion party. Nativists launched the Know-Nothing organization, which made rapid progress across the nation. Temperance advocates eagerly pressed their demands and threatened to form their own political organization. These three causes competed with one another for the attention of the electorate.

It is essential for an understanding of the political revolution in New York during the years 1854-1856 to an-

⁷⁰William G. Bean stresses the importance of anti-slavery sentiment in promoting political nativism. In Massachusetts, this was more important than the religious motive. William G. Bean, "Puritan versus Celt, 1850-1860," NEQ, VII (March, 1934), pp. 70-89.

preciate the integral relationship between antislavery, temperance, and nativist emotions. All three of these crusades appealed to the descendants of New England farmers in the Burned-over-region. Protestant evangelicalism had taken deep root in this area and had made it the center of crusading zeal in the state. Voters in the "infected district" soon confronted the problem of a choice between the three movements. Western and central New York became the critical battleground in the struggle to establish a paramount political issue and a dominant political party. Politicians were caught in this whirlpool of religious idealism as they attempted to create a new political system to replace the one that had been destroyed. We turn now to their perplexities and their decisions.

CHAPTER 2

The Softs

The Kansas-Nebraska bill presented New York Soft Shells with an immediate crisis. The reopening of the slavery controversy threatened to destroy the fragile alliance between Barnburners and moderate Hunkers which had been based upon the finality of the Compromise of 1850. Many Barnburners had joined the Free Soilers in 1848 to seek revenge against the Southern wing of the Democratic party and its Northern allies. However, there were others who had bolted because of their sincere anti-slavery views. These had reluctantly joined the Soft Shell amalgam, but they eagerly looked for some way to revive the defiant spirit of 1848. Douglas' measure afforded them the opportunity for which they had waited. Other dilemmas confronted the Softs. How could they convince Southern Democrats of their loyalty to the national party if they failed to aid the Nebraska bill? How could they maintain control over the President's patronage unless they backed his policy? But if they did support this new course, how could they hold the allegiance of a people almost in insurrection against the Administration?

The Soft Shells experienced a period of anxious uncertainty when the news reached them of Douglas' pro-

posal. One vital matter--the President's attitude toward the measure--remained in doubt. Tammany Hall politician Lorenzo B. Shepard asked the Softs' political chieftain, Secretary of State William L. Marcy, for enlightenment on this subject. George W. Newell, a close associate of the Secretary for many years, was also confused. "We are in a fog here," he acknowledged, "as everybody seems to be, what the Nebraska business means--what Douglas is driving at--whether the administration acts on compulsion or con amore."¹

As it became clear that the Administration would accord its warmest support to Douglas, premonitions of disaster dominated the Secretary of State's mail. One Soft considered the bill a complete mistake. He did not hold congressional compromises sacrosanct; in fact, he believed non-interference in territorial affairs as the best rule. His objections were of a practical nature: Nebraska was "ill-timed, unnecessary, the motive too palpable, and the success too uncertain." Another politician expressed a common attitude of doom: "I go for it against my own convictions of its wisdom, because I believe the Administration is committed to it, but in doing so, I can

¹Lorenzo B. Shepard to Marcy, January 18, 1854, George W. Newell to Marcy, January 25, 1854, Marcy Papers, LC.

not shut my eyes to the consequences that is [sic] sure to follow."²

The Soft Shell press revealed the severe strain unleashed upon the party. Editors were torn between loyalty for the Administration and the mood of the people. Isaac Butts, the editor of the Rochester Union, expressed the dismay of his fellow journalists. He regretted the Administration's support of Douglas, for it had chosen a weak position. It had "offended its friends and exposed itself to the jeers of its enemies." Butts had been forced into opposition, because he knew that Nebraska would "be regarded as an insult by a large portion of the North--not abolitionist or free soilers; and that it would be regarded as a breach of faith pledged in 1820, and 1852 and hence lead to renewed divisions and sectional parties."³

The Albany Atlas was the most important paper to revolt against the new policy. On January 9, 1854, the Atlas condemned Douglas' bill before the editors knew Pierce's position on the measure. Arguing that long-standing compromises should not be altered by a temporary majority, they deplored the unnecessary reopening of slavery agi-

²Theodore Sedgwick to Marcy, February 4, 1854, George R. Davis to Marcy, February 21, 1854, Marcy Papers, LC. See also S. M. Shaw to Marcy, February 14, 1854 and J. J. Jones to Marcy, February 17, 1854, Marcy Papers, LC.

³Isaac Butts to Abel French [Marcy's secretary], February 8, 1854, Marcy Papers, LC.

tation by unscrupulous politicians. The President's paper, the Washington Union, promptly attacked this editorial and threatened to expel from the party any Democrat who stood in the way of the Nebraska bill.⁴ This menacing response enraged the Atlas' editors and engendered a controversy which might have been avoided.

Marcy asked his friend Newell for an explanation of the Atlas-Union editorial war; he was deeply concerned that the Softs' organ would reinforce doubts about the fidelity of Barnburners to the Democratic party. Newell replied that he had tried to avert a confrontation by persuading William Cassidy, an editor of the Atlas, to subdue his opposition to Nebraska. Cassidy had agreed and promised to write another editorial to mitigate the effect of his first. But the Union's attack prevented this retreat--it would be interpreted as knuckling-under⁵ to the Administration.

The matter did not end here. Still smarting from their rebuke, the editors of the Atlas published a new assault on Nebraska. They ridiculed the Union's view that the bill fulfilled the Compromise of 1850 and the Baltimore platform of 1852 and that it would quiet agitation. They averred that nothing in the Compromise of 1850 sought to override the Missouri line, as the latter

⁴Albany Atlas, January 9, 16, 1854; Albany Argus, January 18, 1854.

⁵Newell to Marcy, January 13, 1854, Marcy Papers, LC.

applied to the Nebraska territory; and the fact that agitation had not been silenced was painfully apparent.

The Atlas urged Congress to recede from this dangerous ground and to adopt the territorial bill of 1853 which⁶ had kept the Missouri Compromise intact.

Newell attempted to soothe Marcy's anxiety that this latest outburst was a signal for a general Soft Shell rebellion against the Administration. It was nothing so fundamental as that. It merely reflected "a sort of⁷ vague apprehension of the crushing process" and a feeling that a certain self-respect demands the appearance of dissent from what it has always opposed and what it claims to⁸ be hostile to the Compromise and the platform." The fear of being "crushed out" of the party derived from the Union's assertion that the Nebraska bill would con-

⁶Albany Atlas, January 26, 1854.

⁷Pierce's Attorney-General, Caleb Cushing, considered by many contemporaries the most influential man in the Cabinet, gained notoriety for his phrase "crushing out," by which he meant purging dissident Democrats from the party. See Nichols, Pierce, p. 290.

⁸Newell to Marcy, January 27, 1854, Marcy Papers, LC.

9

stitute a test of Democratic orthodoxy. Newell hoped that the President's newspaper could be made to temper its remarks in the future; it could better influence the Northern mind, if it displayed greater calm and dispassion. He believed, moreover, that the less responsibility the Administration had for the abrogation of the Missouri
10
Compromise the better.

A change in the Union's management failed to mollify this dispute. In early March, the paper did backtrack from a strict Nebraska test; it announced that the President would not regard Democrats who differed on details of the
11
bill as party enemies. But with the passage of Douglas' bill in late May, the Union reverted to its former position. It now maintained that the law's approval by a majority of Democrats made it party policy. The Albany Atlas rejected this interpretation and charged that the law owed "its vitality to the votes of Southern Whigs and northern mis-representatives without whose concurrence it could not have been forced on the country." It applauded Albany's

⁹Washington Union, January 22-31, February 17, 24, 1854; Nichols, Pierce, p. 336. Douglas also considered the Nebraska bill a test of loyalty to the Democratic party. He wrote that "the principle of this Bill will form the test of Parties, and the only alternative is either to stand with the Democracy or to rally under Seward, John Van Buren and Co." Douglas to Charles H. Lanphier, February 13, 1854, in Robert W. Johannsen, ed. The Letters of Stephen A. Douglas, 1813-1861 (Urbana, 1961), pp. 283-284.

¹⁰Newell to Marcy, February 15, 1854, Marcy Papers, LC.

¹¹Washington Union, March 1, 2, 1854; Nichols, Pierce, p. 336.

Congressman, the Hard Shell Rufus Peckham, for obeying the wishes of nine-tenths of his constituents. Although written to satisfy Southerners, Nebraska would boomerang against them. The spirit of ruthless aggression which it had spawned would lead "toward a relentless and exterminating warfare upon the system it was designed to benefit."¹²

The Atlas-Union blowup demonstrated the strained relationship between New York Soft Shells and the national party. Democrats throughout the country, but especially in the South, had not forgotten the Barnburner bolt of 1848. Professor Roy F. Nichols has shown that Southern insistence for repeal of the Missouri Compromise was partly designed as a loyalty test for former free soilers.¹³ Professor Eric Foner has revealed the Barnburners' resentment against similar tests in the past; they believed that Southern pressures for pro-slavery concessions damaged them with their own antislavery constituents.¹⁴ Thus it is not surprising that the Albany Atlas and most

¹²Albany Atlas, May 23, 27, 1854.

¹³Nichols, "Kansas-Nebraska Act," 201-204.

¹⁴Eric Foner, "The Wilmot Proviso Revisited," JAH, LVI (September, 1969), 269-271; Eric Foner, Free Soil, Free Labor, and Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party before the Civil War (New York, 1970), pp. 155-159.

Soft papers reacted to the Nebraska bill with such hostility; they accurately reflected the attitudes of Radical Democrats who regarded Douglas' measure as another unreasonable demand from the Southern wing of the party.

The Nebraska bill placed prominent Softs in an unenviable position. This is best illustrated by considering the dilemma of Secretary of State Marcy. Marcy never had an opportunity to offer an opinion on Nebraska before the President gave his written endorsement to Douglas. If he had, he would certainly have objected. It required little of the Secretary's political sagacity to realize that repeal of the Missouri Compromise would create havoc¹⁵ in the Northern states. But confronted with a fait accompli, he had either to resign or to accomodate him-

¹⁵Nathaniel P. Banks of Massachusetts gave this account of how Pierce consented to Repeal: "Douglas called upon the President to talk about Nebraska and by arrangement [David R.] Atchison [of Missouri] dropped in soon after and they lead Pierce along step by step until they got him to suggest their Amendment which was finally adopted and called the principle of the bill, himself. When he did so Douglas proposed to him to put the Amendment or proposition in writing. He did so at once. And that they hold as evidence against him and hence his inability to back out of his position. This was done without consulting with any member of his Cabinet who were quite taken by surprise when they learned what their Chief had done but none of them had courage enough to break their connexion [sic] with him!!" John Bigelow to Francis P. Blair, Sr., undated, Blair-Lee Papers, PU. Pierce had asked Douglas to consult Marcy before he went ahead with his plans. The Senator went to Marcy's home but did not find him in, and he made no further effort to see him. See Nichols, Pierce, p. 323.

16

self to this new policy. He chose the latter.

The Soft Shells' rebelliousness put Marcy into a difficult situation. He was trapped between his obligation to the President and the opposition of his followers at home. He knew, also, that he must not offend Southern Democrats, who scrutinized his every move. Marcy's dilemma of selecting two New York newspapers for the publication of official documents illustrated the awkwardness of his position. He wrote Governor Horatio Seymour that he had intended to confer this boon upon the Albany Atlas and the Utica Observer, but the situation had "changed since the opening of this Pandora's box--the Nebraska question." The Secretary feared that the Atlas had aroused the suspicion that it was a free soil journal which, masked for a time, had now come into the open. His endorsement of it, Marcy believed, would impair his strength in the Cabinet and receive a sinister interpretation in every part of the Union. He asked Seymour to suggest "two papers which had been at least silent on the subject." Marcy desired to avoid the charge of free soilism but was "un-

¹⁶ Reuben R. Fenton of Chautauqua county and some other Soft Shell Congressmen went to see Marcy to learn the meaning of the new policy. He asked their advice on his resignation which they opposed, fearing that he would be replaced by a Hard Shell. See Nichols, Pierce, p. 324. Marcy's biographer, Ivor D. Spencer, considered Marcy's decision "the most important of his life and certainly the most unfortunate. Against his better judgement, he had stayed in the Pierce administration and had even used his influence, half-heartedly, in favor of the unwise policy." Ivor D. Spencer, The Victor and the Spoils: A Life of William L. Marcy (Providence, 1959), p. 282.

willing to do an act which will look like making the support of that bill a test of democracy. Though I go for it myself I would not withhold my confidence from those who honestly oppose it. I sincerely wish the measure had not been thrown upon us; but it has been and we must meet the exigencies as well as we can." But the Soft press had become so hostile to Nebraska that Seymour could not help Marcy's quest.¹⁷

The matter of greatest importance to the Secretary of State and to other Soft Shell leaders was the maintenance of the Hunker-Barnburner alliance which constituted their faction. Radical Democrats had acquiesced to the Compromise of 1850 and the Baltimore platform of 1852 as the price of returning to the party. But would they accept the Nebraska bill--a measure antithetical to the Wilmot Proviso which they had once espoused? Or would they rally around discontented free soilers once again? David A Ogden, a close friend of Marcy, expressed the common concern that a bolt be prevented: "We shall stand or fall together but we must not break with the barnburners if it can be avoided." Ogden was optimistic that judicious handling could avoid a break, "and without any sacrifice¹⁸ of principle or position on our part."

¹⁷Marcy to Horatio Seymour, February 11, 15, 1854, typescripts, Horatio Seymour Papers, NYHS; Seymour to Marcy, February 21, 1854, Marcy Papers, LC.

¹⁸D. A. Ogden to Marcy, February 21, 1854, Marcy Papers, LC. Ogden was subsequently appointed United States Consul at Honolulu.

The Softs' apprehensions focused upon the former leader of the Radical Democrats, John Van Buren. Known as "Prince John" by his contemporaries, Van Buren derived his power from the combination of his illustrious parentage, his flamboyant personality, and his oratorical ability. In 1847 and 1848, he had led the Barnburner defection from the Democratic party and the alliance with the Free Soilers at Buffalo. Since 1849, when he supported a joint ticket of Barnburners and Hunkers, he had followed a conciliatory course. Although he acknowledged his dissatisfaction with the Fugitive Slave Law, he had urged acquiescence in the Compromise of 1850 and the Baltimore platform. Van Buren's power had been eclipsed by former Hunkers in the Soft Shell faction, especially Marcy and Seymour; they feared that he might use Nebraska as an excuse to lead a new free soil crusade.

These anxieties owed more to the nervousness of the Softs than to any overt threat from the ex-President's son. Newell informed Marcy that Van Buren had expressed his discontent with Douglas' scheme and his intention to speak at a protest meeting in New York City. But Newell was not overly alarmed, for he observed his mild tone.¹⁹ A series of letters between Van Buren and an ex-Senator

¹⁹Newell to Marcy, January 25, 1854, Marcy Papers, LC.

from Alabama, Jeremiah Clemens, were also distinguished
²⁰by their sobriety. John A. Dix, a prominent Barnburner
 politician and the Free Soil candidate for governor in
 1848, had even felt compelled to defend his friend against
 Benton's charge that Van Buren had shown insufficient
²¹zeal in opposition to Nebraska.

Despite "Prince John's" lack of menace, the Tammany
 Hall friends of Secretary Marcy took precautions that they
 would control any utterance from the Democratic General
 Committee on the Nebraska question. They also sought
 to follow the Secretary's counsel to avoid any precipitate
 declaration of policy lest it freeze Democrats into ir-
 reconcilable positions. John Cochrane, who enjoyed the
 lucrative position of Surveyor of the Port of New York,
 assured Marcy that he could control the General Committee.
 He would postpone action for the present, but when the
 Committee did speak out, it would pursue "a course of
 action that not only shall not embarrass but that shall
 confirm the Democratic Party." Cochrane's associate Lorenzo
 B. Shepard did not know what Van Buren planned, but he

²⁰New York Tribune, February 11, 1854.

²¹Dix wrote Benton that Van Buren had written and
 spoken freely against Repeal and had favored a meeting
 of leading Democrats in New York City. He curtailed his
 plans when he realized that the meeting would consist
 mainly of old free soil leaders and would do more harm
 than good. John A. Dix to Thomas Hart Benton, April 15,
 1854, John A. Dix Papers, CU.

was confident that his supporters were "in a very lean minority." He believed that more Barnburners would follow his lead than the free soil leader's. Shepard requested Marcy's ideas on proper resolutions for adoption by the General Committee. He thought they could be passed nearly unanimously; he would try to secure this result by keeping²² adverse members of the Committee away.

The Democratic General Committee met on February 2, 1854 and approved resolutions praising the Pierce administration and the Nebraska bill. The New York Evening Post promptly denounced these declarations as "feble, cowardly, indirect, and circumlocutory." Their timorous style, the Post declared, reflected their author's awareness that he spoke for Washington and not the people. Unruffled by this attack, Shepard sought to mollify the Barnburners. He reported to Marcy that he was doing all he could to quiet feeling, though Van Buren, he was told, was doing all he could to blow it up. He predicted success, nevertheless, for "the cooler Barnburners here approve what we've done and if he [John Van Buren] makes a fight, I think we'll satisfy you that he has not any strength here."²³

Attempting to keep the lid on Barnburner discontent,

²²John Cochrane to Marcy, January 23, 1854, Lorenzo B. Shepard to Marcy, January 26, 1854, Marcy Papers, LC.

²³New York Evening Post, February 4, 1854; Shepard to Marcy, February 7, 1854, Marcy Papers, LC.

Cochrane did not attend the vote of the General Committee. He felt that a confrontation between himself and Van Buren could only antagonize Radical Democrats. Cochrane explained his strategy to Marcy:

As weeks come around I believe that the whole Barnburner army will be found coming gradually up to the support of the Bill on the ground that it is better to leave the question to the people of the Territories--But if dissention [sic] and open dispute occurs, I should be fearful that the debate would be productive of discord--Although Mr. Van Buren has voted no to the Bill, yet if no violent onset is made on his position, it will be found not only that our friends throughout the Country will not follow him, but that he will be obliged to follow them. 24

These exertions to keep the shining knight of the Radical Democracy from leading a new bolt were expended on a man who no longer had the stomach for political warfare. Van Buren confided his thoughts to the Secretary of State to prevent mis-representation of his position. He acknowledged that he had opposed Marcy's selection for the Cabinet (he had favored John A. Dix), but the Secretary's just and honorable treatment of the Barnburners had reconciled him to his appointment. He believed that Pierce was ill-advised to have allowed a renewal of the slavery excitement. The great question of his administration, Van Buren had hoped, would "be 'stealing'--not stealing negroes but money...." He admitted that the Radical Democrats would oppose the Nebraska bill, and he

²⁴Cochrane to Marcy, February 9, 1854, Marcy Papers, LC.

hoped that Marcy would not urge them to vote for it. But so long as the Secretary dealt fairly with them, he would have their support. He desired Marcy, moreover, to take any stand on the Nebraska question that would sustain him in the Cabinet. Thus Van Buren served notice that he was prepared to put up only a mild resistance ²⁵ within the party rather than lead a new revolt.

"Prince John's" decision to pay only lip service to the free soil cause relieved the immediate pressure on Soft Shell federal office holders, but it did not solve the problem of keeping the Barnburners loyal. There were many other Democrats determined to resist the expansion of slavery. Such leaders as Preston King, John Bigelow, and William C. Bryant carefully bided their time before calling Radical Democrats to the abandoned standard of 1848.

The vital support which Tammany Democrats provided the Administration on the Nebraska question was threatened when a smoldering dispute over patronage flamed into an open revolt with the appointment of John McKeon as the United States District Attorney for the Southern District of New York. Because McKeon had openly professed to have voted the Hard Shell ticket in 1853, his selection enraged Lorenzo B. Shepard who had coveted the post for himself.

²⁵ John Van Buren to Marcy, February 12, 1854, Marcy Papers, LC.

Secretary Marcy, who was in receipt of angry letters from the Wigwam, suffered the keenest embarrassment. He was caught between his loyalties to the President and his
 26
 New York City associates.

The Secretary explained to Seymour why the President had appointed McKeon. Marcy believed he had a fair chance to secure Shepard's selection before the news broke that Seymour had offered a judgeship to Gilbert Dean, an anti-Nebraska Soft Congressman. This antagonized Pierce, and he resolved to grant no more favors to the Softs. Marcy feared that the President had been greatly misled about New York politics. He had pressed his advocacy of Shepard--and more particularly his opposition to McKeon--very far, perhaps too far. He was uncertain what the consequences would be, but at the present moment he was "as deeply mortified as a man can be...." This disclosure enraged Seymour
 27
 who threatened a public denunciation of the President.

McKeon's appointment led to a brief rebellion against Pierce. The Democratic General Committee, which had previously endorsed the Nebraska bill, now adopted a resolution sponsored by Fernando Wood which declared the new

²⁶Shepard to Marcy, June 28, July 7, 1854, Levi S. Chatfield to Marcy, July 10, 1854, Fernando Wood to Marcy, July 12, 1854, Elijah F. Purdy and Thomas Dunlap to Marcy, July 6, 1854, Marcy Papers, LC.

²⁷Marcy to Seymour, July 2, 1854, typescript, Seymour Papers, NYHS; Marcy to Seymour, July 12, 1854, Seymour to Marcy, July 6, 1854, Marcy Papers, LC.

District Attorney an unfaithful Democrat; it also criticized the President for fomenting dissension within the party. At the urging of Cochrane, Tammany rescinded its censure, but the narrow margin of victory reflected the²⁸ depth of discontent.

The Kansas-Nebraska Act exacerbated stresses within the Soft Shell organization and threatened to tear it apart. By reopening agitation over slavery, Douglas' measure underlined differences which divided Barnburners from moderate Hunkers and jeopardized the delicate harmony then existing. The Radical Democrats' resentment against this new test of party loyalty was only partially restrained by federal officeholders. Although John Van Buren had abandoned his commitment to the free soil cause, others were ready to take up the struggle. Soft Shell leaders confronted an impossible problem: they must support the Administration; they must please Southern Democrats, who might otherwise aid their Hard Shell rivals; yet, they must not alienate an electorate hostile to the Nebraska scheme. The party's newspapers reflected the tension within the Softs' ranks. Most editors were reluctant to defy the President; nevertheless, they yielded to public opinion. The response of the press, especially the bitter exchanges between the Albany Atlas and the Washington Union, embar-

²⁸New York Evening Post, July 12, August 4, 5, 1854.

passed Secretary of State Marcy and undermined confidence in New Yorkers' fidelity to the national party. Problems over patronage also afflicted the Softs, and these difficulties worsened with the Nebraska bill. In this crisis, it seemed that only one powerful force held the Softs together--the remarkably resilient bond of Democratic party loyalty. It remained to be seen whether this bond could withstand the prodigious strains exerted upon it.

CHAPTER 3

The Hards

New York Hard Shells were a threat to the harmony of the state and national Democratic parties. For over a decade, bitter factionalism between Barnburners and Hunkers and then between Hard Shells and Soft Shells had sapped the strength of the state organization. Disgruntled by their failure to secure the choicest plums of federal patronage, the Hards (also known as Adamantines) were eager to ruin the Pierce administration and its favorites, the Softs--and if necessary, the Democratic party. By dragging their quarrel into national politics, they added significantly to the tense political climate. They played an important role in the unfolding crisis.

The Hard Shells had determined upon a rule or ruin policy even before the introduction of the Kansas-Nebraska bill. Heedless of the delicate harmony established by the Democratic party after the Compromise of 1850, they seized upon the most potent weapon at hand--the charge of free soilism and abolitionism. Their organ, the Albany Argus, printed incessant attacks: "They [the Softs] know they can do more damage to the country and get better places for themselves by pretending (just at present) to be democrats, rather than abolitionists. And so in this way

the paradox of praising abolitionists--just a little, and professing democracy--a very great deal,--is entirely explained."¹ The Softs felt vulnerable to these charges because of the preponderance of Barnburners in their ranks and made every effort to discredit them.

The Hards tried to maneuver their rivals into a damaging position with respect to the slavery question. An instance of this type of harassment occurred during the spring of 1853. By introducing resolutions in the state legislature calling for the endorsement of the Baltimore platform of 1852, the Adamantines sought to embarrass Barnburners opposed to its approval of the Fugitive Slave Law.

Secretary of State Marcy feared that this move would harm both himself and the Softs unless the Radical Democrats went along. Consequently, he counselled that, like it or not, the resolutions must pass: "The radicals must not prove impracticable; for if they do, they will lose everything and the hards will gain their object...the radicals must go unflinchingly for the Baltimore resolutions...." The Barnburners' compliance with his wishes relieved Marcy's anxiety. He retaliated by setting his own snare; he forced his detractors to vote on a resolution approving the state

¹Albany Argus, January 9, 1854.

and national administrations.

This skirmish and similar encounters had a definite audience in mind--the Southern wing of the Democratic party. If they were to replace the Softs as the dominant faction in New York, the Hards knew that Southern help was essential. Sympathetic Senators could aid them by refusing to confirm Pierce's Soft Shell appointees, thereby forcing him to revise his patronage policies. Higher stakes were also involved. Because of the two-thirds majority required for the party's presidential nomination, anyone who had dreams of this office, and there were several among both Hards and Softs--including Secretary Marcy, Governor Horatio Seymour, and Daniel S. Dickinson--must have the support of Southern Democrats; therefore, no aspirant could afford even the suspicion that he was opposed to the Baltimore platform.

Arriving in Washington for the opening of the thirty-third Congress in December 1853, Hard Shell Congressmen tested to see if their efforts to create friction between Southern Democrats and the Administration had succeeded. They were disappointed. James Guthrie of Kentucky, the Secretary of the Treasury, reported that "the New York bolters do not get the sympathy they calculated upon." Marcy informed Seymour of the Hards' astonishment and chagrin at their impotence within the party caucus. They

²Marcy to Seymour, May 27, 1853, June 18, 1853, typescripts, Seymour Papers, NYHS.

had expected "to find the Cabinet tottering but soon ascertained that it was firmly seated." He accused the Adamantines of sending Edwin Croswell, an editor of the Albany Argus, southward

with full power to go as the members from that section wished provided they would recognize and reward the Hards for their present efforts to save the Union, but the South did not feel disposed to acknowledge the value of their faithful services and bore very complaisantly the reproaches of ingratitude.

Marcy concluded that "the hards are here very generally regarded as a faction having for their object the elevation of Dickinson. I have not heard of a single Southern member of Congress who sympathizes with them."³

The Hards' frustration increased when they entreated the House of Representatives to investigate the dismissal of Green C. Bronson, an Alenentine stalwart, formerly the Collector of the Port of New York. This move, a transparent ploy to elicit sympathy, failed. The House denied their request by a vote of 104 to 65. This incident revealed the strength of Democratic opposition to the President: twenty-eight Congressmen from New York and other states, who called themselves National Democrats, voted⁴ against the Administration.

On January 17, 1854, Francis Cutting, a New York

³James Guthrie to Seymour, December 2, 1853, Marcy to Seymour, December 4, 1853, typescripts, Seymour Papers, NYHS.

⁴New York Evening Post, January 4, 5, 1854.

City Adamantine, expressed the Hards' resentment on the House floor. Delving into the preceding decade of his state's history, he sought to demonstrate the continuity between the Soft Shells and the 1848 supporters of Martin Van Buren and the Hard Shells and the 1848 followers of Lewis Cass. He complained that the treacherous Softs were richly rewarded by the Administration, while the faithful Hards were left empty-handed. With his characteristic earthiness, the notorious Mike Walsh--gang leader, drunkard, and workingmens' advocate--also castigated the President.⁵

Theodore L. Westbrook, a freshman Congressman from Kingston, delivered the major rebuttal for the Softs. He denied any direct line of descent between the Barnburner-Hunker factions of 1848 and the present division. He enumerated the names of well-known Softs who had supported Cass in 1848 and of prominent Hards who had been Free Soilers at that time. He defended his political associates against allegations of hostility toward Southern rights: when the Hards bolted from the 1853 state convention and thus inaugurated the split, the majority of remaining delegates "were men who [had] stood up for the South...." Moreover, they adopted resolutions that were "as broad and as national as national can be...." Westbrook charged that the real reason for dissidence was simply that Pres-

⁵Albany Argus, January 19, 20, 23, 28, 1854; Congressional Globe, 33 Congress, 1 Session, 190-194.

ident Pierce called Governor Marcy to his Cabinet and
⁶
 not Daniel S. Dickinson.

These departures into partisan history failed to undermine support for the Administration. Representative William R. Smith of Alabama criticized the Hards for their selfish factionalism and compared the hard-Soft controversy to the Lilliputians' war over which end to break an egg.⁷ No Southern member rose to dispute Smith or to praise the Adamintines. This result confirmed Marcy's appraisal that the Hards would receive no solace from the South, which considered them merely as disappointed office-seekers.

How this intransigence to recognize their claims infuriated the Hards is seen in a remarkable letter from Daniel S. Dickinson to a Southern friend, just prior to the election of 1860. In this long epistle, Dickinson lamented the consistent failure of the South to support her true friends, the National Democrats of the North. He began with New York's split delegation of Barnburners and Hunkers at the Baltimore convention in 1848. The former professed free soilism while the latter stood on the national platform. But through the votes of Southerners,

⁶New York Evening Post, January 19, 20, 23, 28, February 3, 1854; Albany Argus, January 23, 30, 1854; Congressional Globe, 33 Congress, 1 Session, Appendix, 117-120.

⁷Congressional Globe, 33 Congress, 1 Session, 191-192.

both delegations were treated equally. This was an early and fatal blow, for it gave life and perpetuity to free soil heresies and their advocates: "It prostrated the constitutional landmark, and tumbled all together to scramble without well-defined principles for mere party leadership and official station."⁸

Dickinson then gave his version of the Hard-Soft split: "General Pierce had been elected, and although elected as a 'Hard' or National man, he early took the 'free-soilers' into favor and ultimately removed the few 'Hards' he had appointed and gave the entire patronage of his administration, to the 'free-soilers' and 'Softs'." When the "Hards" appealed to their Southern friends for aid," they "received neither encouragement, support or sympathy...." In 1853, the two factions separated at the state convention at Syracuse. Again the Hards appealed for Southern support but met with rebuff. Dickinson went on to describe later instances of disappointment, but what has been outlined here is sufficient to appreciate his bitterness toward Southern Democrats.⁹

Douglas' Kansas-Nebraska bill was useful for the embattled Hard Shells, for here was an opportunity to expose their rivals' free soilism. So fortuitous did

⁸ D. S. Dickinson to Theo N. Corn, October 21, 1860, Daniel S. Dickinson Miscellaneous Manuscripts, NYHS.

⁹ Ibid.

this measure seem, that some speculated whether the Hards were partially responsible for its introduction. The seasoned political observer and historian Jabez D. Hammond believed that the idea of repealing the Missouri Compromise originated with the Hards for the double purpose of gaining the support of the slave-holding states and of exposing the Softs to them. It was obvious to Hammond that if the Softs went for Kansas-Nebraska, they would disgrace themselves with their constituents.¹⁰

Subsequent historical research has failed to uncover any direct evidence of Hard Shell collusion with Douglas. There remains, however, the intriguing possibility that Pierce's political troubles in New York persuaded him to support Nebraska. Angered by his failure to secure the French Mission, James Gordon Bennett, the owner of the New York Herald, had turned his editorial wrath against Pierce and aided the Hards. He offered a large reward for the President's "Scarlet Letter," in which it was claimed, he had endorsed Van Buren in 1848. Upset by this and other charges of free soilism, Pierce tried to vindicate himself. He may have imagined that Soft endorsement of the bill would remove any lingering Southern doubts about himself and his New York friends. Seward first interpreted the bill in these terms--as a maneuver by

¹⁰ Jabez D. Hammond to Seward, February 28, 1854, Seward Papers, URL.

11

Pierce to deprive the Hard Shells of ammunition.

The President was also concerned about his relationship with the Senate; he knew that its support was essential to achieve his goals. His appointment of Heman J. Redfield, a Soft, to replace the dismissed Hard, Greene C. Bronson, as Collector of the Port of New York had been delayed. Newell and Marcy were anxious about Redfield's confirmation. Newell informed the Secretary that he had remonstrated with the Atlas' editors about their article attacking the Nebraska bill because, among other things, it jeopardized their friend's approval. Perhaps it was coincidence, but only a few days after Pierce had consented to the repeal of the Missouri Compromise, Redfield was confirmed¹² by the unanimous vote of the Democratic Senators present.

Perceiving their chance, the Hards redoubled their efforts to ingratiate themselves with Southern Democrats and embarrass the Softs. The Albany Argus immediately announced its agreement with the principle of popular sovereignty or non-intervention, whereby territorial settlers would decide the status of slavery for themselves. Shortly thereafter, prestigious Adamantines declared themselves in favor of repealing the Missouri Compromise. Dickinson

¹¹Seward to Weed, January 7, 1854, Weed Papers, URL; New York Evening Post, January 16, 1854; Nichols, Pierce, p. 318.

¹²George W. Newell to Marcy, January 27, 1854, Marcy Papers, LC; Nichols "Kansas-Nebraska Act," 201-202; Nichols, Pierce, pp. 322-324.

set a pattern by his early support; Charles O'Connor, whom Fierce had removed from his post as United States District Attorney, followed; Bronson renounced an earlier position opposed to slavery extension, thus falling into line with other Hards.^{12a}

Local Hard Shell political organizations also went on record. New York City Hards adopted pro-Nebraska resolutions as early as January 31, 1854. Meetings held in Brooklyn, Jefferson county, and Albany concurred. By February 14, 1854, thirty-seven Adamantine newspapers supported Repeal. The Albany Argus praised Douglas for a "masterly vindication of the measure and a lucid exposition of the whole Subject." When the Senator briefly passed through New York City, such well-known Hards as Augustus and Richard Schell and Judge Samuel Beardsley honored him with a dinner.¹³

If Pierce believed he had conferred a boon on his friends in New York, his recipients received it as a curse. After announcing their support of the Nebraska bill, the Adamantines opened their batteries upon the Softs. They were confident that this time they possessed an issue which would "smoke out" the antislavery leanings of their rivals. A friend of the Secretary of State informed him that the

^{12a}Albany Argus, January 10, February 4, March 15, 16, 1854; New York Evening Post, March 11, 15, 1854.

¹³Albany Argus, February 4, 6, 8, 11, 14, 22, 1854; New York Herald, June 9, 1854.

Hards in Sullivan and Dutchess counties were exultant. At last they believed, they had cornered the President; he would now have to dismiss a part or even all of his Cabinet or be set aside himself.¹⁴

The hostility of the Soft press to Nebraska has been described. This "insubordination" delighted the Adamantines, for it seemed to confirm what they had long been saying. The Albany Argus incessantly attacked its chief rival, the Albany Atlas. It had this comment when the Atlas came out against repeal of the Missouri Compromise: "The Atlas, which has so long maintained a position of armed neutrality between the camps of Baltimore [the Democratic convention of 1852] and Buffalo [the Free Soil convention of 1848] has renewed its adhesion to the latter." The Hard Shell organ hoped that "the rottenness of the root upon which the Administration leaned...is evident to disinterested observers abroad, as at home." The Argus even tendered an olive branch to the President:

And when the Administration, which has forgotten their [the Hard Shell's] proven heroism and devotion in the past, shall turn from later favorites with disgust and dismay, it may find in the national democracy of New York, a band of men whose unbought support it might have earlier secured, had it not imagined the

¹⁴J. J. Jones to Marcy, February 7, 1854, Marcy Papers, LC. Jones added, however, that the Hard Shell rank-and-file shared the opposition of the people. See also S. M. Shaw to Marcy, February 14, 1854, Marcy Papers, LC.

need of purchasing it from others. 15

Since this overture received no response, the Argus continued its war with Pierce and his newspaper, the Washington Union. It ridiculed the Union's presentation of two pro-Nebraska editorials as exemplary of general Democratic opinion while ignoring the condemnations from the Soft Shell press. To illustrate its point, the Argus prepared its own synopsis of printed opinion. It could find but two Soft journals advocating Nebraska, while counting twenty-six in opposition. In contrast, all National Democratic papers supported it. The Argus dared the Union to copy its list and "show the South the complexion of the men into whose hands every appointment has been surrendered--upon whom the title of 'Administration party' has been conferred 'by authority'--and whom the democracy of New York have been bidden to follow as their leaders and teachers in democratic faith."¹⁶

Although delighted by the discomfiture of their political enemies, National Democrats were uncertain what course to pursue. Edmund Burke, editor of the New Hampshire Reporter and the arch-enemy of the President, counselled a policy of opposition to Nebraska unless two conditions were met: either Pierce repudiated the free soil

¹⁵Albany Argus, January 10, 12, 14, 18, 1854.

¹⁶Ibid., January 14, February 8, 1854.

faction of the party or Southern Democrats abandoned the Administration and allied themselves with Northern National Democrats. If neither of these contingencies occurred, Burke advised his political associates to kill the bill.¹⁷

New York Hards were also in a quandary. They had committed themselves in favor of the Nebraska bill, yet they hesitated to render aid to the Administration. Animosity finally governed their actions; they could not resist the temptation to vex the President. Their great coup was the successful advocacy of extended discussion on Nebraska in the House's Committee of the Whole. Francis Cutting proposed this procedure on March 21, 1854. This motion threatened the bill's future; if it carried, it would place the measure at the bottom of the calendar; and to bring it up for a vote would require nearly twenty roll calls. The Administration had hoped to avoid this pitfall and had exerted considerable pressure to prevent it. Cutting's initiative, however, emboldened other Representatives who wanted further consideration on so momentous an issue, and the motion passed by a vote 110

¹⁷Burke's editorial was copied in the New York Evening Post, May 2, 1854.

to 95. This result encouraged anti-Nebraska forces through-
¹⁸
 out the North.

In the speech defending his motion, Cutting alluded to several objectionable points in the Senate bill, matters which required further scrutiny. His high-minded scruples were hardly taken seriously by many members; they judged them a smokescreen designed to kill the bill. John C. Breckinridge of Kentucky accused Cutting of hypocrisy. The New Yorker rose to defend himself, and a bitter exchange followed. Breckinridge took especial umbrage at a remark that he had acted dishonorably and had been "skulking" about his chair. Rumors spread of an imminent duel. The mediation of friends, however, resolved the quarrel
¹⁹
 without bloodshed.

Although Cutting emerged from this encounter physically unscathed, his own and his party's political fortunes sank to a new low. George E. Baker, who was at this time compiling an edition of Seward's speeches, informed the Senator that Cutting was "the most wretched man in the House--he can neither advance or [sic] retreat without annihilation." After a short period of indecision,

¹⁸Ibid., March 22, 1854; Congressional Globe, 33 Congress, 1 Session, 701-702; Nichols, Pierce, p. 336.

¹⁹New York Evening Post, March 28, 29, 30, 1854; Congressional Globe, 33 Congress, 1 Session 759-764.

the Albany Argus approved the Congressman's stand, and the Hard Shell State Committee commended his opposition to executive dictation.²⁰

Despite their approval of Cutting's obstructionism, Adamantine leaders urged their followers to support Nebraska on the final vote. Five Hard Shell Congressmen²¹ disobeyed these appeals. They published a joint letter to their constituents in which they assailed the re-opening of the slavery controversy. They had been elected on the Baltimore platform which had closed this subject forever, and they meant to be faithful to it even though the President was not. Citing as additional evidence the Gadsden treaty and designs to annex Cuba, they accused Pierce of striving to create a sectional party with himself at its head.²²

Other prominent Hard Shells also opposed the decision to support the Nebraska bill. James A. Cooley, the Adamintines' candidate for Controller in 1853, was so angry that he

²⁰George E. Baker to Seward, May 14, 1854, Seward Papers, URL; Albany Argus, March 23, April 4, 13, 25, May 23, 1854.

²¹These included James Maurice (first district, Maspeth), John Wheeler (sixth district, New York City), Jared V. Peck (ninth district, Port Chester), Rufus W. Peckham (fourteenth district, Albany), and Andrew Oliver (twenty-sixth district, Penn Yan). Oliver subsequently became a Know-Nothing.

²²Albany Argus, June 1, 3, 1854; New York Evening Post, May 22, 30, 1854.

presided at an anti-Nebraska meeting. Newell wrote Marcy that rebellion in Hard ranks was widespread, and that if the New York Evening Post and the Albany Atlas would forbear a little in their opposition to Douglas, the Hard Shells would come around to this position too. James T. Brady, the Hards' nominee for Attorney-General in 1853, also dissented. He had always assumed his faction's dedication to insuring the full constitutional rights of the South, but he had never imagined that it would "give the slightest sanction to any device for extending Slavery, or permit the least diminution of any right which belongs to the North." Brady had only contempt for the "ignoble eagerness" of his ~~former~~ associates "to applaud the individual to whom the paternity of the Nebraska scheme is generally attributed."²³

Thus the Nebraska bill was the final straw to many politicians hitherto known for defending the South. They could no longer persist with self-respect, even though many of their colleagues were steadfast. They resigned from their faction and were adrift, the first of a growing number who could no longer find satisfaction within their old parties. Many of these would find the blandishments of Know-Nothingism irresistible.

²³Newell to Marcy, March 3, 1854, Marcy Papers, LC; James T. Brady to Rufus Peckham, undated, letter appearing in the New York Tribune, July 8, 1854.

As the Hard Shell state convention of July 12, 1854 approached, it seemed certain that the Nebraska Act would be endorsed. The Albany Argus expected a harmonious meeting. It cited as evidence the approval by over forty newspapers of the State Committee's decision to maintain its separate organization and to hold an early convention.²⁴ The choice of such a date had a purpose--while other parties scheduled their meetings as late as possible (the Soft and Whig conventions would not convene until September) to make adjustments for recent events, the Hards would spell out their program in advance to demonstrate their unyielding principles.

When the convention assembled, the Hard Shells proved faithful to their name. They surprised such on-lookers as the New York Evening Post, which could not believe they would take such an unpopular stand. Without flinching, they adopted a resolution approving the Nebraska Act. They applauded the doctrine of Congressional non-inter-vention into territorial affairs, and even maintained that Dickinson had originated this idea when he introduced two resolutions into the United States Senate on December 14, 1847.²⁵

²⁴Albany Argus, April 25, May 3, 1854.

²⁵New York Evening Post, June 26, 1854; Albany Argus, July 13, 14, 1854.

The Adamantines now proceeded to criticize the President for "his unwarrantable interference with our local politics...and his unjustifiable and undisguised use of his patronage to control our State elections...." Their final resolution condemned "unmanly and dishonest coalitions"-- that is, the Hunker-Barnburner alliance of Soft Shells-- which "lead only to tricks and struggles for ascendancy between the discordant interests which have bargained to coalesce....." For their own part, they would trust for their success, solely "in the intrinsic excellence of our principles having their foundation in eternal truth and justice, and therefore destined through whatever fluctuations in fortune, ultimately to prevail...."²⁶

After adopting these resolutions, the convention nominated its slate. Ignoring Bronson's refusal to run for governor, it chose him by acclamation. The former Collector's candidacy was another act of defiance of the President. The ticket was otherwise undistinguished.²⁷ Its task completed, the convention adjourned.²⁸

New York Hard Shells represented a threat to the unity of the Democratic party. Embittered by their failure to secure the lion's share of Presidential patronage,

²⁶Albany Argus, July 13, 14, 1854.

²⁷Other candidates included Elijah Ford (Lieutenant-Governor), Clark Burnham (Canal Commissioner), Abram Vernam (State Prison Inspector).

²⁸Albany Argus, July 13, 14, 1854.

6

Adamantine leaders wanted revenge against the Administration and the Softs--and if they could not gain their ends, they were quite willing to destroy the Democratic party. Unscrupulous, often cynical, and totally devoid of principles, they were in politics solely for the spoils of office. When the Hard Shell state convention endorsed the Nebraska Act in defiance of the popular outcry from dozens of public protests, it alienated many old Democrats. These were attracted to new alignments. In the process of carrying out a remorseless campaign against the Softs, the Hards reopened the old wounds of 1848 and helped to undermine the unity of the national party. President Pierce was particularly upset by the Adamantines' criticism; evidence exists to support the hypothesis that he may have endorsed the Nebraska bill in order to vindicate both himself and the Softs from any suspicion of free soilism. Despite the Hard Shells' willingness to follow Southern initiatives, they met repeated rebuffs. These snubs led to an obstructionist policy with regard to the Nebraska bill which only worsened the situation. Eager to latch on to a movement with the prospect of success, the desperate Hards were an unsettling influence on the entire party system.

CHAPTER 4

The Saratoga Convention

The political upheaval caused by the Kansas-Nebraska Act manifested itself in many ways; the most important and enduring result was the formation of the Republican party. In several Northern and mid-western states, anti-Nebraska feeling crystallized into movements to hold conventions "without distinction of party." By early July of 1854, such meetings had taken place in Vermont, Ohio, Indiana, Michigan, and Wisconsin. The principal feature of these gatherings was the selection of a fusion ticket for the campaign of 1854. The name increasingly used to denote¹ these new political organizations was "Republican."

The success of Republicanism in other states inspired Free Democrats to strive for fusion in New York. Their efforts added greater stress to the turbulent political situation in the Empire State. New York Whigs experienced this new strain most acutely. Torn by incompatible loyalties to the national Whig party and the free soil cause, threatened by defections from Know-Nothings and temperance advocates, confronted by a bewilderingly complex canvass,

¹New York Tribune, July 7, 1854; Alexander W. Crandall, The Early History of the Republican Party, 1854-1856 (Boston, 1930), pp. 20-23.

the Whig party in New York was in a state of crisis. Thurlow Weed's behavior reflected the dilemma of the rank-and-file. Groping his way in the transformed political climate of 1854, he struggled to keep himself and his party in power.

The Nebraska Act had the same effect on New York Whigs that it had on the Democrats; it intensified already existing divisions within the party. A strained relationship between conservative and radical Whigs had existed for more than a decade. During this period, many conservatives had joined the Silver Grays' war against the Seward-Weed organization. By reopening the subject about which Whigs differed most heatedly--the slavery issue--Douglas' measure threatened to destroy what remained of Whig unity.

The introduction of the Kansas-Nebraska bill elated radical Whigs. As agitation in the North mushroomed, they perceived an opportunity to cast off their status as a minority party and rise to state and national power. George W. Patterson, an influential Whig from Chautauque county, wrote his long-time friend Thurlow Weed that he was confident Douglas' bill would become law and that the Whigs would reap the benefits. "Let them go their length," he counselled, "and if Seward don't [sic] make more out of its passage, than those who favor it, then I am no judge of the 'signs of the times.'" Another Seward supporter was even more emphatic. He informed Weed that "the Nebraska Bill kills Pierce and Douglas dead as 'Hell.' The President

means to hold every member responsible who does not vote for the bill, and I can tell you that nearly all the Free States will vote against the bill, and Pierce will be in a minority." Horace Greeley came to believe that if things were handled right, the entire North would turn against the Democrats.²

It appears that Seward also appreciated the opportunities presented by the Nebraska bill. In fact the Senator may have been so intrigued by these possibilities that he could not resist the temptation to help their realization. Appearing to follow a course of strong opposition to Douglas' scheme, he delivered several speeches which were widely hailed by anti-Nebraska men; and he urged Weed to promote public demonstrations and legislative resolutions. But evidence has come to light which suggests that the New Yorker may have played a far more complex role. He later told both Charles Francis Adams and Montgomery Blair that it was he who had initially suggested the explicit repeal of the Missouri Compromise to Whig Senators Archibald Dixon of Kentucky and James C. Jones of Tennessee. Dixon later offered this amendment to Douglas' first bill, and the Little Giant, under Southern

²George W. Patterson to Weed, March 16, 1854, N. Darling to Weed, February 12, 1854, Weed Papers, URL. Horace Greeley to Schuyler Colfax, July 7, 1854, Greeley-Colfax Papers, NYPL.

3

pressure, accepted it.

If Seward did indeed adopt this course, his motivation is unclear and open to speculation. Two points appear certain: he wished to make the bill obnoxious to New Yorkers and cripple the Northern Democrats; and at this time, as we shall see, he opposed disbanding the national Whig party and participating in a fusion movement with antislavery Democrats. Perhaps he believed that a crisis within Whig ranks would foster his personal ambition. He might then emerge as a compromise figure between North and South and go to the White House as the candidate of

³William H. Seward to Weed, January 8, 1854, Weed Papers, URL; Nichols, "Kansas-Nebraska Act," 205. Seward's latest and most thorough biographer, Glyndon Van Deusen, thinks "it altogether likely that Seward made some such suggestion to Dixon and Jones." But he believes it also probable "that the idea of outright repeal was already in the air when Seward talked with the two men. The Senator from New York was not at all averse to magnifying the importance of his acts." Van Deusen also notes that other antislavery Senators, notably Salmon Chase of Ohio, were eager to make the bill as unpalatable as possible through amendments. Glyndon Van Deusen, William Henry Seward (New York, 1967), pp. 150-151. See also the footnote, pp. 586-587. The Washington correspondent of the New York Evening Post may have made a shrewd guess when he noted that while Seward spoke effectively in opposition, it is "universally conceded that its [Nebraska's] passage would be of more service to the political prospects of Mr. Seward than the combined efforts of ten thousand friends; this is so generally conceded, that most of the knowing politicians here impute to his management the present agitation of the problem." (my emphasis) New York Evening Post, February 24, 1854.

4

the united whig party. Such a strategy would be consistent with Seward's subsequent attempts at reconciliation during the secession crisis of 1860-1861.

