Political Parties and American Political Development
from the Age of Jackson to the Age of Lincoln

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all Whigs had believed that a "*taking* candidate" provided the only route to power after 1844. Whigs in heavily Democratic states quickly gravitated in that direction, but elsewhere the Whigs essayed a number of different roads to recovery. Only when those various sallies failed to reach the target did Whigs in most states adopt a different strategy to defeat the Democratic foe in 1848. Most southern Whigs did indeed turn to Taylor in 1847, largely but not exclusively, because of the slavery issue. But it was only the disappointing results of 1847 and the apparent issue vacuum following the end of the Mexican War in March, 1848, at a time when the economy still flourished, that shifted the majority of northern delegates toward Taylor and Scott. But just as some Whigs had predicted, that issue vacuum proved to be only temporary. By the fall of 1848, after Taylor had already been nominated, the economy had soured sufficiently that Whigs could once again hammer away at the Walker tariff, at the subtreasury, and at large government deficits in key northern states. Those attacks on traditional issues would reinforce the loyalty of most Whig voters in the North to their party. In combination with Taylor's palpable appeal beyond Whig ranks to Democrats, Native Americans, and first-time voters, with his malleability on the proviso issue that allowed the Whigs to run a two-faced campaign on the slavery extension issue, and with the aggravation of the rupture in the New York Democratic party, they would help to give the Whigs their second, and last, chance to occupy the White House.

The Mysterious Disappearance of the American Whig Party

This essay briefly examines one of the most fascinating puzzles in American political history: namely, what explains the death or total disappearance of the Whig party in the 1850s? Between 1834 and 1848, the Whigs battled the Democrats on even terms if one considers the number of popular votes and of local, state, and national offices won. After winning control of the House of Representatives in the elections of 1846–1847, they captured the presidency, 57 percent of the seats in the House, and 71 percent of the governors elected in 1848.[1] By the end of 1856, eight years after this genuinely impressive performance, the Whigs had ceased to exist as a functioning political organization.

The essay's primary goal is to argue that the collapse of the Whig party should indeed be regarded as a riddle by pointing out how unusual

1. After the 1848 elections, the Whigs also controlled the legislatures in fifteen of thirty states. All figures on percentages of House seats or governorships won in a specific year are taken from Congressional Quarterly, *Guide to U.S. Elections* (Washington, D.C., 1975). Figures on the partisan share of seats in any particular Congress, in contrast, are taken from U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States: Colonial Times to 1970* (2 vols.; Washington, D.C., 1975), II, 1083. The figures differ because prior to 1876 congressional elections were held at different times in different states in both odd- and even-numbered years. For example, although Whigs won 57 percent of the House seats in 1848, they lacked a majority in the next Congress because they did so poorly in 1849. Figures on party strength in state legislatures refer only to the lower house and were aggregated by Walter Dean Burnham for the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research. Neither Professor Burnham nor the consortium is responsible for the use I make of them.

the utter evaporation of a major political party is. But it also explores a fruitful way to begin to solve the mystery of the party's disappearance. The method it employs both to demonstrate and to unravel this puzzle is to make a few brief forays into comparative history.

Most historians have found nothing very mysterious about the expiration of the Whig party, and they have offered a host of explanations for it. Among others, these include the death of the Whigs' two great leaders, Henry Clay and Daniel Webster, internal factionalism, the obsolescence of Whig issues, sectional disruption over the slavery issue, and the incursion of the nativist Know Nothing party into Whig voting support.[2] All of these factors contributed to the party's demise, but the problem is that one can easily think of examples of other major political parties that survived the death of founding leaders, internal division, the loss of old issues, and the threat of third party incursions. Individually or in combination, that is, these weaknesses need not prove fatal to the life of a political institution. Simply put, the mystery is this: Why did the Whig party succumb to these pressures when other major parties at other times and places did not? To give two brief examples of what I mean: the Republican party still exists today long after the death of its founders and the obsolescence of the sectional issues on which it was originally built; and the Dixiecrat revolt from the Democratic party in 1948 was a far more severe sectional rupture than the Whigs ever suffered, yet the Democratic party continues to thrive in both the North and South. Once one invokes a comparative perspective, in short, the reasons for the death of the Whig party are less transparent than historians have thought.

Nineteenth-century Americans who lived through the party's demise also offered a host of explanations for its disappearance. Here let me focus on one that differs somewhat from the list proffered by later historians.

2. One could cite numerous examples of these interpretations, but see: Allan Nevins, *Ordeal of the Union* (2 vols.; New York, 1947), I, 194, II, 28–42; William R. Brock, *Parties and Political Conscience: American Dilemmas, 1840–1850* (Millwood, N.Y., 1979), 151–52, 188; Albert D. Kirwan, *John J. Crittenden: The Struggle for the Union* (Lexington, Ky., 1962), 279–92; Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party Before the Civil War* (New York, 1970), 9, 193–94; Richard P. McCormick, *The Second American Party System: Party Formation in the Jacksonian Era* (Chapel Hill, 1966), 353; Michael F. Holt, "The Politics of Impatience: The Origins of Know Nothingism," *Journal of American History*, LX (1973), 309–31; David M. Potter, *The Impending Crisis, 1848–1861*, completed and edited by Don E. Fehrenbacher (New York, 1976), 240–52.

In 1870 a newspaper editor from Jackson, Mississippi, named Edward Stafford wrote this wonderfully pithy epitaph for the Whigs: "The Whig party died of too much respectability and not enough people."[3] Although this breezy diagnosis may strike some as flippant, it is as trenchant as it is succinct.

First, note what Stafford omitted from his postmortem. Although he wrote only five years after the close of the Civil War and although Mississippi ranked next to South Carolina in terms of fire-eating southern sectional extremism during the antebellum period, he did *not* cite sectional disruption over slavery as *the* or even *a* cause of the Whigs' death. Many historians would probably reject Stafford's analysis peremptorily because of this omission, for surely the most widely accepted explanation of the Whig party's disappearance is that it was a casualty of the sectional conflict that ultimately eventuated in civil war. Yet Stafford in 1870 undoubtedly remembered what later historians who advance this interpretation conveniently forget. The Democratic party was far more rancorously divided along sectional lines in 1860, to say nothing of the next five years when hundreds of thousands of northern and southern Democrats were literally trying to kill each other, than the Whig party ever had been. Yet it had recovered by 1870 and still flourishes today, 135 years after the Whig party descended to its grave. Patently, sectional division need not be fatal to a political party. Northern and southern Whigs, in fact, had been at odds over the slavery issue since the party's founding in 1834, yet despite that internal split it contested and won elections for twenty years. It was only when the Whigs ceased to hold conventions, nominate candidates, and contest elections under the Whig label that we can speak of its death, and the division of the party along sectional lines does not explain its collapse as an effective political force within the rival sections.[4]

3. Jackson *Pilot*, July 30, 1870.

4. For evidence of the persistent division between northern and southern Whigs over slavery, see Thomas B. Alexander, *Sectional Stress and Party Strength: A Study of Roll-Call Voting Patterns in the United States House of Representatives, 1836–1860* (Nashville, 1967); and Michael F. Holt, *The Political Crisis of the 1850s* (New York, 1978). Potter, *The Impending Crisis*, 240–52, argues that it is a mistake to equate sectional division in a national party with its collapse within the respective sections and that nativism, not anti-Nebraska sentiment, best explains the disintegration of the northern Whigs, who tried to exploit anti-Nebraska sentiment. I made the same point earlier in "The Politics of Impatience," and it has recently been conclusively demonstrated in William E. Gienapp, *The Origins of the Republican Party, 1852–1856* (New York, 1987).