Unlike the radicals in their party, conservative whigs saw nothing bright in the Nebraska controversy. They viewed it as an unmitigated disaster. Former Governor Washington Hunt accurately expressed the attitude of conservatives: "The attempt to disturb the Missouri Compromise is audacious and atrocious. I regret this new agitation in all its aspects. It will prove more dangerous than the conflicts of 1820 or 1850." New York's wealthy and urbane junior Senator, Hamilton Fish, did all he could to prevent passage. He submitted to Weed his own draft of anti-Nebraska resolutions which he believed preferable to those already before the state legislature. He warned that swift action was essential to make wavering Congressmen aware of the indignation of their constituents. One Whig, who described himself as "old fashioned," professed to believe in the Union and the

⁴More than two years after the introduction of the Nebraska bill, Erasmus Pershine Smith, a trusted political ally of Seward and Weed, observed that "the South will come to know after a while that Seward is the only man who can stand between them and the retribution they are provoking. The hatred they have felt for him is being very rapidly diluted for it now has to be divided among Sumner, Wade, Fessenden & c...There will be little left soon but respect for his boldness will remain." E. Persh'ne Smith to Henry C. Carey, April 11, 1856, Erasmus Pershine Smith Papers, HSPa.

Compromises of 1820 and 1850 and the South's existing rights over slavery. But he feared that Douglas and the Democrats would drive him from this position into the arms of the Abolitionists.⁵

The major reason for the conservatives' despair was their apprehension that the Nebraska crisis would destroy the Whig party as a national organization. They believed that an alliance of the more substantial citizens in both the North and the South was essential for the prosperity and the very continuance of the Union. The national party had received a strong blow in the election of 1852 when many Southerners deserted Winfield Scott to vote for Pierce. Greeley had declared the party dead soon after the canvass and many agreed with his verdict.⁶ Despite the erosion of mutual trust, the party had held together and, because of bickering among the dominant Democrats, elected some of its local candidates. Conservatives in both sections gained confidence and hoped that the old alliance could be patched up in 1856. The Nebraska bill seemed to destroy these hopes.

Thurlow Weed was at heart a conservative, although closely allied with Seward and the radical wing of the

⁵Washington Hunt to Hamilton Fish, February 7, 1854, Henry H. Elliot to Fish, February 7, 1854, Hamilton Fish Papers, LC; Fish to Weed, January 25, 1854, Weed Papers, URL.

⁶New York Tribune, April 14, November 20, 1854; National Era, April 6, 1854.

party. He had no desire to sever ties with Southern whigs and organize along strictly Northern lines. Quite the contrary is true; the Albany politician's joy at the discomfiture of New York Democrats was tempered by his concern for the national whig organization. "This Nebraska business will entirely denationalize the whig Party," he lamented to Fish. "I cannot see how or where good can come out of it--If Southern whigs would have been sustained at Home in going against it, we would have [been] well." Weed made several vain appeals in his Albany Evening Journal for Southern whigs to eschew the Nebraska bill. Washington Hunt could not believe that the moderate and honest Southern members of his party would support Douglas until the evidence stared him in the face. One devoted whig felt himself politically adrift. "What party are we to belong hereafter," he asked Fish.

Not the whig party I fear--for it seems to me that must cease to exist as a national party--The unanimous desertion of us on this question by the Southern Whigs demonstrates the truth of what I think was Mr. Webster's opinion that the idea of a Southern Whig was almost an absurdity in terms. I have never thought so until this breach of political faith. 7

Although radical and conservative whigs differed about the implications of the Nebraska Act, the former

7Weed to Fish, February 19, 1854, Hunt to Fish, February 7, 1854, B. D. Silliman to Fish, March 14, 1854, Fish Papers, LC; Albany Evening Journal, March 13, May 15. 19, 1854; Glyndon Van Deusen, Thurlow Weed: Wizard of the Lobby (Buffalo, 1947), p. 196.

considering it an opportunity to be exploited and the latter a catastrophe to be remedied, both groups looked upon it in terms of its effect upon the Whig party. The initiative for forming the Republican party in New York did not come from the Whigs, but from Free Soilers or Free Democrats. Rather than welcoming Free Democratic efforts for fusion, most Whigs conceived them as a serious threat, one that they were determined to thwart. The ensuing conflict between opponents and proponents of fusion added significantly to the tense political situation in the state.

The Whigs' determination to maintain their party intact was challenged when a call appeared for a state convention "without distinction of party" to be held at Saratoga Springs on August 16, 1854; New York seemed to be following those states which had pioneered the Republican movement. The call specified that a mass meeting in each county would choose five delegates from each Assembly district. The organizers suggested three topics, among others, to command the delegates' attention:

First.--The propriety of convening a Congress of delegates from all the Free States and Territories, and from such portions of the Slave States as sympathize with the objects proposed for consideration in the general call of this Convention.

Second.--The necessity of thorough preparation for the Fall Elections, that none may be sent to the Congress of the United States, except those who can be relied on for a firm and unflinching opposition to the designs and encroachments of the Slave Representation.

Third.--The best method of permanently restricting the institution of Slavery to the limits prescribed by the Missouri Compromise, and the absolute and complete release of the people of the Free States from any participation in or responsibility for its existence. 8

It is noteworthy that the formation of a new state ticket was not mentioned as a subject for consideration. Despite this omission, Free Democrats had precisely this goal in mind. Before we consider the struggle between Whigs and Free Democrats at Saratoga, we must investigate the motives of both.

After its initial campaign in 1848, the fortunes of the Free Soil party declined. The large Barnburner contingent which had swelled its ranks returned to the Democratic fold in 1849. The Compromise of 1850 struck another blow; as more and more Americans accepted the "finality" of this settlement, former Free Soilers saw less and less need for an antislavery party. Gamaliel Bailey--the editor of the National Era, the free soil newspaper in Washington--issued a call for a "National Convention of Freemen" to oppose the Compromise, but it went unheeded. By late 1850, the name "Free Soil" had fallen into disuse, and the remaining small group of zealots called themselves

⁸Call for the "New York State Convention to be Held at Saratoga Springs, August 16, 1854," James Watson Webb Papers, YU.

9

the Free Democratic party.

For the presidential campaign of 1852, the Free Democrats waged a vigorous campaign. Their platform denounced the Compromise of 1850, especially the Fugitive Slave Act, which the whig and Democratic national conventions had endorsed. With John P. Hale, the former Senator from New Hampshire as their standard-bearer, the Free Democrats garnered about one-half of their vote in 1848. Their greatest loss came in New York, where they obtained 25,000 votes compared to the 120,000 they had received during Martin Van Buren's candidacy.¹⁰ It was a good showing, nevertheless. A party commanding this many votes could not be disregarded in the closely contested elections of the Empire State; the lure of these ballots was a constant force on politicians seeking to construct winning coalitions.

The Kansas-Nebraska Act provided the opportunity for which Free Democrats had been waiting. The precarious sectional peace that had prevailed under the Compromise of 1850 was broken; old party loyalties were crumbling; thousands of Whigs and Democrats were looking for a new political allegiance. The constant warning of Free Dem-

⁹Fred Judd Blue, "A History of the Free Soil Party" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1966), pp. 235-240.

¹⁰Ibid., pp. 285-287, 302.

ocrats that the "slaveocracy" was an unappeasable, aggressive force seemed warranted. Under these changed circumstances, the dream which had sustained loyal Free Democrats in the discouraging years from 1849-1853--the formation of a broad coalition opposed to the extension of slavery--appeared realizable.

The National Era played a prominent role in advocating the creation of this amalgam. Immediately after the House passed Douglas' bill, the Era urged the eighty anti-Nebraska Congressmen from the free states--Democrats, Whigs, and Free Democrats--to call "upon the people to disregard obsolete issues, old prejudices, mere party names, and rally as one man for the re-establishment of liberty and the overthrow of the Slave power. Never mind your parties, gentlemen. 'Let the dead bury their dead.'"¹¹

The New York Free Democratic party had been ineffective in the 1853 election; the division between Democrats had reduced its leverage over the Whigs. Encouraged by the uproar against the Nebraska Act, the Free Democrats sought to align New York with those states which had already established a branch of the Republican party.¹² Focusing their efforts on the forthcoming Saratoga con-

¹¹National Era, May 22, 1854.

¹²Minutes of the Free Democratic League for 1853-1854, NYHS; Whig (Tribune) Almanac, 1854.

vention, they wanted it to form a fusion ticket and not merely to denounce Douglas and Pierce.

Free Democrats played an active role in county mass meetings to select delegates to Saratoga. The Free Soilers had two objects in mind: the adoption of resolutions calling for nominations and the election of Free Democrats as delegates. John R. Hale delivered a two hour oration at both Rome and Oneida. Another Free Democratic hero, David Wilmot of Pennsylvania, spoke in Chemung county. His efforts succeeded; the assemblage adopted the following resolution: "Resolved, that we will support no nominee, of any party, unless that party is entirely separated from the Southern wing of either of the old Whig or Democratic parties." The citizens of Madison county passed a similar declaration. As the convention date approached, Henry J. Raymond reported to Weed that he had "found Joseph Blunt and John Jay busy in preparing resolutions, delegates & c. for the Saratoga Convention. Both are anxious for
13
nominations."

The enthusiasm of the Free Democrats for a fusion ticket at Saratoga finally came to be shared by Horace Greeley. The crusading editor of the New York Tribune

¹³New York Tribune, August 11, 15, 16, 1854; Henry J. Raymond to Weed, August 8, 1854, Weed Papers, URL. Joseph Blunt and John Jay were prominent Free Democrats. Jay, the son of the first Chief Justice of the United States, was President of the New York Free Democratic League.

had not always believed that a new organization was possible in his home state. He revealed his pessimism in a letter to Alvan E. Bovay--the organizer of the famous Ripon, Wisconsin meeting (February 26, 1854), which issued the first call for a new party. Bovay had written to Greeley, urging him to initiate similar action in the Empire State. The journalist replied that New Yorkers were not ready for such a movement:

I fear they, too, generally wish (with John Mitchell) that they had a good plantation and negroes in Alabama--or even Kansas. However, we will try to do what we can. But remember that editors can only follow where the people's heart is already prepared to go with them. They can direct and animate a healthy public indignation, but not 'create a soul beneath the ribs of death.'" 14

Greeley abruptly changed his mind once Douglas' bill had been enacted. He was now certain that the people were not only ready but demanded a union of all those hostile to Nebraska. The Tribune carefully watched and highly¹⁵ praised fusion conventions in other states. Pleased with the name "Republican"--which the Jackson, Michigan meeting (July 6, 1854) had given to its new fusion party,

¹⁴Greeley to Alvan E. Bovay, March 7, 1854, quoted in Curtis, Republican Party, Vol. 1, pp. 174-177. Greeley wrote a similar letter to Theodore Parker. See Isely, Horace Greeley, p. 84. John Mitchell was editor of the Irish journal, the Citizen. See above, p. 13, footnote 13.

¹⁵For the New York Tribune's coverage of fusion meetings in various states, see the following: Indiana, June 5, 7, 1854; Ohio, June 10, 17, 1854; New Hampshire, June 12, 1854; Iowa, June 12, 17, 1854; Wisconsin, June 14, 1854.

the editor thought this title would "be very generally
¹⁶
 adopted."

Greeley devised a bold political course which he believed would further the antislavery and temperance causes, and secure the governorship for himself. Linking the two issues was an essential component of his strategy. "I like the two questions together," he wrote to his friend, Schuyler Colfax. "My first concern is to deserve victory,
¹⁷
 and I know we do that on the new platform."

The establishment of the broadest possible anti-Nebraska coalition was Greeley's second ingredient for success. For this purpose, he refused to advocate any stronger measure of redress than repeal of the Nebraska Act and
¹⁸
 the restoration of the Missouri Compromise. He condemned the New York Evening Post's plan to rally around the slogan of "No More Slave States." This program, Greeley felt, would be considered as an aggressive, retaliative

¹⁶Ibid., July 10, 11, 1854.

¹⁷Greeley to Colfax, June 20, 1854, Greeley-Colfax Papers, NYPL.

¹⁸Greeley defended his position against a protest from William Goodell in which the Abolitionist leader argued that restoration of the Missouri Compromise was an inadequate objective. What was needed was dedication to the goal of completely wiping out slavery. Greeley called this idea "impracticable." He argued that men like Goodell had the best intentions, but that their extreme views made them the most useful servants of the slave power. New York Tribune, June 29, 1854.

action against the South; it would unnecessarily alienate many conservatives who would cooperate with a purely defensive course. Moderate objectives would also aid the political education of the people which was

deplorably defective with regard to Slavery, even at the North. Blind Negro-hate is almost universal among the most degraded, ignorant and brutal of our people, and is not confined to them, though with many others it is a mere affectation, adopted to catch votes or to be in the fashion. As respects Slavery, we believe the predominant impression to be that morally it is not quite right, but physically it is very convenient.

He advised Colfax to follow a similar course in Indiana:

"Make your platform as broad as is safe--no broader.

We are in for a long fight with Slavery, and my chief anxiety is to get as many to go in on the right side as possible. After they get in, they are much easier moving¹⁹ than started."

Greeley expected his strategy and industry to be rewarded by the gubernatorial nomination at Saratoga. Despite his formidable talents and success as a journalist, he harbored a burning ambition for elective office. He had labored long and hard in support of others' advancement. Now he would collect those debts and force his friends, especially Seward and Weed, to acknowledge his

¹⁹New York Evening Post, August 9, 15, 30, 1854; New York Tribune, June 17, 29, 1854; Greeley to Colfax, June 28, 1854, Greeley-Colfax Papers, NYPL.

contributions and award him his rightful prize.²⁰

The Free Democrats' and Greeley's efforts to promote fusion in New York put considerable pressure on Seward. Although the Senator's motives during the Nebraska controversy are cloudy, it is clear that he had no desire to disband the Whig party. Rather than welcoming Free Democratic overtures for fusion, he sought to avoid them. From Washington, he wrote to Weed that he was "plagued to death with letters asking advice about disbanding and reorganizing...." "The Free Soilers here are engaging in schemes for nominating Col. Benton and dissolving the Whig party. We are to hear all manner of absurdities practiced, and there are not less than half a dozen parties coming to negotiate with me as if I was a vender of votes." Seward hoped that he could avoid saying anything indiscreet.²¹

Particularly embarrassing was Greeley's request that Seward draft a statement proposing a union of all parties against Nebraska. "How would such an address look, signed by me? How would it look signed by others and not by me?" he asked Weed. The Senator implored his friend to help him by writing a strong appeal for the people "to look away from Washington and settle these things practically at home."

²⁰Hunt to Fish, August 2, 1854, Fish Papers, LC; Isely, Horace Greeley, p. 87.

²¹Seward to Weed, May 29, June 24, 1854, Weed Papers, URL.

22

I shall forbear at all costs."

By studying the actions of Thurlow Weed in 1854, one can best appreciate the stresses brought to bear on the Whig party. Weed shared Seward's reluctance to abandon old party ties. He had attempted to hold the national Whig organization together during the Nebraska struggle in the Congress; it was not easy for him to adjust to the permanent loss of the Southern wing of his party. Perhaps he still clung to the hope that a reconciliation could somehow be effected. But Weed was a political realist, and he began to take hesitant steps in the direction of new alignments. By the summer of 1854, he crossed party lines to endorse the anti-Nebraska Soft Shell Reuben E. Fenton of Chautauqua for re-election to the House. He gave his approval to the Jackson, Michigan meeting which established the Republican party in that state and urged Whigs to cooperate in the movement. He praised three-hundred New Englanders bound for Kansas as "noble men" engaged in a "holy crusade."

²²Seward to Weed, June 24, 1854, Weed Papers, URL. Henry Wilson--formerly a Whig, but soon to be elected to the United States Senate as an anti-Nebraska Know-Nothing--was upset by what he believed was Seward's desire "to keep up the union of the Northern and Southern Whigs." Wilson admitted that he would like to see Seward as President; however, he would rather vote for Douglas should the New Yorker run as the candidate of the united Whig party. Henry Wilson to Seward, May 28, 1854, Seward Papers, URL.

²³Albany Evening Journal, July 8, 31, 1854; Albany Evening Journal quoted in the New York Evening Post, August 31, 1854; Van Deusen, Thurlow Weed, pp. 197-199.

Despite this movement toward a broader coalition, Weed resolutely refused to disband the Whig party in New York. He declared that the Northern Whig party, by its unanimous opposition to Douglas, had demonstrated that it was the party of freedom and deserved the support of all anti-Nebraska men. Fusion was only justifiable in areas where the party was weak (as in most of the mid-West); where the Whigs were strong, they should remain a distinct entity.²⁴ From three decades of experience, Weed realized that a state-wide party could not be built rapidly. To abandon a smooth functioning machine for a new and untried organization was always dangerous. But in 1854, political experimentation seemed more than ever fraught with peril. The rise of Know-Nothingism posed a formidable threat to New York Whigs and especially to Seward's re-election to the Senate. The Albany leader felt that any further confusion could only benefit his arch-enemies, the Silver Grays.²⁵

Weed took a number of steps to insure that the Saratoga meeting would not make nominations. He accepted Washington Hunt's suggestion to see that the Whig State Committee issue a call for a convention in advance of the Saratoga gathering. This would signalize Whig intentions

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵Hunt to Fish, August 2, 1854, Fish Papers, LC.

26

to act independently. But Weed also had more aggressive action in mind. He informed Patterson that he "did not like the movement [Saratoga] and can not now see any good that it will do. But we ought to have Friends in it--to guard against mischief."²⁷ The "Dictator's" will was carried out by his lieutenants as they filtered into the county mass meetings which chose delegates to Saratoga. At one such public assembly--significantly held at Auburn, the village where Seward made his home--the whigs were observed to be violently opposed to a resolution recommending the organization of an independent party. An associate of the Albany leader reported that the Albion convocation was controlled by Abolitionists, Free Democrats, and Softs, pushed on by a few Silver Grays--all of whom ardently desiring the dismemberment of the Whig party. Although they could not prevent a resolution calling for a fusion ticket, the Sewardites did succeed in choosing two men of the "right stamp" delegates. Whigs in Monroe, Genesee, Livingston, Erie, and Niagara counties encountered fewer²⁸ difficulties and reported everything under control.

²⁶Ibid.; Edwin D. Morgan to Weed, August 11, 1854, Weed Papers, URL.

²⁷Weed to Patterson, July 11, 1854, Weed Papers, LC.

²⁸New York Evening Post, August 14, 1854; Orson Nicholson to Weed, August 11, 1854, Elbridge G. Spaulding to Weed, August 8, 1854, Weed Papers, URL. See also the accounts of various county conventions contained in the Albany Argus, August 15, 16, 1854.

Weed's most difficult task was to convince Greeley to abandon his own plans. It is not exactly clear how this was done. He must have appealed for aid in thwarting the nativist conspiracy against Seward, generating in Greeley's mind his own fear that if nominations were made at Saratoga, he would be powerless to prevent a Silver Gray-Know-Nothing takeover of the Whig convention of September 20. It is also possible that Weed hinted--or Greeley thought he hinted--at the editor's nomination for some state-wide office, most probably lieutenant-governor. In any event, Greeley agreed to cooperate with Weed, but not without the severest misgivings. He revealed his despair to his confidant, Colfax:

We shall have no nomination at Saratoga and alas, no fusion at all, which will do harm in all the "fusion" states. It will tell heavily against us that we carry all the states ~~which~~ that we can, and go "fusion" where we can do no better. Schuyler, this won't work, and you'll find it so.

We are going to do badly here--carry the state strong enough, but on a "Know Nothing" platform, with Silver Greyism the [cat?] under the meal, plotting to defeat Seward and put Fillmore in his place. I am going to Albany on Monday to see what can be done, but I guess it's too late. We shall have the meanest kind of candidates for most everything imposed on us by Know Nothings--if we don't rebel as we ought to, but probably shan't. 29

Representatives of the entire spectrum of New York politics--Hard and Soft Shells, Free Democrats, Seward

²⁹Hunt to Fish, August 2, 1854, Fish Papers, LC; Greeley to Weed, August 10, 13, 1854, Weed Papers, URL; Greeley to Colfax, July 26, 1854, Greeley-Colfax Papers, NYPL; Isely, Horace Greeley, pp. 92-100.

and Silver Gray Whigs, Temperance men, Know-Nothings, and³⁰ Abolitionists--arrived at Saratoga by August 16, 1854. They came from all but three counties. The Free Democrat Joseph Blunt called the convention to order at 10 A.M.. The delegates chose William A. McCoun of Queens, a widely respected politician with Democratic antecedents, as president. Eli Thayer of Massachusetts delivered a half-hour speech explaining the objects of his state's Kansas Aid Emigration Society. Once these preliminaries were over, Horace Greeley reported as Chairman of the Committee on Resolutions. He read statements condemning the Nebraska Act and the doctrine of popular sovereignty, affirming the right of Congress to prohibit slavery in the territories, opposing the admission of any new slave states into the Union, and declaring that free labor could never compete with a slave system.

It was the last resolution which precipitated the crucial question of a fusion party with its own state ticket:

Resolved, that we heartily approve the course of the freemen of Connecticut, Vermont, Iowa, Ohio, Indiana, Wisconsin, and Michigan, postponing or disregarding their minor differences of opinion or preference, and acting together cordially and trustingly in the sacred cause of freedom, of free labor and

³⁰This account of the Saratoga convention is a composite derived from the following newspapers: New York Evening Post, August 17, 1854; New York Tribune, August 17, 1854; Albany Argus, August 18, 19, 1854; New York Weekly Mirror, August 17, 1854; New York Times, August 17, 1854.

free soil, and we commend their spirit to the freemen of this and other states, exhorting each to renounce his party whenever that party proves unfaithful to human freedom.

Before a vote could be taken on this declaration, E. F. Bullard of Saratoga, a former Hard Shell, moved an amendment to follow the example of the previously mentioned states by nominating a state ticket made up of all political organizations. He said the "convention was a scrap book of all parties, and it must act true to the cause." Great confusion greeted this proposal. Despite the hubbub, a vote was called on the amendment and an attempt made to count the Yeas and Nays. It was declared tabled.

Several delegates now insisted on being heard to urge reconsideration. One speaker warned the convention that if it did not do its duty, the people would; he hinted at a bolt. A Free Democrat from Genesee county pleaded that it was time for the North to remove the South's black flag from the Capitol. He wanted the meeting to serve its true function, which was an oven to bake doughfaces. Leonard Gibbs of Washington county, a professed Abolitionist and a participant in subsequent Free Democratic conventions, warned the delegates to beware of both major parties, for they were false to freedom. He urged unity of action among men of all parties in a common cause against slavery: "Make no nominations and you are betrayed. The parties will serve God all they can without offending the devil."

During this flurry of appeals, repeated cries were heard for Preston King to address the meeting. As a Congressman representing St. Lawrence and Herkimer counties, King had been an early supporter of the Wilmot Proviso and had played a prominent role in the bolt of 1847-1848. He had drifted back to the Democratic party following the Compromise of 1850, but he had done so reluctantly. The Nebraska bill stirred him into activity. He addressed public meetings and wrote privately to former Barnburners to gather support against the measure. At this time, he was trying to start a presidential boom for Thomas Hart Benton, who had voted against Nebraska. By the late summer of 1854, it was apparent to many that King had assumed the leadership of the free soil Democrats--the position which John Van Buren had relinquished.³¹

If the Free Democrats expected King to give a powerful boost to their pleas, they were disappointed. He argued that the great mass of the people were not prepared to receive a new slate from the convention. It was true that all parties were rotten and required outside pressure to hold them together. Yet the time was not ripe for

³¹Preston King to Francis P. Blair, Sr., July 16, 1854, Blair-Lee Papers, PU; King to Samuel J. Tilden, July 10, 1854, Tilden Papers, NYPL; Preston King to the Citizens of Madison County, quoted in the New York Evening Post, March 31, 1854; Resolution of Preston King at the Canton (St. Lawrence county) Meeting, quoted in the Albany Argus, August 18, 1854; Ernest Paul Muller, "Preston King: A Political Biography" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, 1957), pp. 535-540.

a new organization; it would be inundated by the unprecedented complexities of this election year. Quite unintentionally, King had done Weed and Seward a great favor. Just as sentiment was warming up for reconsideration of the nominations question, he had dampened this enthusiasm. Thus developed a unity of opinion on the forthcoming campaign which would lay the basis for future cooperation.

The convention finally decided to postpone the decision on an independent ticket until September 26, 1854, when it would reconvene at Auburn. The political situation would be clearer then; both the Soft Shells and the Whigs would have held their state conventions. Raymond, arguing that by delaying its deliberations the meeting could exercise greater pressure on the other parties' platforms and candidates, espoused this solution. This, he said, was the proper task of the present assembly and not the creation of a new organization.

Although this course did not please the Abolitionists and the Free Democrats, the Whigs, who were in control, pressed for adjournment. A Know-Nothing delegate tried to discuss a resolution pledging the convention "to support no man or measure who will subject us to a foreign hierarchy." It was significant that this attempt to divert attention from the slavery to the nativist issue was unsuccessful. The delegates refused to consider the resolution and adjourned.

The Saratoga convention climaxed several months of struggle between Free Democrats and Whigs throughout the state. This conflict added fuel to the political crisis and subjected Whig politicians to great pressure. Although divided among themselves, radical and conservative Whigs united under Weed's leadership and thwarted the aggressive Free Democratic campaign to establish the Republican party in the Empire State. Weed's behavior revealed the pressures exerted upon him and other Whigs. He sympathized with the conservatives in his party and viewed the Nebraska bill as a disaster. A Whig for over twenty years, he could not easily accept the idea of his party's dissolution. But he was opposed to the extension of slavery and had said so on many occasions. Also, it could not be denied that the sectional vote by Northern and Southern Whigs on the Nebraska bill had given a blow to the national Whig organization. As a practical politician, Weed recognized that he had to make adjustments, and he made some gestures toward a new alignment. When confronted with the Free Democrats' demand for immediate fusion, however, he resisted their attempts. His basic conservatism played a part in this decision; perhaps he shared the hope of other conservatives that the national Whig party could be revived. But his most pressing reason for opposing fusion was a practical one, his belief that it would further disrupt the political situation. More turmoil, he felt, could

only aid his most bitter opponents, the Silver Gray-Know-Nothings, and result in Seward's defeat for re-election in 1855. Weed knew that his problems were not over; he would soon have to confront a powerful challenge from the nativists for control of his party.

CHAPTER 5

The Softs Acquiesce in Nebraska

The Soft Shells' prospects for the election of 1894 looked dim. Their unity was threatened by ex-Barnburners outraged by Douglas' measure; their newspapers antagonized the Administration by heaping abuse on the Nebraska bill; discontented Tammanyites had carried strident resolutions against the President's patronage policies; the Hard Shells continued to scorn overtures for reconciliation. Could the Softs overcome these problems? Could they maintain unity and make a respectable showing in the coming canvass? The answers to these questions were of critical importance for the future of the Democratic party in New York.

The Softs' principal dilemma was to formulate a position on the Nebraska issue acceptable to the dissidents in their own ranks, their constituents, and the President. The immediate problem was to persuade Radical Democrats who had opposed the bill to acquiesce in the law. Secretary Marcy had labored to keep this path open by opposing any test of Democratic orthodoxy while the bill was before Congress. He had urged that Nebraska's adversaries be treated indulgently and suffer no penalties, cautioning his political lieutenants against peremptory

behavior, lest this alienate those who could subsequently be drawn back to the party. The Secretary of State grasped that the only way for his party to weather the Nebraska storm was through an ex post facto reconciliation.¹

It remained to convince the President that he must relieve the pressure on Northern Democrats, that he could not demand active support for his Nebraska policy, and that he must be content with acquiescence. That Pierce had reluctantly come to this conclusion seemed apparent from the resolutions adopted by the "Softs" in his native New Hampshire. These statements, widely believed to have been penned in Washington, expressed no direct approval of Nebraska; they merely accepted the status quo. The pragmatic effect of this position did not escape notice. The New York Evening Post stated: "Not to condemn it is to approve of it. Everyone feels that the New Hampshire resolutions were intended to obtain by indirection what could be construed into an approval of the Nebraska bill." The Post quoted from the Washington Union to show that the Administration took this view of the matter.²

The action of New Hampshire offered the prospect of imitation in other Northern states, and New York Dem-

¹Marcy to Seymour, February 11, 1854, typescripts, Seymour Papers, NYHS; Cochrane to Marcy, January 23, February 9, 1854, Marcy Papers, LC.

²New York Evening Post, June 26, 1854.

ocrats warned Secretary Marcy that unless they obtained a similar privilege, they could not hope to avoid a bolt. The Collector of the Port, Heman J. Redfield, made his plea in this candid letter:

As to the resolutions--We can acquiesce in but not approve Nebraska. I saw [Henry H.] Van Dyck [an editor] of the Atlas yesterday. He says that we can acquiesce and keep together--but if more is attempted we may divide--in which case, between you and I, the administration will be in very small minority. I have no hesitation in approving fully the principle contained in the late territorial bills and many others would do likewise--But I should not like to call a division upon the question in the State Convention and it ought not to be invited on. Will acquiescence satisfy our friends at Washington?

A prominent upstate politician concurred with the Collector's appraisal of the attitudes within the Soft party, and he urged a similar course:

I have no doubt we shall have trouble on the subject of Nebraska. We can probably secure a general endorsement of the administration, but we cannot I think a particular one of the Nebraska Bill. There is to [sic] much feeling against it and the Convention will be composed of to [sic] many of those original Barnburners to hope for such a result so at least it appears to me and I think the best we can hope for is silence on the subject.

While these appeals were made to Washington, the Albany Atlas began to editorialize for the policy of letting bygones be bygones; it urged the forthcoming Soft Shell convention to condemn the Nebraska bill but not to ask its repeal.³

³Heman J. Redfield to Marcy, July 15, 1854, D. A. Ogden to Marcy, July 23, 1854, Marcy Papers, LC; New York Tribune, August 8, 1854; Albany Argus, August 5, 1854.

The Democratic State Committee announced that the forthcoming convention would take place at Syracuse on September 6, 1854. Its unique feature would be its size, four instead of one delegate from each Assembly district would be chosen. The Albany Atlas attributed this change to the Committee's desire to heal divisions in the party by assuring the fullest representation of all shades of opinion. If the convention were fully attended, there would be five-hundred-and-sixteen delegates, sixty-four⁴ of them from New York City.

Some of the local meetings to select representatives for the Syracuse convention went off smoothly; the rural postmaster, generally the party leader in his area, engineered the selection of pro-Nebraska delegates. New York City's Tammany delegation consisted of an almost solid block of Custom House and Post Office appointees and their associates. However, in other counties Barnburners resisted the federal officeholders' attempt to control the proceedings. In several cases the insurgents succeeded in choosing delegates and passed strong resolutions⁵ against the repeal of the Missouri Compromise.

⁴New York Evening Post, May 11, 12, 1854; Albany Argus, May 15, 1854.

⁵Newspapers recorded that the Barnburners controlled the delegations from districts in Utica, Orange, Livingston, Albany, Ontario, Delaware, Queens, Schenectady, Buffalo. New York Evening Post, August 29, September 5, 1854; New York Tribune, August 30, 1854; Albany Argus, September 4, 5, 1854.

But the dominant note of most pre-convention meetings was reconciliation. Politicians eagerly sought to smooth over differences, even at the price of embracing opposites simultaneously. The Softs in Chautauqua passed one resolution praising the President and another lauding their anti-Nebraska Congressman, Reuben R. Fenton. A declaration adopted in Yates county eulogized the Pierce Administration, supported the Missouri Compromise and the Wilmot Proviso, and denounced the Nebraska Act in the same sentence. In Geneva, Judge Arphaxed Loomis, a prominent member of the 1846 constitutional convention, tried to censure the President, but the meeting could not agree on any statement. Loomis refused an offer of a nomination for the Assembly; he would not accept an honor from men afraid to declare their principles.⁶ These efforts to relieve the tensions caused by the Nebraska Act revealed the desire of most Softs to hold their faction together.

As the Syracuse convention approached, Administration supporters feared they would have difficulty controlling it. The Batavia Democrat, Collector Readfield's organ, believed Preston King and other free soilers would be seduced by the blandishments held out by the Whigs at Saratoga. The Oswego Palladium and the Westchester Gazette also noted the anxieties of the Custom House.⁷ Distressed

⁶Albany Argus, September 4, 5, 1854.

⁷Ibid., August 22, September 5, 1854.

by the large number of anti-Nebraskaites in the Buffalo delegation, one Soft expressed his opinion that there would be "too many prominent ultra free-soilers in the Convention, to pass such resolutions as might be desirable, or to make such a platform as Seymour can run on."⁸

John Bigelow, an editor of the New York Evening Post, was confident that those Softs who wanted to take strong action against the President would have a powerful voice. He assured Francis P. Blair, Sr. that the expanded size of the Syracuse gathering would strengthen the hand of the rural delegates against the Tammanyites. "And unless we greatly misapprehend the prevalent sentiment of our yeomanry on the Nebraska law, they will see that the administration is not misled by flattering resolutions." Bigelow believed that success was more likely by working from within the Democratic party than by participating in coalition movements such as the Saratoga anti-Nebraska convention; the latter, he maintained, had diverted energies that could have been more profitably spent organizing the Soft Shell convention. Nevertheless, the Evening Post publicly announced its optimism upon scanning the list of delegates, believing it contained a large number

⁸James G. Dickie to Marcy, September 3, 1854, Marcy Papers, LC. Dickie mentioned Benjamin Welch, editor of the Buffalo Republic, E. A. Maynard, and Peter Dorsheimer among the expected trouble makers from Buffalo.

of able men who genuinely reflected the sentiments of
 the New York Democracy.⁹

A day before the Syracuse convention assembled, two caucuses designed to test the views of the delegates revealed a strong anti-Nebraska attitude. John Cochrane attempted to assuage this feeling by opposing any party test on the issue; the past position of each delegate would be forgotten provided he acceded to the repeal of the Missouri Compromise and did not advocate its restoration. Despite a similar effort at conciliation at the other caucus, Captain Issiah Wynders, Cochrane's assistant as Surveyor of the Port, encountered heavy resistance. When it adjourned, he gathered his supporters, who pledged to walk out if anti-Nebraska resolutions passed. The Captain could be seen lobbying with groups of rural del-
¹⁰erates for the rest of the day.

The convention convened on a steamy hot day in which the mercury rose to a temperature of ninety-eight degrees in the shade. A proposal to seek reconciliation with the Hard Shells by offering to split the ticket with them went down to defeat. The Committee on Resolutions then announced that it wished to make two reports. The majority

⁹John Bigelow to Francis F. Blair, Sr., August 30, 1854, Blair-Lee Papers, PU; New York Evening Post, September 4, 5, 1854.

¹⁰Bigelow to Blair, August 30, 1854, Blair-Lee Papers, PU; New York Evening Post, September 7, 8, 9, 1854.

supported the following resolution:

Resolved, That we consider the introduction of the clause in the Nebraska and Kansas bill repealing the Missouri Compromise as inexpedient and unnecessary, but we are opposed to any agitation having in view the restoration of that line, or tending to promote any sectional controversy in relation thereto: And we congratulate the country that the results to grow out of that measure are likely to prove beneficial to the people of the territories.... (my italics)

Abijah Mann, Jr. of Queens county then read the minority declaration:

Resolved, as the sense of this convention representing the democracy of the state, that we unqualifiedly disapprove of the repeal, by the present Congress, of the section of the act, commonly known as the Missouri Compromise, whereby slavery is permitted to extend over unorganized territories indefinitely, as a violation alike of the legislative good faith, the national honor, the spirit of the age, and the Christian civilization and liberty of which we boast. (my italics) 11

This set the stage for a confrontation between King and Cochrane, the champions of the rival positions.

King had carefully considered what action he would take with Democrats who shared his indignation about Nebraska.¹² At the Saratoga convention, he had opposed the formation of a fusion ticket, much to the regret of Free Democrats but to the delight of Weed and Seward. He was now present at Syracuse to make a last effort to

¹¹This account of the Soft Shell convention is derived from the New York Evening Post, September 7, 8, 9, 1854.

¹²Preston King to Francis P. Blair, Sr., August 29, 1854, Blair-Lee Papers, PU; King to Hannibal Hamlin, August 29, 1854, Hamlin Papers, CU (microfilm).

save his party from Southern domination. Taking the floor amidst cheers to concur with the minority resolution, he warned that a veiled approval of the Nebraska Act would abandon the Democracy to the cause of slavery expansionism which would be repudiated by the people. He acknowledged that party discipline required adherence to the majority of the convention, but he could not give such an assurance on a question of so much importance.¹³

Cochrane immediately rose to deny the charge that his position surrendered the Barnburners' objectives and replaced them with pro-slavery principles. He had not forsaken the credo of "free-soil, free speech and free men" when he embraced the ancient Democratic doctrine of the right of all men, whether in a state or territory, to govern themselves. It was this right, Cochrane declared, that was the true "higher law" and the foundation of all our institutions. The Surveyor reiterated his opposition to the expansion of slavery and his belief that Kansas and Nebraska would be free states.¹⁴

The Chairman, William H. Ludlow, called for a division on the question, and the convention defeated the minority resolution by a vote of 245 to 149. Over one-

¹³New York Evening Post, September 6, 9, 1854.

¹⁴Ibid.

15

hundred delegates failed to vote. Abstention must have appealed to many of them as a compromise between self-respect and self-preservation.

Abijah Mann, Jr. tried to offer amendments to the resolution just adopted, but the Chairman ruled them out of order. Undaunted by this check, Mann demanded that Governor Seymour's views on the Nebraska Act be made known to the convention before he was considered for renomination. Again his proposal was ruled out of order.¹⁶ These arbitrary decisions by the presiding officer aggravated the anger of delegates who had sought a strong condemnation of Repeal. Preston King now rose, declared he could no longer work with the convention, and walked out. This served as a signal for a general exodus. The New York Evening Post's correspondent estimated the number of bolters to have been over one-hundred. The Albany Atlas disputed this figure, however, maintaining that few had walked out

¹⁵Ibid.; See also the report of the New York National Democrat (Hard Shell) as quoted in the Albany Argus, September 16, 1854.

¹⁶New York Evening Post, September 8, 9, 1854. Mann subsequently charged Ludlow with packing the resolutions committee and cutting off debate in return for the lieutenant-governor's nomination. Ludlow denied those charges. For this exchange, see the Evening Post, September 11, 16, 1854. There were other insinuations of skulduggery. The Albany Argus charged that the credentials of delegates were not properly checked and that a large number of Federal officeholders gained admittance to the floor through fake certificates. Albany Argus, September 9, 1854.

17

and that some had returned.

With this disruption over, the remaining Softs re-nominated Horatio Seymour for governor and chose William H. Ludlow, the Chairman of the convention, for lieutenant-governor.¹⁶ By supporting Seymour, they presented a challenge to the prohibitionists. The Maine Law had rapidly become an important issue in the coming election.

These results destroyed the hopes of those Democrats who had desired and anticipated a reenactment of the events of 1847-1848. The New York Evening Post called the Syracuse resolutions "spiritless and cowardly" and "wholly inadequate as they were to express the views of the great majority of those who were represented in that convention." The Administration had received a mild rebuke instead of the broadside it deserved.¹⁹ Other old Barnburner papers expressed their disappointment in similar terms.²⁰

¹⁷New York Evening Post, September 8, 19, 1854; Albany Atlas, September 9, 1854.

¹⁸New York Evening Post, September 6, 9, 1854.

¹⁹Ibid., September 8, 1854, September 15, 1854 (semi-weekly edition).

²⁰These papers included the Buffalo Democrat and Weltburger, the St. Lawrence Republican (Preston King's organ), the Saratoga Republican, the Cayuga New Era, the Rochester Union, the Chautauque Democrat, the Syracuse Standard, the Steuben County Advocate, the Buffalo Republic, the Plattsville Advocate, the Pulaski Democrat, the Phoenix (Oswego county) Democrat, the Orleans County Journal. Quotations from these papers can be found in the Albany Argus, September 18, 21, 25, 1854 and the New York Tribune, September 18, 26, 1854.

The National Era's aim to unite all those opposed to Repeal into a new party suffered a setback. Although the Democrats in New Hampshire, Vermont, Maine, and Pennsylvania had succumbed to the Administration, the Era had hoped that the Barnburners would show their old defiance. Gamaliel Bailey, the editor of the Era, sarcastically wrote:

They [the Softs] would blow hot and cold with the same breath; they would ride two horses traveling in opposite directions; they would enact contradictions, serve God and the Devil, please the People and Franklin Pierce. So the Soft Convention met-- a softer one never assembled--and the game of double dealing began. ²¹

The New York Tribune was not disappointed, because it had expected such a result. However, Greeley believed the Softs had lost "their golden moment." Had they spurned the yoke of the Federal officeholders and nominated Preston King for governor on an anti-Nebraska platform, they would have been swept into power. The editor also could not resist the temptation to scorn the Softs' Nebraska resolution. Was there "ever a more sniveling, twaddling, ropedancer balancing proposition?" he asked. This declaration, he predicted, would seal the fate of its proponents; they would be reduced to a powerless faction,²² abandoned by the thousands who once supported them.

²¹The National Era, September 21, 1854.

²²New York Tribune, September 4, 8, 1854.

Why did the Soft Shells give up "their golden moment" and follow the lead of Tammany Hall at this critical juncture? The answer, like the answer to all questions of human motivation, is complex.

Certainly, the desire to retain the Administration's patronage played the dominant role with New York City politicians; the thought of relinquishing the Custom House and the Post Office to the Hard Shells was too painful. Tammany Congressmen who voted for the Nebraska bill expected their rewards. In fact, Collector Redfield complained about the overbearing arrogance of William A. Walker and Peter Rowe; he had been compelled to inform them that there were limits to their influence in regard to appointments.²³

At this time, or somewhat before of its history, Cherry Hall was not the meeting place of the Pentecost, the squeamish, or the weak. The Wigwag, as Tammany was affectionately called, boasted a well-stocked bar and a host of rough-and-ready politicians, equally adept at wielding brass-knuckles and in formulating resolutions. The activities of Isaiah Rynders at the Syracuse convention have been described. Besides his duties as Deputy Collector, Rynders led the notorious Empire Club, a band of toughs famous for their street fighting abilities. William M. Tweed had begun his rise to the top by serving

²³Redfield to Marcy, July 15, 1854, Marcy Papers, LC.

a term in Congress where he voted for the Nebraska bill. The young John Kelly had just secured the Soft nomination to oppose the Hard's Mike Walsh for a seat in the national legislature. Fernando Wood prepared to run for his first term as Mayor of New York City against the leader of the national Know-Nothing party, James W. Barker. In spite of a reputation already dubious, Daniel Sickles had recently been appointed Secretary to James Buchanan, the United States ambassador to Great Britain.

Despite its frank love for the spoils of office, Tammany Hall did represent the views, and in its way, looked after the needs of its constituents, largely impoverished Irish immigrants. The wisdom responded to the Hibernians' fear of free Negro competition and consistently opposed any agitation with a remote tinge of abolitionism, and it classified the anti-Nebraska movement in that category. It also led the party against the nativist menace. On June 21, 1854, The Democratic General Committee adopted resolutions against any attempt to limit the rights of adopted citizens, and the chief feature of the Softs' fourth of July celebration was Lorenzo Shepard's²⁴ attack on Know-Nothingism. It should be noted that although the Syracuse convention hedged on the Nebraska issue, it took an unequivocal position against religious

²⁴New York Evening Post, June 22, July 19, 1854.

or anti-foreign bigotry and adopted the following resolution:

Resolved, That the democratic party, true to the principles with which they have ever been identified, declare that they regard the doctrine of civil and religious liberty as vital to a republican system, and that they hold all citizens to be equal before the law, without reference to creed or the circumstances of birth. 25

But why did the great mass of rural delegates, many of them former Barnburners, follow Tammany Hall's leadership? For these the tie of party was the crucial factor. Ironically, the bolt of the Barnburners strengthened rather than weakened their loyalty to the Democracy. Many never had any real heart in the Free Soil movement and had entered its ranks because of their fidelity to the Van Burens. They were relieved to have been able to return to their familiar alliances and set themselves against any new revolts.²⁶

Others who possessed a modicum of antislavery sentiment easily convinced themselves that substitution of Douglas' squatter sovereignty doctrine for the Missouri Compromise did not constitute grounds for leaving the party. They reasoned that no irretrievable damage had been done;

²⁵Ibid., September 7, 1854.

²⁶John A. Dix was a good example of a prominent Barnburner who reluctantly went along with the bolt of 1847-1848. He considered the Nebraska bill a disaster and opposed it, but he had no intentions of participating in a new rebellion. John A. Dix to Francis P. Blair, Sr., February 25, 1854, Dix to Thomas Hart Benton, April 15, 1854, Dix Papers, CU.

Kansas would in all probability enter the Union as a free state. So why inflame a situation from which only the ²⁷whigs could benefit? Samuel J. Tilden, an ex-Barnburner himself and an opponent of Nebraska, accurately described the state of feeling among the great majority of his old colleagues:

The general disposition among those most dissatisfied with the course of things at Washington is distrust; indifference, in some cases individual opposition, in many independent personal action; but very little towards organized, affirmative movement. They expect the Democratic party to be broken down for the time. They expect the folly of its leaders to inure to the benefit of the whigs...Most will expect the Democratic party to rise again, purified, and to resuming relations with it. I know of none--tho' doubtless there are such individuals--who intend permanent union with the whigs. I know of few who would undertake the formation of a new party outside of existing organizations. The body of those who went with us in 1848 will continue within the organization in which they have since acted. ²⁸

At this point, only a few barnburners who were dedicated to preventing the spread of slavery could not live with the Softs' actions. Those who followed Preston King from the Syracuse convention were the vanguard of their party in the new Republican organization.

²⁷The Albany Atlas encouraged this line of thought. Nothing in the Nebraska Act, the editors averred, required drastic action; before any new organization could take the field, Nebraska and Kansas would find their way into the Union as free states. Albany Atlas, September 7, 1854. For another expression of this point of view, see the speech of Mr. Botts of Orange county at the Syracuse convention, recorded in the New York Evening Post, September 9, 1854.

²⁸Samuel J. Tilden to (?), August 26, 1854, Tilden Papers, NYPL.

Another reason for the Radical Democrats' reluctance to enter a fusion movement was their distrust of Whiggery and their hatred of nativism. The Albany Atlas presumed that the Know-Nothings would overwhelm the Seward-Weed organization at the Whig state convention. It warned Democrats to beware of a party which professed devotion to human freedom but was gangrened by bigotry. Moreover, the intolerant behavior of the Whigs at the Saratoga anti-Nebraska convention alienated many Democrats who considered joining them.²⁹

Thus the Soft Shells decided to submit to the Administration and to Southern Democrats and to spurn fusion. This was a crucial choice and determined the future course of the party. Desire for patronage, optimism concerning Kansas and Nebraska's eventual freedom, and fear of being submerged within a Whig party tainted by Know-Nothingism played a part in this decision. These reasons seem inadequate to completely explain the Softs' actions, however, and one is encouraged to speculate about another motive, the motive of party loyalty, which although more difficult to assess, probably outweighed all other factors. To Democrats who had participated in the political battles of the Jacksonian era, the party was held in deep reverence. Perhaps it is not too much to say that party affiliation was an important part of a man's identity, that

²⁹Albany Atlas, August 17, 1854.

it was a tie that transcended reason, and that consequently, it could not be easily shed. When we assume this almost mystical devotion, we can better understand the remarkable resilience of the Democratic party. We can then grasp the reasons why New York Softs were able to overcome the strains threatening their organization. Although the Kansas-Nebraska Act antagonized many former Barnburners, most of them remained loyal. As Tilden correctly observed, the great majority of them believed the Democratic party would be purified. In 1854, they allowed their hopes to blind them to the fact that the Softs had capitulated to Southern demands. Durable as were the bonds uniting the Democratic party, they were not unbreakable; and as the crisis of the party system continued, more and more Democrats would cut loose from the organization.

CHAPTER 6

Political Wizardry

With the disintegration of the party system, politicians were forced to deal with a turbulent and uncertain environment. The disappearance of old landmarks--the familiar questions of tariff, monetary policy, and internal improvements--made the situation especially difficult. Gauging the relative strengths of the new issues--Nebraska, temperance, and nativism--became essential for political survival. Thurlow Weed felt the pressures of this upheaval most acutely. He confronted a series of challenges which endangered his party's existence. At the Saratoga anti-Nebraska convention, he had thwarted the Free Democrats' attempt to dissolve the Whig organization and to establish a Republican party in New York. However, his problems were far from over. He had yet to grapple with temperance advocates and Silver Gray-know-Nothings; these posed an even greater menace to his leadership. How Weed fought against these threats to the unity of his party provides an example of a consummate politician's response to the crisis of 1854. It also reveals the important role which political manipulators played in shaping the course of events.

Governor Seymour's veto of New York's version of the Maine Law brought the temperance issue into prominence.

The Governor's action restored an old dilemma for Weed; he had hoped that enactment of this measure would have removed this troublesome question from politics. Personally, Weed considered temperance agitation as a dangerous nuisance inspired by fanatical reformers, whom he had always held in contempt. But as the Whig leader, he knew that this question had created a dangerous situation within his party. Whigs in the central and western section of the state overwhelmingly supported liquor legislation while conservatives, especially in New York City, generally opposed it. Party ties had become so weak that both groups threatened to cut loose from their old organization unless¹ they had their way.

Seymour's motives for the veto cannot be known with certainty. His message declared the bill unconstitutional, "unjust and oppressive in its character and subversive of well settled principles of legislation."² As might be expected, prohibitionists were unimpressed with his reasoning, and they roundly criticized him for it.³

¹Weed to Patterson, March 31, 1854, Patterson to Weed, April 3, 1854, Weed Papers, URL; Edwin D. Morgan to Fish, May 2, 1854, Fish Papers, LC.

²Seymour's veto is printed in Charles Z. Lincoln, ed., Messages from the Governors of New York State, Vol. 4 (Albany, 1909), p. 607, and the New York Evening Post, April 1, 1854.

³Seymour received numerous letters scolding him for his veto. See, for example, the letter of Harriet Ferguson to Seymour, April 11, 1854, Seymour Papers, NYSL.

Horace Greeley charged the Governor with a maneuver designed to shore up his own and his party's political fortunes by securing the support of the liquor dealers.