If we turn from what Stafford omitted to what he wrote, his assertion that the Whig party died of too few people points to a crucial fact about American political parties in the nineteenth century. They were not primarily legislative or parliamentary organizations. Rather, they were mass parties whose continued existence was determined by the allegiance of voters to them. In some states, leaders were the first to abandon the Whig organization, but in most places only the previous and massive loss of voter allegiance to the party convinced regretful Whig politicians that they must jettison a party they loved. Stafford, in short, was on the mark. Whig leaders gave up the ghost and the party dissolved when it no longer retained enough voting support to have a chance of winning office.

This last statement, of course, is a truism, and ultimately it is as unsatisfactory an explanation of the Whigs' disappearance as is Stafford's otherwise astute analysis. For one thing, we need to know why, not just whether, the Whigs lacked sufficient voter support. Stafford himself provides no explicit answer to that question, but his implicit thrust is that the Whigs were an elitist party that could not attract enough nonelite voters to win elections and quite possibly drove the majority of them into opposition precisely because it was elitist. If that is what Stafford meant, it is no help at all in explaining why the Whigs died in the 1850s. In most places, the great majority of the wealthy, silk-stocking set supported the Whigs, some Whigs always possessed an aristocratic or antidemocratic ideology, and Whigs did self-consciously present themselves as the party of the sober, church-going, educated, respectable classes, if not of the elite, while simultaneously disparaging Democratic voters as a mindless, feckless, and dangerous rabble. Stafford's characterization of the Whigs, and certainly the Whigs of Mississippi, then, was accurate. The problem is that the Whig party always had a patrician, smugly self-righteous image, yet it still won enough votes and offices to remain an effective opponent of the Democrats for twenty years.[5] Whig elitism cannot explain why the party flourished for a number of years and then vanished.

5. The studies that show the preference of wealthy classes in northern cities as well as southern black-belts for the Whigs are too numerous to list. On the Whigs' aristocratic ideology and self-consciously adopted image of respectability, see John Ashworth, *"Agrarians" & "Aristocrats": Party Ideology in the United States, 1837–1846* (London, 1983), esp. 52–84, 111–31; Daniel Walker Howe, *The Political Culture of the American Whigs* (Chicago, 1979); and Paul E. Johnson, *A Shopkeepers' Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815–1837* (New York, 1978). For particularly vivid examples of the Whig tendency to disparage the Democratic electorate as a drunken, illiterate, and irresponsible rabble, see Horace Greeley's election postmortems in the New York *Tribune* in November and December, 1844.

More important, Stafford's reference to "not enough people" is too vague to be helpful. The crucial issue is exactly how small does a major party's share of the electorate have to be before its leaders decide to throw in the towel and abandon the party entirely. Let me be as precise as possible about this point, for it is central to my analysis. The question before us is not why one party loses to another in an election or even over a series of elections. In any two-party system, one will be the normal majority party and the other the normal minority party, and there is no doubt that during the life of the second party system the Whigs were the weaker of the two major parties. The question is why a major party that may have languished in the minority for a period of years disappears altogether rather than remaining in place as an outlet for those voters, however small their numbers, who dislike the majority party. Why a party dies, in sum, is much more puzzling than why it loses.

Some concrete numbers help illustrate this point. Aside from strong showings in the presidential elections of 1840 and 1848, the Whig record in Mississippi, Stafford's home state, was dismal. Whigs never won the governorship and averaged only two-fifths of the vote in six such elections between 1839 and 1849. Of a total of twenty-two Mississippi seats in the U.S. House of Representatives filled between 1837 and 1849, the Whigs won a grand total of two. Finally, during the decade of the 1840s, the Whigs' share of seats in the state legislature averaged a paltry 32.8 percent. If ever a party had too few people to compete for control of government, the Mississippi Whig party appeared to be it. "We have no hope as a party in this state," one Whig moaned in 1845. "You know we are in the egyptian darkness of Locofocoism."[6]

Despite this palpable futility, the party endured until 1854, long after Mississippi Whigs had every reason to abandon it as a certain loser. One could point out as well that for most of the twentieth century the Republican party was far weaker in most southern states than Whigs ever were and that it survived if only to serve as a broker for federal patronage

6. Duncan McKenzie to Duncan McLaurin, November 2, 1845, in Duncan McLaurin Papers, Perkins Library, Duke University.

when Republicans controlled the White House. Constant defeat at the polls, that is, need not result in utter disappearance.

As this last example suggests, the real measure of a party's competitiveness, if that determines its ability to survive, is not how it does in any single state but its performance nationwide. Even that, however, leaves the Whigs' disappearance a mystery. True, after the party's exemplary electoral record between 1846 and 1848, it went into a sudden tailspin. In 1849, for example, Whigs won only 30 percent of the House seats and 27 percent of the governorships contested. In the election cycle of 1850–1851, the Whigs captured only 38.5 percent of the seats in the House of Representatives, and in 1852–1853 their share dipped still further to 31 percent. During the same years, Whigs lost control of many state legislatures, and consequently their representation in the United States Senate also dropped from 41.6 percent in the Thirty-first Congress (1849–1851) to 39 percent in the Thirty-second and 35.5 percent in the Thirty-third, the Congress that passed the Kansas-Nebraska Act. Finally, even though Winfield Scott, the Whig presidential candidate in 1852, won more popular votes than any Whig ever had, he garnered only 43.8 percent of the popular vote and 14 percent of the electoral vote, whereas the victorious Zachary Taylor had received 47.3 percent of the popular and 56 percent of the electoral count in 1848.

This demoralizing trend, especially the rout in the presidential election, did engender a fatalistic defeatism among many Whigs, who became convinced that the party could never win again and must be abandoned. Manuscript evidence indicates, however, that by the end of 1853 most Whigs had no intention of deserting the party, particularly in states where it had traditionally been most competitive. Moreover, in the North the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act in the spring of 1854 kindled enormous optimism among Whigs and pessimism among Democrats that the Whigs were destined to recapture control of Congress and the White House. That act, groaned a New York Democrat in a typical lament, "must throw most if not all the free states into the hands of the Whigs . . . and secure to them the next President."[7]

7. J. J. Jones to William L. Marcy, March 21, 1854, in William L. Marcy Papers, Library of Congress. For additional evidence of Whig optimism and Democratic pessimism in the spring of 1854 because of the Kansas-Nebraska bill, see Holt, *Political Crisis of the 1850s*, 149–50.

Whatever the plight of the Whigs between 1849 and 1853, indeed, it pales in comparison with the abyss into which the still-flourishing Republican party was plunged in the 1930s. Although the Whigs were routed in the electoral vote in 1852, the margin between their share of the popular vote and that of the Democrats was only 7.1 percent, and that defeat followed a victory four years earlier. In contrast, Republicans lost the presidential election of 1932, and four years later they lost again with a disastrous 36.5 percent of the popular vote and 1.5 percent of the electoral count.[8] At their lowest ebb, the Whigs still controlled 31 percent of the seats in the House and 35.5 percent of those in the Senate. After the 1936 elections, the Republicans held a pathetic 20.5 percent of House seats and 16.6 percent of those in the Senate. Viewed somewhat differently, the Whigs disappeared only three years after they lost control of the White House and seven years after losing their majority in the House of Representatives. In contrast, Republicans were a minority in the House between 1930 and 1946, and after 1932 it would be twenty years before they again won the presidency.[9] Yet the Republicans, unlike the Whigs, obviously survived to fight and win another day.

By this point, it should be clear that the disappearance of the Whig party is more mysterious than most historians have admitted. The question is, Why were the Whigs the only mass major party in all of American history to die?[10] One way to answer that question is chronologically to reconstruct the history of the party and its death throes in order to identify the reasons why voters and politicians eventually deserted it. I have advanced such an interpretation in a previous book, and I am now engaged

8. The previously dominant Republicans lost control of the House as early as 1930, in 1932 Democrats captured control of the Senate as well, and in 1934 Democrats increased their majorities in both. The point is that the Republicans' record of defeat in the 1930s was longer and more severe than that of the Whigs after 1848.

9. Democrats also controlled the Senate from 1932 to 1946.

10. The Federalist party, of course, also died, but although the Federalists were the major rival of the Jeffersonian Republicans between 1792 and 1815, they were not a mass party like the Whigs. They never developed the electoral organization or elicited the passionate loyalty that the Whigs did, and most certainly they never mobilized anywhere near the number of voters that the Whigs did. The same could be said for the short-lived National Republican party, which appeared prior to the emergence of truly mass parties, never developed a credible base in the South, and failed even to combine all the opponents of the Democrats in the North. Hence it seems accurate to say that the Whigs were the only mass major party in American history to disappear.

in writing a much more detailed full-scale history of the party's birth, life, and death. Here I can give only a brief summary of my argument, one that will be familiar to readers of my *Political Crisis of the 1850s*.

The Whig party formed in the winter of 1833–1834 as an opponent of the Jacksonian Democrats, and it continued to exist only so long as it remained a credible opposition party, that is, only so long as it provided clear alternatives to the Democrats on matters of local, state, and national public policy and was perceived as being in conflict with the Democrats. Between 1849 and 1853, a series of developments both within and outside of the political system and of decisions by both Whig and Democratic political leaders narrowed or eliminated the issue conflicts between the parties and created a widespread public conviction that they were more alike, than different from, each other. Of these manifold and complex developments three were most important.[11]

First, in 1852 the national platforms of both major parties committed them to accepting the Compromise of 1850 as a final settlement of the slavery issue. This congruence, which came over the bitter protests of many northern Whigs who wanted to run against the compromise, not only erased partisan differences over slavery but also destroyed the ability of Whigs to campaign one way on the slavery issue in the North and another in the South, an ability that had allowed the Whigs to survive sectional differences over slavery since the party's founding.

Second, whereas the Whigs had traditionally been the party of native-born evangelical Protestants who were most infected with anti-Catholic, anti-immigrant, and prohibitionist sentiments, in 1852 the Whigs attempted to outbid the Democrats for the support of Catholics and immigrants, a tactical shift that required Whigs to disavow any sympathy for prohibitionism as well.[12] In the short run, this about-face proved futile, and it is now clear that a major reason the Democrats won the presidency in 1852 was a massive outpouring of new immigrant vot-

11. Documentation for this argument can be found in Holt, *Political Crisis of the 1850s*, 90–138.

12. On the traditional support of evangelical Protestants for the Whigs, see Johnson, *A Shopkeepers' Millennium;* Howe, *Political Culture of the American Whigs*, 9–38, 150–80; Lee Benson, *The Concept of Jacksonian Democracy: New York as a Test Case* (Princeton, 1961); and Ronald P. Formisano, *The Birth of Mass Political Parties: Michigan, 1827–1861* (Princeton, 1971).

ers into their column.[13] In the long run, the decision proved disastrous, for it permanently alienated nativists and prohibitionists from the Whig party just when they were about to become the fastest-growing voting blocs in the nation.

Third, and most significant of all, a series of state constitutional revisions and an economic boom fueled by the California gold strikes and unprecedentedly massive British investment erased partisan divisions on a host of economic issues that Whigs and Democrats had fought over since the Panic of 1837. This sudden prosperity proved especially pernicious to the Whigs, for the basic rationale behind their economic programs had been that the dearth of private capital required active governmental interventionism to promote economic growth. The abundance of private funds after 1849 not only seemed to render government activism unnecessary, but it also seemed to confirm the wisdom of the Democrats' negative state doctrines.

Whigs themselves were well aware that the economic mission of their party had suddenly become obsolete. A Baltimore Whig wrote his brother in 1853, for example, that because of the abundance of gold in private hands "the great dividing lines between the two old parties are fast melting away and such changes are taking place in the world that issues formerly momentous are now of comparatively trifling importance." Similarly, a Cincinnati Whig concluded in 1852: "The real grounds of difference upon important political questions no longer correspond with party lines. . . . Politics is no longer the topic of this country. Its important questions are settled. . . . Government no longer has its ancient importance. Its duties and powers no longer reach to the happiness of the people. The people's progress, progress of every sort, no longer depends on government." As important as what Whigs said is what they did. In 1852, 1853, and 1854, scores of leading Whig politicians reacted to their perception that government had become irrelevant by

13. Gienapp, *Origins of the Republican Party*, 31–35 and Tables 1.1–1.10 (pp. 482–86); Robert William Fogel, *Without Consent or Contract: The Rise and Fall of American Slavery* (New York, 1989), 319, and Paper 69 in the forthcoming second volume of Fogel's work, to be entitled *Evidence and Methods*. I possess a manuscript copy of this lengthy statistical paper, which stresses the increasing share that naturalized immigrants and American-born sons of immigrants formed of the participating electorate in the 1850s.

retiring from political life altogether in order to devote themselves exclusively to business activities to exploit the boom.[14]

The perceived congruence between Democrats and Whigs fostered widespread public apathy and alienation from *both* parties. The proportion of eligible voters participating in the presidential election of 1852 was lower than it had been in sixteen years.[15] Turnout plummeted still further in the state elections of 1853, but, more important, antipathy toward both parties as corrupt, spoils-oriented machines led by selfish, wire-pulling hacks who impeded popular self-government mushroomed. Party "controversy is continued not for measures, but for men—not for the public good, but for public office," complained a Baltimore newspaper in 1851, while a Philadelphian groused in 1853 that "without any present questions of political importance to preserve the old lines of parties, parties yet preserve the old names which prove convenient vehicles to convey certain individuals to places of trust & distinction & emolument."[16] The concomitant of these complaints that major party politicians were interested only in public pelf rather than redressing public grievances was the appearance in 1852 and especially 1853 of a host of third or splinter parties in local and state legislative elections. Seeking clean government, action against Catholics, prohibition, or simply political reform, these parties, like abstention, severed the moorings that had previously tied tens; if not hundreds, of thousands of voters to the Whig and Democratic parties.