Agreeing with this analysis, Weed wrote Patterson that Seymour had "made a desperate plunge on the grounds, I suppose, that he had nothing to lose."⁴

Whether idealism or politics or a mixture of the two influenced Seymour's decision, the effect of his action cannot be disputed: it made temperance an important issue in the forthcoming election. Washington Hunt, who was in Albany following the veto, informed Hamilton Fish that "the Maine Law was about as prominent a topic there, as Nebraska at Washington...There is no denying that Seymour's veto gives him an active and positive force, it makes him somewhat formidable as a candidate...."⁵

Almost at once the anti-Nebraska movement, which had absorbed so much of the energies of religious idealists in the Burned-over-region, was overshadowed. Tem-

⁴New York Tribune, March 31, 1854; Weed to Patterson, March 31, 1854, Weed Papers, URL. It should be noted that the Evening Post, which was not friendly to Seymour, could not see any advantage in antagonizing the temperance forces in the state, armed as they were with powerful resources, zealous advocates, and alliance with pulpit and press. The editors admitted their surprise at the veto and considered it one of the Governor's rare acts of selflessness. New York Evening Post, March 31, 1854.

⁵Washington Hunt to Fish, April 8, 1854, Fish Papers, LC.

perance organizations immediately declared that they would renew the struggle and that they would not allow their cause to be subordinated to any other; moreover, they announced that if the Whigs would not cooperate, they were prepared to form their own party. One group, The Friends of Temperance, insisted on the primacy of the liquor question and pledged itself "to disregard in the coming political contest all party-ties and partisan associations, and cast our votes for none but men pledged to enact a prohibitory law."⁶ Public meetings in central and western New York echoed this demand. In Allegany county, prohibitionists urged that support for the Saratoga anti-Nebraska convention be contingent on a resolution favoring the Maine Law. This proposal created a furor as many considered it irrelevant, but it passed, nevertheless.⁷

A day after the vote, Greeley rallied the temperance forces for a final battle: "If we must have the controversy over again, and under a form calculated to render it more sharp and bitter, why so be it. We are ready for the contest whenever and wherever it must be waged." Frowning upon a suggestion to adjourn the liquor question and concentrate on the Nebraska issue, he argued that this action

⁶New York Tribune, June 9, 1854.

⁷Ibid., August 9, 1854.

would not bring as many German-Americans into the anti-slavery coalition as its advocates claimed; before the election they would be corrupted by Custom House politicians⁸ in the grog shops of the City.

Although the resurgence of temperance agitation exerted a great strain on the New York Whig party, to Thurlow Weed the growth of know-Nothingism in the rural areas of the state was even more alarming. The American-Republican movement of 1844-1845 had been isolated in New York City.⁹ Logically enough, nativist sentiment had always been strongest in cities and towns where the great majority of Catholic immigrants settled. But in 1844, the countryside, which was overwhelmingly American-born and Protestant, was suddenly seized with xenophobic hysteria, and know-Nothing lodges were formed everywhere, especially in central and western New York, the center of Whig power.

Why did this remarkable expansion of nativist sentiment take place? Certainly, the superior organization of the Know-Nothings was an important factor. The excitement of secret meetings, the opportunity for fraternalism, and the attractions of exotic rituals all played a part.

⁸Ibid., April 1, June 8, 13, 1854.

⁹See above, pp. 30-31, 36.

Coincidental occurrences such as the visit of Papal Nuncio, Archbishop Gaetano Bedini, added fuel to anti-Catholic bigotry. But for the most important reason, we must look to the disruption of the party system. Know-Nothingism was attractive to many politically unattached people. Also, for a brief time, it seemed to incorporate the anti-slavery and temperance movements. It is true that the secret Order appealed to the apprehensions of native born Protestants and rural Americans that Catholic immigrants, especially the Irish, were becoming too numerous and gaining too much power. But it should also be pointed out that many who joined believed that by striking a blow at the Irish, they were also striking a blow at the expansion of slavery and the saloon. To many crusaders in the "infected district," the root of these other evils could be found in the Irish slums of New York City.

Know-Nothing expansionism posed a powerful threat to Weed's control over the Whig state convention, scheduled to assemble at Syracuse on September 20. The reason for this was simply the difficulty of knowing whether a formerly faithful Whig had given his allegiance to the Order and was now pledged to betray his old comrades. None could be depended upon absolutely, and all depended on the strength of the personal friendships which the boss had established during his long career.

County meetings to select delegates often witnessed

battles for domination between Sewardites and Silver Grays, who were in league with the Know-Nothings. Weed received varying reports of success and failure from his lieutenants. At Little Falls, the nativists took a caucus entirely out of the hands of loyal Whigs and elected their own delegates. The situation was reversed at Albion; despite a thorough effort by the Silver Grays, the Sewardites remained in control. As the convention approached, Weed was worried. "I don't see how we are to get through the convention safely," he wrote to Patterson. "The breakers ahead cause serious apprehensions."¹⁰

The efforts of Daniel Ullman, a New York City lawyer and a prominent Silver Gray, to secure the gubernatorial nomination complicated the maneuverings that preceded the Whig convention. His activities also illustrated the problems which politicians faced as they sought to navigate a future for themselves amidst the uncertainties produced by the party crisis. A tireless office seeker, Ullman was willing to join any party and any cause so long as it advanced his goal. His repeated rebuffs from the Sewardites had driven him into the Know-Nothing or-¹¹ganization sometime in 1853. His latest scheme was to

¹⁰Vivus W. Smith to Seward, September 4, 1854, Seward Papers, URL; Orson Nicholson to Weed, September 16, 1854, Weed to Patterson, May 10, 29, September 17, 1854, Weed Papers, URL; New York Tribune, October 23, 1854.

¹¹See Curran, "Know-Nothings of New York," p. 104.

present himself as a compromise candidate, who would be acceptable to all groups. Some of his partisans, assuming the name of "The New York Central Whig Association," sent out a circular letter to a wide spectrum of Whigs throughout the state asking for support. They maintained that Ullman deserved the nomination because of his past political sacrifices, his fidelity to all cherished Whig principles, and his determined opposition to the Nebraska bill.¹²

Ullman's prospects did not look encouraging. He heard that despite great efforts, Weed's followers, who were deeply entrenched in county politics, had triumphed.¹³ Those who felt that they had done better in local caucuses were not optimistic either. One campaigner believed that the Order had carried the state, "but many of those who are delegates are green in politics and I fear may be out generalled."¹⁴ The failure of Silver Grays and Know-Nothings to concentrate their support upon one candidate

¹²The contents of this letter were communicated to Weed by Thomas R. Horton, August 5, 1854, Weed Papers, URL. See also H. Green to Marcellus Ellis, August 7, 1854, Daniel Ullman Papers, NYHS. Ellis was a member of "The New York Central Whig Association"

¹³See, for example, J. Oshander to Robert Wetmore, August 2, 1854, E. F. Hovey to Ullman, August 7, 1854, O. L. Sheldon to Ullman, August 20, 1854, D. L. Fettee to Ullman, September 10, 1854, Ullman Papers, NYHS.

¹⁴L. S. Parsons to Ullman, September 16, 1854, Ullman Papers, NYHS.

handicapped their efforts. Among Ullman's competitors were other well-known nativists--Joseph W. Savage, the former Secretary of the Native Americans (1835), and Judge William Wallace Campbell, a wealthy New York jurist and former American-Republican Congressman. The Albany Register, the semi-official organ of the Silver Grays, favored Savage, and so, it was rumored, did James W. Barker, the President of the National and State Grand Councils.¹⁵ Even with the Whig convention only a few days away, pleas for concerted action went unheeded.¹⁶

Judging it his only chance, Ullman authorized his manager to confer with Weed and see if the boss could be induced to back him as the least objectionable Silver Gray. Weed, however, would have nothing to do with this overture; he had been too often betrayed by the conservatives in his party to trust them now. He knew that his old enemies provided the organizational skill which made the Know-Nothings a success and that this movement had been "invented to kill Seward and his friends."¹⁷

¹⁵N. G. King to Ullman, September 8, 1854, L. S. Parsons to Ullman, September 14, 16, 1854, Sam H. Hammond to Ullman, October 17, 1854, Ullman Papers, NYS. Hammond was an editor of the Albany Register.

¹⁶N. G. King to Ullman, September 8, 1854, L. S. Parson to Ullman, September 14, 1854, George R. Babcock to Ullman, September 16, 1854, Ullman Papers, NYHS.

¹⁷Weed to Patterson, September 17, 23, 1854, Lyman A Spaulding to Weed, August 3, 1854, Weed Papers, URL.

Moreover, he interpreted this last minute appeal as a
¹⁸
 sign that Ullman knew he would be beaten.

Even an opportunist like Daniel Ullman found it difficult to measure the strength of the new issues. That he was a Know-Nothing and that his circular declared hostility to the Nebraska bill was well known. Significantly, he had omitted his position on the temperance question; apparently, judging this matter too dangerous, he had adopted a wait-and-see attitude. To his surprise, he discovered that most of his potential backers in the western section of the state made their support contingent
¹⁹
 on his willingness to sign a Maine Law. Confronted with the intensity of anti-liquor feeling, he gave in and promised to sign a bill should it pass the legislature.
²⁰
 However, this last moment conversion only underlined his previous failure to speak out. His assessment of the

¹⁸D. L. Pettee to Ullman, September 10, 1854, Ullman Papers, NYHS.

¹⁹See, for example, R. B. Warren to Marcellus Ellis, August 7, 1854, Socrates Smith to Ellis, August 11, 1854, E. G. Pettengill to Ellis, August 11, 1854, E. D. Swadholt to Ellis, August 12, 1854, S. Peter Bradford to Ellis, August 24, 1854, Ullman Papers, NYHS.

²⁰Ullman to D. Andrews, September 16, 1854, Ullman Papers, NYHS. This letter was prepared for the exclusive use of Ullman's managers at the whig state convention, and it was never made public.

dominant issue of the canvass had been wrong, and one of his campaigners feared that it had been fatal: "I gather from various sources...the importance of having candidates of well known Maine Law proclivities. I shall feel mad and mortified if such a dirty question should be made instrumental in defeating us, and yet it looks a little like it."²¹

Weed, hoping that the extraordinary political confusion would subside, refused to make any premature decision regarding the governorship. There is evidence to suggest that prior to the veto of the Maine Law he had toyed with the idea of nominating Seward and replacing him in the Senate with Washington Hunt.²² Whether this notion ever became a serious purpose is not known, but it was quickly abandoned because of the liquor question. The temperance men detected Seward; they roundly condemned his Washington dinner parties which were known to feature the finest wines and liquors. Appreciating this fact, Weed sought to stifle any further conjecture about his friend's candidacy.²³

²¹N. G. King to Ullman, September 16, 1854, Ullman Papers, NYHS.

²²Hunt to Fish, April 8, 1854, Fish Papers, LC; Patterson to Weed, May 8, 1854, Weed Papers, URL.

²³Weed to Patterson, May 10, 29, 1854, Weed Papers, URL.

The boss then considered his close associate, George W. Patterson. But Patterson, too, was not held in esteem by Temperance League men, who refused to support anyone unless he was absolutely reliable. If they were not satisfied, they threatened to nominate their own candidate. Moreover, as a loyal Sewardite, Patterson was anathema to the Know-Nothings and would be a perfect target for them.²⁴

As the clamor for a Maine Law grew, the appeal of State Senator Byron H. Clark of Canandaigua became irresistible. John M. Bradford, a confidant of Weed, wrote:

Clark tho' probably not the first choice of any one would it seems to me unite more elements of strength than any one else. He is known as a true reliable ardent Seward man. That 9/10ths of the party would therefore willingly go him--For the same reason he would get the free democracy hereabouts if not throughout the State. He would command the whole Maine law vote. He would lose all whigs who love anti Maine lawism more than their party--and so I think would any man we should nominate who it was understood would not veto a Maine law. We've got to have that law and we may just as well face the music now as ever. The People must have it tried and we may as well make use of it as not. We must take that side. Seymour has already occupied the other. ²⁵

Clark also possessed another valuable attribute, he belonged to a Know-Nothing lodge. Daniel Ullman's partisans also considered him their strongest adversary. They presumed that Weed would choose that Know-Nothing whom

²⁴John M. Bradford to Weed, June 24, 1854, Weed to Patterson, September 23, 1854, Weed Papers, URL.

²⁵John M. Bradford to Weed, June 24, 1854. See also David H. Abell to Weed, Weed Papers, URL

he could best manage, and the Senator was generally considered as a man of only moderate abilities.²⁶ These predictions turned out to be correct; shortly before the convention, Weed consulted with Clark and found his views satisfactory.²⁷

An unusually large number of aspirants for the governorship appeared at the Fair convention in Syracuse. The Hard and Soft Shell division in Democratic ranks made the nomination especially attractive, and those hitherto known for their magnanimity in yielding such honors to others now insisted that their reward was due. Several distinguished Sewardites were in the field--Elbridge G. Spaulding, Levi Harris, Henry J. Raymond, George W. Patterson, and Washington Hunt. Each hoped that Weed would favor him. Also present were the followers of several Silver Gray-Know-Nothing candidates, including Daniel Ullman; but an attempt to focus support on a single nativist failed. None of the candidates agreed to withdraw. On the first two ballots, no one had a clear majority. But on the third roll call, Clark's vote started to climb, revealing him as the second choice of many delegates, and he finally

²⁶L. S. Parsons to Ullman, September 16, 1854, N. G. King to Ullman, September 8, 14, 1854, D. L. Pettee to Ullman, September 18, 1854, Ullman papers, NYHS; Rochester American, quoted in the Albany Argus, September 23, 1854.

²⁷Myron H. Clark to Weed, September 10, 1851, Weed Papers, URL.

28

received the nomination.

The delegates chose Henry J. Raymond, the ambitious editor of the New York Times, for lieutenant governor. Weed, trying to balance his ticket by adding a candidate who would appeal to conservatives, engineered his selection. Horace Greeley, who had also sought the nomination, bitterly resented the choice of his rival--whom he dubbed the "little villain." He could barely contain his anger, and he never forgave Weed or Seward. He had no other choice than to stand behind the ticket, but the political partnership of these three Whigs, which had endured for over fourteen years, would soon be over.²⁹

The keynote of the Whig platform was caution. Although it concentrated on attacking the Nebraska Act and its perpetrators, the convention revealed that it was in no mood for sweeping antislavery proposals; a modest declaration for repeal of the Fugitive Slave Act was hissed down and its advocate forced to withdraw it. The principal resolution was:

Resolved That by the act procuring the repeal of the Missouri Compromise we hold that we are forever discharged from all obligations to support any

²⁸New York Tribune, September 21, 1854; New York Evening Post, September 22, 1854; Albany Argus, September 22, 1854.

²⁹Greeley to Seward, October 5, November 17, 1854, Seward Papers, URL; New York Tribune, September 21, 25, 26, November 9, 1854; Isely, Horace Greeley, p. 30.

compromise with Slavery, except such as are contained in the Constitution of the United States; and most especially that we are forever released from all obligations to admit into our Union any State which sanctions or permits Slavery. 30

It should be noted that this statement was worded to satisfy conservatives who were eager to denounce Repeal but had no wish to alienate the South. They wanted to keep the door open for an eventual reconciliation between the Northern and Southern wings of the party.

Both the New York Evening Post and the National Era pointed out that the Whigs, confining themselves merely to protests, had failed to propose any positive action. The Era believed it detected an important nuance in the Nebraska resolution:

It claims that the People are not bound to receive any more Slave States into the Union, but it does not affirm that they are bound, not to receive any more Slave States. It recognizes a certain right in them, but is silent as to its exercise. 31

The Post, always distrustful of Seward, maintained that the planks of the platform had been inconspicuously constructed to permit the Senator to slip through them if he wished. The editors presented this analysis of Seward's strategy:

When they [the Whig resolutions] are shown to the Southern Whigs, it will be said, "See what a liberal platform we have put together. We condemn the Nebraska

³⁰New York Tribune, September 21, 1854; Albany Argus, September 22, 1854.

³¹National Era, September 28, 1854. The Albany Argus, October 3, 1854, made a similar comment.

Act it is true; but that you do not care for, since we do not offer to repeal it. We say that we are released from all obligation to admit any more Slave States, but we do not promise that we will not admit them. Against the Fugitive Slave Law we say nothing. All we propose to do is to have a President for our wing of the Whig party. You cannot refuse to join us since we do not propose to do anything, but to get the power and offices into our hands." 32

As a result of Weed's management, the Sewardites now possessed a ticket and a program which had appeal to many Whigs who were tempted by new political paths. Such diverse groups as temperance advocates, nativists, conservatives, and opponents of the Nebraska bill could still adhere to their old organization. It remained to be seen whether this "package" which Weed had concocted would have sufficient cohesive power to hold his party together.

During the proceedings of his own convention, Weed was mindful of its effect upon the reconvened anti-Nebraska and the temperance meetings, scheduled to assemble at Auburn a few days later. One of his major aims was to prevent these bodies from making separate nominations. He wrote Patterson that "unless we hit right the Auburn Conventions will act."³³

In the closing days of September, Auburn was the site of feverish political activity as no less than three

³²New York Evening Post, September 22, 1854.

³³Weed to Patterson, September 17, 1854, Weed Papers, URL.

conventions were to meet in as many days--the Free Democratic on September 25, the adjourned Saratoga anti-Nebraska on September 26, and the Temperance on September 27. The choice of a common location afforded many delegates the opportunity to attend all three.

Several Free Democrats had fought an uphill battle to steer the Saratoga anti-Nebraska convention toward fusion. Although this hope had been frustrated,³⁴ they had not given up. They assembled at Auburn in large numbers to make another attempt to establish the Republican party in New York. When the Free Democratic convention met, it, too, was divided between those who urged acceptance of the Whig nominations and those who wanted to hold out for a new fusion party. However, those holding the latter view greatly predominated.³⁵ John P. Hale urged the more popular course; he cautioned his party to avoid a recurrence of 1848, when it had been used merely to whip adversaries

³⁴See above, pp. 96-99.

³⁵During the debate, one Free Democrat observed that the greatest support for endorsing the Whig slate came from the galleries, not from the floor. Presumably, many Whigs had arrived at Auburn to do some early campaigning. See the New York Times, September 26, 1854. The following account of the various Auburn conventions is a composite derived from telegraphic dispatches from the New York Evening Post and the New York Times and the special reporters these papers had on the scene.

and then discarded.³⁶ The majority finally adopted the following resolution, offered by Judge Robert Snow of Madison county, to serve as a clear manifesto of its purpose:

Resolved, That while this Convention cannot completely officiate with either of the political organizations or adopt the tickets nominated by them, we are ready and willing to co-operate with the true friends of freedom of all parties in this and other states by the formation of a Republican organization, and the nomination of a Republican ticket, composed of men who have abandoned, or are ready to abandon the existing political organization of this state. 37

The delegates agreed not to make a separate nomination at that time, but to adjourn until they knew the results of the anti-Nebraska meeting.³⁸ Following these decisions, many Free Democrats proceeded across town to that convention, which was beginning its opening session.

The reconvened anti-Nebraska convention proved to be as thoroughly in the grip of the Whigs as its predecessor at Saratoga. Weed's agents had done their work well. They successfully reversed the previous agreement to vote by Assembly districts and substituted a system of indi-

³⁶New York Evening Post, September 29, 1854.

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸Ibid.; New York Times, September 26, 1854.

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vidual voting Free Democrats considered this a breach
of trust, for many district delegations had entrusted
their vote to one delegate who had undertaken the journey
40
to Auburn.

Although thrown off balance by this maneuver, several
Free Democrats would not give up. For the second time
that day, Judge Snow introduced a resolution for a Repub-
41
lican ticket. John I. Hale advocated it, pleading with
the Whigs to place a Democrat on the ballot, thus creating
a genuine fusion:

In claiming the whole reward of this struggle, are
you not ungenerous?...Tens of thousands of Democrats
feel their inmost natures outraged by this bill.
Let us to-day build anew the Temple of Freedom. If
you do not need aid here, at least have magnanimity.
I had fondly hoped that the time had come for New York
to respond to the call of freedom's champions. But
no--we must wait till some period of the misty future
when millennial glory shall dawn on the Church, for
New York to come forward. 42

The hopes of Free Democrats rested on the following strat-
egy: they agreed to accept the Whig nominee for governor,
Byron H. Clark, provided that Bradford R. Wood, a former

39For charges of Whig sharp dealing, see the letter
of a Free Democrat, "How the Auburn Convention was Be-
Whigged," in the New York Evening Post, October 3, 1854.
Seceders from the convention made similar allegations,
Ibid., September 29, 1854.

40Ibid., October 3, 1854.

41Ibid., September 29, 1854.

42New York Times, September 27, 1854.

Wilmot Proviso Congressman and free soil Democrat, was substituted for Henry Raymond as the candidate for lieutenant governor. Their attempt failed; the vote was 127 for Raymond, ⁴³84 for Wood. As the roll call went against them, some of the fusionists left the hall.

The convention then nominated the entire Whig ticket, adopted a series of resolutions condemning the 1852 Baltimore platforms of both major parties, the Nebraska Act, the Fugitive Slave Law, and called for an assembly of delegates from the free states to nominate presidential and vice-presidential candidates. ⁴⁴The remaining delegates, however, had been unnerved by the bolt, and in the closing moments of the proceedings, they passed a proposal by a Free Democrat, identified as Dr. J. E. Snodgrass, that the standing state committee be called the Republican organization. ⁴⁵Thus at the last instant the Whigs offered an olive branch to Hale's followers; the Republican party of New York existed in name if not in substance.

⁴³New York Evening Post, September 29, 1854.

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵Ibid.; New York Times, September 27, 1854. Snodgrass subsequently took part in several Abolitionist meetings. At a meeting of the American Anti-Slavery Society in May of 1855, he debated William Lloyd Garrison, criticizing him for his aloofness from the electoral process. Snodgrass said that he had lived most of his life in the South. He was Vice-President of the American Settlement Company of New York, an organization dedicated to sending immigrants to Kansas. See the New York Tribune, May 11, 1855.

The seceders met at the Court House that afternoon. They roundly condemned Whig chicanery and defiantly nominated the fusion slate of Clark and Wood. They issued a statement declaring their independence from old parties⁴⁶ and their fellowship with Republicans in other states. The Free Democratic convention endorsed this stand when it reassembled that evening; it renamed its standing organization,⁴⁷ the Republican State Central Committee.

On the following day, the State Temperance convention also met at Auburn. It followed the same pattern as the anti-Nebraska meeting; indeed, it contained almost the same personnel, demonstrating the fact that reformers who opposed slavery's expansion were also active in temperance circles. Some were dissatisfied with Raymond because of his former hostility to liquor legislation, but Clark's name at the head of the ticket plus assurances from Raymond that he had experienced a conversion on the Maine Law reconciled them to the Whig ticket. A small group of die-hards, many of whom had been previously identified as Free Democrats and Abolitionists, tried to replace Raymond with Wood but failed.⁴⁸

⁴⁶Ibid.

⁴⁷New York Evening Post, September 29, 1854.

⁴⁸New York Times, September 26, 1854.

With the State Temperance convention's endorsement of his candidates, Thurlow Weed had achieved all of his major objectives. Although caught in the turbulence of a political revolution, in which familiar guidelines had disappeared, Weed had successfully neutralized the stresses on his party and steered it into a safe position. He had disarmed the threats to his leadership from Free Democrats and Silver Gray-Know-Nothings and had harnessed the Temperance movement for his own purposes. He had formulated a ticket and a platform which appealed to many who had severed old party ties and adopted new causes--to such diverse groups as temperance advocates, nativists, conservatives, and anti-Nebraskaites. Here, certainly, was an example of political wizardry. Yet, Weed's brilliant performance was only a holding action. He had played a very cautious hand in 1854, seeking to shore up the Whig organization rather than strike out on new paths. His primary motive was to secure the re-election of Seward to the Senate, but his basic conservatism also played an important part in his decision. However, as the party system continued to deteriorate, Weed was forced to abandon his cherished party and enter a new alignment.

CHAPTER 7

An Indecisive Election

The election of 1854 revealed the effects of the great stress exerted on New York's party system. A chaotic political situation existed. Four distinct tickets were nominated. Traditional party lines were blurred. The new issues of Nebraska, temperance, and nativism had entirely displaced the old issues. The election further weakened past party alignments; and it thereby prepared the way for the emergence of new political loyalties.

By the end of September, 1854, three separate tickets were in the field--the Soft Shell, the Hard Shell, and the Whig. One other would shortly add to the confusion--the Know-Nothing. Out maneuvered by Thurlow Weed in their bid to gain control of the Whig party, the Silver Grays now turned to the nativist organization which they had carefully nurtured.

The meeting of the New York Grand Council, scheduled to begin on October 5, 1854, proved to be stormy as adherents of every political stripe tried to manipulate it for their own purposes. The past policy of the Order had been to select candidates from other parties rather than nominate its own, and several delegates, presumably Sewardites, urged that Myron H. Clark be endorsed. However, Silver Gray Whigs, who were in firm control, squelched

this move and pushed through the nomination of Daniel Ullman for governor. The Know-Nothings formed a completely new slate for the other state offices and chose James W. Barker, the President of the Council, to oppose Tammany's Fernando Wood in the New York City mayoralty race. These events caused a bolt by those opposed to the creation of a separate ticket. The seceders, subsequently known as "Know-Somethings" or "Choctaws," included a number of antislavery men who wanted an explicit denunciation of the Nebraska Act.¹ The Grand Council refused to adopt any platform, thus leaving the position of its candidates on the Nebraska and temperance issues in doubt.

The Know-Nothings now found it necessary to derogate the credentials of the Whigs' gubernatorial nominee who claimed to be a member of the Order. Clark, like many other Sewardites, had joined the secret organization for his own protection and to establish some control over it. Weed deemed Clark's membership an asset, because he wanted to give a nativist tinge to the ticket. In any case, the Ethan Allen Council No. 133 located in Clark's town of Canandaigua, printed a circular accusing him of being a member of a spurious lodge, whose purpose was to subvert

¹New York Herald, October 7, 1854; New York Tribune, October 6, 9, November 3, 1854.

the genuine chapter for the advantage of William H. Seward. The Whigs in turn spread the rumor that Ullman was not really a native American, but a foreigner born in Calcutta of German-Jewish parents. Horace Greeley seized upon this "exposé" and dubbed the nativists "Hindoos." This title stuck and caused the Know-Nothings considerable embarrassment.³

A general revulsion against old parties and old politicians and the desire to strike them down was an important factor undermining the old parties in New York. Voters were irate over what they believed was an all too frequent tendency towards corruption and the betrayal of constituents. Silver Gray Whigs were held in particular disrepute in central and western New York, where they had a reputation for acquiescence in the demands of the

²J. P. Faurot to Ullman, September 27, 1854, Ullman Papers, NYHS. Faurot was president of the Ethan Allen chapter. A printed copy of the circular mentioned in the text, dated September 26, 1854, is in the Ullman papers; New York Weekly Mirror, September 30, 1854.

³The New York Tribune ran a continual discussion of these charges. See the Tribune for October 13, 26, 28, 30, 31, November 2, 6, 7, 1854. Ullman received numerous letters asking him to disprove these allegations, but he refused to reply. One of these appeals came from Francis Granger, the leader of the Silver Gray bolt in 1850:

"If you were really born any where--for Heavens sake, say where--and as the Clergy say 'if you had the knowledge of Christian baptism' Let the world know where, or you will be lied into a cradle at Sevastopol, and some fellow be found to swear that he rocked you in it there."

Granger to Ullman, October 17, 1854, Ullman Papers, NYHS.

South. Ironically, Silver Gray manipulators within the Know-Nothing organization had to remain as unobtrusive as possible. When Ullman sought to call a meeting of prestigious Silver Grays to endorse his candidacy, Know-Nothing organizers in Sewardite strongholds warned him against this move. They feared that nativists with strong anti-Nebraska feelings would abandon the ticket if they suspected Silver Gray influence. They argued that to maintain the Know-Nothings' zeal at a high pitch, it was necessary for the members to believe that their movement was unsullied by discredited politicians.⁵

Silver Grays took the advice of their organizers; they remained in the background while affording as much help to the nativist slate as they could. No Silver Gray newspaper formally endorsed the Know-Nothing ticket.⁶ Greeley bitterly denounced these journals' practice of "displaying the Whig State ticket ostentatiously at the mast-head and all the time doing their best to defeat it by every kind of sneaking disparagement or open detraction."

⁴Granger to Ullman, October 17, 1854, E. F. Hovey to Ullman, October 17, 1854, George R. Babcock to Ullman, October 18, 1854, Ullman Papers, NYHS.

⁵J. P. Faurot to Ullman, October 20, 1854, L. L. Pratt to Ullman, October 19, 1854. See also the letter of Darius Perrin, S. W. D. Moore, and James R. Thompson to Ullman, November 13, 1854, Ullman Papers, NYHS.

⁶G. Searl to Ullman, December 4, 1854, Ullman Papers, NYHS.

The Albany Argus made a similar observation, noting that the editorial policy of the Buffalo Commercial Advertiser (Fillmore's organ) was totally at odds with the Whig candidates it professed to support.⁷ This policy of the Silver Grays helps to explain the initial success of Know-Nothingism in the Burned-over-region. At first, the conservative leadership of the Order managed to keep its pro-slavery views hidden. Subsequently, when concealment became impossible, nativist strength went into a rapid decline.

Ullman's strategy for the campaign was succinctly expressed by a friend who urged him "not to write any letters, to keep dark and 'Know Nothing.'⁸" To secure the Whig nomination he had been prepared to go on record against Nebraska and in favor of a prohibitory liquor law. Since these admissions were never made public--they were contained in a letter for the exclusive use of his managers--⁹ there was no need to retract them. Ullman decided to

⁷New York Tribune, October 24, 1854; Albany Argus, September 30, 1854. Among Daniel Ullman's correspondents there were several editors of Silver Gray papers who were Know-Nothings. All ostensibly supported the Whig ticket. See L. L. Pratt to Ullman, October 17, 1854, J. T. Henry to Ullman, October 10, 1854, Alexander Mann to Ullman, October 9, 1854, Ullman Papers, NYHS. Pratt was editor of the Fredonia Advertiser, Henry of the Cattaraugus Union, and Mann of the Rochester Union.

⁸Henry Sherman to Ullman, October 9, 1854, Ullman Papers, NYHS.

⁹Ullman to D. Andrews, September 16, 1854, copy of letter, Ullman Papers, NYHS.

take his cue from the Grand Council which had been silent on all other matters in order to give urgency to the nativist issue. He knew, moreover, that Nebraska and temperance were dangerous subjects and that a definite position on them would alienate many voters.¹⁰ He deemed it best to act in the mysterious manner which so delighted the members of the Order and let his lieutenants drop hints where they would do the most good.¹¹ Consequently, he refused to answer requests that he clarify his views on these questions.¹²

The Know-Nothings' great efforts to organize new lodges achieved remarkable success. Particularly heartening to Ullman was the encouraging news from central and western New York, hitherto known for its vigorous antislavery,

¹⁰See the letter of Alexander Mann to Ullman, October 9, 1854, Ullman Papers, NYHS.

¹¹One supporter informed Ullman that in Buffalo both the temperance folks and the rum sellers favored him. Charles G. Irish Jr. to Ullman, October 16, 1854, Ullman Papers, NYHS. Horace Greeley feared that many anti-Nebraska and anti-rum men would be swindled into voting for Ullman: "The wire workers whisper to them that Ullman is as much of their way of thinking as Clark, and thus dupe them into aiding the triumph of Seymour, Slavery, and Liquor!" New York Tribune, November 4, 1854. See also the Tribune for October 27, November 3, 1854.

¹²For examples of these requests, see Jerome Fuller to Ullman, October 12, 1854, G. Searl to Ullman, October 23, 1854, G. W. Horn to Ullman, October 26, 1854, Edward C. Delavan to Ullman, November 6, 1854 (Delavan was President of the New York Temperance Society), Henry W. Cass to James W. Barker, October 21, 1854, Ullman Papers, NYHS.

pro-temperance sentiment and loyalty to the Seward-Weed machine. A correspondent from Rochester informed him "that the district which used to be called by the Albany Regency, the 'infected district,' is at this moment very badly infected with Know-Nothingism."¹³ Writing from what he called the "sink hole of Sewardism in the State," an organizer reported that "he addressed the Council in Rome last night. We were at it until midnight and a more enthusiastic set of fellows you never saw--they will give Ullman a good vote there."¹⁴ L. L. Pratt, the Silver Gray editor of the Fredonia Advertiser, rejoiced:

Old Chautauque, once the home of Seward, now the residence of one of his principal satellites [sic] Ex Lt Gov. Patterson, and a district until now supposed to be under the control of the viceroy Weed will give you and your associates a considerable majority over the Clark or any other ticket. ¹⁵

After the Soft Shells had chosen their ticket and announced their platform, it seemed that they had only the remotest chance of success, but gradually their prospects improved. Governor Seymour had been renominated,

¹³John J. Bowen to Ullman, October 30, 1854, Ullman Papers, NYHS.

¹⁴George O. Jones to S. Sammons, October 28, 1854, Ullman Papers, NYHS.

¹⁵L. L. Pratt to Ullman, October 17, 1854. Ullman also learned that great enthusiasm prevailed in the Lake Counties--Orleans, Niagara, and Monroe. N. G. King to Ullman, November 2, 1854, Ullman Papers, NYHS.

but it was by no means certain that he would run. He bitterly resented the President; his recommendations for appointments had been repeatedly snubbed,¹⁶ and the McKeon¹⁷ affair had brought him to the point of open rebellion. He succinctly expressed his opinion of Pierce as "a fool who aspires to be a knave."¹⁸ Although he had not made his views public, Seymour approved of the Nebraska bill and assured Senator Douglas that his measure was not responsible for the divided condition of New York Democrats. The real cause was the President's patronage policy which had abolitionized the party by infusing new life into the free soil faction; the recipients of this bounty had shown their gratitude by going "into full operation vigorously¹⁹ and effectively against the Bill."

The Governor's refusal to run for re-election alarmed Soft Shell leaders. The equivocal Nebraska resolution

¹⁶Seymour complained about his inability to secure a post office appointment for a friend of one of the most influential Democrats in the state, Erastus Corning of Albany. Both he and Corning had written to the President but had received no reply. Seymour to A. Blanchard, January 13, 1854, enclosed in the letter of Blanchard to Marcy, January 13, 1854, Marcy Papers, LC.

¹⁷See above, pp. 53-54.

¹⁸Seymour to Marcy, September 9, 1854, Marcy Papers, LC.

¹⁹Seymour to Stephen A. Douglas, April 14, 1854, Douglas Papers, University of Chicago.

had cost them the support of those Barnburners who agreed with Preston King, and Know-Nothingism had also made inroads into their ranks. It seemed that the only chance of recouping these losses was to attract Whig and Hard Shell votes on the liquor issue. Since Seymour could generate more anti-Maine Law enthusiasm than any other candidate, many Softs entreated him to change his mind.²⁰

Before Seymour would reconsider and enter the canvass which he judged would "be bitter beyond all precedent," he wanted assurances that he could rely on the good faith of the Administration. He wrote Marcy that

the President should be compelled to take decided grounds for or against us. The present position is intolerable. We are compelled to encounter the odium of being the friends of the President while we have no assurance he will not betray us before November.²¹

Although not pleased with the Soft Shells in New York, Pierce could not permit their total destruction and promised his full cooperation. He had a trusted postal official sent to New York to expedite Seymour's wishes on appointments. The Governor believed that the proper postmasters could influence a great number of votes and

²⁰Henry S. Randall to Marcy, June 24, 1854, David A. Ogden to Marcy, July 23, 1854, Marcy Papers, LC; S. B. Garvin, Dean Richmond, and William Cassidy to Seymour, September 7, 1854, John J. Taylor to Seymour, August 30, 1854, Marcy to Seymour, May 28, 1854, typescripts, NYHS.

²¹Seymour to Marcy, September 9, 1854, Marcy Papers, LC.

help repair the disorganization of the party.²² Swift recuperative action was imperative, and he explained why: "There will be many whigs who will be discontented with the proceedings of their convention. They will take ground in favor of the opposition ticket which they deem the strongest. We must create the hope that our ticket can be elected to call forth any efforts."²³

In his speech accepting the nomination, Seymour revealed that his campaign would emphasize the liquor issue and ignore Nebraska and nativism.²⁴ Such an approach was not without its perils. Collector Redfield feared that the Governor would be decried as the rum candidate: "The difficulty will be in separating him, in the public eye from the liquor interest and making an issue upon the principle involved in the veto message."²⁵ The Soft Shell organ, the Albany Atlas, realized its responsibility for elevating the level of the campaign; and it launched into

²²Seymour to Marcy, September 18, 29, 1854, Jonathan B. Skinner to Marcy, September 28, 1854, Marcy Papers, LC (Skinner was the postal official from Washington); New York Evening Post, September 16, 1854; Nichols, Pierce, pp. 363-364

²³Seymour to Marcy, September 18, 1854, Marcy Papers, LC.

²⁴New York Times, September 30, 1854.

²⁵Heman J. Redfield to Marcy, July 15, 1854, Marcy Papers, LC.

long philosophical discussions with such titles as "Individual Liberty, the True Foundation of Political Freedom," in which it argued that prohibiting alcohol would lead to greater tyrannies and end by depriving the citizen "of all the most sacred safeguards of his person and property."²⁶

However, a meeting held at Tammany Hall to ratify Seymour's nomination was more prosaic. The speakers and the audience fulminated against the Maine Law, saying nothing about any other topic, and then adjourned to the bar for liquid refreshments.²⁷ The Governor's motive was apparent to shrewd politicians at the Wigwam. It would draw attention away from the slavery question and thus help to ease the strains which the Nebraska Act had caused. Tammanyites were more than willing to toast such a policy.

The willingness of temperance advocates to abandon political loyalties had put heavy pressure upon the old parties. But it should be noted that opponents of the Maine Law were also ready to abandon party ties to further their cause. Liquor interests, from distillers to

²⁶ Albany Atlas, September 25, 1854. For other editorials in this vein, see September 30, October 2, 4, 10, 14, 16, 17, 1854. Seymour suggested that his veto message be widely printed to avoid misrepresentation. Robert Kelly to Seymour, October 7, 1854, Seymour Papers, NYSL.

²⁷ New York Tribune, October 10, 1854; New York Evening Post, November 3, 1854.

local merchants, realized the danger to their livelihoods, and, disregarding former political preferences, they made heavy contributions to the Softs. In Steuben county, a group of liquor dealers pledged themselves to spare no effort in electing Seymour. The chairman and one third²⁸ of the members of the organization were Whigs. The Softs expected considerable aid from the Liquor Merchants' Committee of New York City which contained several prominent Whigs, who could reputedly sway large numbers of ballots. The body predicted that forty to fifty thousand voters would change their political allegiance and support the Softs.²⁹ Know-Nothing businessmen also forgot their oaths. "By -- I would like to vote for Ullman, but I must take care of No. 1 and vote for Seymour," was the comment of one storekeeper.³⁰ Consumers were also drawn to the Softs. A surprising number of laborers who enjoyed their beer and ale and gentlemen who relished their wine with dinner were willing to relinquish old political affiliations. For these people, the menace to their pleasure appeared more immediate and important than either loyalty

²⁸John E. McMahon to Seymour, October 29, 1854, Seymour Papers, NYHS.

²⁹Robert Kelly to Seymour, October 7, 1854, Seymour Papers, NYSL.

³⁰Ibid.

to party or the threats of slavery expansion, foreigners, and Catholicism.

The Hard Shells' campaign never attracted much attention. The Hards were the only party to endorse unequivocally the Nebraska Act, an action which made them most unpopular. Their gubernatorial nominee, Greene C. Bronson, wrote a series of public letters on the temperance question in which he tried to take a middle ground position between Seymour and Clark by favoring a more stringent licensing law.³¹ However, his efforts to gain anti-Maine Law support were ineffective, because Seymour, as the stronger candidate, had preempted this source.

The Softs entreated the Adamintines to abandon their unsuccessful campaign and join them.³² These appeals had some success in local contests where the desire to be sheriff or judge overcame old prejudices, and an agreement was reached to share offices.³³ Weed, Seward, and Greeley always expected a more extensive deal to be imminent,³⁴ but Hard Shell leaders refused to countenance

³¹Bronson's letters were printed in the New York Weekly Mirror, October 14, 1854.

³²See, for example, the Albany Atlas, September 22, 1854.

³³William A. Searer to Seymour, November 6, 1854, Seymour Papers, NYSL.

³⁴New York Times, September 30, 1854.

any cooperation on state or congressional tickets.³⁵
 They were playing a desperate game of rule or ruin and their repeated failures intensified their ambition. It might be expected that the Know-Nothings would be the beneficiaries of this situation, and the results satisfied their hopes.³⁶

In defense against the Know-Nothings' and Soft Shells' attempts to emphasize one issue in order to break up the Whig party, Thurlow Weed had constructed a composite platform which he hoped would have sufficient cohesive power to hold his organization together. A firm, yet moderate anti-Nebraska and antislavery position, a strong temperance candidate, and a hint of nativism emerged as the campaign formula. Yet, not even Weed's wizardry could prevent many former Whigs from breaking party ties.

The first component of the platform was immediately subjected to stress when the Saratoga-Auburn conventions

³⁵John Van Schaik Lansing Pruyn, a wealthy landowner and railroad investor, acceded to the requests of Seymour, Erastus Corning, and William Cassidy that he run for Albany's congressional seat. He offered to withdraw in favor of his Hard Shell opponent, Col. Philip Hamilton, if the latter would pledge himself to sustain the state and national administrations. Hamilton, however, refused, and Pruyn remained a candidate. Journal of John Van Schaik Lansing Pruyn, entries from October 23 to November 1, 1854, in Personal Journal No. 1, September 17, 1851-December 31, 1858, NYSL.

³⁶See S. Sammons to Ullman, October 18, 1854, Ullman Papers, NYHS. For a discussion of the Hard Shells' complicity with the nativists, see below, pp. 219-220.

endorsed the Whig nominees. Did the candidates' acceptance of this support imply that they now stood upon the aggressive platform of these conventions, which had repudiated the Whig's Baltimore platform of 1852, urged the repeal of the Fugitive Slave Law, and gone so far as to recommend the creation of a new sectional party?³⁷ This question worried conservative Whigs, and their concern was reflected in two New York City papers which claimed to be their spokesmen. James Watson Webb's Courier and Enquirer remonstrated with the candidates for betraying their trust:

It is thus that your nominations have received the universal sanction of the Whig Party through the State; and yet that sanction is no sooner given, than you simultaneously commit yourselves to a principle and a policy, which you know tens of thousands of the Whigs who had ratified your nomination could not and would not sustain. 38

Robert H. West of the Commercial Advertiser was equally emphatic:

We cannot approve the present action of our candidates if we rightly interpret the Saratoga resolutions, whatever the magnitude of the political successes which may be predicted from the support thus acquired from the party represented by those resolutions. The Whig platform adopted at Syracuse is sufficiently anti-Slavery and not more than sufficiently--for our views--thus far can we go heartily, but no further.... 39

³⁷See above, p. 139.

³⁸New York Courier and Enquirer, September 30, 1854.

³⁹New York Commercial Advertiser, September 30, 1854.

Henry Raymond attempted to quiet the fears of the conservative mercantile community by denying that he or any other candidate had abandoned his party's platform.⁴⁰ Despite these assurances, the question was never conclusively settled.

By endorsing the prohibitionist cause, Weed knew that he had alienated a number of conservatives. Washington Hunt informed him that more were lost than had been anticipated: "They are ready to sacrifice party, country and everything, sooner than be deprived of the bottle and too many of them are against us."⁴¹ The Whigs sustained other losses among German-Americans who revolted against the "cold water apostle, Myron H. Clark" and declared themselves "absolved from all party obligations during the present canvass...."⁴² Weed was also aware of the liquor dealers' extraordinary efforts in Seymour's behalf.⁴³ Weed accepted these tidings without too much alarm. Relying on his gambler's instinct and his long

⁴⁰New York Evening Post, October 30, 1854.

⁴¹Washington Hunt to Weed, October 21, 1854, Weed Papers, URL.

⁴²The Buffalo Telegraph, quoted in the Albany Argus, September 30, 1854.

⁴³Henry Raymond to Weed, October 28, 1854, Weed to Patterson, October 28, 1854, Weed Papers, URL; see also the New York Tribune, November 4, 6, 1854.

experience with the ebb and flow of popular passions, he was hoping that temperance feeling had reached its peak and would carry everything before it.

The greatest threat facing the Whig party were not dissatisfied conservatives, German-Americans, or liquor dealers, but the Know-Nothings. As the campaign progressed, Weed was appalled to discover the extent of their strength in once safe Whig areas. Reports poured in from central and western New York that his lieutenants had never experienced such rough going.⁴⁴ "There never was a time when party ties seemed of so little account," wrote Hunt.

"The new questions have destroyed party discipline, and many staunch old Whigs are floating off they don't know where."⁴⁵ Under normal circumstances the nomination of George W. Patterson for Congress would be tantamount to election. However, the expansion of the Order in Cattaraugus and Chautauqua counties caused his supporters to fear defeat.⁴⁶ Defections by Whigs hitherto known for their fidelity were common. "I have never seen the time before

⁴⁴Elbridge G. Spaulding to Weed, October 13, 1854, Hunt to Weed, October 21, 1854, Weed Papers, URL; George E. Baker to Seward, September 5, 1854, Seward Papers, URL.

⁴⁵Hunt to Weed, October 21, 1854, Weed Papers, URL.

⁴⁶Hanson A. Risley to Weed, November 2, 1854, Weed Papers, URL.

when our best Whigs could not be relied upon," reported one campaigner.⁴⁷ To protect themselves many loyal Sewardites were forced to join the Know-Nothings. Weed encouraged this practice; he would fight treachery with more treachery. Greeley was upset that the party's leader had resorted to the tactics of his enemies:

Some of those he [Weed] relies on are red-mouthed Know-Nothings, going their whole length for the Order and having its regular nomination. This is just the most scoundrelly canvass that I was ever engaged in. I feel a crawling all over on account of it. ⁴⁸

The Know-Somethings or Choctaws, those who had bolted from the Grand Council when it made separate nominations, were also a factor in the election. Although no definite evidence exists to implicate either Seward or Weed in the bolt, it is probable that they played an important role. Using loyal Whigs who had infiltrated the Order was too tempting an idea to resist;⁴⁹ a rival organization might expose the anti-temperance, pro-slavery Silver Gray leadership of the parent body and help break it up. The results of the Know-Something convention, which assembled at Utica on October 26, suggest Whig influence. Several delegates

⁴⁷A. J. Upham to Weed, November 1, 1854, Weed Papers, URL.

⁴⁸Greeley to Colfax, November 6, 1854, Greeley-Colfax Papers, NYPL.

⁴⁹A correspondent of Seward suggested the idea of a "backfire" against the Know-Nothings. Vivus W. Smith to Seward, September 4, 1854, Seward Papers, URL.

tried to divert some of the reformist energy then concentrating in nativist hysteria into antislavery and prohibitionist channels. According to the New York Tribune's correspondent, "the prevailing sentiment was that Rum, Slavery and political Catholicism were all alike fatal to the well being of the State...."⁵⁰ (my italics) Although the Choctaws refused to endorse any of the candidates already in the field, one Know-Nothing in Utica wrote that "they no doubt understand to vote and work for Mr. Clark."⁵¹

The results of the election for the national legislature were soon apparent, and they indicated that New York had joined other Northern states in administering a severe rebuke to the Democratic party for its Nebraska policy. In 1852, a united Democracy could claim about two-thirds of the state's thirty-three Representatives, but in 1854, not a single Hard Shell was elected and only two Softs. One of the latter was Francis E. Spinner from Preston King's district (encompassing Herkimer and St.

⁵⁰New York Tribune, October 30, 1854. See also the report of the Syracuse Chronicle, quoted in the Tribune, November 3, 1854.

⁵¹George O. Jones to S. Sammons, October 28, 1854, Ullman Papers, NYHS. J. W. Coley warned Ullman against a number of Choctaws who were "doing their best to divide and go for Clark." Coley promised "to meet them and confront them at every point possible." Coley to Ullman, October 17, 1854. See also Lyman Bradley, M. M. Cady, and L. Higby to Ullman, October 17, 1854, Ullman Papers, NYHS.

Lawrence counties), and he was staunchly anti-Nebraska. The only Congressman-elect whom the Administration could claim as friendly to its territorial policy was the young and ambitious Tammanyite, John Kelly, who had launched his long career by defeating the popular Hard Shell, Mike Walsh, by 21 votes in an Irish district. Approximately fifteen successful candidates received the Know-Nothings' endorsement, but these, though of varied political antecedents, were all opposed to Douglas. The remainder of those elected were Sewardites whose attitudes toward Nebraska were never in doubt.⁵²

The result of the state canvass remained in doubt for nearly two weeks because of an extremely close vote. At first, to everyone's astonishment, it seemed that Ullman would win as he piled up an early lead.⁵³ But as more returns came in, the contest narrowed to a struggle between Clark and Seymour. It stayed this way for days, one or the other candidate taking the lead as some report was added or discredited. Most newspapers despaired of sifting through the conflicting data and waited for the official canvassers to deliver the verdict. When finally counted

⁵²New York Evening Post, November 10, 11, 1854; New York Times, November 13, 1854; Whig (Tribune) Almanac, 1853, 1855.

⁵³See, for example, the New York Times, November 8, 1854.

the vote stood as follows: Clark, 156,804; Seymour, 156,495; Ullman, 122,282; Bronson, 33,850. Clark's plurality over Seymour was only 309 votes.⁵⁴

The Whig state ticket had squeezed through by the narrowest of margins. Weed's gamble that temperance would be the pivotal issue of the campaign paid off; fervent prohibitionists did not trust the Know-Nothings' hints that Ullman would sign a Maine Law and went heavily for Clark.⁵⁵ The newly elected legislature was also a cause for satisfaction; it contained a preponderance of Whigs, although it remained to be seen how many of them would vote for Seward's return to the Senate.⁵⁶

These successes, however, could not disguise the fact that the Whig party had been badly battered; the election had been more a temperance triumph than a Whig one.⁵⁷ Most alarming to the Sewardites was the size of the Know-Nothing vote. "Who would have believed that K.N.