14. Charles Barringer to Daniel M. Barringer, February 4, 1853, in Daniel M. Barringer Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina; diary entry for September 24, 1852, in Charles R. Williams, ed., *Diary and Letters of Rutherford Birchard Hayes, Nineteenth President of the United States* (5 vols.; Columbus, Ohio, 1922), I, 421–22. I will document this assertion about prominent Whig politicians retiring from political life in my forthcoming book, but I have in mind men like William B. Campbell, who left the governorship of Tennessee in 1853 to become a cotton factor in New Orleans, and Connecticut's Truman Smith, who resigned his Senate seat in May, 1854, before his term expired, in order to practice law in New York City.

15. Estimates of voter turnout can be found in U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States*, II, 1072. The tables in Gienapp, *Origins of the Republican Party*, 482–86, indicate that the turnout rate in the North would would have been even lower had not first-time voters and previous abstainers replaced former voters who now stayed home. Everywhere except Massachusetts and Connecticut, moreover, Democrats captured the preponderance of that new vote.

16. Baltimore *Clipper*, January 6, 1851, quoted in William Evitts, *A Matter of Allegiances: Maryland from 1850 to 1861* (Baltimore, 1974), 45; William Pettit to John M. Niles, December 8, 1853, in Gideon Welles Papers, Library of Congress.

Hence, when powerful new issues—namely, anti-Nebraskaism, anti-Catholicism, and prohibitionism—emerged in 1854 and 1855 and produced a realignment against the Democrats, most anti-Democratic voters wanted nothing to do with the Whig party. Its credibility as an authentic opponent of the Democrats and representative of the people had already been destroyed. Instead, anti-Democratic voters chose populistic new parties, the Republicans and the Know Nothings, through which they could punish the Democrats and the despised political hacks who commanded both old parties. As a New York Know Nothing paper explained that party's appeal in 1854, the people "saw [the Whig and Democratic] parties without any apparent difference contending for power, for the sake of power. They saw politics made a profession, and public plunder an employment."[17] At the same time, however, the very ferocity of Republican and Know Nothing assaults on the Democrats gave the targets of those parties—southerners, Catholics, immigrants, and wets—a new appreciation of the Democracy, thus sparing it from the utter disintegration suffered by the Whigs.

If one can describe what happened to the Whig party—and I fully realize that not everyone will agree with my interpretation—that description still does not fully answer the question of why the Whig party was the only mass major party in American history to disappear. As previously suggested, other major parties have withstood defeat, division, voter apathy and alienation, and third party threats. Put differently, the danger of chronologically reconstructing the demise of the Whig party is that one gets so immersed in the trees that he fails to see the forest, that one becomes so familiar with the details of the story that he remains blind to what differentiated the political structure and political ideology of the 1850s from other times when major parties managed to survive similar disabilities.

In other words, we must alter the question from what *caused* the death of the Whig party to what in the political context of the 1850s *allowed* the party to vanish at that time. If we think of the issues and

17. Livingston *Republican*, October 11, 1855. Although I name only Republicans and Know Nothings as new parties that emerged in 1854 and 1855, the situation in those turbulent years was not simple. Literally dozens of splinter parties with a wide variety of names mushroomed then to challenge the Whigs and Democrats, and it took time before Know Nothings and Republicans emerged from that confusion as the two major challengers.

developments of the 1850s as a chemical reaction, what in the chemical solution acted as the catalyst to cause the mix of elements to produce a specific result when, absent that catalyst, the reaction would not have occurred? To isolate and identify those distinctive catalytic agents, the best approach is to examine other major parties at other times and places that suffered similar degrees of duress but did not disappear.

Reasonable people will always disagree about the appropriateness of the two things being juxtaposed in any comparative analysis, but two major parties, the American Republican party in the 1970s and the British Conservative party in the 1840s and 1850s, so closely approximated the condition of the Whig party in the 1850s that extended comparison is justified. Together, these comparisons yield vital clues as to why the Whigs disappeared.

Given Republican control of the White House throughout the 1980s, it is easy to forget the striking similarities between the condition of the Whig party in the 1850s and that of the Republicans in the 1970s. The Whigs elected Zachary Taylor president in 1848, yet Taylor died in July, 1850, the second summer of his term, in the midst of scandals that tarred his administration as corrupt. His successor, Millard Fillmore, immediately alienated a substantial fraction of his party by supporting the Compromise of 1850, and in the following congressional and state elections of 1850–1851 the Whigs were reduced to 38 percent of the seats in the House, 39 percent in the Senate, and 20 percent of the governorships. Worse still, the party was deeply divided along sectional and ideological lines going into the national convention in 1852, and its outcome failed to unite the party as northerners repudiated the platform while southerners denounced the candidate. As many Whigs predicted, they lost the election that year when turnout plunged to its lowest level in sixteen years. Then, in 1853, 1854, and 1855, the party disintegrated because of the apathy, alienation, and voter defection I have already described, despite the fact that the actions of the new Democratic administration, both in its endorsement of the Kansas-Nebraska Act and in its blatant solicitation of Catholic immigrant support, handed the Whigs golden issues that should have allowed a comeback like the one that the actions of the Polk administration generated in 1846–1847.

Now look at the Republicans' story. After his overwhelming reelection in 1972, Richard Nixon was forced to resign the presidency in August, 1974, the summer of the second year of his new term, because of the Watergate scandal. His successor, Gerald Ford, immediately alienated a large portion of the electorate, including many Republicans, by pardoning Nixon. Watergate also helped spawn a widespread sense of unresponsiveness and pervasive corruption in the political system, just as existed in the 1850s, and in part because of this the Republicans were crushed in the midterm elections of 1974. That year they were reduced to a third of the seats in the House and 38 percent in the Senate, slightly worse than the Whig showing in 1850–1851, and they controlled only 26 percent of governorships compared with the Whigs' 20 percent in 1850–1851.[18] Like the Whigs, the Republicans were also sharply divided along sectional and ideological lines going into their next national convention, with conservatives and southerners supporting Ronald Reagan for the nomination and moderates and northerners supporting Ford. As in 1852, moreover, the favorite of the southerners lost.

Other aspects of the politics of the 1970s are also eerily akin to those of the 1850s. Every index available—ranging from the deplorably low level of voter turnout, to the declining rates of partisan identification in the electorate, to public opinion polls, to the scholarship of political scientists like Walter Dean Burnham, to the comments of pundits, most notably the astute David Broder of the Washington *Post*—indicated massive popular disgust with and disaffection from both major political parties and a despairing sense of political inefficacy. Indeed, because of this lack of public confidence and because of demonstrable institutional weaknesses, political parties by the 1970s barely resembled the formidable organizations that dominated nineteenth-century political life.[19]

More intriguing, between 1974 and 1976 there were widespread predictions from both within and without the Republican party that it would disappear and be replaced by a new party, most likely a new conservative party, unless it won the presidential election of 1976. Moderate

18. The figures on Republican strength come from an illuminating article by David Broder and Lou Cannon, "The Future of the GOP in Question," Washington *Post*, June 28, 1976.

19. The literature on the loss of confidence in political institutions, the waning of partisan loyalty, and and the disintegration of modern political parties is too vast to be cited, but much of it is conveniently summarized and annotated in Richard Jensen, "The Last Party System: Decay and Consensus, 1932–1980," in *The Evolution of American Electoral Systems*, ed. Paul Kleppner (Westport, Conn., 1981), 203–41.

Republicans expressed fright at this possibility. In contrast, many conservatives, angered by the me-tooism of the Ford administration, enthusiastically welcomed it. In 1975, for example, House Minority Leader John Rhodes actually circulated a document asking the 144 House Republicans to pledge that they would never desert the party for a new organization. Only 111 signed the pledge, and the others said they would welcome a new party. In the spring of 1976, national party chairman Mary Louise Smith called herself "terribly worried" about the future of the party because of "apathy and indifference and the drift to independence," while Republican political consultant John Deardorf bluntly declared, "Nationally, the Republican party is finished—it is saddled with too many problems, some current and some historic." Moderate Minnesota Republican congressman Bill Frenzel predicted that Reagan's nomination that year would put "the stake in the heart of the corpse . . . but I don't believe there's much life left in the party in [any] case." The widely respected moderate Republican senator from Maryland, Charles Mathias, echoed that sentiment when he stated on several occasions in 1976 that unless the Republicans broadened their base, they would "go the way of the Whigs."[20]

Although the Republicans lost the presidential election of 1976, which just like 1852 evoked the lowest level of turnout in sixteen years, and remained decided minorities in the House, Senate, statehouses, and state legislatures, the party palpably did not "go the way of the Whigs" by disappearing entirely during the next four years.[21] Rather than start a new party to challenge Republicans for the anti-Democratic vote, conservatives simply seized control of the Republican party, which remained in place to benefit from public exasperation with the blundering Carter administration. Nor did anyone else start a new party to replace the Republicans. The vast majority of moderates remained in the GOP despite the Reaganite takeover and used it, not a new organization, to punish the

20. "111 on Hill Vow GOP Loyalty," Washington *Post*, March 14, 1975; "The Future of the GOP in Question," *ibid.*, June 28, 1976. All of the quotations, except that by Senator Mathias, come from the latter article. I have not bothered to find newspaper citations for the Mathias statement, but I am absolutely certain that he made it and have personally talked to him about it.

21. On Republican weakness at the state level and in Congress throughout the 1970s, see Table 6.9 in Jensen, "The Last Party System," in *Evolution of American Electoral Systems*, ed. Kleppner, 221.

offending Democrats. Aside from preexisting and hopeless minor parties like the Libertarians and Socialists or principled abstention, the only other alternative available for voters who disliked the choice presented to them in 1980 was the forlorn independent candidacy of John Anderson, who with approximately 8 percent of the popular vote amassed a total akin to that won by John P. Hale, the Free Soil candidate, in 1852.

Given the similarity in the political atmosphere of the 1850s and 1970s, and given the fact that the Democratic Pierce administration between 1853 and 1856 generated even more opposition than did the Carter administration, why didn't the Whigs replicate the Republicans' performance? Why couldn't the party remain in place long enough to exploit a voter backlash against the incumbent Democrats?

This contrast illuminates an absolutely crucial point. It was both far more necessary and, paradoxically, more easy for those who wished to challenge the major parties' dominance of political life to start new parties in the nineteenth century than in the twentieth century. The vital fact is so obvious that it can easily be overlooked, but the Whig party did not disappear simply because its supporters became temporarily disillusioned with it. Had that alone been the case, the Whigs could have rebounded once voters' wrath turned against the Democrats, just as the Republicans did in 1980. Rather, it disappeared because new parties suddenly emerged and won away the allegiance of former Whig voters. Unlike the 1970s, when the only realistic choice was between Democrats and Republicans, after 1853 voters had a choice among Democrats, Whigs, Republicans, and Know Nothings. In sum, unlike the modern Republicans, the Whig party could not monopolize opposition to the Democrats, and, more than anything else, that simple fact explains its disappearance.

As so many scholars and observers have demonstrated, in contemporary politics those who are dissatisfied with the leadership or agendas of both major parties need not attempt to start a new party to challenge them. The parties' control of the nominating process is so attenuated that any outsider who has enough money to purchase television time can announce his or her candidacy for either party's nomination for congressman, senator, or governor and try, in effect, to buy the nomination by a media campaign. Because the existing major parties are so vulnerable to outside penetration, beginning a new party seems unnecessary except to ideolog-

ically inspired fringe groups.[22] In the nineteenth century, in contrast, the absence of electronic media through which one might reach the electorate over the heads of established party leaders, the partisan control of the existing means of communication, decentralized party organization, and the clout of established leaders in local, state, and national party conventions rendered such incursions by complete party outsiders virtually impossible. To win public office, an ambitious or disgruntled aspirant or group of voters either had to build an organization within one of the major parties to capture its nomination or to build a new party organization outside the existing ones.

If nineteenth-century parties were less vulnerable to internal challenges from outsiders than they are today, they were far more susceptible to external competition from new parties. Launching a new party to contest the major parties was simply far easier for most of the last century than it is today. In turn, the ability of new parties to lure away Whig voters and thus displace the Whigs as the most effective anti-Democratic party, perhaps more than anything else, provides the key to explaining the party's disappearance. The contrast between the 1970s and 1850s is again instructive.

In 1980 the most plausible alternative for those dissatisfied with the choice between Republicans and Democrats was the isolated candidacy of John Anderson in the presidential race, not a *party* that ran candidates for other offices as well. In fact, since the Progressive party of the 1910s and 1920s, all significant challenges to the major parties, except in occasional local or state contests, have come in presidential elections from men who ran on their own without support further down the ticket—Strom Thurmond and Henry Wallace in 1948 and George Wallace in 1968. It is almost inconceivable to think of a new party today building from the bottom up, running candidates simultaneously in a number of states for local, state, and congressional offices *before* mounting a campaign for the presidency.

Yet that kind of ground-up political movement is precisely what displaced the Whig party. True, Whigs faced challenges from the Liberty and Free Soil parties in presidential elections between 1840 and 1852,

22. Again, Jensen, "The Last Party System," in *Evolution of American Electoral Systems*, ed. Kleppner, 219–20, summarizes much of the literature on this point.

but those antislavery parties caused the Whigs far more harm because they also contested congressional and especially state legislative elections than because they ran presidential candidates.[23] More important, the Whig party disintegrated because its voters defected to new parties in local, state, and congressional elections in 1853, 1854, and 1855, not in a presidential election. By the next presidential election of 1856, it had already been so weakened that it was moribund.

The operative question then becomes, Why have challengers to the major parties since the 1920s focused almost exclusively on the presidency, whereas new parties in the 1850s, and for most of the nineteenth century, for that matter, were launched in subpresidential and especially in local and state races? In part, the timing of events explains this discrepancy, for the local, state, and congressional elections of 1854 and 1855, and not a presidential election, were the first to be held after the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act in May, 1854, and the emergence of the Know Nothing movement. Those who wanted to exploit anti-Nebraska sentiment and nativism when they were most powerful had to focus on the elections at hand. They could not wait until 1856, particularly because a conscious purpose of both Republican and Know Nothing leaders was to displace the Whig party.