⁵⁴Whig (Tribune) Almanac, 1855.

⁵⁵Some counties that went strongly for Clark were Wyoming, Oswego, Oneida, Wayne, Washington, Essex, Saratoga, Broome, Orange, Delaware. Ibid.; New York Tribune, December 1, 1854.

⁵⁶George E. Baker to Seward, November 10, 1854, Seward Papers, URL; Robert Kelley to Seymour, November 15, 1854, Seymour Papers, NYSL.

⁵⁷This is also the conclusion of John A. Krout, "Maine Law in New York Politics," 267-268.

fanaticism was so extensive and so well organized," wrote
 George E. Baker to Seward.⁵⁸ A glance at the returns
 confirmed the Whigs' worst fears; areas of their greatest
 strength in central and western New York returned plural-
 ities, and in some cases, majorities for the secret Order.⁵⁹
 The extent of their loss may be illustrated by examining
 the balloting in Chautauqua and Cattaraugus. These counties
 had been among the few to give majorities for Winfield
 Scott in 1852, but in 1854, they delivered 50.51% and
 51.44% of their vote respectively to Daniel Ullman.⁶⁰
 In the congressional race, a coalition of the Soft, W. P.
 Angel, and the Whig, George W. Patterson, in support of
 Reuben R. Fenton's re-election failed to prevent the vic-
 tory of the Know-Nothing candidate, Francis S. Edwards.⁶¹
 These results and other similar cases cast a shadow over
 the future of the Whig party.

⁵⁸Baker to Seward, November 10, 1854, Seward Papers, URL. See also the New York Times, November 9, 1854.

⁵⁹Examples of normally Whig counties which went heavily for the Know-Nothings include: Ontario, Livingston, Orleans, Cattaraugus, Chautauqua. See the New York Tribune, November 17, 1854 and the New York Times, November 8, 1854; Whig (Tribune) Almanac, 1855.

⁶⁰See Curran, "Know-Nothings of New York," p. 308.

⁶¹George W. Patterson to Seward, November 8, 1854, Seward Papers, URL; L. L. Pratt to Ullman, November 9, 1854, Ullman Papers, NYHS; New York Tribune, November 7, 1854.

Another casualty of the Whig victory was the political partnership of Weed, Seward, and Greeley. The Tribune's editor had soon regretted his acquiescence in Weed's plan to thwart fusion in New York; the nomination of Raymond and Weed's cooperation with Know-Nothings had alienated him even more. As the canvass progressed and it appeared that a Whig victory was doubtful, Greeley could no longer restrain his anger. He charged that if New York failed to show a popular majority against Douglas of at least 100,000, it would be the fault of selfish Whig politicians who refused to follow the will of the people.⁶² Of course, the reasons for his pique were clear. On the eve of the election, he acknowledged his premonitions of disaster,⁶³ and the result seemed to confirm his fears; from November 7 to 18, the Tribune predicted Seymour's victory. It was during this period that Greeley wrote to Seward his famous letter, declaring that henceforth he would act as an independent agent.⁶⁴

⁶²New York Tribune, October 16, 1854. See also the Tribune, November 2, 1854.

⁶³Greeley to Colfax, November 6, 1854, Greeley-Colfax Papers, NYPL.

⁶⁴Greeley to Seward, November 17, 1854, Seward Papers, URL. See the New York Tribune, November 9, 11, 14, 1854, for Greeley's public recriminations against New York's Whig leadership.

The Know-Nothings and the Silver Grays were delighted with the outcome, despite their loss. Ullman received numerous congratulatory messages for his large vote; some of his partisans believed that two more weeks of campaigning would have brought success.⁶⁵ The nativists, judging the canvass a harbinger of subsequent triumphs, exuded confidence in the future. The leader of the original Silver Gray bolt, Francis Granger, assumed that victory was near:

The more I examine the late election and see how completely this abolition fusion tribe are routed in almost everyone of their former strongholds, the stronger is my conviction that discreet and firm, unwavering action now, will secure a victory. ⁶⁶

Another politician immediately thought of the presidential campaign of 1856, and he envisioned a sweep of "at least twenty-five states." Nothing was impossible, he asserted provided we avail "ourselves of the resistless Know-Nothing element."⁶⁷ The conservative New York Weekly Mirror, though sympathizing with the nativists, had finally decided to support Bronson. However, after the election,

⁶⁵L. S. Parsons to Ullman, November 11, 1854, G. Searl to Ullman, December 4, 1854, G. M. Holbrook to Ullman, November 20, 1854, Ullman Papers, NYHS; Jacob G. Sanders to James W. Beekman, November 19, 1854, Beekman Papers, NYHS.

⁶⁶Francis Granger to Ullman, November 14, 1854, Ullman Papers, NYHS.

⁶⁷Alexander Mann to Ullman, November 16, 1854, Ullman Papers, NYHS.

it predicted:

We see the dawn--aye, the full morning of a flaming day when the conservative, Union-loving, law abiding American masses will march, shoulder to shoulder, to national triumph...Once more we rejoice in the TRIUMPH OF AMERICANISM." 68

The Soft Shells were dismayed by their congressional defeats but buoyed by their strong vote on the state ticket. They could not escape the revulsion against Nebraska and shared the fate of their party throughout the North. However, Seymour's strategy of focusing his campaign on the liquor question almost succeeded; the love of many for their drinks had overcome their fidelity to party and their concern for Nebraska, foreignism, and the alleged Catholic menace.⁶⁹ The Governor maintained that he was satisfied with the result and so were other Soft politicians who believed that their party had stood up remarkably well, considering Hard Shell factionalism, Barnburner defections,⁷⁰ and Administration bungling with which it had to contend.

⁶⁸New York Weekly Mirror, November 11, 1854.

⁶⁹Francis E. Spinner believed that Seymour's silence on Nebraska cost him support, too. During his campaign for Congress, Spinner took a strong anti-Douglas position, and he ran far ahead of the Soft ticket. He noted subsequently, that had the Governor come within a thousand votes of his majority, he would have been re-elected. Spinner to Thomas Cunningham, February 19, 1885, Francis E. Spinner Miscellaneous Manuscripts, NYHS.

⁷⁰Horatio Seymour to John F. Seymour, November 22, 1854, Seymour Papers, NYHS; Henry S. Randall to Seymour, December 26, 1854, Robert Kellog to Seymour, November 15, 1854, Seymour Papers, NYSL.

The Softs discovered several aspects in the outcome which gave them confidence that they would return to power. The victory of Fernando Wood over James W. Barker in New York City's mayoralty race showed that the Know-Nothings could be beaten; it also strengthened the bonds which tied adopted citizens to the Democratic party. But most important was their feeling that the coalitions against them could not be maintained. They shared Douglas' view that the Democracy had only sustained a temporary loss and accepted his admonition to "be of good cheer...Though the skies are partially overcast, the clouds are passing away."⁷¹ One Soft Shell expressed this attitude in his own words: "The omens and prospects look to me bright as respects the future. The new party [the Know-Nothings] may succeed for a time but they have torn the Whig strength to pieces and nearly annihilated the Hards."⁷²

It had not escaped notice that the combined Soft and Hard Shell vote would have resulted in an easy victory. Moreover, the Adamintines had lost considerable ground. Their gubernatorial candidate obtained 33,850 votes compared to 99,835 for the head of the ticket in the preceding year; this represented a loss of nearly two-thirds. But

⁷¹Quoted in Crandall, Early History of Republican Party, p. 25.

⁷²Robert Kellog to Seymour, November 15, 1854, Seymour Papers, NYSL.

even more damaging than this sharp decline were the indications that Hard Shell ballots had gone directly to the Know-Nothings. A supporter of Seymour wrote the Governor that it would "be a difficult matter for them [the Hards] to maintain a respectable organization after the general desertion of their ticket in all parts of the state and the suspiciously small vote in the places where Dickinson has influence."⁷³ It would not be easy for the Adamintines to disprove charges of conspiring with the nativists, and it seemed that their bid to convince the South that they were the reliable Democrats of New York had failed. In view of these facts, some Soft Shell politicians predicted that within a short time the so-called National Democrats would come trooping back to beg forgiveness.

The election of 1854 clearly demonstrated that an upheaval was taking place in American politics. The effects of the great strain placed on the party system by the Nebraska Act, the temperance movement, and the Know-Nothing crusade were apparent. The national Whig party, which

⁷³The vote in Binghamton, the home of Dickinson and an area where he was reputed to have power, looked especially suspect: Ullman, 479; Clark, 76; Bronson, 41; Seymour, 14. See the New York Times, November 11, 1854. The Albany Atlas immediately accused the Hards of complicity with the nativists: "Thus professing rigid principles, they have gone for a party professing no principles except proscription." Albany Atlas, November 11, 1854. However, one Soft noted that in his locality the Hards played "to kill" by voting directly for Clark. Henry S. Randall to Seymour, December 26, 1854, Seymour Papers, NYSL.

had existed in weakened condition ever since the canvass of 1852, was moribund. Northern and Southern Whigs were politically adrift and drawn to other alignments. The national Democratic party, too, had sustained severe losses. Only two years before it had elected a President with the greatest majority in its history and achieved preponderance in the national legislature; now it confronted a hostile North and an anti-Nebraska majority in Congress.

In New York, the state parties were also victims of the forces destroying the party system. The Softs could not escape the opprobrium attached to the Nebraska Act and suffered a crushing defeat in the congressional elections. Aided by vast sums of money from the liquor interest, they made a good showing in the gubernatorial race; however, resistance to the Maine Law was hardly a traditional Democratic issue and certainly a poor basis on which to build a party. Because of an explicit endorsement of the Nebraska Act, the Hards lost two-thirds of their former voting strength. Hards and Softs were still unreconciled, each faction competing for Southern support. This feud taxed even the remarkable resilience of the Democratic party; a growing number of old Jacksonians were attracted to Know-Nothing and anti-Nebraska coalitions.

Under the able management of Thurlow Weed, New York Whigs had won a nominal victory in the state contest.

But this success could not hide the widening fissures in the Whig party. The election of Myron H. Clark was more a temperance than a Whig triumph. Silver Gray-Know-Nothings had lured thousands of old Whigs into the secret Order. Nativist strength was growing in the "infected district" of central and western New York, the traditional center of Whig power. Free Democrats continued to agitate for the break-up of the Whig organization and alliance with the Republican party in other states.

Although a political revolution was in progress, its course was not immediately apparent. The election of 1854 acted like a crucible--it melted down old political loyalties--but it was inconclusive. Because the religious idealism of citizens in the vitally important Burned-over-region had been diverted into different channels, neither a dominant party nor a paramount issue had emerged. More time was needed before the upheaval could work itself out and reveal the shape of the future.

CHAPTER 8

The Know-Nothings and Slavery

The New York Silver Grays knew that the slavery question was the main problem facing the national parties. In their efforts to build a national conservative party, they tried to avoid this issue at all costs, lest their organization fall victim to the same pressures racking the Seward-Whig and Democratic parties. They predicated their strategy upon the principle that nativist goals be paramount. This policy had been followed by the New York Know-Nothing Grand Council in the campaign of 1854, when it refused to make a statement regarding any other issue. However, in 1855, silence became impossible. Sectional tension appeared among the Know-Nothings and threatened to destroy the schemes of the Silver Grays.

The impending selection of a United States Senator by the New York legislature on February 6, 1855 attracted wide attention. This would be a crucial confrontation between nativists and Whigs, and both sides exerted themselves to the utmost. Know-Nothings throughout the nation eagerly waited to see if Seward would be defeated; his humiliation could give a powerful boost to the secret Order all over the Union.

One of the consequences of the disruption of the

party system was the great uncertainty in political affairs. This fact was clearly demonstrated in the New York Senatorial contest. The Whigs appeared to have an impressive majority in the Assembly. The Whig Almanac listed its composition as follows: "Whigs of all sorts, 82; Softs of all grades, 26; Hards, 16; Maine Law Independents, 3; Vacancy, 1; Total, 128." However, these figures did not reveal the true picture as the Almanac observed: "Know-Nothings are sprinkled miscellaneously among Whigs, Hards and Softs; and exactly how many there are of these gentry in the Assembly Nobody Knows."¹ The operations of the secret Order had cast doubt upon the party affiliation of practically every legislator. Thus, the reelection of Seward depended on the fidelity of the ostensible Whig majority.

During this period of political crisis, critical choices had to be made. Many politicians felt themselves pulled simultaneously in two directions. Old party connections were still strong. Yet, with the breakdown in the party system, politicians were forced to make adjustments. These were not always painless decisions and often caused considerable personal distress. Caught between the old and the new politics were approximately thirty Whig Assemblymen from rural areas, who had been elected with Know-Nothing

¹Whig (Tribune) Almanac, 1855, p. 54.

backing. Should they follow their oaths to the Order and vote against Seward or should they break them? Tremendous pressure would be brought to bear to influence them.

Because of these wavering Assemblymen, an interim election scheduled for January 30, 1855, to fill the senate seat of the newly elected Governor, Myron H. Clark, assumed considerable importance. The vacancy existed in the twenty-ninth district, encompassing Livingston and Ontario counties, an area known for its normally heavy Whig vote. The result here could well influence the ballots of vacillating legislators in the Senatorial struggle. Consequently, both Whigs and Know-Nothings made great exertions to secure a victory in this local contest. The former participated in a fusion effort and backed a veteran Democrat, Chester Loomis, while the latter secretly endorsed a former Hard Shell, a Methodist minister William H. Goodwin.²

The president of the nativist council at Canandaigua reported that his men were busily at work but were continually harassed by two of Weed's agents who had been sent there to organize the Whig campaign.³ One of these men, General Benjamin F. Bruce, informed Weed that Goodwin would be difficult to beat, but that every effort would

²New York Tribune, January 29, 31, 1855.

³J. P. Faurot to Ullman, January 25, 1855, Ullman Papers, NYHS.

be made to elect Loomis.⁴ The Know-Nothings eventually won; greatly encouraged, they felt that they had finally cornered Seward.⁵ "Can it be that the members of the legislature that belong to our order will prove traitors? I trust not now after our signal victory," wrote one nativist. "It seems to me it must have a powerful effect upon the wavering...."⁶ The New York Tribune, however, was quick to deny the inference that Know-Nothingism was the wave of the future. Though disappointed by the outcome, it noted that in 1854 Clark had been beaten by 4,683 votes and that Loomis would only lose by 2,500.⁷ These figures seemed to disprove nativist boasts; the bigots' power was waning rather than increasing.

Know-Nothing leaders did not allow their recent success to lull them into complacency. Silver Gray newspapers, which had ostensibly supported the Whig ticket in 1854, vigorously attacked their old foe. Emphasizing

⁴Benjamin F. Bruce to Weed, January 27, 1855, Weed Papers, URL.

⁵See, for example, O. L. Sheldon to Ullman, January 31, 1855, Ullman Papers, NYHS.

⁶J. P. Faurot to Ullman, January 31, 1855, Ullman Papers, NYHS.

⁷New York Tribune, January 31, 1855. It turned out that Goodwin's official majority was 2,113, New York Tribune, February 14, 1855.

his reputed pandering to Catholics, they pointed to his
 proposal for public support of parochial schools as evidence.⁸
 Meanwhile, the Order tried to keep its representatives
 in the Assembly faithful to their anti-Seward pledges.
 One nativist believed that the ruling consideration with
 these thirty-two Whigs would be concern for their repu-
 tations in their rural districts. Although great pressure
 would be exerted by Weed, what they were certain to fear
 most was the "stain of perjury on their souls" and the
 consequent loss of trust among their neighbors.⁹ The
 legislators received letters warning them not to violate
 their oaths lest they be burned in effigy and shunned in
 their home towns.¹⁰

Thurlow Weed had been working hard to secure his
 friend's re-election; all other considerations during the
 preceding canvass had been subordinated to this objective.¹¹
 The boss did not relax after his 1854 victory. He used

⁸Ibid., November 22, 1854, January 29, 1855; Albany
State Register, December 29, 1854, quoted in Ibid., De-
 cember 29, 1854, quoted in Ibid., December 30, 1854.

⁹Roswell Hart to Ullman, January 25, 1855, Ullman
 Papers, NYHS.

¹⁰L. L. Pratt to Ullman, January 27, 1855, Ullman
 Papers, NYHS; New York Tribune, February 9, 1855.

¹¹Greeley to Colfax, November 6, 1854, Greeley-Colfax
 Papers, NYPL; J. Sanders to James W. Beekman, August 10,
 1855, Beekman Papers, NYHS.

Governor Clark's patronage power to make promises to those most receptive to this kind of persuasion. There is evidence to suggest that, pledging Whig votes for a Maine Law in return for backing Seward, he came to an understanding with temperance forces. He struck a similar bargain with antislavery nativists who wanted legislation ending the control of Roman Catholic bishops over their churches' property and giving it to elected members of the congregation.¹²

Two events prior to the Senatorial vote revealed that Weed's strategy had been successful. The Whig caucus gave Seward the preponderant majority of 74 of 80 ballots,¹³ and DeWitt C. Littlejohn of Oswego--a politician whom the Know-Nothings had singled out for defeat because of his betrayal--was elected Speaker of the Assembly.¹⁴ These results caused an acrimonious debate in both legislative chambers between those who had abjured the Order and those who had remained faithful to it. Littlejohn, for example, admitted that he had joined the secret organization because

¹²John Sanders to Beekman, February 17, 1855, Beekman Papers, NYHS; Albany Argus, March 22, 23, 1855; Thomas J. Curran, "Seward and the Know-Nothings," NYHSQ, LI (April, 1967), 156-158.

¹³New York Tribune, February 2, 1854.

¹⁴See J. D. Colver to Ullman, November 21, 1854, February 3, 1855, Ullman Papers, NYHS.

of a sincere apprehension of the foreign vote menace, but he had found the remedy worse than the disease. He denounced the despotic structure of the Know-Nothings which resembled the hierarchy of their reputed enemy, the Catholic Church; it gave to one man, James W. Barker, an arbitrary power similar to that exercised by the Pope of Rome. Loyal Know-Nothings angrily accused the Choctaws of trampling on sacred oaths, and the galleries, largely filled with nativist partisans, became unruly. Pandemonium broke out on several occasions during these exchanges, and the Chair remonstrated with members and threatened the removal of visitors.¹⁵

The balloting for United States Senator was anticlimactic; Seward was re-elected by 69 of a possible 128 votes. The opposition divided its strength among several candidates, and none of them ever posed a serious threat to the front runner.¹⁶ Acknowledging his debt to Weed, the Senator wrote a brief note to his friend in Albany. He expressed his deep gratitude and "amazement at the magnitude and complexity of the dangers through which you have conducted our shattered bark and the wonderful sagacity

¹⁵New York Tribune, February 6, 1855; Albany Argus, February 6, 1855. See also the Journal of the New York Assembly, 78th Session, p. 264.

¹⁶The vote is recorded in the Journal of the New York Senate, 78th Session, p. 198, and the Journal of the New York Assembly, 78th Session, p. 267.

and skill with which you have saved us all from so imminent a wreck."¹⁷

But Weed's management was not the only reason, nor even the most important reason for the result. The legislators from the Burned-over-region who disregarded their¹⁸ oaths were not persuaded by any combination of threats, cajolery, and blandishments. They were following the dictates of their conscience and making a shrewd political gamble at the same time. Loyalty to old friends and political colleagues asserted itself and played an important part in their decision; the Whig party, like the Democratic party, still possessed considerable resilience. They had joined the Order when it was spreading, but they had soon learned to despise it and saw that its strength would not last. They knew that their constituents' indignation over Seward's fondness for alcoholic beverages and his advocacy of publicly supported Catholic schools was at variance with their admiration for his eloquent denunciations of the slave power. The Choctaws who voted for the Senator staked their futures upon the judgement that opposition to the slaveholders would become the more powerful and enduring issue.

¹⁷Seward to Weed, February 7, 1855, Weed Papers, URL.

¹⁸The names of those who "betrayed" the Order are listed in the Know-Nothing Almanac and True American's Manual (1855), p. 54.

Several Silver Grays tried to disparage the importance of Seward's return to the Senate as only a temporary setback to "Sam"--a commonly used sobriquet for the Know-Nothings. Since they attributed their defeat to treachery rather than to any weakening in nativist sentiments, they hoped to repair their organization; they predicted that no amount of skulduggery could prevent their triumph in the next election.¹⁹

In retrospect, it is clear that Seward's victory was a disaster to the nativists. Several politicians perceived this fact; they predicted that future historians would date the beginning of Know-Nothing decline with the vote in the New York legislature. One astute observer of many political wars, the historian Jabez Hammond--who was in his seventies at the time--made this assessment. He wrote to Seward that the nativists would gradually fade out of existence.²⁰ Some Whigs assumed that the public exposure given to the Order's practices had shocked people into the realization that they had been lured into an authoritarian organization in their zeal to perfect

¹⁹See, for example, Jacob G. Sanders to Beekman, February 6, 1855, John Sanders to Beekman, August 10, 1855, Beekman Papers, NYHS; James R. Thompson to Ullman, March 15, 1855, Ullman Papers, NYHS; Albany State Register, quoted in the New York Tribune, February 8, 1855.

²⁰Jabez Hammond to Seward, April 2, 1855, URL.

21

American democracy.

Because the New York Senatorial contest demonstrated the impossibility of subordinating the slavery question to the anti-Catholic and anti-foreign issues, it upset the strategy of the Silver Gray Whigs in the Empire State and conservatives throughout the country who had seized upon the Know-Nothing movement as a vehicle for their own aims.²² Although they generally sympathized with nativist objectives, they judged these secondary to the creation of a national conservative party which would play down the slavery issue and consign to oblivion the free soilers and abolitionists of the North and the fire eaters and secessionists of the South. Seward was opposed not so much for his past pro-Catholic stand as for his present

²¹See, for example, Henry Morgan to Weed, February 8, 1855, Weed Papers, URL; George Geddes to Seward, February 7, 1855, Seward Papers; New York Tribune, February 7, 1855.

²²A number of examples could be cited to show the conservatives' "use" of the Know-Nothings for their own purposes. One Silver Gray described the nativist movement as a "'god send' for us," because Fillmore had failed to destroy the Sewardite branch of the party when he had the chance. James R. Thompson to Ullman, March 15, 1855. Some Silver Gray-Know-Nothing newspapers candidly admitted their paramount concern. The Buffalo Commercial Advertiser (Fillmore's organ) wrote: "We hailed the rise of this American party with much satisfaction, and for the reason, principally, that it seemed capable of throwing a bridge across the chasm which fanatics, North and South, had made between different sections of the country, permanent enough to permit men from both sides to pass over and renew those fraternal relations which formerly subsisted, to the great advantage of all." Quoted in the New York Tribune, May 29, 1855. For similar comments, see the American Organ, quoted in the New York Tribune, December 22, 1854 and the New York Weekly Mirror, October 28, 1854.

23

menace to Union.

Although Seward's triumph disappointed Know-Nothings throughout the country, its impact was greatest in the South. The spectacle of so many New York nativists casting their votes for a prominent antislavery politician demoralized Southern "Americans." Nativists below the Mason-Dixon line had begged New York leaders to exert every effort to defeat the Senator. "It will hurt us greatly in our part of the Country if he [Seward] should be elected by 'Know-Nothing' votes," wrote Kenneth Rayner, a former North Carolina Whig, now a nativist. "For God's sake, have him defeated, if possible."²⁴

The outcome in New York had an important effect on the Virginia gubernatorial election of May 24, 1855, which was a crucial test of the Know-Nothings' capacity to establish a viable national party. In general, the nativists were confident of success during the campaign. Their optimism was not even lessened by the Democrats' nomination of Henry A. Wise, a politician renowned for

²³See, for example, the American Organ, quoted in the New York Tribune, December 22, 1854.

²⁴Kenneth Rayner to Ullman, January 22, 1855, Ullman Papers, NYHS.

his stump speaking ability.²⁵ However, to achieve victory it was essential to convince Virginia Whigs that the Know-Nothings had inherited their old party's conservative principles without its antislavery propensities. Thus, Virginia members of the secret Order were looking forward to Seward's defeat; it would belie Wise's charge that they were only abolitionists in disguise. "We are advancing gloriously now," wrote one campaigner. "But arm us with this anti abolition fact, and we will bear down all opposition. The effect in all the South, too, will be prodigious."²⁶

Adding to the impact of Seward's victory on the Virginia election was the action of the Massachusetts Know-Nothing Grand Council. This body, under the leadership of Henry Wilson, adopted resolutions hostile to slavery and its expansion, and the New Hampshire Grand Council swiftly followed suit.²⁷ These proceedings placed great pressure on New Yorkers to hold up the Northern wing of the party. Rayner wrote that the two New England states

²⁵See, for example, William E. Cunningham (Norfolk, Va.) to Ullman, April 10, 1855, George M. Wise (Charlottesville, Va.) to Ullman, April 14, 1855. See also Rayner to Ullman, March 4, 1855, Ullman Papers, NYHS.

²⁶Joseph Segar (Roseland, Va.) to Ullman, January 5, 1855, Ullman Papers, NYHS.

²⁷New York Tribune, May 4, 1855.

had discouraged the Order in the South, and he greatly feared the consequences on the Virginia election. He appealed for aid: "Conservative action on the part of N. York can put all right. Your state is now the great Break-Water, as it were, to preserve us against the floods and tides of mischievous agitation."²⁸ However, it was too late to offset the effect of these events--Virginia Whigs were now thoroughly alarmed by the "ghost of Abolitionism stalking among the Councils at the North"²⁹--and Wise scored an impressive victory.³⁰

The Virginia election cast a shadow over the National Grand Council, which was scheduled to assemble in Philadelphia during the middle of June. Many Know-Nothings in both sections agreed with New York Silver Grays that the only chance for the Order to survive was for the Council to ignore the slavery issue and declare the primacy of the foreign and Catholic questions.³¹ This view did not prevail,

²⁸Rayner to Ullman, May 8, 1855. See also Vespasian Ellis to Ullman, May 13, 1855, Ullman Papers, NYHS.

²⁹Samuel H. Hammond to Ullman, April 20, 1855, Ullman Papers, NYHS.

³⁰J. Timberlake (Charlottesville, Va.) to Ullman, May 30, 1855, Ullman Papers, NYHS.

³¹Vespasian Ellis--the editor of the American Organ, a paper designed to promote the national organization of the party--tried to maintain "high Constitutional ground" on the slavery issue to avoid charges of free soilism on the one hand and pro-slaveryism on the other. Despite his efforts to refrain from discussions of the "peculiar institution," he found this impossible when taunted by

for extremists on both sides wanted to force a showdown. Southern representatives demanded the inclusion of Article XII in the platform. This plank endorsed the principle underlying the Nebraska Act; it denied the power of Congress to determine the status of slavery in the territories or to exclude any state from admission into the Union, because its constitution did or did not recognize the institution of slavery.³²

The inclusion of Article XII in the party's platform caused a bolt by every Northern delegation except New York. The seceders went to Cincinnati to participate in a national Know-Something convention, which had been scheduled to compete with the Philadelphia meeting. Choctaws from the Empire State played an important role in this assembly. The united convention adopted a platform which combined

papers like the New York Tribune. Vespasian Ellis to Ullman, November 17, 1854, Rayner to Ullman, January 22, 1855, Ullman Papers, NYHS; New York Tribune, December 22, 1854. Rayner wrote that the Order must leave the question of slavery exactly where the institutions of the country had left it, and not "to hazard the integrity of the Union by discussing or agitating the question, either at the North or the South. On this subject we have fanatics, agitators, and disunionists at both ends of the Union. Our order shall lend no encouragement to either." Rayner to Ullman, January 22, 1855, Ullman Papers, NYHS.

^{32A} A printed copy of the Know-Nothing platform adopted at Philadelphia was included in a letter from S. Sammons to Ullman, June 11, 1855, Ullman Papers, NYHS.

a mild nativism with a firm opposition to the extension
³³
 of slavery.

The Virginia election and the Philadelphia convention were widely interpreted to have erected an unbridgeable chasm between the Northern and the Southern branches of the Know-Nothing party; politicians who had sought to ignore the slavery issue found it impossible to do so; they confronted the same sectional tensions which plagued the other national parties. Delighted with the twin debacles of their enemies, both Whigs and Democrats predicted the Order's eventual disintegration. Tammany Hall in Manhattan and Democrats in Brooklyn staged public celebrations when the news of Wise's victory came over the telegraph.³⁴ They concluded that nativists in both sections of the country would find their way into the Democracy.³⁵ The Whigs, too, were awaiting the future course of the Know-Nothing organization, now known as the American party. The New York Tribune agreed that Southern nativists would turn to the Democrats but that their Northern

³³New York Tribune, June 14, 1855; Albany Argus, June 15, 1855. The Know-Something platform may be found in the New York Tribune, June 23, 1855.

³⁴Albany Argus, June 3, 4, 1855; New York Tribune, June 1, 1855.

³⁵See, for example, the Albany Argus, June 1, 1855.

36

compeers would become Republicans.

Sectional pressures at the national level had exacerbated stresses within the New York Democratic and Whig parties and brought them to desperate straits. Events following the Philadelphia convention revealed that nativists in the Empire state were also affected. The disastrous outcome of the national meeting intensified a split in the New York Order which had festered for a long time and had sapped its effectiveness. Internal rivalries, especially between the forces of James W. Barker and Daniel Ullman, had weakened the Know-Nothings' attempt to control the Whig convention of 1854 and to defeat Seward the following year.³⁷ Barker had dominated his state's representatives at the National Grand Council and was responsible for its position as the only Northern delegation that refused to bolt. One member from New York had tried to propose a substitute for Article XII which he felt would have been less objectionable to Northerners and would certainly have passed, but Barker, closing off

³⁶New York Tribune, May 28, 31, June 15, 16, 1855. See also, N. Darling to Weed, May 30, June 20, 1855, Weed Papers, URL.

³⁷Rayner voted for Barker's re-election as President of the National Grand Council. He wrote Ullman that he hoped this action would not stand in the way of their friendship. Rayner to Ullman, August 21, 1855, Ullman Papers, NYHS.

debate, had moved the previous question.³⁸ This high-handed behavior had enraged his enemies, and a struggle began for control of the State Council which would have to pass on the Philadelphia proceedings.

Barker's opponents believed that Article XII would ruin the party in New York and urged its repudiation. "With the Slavery Clause in the platform I very much doubt whether a single County in the state can be carried whereas if it had been omitted the state would have been perfectly secure," wrote one dissident.³⁹ Another nativist concurred: "That 12th article introduced into the platform at Philadelphia must come out forthwith in this State or we are lost...Our delegates to that convention entirely mistook and misrepresented four fifths of this state...."⁴⁰ Some predicted that Southern intransigence would provoke a counter reaction. "Had the South been willing to make mutual concession with the North, for the purpose of harmonizing the party--we could have submitted to a little

³⁸S. Sammons to Ullman, June 15, 1855, Ullman Papers, NYHS. The New York Tribune commented that the representatives from the state had appeared more zealous in favor of slavery than the most ultra Southerners and had been anxious to concede more than was ever asked. New York Tribune, June 15, 1855.

³⁹Killian Miller to Ullman, June 24, 1855, Ullman Papers, NYHS.

⁴⁰J.D. Colver to Ullman, June 24, 1855, Ullman Papers, NYHS.

pro-slavery," was the view of an upstate Know-Nothing.

But he feared now "that nothing short of the restoration of the Missouri Compromise will satisfy the Northern sentiment."⁴¹ A friend pleaded with Daniel Ullman to prevent him from publicly denouncing the Philadelphia platform:

"If you continue to encourage the idea of revolt you can't repair the injury after a short time. Weed evidently wants us to shake in the wind and then he has a point from which to assail us."⁴²

Know-Nothing leaders in central and western New York, where antislavery sentiment was strongest, had great difficulty controlling the membership. Francis S. Edwards, the newly elected Congressman from Chautauque and Cattaraugus counties, found it necessary to sponsor a set of resolutions which gave a "harmless dose of anti-slavery" to the councils in his region.⁴³ James R. Thompson, a prominent Rochester Silver Gray, opposed this deviation from the national platform. Arguing that repudiation of Article

⁴¹H. F. Pultz to Ullman, June 22, 1855. For similar opinions from other New York nativists, see B. Thomson to Ullman, August 14, 1855, Jerome Fuller to Ullman, July 24, 1855, William F. Minor to Ullman, July 14, 1855, Ullman Papers, NYHS.

⁴²James R. Thompson to Ullman, June 28, 1855, Ullman Papers, NYHS.

⁴³Francis S. Edwards to Ullman, June 15, 19, 23, 1855, Ullman Papers, NYHS.

XII would destroy the "nationality" of the New York party, he warned that "the moment you break your nationality you are broken and beaten and Weed knows that right well."⁴⁴ Thompson still believed that the only way to prevent the antislavery issue from engulfing the party was to insist on the primacy of the nativist cause. Consequently, he advocated the following resolution at his local council:

That whilst we condemn now as we have ever done the repeal of the Missouri Compromise as a breach of national faith and a base design of northern and southern demagogues to divide the American people and divert attention for the time being from the great practical idea of the nation to wit a thorough amendment of the naturalization laws--we shall not gratify the friends of Arch Bishop Hughes in this state by uniting with them in attempting to organize a northern party to accomplish a present impossibility or to undertake a work which if successful in the end would take at least 5 years to accomplish and thereby defeat forever the only opportunity which Americans will ever have of taking the helm and divesting our national and state administrations of the foreigner and Catholic influences which now disgrace the Country. ⁴⁵

Thompson maintained that this proposition would secure hundreds of votes in his county and urged its adoption throughout the state. He explained why: it denounced those responsible for the repeal of the Missouri Compromise and conceded the right of further agitation, and it provided the Order with an effective rejoinder to Seward's

⁴⁴James R. Thompson to Ullman, July 10, 1855, Ullman Papers, NYHS.

⁴⁵James R. Thompson to Ullman, June 26, 1855, Ullman Papers, NYHS.

proposal to build up a new party dedicated to restoring the Missouri line; Know-Nothings must argue that they will not postpone their other work until that can be accomplished, for at the end of five years the country is not worth saving.⁴⁶ Another organizer reported substantial success with a similar approach in Ontario county:

Now in reference to the members of the Order, many of them do not like the twelfth article, but we take the position that we are not to be driven from our great object if there be something that does not precisely suit us. ⁴⁷

The meeting of New York's State Council, held at Binghamton at the end of August, resulted in a struggle between the Barker faction, largely the New York City and the Brooklyn delegations, and the representatives of upstate nativists. The former fought for the endorsement of the entire Philadelphia platform, while the latter demanded the omission of Article XII and its replacement by a statement more in accord with the anti-Nebraska sentiments of their constituents.⁴⁸ By the time of the meeting, even James R. Thompson, who had formerly opposed tinkering with the platform, felt that some action was necessary to prevent his party from forfeiting its excellent

⁴⁶Ibid.

⁴⁷J. P. Faurot to Ullman, July 10, 1855, Ullman Papers, NYHS.

⁴⁸New York Tribune, August 29, 30, 1855.

prospects. He reasoned that elections had already been held in the South, and that the New York Order must now look out for itself.⁴⁹

The Binghamton convention rejected the extreme Southern orientation of the Barker faction and refused to accept Article XII. Nevertheless, it still clung to the policy of subordinating the slavery question. One resolution declared the foreign and Catholic menace the foremost concern of the nation. Another maintained that slavery was a local and not a national issue, that regional differences of opinion on the subject were natural and permissible, and that these should not divide members of the American party. However, the convention went on to contradict its own priority list. The rest of the platform condemned the Nebraska Act and its perpetrators. Although it did not demand restoration of the Missouri line, it resolved that repeal should not result in territorial advantage for slavery.⁵⁰

⁴⁹James R. Thompson to Ullman, August 14, 1855, September 8, 1855, Ullman Papers, NYHS.

⁵⁰New York Tribune, August 30, 1855; New York Weekly Mirror, September 8, 1855; Journal of Commerce, September 4, 1855. The Order held another convention in late September to nominate its candidates for office. The delegates chose Joel F. Headley of Orange county to lead the ticket as the candidate for Secretary of State. New York Tribune, September 26, 1855.

Try as they might, the New York Silver Grays could not overcome the slavery dilemma and avoid the sectional tensions which had engulfed the other national parties. Nor could they escape from the fact that the "peculiar institution" had become the paramount issue before the nation. Thousands of nativists in the Burned-over-region would only vote the Know-Nothing ticket if they believed it was also an antislavery ticket. Silver Gray leaders were forced to accomodate anti-Nebraska sentiment, even at the cost of diverging from the national platform. This decision eventually proved disastrous; to Southerners, there was no such thing as a "harmless dose of anti-slavery." Repercussions of the Philadelphia debacle were immediately felt in New York, where they intensified old dissensions and reduced the party's effectiveness. Ironically at a time when the long range future of both the national and state parties looked bleak, the New York organization was in its heyday and appeared on the threshold of its first electoral triumph. Years of patient effort had brought it to the peak of its power. From then on, its path would be one of rapid decline.

CHAPTER 9

Fusion

In 1854, the Whigs had resisted the attempts of Free Democrats to establish a branch of the Republican party in the Empire State. The response of Seward and Weed to the political chaos of that year had been conservative; they had sought to shore up the Whig organization rather than participate in any fusion movement. By 1855, the forces disrupting the party system had not abated but had increased. The New York Whig party had been weakened by temperance advocates, Free Democrats, and Know-Nothings. The disbandment of the Whig organization throughout large parts of the country had dashed any rational hope for its revival. The election of 1854 revealed that the Republican party had made impressive gains in large portions of the Northwest and New England. The threat of armed hostilities in Kansas had added a new and dangerous strain on sectional relations. Clearly, the political revolution had reached a stage which made looking backward impossible. New York Whigs were forced to adapt to these pressures. They could no longer cling to the Whig party.

During the spring of 1855, New York Whigs continued to resist the Republican movement. Preston King, who was in Albany for several days in March, noted the absence of

any general concurrence on political action; politicians devoted to particular men or cliques still dominated the scene. However, he did observe the existence of the "vague idea" that it was necessary for those who agreed on principles and measures to come together. "This last idea is gradually developing itself and growing more clear to the minds of all," he wrote.¹ A month later, Jabez Hammond acknowledged his disappointment that a union of Radical Democrats and Seward Whigs would not take place. He believed the major obstacle to such action was "the love of office and its emoluments...The Democrats want all offices and so do the Whigs."²

The frustration of would-be fusionists disappeared in mid-summer when newspapers printed calls for Whig and Republican conventions, both scheduled to assemble at Syracuse on September 26, 1855. The significance of this announcement was clear: it heralded the formation of the New York Republican party.³ Why did the Whig leader-

¹Preston King to Azariah C. Flagg, March 5, 1855, Flagg Papers, CU. Flagg had been a prominent Barnburner. He served two terms as Comptroller of New York City from 1852-1859.

²Jabez Hammond to Seward, April 2, 1855, Seward Papers, URL.

³New York Tribune, July 19, 1855; Albany Argus, July 20, 1855; Albany Evening Journal, July 20, 1855.

ship reverse itself? The answer lies in happenings outside of the state and beyond the control of its politicians. The election of 1854 had brought the Republican party into prominence in the Northwest and in much of New England, while the Whig party in these areas had either been abandoned or existed as only a remnant. The news of difficulties in Kansas and the threat of war there immeasurably strengthened the fusionists. By giving a new character to the political crisis, these developments exerted great pressure on New York Whigs and forced them to give up their organization.

Republican party machinery already existed in Michigan and Wisconsin. In Iowa, the successful coalition of Whigs and Free Soil Democrats which had elected James W. Grimes Governor was Republican in all but name. Know-Nothings had played an important role in the victory of fusionist parties in Indiana and Ohio, but these amalgams were staunchly anti-Nebraska. The only mid-western state in which the Whigs remained powerful was Illinois. In New England, Maine and Vermont fusion parties had been founded that were for all practical purposes Republican. Although Massachusetts had voted overwhelmingly Know-Nothing, a minor Republican party had been established. The split

⁴Crandall, History of the Republican Party, p. 25; Curtis, The Republican Party, Vol. I, pp. 216-218.

in nativist ranks at Philadelphia in June of 1855 had cleared the way for purely Republican organizations in those states.

The Kansas-Nebraska bill had enraged Northerners, but their indignation had been mollified by arguments that inhospitable conditions of soil and climate made slavery in Kansas impossible. However, the intervention of pro-slavery Missourians in territorial elections on two occasions--the first in late December of 1854 and the second in early April of 1855⁵--confirmed warnings that Kansas was in danger. The New York Tribune led the Northern press in denouncing these acts. Greeley confided to Colfax that he made it his "first business" to keep the Kansas issue before the people.⁶ Kansas was to continue as an irritant for the Democratic party for over six years; at the same time it greatly aided the growth of the Republicans.

The successes of the Republican party convinced many New York Whigs that they could not afford to maintain a separate organization for very long. Besides, the election of 1854 had shown the Whigs to constitute a hopeless mi-

⁵The tangled story of border warfare in Kansas has been closely studied by historians. A detailed account may be found in Nevins, Ordeal of the Union, Vol. II, pp. 313-314, 380ff, 408ff.

⁶Greeley to Colfax, June 28, 1854, Greeley-Colfax Papers, NYPL.

nority of the total vote, and it seemed that their only chance of securing a majority was through an amalgamation with free soil Democrats. Some politicians had foreseen this result after the canvass. One prominent Whig, after the victory of Myron H. Clark, acknowledged that his party would have to join the fusionists, if it were to retain its power. He believed that this could be accomplished in a way which would maintain control in the present leadership.⁷ By the summer of 1855, delay was no longer possible; Sewardites had either to enter the Republican movement or be crushed by it. Weed explained the reason for his conversion: "The necessity for getting in line with other states is imperative."⁸

Having made his decision, Weed skillfully effected a reconciliation with the Free Democrats whom he had spurned the previous year. Although they had been infuriated by Sewardite duplicity at the Saratoga and Auburn anti-Nebraska conventions of 1854 and had initially refused to support Henry Raymond for lieutenant governor, they had subsequently relented and had supported the entire

⁷John M. Bradford to Hamilton Fish, December 12, 1854, Fish Papers, LC.

⁸Weed to Seward, July 23, 1855, Seward Papers, URL. For similar opinions, see Alonzo Johnson to Weed, August 17, 1855, Weed Papers, URL, and Myron H. Clark to Seward, October 1, 1855, Seward Papers, URL.

Whig ticket. However, the Free Democrats let it be known that they would not make similar sacrifices in the future; if their aid was desired, they must be accorded a fair share of the spoils.⁹ Weed's overtures delighted Free Democratic leaders, and they issued an address recommending that energies be concentrated on the election of delegates to the Republican conventions. It alluded to certain ungenerous and unfair proceedings at Auburn, but expressed confidence that future efforts would result in a genuine fusion.¹⁰

Since his major objective was to attract recruits from the Democratic party, Weed had to find men with unimpeachable Democratic credentials who were willing to cooperate with him. For several months, a rapprochement had been going on between the Whig leadership and Preston King. Although they had been bitter political opponents during the Jacksonian period, the events following the repeal of the Missouri Compromise had drawn them together. Although King had bolted from the Soft Shell convention of 1854, he had refused to aid the Free Democrats' attempt to launch the Republican party at Saratoga.¹¹ Shortly

⁹New York Tribune, August 24, 1855.

¹⁰This address--dated August 6, 1855 and signed by John Jay, President and William R. King, Secretary--was printed in Ibid., August 7, 1855.

¹¹See above, pp. 98-99, 109-111.

thereafter, he had begun a correspondence with Seward. The Senator had invited him to stay at his Auburn home if he planned to participate in the reconvened anti-Nebraska convention, and King, eager to prevent his own nomination for Governor, had asked Seward's cooperation.¹² At this time, King was disgusted with parties, conventions, and political double-dealing. His solution for the nation's ills rested on an overwhelming popular draft of Thomas Hart Benton for President; he believed that the people would gladly jettison the whole corrupt party system and respond with one voice to a man of proven integrity and courage.¹³ However, Benton's defense of the Missouri "brigands" who voted illegally in Kansas killed any hopes of his candidacy. King was now receptive to overtures from the Whigs; in March of 1855, Governor Clark appointed him to a commission investigating New York City's harbor facilities.¹⁴

¹²Preston King to Seward, September 19, 1854, Seward Papers, URL. There was some talk of nominating King at Auburn. See, for example, an anonymous letter in the New York Evening Post, September 20, 1854. See also, Muller, "Preston King," p. 547.

¹³King to Francis P. Blair, Sr., July 16, October 14, 1854, Blair-Lee Papers, PU; Albany Argus, August 18, 1854.

¹⁴King to Flagg, March 5, 1855, Flagg Papers, CU. Erasmus Pershine Smith subsequently revealed his high esteem for King:

"I have a personal acquaintance with Preston King--He is an old Rep in Congress of Silas Wright's district the strongest Democratic in the state. He resisted the annexation of Texas & the compromises of 1850--His great quality is backbone. We ran him

The next task was to work out the details of fusion. There is evidence to indicate that Weed considered assembling a "Peoples' convention to launch the new party. This method would avoid charges of a deal between political bosses. However, popular conventions were always unpredictable, and it appears that Weed was afraid it might get out of control.¹⁵ Thus, he settled on the plan of simultaneous Whig and Republican conventions which would make an agreement on candidates and platform. The former meeting would be composed of one delegate from each Assembly district and the latter of two.¹⁶ Pleased with these arrangements, Weed wrote Seward that "it was well done, and promises fairly."¹⁷

A difficulty arose immediately because the Republican organization existed in theory but not in fact. A month before the convention met, Horace Greeley worried

for Secty of State last Fall, having the winter before put him on the N.Y. Harbor commission, without asking, as an overture to the Demo Free soilers. There is nothing Soft about him & he is as [illegible] honest as a Loco Foco can be." E. Pershine Smith to Henry C. Carey, October 17, 1856, Smith Papers, HSPa.

¹⁵See James C. Hopkins to Weed, July 17, 1855, Weed Papers, URL.

¹⁶New York Tribune, July 19, 1855.

¹⁷Weed to Seward, July 23, 1855, Seward Papers, URL.

that the absence of county and district machinery would prevent representation of many areas--even those most in accord with Republican aims. Consequently, urging his readers to take independent action, he exhorted them to draw up a brief call for a district meeting and to induce their anti-Nebraska neighbors to sign it. He advocated the selection of two delegates who represented "diverse¹⁸ by-gone politics, if that be feasible."

The process of fusion went smoothly. The two conventions at first met separately. Each appointed committees of conference to work out a basis for merger. Weed and King were the dominant figures in these negotiations. After these preliminaries, the Whig delegates entered the Republican meeting hall, thereby formally surrendering their organization. The Republican members cheered when¹⁹ they appeared and accorded them the center seats. The platform adopted the typical Republican position. It opposed the introduction of slavery into the territories; condemned President Pierce's removal of Kansas' Governor, Andrew W. Reeder, who had frustrated the aims of proslavery settlers by refusing to issue commissions to fraudulently elected legislators; and praised the citizens

¹⁸New York Tribune, August 24, 1855.

¹⁹Ibid., September 28, 1855; Henry Brewster Stanton, Random Recollections (New York, 1887), p. 91; Muller, "Preston King," pp. 558-560.

of the free states who had migrated to the territory. One resolution denounced secret political associations, specifically naming the Know-Nothings, as inconsistent with the liberal principles of free government.²⁰ Meeting in their own convention, the Know-Somethings of New York strengthened the fusion movement by endorsing the Republicans' nominees.²¹

The Syracuse conventions tried to give the impression that a true fusion had been achieved, that the product was not the old Whig party with a few Democrats placed up front for window dressing.²² An equal balance existed between former Whigs and Democrats on the Republican State Committee and on the state ticket, where five men from each of the old parties were nominated. Preston King running for Secretary of State, headed the slate. The second most desirable position, that of Comptroller, went to the Whig incumbent, James M. Cook.²³

Democrats admitted that they had been treated fairly. Abijah Mann, Jr., who had distinguished himself the year

²⁰New York Tribune, September 28, 1855.

²¹Ibid.

²²See Alonzo Johnson to Weed, August 17, 1855, Weed Papers, URL.

²³New York Tribune, September 28, 1855; New York Weekly Mirror, October 6, 1855.

before as an insurgent leader during the Soft Shell convention,²⁴ had coveted the Comptroller's position, but he was content with his nomination for Attorney-General. He assured Weed that he recognized the equity of the result: "The arrangement was not only proper in itself but was made in entire good faith with my consent."²⁵ Democrats could not expect to occupy the two most influential places, especially when they "could not bring a large force to its support."²⁶ Mann added that John Bigelow, the co-editor of the New York Evening Post, and David Dudley Field,²⁷ a once prominent Barnburner, were also satisfied. Thus, a good beginning had been made by securing the confidence of Democrats that they would be treated justly by the overwhelming Whig majority in the new party.

Now that fusion had been accomplished, what course would the temperance forces take? Their efforts had been rewarded with the passage of a temperance act in early April of 1855.²⁸ The Democrats promptly charged that the

²⁴See above, pp. 109-111.

²⁵Abijah Mann Jr., to Weed, September 29, 1855, Weed Papers, URL.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸New York Tribune, April 4, 5, 1855.

Whigs had reluctantly fulfilled their part of the bargain²⁹ which had returned Seward to the Senate. But much to their chagrin, the foes of alcohol discovered that it was one thing to pass such legislation and quite another to have it obeyed. The law was openly flouted in many areas, while local authorities looked in the other direction. Fernando Wood, the recently elected mayor of New York, added to his notoriety by refusing to enforce the measure.³⁰ Temperance men naturally demanded strict adherence and expected their Whig allies to support them. However, Weed and other Sewardites, who had been hostile to the reform from the beginning, turned down this request; they did not want to suffer the consequences of forcing compliance in hostile localities.³¹ Moreover, their efforts to secure harmony within the new Republican organization would be jeopardized; several prominent Democrats and Whigs who had crossed over into fusion ranks were well-known opponents of the Maine Law.³²

²⁹Albany Argus, April 17, 1855.