Yet I would suggest that a more fundamental difference between the 1850s and contemporary politics has been the shift of effective governmental power within the American federal system. Since the beginning of the twentieth century and especially since the New Deal, more and more power has been concentrated in the national government at the expense of state and local governments. Within the elective branches of the national government, moreover, the tendency has been for power to concentrate in the hands of the executive at the expense of Congress, because the president has the initiative in conducting foreign policy and in staffing regulatory and other administrative agencies as well as the federal judiciary. Because of that trend and because of the apparent invulnerability of congressional incumbents, I suspect, the perception exists that the only

23. Some will question this assertion, for the Whigs' loss in the presidential election of 1844 is often attributed to the defection of northern Whigs to the Liberty party, especially in New York. Close statistical examination, however, reveals that most former Whig defectors to the Liberty party returned to vote for Clay in 1844 and that the growth of the Democratic vote after 1840, not the loss of Whig votes since that date, was the primary reason for Clay's defeat.

way to change the direction of the national government is to capture control of the White House. Hence the sporadic Lone Ranger independent campaigns for the presidency alone.

In the 1850s, in contrast, the federal system was far more vibrant in that local and state governmental jurisdictions possessed more effective power over matters of vital importance to voters than they do today. Hence, gaining control of local and state governments was every bit as important to them as winning control of Congress or the presidency. Look briefly at the issues that fueled the party reorganization and voter realignment of the mid-1850s, for example. Prohibition was a matter of state and local, not national, jurisdiction. It required control of state legislatures and governorships to pass prohibition laws, but enforcement of those laws was primarily the responsibility of county and municipal officials. Hence prohibitionists focused on local and state races. Know Nothings wanted to bar Catholics and immigrants from voting and holding public office, and state legislatures (or state constitutional conventions), not Congress, established those requirements. State and local governments also had direct jurisdiction over the three chief menaces angry Protestants identified with the Catholic Church: the transfer of legal title to the physical properties of Catholic churches from the laity to the clergy; the Catholic drive to ban the Protestant Bible from public schools; and most important, the Catholic drive to get public tax support for parochial schools. Defeating these Catholic initiatives required control of local and state governments, not Congress or the presidency; hence Know Nothings placed first priority on capturing subnational offices. True, extending the naturalization period for immigrants from five to twenty-one years, just like repealing the Kansas-Nebraska Act, required gaining control of Congress; and the Know Nothings, like the embryonic Republican party, competed with Democrats and Whigs for control of House seats in 1854 and 1855. Even that goal, however, necessitated a focus on state legislative races, because in the 1850s state legislatures, not popular voters statewide, elected United States senators. For all of these reasons, the emerging rivals to the Whigs first aimed their efforts at state and local races, not the presidency.[24]

24. I have discussed these matters more fully in "The Politics of Impatience"; "The Antimasonic and Know Nothing Parties," in *History of U.S. Political Parties*, ed. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. (4 vols.; New York, 1973), I, 575–737; and *Political Crisis of the 1850s*, 155–69.

The point is crucial, for, given the organizational difficulty of selecting candidates and distributing ballots, the smaller the geographical size of a jurisdiction the better the chances that a new party could successfully challenge an existing organization. It was far more difficult to launch a new party in a presidential or even gubernatorial election than in races for mayor, county commissioner, state legislator, or congressman. The new Republican and Know Nothing parties—and the dozens of other new parties that contested elections in the chaos of 1854 and 1855—picked precisely those elections in which it was easiest to wean away Whig voters. Building a coherent nationwide or even statewide organization across hundreds of local jurisdictions, of course, required an exceptional degree of coordination, one that did not exist in 1854 or 1855 and emerged only fitfully in 1856. Yet those local jurisdictions proved perfect battlegrounds on which a bewildering variety of insurgent new parties could both smash the Democracy and annihilate Whiggery.

In addition to the shift within the federal system, there was a second reason why it was far easier to build successful new parties in the 1850s than in the 1970s. It can be summarized in two words—ballot access. Prior to the adoption of state-printed secret ballots in the 1890s, political parties themselves had the obligation to print and distribute ballots. In a host of ways, this requirement made political parties far more powerful than they are today, for candidates were absolutely dependent upon the party organization to give people a chance to vote for them. But this practice also meant that anyone who had access to a printing press and enough manpower to distribute ballots could start a new party. In sum, challengers to the major parties did not have to clear a series of legal hurdles to get "on the ballot." They could print their own ballots that were just as legal as those printed by the major parties.

Since the so-called reforms of the 1890s, in contrast, places on the state-printed ballots are reserved for officially sanctioned or recognized political parties. Evidence indicates, indeed, that in many states the major parties adopted the Australian ballot with the explicit intention of denying third parties like the Socialists and Populists access to the electorate.[25] The

25. Richard L. McCormick, *From Realignment to Reform: Political Change in New York State, 1893–1910* (Ithaca, 1981), 114–18; John F. Reynolds and Richard L. McCormick, "Outlawing 'Treachery': Split Tickets and Ballot Laws in New York and New Jersey, 1880–1910,"

two major parties, in sum, monopolized ballot access for themselves specifically to quash third-party challenges. To break that monopoly, minor or third parties face severe hurdles. Either they must prove that they received a certain proportion of the vote in a previous election, literally an impossible task for a new party, or they must secure a specified number of validated signatures on petitions to gain a place on state-printed tickets—arduous tasks that, one can recall, obsessed the Wallace and Anderson campaigns of 1968 and 1980.

A comparison of the respective fates of the Whigs in the 1850s and of the Republicans in the 1970s, therefore, offers an important clue about the death of the Whig party. It disappeared because it was quickly replaced by new parties that outbid it for the anti-Democratic vote; and it was the rules of the political game and the nature of the federal system in the 1850s, and not simply the undeniable power of the issues that the new parties exploited, that explains why successful new parties could emerge in that decade when they have not in the twentieth century.

The British Conservative party of the 1850s provides another example of an organization that survived in the face of conditions amazingly similar to those that confronted the Whigs. Although the Conservative party was formed in 1832, only two years before the creation of the Whig party, to my knowledge no one has ever made a systematic attempt to compare the two organizations. Perhaps that failure is attributable to the confusing fact that the opponents of the Conservatives were themselves called Whigs. But I suspect that the primary reason is that Louis Hartz and others have persuaded historians that Americans never had an authentic conservative tradition and that because the Whigs lacked a genuinely conservative pedigree, any comparison between the two would be spurious.[26] Ideology aside, however, the two parties had remarkably similar

Journal of American History, LXXII (1986), 835–58; Peter H. Argersinger, "A Place on the Ballot: Fusion Politics and Antifusion Laws," *American Historical Review*, LXXXV (1980), 287–306.

26. Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America* (New York, 1955), 22, 89–113; Hartz, *The Founding of New Societies* (New York, 1964), 34–37, 82–92. Robert Kelley's otherwise admirable comparative analysis of liberal ideology in England and the United States complicates the problem in another way because he insists on identifying the great Conservative leader Robert Peel with the American Democrats. See Robert Kelley, *The Transatlantic Persuasion: The Liberal-Democratic Mind in the Age of Gladstone* (New York, 1969), 184–93. One can hope that the appearance of books

careers as competitive political organizations within the emerging two-party systems of the two nations.[27]

The history of both parties, for example, can be understood in terms of the efforts of leaders to attract new elements into a coalition with an older, narrower, and discredited conservative predecessor. In the case of the Whigs, that predecessor was the candidly elitist National Republicans, who self-destructed in the South and West by opposing Indian removal, espousing ultranationalism, which seemed to threaten slavery, and championing the Bank of the United States. For the Conservatives, it was the "Ultra" Tories, whose intransigent opposition to the Catholic Emancipation Act of 1829 and Reform Bill of 1832 stigmatized them as unpopular, and politically unrealistic, reactionaries. To build broader conservative coalitions in the face of prevailing "liberal" majorities, leaders such as the Whigs Henry Clay and Thurlow Weed and the Conservative Robert Peel attempted to establish new and distinctive identities for the new parties, identities that were symbolized by new names and that would differentiate those organizations both from their defeated conservative predecessors and from their victorious opponents. The Whigs had accomplished this feat by 1841, when they controlled the presidency, both houses of Congress, and two-thirds of the state governments. Under Peel's leadership, which was absolutely critical to building a broader Conservative coalition on the Tory base, the Conservatives captured control of Parliament in the same year.

After 1841 both parties suffered fragmentation and electoral defeat and faced the task of finding new strategies to make a comeback. The Whigs split immediately when John Tyler became president, and their

like John Ashworth's *"Agrarians" & "Aristocrats,"* which assert that the Whigs were indeed conservative, will spur comparative analysis of the Whigs and Conservatives.

27. I claim no expertise on nineteenth-century British politics, and the following account of the Conservative party is exclusively based on Norman Gash, "From Origins to Sir Robert Peel," in *The Conservatives: A History from Their Origins to 1965*, ed. Lord Butler (London, 1977); Robert Blake, *The Conservative Party from Peel to Churchill* (London, 1970); Robert Stewart, *The Foundation of the Conservative Party, 1830–1867* (London, 1978); and Angus Macintyre, "Lord George Bentinck and the Protectionists: A Lost Cause?" *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th Series, XXXIX (1989), 141–65. I am especially indebted to Professor Macintyre of Oxford University, who, in his role as commentator on my Commonwealth Fund Lecture at University College London, pointed out numerous errors in the portrait of the Conservative party I presented there.

newly won majorities were wiped out within two years. Conservative cohesion lasted slightly longer. As is well known, however, Peel's attempt to continue to broaden the Conservatives' constituency by wooing Catholics with the Maynooth Grant and urban middle classes with Corn Law Repeal infuriated the die-hard agrarian Tory base of his party and provoked a bitter rupture in 1846. After that date, there were in effect three parties rather than two in Parliament—the Conservatives, the Peelites, and the Whigs—and in the elections of 1847 the Conservatives, or Protectionists as they temporarily called themselves, lost about fifty seats from their already truncated delegation, just at the time when the American Whigs were bouncing back.[28]

From 1847 until 1856 and beyond, the Conservatives languished in the minority, confined effectively to their stubborn agrarian base, which still denounced the Maynooth Grant and Repeal of the Corn Laws. True, the Conservatives established a minority ministry in the early 1850s, but the Whig administrations between 1849 and 1853 might also be considered a minority ministry because Democrats controlled Congress and most state governments. In any event, Disraeli's provisional budget of April, 1852, by clearly favoring the party's agrarian constituency at the expense of other groups, helped tumble it from power, just as the Whigs were thrashed that year. Through all this time, the Conservatives and their former Peelite allies, whom one might liken to the Free Soilers, remained bitter enemies, and that animosity continued when most Peelites eventually combined with the Whigs in the new Liberal party.

Like the Whigs in the early 1850s, that is, the Conservatives seemed doomed to permanent minority status. Yet the similarities between the two parties did not end there. As in the United States, anti-Catholic

28. Stewart, *Foundation of the Conservative Party*, 229. The exact extent of the Conservatives' losses in 1847 is unclear because of the difficulty of distinguishing Peelite Conservative from Protectionist Conservative candidates, and some historians contend that the Peelites suffered a more severe defeat than the Protectionist Conservative rump. For example, see Macintyre, "Lord George Bentinck," 150. The authorities also disagree about whether the initial breach between the two wings was irreparable from the start or was made so by personal animosities. What is certain, however, is that the leadership split in the Conservative party was more severe than any rupture at the leadership level the Whig party ever suffered during its entire history, and yet the Conservative party still managed to survive.

sentiment became a potentially powerful political force in England in the early 1850s when the so-called "Papal Aggression" of 1849 ignited protest meetings in counties throughout the nation. Just as in the United States, where Whigs had traditionally been the anti-Catholic party before 1852, this explosion stood to benefit the Conservatives, the staunchest defenders of the Church of England and foes of any concessions to Catholics. Yet Conservative attempts to exploit anti-Catholic outrage were blunted when Whigs took an equally strong anti-Catholic position. Just as both the Whig and Democratic parties in the United States moved to a pro-Catholic position in 1852, in short, both major parties moved to an anti-Catholic position in England. Unlike the United States, where anti-Catholicism spawned a new party and helped doom the American Whigs, therefore, anti-Catholicism failed to realign British politics in the 1850s or to help Conservatives return to power in 1852.[29]

In another vital respect, however, English politics had assumed a shape by the mid-1850s that was extraordinarily similar to the condition of American politics then. A consensus seemed to prevail between the minority Conservatives and majority Whig-Liberals on virtually every issue. In America, such a perceived lack of partisan difference caused a decomposition of the Whig electorate, but the British Conservatives clung to life throughout the decade. Conservative leaders themselves marveled at the endurance of their party when it had no distinguishing issue to sustain it. Lord Malmesbury, for example, complained to the Earl of Derby in 1856 that "the Conservative body can never be an active one except in office, or in opposition to . . . a Minister who attacks our institutions, and . . . we are without either of these stimulants and therefore dormant." Derby replied that he was less surprised by the apathy of

29. My discussion of the "Papal Aggression" rests on a seminar paper I wrote in 1962, my first year in graduate school, on the county meetings held to protest the Pope's reestablishing Catholic bishropics in Anglican sees. That paper, like the Whig party, alas, disappeared years ago, and my memory is admittedly hazy. But Conservative M.P.s at those county meetings uniformly blamed the pro-Catholic policies of the Whigs for encouraging the Pope's action, whereas Whig M.P.s, mouthing virtually word for word the arguments of John Russell's Durham Letter, denied responsibility and denounced the effrontery of the Catholic Church. Bereft of other issues, many Conservative candidates still ran as defenders of Protestantism in 1852. Stewart, *Foundation of the Conservative Party*, 254–55.

Conservatives than by the fact that the party still survived "in the absence of any cry or leading question, to serve as a broad line of demarcation between the two sides of the House. . . . That a Conservative party should have held together at all in such circumstances is rather to be wondered at, than that there should be apathy and indifference when there is nothing to be fought for by the bulk of the party."[30]

Historians of the Whig party can only share this sense of wonder. In the United States, perceived congruence between the parties produced not just apathy but alienation, fears about the continued existence of self-government, and the immediate formation of new parties that rapidly displaced the Whigs. The potential for similar processes of decomposition, realignment, and party reorganization existed in England, yet none of them occurred. Why, in the face of such similar circumstances, were the fates of the Whig and Conservative parties so dramatically different?