³⁰Leonard Chalmers, "Fernando Wood and Tammany Hall, The First Phase," NYHSQ, LII (October, 1968), 379-402.

³¹See, for example, N. Darling to Weed, September 20, 1855, Weed Papers, URL.

³²Examples of such men would be John A. King, Philip Dorsheimer, Moses H. Grinnell, Parke Godwin. See the New York Tribune, September 29, 1855.

By this time the Maine Law movement had ebbed considerably. For one thing, the accomplishment of its object had reduced the zeal of its supporters. But most important, their attention had been held by the slavery extension issue. Some fervent prohibitionists still insisted that enforcement should be the paramount concern of reformers. Two of these enthusiasts requested the removal of their names from the Republican convention call when that document made no direct reference to the temperance question and stated that the restoration of the Missouri Compromise was the only political issue before the people.³³ But the advocates of temperance often found their old audience in the Burned-over-region too busy raising money for "Beecher's bibles"--a popular expression for rifles to be sent to Kansas--to listen to their entreaties.

Horace Greeley, who the year before had refused to subordinate the temperance cause,³⁴ changed his mind and urged his readers to do likewise. He wrote that temperance was a local matter while the extension of slavery was of national importance. It was the latter concern

³³Ibid., July 25, August 1, 1855; Albany Argus, July 23, August 1, 1855.

³⁴See above, pp. 123-124.

which was responsible for the abandonment of old parties.³⁵
 He endorsed the resolution passed by Massachusetts Republicans at their state convention:

Resolved, that we require no conformity of opinion on other subjects of National or State policy... We all recognize the duty of making the question of Freedom paramount. To secure unity of action here, we attempt no unity of action else-where. 36

At the Syracuse fusionist conventions, a majority of the Republican delegates revealed again the close relationship between reform movements by demonstrating that antislavery men were also temperance advocates; they favored a plank in the platform demanding strict enforcement. However, the Whigs would not tolerate it. The two meetings worked out a compromise: they demanded a fair trial for the temperance law but made no commitment to any definite action.³⁷

Attention now focused upon the State Temperance convention, which assembled at Utica on October 3, 1855. There was some fear that this body might reject the Republican candidates and nominate its own ticket.³⁸ These apprehensions proved unfounded; the Utica convention,

³⁵New York Tribune, July 25, 1855.

³⁶Quoted in Ibid., September 29, 1855.

³⁷Ibid., September 24, 26, 28, 1855.

³⁸Ibid., September 29, 1855.

though not happy with the fusionist proceedings, agreed to accept its state-wide nominees while urging the election of local temperance men.³⁹ By this action, anti-liquor zealots tacitly acknowledged the primacy of the slavery extension issue; they refused to draw off votes for their own slate and thereby weaken the impact of New York's demand for freedom in Kansas.

The formation of the New York Republican party left many conservative Sewardites in a dilemma. Although they had frequently had differences with the liberal wing of the party, they had tried to cooperate with it. In this respect they differed from the Silver Grays, who had declared war against Seward and Weed. But fusion marked the line beyond which some would not venture. These conservatives were often cosmopolitans--well educated, well traveled, and of substantial means. Many were merchants and lawyers who had business ties with Southerners. Incensed by the Nebraska bill and the events in Kansas, they had participated in public meetings, sent petitions to Congress, and contributed to aid free state emigrants in the territory.⁴⁰ They had, however, opposed any mention of disbanding the Whig party and had only disdain

³⁹Ibid., October 3, 1855.

⁴⁰See above, pp. 11-12; Philip Foner, Business & Slavery, pp. 96-97, 100-101.

for the Republicans.⁴¹ One fundamental consideration dominated their motives: they believed that the establishment of a purely Northern party would lead to the end of the Union.

Hamilton Fish, Washington Hunt, and Robert A. West may serve as examples of conservatives who declined to follow their associates into Republican ranks. All three had attained prominence as Whigs: the first was then the junior United States Senator; the second had been governor from 1850-1852; the third was editor of the New York Commercial Advertiser. These men shared a common antipathy toward the extension of slavery, but they wished to pursue this campaign in a conservative manner. They also wanted to play down the slavery issue, both North and South. White men should end their constant bickering over the black man and return to the task of building the country. Hunt wrote a poignant letter to Weed in which he regretted that his sense of duty prevented him from joining his old friends. He gave his reason:

In every proper way, I want to do right and prevent wrong on the slavery question, so far as we have any power over it. But you know I never could make it the sole object of my thoughts, to the exclusion of more practical concerns. ⁴²

⁴¹See above, pp. 155-157; Philip Foner, Business & Slavery, p. 107.

⁴²Washington Hunt to Weed, August 10, 1855, Weed Papers, URL.

Fish also denounced the attempt "to make the slavery question the 'be all and end all' of political organization, and of political strife...."⁴³ West did not believe that Whigs could "be transferred unresistingly from their broad, tried national platform to this single plank of Abolitionism."⁴⁴

Having made their decision to oppose fusion, it was necessary for Old Line or straight Whigs, as they came to be called, to determine their future action. There were three possible alternatives: to remain as Whigs, hoping that somehow their state organization and a national alliance could be patched up; to swallow their distaste for Know-Nothingism and join the nativist party; to embrace their traditional opponents, the Democrats. In 1855, all of the men mentioned above decided to take the first course. West's newspaper became the principal advocate for this line of thought;⁴⁵ Hunt published a public letter calling old Whigs to their abandoned standard;⁴⁶ Fish proposed that an address be issued by distinguished Whigs from the dif-

⁴³Fish to Hunt, October 5, 1855, Letter Copy Book, Vol. 196, Fish Papers, LC.

⁴⁴New York Commercial Advertiser, July 19, 1855.

⁴⁵Ibid., June 20, July 19, 1855; Robert A. West to Fish, November 7, 1855, Fish Papers, LC.

⁴⁶New York Tribune, August 16, 1855; New York Weekly Mirror, August 25, 1855.

ferent counties of the state, repudiating the actions of the fusionists and seeking to place the party on national grounds.⁴⁷

Several difficulties stood in the path of a successful revival of the Whig organization. One of these was the reluctance of Former Sewardites to associate with their old enemies, the Silver Grays. Fish, for example, whose elevation to the Senate had been opposed by these in 1851,⁴⁸ specifically cautioned against their inclusion.⁴⁹ Hunt was also distressed that those who had done their best to destroy the party should now presume to be its saviours.⁵⁰ Moreover, it was feared that Silver Gray participation would weaken the movement by exposing it to the charge of being pro-slavery. An even greater handicap was the lack of party machinery, nearly all of which had remained

⁴⁷Fish to Hunt, October 5, 1855, Letter Copy Book, Vol. 196, Fish Papers, LC.

⁴⁸See DeAlva S. Alexander, A Political History of the State of New York, Vol. II (New York, 1906), pp. 159-163.

⁴⁹Fish to Hunt, October 5, 1855, Letter Copy Book, Vol. 196, Fish Papers, LC.

⁵⁰Hunt to Fish, October 7, 1855, Fish Papers, LC. Several Silver Grays met in New York City to denounce the abandonment of the Whig party. The New York Tribune, October 5, 1855, and the New York Courier and Enquirer, October 6, 1855, accused them of shedding crocodile tears; for years they had done their best to destroy the Whig organization and were presently enrolled as Know-Nothings.

loyal to Seward and Weed; Whig papers opposed to fusion⁵¹ had discredited themselves by rushing into Know-Nothingism. But the most crushing problem was this: to a substantial degree the success of the straight Whigs depended on a similar resurgence in the South. Critics of the Old Liners effectively capitalized on this point, charging them with blindness to actual political conditions below the Mason-Dixon line. The New York Tribune argued that men like Washington Hunt engaged in wishful thinking when they appealed to conservative Southerners for help in repealing the Nebraska Act; there was hardly a politician or a newspaper⁵² in the South which dared to occupy such ground.

A straight Whig state convention assembled in New York City on October 23, 1855. Hunt observed that a more⁵³ desirable location would have been Utica or Syracuse, no doubt to avoid the inference that the meeting was the voice of cotton merchants. Upstate representatives from thirty-one counties did attend, but their mood was not encouraging. They generally reported that there was little opposition to fusion in their areas and that the rank-

⁵¹Hunt to Fish, October 7, 1855, Fish Papers, LC.

⁵²New York Tribune, August 22, 1855. See also the New York Courier and Enquirer, October 6, 1855.

⁵³Hunt to Fish, October 7, 1855, Fish Papers, LC.

and-file of former Whigs had gone over to the Republicans.⁵⁴
 Robert A. West drafted a set of resolutions which condemned
 the formation of a sectional party, declared the Whig
 party to be still alive, and urged all true Whigs to vote
 against the Republicans.⁵⁵ It remained for the conven-
 tion to decide whether to nominate its own ticket. The
 Know-Nothings were fearful of this possibility,⁵⁶ while the
 Republicans welcomed it;⁵⁷ another conservative slate would
 draw away votes from the nativists. The Old Liners fi-
 nally resolved not to enter the canvass with their own
 candidates; instead, they recommended that their adher-
 ents vote for those most in accord with Whig principles.⁵⁸

⁵⁴New York Weekly Mirror, October 27, 1855; New York Commercial Advertiser, October 24, 1855; Philip Foner, Business & Slavery, pp. 111-112.

⁵⁵Ibid.

⁵⁶The Albany State Register pleaded with the straight Whigs not to distract the opposition to Republicanism by choosing a separate ticket; it urged all enemies of fusion to vote Know-Nothing. Albany State Register, October 23, 1855, quoted in the New York Tribune, October 25, 1855.

⁵⁷See, for example, George E. Baker to Seward, October 5, 8, 1855, Seward Papers, URL.

⁵⁸New York Commercial Advertiser, October 24, 1855; New York Tribune, October 24, 1855; Philip Foner, Business & Slavery, pp. 111-112. George E. Baker appraised the straight Whig convention to be a "miserable abortion. The opposition to the Republican party is by no means equal to the Clay opposition to Taylor which flattened out so completely." Baker to Seward, October 5, 1855, Seward Papers, URL.

Although many conservative Whigs agreed with the Old Liners, there were also many who entered the Republican party because they had come to the conclusion that the aggressive tactics of the South necessitated active resistance. They judged the Whig organization moribund and recoiled at the thought of joining either the Know-Nothings or the Democrats.

James Watson Webb, the editor of the New York Courier and Enquirer was an important convert to this point of view. Webb had impeccable credentials as a conservative Whig, and his paper had faithfully reflected the opinions of the New York merchant class.⁵⁹ Less than a year before, the Courier had joined with the Commercial Advertiser in criticizing the Whig candidates for accepting the nomination of the Saratoga-Auburn anti-Nebraska conventions because that body had issued resolutions in favor of a Northern fusion party.⁶⁰ Sympathizing with the demand for a change in the naturalization laws, he had considered joining the Know-Nothings, but their secrecy and proscriptive practices⁶¹ against Catholics had dampened his enthusiasm. Subsequent occurrences, especially the eruptions in Kansas and

⁵⁹James Crouthamel, "James Watson Webb and the New York Courier and Enquirer, 1827-1861" (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Rochester, 1958), p. 727.

⁶⁰See above, pp. 155-156.

⁶¹New York Courier and Enquirer, July 11, 12, 1855.

the Philadelphia Grand Council, had convinced him that cooperation with the South was no longer possible. Webb now took the lead in persuading his readers to become Republicans.⁶² But more powerful than his arguments would be the course of events which forced more and more conservatives into the party they had always dreaded.

By 1855, the great pressures unleashed upon the second American party system brought about a transformation in New York politics. Ravaged by temperance men, Know-Nothings and Free Democrats, the Whig party had surrendered its organization and joined fusionist ranks. The successes of the Republican movement in other states and the threat of war in Kansas had applied additional pressure on New York Whigs and made their decision unavoidable. One favorable development for the New York Republican party was the reduction in temperance fervor. The religious idealism which had flowed into this cause had largely dried up as the slavery issue held the people's attention. But New York fusionists still confronted many difficulties. Not all Whigs had made the transition. Old Liners vowed hostility to the new party and tried to thwart its progress at every opportunity. Enormous problems of building

⁶²Ibid., July 21, September 29, October 2, 6, 18, 1855; James Watson Webb to Seward, October 2, 1855, Seward Papers, URL; Edward Harte to Webb, November 25, 1855, Webb Papers, YU.

an effective organization, and of harmonizing former political opponents existed. The Know-Nothings remained a formidable threat; yet, it appeared that they were losing their appeal. Although weak in 1855, the New York Republican party had been built upon a solid foundation, and it would grow rapidly.

CHAPTER 10

The Hards and the Softs in 1855

In 1854, the New York Democratic party had suffered severe reverses. By 1855, its problems were compounded. The situation in Kansas made it increasingly difficult for the Softs to convince antislavery constituents that the Nebraska Act was innocuous. Angered by repeated failures to gain the upperhand over their rivals, Hard Shell leaders prepared to join any alliance so long as it enhanced their power. The formation of the Republican party provided an alternative for the dissatisfied of both factions. These new pressures challenged the ties of loyalty which had held the Democratic party together.

After the election of 1854, many Softs had hoped that the reverse suffered by the Hards would convince them to abandon their tactics and seek alliance with their fellow Democrats.¹ However, they again underestimated the tenacity of Daniel S. Dickinson and his followers.² The Softs argued that no substantive difference separated

¹See above, pp. 167-168.

²See the Albany Argus, January 29, February 1, 19, March 9, 18, April 2, 1855. Formerly the Hard Shell organ, the Argus had changed ownership in January of 1855 and was now a Soft paper. An explanation of this transition is given below, pp. 219-220

the two factions on the slavery-extension issue, while the Adamantines seized every opportunity to indict their opponents as abolitionists in disguise. Seeing that their wooing was of no avail, the Softs gave up conciliation and accused their antagonists of defecting to the Know-Nothings, a damaging charge in view of the large nativist vote in Hard Shell strongholds.³

Meeting in their state convention on August 23, 1855, the Hards reaffirmed the position they had taken on Nebraska: they praised the measure and set themselves against all efforts to repeal it.⁴ Conspicuous by its absence was any reference to the interference of armed Missourians in Kansas' elections which had outraged the North. Attempting to belie the accusations of Know-Nothingism leveled against them, they condemned all secret political societies which discriminated on the grounds of religion or place of origin. They also condemned the prohibitory liquor law, and called for its repeal.

Dickinson and his allies now nominated a slate of delegates who would claim to represent the New York Democracy at the forthcoming national convention, which would meet in Cincinnati in June of 1856. Some National

³Albany Argus, June 8, 12, 16, 1855. See above, p. 168.

⁴This account of the proceedings of the Hard Shell convention is derived from the telegraphic account in the Albany Argus, August 24, 25, 1855.

Democrats resisted this move; they argued that the convention had not been called for any such purpose and championed the right of each district to choose its own representatives. One opponent, observing that the majority thought it necessary to act immediately in order to secure good Dickinson men, asked pointed questions: "Why were these gentlemen afraid to trust the people? Was Mr. Dickinson so unpopular that the people would not select delegates favorable to him?" The lopsided vote of 88 to 19 squelched this revolt.

The Adamintines again disregarded their constituents' views on the slavery-extension issue. Their platform was not written for New Yorkers but for Southern Democrats who would determine whether they or the Softs would be recognized at Cincinnati. The New York Evening Post charged them with a flagrant display of their subserviency to the South.⁵ Horatio Seymour appraised his opponents' convention as an unrepresentative body, carrying little weight in the state. He added that its purpose to act solely with reference to the Cincinnati convention was well understood. But Seymour acknowledged that the resolutions were shrewd and the selection of delegates was judicious. He concluded that they had "played their

⁵New York Evening Post, August 24, 1855.

best card."⁶

Negotiations over the sale of the Albany Argus, the Hard Shell organ, shed more light on the relationship between the Adamintines and the Know-Nothings. After the canvass of 1854, James I. Johnson, one of the editors of the Argus, judged the National Democratic cause to be lost and desired to change his political allegiance. He was a man for hire, and both the Know-Nothings and the Soft Shells made their bid. According to one Know-Nothing who was involved in the bargaining, Dickinson advised Johnson to go over to the nativists. The former Senator admitted that he favored the Order and wanted it to succeed, but his position was such that he could assume no open stand. Edwin Croswell, another Hard Shell stalwart, expressed a similar opinion.⁷ Gideon J. Tucker, who owned a small share of the Argus, remained faithful to Dickinson. Forced to sell his interest in the paper, Tucker reminded Daniel Ullman that no definite offer had been made by his party. He wrote: "As I would greatly prefer that they [the Know-Nothings] should purchase the property, I am only acting in good faith when I intimate the abso-

⁶Seymour to Marcy, Augsut 27, 1855, Marcy Papers, LC.

⁷Francis S. Edwards to Ullman, December 10, 1854. See also S. Sammons to Ullman, November 27, December 15, 1854, Ullman Papers, NYHS.

lute necessity of an offer, this week, in their behalf."⁸
 The nativists' hesitancy benefited Soft Shell politicians who were determined to gain control of the Argus, and Seymour, backed up by Erastus Corning, John Stryker, and Secretary of State Marcy, made an attractive offer to Johnson which he accepted.⁹ The Adamantines, despite their professions to the contrary, were quite willing to cooperate with the Know-Nothings provided it was done secretly so that their relations with the South would remain undisturbed. They continued to be a potent, unpredictable force in the unfolding political crisis.

The year 1855 was difficult for the Soft Shells. In addition to Hard Shell obstinacy, dissension over patronage still threatened to destroy the organization. This problem could also be traced to the increased sectional tensions within the national party. A reconciliation had come about during the campaign of 1854, when the President had agreed to follow the advice of the state's party leadership, but the new year brought fresh difficulties. The most important case was that of Henry C. Miller who was to be appointed Secretary to the Peruvian Legation.

⁸Gideon J. Tucker to Ullman, December 15, 1854, Ullman Papers, NYHS. Tucker subsequently became the editor of the new Hard Shell organ, the New York National Democrat.

⁹Francis S. Edwards to Ullman, December 10, 1854, Ullman Papers, NYHS. See also the Albany Argus, January 16, 27, 1855.

Opposition developed against his confirmation because of his anti-Nebraska activities. Seymour came to Miller's defense. He urged Senator Douglas to aid the nomination, for a rejection would stir up a hornet's nest in New York. Seymour acknowledged that Miller had been a Free Soiler in 1848 and had been against Nebraska, "but when the scheme of a 'Northern Party' was started by Preston King and others he took decided grounds against it and supported the Democratic ticket last November with great zeal and ability." The ex-Governor pleaded for some appreciation of New York's special problems:

We have so few in New York who can point to clear records that I have always contented myself with learning that men are 'right now' without looking into their past histories...I am very anxious our friends in New York should be taught to look forward and not backwards. 10

Despite a strong campaign in Miller's behalf, his name was withdrawn by President Pierce, who was afraid of antagonizing Southern Democrats. For several months after this episode, Secretary Marcy had to employ all his cur-¹¹ative powers in order to reassure his friends.

¹⁰Seymour to Stephen A. Douglas, February 7, 1855, Douglas Papers, University of Chicago. Seymour wrote a similar letter to Marcy, February 8, 1855, Marcy Papers, LC.

¹¹Marcy explained the reasons for the President's action in a long letter to Seymour. Miller was denied his appointment not because he had opposed Nebraska but for the manner in which he had done so. He had united with the Whigs in his county in their assaults upon the

The greatest dilemma facing the Soft Shells was how to confront the Republican challenge. Disagreement existed over which strategy to follow during the campaign of 1855. Some again advised concentration on local issues, particularly temperance. "As it is a simple state election the more national disturbing matters are kept out¹² of it the better," was the opinion of George W. Newell.

Seymour urged a different tactic; in his judgement, attempting to play down the Nebraska and Kansas issues only aided those who wanted to agitate them. Consequently, he favored attacking the Republicans for promoting disunion. He believed that a reaction would soon set in against Republican irresponsibility and that, if the Soft convention acted properly, conservatives from all over the state would rally to its standard. He also predicted that the public mind would get sick of "the philanthropic line of business" and that "sound, conservative democratic principles" would be appreciated again by 1856. "If so

Administration and the Democratic members of Congress who favored that measure. He had furnished a letter to the Whig Congressman Orasmus B. Matteson, who had effectively used it in an anti-Nebraska speech. Marcy to Seymour, February 25, 1855, copy. Seymour to Marcy, February 28, July 31, 1855, Marcy Papers, LC. Marcy also reassured John Van Buren that Miller's rejection did not signify a revival of any Nebraska test of Democratic orthodoxy. Marcy to John Van Buren, April 8, 1855, copy, Marcy Papers, LC.

¹²George W. Newell to Marcy, July 14, 1855. For another expression of this point of view, see James G. Dickie to Marcy, August 19, 1854, Marcy Papers, LC.

we shall carry the Presidential election without difficulty."¹³

Assembling in Syracuse on August 29, 1855, the Soft Shell convention quickly agreed on such matters as the financial profligacy of the Whigs and the threat to democracy from both the Know-Nothings and the prohibitory¹⁴ law. The meeting then came to loggerheads over the Kansas policy of the Administration. Tammanyites entrenched within the New York City Custom House and Post Office were present in force. Ably led by Lorenzo Shepard, they were determined to defend the President. They demanded endorsement of Pierce, approval of his actions in Kansas (including the removal of Governor Reeder), and an "unqualified approbation" of the doctrine of popular sovereignty and the Nebraska Act. A new crop of insurgents, who came primarily from the "infected district," put up an unexpectedly strong resistance against the officeholders and demanded the explicit condemnation of Nebraska and the

¹³Seymour to Marcy, July 31, August 27, 1855. Seymour interpreted Washington Hunt's letter opposing fusion as a sign that a conservative reaction was beginning. Seymour to Marcy, August 24, 1855, Marcy Papers, LC

¹⁴This account of the proceedings of the Soft Shell convention is derived from the telegraphic account in the Albany Argus, August 30, 31, September 1, 1855.

15

Administration's conduct in Kansas. They pleaded with the convention to give them a platform which would satisfy their constituents and refused to be swayed by warnings that their position would prevent the Softs from gaining recognition at the Cincinnati convention. Several delegates expressed these views forcefully:

I came here not to bow the knee to slavery, nor to the Custom House and Post Office of New York...What's the matter with the officeholders? They have not heard from the rural districts. I mean they shall hear from them...If the convention don't [sic] repudiate the infamous Nebraska bill they will omit it at their peril. 16

They [the officeholders] talk of being excluded from the Cincinnati National Convention if we don't stand upon their platform. I have no fear of that, but the New York delegation only exhibit their fears by their sensitiveness. 17

Since neither position was able to secure a majority, the delegates decided upon a compromise. This plan accepted the Nebraska Act as a fait accompli but enjoined its strict enforcement. Although refusing to criticize the President for his conduct in Kansas, it did denounce

¹⁵Some of these dissidents included: James W. Nye of New York, Timothy Jenkins of Oneida, William Murray of Orange, T. G. Alvord of Onondaga, J. Hinckley of Ontario, Arphaxed Loomis of Herkimer, Sanford E. Church of Orleans, Ward Hunt of Oneida. These politicians soon found their way into Republican ranks.

¹⁶Remarks of J. Hinckley of Ontario, quoted in the Albany Argus, August 31, 1855.

Ibid. ¹⁷Remarks of T. G. Alvord of Onondaga, quoted in

the illegal interference of armed bands in that territory's elections. Just at the moment of the final vote, with feeling running high on both sides, John Van Buren dropped a bombshell. He proposed as an amendment the so-called Corner Stone declaration of the 1848 Barnburner convention at Utica:

Resolved, that while the Democracy of this State will faithfully adhere to all the compromises of the Constitution and maintain all the reserved rights of the States, they deem this an appropriate occasion to declare and repeat their fixed hostility to the extension of slavery into free territory.

Tammanyites knew that this statement could be interpreted as a reaffirmation of the Wilmot Proviso, pledging the Softs to resist actively the extension of slave territory, and they were afraid it would give the Hards victory at Cincinnati. But, thrown off balance by Van Buren's maneuver, they were powerless to halt the flood of popular¹⁸ enthusiasm which carried it.

¹⁸ Shepard wrote to Marcy that he had never felt more indignant at Van Buren's "natural proclivity to mischief," and he believed that "the Prince's" action was meant to damage the Secretary. Van Buren gave his own explanation for his behavior. He had no wish to hurt Marcy or to sabotage the Soft campaign. Quite the contrary. He hoped that his action would be condemned by the Washington Union, the Administration paper, and the Southern press. Such denunciations, Van Buren observed, would enhance his own influence with anti-Nebraska Democrats and would greatly aid the Softs in the coming canvass. He noted that Preston King and James W. Nye, two former Barnburners who were now Republicans, wanted to destroy his power over the Radical Democracy. However, all their efforts would come to naught if the Union would attack him. Lorenzo B. Shepard to Marcy, September 8, 1855, John Van Buren to Marcy, September 20, 1855, Marcy Papers, LC.

The Syracuse convention ended much like its predecessor in 1854.¹⁹ Once again, incompatible positions appeared in the platform: the delegates sought to soothe anti-Nebraska feeling with the Corner Stone declaration, but they refused to censure the President and Southern Democrats who had brought about the Kansas situation and continued to inflame it. This type of equivocation seemed to be the only method for smoothing over differences within the party caused by differences over the slavery issue. Ambiguity could serve another function: it might keep antislavery constituents loyal without antagonizing Southern Democrats. However, this scheme could also backfire; the Softs might lose voters alarmed about Kansas and also incur the hostility of their colleagues below the Mason-Dixon line.

Some Soft Shell leaders were satisfied with the outcome. Seymour confessed to a sense of relief that the convention had abstained from attacking the President; he did not interpret Van Buren's amendment as foisting the Wilmot Proviso on the party; in fact, Seymour was delighted that free soil trouble makers such as James W. Nye and others like him had been rebuffed.²⁰ Newell

¹⁹See above, pp. 108-112.

²⁰Seymour to Marcy, August 27, 1855. See also Seymour to Marcy, August 24, 1855, September 3, 1855, Marcy Papers, LC.

was also pleased. He judged the proceedings to be the best thing for the state and the Union, "if people would look at them calmly. But there are very many who will not do so nor let others."²¹

Newell was correct. The "balancing act" performed by the convention was now subjected to attacks from both the right and the left, from those who felt that it constituted a provocative challenge to Southern interests and from those who believed that it had capitulated to "the lords of the lash."

Tammany Hall called a special meeting to give its own interpretation of Van Buren's amendment. The Wigwag passed a resolution which read, in part:

...we have perceived with deep regret that an interpretation has been given to the amendment of Mr. Van Buren...as though it were at variance with the known approbation of all sound Democrats of the principles of popular sovereignty; whereas it was on the contrary, as was at the time expressly understood, the expression of an abstract opinion....²² (my italics)

According to Tammany, the Softs' profession of "fixed hostility to the extension of slavery into free territory" did not commit them to oppose actively the admission of new slave states. They had merely announced a preference

²¹Newell to Samuel J. Tilden, September 18, 1855, Tilden Papers, NYPL.

²²New York Journal of Commerce, September 8, 1855. The Albany Argus also tried to explain away Van Buren's amendment as an "abstract expression." Albany Argus, September 3, 6, 1855.

or an "abstract opinion" which had no binding effect. Put bluntly, the Softs would acquiesce to the extension of slavery, even though they disapproved of it. Lorenzo Shepard did not think highly of this pronouncement, but he had sponsored it because the editors of the New York Journal of Commerce promised to support the Softs if they adopted it. "This acquisition of the Journal of Commerce is of very great importance," Shepard wrote to Marcy. "And whatever may be their reason for going with us and I am entirely ignorant of it, it is an ally very deserving of consideration."²³

The motives of the Journal were not really difficult to fathom. The paper, which represented the most conservative members of the mercantile community, had come to the conclusion that a united Democracy was the only chance for thwarting the Republicans. After the Know-Nothing debacle in Virginia in May of 1855, it realized that the nativists could never win a presidential canvass and began a campaign to convince its readers not to waste votes or money on the American party.²⁴ The paper considered the straight Whig movement, led by the

²³Lorenzo B. Shepard to Marcy, September 8, 1855, Marcy Papers, LC.

²⁴New York Journal of Commerce, June 12, 1855.

New York Commercial Advertiser, to be equally ineffect-
²⁵ual. The Journal had endorsed the Hard Shells in 1854²⁶
 but had grown increasingly dissatisfied with their sel-
²⁷fish factionalism. Thus, when Dickinson and his fol-
 lowers refused to unite with the Softs in 1855, the Journal
 turned to the latter. But before it would commit itself,
 it demanded the dilution of Van Buren's amendment. On
 the slavery question, Tammany Hall had become the spokes-
 man not only for Irish immigrants, but also for the mer-
 chant princes.

The support of the Journal of Commerce was offset
 by the loss of the New York Evening Post. Although in
 disagreement with the Soft Shell position for nearly two
 years, William Cullen Bryant and John Bigelow had not
 officially endorsed the fusionists. Their hesitancy was
 due to a deep distrust of Seward and Weed. But their
 dissatisfaction with the Soft convention of 1855 and the
 supplementary resolution of Tammany Hall plus conciliatory
 gestures from the Whig leadership overcame their reluctance.²⁸

²⁵Ibid., November 3, 1855.

²⁶Ibid., September 29, 1854.

²⁷Ibid., September 8, 1855.

²⁸New York Evening Post, August 31, September 1,
 8, 1855; Abijah Mann, Jr. to Weed, September 29, 1855,
 Weed Papers, URL; Margaret Clapp, Forgotten First Citizen:
John Bigelow (Boston, 1947), p. 96.

Unlike the brilliant lawyer Samuel J. Tilden, who had not only endorsed the Soft Shell proceedings but had accepted the Softs' nomination for attorney-general, they refused²⁹ to compromise.

The Softs sustained other permanent losses. In 1854, few antislavery Softs had joined either the Whigs³⁰ or the Know-Nothings. But subsequent developments in Kansas had aggravated the slavery-extension issue, and the second refusal of the convention to express their views caused more and more to change their minds. The New York Tribune proclaimed that the Softs' platform had alienated many Democrats. "Let the Republicans place on their ticket a liberal number of sound Democrats,"³¹ it urged, "and they will sweep the state."

By 1855, the difficulties of the New York Democratic party were even greater than the year before. The Hard Shells rejected all proposals for reconciliation with the Softs and continued to pillory them as free soilers. Having divorced themselves from the opinions of their constituents, the Adamantines were willing to go to any lengths to gain Southern support. But in the event that they were

²⁹John Bigelow and William C. Bryant to Samuel J. Tilden, September 3, 1855, Tilden Papers, NYPL.

³⁰See above, pp. 116-117.

³¹New York Tribune, September 5, 1855.

again rebuffed, Dickinson and his colleagues had established connections with the Know-Nothings. In 1854, the Nebraska Act had threatened to divide the Softs; the most pressing problem had been holding antislavery Barnburners faithful to the party. The following year, the possibility of violence in Kansas made this task even more difficult. The Softs had also to satisfy the Administration and Southern Democrats, who suspected their loyalty to the national party. When confronted with incompatible demands from antislavery men and Federal officeholders, a majority of delegates to the Syracuse convention equivocated in order to prevent the party from being torn apart. But evasion had its limitations. By trying to please everyone, the Softs' platform pleased no one. Alarmed that Van Buren's resolution would be construed as a revival of the Barnburner movement, Tammany Hall Democrats demanded that it be watered down. Disgusted by the second refusal of a Soft convention to denounce the policy of the Administration, many Democrats from the Burned-over-region rebelled. In the past, Democratic loyalties had prevented them from bolting and following Preston King into the Republican camp. They were now ready to take this step. Subjected to these pressures, the resilience of the New York Democratic party showed signs of reaching the breaking point.

CHAPTER 11

The Election of 1855

The New York election of 1854 had been indecisive--neither a paramount issue nor a dominant party had emerged out of the political chaos of that year. Politicians waged the campaign of 1855 with an energy entirely out of proportion to the minor state offices involved. They knew that much more was at stake--that the survival of their parties depended upon the result. Although the election failed to eliminate all the uncertainty which marked the previous contest, it clearly established one fact--that the slavery issue was the voters' foremost concern and that both the temperance and nativist causes were of secondary importance. This basis for the supremacy of the Republican party in the Empire State had been established.

In 1855, the Know-Nothings in New York reached the peak of their power, but they were soon shown to be fatally weak. They sought to repair their organization, expelling those who had voted for Seward during the Senatorial struggle, and to increase the number of lodges. They maintained their momentum in the county and town elections, which were held during the winter and spring,

1

and routed the Whigs in many districts. However, nativism in the Empire State was seriously affected by the disorders in Kansas, the election in Virginia, and the troubles of the National Grand Council in Philadelphia. Hostility to slavery extension overshadowed everything at the State Council at Binghamton.

The Silver Grays were also in a precarious situation during the campaign of 1855. Caught between the incompatible demands of New York and Southern Know-Nothings, they had been forced to accept the deletion of Article XII at the Binghamton convention, but they knew that this decision would not go unnoticed in the South. All efforts to avoid the sectional strains destroying the other national parties had so far been abortive. The anti-foreign and anti-Catholic issues, which were to be the basis of a national conservative party, were being submerged by the slavery question. Desperately, the Silver Grays tried

¹In Chautauqua, despite a fusion of Whigs and Softs against the Know-Nothings, the latter carried 21 out of 25 towns. Francis S. Edwards to Ullman, February 21, 1855, Ullman Papers; George W. Patterson to Weed, February 17, 1855, Weed Papers. In Rochester, the result was similar. James R. Thompson to Ullman, March 8, 1855, Ullman Papers. For more on these local elections, see Francis S. Edwards to Ullman, January 27, 1855, J. D. Colver to Ullman, March 13, 1855, James R. Thompson to Ullman, March 15, 1855, Ullman Papers, NYHS; N. Lapham to Weed, February 13, 1855, Weed Papers, URL; S. M. Shaw to Marcy, February 23, 1855, Marcy Papers, LC.

to reverse this process. One of them offered Daniel Ullman this advice for a speech:

Dwell upon the fact that the Pro-slavery prejudices of the South are appealed to by demagogues to oppose the American party and that the Black Republicans of the North are led by men who have long slept with [Bishop John] Hughes. Show that Seward and Pierce have a common interest in crushing out the American sentiment of the country--that one fights with certain weapons at the South, and the other with different weapons at the North, but they both fight under the Black flag of political Romanism.

He cautioned him against spending too much attention on the slavery issue:

Go just far enough and then stop in denouncing the repeal...attempting to set up now for restoration of the Missouri line, makes the slavery issue the prominent issue. Be careful to speak to the audience before you and let them see and feel that your heart is in the American movement. 2

When Thurlow Weed joined the Republicans in mid-summer of 1855, he believed there was a chance for victory. "It is possible that the state may be carried this fall. There are elements enough, if combined, to effect it," he wrote to Seward.³ To achieve success, the new party had to build political machinery fast. It would be a mistake to assume that the Republican organization was easily established or that it was merely a slightly

²James R. Thompson to Ullman, September 1, 1855, Ullman Papers, NYHS.

³Weed to Seward, July 23, 1855, Seward Papers, URL.

revamped version of the old Whig party. The Seward-Weed organization had been thrown into chaos by the events of the past two years. In some localities, enough of it survived to serve as a nucleus for the Republicans, but in other areas, the fusionists had to begin from scratch. Henry B. Stanton, formerly a prominent abolitionist and Free Democrat and now a Republican, worried about the lack of order. He informed Weed of his experience in the campaign:

Everything in the shape of organization is in utter chaos--I mean the kind of minute and detailed organization having for its chief object the bringing of votes to the polls. All old Whig committees are of course disabled and their substitutes are to a large extent yet to be appointed. ⁴

George E. Baker perceived a similar situation. He wrote to Seward: "I now see, what you saw long ago, how hard ⁵ it is to break up an old party and organize a new one." Two weeks before election day, the New York Tribune expressed dismay at the absence of county committees and ward clubs in many crucial districts and appealed for ⁶ swift action to remedy this defect. In an editorial

⁴Henry B. Stanton to Weed, October 15, 1855, Thurlow Weed Miscellaneous Manuscripts, NYHS.

⁵George E. Baker to Seward, October 19, 1855, Seward Papers, URL.

⁶New York Tribune, October 20, 31, 1855.

entitled "One Week for Freedom," Weed made a final plea for redoubled efforts:

If the few days remaining are devoted to ORGANIZATION, ten thousand more votes will be secured to the Republican ticket than if we should go into the canvass unprepared. The first important work is to select FAITHFUL MEN TO DISTRIBUTE BALLOTS...Friends! give this week to the Cause, and ALL WILL BE WELL. 7

The Republicans urgently needed campaigners to canvass the state. In order to attract support from former Democrats and Whigs, teams of both were sent into the countryside. Requests for speakers dominated Weed's correspondence. "Many Democrats are halting, and a few words from [James W.] Nye or some other former Democrat would determine them," wrote one worker.⁸ A special effort was needed to bring in conservative Whigs, many of whom withheld their aid from the new party. Stanton advised the boss that it was "important to have speakers who have been known throughout the state as prominent Whigs."⁹ DeWitt C. Littlejohn, the Speaker of the Assembly, appealed to Weed for aid in Oswego. He reported that Whigs who were once in the habit of contributing freely were now in op-

⁷Albany Evening Journal, October 29, 1855.

⁸George Barker to Weed, October 20, 1855. See also Steven B. Ayres to Weed, October 13, 1855, Weed Papers, URL.

⁹Henry B. Stanton to Weed, October 15, 1855, Thurlow Weed Miscellaneous Manuscripts, NYHS.

position and called a meeting to resuscitate the old party.¹⁰
 The fusionists made great exertions in Lockport, the home
 of Washington Hunt, to offset his influence.¹¹ Numerous
 writers begged Seward to take the stump, and the Senator
 responded. Together with James W. Nye, he spoke in several
 cities along the Erie Canal route.¹²

Republican leaders looked upon the campaign as an
 enterprise in mass education. They deemed it necessary
 to convince a confused electorate, dizzy with the prolif-
 eration of parties and crusades, that the prevention of
 slavery extension was the most pressing issue. It was
 also imperative to expose the evasions, half-truths, and
 outright lies with which the opposition disguised its
 capitulation to the South. Praising one of Seward's speeches
 for its instructional value, Baker observed that "if we
 fail this fall it will be because the people have read
 more about the Pope and Bishop [John] Hughes than about
 Slavery and Equal Rights."¹³ In a letter to the Chair-

¹⁰DeWitt C. Littlejohn to Weed, October 15, 1855, Weed Papers, URL.

¹¹Lyman A. Spaulding to Weed, October 5, 1855, Weed Papers, URL.

¹²Elbridge G. Spaulding to Weed, October 14, 1855, Henry Fitzhugh to Weed, October 17, 1855, Weed Papers, URL; George E. Baker to Seward, October 19, 1855, Seward Papers, URL.

¹³Baker to Seward, October 13, 1855, Seward Papers, URL.

man of the Republican State Committee, Seward expressed his attitude toward the canvass. He rejoiced that the revolution had commenced and was certain that it would ultimately prevail. But he realized that there would be setbacks and temporary defeats. Republicans must remember that "they who work out political reformation through the action of popular suffrage under constitutional government must allow the people time, and calculate on many disturbances and caprices."¹⁴

The conservatives constituted a special problem. To gain their support, Republicans wrote carefully reasoned appeals refuting accusations of radicalism and irresponsibility. Thurlow Weed, Horace Greeley, and James Watson Webb argued that they adhered to the true conservative party, because it sought to preserve territories consecrated for free men. Those who would yield the rights of the North to the aggressions of slavery were the real radicals.¹⁵

The strategy of the Soft Shells was to take no definite stand on the slavery issue. Maintaining an equivocal position seemed to be the only way to ease the strain

¹⁴Seward to E. A. Stansbury, September 14, 1855, Seward Papers, URL.

¹⁵See, for example, the Albany Evening Journal, November 2, 1855, the New York Tribune, November 3, 1855, and the New York Courier and Enquirer, November 6, 1855.

16

on the party. Did the Softs stand on John Van Buren's platform, which declared "fixed hostility to the extension of slavery into free territory," or was Tammany Hall correct when it declared this statement only an "abstract opinion" without practical application? The Softs deliberately left this question unanswered. By this plan, they hoped to attract the votes of antislavery Barnburners without alienating conservative Whigs and Democrats and their colleagues below the Mason-Dixon line.

John Van Buren stumped the state, attempting to revive his old standing with Radical Democrats. His speeches, reaffirming his Wilmot Proviso position of 1848, came under attack from the Washington Union, which called for his banishment from the party. If the Softs stood behind these heresies, warned the Union, they could not belong to the national Democratic party. The Administration paper declared that in such a case, it would be "a matter of indifference, so far as the interests of the Democratic party are concerned, whether his [Van Buren's] ticket succeeds or not."¹⁷ "Prince John" welcomed this criticism. As he explained to Marcy, the attacks of the Ad-

¹⁶The New York Tribune accused the Softs of standing upon a platform made of Indian rubber, which was capable of unlimited stretching in opposite directions. New York Tribune, November 6, 1855.

¹⁷The Washington Union, quoted in the Albany Evening Journal, October 29, 1855.

ministration would be translated into thousands of votes¹⁸
for the Softs.

At the same time that Van Buren toured the country-side, Horatio Seymour made a bid for conservative votes at home and Southern support at Cincinnati. He delivered a carefully prepared speech at Tammany Hall in which he lauded the principle of popular sovereignty and the Nebraska Act. Gently chiding the "border irregularities" committed by pro-slavery Missourians, he found ample prov-¹⁹
ocation in the activities of Kansas emigrant societies. The Albany Atlas observed that Seymour's address "pitched the true keynote of the Democracy" and the Washington Union called it "thoroughly national," presenting "a platform on which northern and southern men can meet and join hands and heart for the perpetual preservation of the Union."²⁰

At their state convention, the straight or Old Line

¹⁸John Van Buren to Marcy, September 20, November 13, 1855, Marcy Papers, LC; Henry D. Rich to John Van Buren, November 21, 1855, included in the Samuel J. Tilden Papers, NYPL; see above, p. 225, footnote No. 18.

¹⁹Seymour's speech was printed in the Albany Argus October 1, 1855.

²⁰The Albany Atlas and the Washington Union, quoted in the New York Evening Post, October 4, 1855. The Evening Post gave this caustic appraisal of Seymour's speech: "In regard to slavery, he is in favor of letting the South do all the agitation, and the North all the acquiescence." Marcy approved of the speech. See Seymour to Marcy, September 9, October 5, 1855, Marcy Papers, LC, and Marcy to Seymour, September 12, 1855, typescript, Seymour Papers, NYHS.

Whigs refrained from naming a state-wide ticket. How then was an Old Liner to cast his vote? Both the Know-Nothings and the Softs had their own self-serving answers. Each party claimed that it had the only chance to defeat the Republicans; therefore, Whigs should do their patriotic duty.²¹ The New York Commercial Advertiser, the chief spokesman for the Whigs, urged its readers to vote so as to promote the welfare of the Union. Coming down to specifics, it acknowledged its uncertainty about the relative strengths of the Softs and the Know-Nothings, although it tended to favor the latter because of their superior organization and better candidates.²²

The Commercial Advertiser did its best to dissuade conservative Whigs from joining the fusionists. Besides repeated caveats for the safety of the Union, an effective tactic was to print the old voting records of Republicans with Democratic antecedents. The enmities of the Jacksonian period survived in memory if not in substance, and many Whigs were unhappy about voting for candidates who had advocated the destruction of the United States Bank and the veto of internal improvements. Preston King and

²¹See the Albany Argus, October 29, 1855; the New York Journal of Commerce, November 3, 1855; the New York Weekly Mirror, September 8, 1855; the Albany State Register, quoted in the New York Tribune, October 25, 1855; Simeon B. Jewett to Samuel J. Tilden, October 6, 1855, Tilden Papers, NYPL.

²²New York Commercial Advertiser, November 5, 6, 1855.

Abijah Mann, Jr. were embarrassed by revelations that they had once voted with the South against the right of²³ petition.

The election result revealed a narrow Know-Nothing victory of nearly 12,000 votes over the Republicans. The state-wide returns for the head of the ticket (Secretary of State) were: Joel T. Headley (Know-Nothing), 148,557; Preston King (Republican), 136,698; Israel T. Hatch (Soft), 91,336; Aaron Ward (Hard), 59,353.²⁴

The Know-Nothings were delighted with their victory. In an off year election, they had increased their state-wide total by more than 25,000 votes.²⁵ They made considerable gains in the eastern portion of the state. In 1854, the party had carried only 5 of the 26 counties comprising this region; in 1855, its total increased to²⁶ 15. They also registered gains in the heavily populated

²³Ibid., November 6, 1855. Hamilton Fish provided this information. Robert A. West, the editor of the Commercial Advertiser, believed these disclosures were important in defeating the Republicans. West to Fish, November 7, 1855, Fish Papers, LC.

²⁴The True American's Almanac and Political Manual, 1857.

²⁵Ibid.; Whig (Tribune) Almanac, 1855.

²⁶See Curran, "Know-Nothings of New York," p. 311. Curran attributes the nativists' poor showing in eastern New York in 1854 to the fact that Pro-Renter Daniel Ullman headed the ticket. Although most powerful in the 1840's, Anti-Rentism remained an important factor in the politics of the Hudson valley a decade later. See Ibid., p. 198.

cities of Brooklyn and New York. As one nativist expressed it, "New York is covered with honor. Fusion--Seward, Weed, Greeley, Raymond are prostrate. The fusionists are not only astonished, but bitterly malignant; they fought with the desperation of pirates."²⁷

New York Republicans shared in the reverses which the party suffered in most of the North. Besides New York, the Know-Nothings carried New Hampshire, Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Rhode Island. Only in Iowa, Michigan, and especially Ohio--where Salmon P. Chase was elected governor--did the fusionists triumph.²⁸ New York City and other urban areas in the state delivered a sharp setback to the new party.²⁹ In Brooklyn and New York, it received only 15.13% and 11.90% of the vote.³⁰ The com-

²⁷John Sanders to James W. Beekman, November 19, 1855, Beekman Papers, NYHS. For similar expressions of Know-Nothing joy, see J. P. Faurot to Ullman, November 9, 11, 1855, Vespasian Ellis to Ullman, November 8, 1855, Ullman Papers, NYHS.

²⁸Crandall, Early History of the Republican Party, pp. 32-35.

²⁹Weed wrote that the Republicans were beaten by the solid vote of New York City and Brooklyn, "those huge ulcers upon the body politic." Albany Evening Journal, November 8, 1855. One fusionist wrote that "there was no good reason why New York, Albany, Buffalo, and Troy should behave so badly." He felt it was shameful that after the great efforts in the interior and western counties and after the victories achieved there, the Republicans should be beaten by the cotton merchants of New York City. Publius D. Foster to Seward, November 19, 1855, Seward Papers, URL.

³⁰See Curran, "Know-Nothings of New York," p. 312.

bination of the Irish laborers' vote for the Softs and the merchants' support of the Hards and Know-Nothings³¹ swamped the fusionists. But the anti-Republican vote, though overwhelming, was divided.

Conservative newspapers in New York City, regardless of party, were jubilant. The New York Express--whose editor, Erastus Brooks, had made a career out of baiting Archbishop John Hughes--concluded that efforts to create a sectional party were doomed. The paper hoped that the Know-Nothings would gain new recruits. According to the Express, the only requirement for admission was to hold Negro principles in subordination to white men's principles:

The American party was created for Sam, and not for Sambo. It is held to be of more importance to protect the white men of the country from foreign and Papal invasion, than it is to battle about the African, to the sacrifice of everything American. ³²

Although disappointed that the Soft Shells were beaten, the New York Journal of Commerce was satisfied that the Republicans were "signally defeated." It remarked that

³¹Greeley admitted that "'Down with the Pope'" had been shown to be an effective partisan cry in the cities, but even better was "'Down with the negroes and negro-lovers'...Because while the Pope is far off and to most of us an invisible abstraction, the negroes are around and among us, and not usually regarded as either fragrant or otherwise enchanting...Combine these two, and you have a double team that will draw almost anything till the traces break." New York Tribune, November 8, 1855.

³²New York Express, November 13, 1855.

"such a rebuke to that dangerous faction...is glory enough for one day."³³ The voice of the straight Whigs, the New York Commercial Advertiser, rejoiced that "disunion- and abolitionism" had been checked. New York had shown "that her citizens have something else to do and to think about than bootlessly fretting over an evil which even were it greater than it is, and did it more nearly affect them, they are powerless to remedy."³⁴

The Republicans disputed the claims of newspapers which hastened to write their obituary. They had come close to victory in spite of their weak organization. The New York Evening Post offered this rejoinder:

Considering that the Republican party was a sort of improvisation, an extempore affair, a spontaneous association of men not accustomed to act together, who came together reluctantly, and had no proper organization, it has done wonders. ³⁵

Seward believed that Republican "wonders" would increase.

"We have rather a tough beginning with our new organization, but it will work effectually in the end," he wrote to a

³³New York Journal of Commerce, November 8, 1855.

³⁴New York Commercial Advertiser, November 7, 1855; See also Robert A. West to Fish, November 7, 1855, Fish Papers, LC. For another expression of satisfaction from a conservative paper, see the New York Weekly Mirror, November 10, 1855.

³⁵New York Evening Post, November 9, 1855.

friend.³⁶ The Senator reported that old friends were "panic struck about the future. But my philosophy is not disturbed."³⁷ He advised a close associate not to fear the Know-Nothings: "There is just so much gas in any ascending balloon...But the balloon is always sure, not only to come down, but to come down very quick. The heart of the country is fixed on higher and nobler things. Do not distrust it."³⁸ Greeley credited the Republicans with 20,000 more votes than the Know-Nothings at election time and attributed the fusionists' defeat to an inadequate organization--which allowed nativists, posing as Republicans,³⁹ to destroy the latter's ballots. One prominent Whig, now a Republican, celebrated what he called "a sort of half victory this fall--a presage I trust of a whole one the next time--a republican triumph--and a

³⁶Seward to Willard McKinstry, November 8, 1855, Seward papers, URL.

³⁷Seward to (?), November 10, 1855, quoted in Frederick W. Seward, William Henry Seward at Washington as Senator and Secretary of State (New York, 1891), p. 258.

³⁸Seward to George E. Baker, quoted in Ibid., p. 259.

³⁹Greeley to Colfax, November 13, 1855, Greeley-Colfax Papers, NYPL; see also the New York Tribune, November 7, 1855.

hindoo and pro-slavery defeat."⁴⁰

The primary reason for the Republicans' optimism was their success in central and western New York, the mainstay of the old Whig party. Many counties in the "infected district" had gone heavily Know-Nothing in 1854. This trend seemed to have been reversed, with the Republican party as the chief beneficiary. In 1854, the secret Order had carried 11 of the 29 counties in the Burned-over-region; the following year the nativists carried only 7 of the 29 counties.⁴¹ Fusionists were jubilant to find their predictions fulfilled. They noted that the Know-Nothing fever only appeared to last for one year in any locality before it died out.⁴² The New York Tribune observed that in 1854 the Know-Nothings had carried much of the west--Seneca, Ontario, Orleans, Livingston, Genesee, Erie, Chautauqua, Cattaraugus, Allegany, Steuben, Chemung.

⁴⁰John M. Bradford to Seward, November 27, 1855. For other correspondence reflecting Republican satisfaction and confidence in future success, see George M. Grier to Seward, November 12, 1855, T. Apoleon Cheney to Seward, November 14, 1855, Hanson A. Risley to Seward, November 15, 1855, Myron H. Clark to Seward, December 22, 1855, Seward Papers, URL.

⁴¹In 23 of the 29 counties, the Republicans made gains as compared with the percentage of the vote received by the Whigs in 1854. See Curran, "Know-Nothings of New York," pp. 308-309.

⁴²John M. Bradford to Fish, November 8, 1855, Fish Papers, LC.

Of all the counties west of Cayuga Lake, only Wayne, Monroe, Niagara, and Wyoming had given pluralities against Daniel Ullman. In 1855, these four counties were still anti-Know-Nothing, and neighboring ones had been largely reclaimed.⁴³ Thurlow Weed was delighted. He wrote:

The REPUBLICAN PARTY needs no stronger or surer guarantees for the future, than the glorious WEST has furnished in its recent emphatic vote for FREEDOM. In Counties obscured for a brief season by the dark-lantern delusion, there is now light and liberty. With the WEST now, as formerly strong and firm in their devotion to FREEDOM, all is safe. ⁴⁴

The Soft Shells lost ground in the election, although they, too, were able to discover reasons for optimism. Collector Redfield admitted that he had hoped for a small plurality, but he was not disappointed with the result. He found comfort in the fact that the combined Hard and Soft Shell vote was still a majority. Redfield predicted that the total vote for 1855 would be 200,000 less than in 1856 and that those who abstained from balloting--in his judgement, mostly conservative Democrats who were disgusted by the divisions in the party brought about by profligate leaders--would support the Softs in the presidential campaign. The Collector assumed that in

⁴³New York Tribune, November 12, 1855.

⁴⁴Albany Evening Journal, November 8, 1855. The dark lantern was a symbol used by the Know-Nothings. Seward wrote that "all the west has partially or fully redeemed itself...." Seward to (?), November 10, 1855, quoted in Frederick W. Seward, Seward at Washington, p. 258.

1856 the leading Adamintines would join the Know-Nothings⁴⁵ but that the rank-and-file would return to the Democracy.

The election of 1855, like its predecessor, was inconclusive; the revolution in the New York party system had not yet been completed. As we have seen, all three major participants--the Know-Nothings, Republicans, and Softs--believed they had a good chance for success in the coming presidential campaign.

However, one highly significant result did occur--the slavery extension issue emerged as the paramount subject before the electorate.⁴⁶ Temperance, the most potent question of 1854, was reduced in importance. This fact had become apparent when the state temperance convention agreed to endorse the Republican ticket instead of nominating its own. The narrow victory of Know-Nothingism reflected the power of anti-foreign and anti-Catholic prejudice. Yet, Silver Gray managers were forced to renounce Article XII to hold antislavery nativists in the Burned-over-region, and they were hard pressed

⁴⁵Heman J. Redfield to Marcy, November 27, 1855, Marcy Papers, LC.

⁴⁶The New York Evening Post came to this conclusion after the election: "We do not pretend to foresee what particular shape parties will take in the approaching contest for the Presidency, but we do not perceive any way by which politicians can be able to avoid the necessity of recognizing the difference of opinion on the slavery question as the dividing line between parties." New York Evening Post, November 9, 1855.

in emphasizing "Popery" rather than Kansas. The success of the "Americans" was due to their excellent organization and not to the primacy of nativist objectives. The Softs also had to deal with the slavery issue, whereas in 1854, they had given exclusive attention to liquor. Because they refused to take an unequivocal stand against slavery in Kansas, they experienced great difficulty in keeping ex-Barnburners loyal.

But if antislavery sentiments had come to dominate the people's response to the political crisis, why, then, did New York Republicans fail to receive a preponderant endorsement at the polls? The inadequate organization of the new party was partly responsible for its defeat. Seward and Weed had hesitated to abandon the Whig party because they anticipated the difficulty of establishing another one. Their apprehensions proved correct; much work remained before the Republican machine operated with the same effectiveness as the Know-Nothing's. However, even more important than the lack of an efficient party apparatus was the fact that no clear distinction on the slavery extension issue emerged between the Republicans and their principal opponents; during the canvass, the Soft Shells and the Know-Nothings also opposed the expansion of the South's "peculiar institution." Both of these parties found themselves subjected to the strain of having to satisfy both the antislavery attitudes of constituents

and the demands of Southern colleagues. Confronted by the immediate problem of the 1855 election, these two parties felt compelled to adopt positions satisfactory to local opinions. Many nativists who voted Know-Nothing believed that they were also voicing opposition to the spread of slavery. The same was true of a large number of Barnburners who were deceived by the statements of John Van Buren. In this way, thousands of ballots were lost to the Republicans.

The Republicans lost their first battle in 1855, but they took a giant step toward final victory. The fusionists had forced their opponents to fight on their terrain, differences on slavery and its extension having become the dividing line between parties. The turning point was the success of the Republican party in the "infected district." This region had postponed temperance crusading and was growing disillusioned with nativism. Efforts to save Kansas from slavery had taken precedence over all other goals. With the election completed, attention focused on the drama unfolding in Kansas, and on Washington, where an anti-Nebraska House of Representatives would soon meet.

CHAPTER 12

The Cincinnati Convention

Sectional tension within the national party brought severe difficulties to New York Democrats. But the problems of the Democratic organization in the Empire State also threatened the national party. By 1856, the Hard Shell-Soft Shell feud had become a matter of great concern to the entire Democracy. In three successive elections from 1853-1855, factionalism had resulted in Democratic defeat in New York; in each case the combined Hard-Soft vote had been a majority. Democrats throughout the nation appreciated the crucial importance of New York's thirty-five electoral votes, which had often been the decisive margin in presidential elections, and they demanded an end to this disastrous rift.

The Hard-Soft split also created other dilemmas. Determined to secure their objectives by any means, the Adamantines had recklessly reopened the bitter controversies of 1848. They continued to accuse the Softs of free soilism and scorned all attempts at reconciliation. Having carried on the struggle for so long, the Hards were de-

terminated to bring their case before the Cincinnati convention.¹ Since efforts to obtain unity had failed, the Softs resumed the denunciation of their rivals. They indicted the Hards for complicity with the Know-Nothings; the Albany Argus even suggested that Dickinson was anxious² for a spot on the nativists' presidential ticket. By undermining confidence in the loyalty of New York Democrats, these charges and counter charges weakened the ties of mutual trust which bound the national party together.

The Soft Shells had powerful arguments in favor of their claim to being the regular Democrats of the state. They pointed to their superior voting strength in the past two canvasses. They also pointed to their many newspapers.³ Nevertheless, they felt vulnerable. They feared

¹Gideon J. Tucker--the editor of the new Hard Shell organ, the New York National Democrat--would only cooperate with his foes if they accepted Dickinson as the state's favorite son. This was obviously untenable to the Softs. See Gideon J. Tucker to S. D. Dillaye, December 4, 1854, printed in the Albany Argus, December 12, 1855. See also George W. Clinton to Seymour, May 13, 1856, typescript, Seymour Papers, NYHS.

²Albany Argus, December 20, 1855, April 30, 1856, May 1, 2, 15, 1856.

³See, for example, Ibid., June 2, 1856. About a week before the Cincinnati convention assembled, two prominent Tammanyites, John Kelly and Lorenzo Shepard, delivered speeches arguing why the Softs should be recognized as the regular party of the state. Congressman Kelly's remarks may be found in the Congressional Globe, 34 Congress, 1 session, appendix, 595-598. This speech was printed as a pamphlet and distributed to the delegates at Cincinnati. See The Union of the New York Democracy--the Kansas-Nebraska

that popularity at the polls would count for little with Southern Democrats if their orthodoxy on the slavery issue were doubted.

The Softs had reason for concern. Custom house and postal appointees had secured a grudging endorsement of the Nebraska Act, but they had been compelled to make concessions to antislavery sentiment. The 1854 state convention declared the Act "inexpedient and unnecessary" and the 1855 conclave adopted John Van Buren's resolution pledging "fixed hostility to the extension of slavery."⁴ Besides soothing the anger of many delegates, these "sweeteners" helped to hold many antislavery Democrats in the party. Although this ambiguous policy had relieved some immediate strains on the Softs, it exposed them to Adamantine charges of free soilism. With the election of 1855 over, Soft Shell leaders realized that they had to place their faction on unassailable national grounds.⁵

Act Vindicated. Speech of Hon. John Kelly of New York. Delivered in the House of Representatives, May 26, 1856. (Washington?, 1856). Shepard's address, delivered at the Wigwam, was widely publicized. It may be found in the Albany Atlas and Argus, May 27, 1856.

⁴See above, pp. 109, 225.

⁵The Marcy Papers include an article clipped from the Weekly Express (Maysville, Kentucky), September 11, 1855, which praises the Hard Shells for the nationality of their platform and condemns the Softs' position as thoroughly antislavery. Presumably, this type of commentary alarmed the Secretary of State.

Great care was taken to insure that the Soft Shell convention of January 10-11, 1856 avoided dissension. Horatio Seymour assured Marcy that unmanageable radicals⁶ would be strictly excluded. The meeting was composed almost entirely of Federal officeholders, and the Administration's wishes regarding the platform were solicited well in advance.⁷ Lorenzo Shepard of Tammany--whose efforts to secure a blanket endorsement of the President's actions had been thwarted for two years--reported the resolutions.⁸ The first pronouncement attacked the Republicans for attempting "to impair the security of the domestic institutions of the South" and for going beyond the limits set forth in the Constitution, which, by establishing the principle of the equality of the states, sought to prevent the tyranny of one section by another. The Kansas-Nebraska Act and the principle of popular sovereignty received an unqualified endorsement; Van Buren's

⁶Seymour to Marcy, September 9, 1855, James G. Dickie to Marcy, December 24, 1855, Marcy Papers, LC. See also Henry H. Van Dyck to Martin Van Buren, December 21, 1855, Van Buren Papers, LC.

⁷Dean Richmond, the Chairman of the Democratic State Committee, requested Marcy's opinion on "how far prudence would dictate that we should go on the Kansas question." See James G. Dickie to Marcy, December 24, 1855, Marcy Papers, LC.

⁸This account of the convention is derived from the telegraphic reports contained in the Albany Argus, January 12, 1856.

amendment, adopted only three months before, was omitted. The last statement eulogized the Pierce Administration. These resolves passed with only one negative vote.⁹ The convention then approved an address to the Democracy of the state, which amplified the views contained in the resolutions.¹⁰ The final order of business, the selection of delegates to contest the Hard Shells at Cincinnati, also went smoothly.

Soft Shell leaders were relieved that they had adopted pro-Administration resolutions. Secretary of State Marcy announced his satisfaction and so did the President and the Cabinet.¹¹ William Cassidy, an editor of the Albany Atlas,¹² had once opposed the Nebraska bill but was unwilling to sever his ties with the national Democracy over the issue. He explained his reasoning to former President Martin Van Buren: "It would be a folly and a crime to destroy a party organization to which the people have

⁹This was cast by Henry H. Van Dyck, the co-editor of the Albany Atlas. Van Dyck subsequently sold his interest in the Atlas and joined the Republicans. See below, pp. 327-328.

¹⁰This address--written by Nicholas Hill, Jr., an Albany lawyer and a rising politician--was printed in the New York Tribune, January 10, 1856 and the Albany Argus, January 14, 1856.

¹¹Marcy to Seymour, January 18, 1856, typescript, Seymour Papers, NYHS.

¹²See above, pp. 41-45.

owed so much, since the very foundation of the government,
for the sake of a few temporary & adventitious errors."¹³

The Albany Argus defended the deletion of John Van Buren's amendment. No one, it maintained, had the right to usurp the prerogatives of territorial citizens; should a majority of settlers include slavery in their constitution and apply for entry into the Union, they must be admitted.

The Argus argued, moreover, that no substantive change had occurred in the Softs' position. Adopting the view which Tammany Hall, at the bidding of the New York Journal of Commerce,¹⁴ had first enunciated, the Argus stated that Van Buren's resolution had been understood to be abstract¹⁵ and with no practical meaning.

The Softs had finally abandoned the equivocal position which had been the keynote of the party's platform for the past two years. By taking this action, they exposed themselves to Republican attacks. The Albany Evening Journal accused the Softs of approaching the Cincinnati convention "with the black banner of slavery substituted

¹³William Cassidy to Martin Van Buren, January 13, 1856, Van Buren papers, LC.

¹⁴See above, pp. 227-228.

¹⁵Albany Argus, January 7, 11, 1856.

for that of freedom."¹⁶ The New York Tribune commented that once again the Softs had proved faithful to their name: "Under the rays of Federal official patronage they [the Softs] have been gradually melting, till now apparently they are reduced to a state of almost perfect liquidity, ready to run into any mold and to take any shape which the Cincinnati convention may require."¹⁷ The Softs' decision alienated Democrats who had allowed themselves to believe that the party was firmly committed against the extension of slavery. An explicit refutation of this belief was necessary before the party loyalty of many Democrats could be overcome. These men now began to join¹⁸ the Republicans in large numbers.

The Hard Shells would not allow their rivals to escape so easily from the stigma of free soilism; the Adamantines' only chance for recognition at Cincinnati depended on the credibility of this charge. Dickinson's organ, the New York Daily News, accused its foes of "groveling in the dust...acknowledging themselves hypocrites and pretenders...and sickening all beholders with a newly-assumed cant of nationality and patriotism. All of this

¹⁶Albany Evening Journal, January 3, 1856.

¹⁷New York Tribune, January 12, 1856.

¹⁸See below, p. 324ff.

for the sake of miserable offices, and in the hope of retaining them...." The News maintained that three-fourths of the delegates to the convention had supported the Buffalo platform in 1848 and had taken a consistent free soil position afterwards. It warned Democrats in other states not to be deceived by these new professions:

Can anybody, then, truly and honestly confide in what they say now? Can we have any earthly guaranty that they have been joking all these many years, and are in earnest now? Somebody is to be deceived; either they were playing false to the one hundred thousand voters who followed them into the support of Van Buren and Adams in 1848, or they are playing false to President Pierce and the Cincinnati convention in 1856. Which is it? 19

The Hard-Soft feud made New York a center of political intrigue for presidential aspirants. Maneuvering²⁰ began in earnest after the election of 1855. Four men appeared as the most likely candidates--Secretary of State Marcy, President Pierce, Senator Douglas, and Minister James Buchanan. Each of these men had his adherents in the Empire State.

Marcy was the weakest contender for several reasons. He shared the opprobrium attached to the Nebraska bill, even though he had had no part in its formulation and had²¹ disapproved of it; the President desired a second term;

¹⁹New York Daily News, quoted in the New York Tribune, January 16, 1856.

²⁰See James G. Dickie to Marcy, December 24, 1855, Marcy Papers, LC.

²¹See above, p. 46.

and the Secretary could not depend on New York as a political base. The Hard Shells hated him and the Soft Shells were suspect in many parts of the country. Nevertheless, some of Marcy's friends hoped that in a deadlocked convention the "lightening" might strike him.²²

It is rare that an incumbent president's desire for renomination can be resisted. The exceptions occur during periods of political crisis. In 1856, many Democrats held President Pierce responsible for the defeats suffered by the party, and they were determined to see him retired. Pierce possessed strength in the South and in New England and expected aid from the Softs in return for his patronage. However, his New York beneficiaries had only contempt for him; the New York Tribune correctly observed that the Softs used the same foul language to describe Pierce in private which the Hards used in public.²³ Although nominally committed, the Softs' real attitudes were

²²John Stryker to Marcy, May 7, 27, 1856, S. M. Shaw to Marcy, May 3, 1856, Marcy Papers, LC. See also Seward to Weed, May 4, 1856, Weed Papers, URL.

²³New York Tribune, October 3, 1854. S. M. Shaw wrote Marcy that in his county (Otsego) he didn't know a single man with the exception of the postmaster who favored Pierce's renomination. He surmised that this was true throughout the state, concluding that "beyond the officeholders, Pierce has no party in N.Y." S. M. Shaw to Marcy, May 3, 1856. Marcy Papers, LC. Daniel Sickles made a similar appraisal. See Sickles to James Buchanan, February 3, 1856, Buchanan Papers, HSPa.

well-known. This left the door ajar for secret overtures from the adherents of other candidates.

Stephen A. Douglas also coveted the nomination. He possessed an energetic agent in the Empire State, David T. Disney, a Cincinnati lawyer and former Congressman. Seeking to unite New York's feuding politicians behind Douglas, Disney traveled about the state speaking with the leaders of each faction. He repeated the same argument to all his conferees: both the Hards and the Softs faced a barren future if they presented contesting delegations; however, if they seized the opportune moment and rallied around the Illinois Senator, they could place themselves in a commanding position at Cincinnati.²⁴ Although confident that his reasoning would have the desired effect, Disney urged the Little Giant to assist him by sending some Southerner to New York. The Ohioan surmised that this would be particularly useful for its effect on Daniel S. Dickinson: "I may go up and see Dickinson but at present I think that in going to him it would be well for me to have as coadjutor some Southern man of standing--such a man and myself can control Dickinson... I say Southern because that location would weigh with

²⁴David T. Disney to Stephen A. Douglas, February 28, 29, 1856, Douglas Papers, University of Chicago.

Dickinson."²⁵

Although James Buchanan had been a perennial aspirant for the nomination, the prize had always eluded his grasp, and he had to be satisfied with prominent roles in other men's administrations. Secretary of State in the Polk administration, he had coveted the same office under Pierce and was piqued when the State Department went to Marcy. Nevertheless, the Pennsylvanian accepted the position of Minister to the Court of St. James, an appointment which proved to be a blessing in disguise. Safely installed in London, he had the ocean between himself and the Kansas-Nebraska controversy. Buchanan subsequently announced his approval of the Administration's Nebraska policy but only after it had been established as a new maxim of Democratic orthodoxy; thus he avoided the resentment of thousands of Democrats--both from the North and the South--who despised Douglas' measure.

26

²⁵Disney to Douglas, February 29, 1856. Douglas could not comply with this request. He did not know of any suitable Southerner that he could send. See Douglas to James W. Singleton, March 16, 1856. Disney made some vague promises where he thought they would do the most good:

"I have hinted that Dickinson may be assured that he will be cared for in case of your success--I however phrased it in general terms and spoke of it as a natural matter of course thing."

Disney to Douglas, undated, Douglas Papers, University of Chicago.

²⁶Buchanan's endorsement of the Nebraska Act as a final settlement of slavery agitation was contained in

In New York, Buchanan had significant support in the metropolis, especially among the merchants, who, although somewhat uneasy about his record as an expansionist, viewed him as a sound conservative.²⁷ One of the envoy's earliest and most ardent adherents was George W. Butler, an editor of the New York Journal of Commerce.²⁸ The former Tammanyite Daniel W. Sickles, recently Buchanan's Secretary of legation at London, applied his genius for rascality in behalf of his former superior.²⁹ He pursued the same difficult objective as David Disney--to unite Hards and Softs behind his friend. Sickles arranged a regal welcome for the Pennsylvanian upon his arrival from England in April of 1856. Buchanan rode triumphantly

a letter to John Slidell (Senator from Louisiana), December 26, 1855, Buchanan Papers, HSPa. This letter was widely printed in the press.

²⁷Disney was well aware of Buchanan's strength in New York City among conservatives. See Disney to Douglas, February 22, 28, March 4, 1856, Douglas Papers, University of Chicago.

²⁸Other New York City papers which urged Buchanan's nomination were the New York Atlas and the New York Sun. Anson Herrick to Buchanan, February 13, 1856, M. S. Beach to Buchanan, April 28, 1856, Buchanan Papers, HSPa. Herrick was editor of the Atlas and Beach was editor of the Sun.

²⁹Sickles to Buchanan, November 25, 1855, February 3, 19, 1856, May 24, 1856, Buchanan Papers, HSPa. For Sickles fascinating career, see W. A. Swanberg, Sickles the Incredible (New York, 1956).

down Fifth avenue to the Everett House on Union Square, where he met a large crowd and several speakers eulogized him.³⁰

All the schemers who tried to unite the Hards and Softs behind a favorite candidate failed. They underestimated the bitterness which separated the two antagonists. The Hards and the Softs could not resolve their differences, even though this might have placed them in a powerful position. When the Cincinnati convention assembled on June 2, 1856, the problem of New York's divided delegation was referred to the committee on credentials.

The Adamantines briefly investigated the possibility of supporting Douglas but finally decided to cast their lot with Buchanan. Several considerations played a part in this decision. First, they and the former envoy shared a mutual hatred for both Pierce and Marcy. Second, rumors of an understanding between Douglas and Pierce alarmed Dickinson and his friends; the success of either would ruin them. Third, Beverly Tucker, a leading National Democrat--whose paper, the Washington Sentinel, attacked

³⁰ Mayor Fernando Wood, a match for anyone when it came to unscrupulousness, also extended a warm welcome to Buchanan. Wood, of course, was nominally committed to Pierce. See Wood to Buchanan, May 26, 1856, Buchanan Papers, HSPa.

the Administration at every opportunity--warmly supported Buchanan.³¹ When the Hard Shells arrived in Cincinnati, Buchanan's partisans pledged their assistance to them in the coming contest with the Softs; in return, Dickinson³² promised to stand behind the Pennsylvanian.

The Softs had no real choice. Dependent on the President and his adherents for gaining admittance to the convention, they had to support him, whether they liked him or not. Many leading Softs favored Marcy, but they found upon arrival that the Secretary of State had little strength. For the very reason that made him attractive to the Hards, Buchanan was an unthinkable alternative. Secret hopes settled on the Little Giant. Should the opportunity arise, the Softs were ready to desert Pierce.

While the main body of the Cincinnati convention passed its platform, including the doctrine of popular sovereignty, the credentials committee listened to arguments from New York's feuding delegations. Horatio Seymour advocated the case of the Softs; Samuel Beardsley spoke

³¹Sickles had to restrain Tucker from coming out prematurely for Buchanan. Sickles to Buchanan, February 19, 1856. See also Thos. Pearsall to Buchanan, May 26, 1856, George W. Sanders to Buchanan, May 24, 1856, Robert Tyler to Buchanan, May 26, 1856, John Appleton to Buchanan, April 26, 1856, Buchanan Papers, HSPa.

³²Disney's belief that this last minute deal converted the Hard Shells from an original preference for Douglas is doubtful. Disney to Douglas, June 7, 1856, Douglas Papers, University of Chicago.

for the Hards. Regretting the inclusion of John Van Buren's resolution in 1855, Seymour pointed to the January, 1856 pronouncements as representing the true position of his faction. Beardsley disparaged his rivals' latest position on Nebraska. He charged that it had been adopted at the eleventh hour with one object in mind--to deceive the national convention. It hid the free soil inclinations of the Softs, which, according to Beardsley, had been so apparent in their last campaign.³³

The great importance accorded to these charges and counter charges revealed the sectional strains tearing the national party apart. The slavery question had thrust all traditional Democratic issues aside. An acceptable stand on slavery had become the sine qua non of party regularity. Deviation from the official party platform could deny a state organization its representation at the national convention. Democrats throughout the North resented the inquisitorial atmosphere at Cincinnati. Knowing the attitudes of New York's Radical Democrats, Secretary of State Marcy had sought to prevent a party test on Nebraska, but he had failed.³⁴ Former Barnburners had previously resented proceedings in which Southern

³³New York Tribune, June 5, 1856.

³⁴See above, pp. 47-48.

Democrats assumed the role of prosecutor, judge, and jury. Many now resolved never to go through this ordeal again. After the Cincinnati convention, large numbers of Barn-³⁵burners joined the Republican party.

Unable to agree, the credentials committee presented a majority and a minority report. The former recognized the Softs as the regular party and granted them 20 of New York's 35 votes, a distribution justified by the Softs' superior voting strength.³⁶ The minority report--presented by Senator James Bayard of Delaware, a secret Buchanan supporter--³⁷ favored a more equal distribution, 18 votes for the Softs and 17 for the Hards. Bayard adopted Beardsley's argument that the Soft Shells' success had been achieved with a platform tinged with free soilism. Since this error had been corrected, Bayard would neither debar the Softs from the convention nor reward them by according them status as the regular party and a greater portion

³⁵See below, p. 324ff.

³⁶Official Proceedings of the National Democratic Convention, Held in Cincinnati, June 2-6, 1856 (Cincinnati, Enquirer Company Steam Printing Establishment, 1856), pp. 34-37. The Albany Atlas and Argus printed the minority and majority reports of the credentials committee. These do not appear in the official proceedings. See the Atlas and Argus, June 12, 13, 1856.

³⁷See Roy F. Nichols, The Disruption of American Democracy (New York, 1967), pp. 18-32.

38

of New York's vote.

Daniel Sickles quickly became bored by the speeches on the convention floor and decided to seek refreshment. He also found time to write a letter to Buchanan which confidently predicted the envoy's nomination. Sickles was suddenly interrupted by George W. Butler, who brought the alarming news that a majority of the credentials committee had decided to recognize the Softs. Sickles abruptly closed his note, finished his drink, and sprang into action: "We shall vote this down in the convention & to this I must give immediate attention...."³⁹

The vote on the two reports represented a test of strength between the partisans of the major contestants. Douglas' and Pierce's followers supported the Softs, and Buchanan's delegates backed the Hards. The result was a narrow victory for the latter; the balloting stood 137 to 123.⁴⁰ Anson Herrick, the editor of the New York Atlas,

³⁸Albany Atlas and Argus, June 12, 13, 1856.

³⁹Sickles to Buchanan, June 4, 1856, Buchanan Papers, HSPa.

⁴⁰The vote of the various state delegations on this issue is printed in the Official Proceedings, p. 36. The New York Tribune's correspondent observed that the rejection of the majority report was the first important demonstration of Buchanan's power in the convention. By neutralizing the vote of New York and alarming the officeholders who supported Pierce, it paved the way for the Pennsylvanian's nomination on the next day. New York Tribune, June 10, 1856.

wrote Buchanan that "the disposition of the 'New York difficulty' was a master stroke in political strategy and an achievement that entitles somebody to an exalted diplomatic position."⁴¹

With the New York question settled, the convention could proceed with the selection of its standard-bearer. The Hards fulfilled their bargain to vote for Buchanan, and the Softs reluctantly went for Pierce.⁴² When the first voting session ended, Buchanan was the front runner but still lacked the two-thirds majority necessary to nominate. That evening candles burned late in smoke filled rooms, and an agreement emerged to stop Buchanan. Pierce's adherents promised to support Douglas until either the Senator or a dark horse received the nomination.⁴³

When the convention reassembled for the fifteenth ballot, everything went according to plan. New Hampshire withdrew Pierce's name and all who had supported him went for Douglas, New York Soft Shells among them. The decisive moment had now arrived. Douglas' floor manager abruptly

⁴¹Anson Herrick to Buchanan, June 8, 1856, Buchanan Papers, HSPa.

⁴²Official Proceedings, pp. 39-42; Sickles to Buchanan, June 5, 1856, Buchanan Papers, HSPa.

⁴³Nichols, Disruption of American Democracy, p. 31.

withdrew the Senator's name. He read a letter from Douglas declaring his unwillingness to create bitterness among Democrats; the triumph of his principles meant much more to him than personal elevation. Although this announcement surprised everyone, its significance was clear: it assured Buchanan's nomination. When order was restored and the seventeenth ballot called, New York Softs, who, in common with many other delegates felt betrayed by the swift capitulation of Douglas, had no other choice than join the stampede toward the Pennsylvanian. Before adjourning, the convention enjoined the Hards and the Softs to settle their differences and establish one organization. This they promised to do.⁴⁴

The Hard Shells were jubilant over the result. Having long been denied all Federal patronage and snubbed by Southern Democrats, they had suddenly found a powerful champion.⁴⁵ Samuel Beardsley wrote to Buchanan that

⁴⁴Official Proceedings, pp. 45-49, 60-61.

⁴⁵Many politicians concurred in the belief that if the Hard Shells were excluded from Cincinnati, they would then have gone over completely to the Know-Nothings. James R. Thompson worried about a large influx of Adamantines. He felt that they would endanger Silver Gray control of the party. Thompson to Ullman, April 23, 1856, Ullman Papers, NYHS. Another nativist, however, looked forward to a large Hard Shell contingent. N. K. Hall to Millard Fillmore, March 23, 1856, Fillmore Papers, SUNY (Oswego). Republicans feared that an alliance between the Hards and the Know-Nothings would be too strong to overcome. E. Pershine Smith to Henry C. Carey, February 9, 1856, Smith Papers, HSPa. Daniel Sickles warned Buchanan that Dickinson sought a place on the American ticket, either for Pres-

he was "exceedingly gratified." Dickinson expressed his appreciation to "the Pennsylvania delegation and the 'Buchanan men' generally in taking our New York friends by the hand & carrying them through against the packed instruments of a most perfidious administration."⁴⁶

Humiliation and envy were the lot of the Soft Shells as they returned to New York. Winding up his duties in Cincinnati, the New York Tribune's correspondent made this observation:

Of all who retire from the scene of this week's strifes, none do so more cheapened, humiliated and disgraced than the New-York Softs, who came with high hope, and leave beaten at every point, with revenge even unsatiated, and nothing remaining for them but to crawl under the wings of the Hards, and fight the battles of Pro-Slavery Democracy under leadership which they have heretofore contemned. ⁴⁷

John Pruyn of Albany--a prominent landowner and railroad capitalist, who had been a delegate to the convention--felt that his faction had been treated with gross injustice. Noting that the Softs' position on the slavery issue had been acceptable to the delegations of North and South

ident or Vice-President, in case his faction was denied recognition by the national convention. Sickles to Buchanan, December 25, 1855, Buchanan Papers, HSPa.

⁴⁶ Samuel Beardsley to Buchanan, June 15, 1856, D. S. Dickinson to Buchanan, June 10, 1856. For other congratulatory letters from Hard Shells to Buchanan, see Henry C. Murphy to Buchanan, June 10, 1856, N. Niles to Buchanan, June 6, 1856, Buchanan Papers, HSPa.

⁴⁷ New York Tribune, June 11, 1856.

Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi, who had supported the majority report of the credentials committee, Pruyn believed that penalizing the Softs for alleged free soilism was both insulting and absurd.⁴⁸

Yet, most Soft Shell leaders did not allow this defeat to weaken their fidelity to the national organization. Pruyn decided to swallow his pride and support Buchanan⁴⁹ rather than cut his ties with the Democratic party. Horatio Seymour, although "intensely mortified with the position of New York," promised to go into the contest with vigor.⁵⁰ The anger of the editors of the Albany

⁴⁸Entry in the Journal of John Van Schaik Lansing Pruyn, June 6, 1856, Journal No. 1, NYSL. Pruyn believed that both the Hards and the Softs had been treated in an insulting manner:

"Had it not been for the wish to procure a new organization, and settle our troubles at home, it would have been better for both delegations to have left early in the week--the way New York was treated, was not at all complimentary to our state--several delegates on both sides agreed with me in this opinion."

Ibid. After the decision on the credential committee's reports, the convention denied a request to admit to the floor superfluous delegates from New York, even though they would possess no vote. See the Official Proceedings, p. 38.

⁴⁹Pruyn to Buchanan, June 12, 1856, Buchanan Papers, HSPa.

⁵⁰Seymour to Buchanan, June 6, 1856. See also John A. Dix to Buchanan, June 13, 1856, Buchanan Papers, HSPa.

Argus briefly gained control over their discretion, and they printed a bitter article against partisans of Buchanan, singling out James W. Bayard of Delaware for special abuse. The next day, party discipline prevailed; the Argus⁵¹ eulogized the Buchanan-Breckinridge ticket.

The Softs carefully scrutinized Buchanan's actions and public statements to learn his attitude toward them. Leaders of the humiliated faction solicited the nominee's promise that he would not hold their convention preference against them. This assurance was essential, they claimed, to bring forth the exertions necessary to carry the state. John Van Buren ventured this bit of advice:

Pray be very careful what you say or do in or about this State. With the simple exception of using your influence (if necessary) to compel a single organization & a cordial union, the less you see or correspond with our politicians the better you will be off. Not but that they are as honest, & intelligent as other men, but they are at this moment very jealous of each other, & of course, of you. 52

The road toward reunion proved to be a difficult one; mutual suspicion impeded progress at every step. Only the twofold fear of Buchanan's anger and of losing the state beyond redemption forced an alliance. An agreement was reached to hold a joint convention on July 30,

⁵¹Albany Argus, June 6, 7, 1856.

⁵²John Van Buren to Buchanan, June 10, 1856. Henry S. Randall, a former New York Secretary of State, offered similar counsel. Randall to Buchanan, June 10, 1856, Buchanan Papers, HSPa.

1856 for the purpose of selecting presidential electors and a state ticket. Several representatives of each faction coveted the gubernatorial nomination. Amasa J. Parker, a judge on the Court of Appeals, received the honor, mainly because he had stood aloof from the Hard-Soft feud and neither faction could take umbrage at his selection. A new Democratic State Committee emerged with equal representation accorded to the former opponents.⁵³

Thus, an uneasy truce was established. Heretofore, New York Democrats had never been particularly alarmed when internal feuds enabled their political opponents to carry the state. Fairly certain of patching up differences when participating in a united campaign, they had always been confident of easily regaining control. In 1856, however, they embarked upon the campaign without the former optimism. Now that their fratricidal struggle had ended, they were appalled to discover the growing strength of the Republican party.

Factionalism among New York Democrats added to the strain upon the entire Democratic party. The Hard-Soft split threatened to deprive the Democratic presidential nominee of the Empire State's crucial electoral vote. Persistent accusations of disloyalty from both the Hards and Softs weakened confidence in the New York branch of the party. By taking their quarrel to the Cincinnati convention, New York's feuding politicians called atten-

tion to the overwhelming sectional tensions within the party. The hearings of the credentials committee showed that all traditional guide lines for party membership had lapsed and that a state party's position on the slavery issue had become the essential condition for determining its regularity. Southern Democrats demanded rigid conformity on a platform acceptable to themselves; any deviation would result in immediate expulsion. These proceedings alienated ex-Barnburners who had repeatedly declared opposition to tests of loyalty over slavery. Instead of promoting peace among New York's divided politicians, the outcome of the national convention created further bitterness. The Hards could not resist scheming against their old foes, and the Softs were deeply suspicious of every action taken by Buchanan. Reconciliation was very difficult to obtain under such circumstances. When an agreement was finally worked out, Democratic leaders were dismayed to learn that while they bickered, thousands had abandoned the party and joined the Republicans.

CHAPTER 13

The Decline of Know-Nothingism

In 1856, the Know-Nothings had plans to capture the Presidency. And, for a moment, this ambition did not seem unrealistic. An impressive list of electoral triumphs, including one in the Empire State, encouraged the nativists. Yet, the events of previous years had revealed that they were not immune from the strains breaking up the other national parties. In 1854, the New York Order had failed to appreciate the strength of temperance sentiment and suffered the consequences. In 1855, the re-election of Seward in New York, the triumph of Governor Wise in Virginia, and the split in the Grand Council at Philadelphia had demonstrated the difficulty of subordinating sectional differences over slavery. Divisions in the party would have to be overcome if the party were to succeed further.

The opening session of the Thirty-Fourth Congress in December, 1855 presented nativists with an opportunity to reconcile their differences. Many unknown Congressmen from two new parties--the Republican and the American--arrived in Washington during the early winter. They had been elected as a result of the revolution in the nation's party politics. A formidable number of Representatives

from both North and South had been elected with the Order's support. Although not a majority, the Know-Nothings held the balance of power between the Democrats and the Republicans. If they could cooperate, they had an excellent chance of electing a Speaker favorable to their interests.¹

Problems appeared even before the Congress convened. Southern Know-Nothings circulated a letter announcing an intention to vote for no candidate for Speaker unless he declared the finality of existing laws on slavery. Vespasian Ellis, the editor of the American Organ, feared that this attempt to dictate the terms of cooperation would destroy the party; it would drive off conservatives and others of the North. He urged Daniel Ullman to use his influence and to enlist Erastus Brooks, the co-owner of the New York Express, against the plan.²

¹The exact number of Know-Nothing Congressmen is difficult to determine. Various estimates of the size of the contingent exist. Allan Nevins assesses the number to be as low as 43, while Thomas Curran places the figure at approximately 90. Nevins, Ordeal of the Union, Vol. II, p. 414; Curran, "Know-Nothings of New York," p. 218. Part of the difficulty arises from the fact that several Representatives were elected under the Whig party name but were secretly endorsed by the Order. The Know-Nothing Almanac, for example, claimed 19 of New York's 33 Congressmen; however, all of these had run as Whigs. Know-Nothing Almanac, 1855, p. 64. Confusion is compounded when it is remembered that many Northern Representatives were professed anti-Nebraskaites as well as recipients of nativist aid.

²Vespasian Ellis to Ullman, November 11, 1855, Ullman Papers, NYHS. The circular of the Southern Know-Nothings is also contained in the Ullman Papers.

When the House convened, a deadlock developed over the Speakership. The Democratic minority, refusing to yield to the anti-Nebraska majority, selected William A. Richardson of Illinois, the floor manager of the Nebraska bill, as its candidate. The Republicans concentrated their strength on Nathaniel P. Banks, a former Know-Nothing from Massachusetts. The Americans fell victim to the worst apprehensions of nationalists within the party. Unable to support a single candidate, they split along sectional lines. Northern nativists voted for Henry M. Fuller of Pennsylvania and Southerners supported Humphrey Marshall of Kentucky. For two months the impasse continued.³

The letters of Solomon G. Haven--the law partner and political confidant of Millard Fillmore, who represented the city of Buffalo in Congress--illustrated the plight of nationalists attempting to relieve the pressures pulling the Know-Nothing party apart. Haven tried "to stand upon purely conservative middle ground making the American question subordinate to no other and fighting extreme men north and south." However, he found that sectional feeling controlled even Know-Nothings. The Buffalo Congressman admitted that in his role as a would-be arbiter, he was

³ See Nevins, Ordeal of the Union, Vol. II, pp. 412-416.

"very nearly crushed out."⁴ New York's House contingent proved especially vulnerable to the polarizing process. Haven complained that Benjamin Pringle, Thomas T. Flagler, Russell Sage, Guy Petton, Abram Wakeman, and James Stranahan--all of whom had been elected with Know-Nothing aid--had sunk "every other consideration in the Nebraska issue or folly and thereby became as essentially allied to Republicanism as if they were its born heirs and sole representatives."⁵

After months of fruitless balloting, the House agreed to change its rules and permit the Speaker to be elected by a plurality. All minor contenders were eliminated so that only two sectional candidates remained. Southern Know-Nothings voted for the Democratic choice--William Aiken, a wealthy South Carolinian slaveholder; Northern members of the Order supported Banks. The final vote stood: Banks, 103; Aiken, 100.⁶

⁴Solomon G. Haven to Ullman, December 16, 1855, Ullman Papers, NYHS.

⁵Haven to Ullman, December 13, 1855, Ullman Papers, NYHS. Even the staunch nativist Francis S. Edwards, the newly elected Congressman from Chautauqua and Cattaraugus counties, could not resist the pressure to vote for Banks. F. S. Edwards to Greeley, June 13, 1856, Greeley Papers, NYPL.

⁶Nevins, Ordeal of the Union, Vol. II, p. 415. A small number of New York Know-Nothings abstained from voting on the final ballot. They included William W. Valk (Queens), Solomon G. Haven (Buffalo), and Francis S. Edwards (Chautauqua and Cattaraugus). Edwards claimed that his absence was due to his wife's illness. F. S. Edwards to Greeley, June 13, 1856, Greeley Papers, NYPL.

Having worked hard to secure Banks' election, the Republicans were elated over the result. Horace Greeley, who had personally covered the contest at Washington for the New York Tribune, seized the moment of triumph to draw this conclusion: "Americanism" as a watchword of party was a sham, "because events are constantly showing that the pretense of making this the pivot of political action ~~is~~ insincere. A Congress might be elected on the 'American' platform; but it could not sit a month without being resolved into its original elements." Nothing could have demonstrated the truth of his analysis with greater impact, Greeley stated, than the final vote for Speaker. "Can more be needed to show that the question of slavery⁷ in the territories reigns paramount.....," he asked.

The Know-Nothings had another opportunity to resolve their differences when the National Grand Council, composed of delegates from the state councils, met at Philadelphia on February 18, 1856, only four days before the scheduled assembly of the presidential nominating convention. The problem was to seek a substitute for Article XII.

The sessions of the National Council were acrimonious; Northern representatives insisted that Article XII be omitted and Southerners demanded its retention. After

⁷New York Tribune, February 13, 1856.

extremists had made their views known, the Council debated some of the complicated resolutions which had been drawn up as compromises. A series of pronouncements written by Vespasian Ellis, a compromise previously adopted in the District of Columbia, was approved. However, several delegates remarked that the language was so unclear that⁸ the people would be unable to decipher it.

The great efforts expended formulating platforms were a noteworthy consequence of the Know-Nothings' problems. Many hoped that a properly worded resolution would dispel the stresses destroying the party. But these attempts backfired; they only called attention to fundamental disagreements. Haven perceived that this was the case. He complained about the divisive effect of the passion for writing resolutions. "People seem absolutely crazy on that subject," he observed. "No man seems easy unless⁹ he has a platform in his pocket."

The main feature of the platform adopted by the Grand Council resorted to an expedient adopted by the Soft Shells in 1854:¹⁰ it denounced the repeal of the Missouri

⁸Vespasian Ellis to Fillmore, July 31, 1856, Fillmore Papers, SUNY (Oswego); Ellis to Ullman, March 2, 1856, Ullman Papers, NYHS.

⁹Haven to Ullman, December 13, 1855, Ullman Papers, NYHS.

¹⁰See above, pp. 108-111.

Compromise but approved the principle of popular sovereignty. Interference with the "domestic and social affairs" of the territories was declared outside the power of Congress. One plank called for the perpetuation of the Union and another for "unqualified recognition and maintenance of the reserved rights of the several states... [and the] non-interference by Congress with questions appertaining solely to the individual states...." The word slavery¹¹ did not appear in the platform.

This "compromise" satisfied no one, but Northern delegates were particularly distressed. Many critics pointed out that the new creed did not make any substantive departure from Article XII.¹² A few days later at the presidential nominating convention, a group of free state delegates gave vent to their discontent. They introduced a motion requiring that the standard-bearer of the party be "in favor of interdicting the introduction of slavery north of 36° 30'." When this move was defeated by the vote of 141 to 60, 42 representatives from Connecticut, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Ohio, Indiana, New Hampshire, Iowa, and Pennsylvania bolted. 185 delegates,

¹¹New York Times, February 20, 21, 1856; Nevins, Ordeal of the Union, Vol. II, pp. 466-467; Curran, "Know-Nothings of New York," pp. 221-222.

¹²See, for example, the New York Tribune, February 23, 1856.

including the entire New York contingent, stayed in their seats. Following this disruption, the remaining delegates passed the platform agreed upon by the National Grand Council.¹³

Before proceeding with the outcome of the Philadelphia nominating convention, it is necessary to consider the struggle waged in New York for control of that state's delegation. The feud between the Daniel Ullman and the James Barker factions, which had racked the party and reduced its effectiveness,¹⁴ grew more embittered with the prospect of a national campaign and the likelihood that a New Yorker would be the presidential nominee. The Ullman clique backed ex-President Millard Fillmore for a second term. Barker and his allies supported George Law, a wealthy owner of a steamship company based in New York City. Formerly a Democrat, Law had joined the Know-Nothings because the new organization appeared to offer a more fertile field for his ambition.

Law spent money liberally to secure his objective. He purchased the services of Sam Hammond, the editor of

¹³New York Times, February 26, 1856.

¹⁴See above, p. 186ff.

the Albany State Register, the unofficial party organ.¹⁵
 Stephen Sammons, a rising politician who sided with Fillmore, reported rumors that the shipping magnate had given \$13,000.00 to secure Hammond's aid,¹⁶ but he could not believe the sum had been so large. Ullman even feared that the American Organ at Washington would fall under Law's control;¹⁷ Vespasian Ellis assured him it would not. Since each Congressional district would send a representative to the Philadelphia nominating convention, the crucial struggle went on within the local lodges. Sammons warned "that unless steps are immediately taken and men selected who are unpurchasable every where a majority of the delegates will be lost. The Law men are constantly maturing their plans and will have (now have) men all over the State."¹⁸
 Although confident of his law partner's nomination, Haven worried about the large amounts of money spent by Law's

¹⁵Ullman and his friends had always distrusted Hammond, and now their apprehensions were confirmed. The editor had failed to support Ullman's candidacy in 1854. See Francis S. Edwards to Ullman, December 10, 1854, L. S. Parsons to Ullman, November 29, 1854, S. Sammons to Ullman, December 11, 1854, Sam Hammond to Ullman, April 29, 1855, Solomon G. Haven to Ullman, December 13, 1855, Ullman Papers, NYHS.

¹⁶S. Sammons to Ullman, December 7, 11, 1855, Ullman Papers, NYHS.

¹⁷Ellis to Ullman, October 27, 1855, Ullman Papers, NYHS.

¹⁸S. Sammons to Ullman, November 26, 1855, Ullman Papers, NYHS.

adherents and their reputed success in corrupting delegates.¹⁹

Despite Law's efforts, when the national convention assembled at Philadelphia, a majority of the delegates favored Fillmore. The ex-President received strong support from Southern Unionists, who remembered his services during the Compromise of 1850 and his signing of the Fugitive Slave Act.²⁰ Although the first ballot revealed that the former President would become the standard-bearer, the vote from New York was disappointing: 20 of the state's 35 delegates went for Law. On the second roll call, which decided the nomination, the victor picked up only four more votes from the Empire State.²¹ The Know-Nothings, having selected a man with Northern Whig antecedents, sought to balance the ticket by choosing a Southerner with a Democratic past. The Vice-Presidential position went to Andrew Jackson Donelson of Tennessee.²²

Failing to capture the nomination for their favorite, the partisans of George Law walked out of the meeting

¹⁹Haven to Fillmore, January 20, 1856, Fillmore Papers, SUNY (Oswego).

²⁰Ellis to Ullman, February 17, 1856, Ullman Papers, NYHS.

²¹New York Times, February 26, 1856.

²²Ellis to Ullman, February 17, 1856, Ullman Papers, NYHS.

hall and joined the North American delegates who had departed during the platform fight. Law had previously endorsed Article XII, but now he condemned the Fillmore convention for its pro-slavery bias. The bolters issued an address calling for restoration of the Missouri Compromise, and some professed their intention to enter Republican ranks without delay. However, the majority, desiring to exert as much political leverage as possible, agreed to meet again in early June, just prior to the Republican national convention, scheduled for June 17.²³

Although slavery was the chief source of dissension, the Know-Nothings were confronted with another severe problem. They were under considerable pressure to dilute the principal objective of the party--the establishment of restraints upon the Catholic and foreign born population. These efforts threatened to turn the "American" organization into a party without a program.

Northern Know-Nothings clamored for the admission into the party of Protestant citizens from Europe, who they argued were necessary for success at the polls; Southern Americans, especially in Louisiana, importuned for the entry of Catholics born in the United States. In New York, the Order had widened its appeal to include Protestants born abroad. It also tried to make a distinction

²³New York Times, February 26, 1856.

between religious and political Catholicism; it professed to oppose only the latter.²⁴ Agitation for change reached its climax during the National Grand Council of 1856, and despite strong resistance, both foreign born Protestants and native born Catholics were accorded the privilege of membership. Henceforth, only the Irish-Catholic immigrant remained a target for the Know-Nothings. Ironically, Silver Grays, who had seized upon "Americanism" to divert attention from the slavery controversy, found themselves in opposition to the one ethnic group in agreement with their desire to quiet sectionalist discord.

After his retirement from the Presidency, Millard Fillmore went into retirement, but his ambition to return to the White House remained strong. He toured the country in 1854, ostensibly on a pleasure trip, but really to assess his strength. Throughout his travels, he maintained an unbroken silence on the Nebraska question. Although fully aware of the activities of his fellow Silver Grays, who were seeking to control the Know-Nothing organization, he made no public statement either praising or condemning the nativist fever sweeping the country. Even many of his old friends were uncertain of his views. James R. Thompson, whom Fillmore had appointed as Collector of the Port of Rochester, regretted that the former President had not

²⁴See, for example, the New York Express, November 13, 1855.

destroyed Seward's power when he had had the opportunity. Since he had failed to seize his chance, Thompson continued, "it was a 'god send' for us that this new movement [Know-Nothingism] came up and he cannot blame his friends if they make the most of it."²⁵

Fillmore waited to see if the new nativist party could mobilize sufficient strength before disclosing his hand. The election of 1854, with its important Know-Nothing victories, settled the question. Fillmore was now ready to place himself into a position of availability. In a letter obviously intended for publication, the former President spelled out his views. He declared that he had "for a long time looked with dread and apprehension at the corrupting influence which the contest for the foreign vote is exciting upon our elections." He decried the fact that "the rights of native-born citizens are voted away by those who blindly follow their mercenary and selfish leaders." Fillmore concluded by alerting men to Washington's²⁶ warning to beware of foreign influences. This admonition

²⁵Robert J. Rayback, Millard Fillmore: Biography of a President (Buffalo, 1959), pp. 390-391; James R. Thompson to Ullman, March 15, 1855, Ullman Papers, NYHS.

²⁶Fillmore to Isaac Newton, January 3, 1855, printed in Frank Severance, ed., Millard Fillmore Papers, Vol. II (Buffalo, 1907), pp. 347-349. Newton was a leader of Philadelphia's Native American Party.

had not been chosen without design; the reputed statement of Washington at Valley Forge--"Place none but Americans on guard tonight"--had become the slogan of the Know-Nothings.

Having indicated his willingness to be a candidate, Fillmore did not wait at home for expected overtures. Heeding the bitter experience of others--the memory of Henry Clay's disastrous letter on the annexation of Texas in 1844 had not been forgotten--Fillmore set sail for Europe in March of 1855 to place the ocean between himself and letters on the slavery issue. He turned over the management of his interests to his friend Solomon G. Haven.

Contending against the forces disrupting the American party was not an easy task. Persistent rumors that Fillmore was not a member of the Order and that he would decline the nomination handicapped the Know-Nothing campaign. Only the letter to Isaac Newton could be used to reassure worried nativists.²⁷ Haven believed that a formal letter of acceptance would restore confidence in the candidate and stimulate greater efforts for his election. Urging that this letter be carefully composed, he outlined those points which he wanted Fillmore to emphasize. First, the former President must woo Protestant feeling: "You must come out square American & a little smack protestant

²⁷Haven to Fillmore, May 11, 25, 1856, Fillmore Papers, SUNY (Oswego).

....Your strength is with the 'boys.' They have the only live politics of the day, and you must satisfy them first 2d & last."²⁸ Although he advised Fillmore not to alter any of his conservative Whig doctrines, one more principle must be supported--"and that is as a general rule 'Americans shall rule America'...."²⁹ Haven described the ideal tone of the letter as "a little Protestant Plymouth Rock in its cast...."³⁰

Turning to the slavery dilemma, Haven revealed that he still adhered to the Silver Gray strategy of playing down this issue. He urged Fillmore to make the "Slavery question altogether subordinate...." but treat all parties to that problem fairly. He must "acknowledge no extreme men" and promise to "stand in the center" and serve "as an absolute check & control upon all extremes."³¹ The point should be made, urged Haven, that "you would be guilty of rank treason to your own history and to your past administration if you refused to stand forward on

²⁸Haven to Fillmore, May 25, 1856, Fillmore Papers, SUNY (Oswego).

²⁹Haven to Fillmore, April 24, 1856, Fillmore Papers, SUNY (Oswego).

³⁰Haven to Fillmore, May 11, 1856, Fillmore Papers, SUNY (Oswego).

³¹Ibid.

any respectable call to vindicate national and moderate men and measures which are identically those which you staked your all upon in 1850."³²

Finally, Fillmore must try to dispel the aura of "Fogyism" surrounding his candidacy by making a special appeal for "Young America" to join him in saving the Union. Haven predicted that a letter encompassing these ideas "would send a thrill through the country, that democracy & republicanism combined could not resist."³³

With the campaign still going badly, Fillmore's partisans asked him to leave Europe and return home so that he could infuse life into the faltering Know-Nothings. Haven believed that his friend's arrival would set things in motion and unlock the pockets of the tightfisted. Already by May of 1856, the coffers of the party were empty and efforts to raise funds met with little success.³⁴

Fillmore, arriving in New York City on June 22, 1856, followed the same route that Buchanan had traveled two months before. Elaborate arrangements for a "spontan-

³²Haven to Fillmore, April 24, 1856, Fillmore Papers, SUNY (Oswego).

³³Haven to Fillmore, May 11, 1856, Fillmore Papers, SUNY (Oswego).

³⁴Haven to Fillmore, May 11, 25, 1856, Fillmore Papers, SUNY (Oswego).

eous" show of enthusiasm insured a warm welcome.³⁵ Mayor Fernando Wood, who liked to keep all of his alternatives open, spread out the red carpet for the former President.³⁶

Arrival from abroad was a favorite device of presidential candidates; it afforded them the opportunity for expounding their views without transgressing the nineteenth century rule of decorum which forbade campaigning. Fillmore took full advantage of the opportunity, not only in New York City but throughout the state. Proceeding at a leisurely pace from city to city along the Erie Canal, en-route to his Buffalo home, he allowed himself to be "lured" into making brief speeches to the local citizenry. In these addresses, he set forth his political creed.

Fillmore's oration at Albany on June 26, 1856, may serve as a model of the type of speech he repeated on other occasions. Here, as elsewhere, one theme prevailed: the Union was in danger from unbridled sectional agitation over slavery and only he could save it. He began by alluding to the troubled times surrounding the Compromise of 1850, when after the death of Zachary Taylor, he had assumed the Presidency. He then felt it his duty "to rise

³⁵Haven to Fillmore, May 11, 1856, Fillmore Papers, SUNY (Oswego).

³⁶Fernando Wood to Fillmore, June 21, 1856, Fillmore Papers, SUNY (Oswego).

above sectional prejudice, and look to the welfare of the whole nation...to overcome long cherished prejudices, and disregard party claims." Thanks to the efforts of patriotic, unselfish men from the Democratic and the Whig parties, who rallied around his Administration in the crisis, peace and harmony were restored to a distracted country. But "Where are we now?," asked the former President, rhetorically. "Threatened at home with civil war....," he answered. He laid the blame for this ruinous deterioration upon Pierce and the Democrats, who had "recklessly and wantonly" reopened the slavery issue. Turning to the Republicans, he denounced them as a purely Northern party. Should they succeed in November, the South would withdraw from the Union, and Fillmore intimated his belief that secession would almost be justified.³⁷

It should be observed that neither the word "Americanism" nor the word "Protestanism" appeared in Fillmore's address at Albany. When he did mention "Americanism," it was in the diluted form recently approved at the National Grand Council. He censured only religious groups organized for political purposes. He would not restrict immigration; on the contrary, he would "open wide the gates and invite the oppressed of every land to our happy country...."

³⁷ Fillmore's speech at Albany and other orations at different cities along his route are conveniently printed in Severance, Fillmore Papers, Vol. II, pp. 18-33.

The former President permitted himself only one concession to nativist feeling: he stated his belief that as a general rule, "Americans should govern America."³⁸

These speeches indicated that Fillmore realized that the strategy of Haven and other Silver Grays needed modification. The candidate downgraded the appeal to prejudice because events had shown that this emotion could not hold Northern and Southern conservatives together. He also abandoned attempts to ignore the slavery issue; he perceived that the strains within his party could not be relieved by refusing to recognize their existence. The former President retained only one feature of the Silver Gray plan: he tried to subordinate differences over slavery--but this time to the overriding goal of maintaining the Union. He would admit that grave problems existed, yet he would call upon the patriotism of the people, both North and South, to overcome them. Under Fillmore's aegis, the Know-Nothings' use of the term "Americanism" went through a subtle but significant mutation--it came to mean "Unionism" rather than anti-foreignism and anti-Catholicism. As Fillmore stated explicitly on several occasions, Unionism was the paramount issue before the nation. In a letter accepting the endorsement of the Virginia Whig convention, he wrote:

³⁸ Fillmore's remarks concerning "Americanism" were contained in his speech at Newburgh, New York. See Ibid., pp. 16-17.

"Whatever may be our differences on minor subjects, I am sure there is one on which we agree; and that one at the moment is paramount to all others. I allude to the preservation of the Union of these States, and the rescuing of the country from sectional strife."³⁹

The deemphasis on nativism apparent in Fillmore's speeches prevailed during the canvass in New York. This new course elicited complaints from bigots. One Know-Nothing acknowledged his dissatisfaction with the campaigners sent to his area: "I hope you will pardon me for saying that our speakers have said too little about the great American principles."⁴⁰ Opponents of the Order also recognized the change. "Do you notice that Know-Nothingism has utterly sunk all discussion of its leading principle," asked Erasmus Pershine Smith, formerly a Seward Whig and now a Republican. "It has nothing to say against foreigners, and its only allusion to Catholicism is in connection with the charge against Frémont."⁴¹

It would be an error to assume that all appeals to intolerance were abandoned. They were merely deemphasized

³⁹Fillmore to Windham Robertson Esq., August 6, 1856, printed in Ibid., p. 363.

⁴⁰D. C. Calvin to Ullman, October 13, 1856, Ullman Papers, NYHS.

⁴¹E. Pershine Smith to Henry C. Carey, October 31, 1856, Smith Papers, HSPa.

in formal speeches and newspaper editorials. A powerful undercurrent of bias, especially against Catholics, still remained. This manifested itself, as Erasmus Smith observed, in the charge that John C. Frémont, the Republican Presidential candidate, was a Catholic. Although false, this rumor did considerable damage to the Republican cause.⁴² If they did not actually manufacture this allegation, the Know-Nothings certainly exploited it. Stephen Sammons--who supervised the nativists' campaign in New York--wanted a pamphlet containing the "proofs" of Frémont's Catholicism printed and distributed in mass quantities.⁴³ He directed that letters be written to Methodist, Baptist, and other religious organs "and gotten into these papers by hook or by crook, for love or for money--this would drive the last nail in his [Frémont's] political coffin."⁴⁴ One Know-Nothing sent a manuscript

⁴²For the effect of this accusation on the Republican campaign, see Schuyler Colfax to Francis P. Blair, Sr., July 17, 1856, Blair-Lee Papers, PU; Weed to Edwin D. Morgan, August 9, 1856, Morgan Papers, NYSL; C. J. Albright to James Watson Webb, August 9, 1856, Webb Papers, YU; Edward Dodd to Weed, September 8, 1856, Weed Papers, URL.

⁴³S. Sammons to Fillmore, July 24, 1856, Fillmore Papers, SUNY (Oswego). Several pamphlets were subsequently written. See, for example, "Frémont's Romanism Established: Acknowledged by Archbishop Hughes" (n.p., 1856), NYSL.

⁴⁴S. Sammons to Fillmore, July 25, 1856, Fillmore Papers, SUNY (Oswego).

to Fillmore containing a summary of the testimony presented to the public. Telling the former President to make the best use of it, he observed that such literature "is the battery which proves most effective in thinning his [Frémont's] ranks."⁴⁵

Another overture to religious prejudice was the nomination of Erastus Brooks--"that Prince of newspaper liars," according to one Republican--for governor.⁴⁶ Brooks shared the editorship of the New York Express with his older brother, James. Both men had a long history of Silver Grayism. Grasping the potential of the Know-Nothing movement as a powerful weapon against Seward and Weed, they had given it their entire support. The younger Brooks had provoked a bitter controversy with Archbishop John Hughes. His triumphant re-election to the state Senate from New York City in 1855 testified to his success at baiting the clergyman. His nomination for governor was a patent attempt to exploit anti-Catholic feeling. One Know-Nothing candidly admitted this fact. He wrote that Brook's candidacy "will bring up the Hughes controversy involving the Catholic interference with our state politics, and that will bring us in tens of thousands to our whole

⁴⁵N. Sargent to Fillmore, October 12, 1856, Fillmore Papers, SUNY (Oswego).

⁴⁶A. B. Parmelee to John A. King, October 6, 1856, King Papers, NYHS.

ticket regardless of every other consideration."⁴⁷

Fillmore and his advisers had conceived his remarks in New York to be his final statements during the campaign. They wished to emphasize sectional reconciliation without supplying the details. Printed in pamphlet form, the speeches were distributed throughout the nation. One of the former President's friends praised him for saying "just enough and in the right way."⁴⁸ After congratulating his law partner on his oratory, Haven cautioned him against saying anything else: "I do not think there is anything you can add, that would better things nor do I believe you have left any thing unsaid which you could have said with profit or advantage. As the boy said about the molasses now 'let her run.'" The inevitable flood of requests for opinions on "immaterial matters" should not receive specific answers. "The true way I think now," advised Haven, "is to all such to point them to your past administration, to your messages & public papers & to your late speeches and tell them all you can promise will be to do as your judgement may dictate when the occasion arises, unpledged

⁴⁷A. H. Wells to Fillmore, July 15, 1856, Fillmore Papers, SUNY (Oswego).

⁴⁸Benjamin G. Ferris to Fillmore, July 2, 1856, Fillmore Papers, SUNY (Oswego).

& uncommitted in any way."⁴⁹

As Haven predicted, requests for further details and clarifications piled up on Fillmore's desk. Several correspondents informed the nominee that Democrats in the South construed his remarks at Rochester--in which he condemned the repeal of the Missouri Compromise (but was careful not to place the blame on Southern politicians)--to mean that he favored restoration of the Missouri line; another writer enclosed an article which maintained that Fillmore favored the ending of the slave trade and abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia. Allegedly the candidate's friends, they urged him to refute these charges.⁵⁰ Northerners demanded reassurance from Fillmore that he would oppose the extension of slavery. One Know-Nothing from Cayuga warned him of the absolute necessity for gaining public confidence on this issue:

The means whereby the people may become satisfied that in your accession to power, slavery should not pollute that portion of our common country secured to freedom by the provisions of the Missouri Compromise, is beyond my comprehension--yet, by no means out of your

⁴⁹Haven to Fillmore, July 4, 1856, Fillmore Papers, SUNY (Oswego).

⁵⁰John W. Syme (Petersburg, Virginia) to Fillmore, July 2, 1856, Leonard F. Doyal (Georgia) to Fillmore, July 13, 1856, James Hamilton (Baltimore) to Fillmore, Fillmore Papers, SUNY (Oswego). Fillmore's Rochester speech may be found in Severance, Fillmore Papers, Vol. II, pp. 23-26.

reach...On this point hangs our hope in the great battle before us. ⁵¹

The fact that Fillmore had signed the Fugitive Slave Act furnished the Republicans with a powerful campaign argument. Ephraim Schutt, a nativist from Ithaca, reported that Weed's lieutenants accused the Know-Nothing candidate of pro-slavery leanings and used his approval of the Act to substantiate the charge. This tactic proved successful; there was strong resentment against the measure, Schutt observed, for it "requires us free state men to hound down a poor black man who wants his freedom."⁵² Stephen Sammons searched for some way to counteract this attack. Realizing that Fillmore could not personally address himself to the question, he proposed that a letter be prepared by some prominent person, preferably a judge, who should argue that signing the Act was a constitutional necessity. Sammons believed that such a letter was urgently needed in the rural areas of the state.⁵³

These letters from both North and South illustrated the plight of the American party in the campaign. Caught

⁵¹Blanchard Fosgate to Fillmore, July 5, 1856. For similar requests, see Edgar Smith to Fillmore, October 20, 1856, R. P. Solace to Fillmore, October 20, 1856, Walter Beebe to Fillmore, October 27, 1856, Fillmore Papers, SUNY (Oswego).

⁵²Ephraim Schutt to Fillmore, October 21, 1856, Fillmore Papers, SUNY (Oswego).

⁵³S. Sammons to Fillmore, illegible date (probably August 25, 1856), Fillmore Papers, SUNY (Oswego).

between irreconcilable extremes, it was indeed being "crushed out." Fillmore's strategy of emphasizing Unionism could not alleviate the divisive sectional forces. Under such duress, Know-Nothing strategists found it difficult to hold fast to their original intention of making no clarifications. Even D. O. Kellogg--a trusted adviser of Fillmore, who had originally commended the decision to remain silent--urged his friend to reconsider whether he should not publicly refute "the misapprehension that our opponents are industriously fostering and extending, which seeks to connect you with pro-slavery interests, and slavery extension objects...." Kellogg knew that such a statement would have to be carefully weighed:

You know, much better than I do, whether there is danger of disobliging the conservatives of the south, by further explanations for the north...I am sure that the removal of the misapprehension referred to, would strengthen you in the free states. If it should lead to other misapprehensions in the slave states, in your judgement, then I would not ask for a public answer. 54

Fillmore did defend himself in private. He assured several Northerners of his opposition to the extension of slavery. "All my education, all my sympathies, all my instincts are against it," he exclaimed. 55 To Anna Ella

⁵⁴D. O. Kellogg to Fillmore, July 17, 1856, October 14, 15, 1856, Fillmore Papers, SUNY (Oswego).

⁵⁵Fillmore to Henry Dana Ward, September 2, 1856, copy of letter in Ward's diary (1850-1857), NYPL. Ward, a minister, admitted that he would vote for Frémont. See Ward to Fillmore, September 3, 1856, Fillmore Papers, SUNY (Oswego).

56

Carroll, the author of several nativist tracts, he admitted that he favored restoration of the Missouri Compromise. "Were it possible, it would annihilate black Republicanism at a blow, and the Hydra-headed monster of disunion would be crushed...." Yet, he recognized the futility of agitating the question, for the Senate would never give its consent to repeal. Confessing that he saw "no light leading from this dark and bewildering cave, but that which points to Kansas as a state," he promised, if elected, to repeal its obnoxious laws and make sure that only residents participated in framing its constitution; he did not care whether it became a slave or a free state, so long as the will of the people prevailed. Fillmore yielded to self pity and lamented the uselessness of proclaiming his position: "I am attacked at the South as an abolitionist, as you will see by a pamphlet recently issued from the Union press at Washington, and at the North as a pro-slavery man, as you see by the whole black Republican press."⁵⁷ Discouragement strengthened Fillmore's resolve to resist the pressure exerted upon him, and he

⁵⁶See, for example, Anna Ella Carroll, The Great American Battle; or, the Contest between Christianity and Political Romanism (New York, 1856).

⁵⁷Fillmore to Anna Ella Carroll, September 8, 1856, Carroll Papers, Baltimore Historical Society.

58

refused to issue any further amplification of his views.

Events in Kansas caused a further decline in the prospects of the American party. By the end of March, Seward's and Douglas' rival bills, which proposed antithetical plans for the admission of Kansas as a state, were helping to crystallize two hostile camps in the Congress. At this time, hostilities had not yet broken out in the territory; nevertheless, the situation there had become critical.⁵⁹

Subjected to the pressures of this sectional division over Kansas, many Know-Nothings abandoned commitments to the nativist party; Northern members of the Order joined the Republicans and Southerners, the Democrats. Haven deplored the fact that Congressmen elected from New York had revealed themselves to be turncoats of the same breed that returned Seward to the Senate. He wanted the press to "pitch into them."⁶⁰ By early May, the Know-Nothings had been reduced to a small and ineffectual group. "Everybody who could be coaxed, frightened or driven has been operated against us," lamented

⁵⁸D. O. Kellogg finally approved of this decision. Kellogg to Fillmore, November 18, 1856. See also, Isaac Hazlehurst to Fillmore, October 18, 1856, Fillmore Papers, SUNY (Oswego).

⁵⁹See Nevins, Ordeal of the Union, Vol. II, pp. 424-431.

⁶⁰Haven to Ullman, April 23, 1856, Ullman Papers, NYHS.

Haven. "Our men in Congress have been demoralized & broken up holding no associations whatever."⁶¹

At the end of May, news from Kansas caused another blow to Know-Nothing unity. A sheriff's posse of pro-slavery men entered Lawrence, the stronghold of the free staters, and burned and looted several buildings. Shortly thereafter, in retaliation for the attack on Lawrence, John Brown and his sons brutally murdered five Southern sympathizers. This deed unleashed a full scale guerrilla war in the territory with much loss of life on both sides.⁶² These happenings, which excited the entire nation, accelerated the process of sectional polarization destroying the nativist party.

Nationalists within Know-Nothing ranks tried to restore calm in Kansas. George G. Dunn, an Indiana nativist Congressman, submitted a bill for the restoration of the Missouri Compromise line and the reaffirmation of the Fugitive Slave Law. Dunn sought to forge an alliance between Northern and Southern nativists behind his measure, but he discovered that it was totally unacceptable to

⁶¹Haven to Fillmore, May 11, 1856. Thomas R. Whitney, a New York Congressman who remained loyal to the Know-Nothings, admitted that he was a member of a lonely minority. Whitney to Fillmore, July 21, 1856, Fillmore Papers, SUNY (Oswego).

⁶²See Nevins, Ordeal of the Union, Vol. II, pp. 432, 434-437, 472-480.

the latter.⁶³ The Republicans voted for the Indianan's bill, but many secretly hoped it would fail. Horace Greeley, for example, worried that it would provide a solution for Kansas and thus deprive the Republicans of their most effective campaign issue. Delighted that sectional lines had been established, he wanted Congress to adjourn and leave them that way.⁶⁴

Instead of promoting harmony within the Order, Dunn's efforts underlined irreconcilable differences. Haven discovered this fact to his dismay. He had supported the bill for several reasons. He knew that a negative vote would be difficult to explain to his constituents. But most important, he hoped his stand would aid the Know-Nothing cause throughout the North. The Buffalo Congressman feared, however, that his vote would have bad consequences in the South.⁶⁵ This proved to be the case. A week later, Fillmore learned that Southern Democrats had unleashed a bitter attack against himself. "They [the Southern Democrats] are now in a terrible fever about

⁶³Congressional Globe, 34 Congress, 1 Session, pt. 2, 1815-1817. Haven informed Fillmore that Dunn was his ardent supporter. Haven to Fillmore, July 29, 1856, Fillmore Papers, SUNY (Oswego).

⁶⁴Ibid.; see also Iseley, Horace Greeley, p. 184.

⁶⁵Haven to Fillmore, July 29, 1856, Fillmore Papers, SUNY (Oswego).

my vote on Dunn's bill.....," wrote Haven. "According to men from every where I defeat you effectually every vote I give."⁶⁶ Southern harassment of Haven increased as the session came to a close. He confessed that he never felt his hands so tied: "I could blow those Republicans into a cocked hat in a week if I had no South to deal with, but as it is I am compelled to sit here and hold my peace."⁶⁷

Haven's humiliation in the House reflected Fillmore's dismal prospects in the South. The second split of the party at Philadelphia had deepened the pessimism of Southern nativists to the point of despair.⁶⁸ Their greatest concern centered about rumors of an imminent amalgamation of the North American bolters with the Republicans. This apprehension increased the suspicion that Fillmore could never carry the North and caused him severe damage. The former President became the victim of a crisis of confidence, which continued to grow. Haven described its operation in both sections:

⁶⁶ Haven to Fillmore, August 5, 1856. Vespasian Ellis was also afraid that the Northern Know-Nothings' support for Dunn's bill would ruin the nativists in the South. Ellis to Fillmore, July 31, 1856, Fillmore Papers, SUNY (Oswego).

⁶⁷ Haven to Fillmore, August 25, 1856, Fillmore Papers, SUNY (Oswego).

⁶⁸ See, for example, C. M. Conrad (New Orleans) to Fillmore, April 17, 1856, Fillmore Papers, SUNY (Oswego); Kenneth Rayner to Ullman, June 2, 1856, Ullman Papers, NYHS.

The democracy and republicans...join hands and efforts. The former in making the public believe you can carry nothing at the north so as to get everybody to vote with them south rather than throw their votes away. The latter in making the public believe you can carry nothing south so that no body need throw their votes upon you north. 69

Many conservatives in the South announced a preference for Fillmore but regretfully admitted they would vote for Buchanan. "In this part of the Country, both in Georgia--and Alabama--strong--influential members of the American party--are leaving it in bodies," wrote a politician from Montgomery, Alabama. "Men also would rejoice to see you elected, but they say that in the coming struggle the strength of the opposition to Free-Soilism must not be divided."⁷⁰ Another Southerner reported that he had "frequently heard the wish expressed by your most devoted friends that your name had never been put in nomination because of the impossibility of success--Those who every way prefer you, will feel compelled to vote for Mr. Buchanan."⁷¹

⁶⁹Haven to Fillmore, March 28, 1856, Fillmore Papers, SUNY (Oswego). In a letter to Ullman, Haven remarked that lack of confidence was the most serious problem facing the American party. Haven to Ullman, April 3, 1856, Ullman Papers, NYHS.

⁷⁰Henry W. Hilliard to Fillmore, June 26, 1856, Fillmore Papers, SUNY (Oswego).

⁷¹E. Root (Stewart county, Georgia) to Fillmore, June 26, 1856, Fillmore Papers, SUNY (Oswego).

New York Know-Nothings attempted to shore up the confidence of the South. The hard pressed Southern nationalists were anxious for good news from the Empire State; this was the most effective argument against allegations that Fillmore's chances were hopeless in the North. The former Whig Governor of Kentucky, Robert P. Letcher, entreated Fillmore to have his New York friends write daily to Southerners to assure them of their undoubted ability to carry the state. "If the public should be convinced of that fact," Letcher continued, "you may rely upon it, that your success is almost, if not perfectly sure."⁷² Fillmore's campaign managers met with little success when they tried to beat the Democrats at their own game and sought to persuade the South that the contest at the North would be narrowed down to Fillmore and Frémont.⁷³

The resort area of Saratoga Springs, New York became a prominent electioneering post. Visitors from all over the country, but especially from below the Mason-Dixon line, came to bathe in the mineral waters. According to Stephen Sammons, Southerners vacationing at the spa

⁷²R. P. Letcher to Fillmore, July 12, 1856. Francis Granger promised to assure Letcher that a vigorous effort would secure New York. Francis Granger to Fillmore, August 9, 1856, Fillmore Papers, SUNY (Oswego).

⁷³E. R. Jewett to Haven, July 27, 1856, Sammons to Fillmore, July 18, 1856, Fillmore Papers, SUNY (Oswego).

sent hundreds of letters to friends back home, urging them to stand by the Know-Nothing ticket.⁷⁴

These efforts failed to arrest the loss of Southern Know-Nothings to the Democratic party. The August elections in North Carolina, Kentucky, and Missouri went badly for the nativists.⁷⁵ Good news became increasingly rare at Fillmore headquarters.

The experience of the American party in 1856 vividly illustrated the overwhelming strains on the party system. The Know-Nothings' efforts to surmount differences generated by the slavery issue miscarried again and again. Unable to support a single Congressman for Speaker, Northern and Southern nativists succumbed to sectional pressures and voted for Democratic and Republican candidates. The platform approved by the National Grand Council did not bring harmony; it only created further dissension as Northern delegates bolted and gave indications of joining the Republicans. The desire to secure the votes of foreign born Protestants in the North and native born Catholics in the South undercut the raison d'être of the Know-Nothings.

⁷⁴Sammons to Fillmore, July 18, 1856. Ullman believed that Fillmore's presence at Saratoga would help the campaign throughout the country, and he urged the nominee to take a "holiday" there. Ullman to Fillmore, August 6, 1856, Fillmore Papers, SUNY (Oswego).

⁷⁵Haven to Fillmore, August 15, 1856, Isaiah Fuller to Fillmore, August 15, 1856, Fillmore Papers, SUNY (Oswego).

During the campaign, presidential nominee Fillmore established a new emphasis for his party; he altered the meaning of "Americanism" from anti-foreignism and anti-Catholicism to Unionism. But the numerous requests for amplification of his views revealed that his patriotic appeal could not hold nativists together. The outbreak of guerilla war in Kansas hastened the polarization of Know-Nothing Congressmen into Republican and Democratic camps. The attempt of George Dunn to unite North and South Americans behind a solution for Kansas' problems only demonstrated the gulf between them. Lack of confidence also worked to destroy the nativists' prospects. Many conservatives in both sections preferred Fillmore to any other candidate; nevertheless, they felt compelled to vote for either Buchanan or Frémont, because they believed the Know-Nothings had no chance. The failure of the American organization to act together seemed to confirm the worst fear of nationalists--the forces dividing North and South were too powerful for any political party to overcome.

CHAPTER 14

The Republican Triumph

The New York Republican party became the ultimate beneficiary of the revolution in the state's politics. The stresses destroying the party system had continued to intensify for three years; during this period, thousands had abandoned old partisan loyalties. The fusionists absorbed most of these. In 1855, the Republican party represented an alliance of Free Democrats, Seward Whigs, and temperance men. Barnburners and Soft Democrats, anti-slavery Know-Nothings, and conservative Whigs had participated in relatively small numbers. By 1856, the last three groups also contributed to the new grouping. The formation of a winning coalition was partly due to organizational improvements, but the outbreak of civil war in Kansas and the attack on Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts dramatized the Republican cause and gave it a tremendous boost. Also, after the presidential nominating conventions, neither the Know-Nothings nor the Softs could effectively combat the charge of Southern domination. Republican success rested upon the growing consensus that slavery extension was the foremost threat to the nation and that all other issues must be postponed until this one had been solved.

Republican leaders ascribed defeat in their initial campaign to an inadequate organization,¹ and immediately after the canvass, they attempted to remedy this defect. Primary responsibility for this task fell upon the Chairman of the Republican State Committee, Edwin D. Morgan. A wealthy merchant from New York City and a rising politician, Morgan brought to his job a businesslike efficiency, a capacity for hard work, and a zealot's enthusiasm. This last quality revealed itself early in 1856, when in a letter to Thurlow Weed, Morgan wrote that he was "not disheartened, but firm in the faith of the justice of our cause and of its final triumph."² The Chairman prepared a detailed printed questionnaire, which he sent to every local party leader.³ In this manner, he efficiently allocated the resources at his disposal. Through the exertions of Morgan and his aides, Republicans in New York acquired an organizational framework which permitted them to absorb thousands of new adherents. Republicans throughout the country subsequently recognized Morgan's abilities and appointed him the first Chairman

¹See above, pp. 245-246.

²Edwin D. Morgan to Weed, June 24, 1856, Morgan Letter Copybook, Vol. 4, Morgan Papers, NYSL.

³For a copy of this questionnaire, see the Morgan Papers, August 25, 1856, NYSL.

of the National Republican Committee.⁴

Although the diligence of local Republicans was an important factor in the growth of the party in the state, events outside their control were of much greater importance. The full effects of the Kansas-Nebraska Act became evident when in the spring of 1856 civil war broke out in Kansas. Then more dramatic news filled the newspapers. While writing letters at his desk on the Senate floor, Charles Sumner was assaulted and severely injured by the South Carolinian Congressman Preston Brooks.

These events had the same profound effect on politics in the Empire State that they had throughout the North. They impaired the efforts of straight Whigs, Democrats, and Know-Nothings to hold on to their constituencies. A significant number who had voted for these parties in the past now came over to the Republicans. The rival issues of prohibition, anti-Catholicism, and anti-foreignism fell into the background when compared with the emergency in Kansas and the outrage on the Senate floor. Many New Yorkers had wanted to believe the best about the situation in Kansas. Editorials in conservative papers had aided complacency by dismissing the pos-

⁴Republican leaders had the highest praise for Morgan's direction of the campaign of 1856. See Weed to Morgan, November 2, 1856, and Simeon Draper and others to Morgan, December 27, 1856, Morgan Papers, NYSL.

sibility of armed conflict and accusing the New York Tribune of alarmism.⁵ All at once, the warnings in the Tribune and other Republican journals seemed to have been borne out by facts.

Shocked by the bloodshed in Kansas and the attack on Sumner, some of the staunchest opponents of Republicanism--straight or Old Line Whigs--found themselves wavering. These conservatives joined in the general expressions of indignation. A Sumner protest meeting at the Tabernacle, one of the largest churches in New York City, attracted many well-known straight Whigs.⁶ This gathering revived the hopes of Edwin D. Morgan--who, once confessing that the city was "bad soil for free soil,"⁷ had frequently been discouraged by the failure of his efforts in the metropolis. Believing that the Old Liners were gradually coming around to the Republican point of view, he noted that "the doubtful hesitating men are more excited now--⁸ than those who took took the right ground early." The

⁵See the New York Tribune, December 7, 1855, February 18, 1856, April 29, 1856.

⁶For the proceedings of this meeting, see Ibid., May 31, 1856. A similar gathering was held in Brooklyn. See Ibid., June 2, 1856.

⁷Morgan to John Niles, March 18, 1856, Morgan Papers, NYSL.

⁸Morgan to John Bigelow, June 2, 1856, Morgan Papers, NYSL.

Tabernacle event also encouraged Thurlow Weed. "New York [City] is at last avowed," he declared. "There was a tremendous meeting last night. Light is breaking very rapidly upon our state."⁹

Many Old Line Whigs still felt themselves politically homeless. In 1855, such prominent conservatives as Hamilton Fish, Robert A. West, and Washington Hunt decided to remain with their dissolving party rather than join the Republicans, Know-Nothings, or Democrats.¹⁰ By 1856, this alternative was no longer practical, for it became increasingly apparent that the Whig party was moribund.

Deeply dismayed by a course of events which in his opinion would end in the break up of the Union, New York's junior United States Senator, Hamilton Fish, attempted to rally old Whigs in Congress. When only a handful of men heeded his appeal, however, he concluded that his party was indeed dead.¹¹ Jonathan Nathan, a former Columbia College classmate and close friend of Fish, voiced his

⁹Weed to Dear Governor (probably Seward), May (?) (probably May 31, 1856), Thurlow Weed Miscellaneous Manuscripts, NYHS. Jonathan Nathan, a sympathizer with the straight Whigs, informed Hamilton Fish that Weed had boasted of numerous influential converts to Republicanism. Nathan to Fish, May 26, 1856, Nathan Papers, CU.

¹⁰See above, p. 208ff.

¹¹Washington Hunt to Fish, February 16, 1856. See also S. F. Vinton to Fish, September 27, 1856, Fish Papers, LC.

own and the Senator's despair after they appraised the condition of their party: "I am deep in the blues--I looked for some chance of re-establishing our old party--¹² our glorious old party--now alas gone--gone--gone--"

James A. Hamilton, a son of the former Secretary of the Treasury, also tried to resuscitate the Whig organization. He invited famous Whigs from all over the nation to his home at Dobbs Ferry to discuss what should be done.¹³ Again, the response was disheartening. When the date for the proposed conference arrived, only two others besides Hamilton were present.¹⁴ Letters from absentees brought little cheer. Most respondents agreed that Whigs should not hold a national convention to nominate their own candidates for president and vice-president. Such an assembly would be impractical and dangerous; it would demonstrate the weakness and divisions of the party. Moreover, even if a measure of success could be attained in the North, the chaotic condition of Whiggery in the South would make it impossible to mount an effec-

¹²Nathan to Fish, undated (received by Fish on February 27, 1856), Nathan Papers, CU.

¹³Robert A. West informed Fish of this proposed meeting. West to Fish, December 15, 1855, Fish Papers, LC.

¹⁴Samuel B. Ruggles, a well-known New York City attorney, and a Mr. Chapman from Boston were present. West to Fish, January 13, 1856, Fish Papers, LC.

15
tive campaign.

Once it was established that the Whig party could not be resuscitated, the problem still remained--what were Old Liners to do in the forthcoming campaign? Daniel Dewey Barnard, an aged Silver Gray and bitter opponent of Seward and Weed, offered a solution. He urged Whigs to vote for Fillmore and maintained that it was their patriotic duty to do so: "Our first and highest duty will be to do what in us lies to ensure the defeat of the party of sectionalism, as essentially, and from its very constitution, a party of disunion."¹⁶ After writing a lengthy exposition of his views, which was subsequently printed in the Albany Statesman, Barnard informed Fillmore that he had tried to demonstrate the truth of the ex-Pres-

¹⁵Hamilton reported the result of his efforts to Fish. Hamilton to Fish, February 2, 1856, Fish Papers, LC. J. Prescott Hall, formerly the United States Attorney for the Southern District of New York in 1850, wrote that "the great political body of the nation, which carried General Taylor into power in, 49,--is dead,--and we have no Elisha now, by the touch of whose bones, it could spring into life again." Hall to Hamilton, January 5, 1856. See also Daniel D. Barnard to Hamilton, January 2, 1856, Washington Hunt to Hamilton, January 5, 1856, James A. Hamilton Miscellaneous Manuscripts, NYHS; Edward Everett to Hamilton, December 3, 17, 1855, Edward Everett Miscellaneous Manuscripts, NYPL. Robert A. West and Hamilton Fish also believed a national convention to be impossible. See West to Fish, December 17, 1855, Fish Papers, LC. Washington Hunt recognized that a major problem would be whether a Southern delegation would attend a national convention. Hunt to Fish, December 20, 1855, Fish Papers, LC.

¹⁶Daniel D. Barnard to Hamilton, January 2, 1856, James A. Hamilton Miscellaneous Manuscripts, NYHS.

ident's remarks at Albany--"that nothing is wanting to a party of sectionalism like the Republican party but success, to make it necessarily a party of Disunion. Success is ipso facto Dissolution."¹⁷

Many straight Whigs, although considerably less enthusiastic about Fillmore than Barnard, considered voting for him. Disturbed by the intolerance of the Know-Nothings, they nevertheless looked upon Fillmore as the least objectionable candidate. Washington Hunt acknowledged his poor opinion of Fillmore and his distaste for Know-Nothingism, but he admitted that he might support the nativist nominee on "high considerations of patriotism."¹⁸

James A. Hamilton was also half persuaded; he urged Hamilton Fish to abandon his objections to Fillmore, arguing that it was "the duty of conservative men of all parties to throw off all party obligations and interests; and if you please to choose the least of evils."¹⁹

Robert A. West also considered Fillmore to be the only feasible alternative. His New York Commercial Ad-

¹⁷Barnard to Fillmore, July 26, 1856, Fillmore Papers, SUNY (Oswego). See above, pp. 292-293, for a discussion of Fillmore's Albany speech.

¹⁸Hunt to Fish, January 16, 1856, Fish Papers, LC. Hunt eventually supported Fillmore and ran for Congress as a Know-Nothing. See the New York Commercial Advertiser, November 3, 1856.

¹⁹Hamilton to Fish, March 7, 1856, Fish Papers, LC.

vertiser announced that it would "support him [Fillmore] in spite of his being a member of the Know-Nothing or American order."²⁰ The editor frankly admitted to the

ex-President the reasons for his paper's endorsement: "As a Whig I am quite willing to acknowledge that the American party is the chief agency now existing. It is chief because of its greater numerical strength and because it is an organization, which the Whigs are not."

Enclosing a copy of Fillmore's speech accepting the nomination, West underlined the portion which he deemed most significant: "It [the Know-Nothing party] alone in my opinion, of all the political agencies now existing, is possessed of the power to silence this violent and dis-

astrous agitation...."²¹ The Commercial Advertiser considered backing Buchanan and even commended the Democratic convention for making such a good choice. However, the aggressive tone of the Democratic platform with regard to foreign policy posed an insuperable obstacle to further cooperation.²²

²⁰New York Commercial Advertiser, February 26, 1856.

²¹Robert A. West to Fillmore, June 26, 1856. See also West to Fillmore, June 23, 1856, Fillmore Papers, SUNY (Oswego). Fillmore's acceptance speech is printed in Severance, Fillmore Papers, Vol. II, pp. 358-360.

²²West to Fish, March 22, 1856, Fish Papers, LC; New York Commercial Advertiser, June 6, 1856, November 1, 3, 1856.

A group of Old Liners claiming to speak for the New York Whig party met in Albany on August 14 for the purpose of selecting delegates to a national Whig convention in Baltimore on September 17, 1856. Both of these meetings adopted the Know-Nothing candidates of Fillmore and Donelson. These endorsements carried little weight, however; they were clearly the action of only a rump of the Whig party. Although Francis Granger traveled to Baltimore to represent New York, Washington Hunt, pleading poor health, stayed at home.²³

Other straight Whigs proved more receptive to the Democratic nominee. A letter written by Rufus Choate, a prominent Massachusetts conservative, argued the case for Buchanan with important effect. Choate called upon all Whigs to stop the drift of the nation toward disunion by voting for the only candidate capable of winning. In New York, the Journal of Commerce reiterated the same idea. Lamenting the defection of so many Whigs to Buchanan, Daniel Barnard wrote that it was a "singular feature of this contest, that Fillmore, if defeated, will lose by the failure of those who believe that he is the best and

²³C. D. Brigham to Fillmore, August 12, 1856, S. Sammons to Fillmore, August 13, 1856, John B. Fry to Fillmore, August 15, 1856, Francis Granger to Fillmore, August 9, 16, 1856, Edward Bates to Fillmore, September 19, 24, 1856, Fillmore Papers, SUNY (Oswego).

safest man for the country."²⁴

Other straight Whigs continued to enlist in the Republican party. Hamilton Fish was the most influential New Yorker to undergo conversion. The Senator had done everything in his power to foil the Republican party. His stand had alienated him from his close friend Thurlow Weed and in 1857 led to his replacement in the Senate by Preston King.²⁵ As the hopelessness of reanimating the Whig party became apparent, however, Fish moved closer to the Republican point of view. Finally, in a carefully reasoned letter to James A. Hamilton, the Senator declared his intention to vote for Frémont.

Fish examined the various choices open to Whigs: Buchanan represented a narrowly sectional party dominated by the South and abetted by ambitious office seekers in the North; Fillmore stood at the head of an intolerant organization with ideals repugnant to most Whigs; the Republicans were not really a sectional party as their enemies charged. They stood merely for limiting the extension of slavery and made no attack on the institution

²⁴Barnard to Fish, September 23, 1856, Fish Papers, LC.

²⁵Fish to Weed, November 8, 12, 1855, Weed Papers, URL; Weed to Fish, November 11, 13, 1856, Fish Papers, LC.

26

where it already existed. Jonathan Nathan, however, perceived the fundamental reason for his own and Fish's shift to the Republicans, and he stated it clearly:

The great difficulty in our position arises from the fact that the only issue between parties is slavery. There is no other dividing line, no other practical question...I contend that we must be either Democrat or Republican. Now if Republicanism means abolition I aint there--but if the choice be presented to me of Abolitionism or slavery extension and Southern principles and predominance I ask you which must I take. 27

Republicans never abandoned hope of winning over additional straight Whigs and made great efforts to secure their support. In New York City, the Frémont press denied charges of "radicalism" and sought to portray its candidate and party as truly conservative. These journals emphasized the point that the goal of Republicanism was only to prevent the extension of slavery and not its abolition. James Watson Webb, the editor of the New York Courier and Enquirer, judged this distinction to be vital. He warned Edwin D. Morgan that a man "who is not satisfied with opposition to Slavery Extension is too unrea-

²⁶Fish to Hamilton, September 12, 1856, Hamilton Fish Miscellaneous Manuscripts, NYPL. This letter was highly prized by Republican leaders and received wide publicity. John Bigelow wrote Francis P. Blair, Sr., that it would influence many of the wavering. Bigelow to Blair, September 27, 1856, Blair-Lee Papers, PU. See also Montgomery Blair to Fish, September 28, 1856, Fish Papers, LC. Even Weed warmly thanked Fish for his valuable aid. Weed to Fish, September 27, 1856, Fish Papers, LC.

²⁷Nathan to Fish, undated (received by Fish on April 26, 1856), Nathan Papers, CU.

sonable to be entitled to further concessions."²⁸ The party chairman agreed with the editor. He reassured one correspondent that "it is against the aggressions only that we wage war. I am in no sense an abolitionist, and will protect the South in all their just rights, as readily as I will do the same thing in the North."²⁹

Republican newspapers also tried to allay the conservatives' fear of disunion. They scoffed at the pronouncements of prominent Southerners that Frémont's election would be the signal for the break up of the nation.³⁰ However, Republicans did not always believe their own assurances. John Bigelow anxiously queried Francis P. Blair concerning rumors about an alleged agreement between

²⁸ Webb to Morgan, March 31, 1856, Morgan Papers, NYSL. The abolitionists, of course, were not satisfied with opposition to slavery extension. To dramatize their discontent, the National Radical Abolitionists, composed of such men as Lewis Tappan and Frederick Douglass, assembled at the same time and in the same city (Syracuse) as a Republican state convention. They issued an address which condemned slavery wherever it existed and attacked the Republicans for failing to adopt a similar stand. New York Tribune, May 29, 1856. Gerritt Smith and the Liberty party also refused to endorse Republican candidates on the same grounds. Albany Atlas and Argus, April 14, 1856.

²⁹ Morgan to E. I. Woolsey, September 19, 1856, Letter Copy Book Vol. V, Morgan Papers, NYSL.

³⁰ See, for example, the New York Tribune, June 23, July 18, August 7, September 12, October 14, 15, November 4, 5, 1856.

President Pierce and Jefferson Davis to permit secession.³¹

Thus many Old Line Whigs who had first resisted the formation of a sectional party found themselves drawn to it. The reason was simple; they felt they had no other place to go. Three years of political crisis had hurt conservatives. Their principal aim--harmony between North and South--seemed more and more elusive. They would have preferred to remain in the national Whig party, but they were forced to accept the fact of its destruction. Although the Know-Nothings made a vigorous attempt to enlist their support, many moderates could not overcome their revulsion for nativist intolerance. They deemed the name "American" party a disgraceful sham--for them, true "Americanism" meant equal opportunity for all regardless of religion or place of birth. Having discarded this possibility, they found themselves confronting the dilemma which Nathan had described--either they must ally themselves with pro-slavery Democrats or with antislavery Republicans. Once the choice narrowed to these two alternatives, an increasing number of conservatives discovered the Republican party to be their only recourse.

New York's Republican leadership knew that success depended upon attracting antislavery Democrats. Since

³¹Bigelow to Blair, September 27, 1856, Blair-Lee Papers, PU.

the 1830's, the Democracy had enjoyed a predominant position in the Empire State, a role which Whig leaders had deeply envied. Even during the period of factional strife from 1853-1855, the combined Hard and Soft Shell vote still constituted a majority of the ballots cast; hence, it was reasonable to believe that a united party would carry the state for Buchanan. By 1856, only a small vanguard of Democrats, led by Preston King, had joined the Seward Whigs. However, during the presidential election campaign, the effects of three years of unrelenting stress were apparent: a large number of Democrats defected from their party and supported the Republican coalition.

Many Barnburners had hoped that their party would resist the pressure of Southern politicians. Soft Shell Federal officeholders had tried to keep this faith alive. But the resolutions adopted by the Soft convention of January 10, 1856, which gave an unqualified endorsement of the Administration and made a transparent bid for Southern support at Cincinnati,³² alienated many Democrats. Republicans now saw a chance to gain the recruits they required. After reading an account of the latest Soft Shell convention, Seward observed to Weed: "I think you are through with the Softs in New York--what a pitiful

³²See above, pp. 255-256.

conclusion!"³³ Edwin Barber Morgan concurred with the Senator's appraisal. He urged Weed to take full advantage of the bitterness engendered by the Soft Shells' action. "If you can protract any fusion, for a little time," coun-³⁴ selled Morgan, "I am certain it will do us good."

Weed saw an immediate opportunity for a gesture to dissatisfied Democrats, and he took advantage of it. Concurrent with the Speakership battle in Washington, a similar struggle was taking place in Albany. Interminable balloting failed to elect a Speaker of the Assembly. The Know-Nothings cast approximately 45 votes, the Republicans 35, and the combined Hard and Soft Shell strength was estimated at about 40. Realizing that the Republicans could not win and wishing to prevent a nativist victory, Weed brought his followers to the aid of the Softs' nominee--Orville Robinson of Oswego, a former Barnburner--who was elected. Supporting a Democratic candidate was deemed the lesser evil by Republicans, who considered

³³Seward to Weed, January 15, 1856, Weed Papers, URL.

³⁴Edwin Barber Morgan to Weed, January 14, 1856, Weed Papers, URL. Edwin Barber Morgan was a cousin of Edwin D. Morgan.

the Americans their most dangerous opponent.³⁵ But Weed's action was also a calculated overture to Radical Democrats outraged by the last Soft Shell convention. If they could overcome suspicions of "Whig tricks" and obtain assurance of fair treatment, they would constitute a valuable source of strength.

An important newcomer to Republican ranks was Henry H. Van Dyck--the co-editor of the Soft Shell organ, the Albany Atlas. He had grown increasingly dissatisfied with acquiescence to Southern demands and had alarmed party leaders when he voiced his misgivings in his paper.³⁶ Undoubtedly, the expectation of a warm welcome from the opposition encouraged his boldness. Determined upon a break after the convention of January 10, the editor wrote Martin Van Buren this letter:

You will undoubtedly have seen the doings of the state convention. It was wholly controlled by the office-holders....If the 'Hards' should reconvene their convention and go for Cuba and the opening of the African slave trade, I am afraid they would be ahead of us. Without this I have no fear, as I am quite sure in no other way can they get South of our platform. 37

³⁵Weed to Fish, January 17, 1856, Fish Papers, LC; E. Pershine Smith to Henry C. Carey, January 19, 1856, Smith Papers, HSPa; Haven to Fillmore, January 20, 1856, Fillmore Papers, SUNY (Oswego); Albany Argus, January 18, 1856; New York Tribune, January 12, 17, 1856.

³⁶William Cassidy to Seymour, September 26, 1855, Seymour Papers, NYSL.

³⁷H. H. Van Dyck to Martin Van Buren, January 14, 1856, Martin Van Buren Papers, LC.

After selling his share in the Atlas, Van Dyck accepted Weed's invitation to run for Albany's congressional seat.³⁸

Thousands of Democrats soon followed Henry Van Dyck's example. Several well-known Softs--including past state officers and legislators, former Congressmen, and presidential electors--signed a pamphlet entitled the "Voice of the Radical Democracy of New York."³⁹ This manifesto began by attacking the Kansas-Nebraska Act and President Pierce for unnecessarily stirring up slavery agitation; Democrats throughout the free states had suffered defeat as a consequence of this policy. It then denounced the Soft Shell convention of January 10 for changing the position of the party from "ardent opponents of slavery extension into quiescent abettors of its diffusion." By submitting to Southern demands, which insist that Northern politicians worship at the "Moloch of slavery," the delegates had betrayed the views of most New York Democrats. Lest it be thought that Radical Democrats were actuated

³⁸Nicholas Hill, Jr. to Samuel J. Tilden, January 14, 1856, Tilden Papers, NYPL; H 11 to George W. Newell, February 1, 1856, in the Marcy Papers, LC. Van Dyck lost his bid for a House seat to Erastus Corning. See below, p. 354.

³⁹The list of signatures included such men as Abijah Beckwith, Nathaniel Jones, George Rathbun, Chester Loomis, Ward Hunt, Henry R. Selden, Daniel T. Jones, Robert Denniston, Richard Hulbert, Platt Potter. This document may be found in the Martin Van Buren Papers, LC. It was also printed in the New York Tribune, May 19, 1856.

by "a morbid philanthropy toward the African race," they hastened to explain that their primary concern was the degrading effect of a slave system on free white labor. This document was a clear call to attract Barnburners.

Buchanan's partisans in New York could do little to halt the exodus. They pleaded with Democrats to beware of "Whig tricks," but these warnings had lost their former power. The Albany Atlas and Argus, the new party organ formed from a merger of the two papers, tried to expose the activities of bolters working in close conjunction with Weed; however, the editors could not deny that these plotters had once occupied honored places within the Democracy.⁴⁰

Democratic prospects looked bleakest in the central and western portions of the state, the Burned-over-region, and in the northern counties, the former center of Barnburner strength. Henry S. Randall concluded that "the Democratic party is annihilated, for the time being, in the centre." He feared that Frémont's majorities in the middle counties would overwhelm Buchanan's strong areas in Erie

⁴⁰ Albany Atlas and Argus, February 25, March 1, 4, July 7, 1856; New York Tribune, March 4, 1856. The Albany Atlas and Argus asked whether it was not pitiable to see so many renowned Democrats lured into the clutches of the Whigs and the Hindoos. Albany Atlas and Argus, November 3, 1856.

county, the Hudson valley, and New York City.⁴¹ Another Soft Shell made a similar appraisal: "I consider success as very doubtful--with the precedent of 1840 before me I fear the effect of the excitement and popular cry that has been raised of 'freedom.'⁴²" Secretary of State Marcy was also pessimistic. He told George W. Newell that he was asked 40 times a day how New York would go. "I do not reply positively that it will go against us," Marcy confided, "yet my apprehensions are so strong that they amount to a conviction that such will be the result."⁴³

The Know-Nothings were also alarmed by Democratic losses to the Republicans. "Are not the democrats going over to Frémont too much in our state to make it agreeable for us,?" queried Solomon G. Haven.⁴⁴ Stephen Sammons complained to Fillmore that "in the end you have got to fight all the Soft Shells and we will be fortunate if

⁴¹Henry S. Randall to Martin Van Buren, September 5, 1856, Martin Van Buren Papers, LC; Randall to Marcy, Marcy Papers, LC.

⁴²Chas. H. Haswell to Marcy, September 10, 1856, Marcy Papers, LC.

⁴³Marcy to Newell, October 20, 1856, William L. Marcy Miscellaneous Manuscripts, NYHS.

⁴⁴Haven to Fillmore, July 15, 1856, Fillmore Papers, SUNY (Oswego).

the Irish Catholics in this state do not go to Frémont."⁴⁵

Several lifelong Democrats resisted the temptation to become Republicans. For these, loyalty to their party prevailed over dissatisfaction with its actions. Martin Van Buren, the former President and the Presidential candidate of the Free Soilers in 1848, was one of these. Edwin D. Morgan invited him to preside over the Republican national convention, but the aged statesman had no intention of embarking on another free soil crusade.⁴⁶ Although he deplored the repeal of the Missouri Compromise and disliked Buchanan, he believed that the Democratic party provided⁴⁷ the only hope for keeping the Union intact.

Republicans made every effort to allay Democratic fears. The prominence of men like Seward and Weed in the

⁴⁵Sammons to Fillmore, August 11, 1856, Fillmore Papers, SUNY (Oswego).

⁴⁶Edwin D. Morgan asked Francis P. Blair, Sr. to broach the question to Van Buren. Morgan to Blair, May 14, 1856, Morgan Letter Copy Book, Vol. V, Morgan Papers, NYSL. See also, Blair to Van Buren, May 17, 1856, Martin Van Buren Papers, LC.

⁴⁷Van Buren explained his reasons for remaining with the Democratic party to Samuel J. Tilden. Van Buren to Tilden, September 1, 1856, Tilden Papers, NYPL. See also Van Buren's public letter to the Tammany Society, dated June 28, 1856, printed in the Albany Atlas and Argus, July 8, 1856. Azariah Flagg, the highly respected Comptroller of New York City, followed the lead of Van Buren. However, Benjamin F. Butler, Jackson's former Attorney-General, was an early convert to Republicanism.

new party--for whom most Democrats had an abiding suspicion--made this necessary. Gathered in convention for the purpose of choosing candidates for the state offices, New York fusionists adhered to the policy of the previous year and distributed nominations equally among former Whigs and former Democrats. In 1855, Preston King, a Democrat, had headed the slate. In 1856, John A. King, the son of Rufus King and a Whig, secured the nomination for governor. Morgan explained the reason why Henry R. Selden, a well-known Soft and a signer of the "Voice of the Radical Democracy," received the lieutenant-governor's slot: "The nomination of Mr. King for Gov. made it advisable to put on a Democrat in antecedents for Lt. Gov. Consequently Mr. Selden was taken--none better from that branch of our party could have been selected."⁴⁸

Democrats such as Preston King, John Bigelow, William Cullen Bryant, and Abijah Mann, Jr., played an important role in the new party, but it appeared that former Whigs were in control. Morgan attested to this fact when he assured the arch-Whig James Watson Webb that only friends of Seward would be placed on the ticket.⁴⁹ Erasmus P. Smith also knew where real power rested: "Put our party

⁴⁸Morgan to James Watson Webb, September 19, 1856, Webb Papers, YU.

⁴⁹Ibid.

in power & we will lead them [the Democrats] twelve years more--We are the Whig party after all and they but an appendix."⁵⁰ The ambition which Seward and Weed had harbored for a generation--to make significant gains at the expense of their powerful rival--appeared to have been achieved. The Republican party chairman, a former Whig himself, expressed his own satisfaction at the course of events: "The changes from the Soft division of the late Democratic Party in this State in favor of Frémont, and of prominent men are very numerous making our position eminently safe here."⁵¹

The defection of so many Democrats would never have been possible without the intervening three years of political crisis. The events of this period had placed an unbearable strain on the New York Democracy. Soft Shell leaders had managed to keep losses to a minimum in 1854 and 1855, but they could not avoid indefinitely Southern pressure for an unqualified acceptance of the Nebraska Act and all its bitter consequences. Many Barnburners resented what they regarded as the unreasonable pro-slavery demands of Southern Democrats. They had rebelled against tests

⁵⁰E. Pershine Smith to Henry C. Carey, November 21, 1856, Smith Papers, HSPa.

⁵¹Morgan to James Nye & B. Marrierre, July 7, 1856, Morgan Papers, NYSL.

of Democratic orthodoxy in the past, and when the Nebraska policy was rigidly imposed at Cincinnati, they bolted again. The powerful bonds of loyalty holding the Democratic party together had finally broken.

New York Republican leaders recognized that nativist sentiment remained a potent political force within the state. No one appreciated this fact better than Thurlow Weed. The boss did not share the attitude of one optimist who considered Fillmore's nomination to be "a joke."⁵² Weed saw no humor in the situation; he judged the candidacy of his old Buffalo adversary as a formidable threat.⁵³

Weed looked for some way to neutralize Know-Nothing strength. He had always been attracted to the possibility of embracing the antislavery and nativist issues within a single party. He realized that such an amalgam would have irresistible strength among Protestant and native born voters who wanted to express their hostility to the expansion of slavery but who also desired to strike a blow at immigrants and Catholics. Loose coalitions of anti-Nebraskaites and Know-Nothings had worked together in most Northern states, but the dominance of Silver Grays within the

⁵²Augustus Steele Porter to Seward, March 13, 1856, Seward Papers, URL.

⁵³Weed to Seward, February 27, 1856 (incorrectly catalogued as February 27, 1855), March 5, 1856, Seward Papers, URL.

Order in New York had prevented similar cooperation. Nevertheless, the potentialities in mingling the two causes had encouraged Weed to foster secretly the Know-Something movement, which combined a strong anti-Nebraska sentiment with a mild nativism.⁵⁴ His support revealed that the powerful editor was prepared to make concessions to "Americanism." He insisted, however, that the antislavery crusade be paramount and that anti-Catholicism and anti-foreignism be kept in the background.

During the winter and spring of 1856, Weed negotiated with the leaders of the North Americans who had bolted the Philadelphia convention which had nominated Fillmore. They were ideal instruments for his purpose; as moderate nativists, they could widen the appeal of Republicanism. Weed made important progress when he enlisted George Law, who was bitter over his defeat for the Know-Nothing nomination.⁵⁵ Fillmoreites suspected that some plot was in process. One correspondent informed the ex-President that he had observed Weed in close communion with an associate of Law.⁵⁶ Another reported that the steamship magnate was

⁵⁴See above, pp. 159-160.

⁵⁵Weed to Seward, March 5, 1856, Seward Papers, URL.

⁵⁶Jas. W. Hale to Fillmore, March 4, 1856, Fillmore Papers, SUNY (Oswego).

doing all he could to stir up mischief.⁵⁷

Seward deplored Weed's willingness to cooperate with the North Americans. The target of bigots ever since his proposal for state supported Catholic schools, the Senator feared that any coalition with nativists would close the door on his ambition for the presidency. He had persistently discouraged attempts to bring about a union of anti-Nebraska Know-Nothings and Republicans. Invited by Francis P. Blair, Sr., to discuss such a coalition, he declined

to do so.⁵⁸ Seward wrote to Weed that he "must distinctly protest against any combination with 'Know-Nothings.'"
When told by Preston King that such an alliance was inevitable, the Senator declared that "at a proper time, and in a proper way, I should let the world know that I disavowed all connection or sympathy with such a combination; and my support of candidates must be placed by myself distinctly on grounds other than, and different from, 'Know-Nothingism.'"⁵⁹

Weed was sorry that his friend had refused Blair's

⁵⁷Henry E. Davies to Fillmore, May 15, 1856, Fillmore Papers, SUNY (Oswego).

⁵⁸Seward to Blair, December 29, 1855, Blair-Lee Papers, PU. This meeting was an important planning session. Senators Salmon Chase and Charles Sumner; Gamaliel Bailey, editor of the Washington National Era; Nathaniel Banks, Speaker of the House; and Preston King attended.

⁵⁹Seward to Weed, December 31, 1855, Weed Papers, URL.

invitation. He could see no reason for not cooperating in preliminary plans of organization. "I would go cordially with anti-Administration and anti-Nebraska friends, to the end," Weed wrote, "unless, in our progress, we get to a point where paths, and our sense of duty, compel a separation."⁶⁰ Seward acceded to the views of his adviser and participated in subsequent efforts to bring all anti-slavery forces together. Nevertheless, he continued to argue that by courting the Know-Nothings, the Republicans were losing their grip on the party and sacrificing their principles:

It is manifest that here [Washington], the tone of anti-slavery feeling is becoming daily more and more modified, under the pressure of the 'Know-Nothing' influences. While we met in caucus and cheered each other with strong anti-slavery speeches, those who advised and got up the affair announce, everywhere, that the object is to let us down to the level of non-committal and questionable nominations. ⁶¹

Despite Seward's misgivings, Weed continued to pursue an understanding with antislavery North Americans. He also sought to discourage the rising demand among New York Republicans for an aggressive campaign to obtain the presidential nomination for Seward. Many of the Senator's admirers acknowledged that they could not generate enthusiasm for any other candidate and urged Weed to defy

⁶⁰Weed to Seward, January 3, 1856, March 5, 1856, Seward Papers, URL.

⁶¹Seward to Weed, March 13, 1856, Weed Papers, URL.

the nativists. "If it were not for that God forsaken party, the K-N, every voice would cry Seward," wrote New York Congressman Edward Dodd. "Why should it not be him any way? I have no 'stomach for the fight' on any body else and would rather be beaten than strengthen the K-N party or yield to their exactions."⁶²

Weed frustrated the desire of Seward and his boosters, because he believed that the time was not ripe for the Senator's nomination. He preferred to wait until 1860, when the Republicans would be stronger and could assure victory. Also, he reasoned that in four years the nativist fever would subside and objections to Seward would diminish. Reminding his friend that popular support could not be artificially manufactured, he pointed out certain truths to Seward. If he ever received the nomination, "it must be when the people are ready, and demand it, and not by art of your own. It is a question which will take care of itself. It can neither be hastened nor hindered by individuals."⁶³

Other prominent Republicans agreed with Weed's anal-

⁶²Edward Dodd to Weed, April 4, 1856. For similar views, see Levi C. Turner to Weed, May 9, 1856, A. M. Clapp to Weed, May 6, 1856, George P. Morgan to Weed, June 1, 1856, Weed Papers, URL.

⁶³Weed to Seward, March 5, 1856, Seward Papers, URL.

ysis. Erasmus P. Smith observed that Seward should not run "till we feel sure." The best candidate, according to Smith, would be one who could draw enough votes to make the Republican party a powerful organization. Then we can "sweep the field with Seward" in 1860.⁶⁴ Samuel Wilkeson, an editor of the Albany Evening Journal and the Senator's close friend, tried to soothe Seward's disappointment. He praised him as the "completest exponent of Republicanism" and for being at the "head of American political civilization." Unfortunately, the delegates to the Republican convention would clamor for a lesser man, but Wilkeson was confident that in 1860 they would be ready for their true leader.⁶⁵

Having made his decision to woo nativist votes and to delay Seward's bid for the presidency, Weed had to find another candidate. Widely mentioned as a possibility was John McLean of Ohio, an Associate Justice of the Supreme Court. McLean's advanced age and lackluster personality appealed to conservatives but failed to generate any enthusiasm among the more radical elements of the party. Weed distrusted him; he feared that the Ohioan

⁶⁴E. Pershine Smith to Henry C. Carey, March 17, 1856, May 2, 16, 1856, Smith Papers, HSPa.

⁶⁵Samuel Wilkeson to Seward, June 15, 1856. John L. Schoolcraft also advised Seward that it would be imprudent for him to be a candidate. Schoolcraft to Seward, June 16, 1856, Seward Papers, URL.

would betray his party, much as Tyler and Fillmore had done in the past. Jonathan Nathan reported the boss' unflattering appraisal of McLean: "he [Weed] would go for a democrat in preference to that 'white liver'd hollow-hearted-Janus faced rascal' Judge ML--I think he prefixed 'd--d.'" ⁶⁶ The state nominating convention revealed that New York Republicans shared this distaste for the Justice. ⁶⁷ His name failed to inspire any support.

As the Republican national convention drew near, the prospects of John C. Frémont of California rose rapidly. The famous pathfinder benefited from the advocacy of such influential men as Francis P. Blair, Sr., John Bigelow, William C. Bryant, and Nathaniel Banks. Seward reported that Republicans in Congress were overwhelmingly ⁶⁸ in favor of the Californian. Weed, along with other leading politicians, sensed the strong appeal of Frémont and decided to join his supporters. As might be expected, the state nominating convention was most enthusiastic

⁶⁶Nathan to Fish, undated (received by Fish on April 17, 1856), Nathan Papers, CU. See also E. Pershine Smith to Henry C. Carey, May 23, 1856, Smith Papers, HSPa; Lewis Benedict to Seward, May 15, 1856, Seward Papers, URL.

⁶⁷Edwin D. Morgan to John Bigelow, June 2, 1856, Morgan Papers, NYSL.

⁶⁸Seward to Weed, April 4, 1856, Weed Papers, URL.

for Seward; its favorable attitude toward Frémont, however, revealed that the explorer was the second choice of most delegates.⁶⁹

The close cooperation which Weed had established with North American leaders proved of great importance in unifying antislavery forces behind Frémont. The Pathfinder's supporters were worried about the forthcoming North American convention, scheduled to assemble in Philadelphia on June 12, 1856, only five days before the Republican meeting. This date had obviously been chosen to afford the maximum leverage over Republican nominations.⁷⁰ The problem confronting Frémont's backers was a difficult one. If the first convention refused to nominate the explorer and the Republicans did select him, this would divide antislavery strength into two tickets. However, if the Know-Somethings supported Frémont, foreign born voters, who had the balance of power in several key states, would turn against him, and the Republicans might be forced

⁶⁹Morgan to Bigelow, June 2, 1856, Morgan Papers, NYSL.

⁷⁰Blair requested Weed's presence in Washington to help work out some arrangement with the North Americans which would avoid embarrassing the Republican convention. Blair thought that it might be necessary to change the date of the Republican meeting. Seward to Weed, April 14, 1856, Weed Papers, URL.

71

to find another candidate.

Republican leaders devised a plan to solve this dilemma. The North Americans must be persuaded to nominate Banks for President and Governor William F. Johnston of Pennsylvania for Vice-President with the understanding that Banks would resign in favor of Frémont and the Republican's Vice-Presidential candidate would yield in favor of Johnston. By such a bold stroke, antislavery nativists and Republicans could be united behind one ticket and sweep the North. This scheme appealed to Weed, and he and his lieutenants--Morgan, King, and Spaulding--came to Philadelphia to use their influence with Know-Something delegates. It was rumored that when ordinary methods of persuasion failed, bribery succeeded, and that \$50,000.00 was used for this purpose. Weed's alliance with George Law was also an important factor in achieving the desired result. The North American convention nominated Banks and Johnston and chose Law as the chairman of a committee to confer with the Republicans. It then adjourned, to convene again two days after the Republicans had nominated

⁷¹Greeley to Colfax, May 6, 1856, June 1, 1856, Greeley-Colfax Papers, NYPL; New York Tribune, June 11, 1856; Fred Harvey Harrington, "Frémont and the North-Americans" AHR XLIV (July, 1939), 843; Allan Nevins, Frémont, Pathfinder of the West (New York, 1936), p. 430.

72
their slate.

Fulfilling the bargain made with the North Americans was a more difficult matter. When the Republican national convention assembled at Philadelphia on June 17, George Law and his committee asked for permission to confer upon candidates for president and vice-president. Empire State delegates took the lead in advocating their participation. DeWitt C. Littlejohn of Oswego, the former Speaker of the New York Assembly who had once been the special target of Know-Nothing enmity,⁷³ urged all friends of freedom to unite; consequently, he advocated that the North Americans should have one candidate on the ticket. Joshua R. Giddings of Ohio, for more than a generation the opponent of slavery in the House of Representatives, opposed any deal with the Know-Somethings. If the Republicans parleyed with a committee of native born Americans, he argued, they should also treat with a committee of foreign born citizens. He, for one, was there to speak for all the people of the United States, regardless of birth.⁷⁴

⁷²Weed to Seward, March 5, 1856, Seward Papers, URL; New York Herald, June 16, 1856; Harrington, "Frémont and the North-Americans," 843-845; Nevins, Frémont, pp. 430-431.

⁷³See above, pp. 176-177.

⁷⁴Proceedings of the Philadelphia Republican Con-
of 1856 (n.p., n.d.), pp. 57-58.

The Ohioan's speech had the desired effect; George Law and the Know-Somethings did not play the role which they and Thurlow Weed had intended. The Republicans nominated Frémont for President but refused to acknowledge the agreement made with the North Americans concerning the Vice-Presidency. Governor Johnston failed to receive second place on the ticket, but William Dayton of New Jersey was chosen instead.

New York Republicans were distressed by the collapse of the plan which they deemed vital for a successful campaign. Acknowledging his disappointment to Giddings, Morgan, the newly chosen national party chairman, admitted that he had wanted a Vice-Presidential candidate acceptable to the Americans.⁷⁵ He also complained to Congressman Russel Sage. Although he and Weed had labored for such a result, the convention could not be made to feel its importance.⁷⁶ After the election of 1856, Weed ascribed great weight to these events. "The first, and as I still think fatal error," he wrote to Simon Cameron, "was in not taking a Vice-President in whose nomination the North Americans would have concurred cordially."

⁷⁵Edwin D. Morgan to Joshua Giddings, July 2, 1856, Morgan Papers, NYSL.

⁷⁶Morgan to Russel Sage, June 28, 1856, Morgan Papers, NYSL.

Weed blamed McLean's partisans and Horace Greeley for
 Dayton's success.⁷⁷

Reconciling the North Americans to the Frémont-Dayton ticket proved to be difficult. When the Know-Somethings reconvened their convention, several delegates angrily attacked the Republicans, a few even threatening to support the Fillmore-Donelson ticket. However, cooler heads prevailed and the majority agreed to withdraw Banks and substitute Frémont. But it refused to drop Johnston for
 Dayton.⁷⁸

Confusion now existed throughout the North; some ratification meetings endorsed the Frémont-Dayton ticket and others the Frémont-Johnston slate. Primary responsibility for resolving this dilemma fell into Morgan's hands. At various times, he attempted to persuade both Johnston and Dayton to resign, but both refused. A solution was finally found when Johnston met with Frémont and received assurances of "fair treatment" in the event of
 Republican victory. He then withdrew from the campaign.⁷⁹

⁷⁷Weed to Cameron, November 12, 1856, quoted in Nevins, Frémont, p. 435.

⁷⁸New York Tribune, June 20, 21, 1856.

⁷⁹Weed to Morgan, August 3, 1856. Morgan to William Dayton, July 10, 1856, Letter Copy Book, Vol. V, Morgan Papers, NYSL. Harrington, "Frémont and the North-Americans," 846-848; Roy F. Nichols, "Some Problems of the First Republican Presidential Campaign" AHR XXVIII (April, 1923), 492-494.

All of these intrigues were designed to achieve one purpose--to united those voters with both nativist and antislavery inclinations behind the Republican candidate. The bargaining power of the North Americans derived from their claim to represent this constituency. Of course, deals between political chieftains are not always ratified at the grass roots level, and the crucial question still remained unanswered: Would antislavery Know-Nothings abandon Fillmore and support Frémont? The answer appeared to be in the affirmative. Republican leaders were gratified by evidence of mass defections. Erasmus P. Smith observed that "it looks as if there was to be an explosion of those who have never believed, what we have always told them, that they were sold to the Silver Grays."⁸⁰

Reports from the huskings confirmed Smith's impression. The situation looked especially bright in central and western New York. Spaulding announced that Fillmore was losing strength every day in Erie county and would⁸¹ probably be third at election time. From Batavia, once a Know-Nothing stronghold, came the news that the great

⁸⁰E. Pershine Smith to Henry C. Carey, February 26, 1856, Smith Papers, HSPa.

⁸¹E. G. Spaulding to Morgan, October 11, 1856, Morgan Papers, NYSL.

majority of the Order had declared their intention to
 spurn Fillmore and vote Republican.⁸² The town of Auburn,
 where Seward made his home, also experienced a turnabout.
 A friend of the Senator noted that the wind had been taken
 out of the Hindoos' sails. The local lodge would soon
 suffer an open rupture and over one-half would vote for
 Frémont.⁸³ By the summer of 1856, Republicans in New
 York breathed easier. The great nativist excitement ap-
 peared to be waning and giving way to antislavery enthu-
 siasm.

The Know-Nothings' failure to eliminate strife
 in the national organization led to disastrous results.
 Neither an emphasis on anti-Catholic and anti-foreign
 prejudice nor a patriotic appeal to maintain the Union
 could surmount sectional differences over slavery. Like
 the Democrats, New York Know-Nothings suffered the con-
 sequences of Southern demands for endorsement of the Ne-
 braska Act and its aftermath in Kansas. In 1855, many
 nativists in the Burned-over-region had only voted for

⁸²T. Cary to Seward, May 1, 1856, Seward Papers, URL.

⁸³Jesse Segoine to Seward, June 20, 1856. For other correspondence regarding the loss of Know-Nothing strength, see Salmon G. Grover to Seward, March 14, 1856, George E. Baker to Seward, June 8, 1856, Asahel N. Cole to Seward, July 14, 1856, Seward Papers, URL; David H. Abell to Weed, September 9, 1856, Weed Papers, URL; Levi Benedict to Morgan, (?) 1856, Morgan Papers, NYSL.

Know-Nothing candidates because the Binghamton resolves had persuaded them that their party was also antislavery. However, the platform of the National Grand Council and the nomination of Fillmore had revealed the reverse. When Southern control of the party became undeniable, nativist lodges disbanded throughout the "infected district" and were replaced by Republican clubs. This change did not mean that bigotry had suddenly disappeared; it merely indicated that the dramatic news from Kansas had displaced all other issues.

While recruiting new adherents from the ranks of conservative Whigs, Democrats, and Know-Nothings, Republicans sought to maintain the allegiance of temperance men. Although the fusionist platform of 1855 remained silent on the question of enforcing New York's Maine law, prohibitionists had still supported the new party, thus revealing a willingness to subordinate the anti-liquor⁸⁴ to the antislavery cause. A new problem arose when in March of 1856 the state's Court of Appeals declared the⁸⁵ prohibition act unconstitutional. Would this be the signal for a new crusade to restore the law? Would it force the Republicans to take a more definitive stand against alcoholic beverages? These questions perplexed Republican

⁸⁴See above, pp. 206-207.

⁸⁵Albany Atlas and Argus, March 26, 1856.

leaders.

Thurlow Weed again preferred to remain silent, thereby alienating neither temperance advocates nor their opponents. Greeley agreed; he repeated his 1855 appeal which entreated prohibitionists to suspend agitation and concentrate on "the sole object of freedom in Kansas and non-extension of slave territory."⁸⁶ Governor Myron H. Clark, once the leader of anti-liquor forces in the legislature, assured Weed that the issue could be avoided. He gave these reasons why John A. King, the Republican gubernatorial candidate, should not answer letters on this subject:

Now the fact is that question is bound to be ignored at this election and I think it best under the present state of things for Mr. King to say nothing; not answer at all; as things are now it will do no good, and might do harm. I do not believe my particular friends will care one fig about it--I have seen some, and will see others. ⁸⁷

Clark's statement revealed that temperance leaders had agreed not to press their cause. Once again, they refused to divert both energies and votes needed for the struggle against slavery. The liquor issue, which had dominated the election of 1854 and was subordinated in 1855, was almost totally ignored in 1856. The distribution of po-

⁸⁶New York Tribune, April 30, May 3, 1856.

⁸⁷Myron H. Clark to Weed, September 26, 1856, Weed Papers, URL.

litical rewards aided this outcome. Wesley Bailey, editor of the Utica Teetotaler, received the Republican⁸⁸ nomination for State Prison Inspector. By election time, New York's temperance organizations and newspapers were solidly behind Frémont and King.

Defections from the straight Whigs, the Democrats, and the Know-Nothings had swelled the New York Republican organization and the confidence of its leadership. A powerful coalition opposed to the extension of slavery and resolved to subordinate all other issues had formed. As early as May, 1856, one Republican noted the growing strength of the party and the prevailing mood of its members: "We are gaining ground in this state--not only the Republican party proper, but also Radical Republicanism--or rather a Republicanism that looks to force as well as arguments. You would be astonished to see how strong⁸⁹ and universal this feeling is becoming."

Reports from campaign workers were especially encouraging from the Burned-over-region. "In the western counties, where I spent the last fifteen days, our prospects are good and you will be astonished at the majorities which some of them will give for the Republican ticket,"

⁸⁸Albany Atlas and Argus, October 1, 20, 1856.

⁸⁹James B. Swain to Seward, May 22, 1856, Seward Papers, URL.

90

wrote one of Morgan's correspondents. Haven, running for re-election from Buffalo, and Washington Hunt, seeking the Orleans-Niagara congressional seat as the American candidate, were special targets for Republican efforts, and it appeared that these influential politicians would be defeated.⁹¹ After a speaking tour in Oneida and Herkimer, Greeley predicted that these counties would "give Frémont some 15,000 votes to 7,000 for Buchanan and 4,000 for Fillmore. Jefferson, Lewis, Onondaga, Madison, Otsego--all formerly against us, are as good." The editor believed that Frémont's state wide plurality would be closer to 100,000 than the 50,000 he had originally estimated.⁹²

So promising did the canvass appear that one politician advised the party chairman that the forensic abilities of Joshua Giddings were wasted in the "infected district" of the state. He suggested that speakers of Giddings' calibre be sent to the Hudson river counties, where a contest still existed, or better yet, to Pennsyl-

⁹⁰V. M. Rice to Morgan, November 1, 1856, Morgan Papers, NYSL.

⁹¹Ibid.; E. Pershine Smith to Henry C. Carey, October 31, 1856, Smith Papers, HSPa. Weed said that Hunt only became a candidate when he was assured of Democratic as well as Know-Nothing support. Weed to Morgan, November 2, 1856, Morgan Papers, NYSL.

⁹²Greeley to Colfax, September 26, 1856, Greeley-Colfax Papers, NYPL.

93
 vania, which seemed to be the real battlefield.

Although the Republicans failed to carry the presidential election, the New York branch of the party fulfilled the expectations of its chieftains. (see Table I)

TABLE I
 Presidential Votes in 1856⁹⁴

	<u>National Total</u>	<u>New York</u>
Buchanan	1,838,169	198,878
Frémont	1,347,264	276,007
Fillmore	874,534	124,604

Frémont carried the state by a substantial plurality; the state ticket also won handily, carrying with it a large majority in the Assembly.⁹⁵ For the first time in three years, the combined Democratic vote failed to constitute a majority, an important indication that the Democracy had sustained heavy losses. Fillmore ran third

⁹³Elias W. Leavenworth to Morgan, October 24, 1856. For other letters reflecting Republican optimism in New York, see Weed to Morgan, November 2, 1856, Morgan Papers, NYSL; Myron H. Clark to Weed, undated, David H. Abell to Weed, September 9, 1856, Weed Papers, URL.

⁹⁴Tribune Almanac and Political Register, 1857.

⁹⁵The state voting figures for the head of the ticket (governor) were John A. King (Republican), 264,400; Amasa J. Parker (Democrat), 198,616; Erastus T. Brooks (American), 130,870. The Assembly would consist of 81 Republicans, 8 Americans, 31 Democrats, 8 Americans and Democrats. Ibid.; see also E. Pershine Smith to Henry C. Carey, November 6, 1856, Smith Papers, HSPa.

in New York as he did in the nation. Within a year, the Know-Nothings had suffered a fatal decline, falling from first to last place at the polls.

The heavy pluralities and majorities which the Republicans piled up in the western, central, and northern portions of the state cancelled out and surmounted the pockets of Know-Nothing and Democratic strength in eastern and southern New York. The Fillmoreites' hope of building a powerful base in the "infected district" had been crushed. Failing to carry a single county in this region, they lost their former strongholds to the Republicans;⁹⁶ in most cases, the decline in their vote was precipitous. Neither Haven nor Hunt escaped the rout. The former ran third in a bitter three cornered race, in which the popular Democrat Israel T. Hatch narrowly beat Elbridge G. Spaulding,⁹⁷ the Republican candidate; the latter lost by a large margin⁹⁸ to his Republican opponent, Silas Burroughs. The nativists also sustained losses in the Hudson river counties and New York City, but these were not as significant.

⁹⁶The Know-Nothings lost control of Tompkins, Orleans, Seneca, Ontario, Chautauqua, Livingston, Steuben. Consult Appendix for voting statistics.

⁹⁷Elbridge G. Spaulding to Seward, November 7, 1856, Seward Papers, URL.

⁹⁸E. Pershine Smith to Henry C. Carey, November 6, 1856, Smith Papers, HSPa.

Astounded by the result, Stephen Sammons exclaimed that "people acted as if they were bereft of their senses."⁹⁹

The Democrats were most successful in the downstate area, especially in New York and Kings counties, where they garnered 52.65% and 46.21% of the vote, respectively.¹⁰⁰ As usual, they obtained overwhelming majorities in the Irish wards. They also received a significant number of votes from wealthier sections of the City, thus revealing that many conservative merchants, who had formerly voted Whig and then Know-Nothing, had turned full circle and supported their old enemies. Their reasons were clear and openly professed: Buchanan appeared stronger than Fillmore and therefore better able to defeat Frémont.¹⁰¹ Democrats also showed vitality in the Hudson river counties, an area where the economy was closely tied to New York City. Henry H. Van Dyck--the former editor of the Albany Atlas, who defected to the Republicans--was beaten by the influential and wealthy Erastus Corning in a hotly contested canvass for Albany's congressional seat. Dem-

⁹⁹Sammons to Fillmore, November 7, 1856, Fillmore Papers, SUNY (Oswego).

¹⁰⁰Consult Appendix for voting statistics.

¹⁰¹Philip Foner, Business & Slavery, Ch. 6.

ocrats won other victories in congressional races and
¹⁰²
 gained a total of eleven seats.

These successes could not hide the fact that the Democrats had suffered a serious setback. Like the Know-Nothings, the Democracy had been routed in the "infected district." A review of the election returns prompted one Buchanan supporter to complain that the party was "hopelessly prostrate and except in N.Y.C. & Bklyn can hardly be said to exist in the state."¹⁰³ Horatio Seymour agreed with this assessment:

We are badly beaten in this state notwithstanding our best efforts to uphold the democratic party. I am mortified at the result. In central and western New York we were swept away by the popular feeling. In Oneida county we put our best speakers and most active men into the field, but the majority against us is nearly five thousand. ¹⁰⁴

David A. Ogden admitted that he had never engaged in a campaign like the last and hoped never to do so again. According to Ogden, the people of the North went berserk: "They would not reason or hardly think, but the Republican party moved forward in solo column like the crusaders of

¹⁰²Tribune Almanac and Political Register, 1857; Albany Atlas and Argus, November 7, 1856.

¹⁰³Evers M. Johnson to Marcy, November 7, 1856, Marcy Papers, LC.

¹⁰⁴Seymour to Marcy, November 12, 1856, Marcy Papers, LC.

old--excited, fanatical, abusive, & irresistible."¹⁰⁵

New York Republicans had expended great efforts to attain a national victory, and they were naturally disappointed over Frémont's defeat. Nevertheless, they were elated over their victory at home. Especially gratifying were the large majorities from upstate. "It is with pride that I look upon the rural districts of our state and with a very different feeling--at the cotton portion of it," wrote Edwin Barber Morgan. "That the interior should wipe out the 30,000 majority of N. York City and its twin sister Brooklyn & pole [sic] up 30 or 40,000 more is consoling."¹⁰⁶ While watching the election returns come in on the telegraph, Erasmus P. Smith wrote a letter which articulated the Republicans' pleasure:

The more the figures come in, the larger is the victory in this state...We have now a party which contains the elite of the Whigs & the Democrats--all that gave either of them strength is with us--all that weakened either is left with the Hindoos & Democrats. It has ceased to be a coalition & has become a chemical union... We have the strongest party that ever took the field & four years hence, it will sweep the country. ¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵David A. Ogden to Marcy, November 30, 1856, Marcy Papers, LC.

¹⁰⁶Edwin Barber Morgan to Seward, November 6, 1856, Seward Papers, URL.

¹⁰⁷E. Pershine Smith to Henry C. Carey, November 6, 1856, Smith Papers, HSPa.

The victory of the New York Republican party climaxed three years of political upheaval. The chaotic canvass of 1854 had broken down old party loyalties, but it failed to reveal a pattern for the future. In 1855, though the antislavery issue had clearly become paramount and nativism subordinate, the Know-Nothings, having reached the peak of their power, won by a small plurality. But in 1856, the revolution in the party system attained a definitive stage; the Republicans' decisive triumph and growing strength revealed that a dominant party had emerged in the Empire State.

The Republicans had put together a winning coalition. Seward Whigs, who comprised the largest and controlling contingent; Free Democrats, who had striven to mold an antislavery fusion for years; Barnburners, who had rebelled against the Nebraska test of Democratic loyalty; conservative Whigs, who were convinced that Southern demands were insatiable; temperance reformers, who decided to fight against slavery now and against alcohol later; and Know-Somethings, who were disgusted with Southern domination of the Know-Nothings, all joined the new party. Why did this amalgam take shape and succeed in 1856?

The clarification of doctrine with regard to the slavery extension issue contributed greatly to the Republican victory. Uncertainty had prevailed concerning the

precise position of the Know-Nothings and the Democrats on this vital question. Both of these parties, realizing the strong feeling against the Nebraska Act, had adopted state platforms which could be and were interpreted as hostile to Douglas' measure. In 1855, the nativists' Binghamton resolves omitting Article XII of the national platform and the Softs' declaration against further encroachment of free territory had lessened the distinction between them and the Republicans. However, one year later, no such confusion was possible. New York's Know-Nothing and Soft Shell leadership submitted to the discipline of their national organizations, both of which were dominated by the Southern point of view. Only the Republicans stood firmly for the admission of Kansas as a free state. The election revealed that the people of the Empire State had had enough acquiescence; what they wanted now was resistance.

The outbreak of guerrilla war in Kansas and the assault on Charles Sumner persuaded many that prohibition and legislative discrimination against foreigners and Catholics would have to wait until slavery's expansion had been checked. Although fearful of secession, a growing number of Old Line Whigs had also come to the conclusion that appeasement of the South should be ended.

The political skill of Thurlow Weed played an im-

portant part in bringing temperance advocates and nativists into the Republican coalition; he adroitly hinted at the possibility of his aid to these other crusades, although secretly he had only contempt for them. Nowhere did Weed's strategy have greater impact than in the Burned-over-region. During the period 1854-1855, the "infected district" had been attracted to both Know-Nothingism and temperance reform. However, in 1856, this region gave its overwhelming support to the antislavery movement.

Another factor in Republican success was the wide appeal of the "non-extension" principle. Even many abolitionists, who were dedicated to the total eradication of slavery, convinced themselves that the Republicans would eventually support this position. Straight Whigs, on the other hand, were reassured by the limited objectives of Republicanism and the repeated professions of conservatism by its leaders. Republicans deliberately cast a wide net and succeeded in unifying individuals who had formerly been at opposite ends of the political spectrum.

The election of 1856 brought the revolution in New York's political system to an end. The pattern of party alignments and power which emerged during the Frémont campaign persisted for many years to come. Consequently, this study has been circumscribed by the years 1854-1856. The American party, having sustained a crippling blow,

never regained its former promise and finally merged with the Republicans in 1860. The Democrats lost control of the Empire State, in both national and local contests, until 1862. Never again would they occupy the preponderant position which they had enjoyed in the past. The Republicans prevailed in all the crucial contests before secession. Although failing to place Seward in the presidency, they carried their state for Abraham Lincoln in 1860.

CONCLUSION

The second American party system endured for approximately twenty years before succumbing to the overwhelming stresses exerted upon it. By 1854, the two major parties were in an advanced state of decay. Many of the old Jacksonian issues which had formerly helped to define differences between Whigs and Democrats were obsolete. But most important, the failure to keep the slavery issue out of national politics created a growing strain. Sectional tension in the national political organizations was transmitted to the New York state parties, where it intensified the bitter feuds between Hard Shells and Soft Shells and Seward and Silver Gray Whigs. The deterioration of the political parties in New York was to a marked degree a consequence of pressures at the national level.

At a time when the party system was least able to cope with disruptive forces, it was subjected to major strains which practically destroyed it. By reopening agitation over slavery, the Kansas-Nebraska bill renewed the stress on the weakened national parties. When Southern and Northern whigs aligned themselves with their sections in the vote on Douglas' measure, the Whig party collapsed. The Democratic party also suffered a reverse;

about one-half of the Northern Democrats defied the Pierce administration and voted against the bill. The spontaneous outpouring of Northern indignation manifesting itself in hundreds of anti-Nebraska meetings helped to undermine all existing political organizations. Held "without distinction of party," these gatherings revealed the widespread attitude that old political organizations were no longer capable of handling the new emergency. The temperance and nativist crusades reinforced the destructive effect of the Nebraska Act. Thousands abandoned former political loyalties and joined movements dedicated to outlawing liquor and erecting discriminatory laws against Catholics and foreigners. In the Burned-over-region, the antislavery, nativist, and temperance causes enjoyed wide support and competed with each other for the zeal of reformers. This area became the crucial battleground.

The Hard Shell-Soft Shell feud severely weakened the New York Democratic party and represented a dangerous threat to the entire Democracy. Dissatisfied with the patronage granted them by President Pierce and Governor Seymour, the Hards waged a desperate struggle to gain their objectives. Repeated rebuffs from Southern Democrats only increased their alienation, and they entered into a loose alliance with the Know-Nothings. Rather than healing this rift, the Cincinnati convention made

it worse. Although Buchanan's nomination brought the Hards back into the Democratic fold, the Softs' humiliation and envy prevented effective cooperation in the canvass.

The Nebraska bill brought about a crisis in the Soft Shell faction. It jeopardized the fragile alliance between Barnburners and Hunkers composing the Soft amalgam. Confronted by the impossible task of satisfying the President and the people, the Soft press revealed the tensions unleashed within the party. Secretary of State Marcy's plight illustrated the pressures on leading Soft politicians; he had to soothe angry Radical Democrats without antagonizing Southern members of his party. Douglas' measure reawakened Barnburner resentment against Southern tests of party loyalty and encouraged antislavery Democrats to revive the rebellious spirit of 1848. The Softs found that the only way to relieve the stresses threatening the party was to adopt an equivocal position on slavery extension. On the one hand, they appeared to endorse the Nebraska Act, while on the other hand, they affirmed their devotion to the free soil cause. Concentration on the liquor question was another dodge designed to divert attention from differences over slavery.

The powerful ties of Democratic party loyalty were the greatest asset of New York Softs. In 1854 and 1855,

this emotion enabled Tammany's Federal officeholders to prevent substantial numbers of Barnburners from defecting. After three years of unremitting crises, however, the limitations of this remarkably resilient bond were exceeded. In 1856, the combination of guerrilla warfare in Kansas, the unqualified Soft Shell endorsement of the Administration's Kansas policy, and the Cincinnati convention, which permitted no deviation from the Nebraska test, overcame years of identity with the Democratic party and sent thousands of Barnburners into the Republican party.

The grand scheme of the New York Silver Grays to avoid the sectional stresses destroying the other national parties aborted. Although a strong issue, prejudice against Catholics and foreigners could not overcome sectional differences over slavery. The decision of many New York Assemblymen to betray the secret Order and vote for Seward's re-election marked the beginning of Know-Nothing decline. It demonstrated that New Yorkers' devotion to antislavery principles was stronger than their adherence to nativist ones. Even Fillmore's attempt to deemphasize bigotry and concentrate on Unionism could not bring harmony. The Silver Grays' failure to build a basis for a national organization gave substance to the worst fear of nationalists--that no party would be able for long to mediate stresses dividing the North and the South.

The New York Whig party suffered the greatest damage from the nativist and temperance crusades. Only by paying lip service to temperance in 1854 did the Whigs achieve a narrow victory. Seward and Weed followed a cautious policy with regard to the Republican movement. Both demonstrated considerable reluctance in giving up the Whig organization. In 1854, they deliberately thwarted Free Democratic exertions for fusion. However, one year later, after Republican successes in many Northern states had left them no other choice, they controlled the process of forming the New York Republican party.

The political wizardry of Weed played an important role in the crisis. With great skill, he disarmed those who challenged his leadership, neutralized the stresses on the Whig party, and guided its disparate elements into Republican ranks. He concentrated his efforts on regaining his old political base in the "infected district." Although he despised both temperance and nativist sentiments, he used these causes for both Whig and Republican advantage. He always maintained, however, the necessity for holding the antislavery issue paramount. His strategy succeeded in 1856, when the Burned-over-region gave an overwhelming endorsement to the Republican party.

The civil war in Kansas and the assault on Sumner dramatically increased sectional antagonism and gave a

tremendous boost to the Frémont campaign. The same events depressed Know-Nothing and Democratic prospects, which were dependent on an easing of tension between North and South. These occurrences had a decisive impact on many Old Line Whigs, who reluctantly concluded that Republican charges of Southern insatiability were true. The fusionists' ability to attract not only conservative but also abolitionist votes revealed the wide appeal of the "non-extension" principle. An effective combination of principle and practical politics was the essential reason for Republican success. The fusionists had their ideologues, but they were also guided by experienced politicians. No source of prospective support was ignored or abandoned to the opposition.

The revolution in the New York party system had three distinct stages, corresponding to the three years of upheaval. The canvass of 1854 helped to destroy old partisan loyalties but failed to give any order to the politically chaotic situation. No trend could be discerned in the Burned-over-region, where reformers divided their voting strength between Know-Nothing and Whig-temperance candidates. By 1855, an important change had taken place: the antislavery issue emerged as the foremost subject before the electorate. As attention focused on threatening developments in Kansas, temperance and nativist

enthusiasm declined throughout the state but especially in the "infected district." The Republicans' defeat in 1855 was largely attributable to the fact that both the Softs and the Know-Nothings endeavored to give their campaign an antislavery character. Thus no clear distinction emerged between the fusionists' position and that of their opponents. But in 1856, a clarification of party doctrine and a tightening of party discipline occurred. Softs and Know-Nothings submitted to Southern demands for approval of the Nebraska policy; only the Republicans stood firmly opposed to the extension of slavery in Kansas.

The fusionists' decisive victory and expanding power ended the revolution in the state's politics. The great confusion caused by the existence of numerous parties and crusades had been resolved. The Constitutional requirement that, to prevent a contest in the House of Representatives, the president be elected by a majority of electoral votes had acted to restore the two party system. The Empire State had finally added its powerful voice to the growing demand that the scourge of slavery be confined and placed upon the road to ultimate extinction.

APPENDIX
Election Returns, 1856

TABLE I

1

Party Vote by Percentages in the Burned-Over-Region, 1856.

<u>County</u>	<u>Total Vote</u>	<u>Republican %</u> <u>(Frémont)</u>	<u>Democratic %</u> <u>(Buchanan)</u>	<u>American %</u> <u>(Fillmore)</u>
Allegany	9041	72.39	18.13	9.46
Broome	7194	59.73	29.27	10.99
Cattaraugus	7917	65.25	22.39	12.35
Cayuga	10,776	65.28	16.87	17.84
Chautauqua	10,901	64.55	16.94	18.50
Chemung	5219	51.04	34.27	14.67
Chenango	8934	61.09	26.93	11.97
Cortland	5405	66.53	21.85	11.61
Erie	19,957	34.57	37.76	26.65
Genessee	6154	58.82	23.30	17.87
Jefferson	12,803	64.43	27.30	8.26
Lewis	4656	67.09	23.92	8.97
Livingston	7228	49.76	22.85	27.37
Madison	9038	69.83	20.59	9.57
Monroe	15,337	49.44	30.53	20.01
Niagara	7755	50.36	24.03	25.59
Oneida	19,159	58.31	33.33	8.35
Onondaga	16,022	62.85	26.38	10.76
Ontario	8382	54.29	19.58	26.11
Orleans	5552	55.61	18.94	25.43
Oswego	13,104	62.92	28.10	8.96
Schuyler	3984	63.80	24.62	11.57
Seneca	5053	42.80	32.15	25.03
Steuben	12,521	58.06	25.69	16.24
Tioga	5920	56.26	36.38	7.34
Tompkins	6919	58.08	20.66	21.24
Wayne	9223	62.62	21.67	15.69
Wyoming	6548	62.09	29.18	8.72
Yates	4260	70.28	21.47	8.23
Regional Totals	264,962	58.26	26.20	15.53

¹The computations are my own. Percentages have not been rounded off and thereby do not always add up to 100%. This is also true for the other tables. Tribune Almanac and Political Register, 1857, p. 46.

TABLE II

Party Vote by Percentages in Eastern New York, 1856.²

<u>County</u>	<u>Total Vote</u>	<u>Republican</u> % (Frémont)	<u>Democratic</u> % (Buchanan)	<u>American</u> % (Fillmore)
Albany	16,068	27.76	42.89	29.33
Columbia	8819	43.29	34.24	22.46
Clinton	6104	43.56	34.96	21.47
Delaware	8483	51.47	24.83	23.68
Dutchess	11,564	47.66	34.92	17.40
Essex	5033	57.69	23.30	18.99
Franklin	4214	34.85	37.96	27.17
Fulton	5001	51.84	27.47	20.67
Greene	6043	35.81	38.82	25.36
Hamilton	516	28.87	48.44	22.67
Herkimer	7954	63.79	20.74	15.46
Montgomery	6274	49.02	23.66	27.30
Orange	10,394	41.11	37.98	20.89
Otsego	11,197	56.81	32.10	10.97
Putnam	2538	37.94	43.18	18.87
Rensselaer	14,116	36.50	31.27	32.21
Rockland	3131	21.33	48.73	29.73
Saratoga	9551	47.36	25.60	27.02
Schenectady	3714	46.14	21.19	32.66
Schoharie	6843	34.72	41.45	23.81
St. Lawrence	12,780	75.88	15.25	8.85
Sullivan	5310	31.82	29.81	38.36
Ulster	11,665	25.13	34.54	40.31
Warren	3943	55.84	25.51	18.64
Washington	8654	59.78	18.85	21.35
Westchester	12,691	35.06	36.24	28.68
Regional Totals	204,600	44.47	31.46	24.06

²Ibid.

TABLE III

Party Vote by Percentages in Downstate New York, 1856.³

<u>County</u>	<u>Total Vote</u>	<u>Republican %</u> <u>(Frémont)</u>	<u>Democratic %</u> <u>(Buchanan)</u>	<u>American %</u> <u>(Fillmore)</u>
Kings	30,667	25.58	46.21	28.19
New York	79,606	22.32	52.65	25.02
Queens	6801	27.73	35.20	37.06
Richmond	3232	22.77	47.95	29.26
Suffolk	6418	37.28	31.86	30.85
Regional Totals	126,724	24.17	48.98	26.84
State Totals	596,286	46.28	32.84	20.86

³Ibid.

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