In answer to this question, students of the Conservative party would undoubtedly point to the rocklike support it attracted from an extensive agrarian constituency in England. Its defense of the Church of England and the agricultural interest gave it a lock on rural constituencies in southern England that guaranteed the party an irreducible base in the House of Commons. The malapportionment of that body, which overrepresented England and Wales at the expense of Ireland and Scotland, where Conservatives were far weaker, moreover, gave them greater power in Parliament than even their substantial constituency justified. In short, by assuring Conservatives of at least two-fifths of the Commons, these unshakable bastions seemed to assure the party's perpetuation.[31]

Nonetheless, the contrasting fortunes of the Whigs and Conservatives also reemphasize how crucial the federal structure of American politics was to the demise of the Whigs. Although British parties had developed extensive grass-roots organizations by the 1850s to manage the annual voter registrations and mobilize the electorate, and although there were occasional contests for control of municipal governments, most political activity and attention in Britain focused on Parliament, not counties and localities. At the least, the Conservatives, unlike the Whigs, did not

30. Quoted in Blake, *Conservative Party from Peel to Churchill*, 90–91.

31. Macintyre, "Lord George Bentinck," 150, 163–65; Stewart, *Foundation of the Conservative Party*, 84–85, 158–60.

have to worry about the erosion of their support in the constant local and state elections that filled the American political calendar.[32]

But the vulnerability of the Whigs to displacement does not answer another crucial question illuminated by the British example. Why was the reaction of rank-and-file members of the Conservative party to the lack of interparty differences and conflict in the 1850s so different from that of American voters in similar circumstances?[33] Why couldn't American voters tolerate consensus? Why did that perception generate not only apathy, but also fears for the very survival of popular self-government and demands for new parties that would be more responsive to the people, when sheer inertia in the face of apathy seemed to hold the British Conservatives together in their party? To answer that question, we must look at the peculiar ideology shared by American voters in the 1850s, for, I suspect, they placed a much greater ideological burden on the act of voting than did Englishmen in that decade or, it should be stressed, than did Americans in the 1970s.

As historians like Rush Welter and George Forgie have brilliantly reminded us, between 1820 and 1860 Americans of all parties were obsessed with a sense of history and with their historical obligation to protect the republican experiment in self-government that was the product of the Revolution. Liberty, equality, and self-government, Americans were consciously educated to believe, were always threatened by tyranny, privilege, corruption, and subversion; and it was their duty to be ever vigilant that the achievements of the Revolutionary fathers were not squandered by their sons. The way they could perform that duty was to participate in politics, to monitor the men who governed them, and to cast votes for the men who seemed most loyal to republican ideals. Thus voting for Americans became a cathartic act, a way for a new generation to refight the Revolution as their ancestors had to secure freedom. Among other things, I suggest, this conviction that politics remained the chief battleground for

32. Stewart, *Foundation of the Conservative Party*, 128–46, 159–62. True, a few by-elections for Parliament were held almost every year in Britain, but elections for local, state, and national offices were far more frequent in the United States, where many localities held two or more elections every year.

33. It is difficult to tell from the quotations in Blake, but it is possible that both Malmesbury and Derby were in fact referring to Conservative members of Parliament rather than rank-and-file supporters.

freedom best explains the pervasive use of military metaphors to describe political life in the antebellum period.[34]

In 1848 an anonymous Whig writer articulated the prevailing value system in a way so apt as to merit extensive quotation.

> When the Constitution confers the power of suffrage upon a citizen, it imposes a duty; he has taken a share in the government. . . . How unworthy, then, of this high privilege are those inert or supercilious citizens, who affect to disregard the elections, or to speak of them as a vain and interested contest of office-seekers. A people who respect their institutions, and who not only know, but *feel* that government emanates from themselves, will not confound the contemptible enthusiasm of place-seekers, with the ardor of *patriots*. . . . Whoever feels within himself the least spark of that generosity of soul which makes men republicans is, so far, a POLITICIAN. Politics, the judging and acting for the honor and the prosperity of the nation, is properly an art to which all of *us* are born. *We*, the citizens, who think we have no masters but the laws, cannot be too careful or too vigilant in the exercise of the power of election, in which we perform the initiative art of government.[35]

For a variety of reasons dating from the 1820s and 1830s, moreover, Americans identified the efficacy of the vote, their weapon for protecting and effecting self-government, with the presence of at least two parties that offered them genuine alternatives on the issues of the day. The legitimacy of the entire political system rested on the belief that men governed themselves. That belief, in turn, required faith that men could determine or change what government did, a faith that depended upon the ability to change the actions of government by voting out an old set of officeholders and replacing them with new men who would pursue a different course. Interparty conflict, a perceived difference between the parties, which assured that government actions would change when one party

34. Rush Welter, *The Mind of America, 1820–1860* (New York, 1975), 3–74 and *passim*; George Forgie, *Patricide in the House Divided: A Psychological Interpretation of Lincoln and His Age* (New York, 1979). See also Jean H. Baker, *Affairs of Party: The Political Culture of Northern Democrats in the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (Ithaca, 1983).

35. "Necessity of Party—The Press—The Locofoco Platform," *American Review*, II (July, 1848), 69.

replaced another in power, therefore, seemed indispensable to the perpetuation of republican self-government and of the liberty it protected. As the same Whig writer put it in 1848, "The very life of liberty is maintained only by the strife of contending parties." Nor could that struggle be for office alone. It had to involve the promise of alternative public policies. Thus Preston King, a New York Democrat, wrote to Francis Preston Blair, the former Jacksonian editor, in 1855: "There is no other way to carry out in practice the theory of our Republican Government but openly and clearly to declare principles and measures and for men and parties to divide upon them as they are for them or against them. . . . Our whole theory of Government stands upon the idea that the electors of the whole country can and will understand and choose the right." What King clearly implied but left unsaid is just as important as what he did say. Unless the parties provided the electors with a genuine choice, unless they openly and clearly defined their differences on principles and measures, then republican self-government stood in peril.[36]

This mind-set thus helps explain why the fate of the Whigs in the 1850s was so different from that of the contemporaneous British Conservatives and of the Republicans in the 1970s. Once the Whig and Democratic parties were perceived as no longer offering alternatives to the voters, once they appeared to be merely spoils-oriented machines rather than agents of self-government, citizens feared that their primary objective, the preservation of the republican experiment, stood in jeopardy. Hence they could not simply grouse about an unresponsive political system and abstain as so many did in the 1970s, or wait for new issues to exploit as did the Republicans of that decade, or remain loyal to the old party through sheer inertia as British Conservatives seemed to in the 1850s. To accept the absence of alternatives on public policy, of a genuine choice at the polls, was to strip the vote of its utility as a weapon in the defense of republican self-government. Acquiescing in a struggle between contemptible office seekers who ignored public demands and did not change government policies no matter which party controlled government meant condoning the destruction of the precious Revolutionary legacy of self-government. Given the ideological baggage of Americans in the antebel-

36. *Ibid.*; Preston King to Francis Preston Blair, Sr., November 21, 1855, in Blair-Lee Papers, Princeton University.

lum period, given the supreme importance they placed on active political participation, it was natural, indeed necessary, that they reject the old parties as corrupt, boss-ridden, and useless, and demand new parties that would be more responsive to the people by taking distinctive stands on issues the old parties now agreed upon or refused to address. In sum, federalism and balloting practices allowed the Whigs to follow a different course than did the Conservatives and modern Republicans, but the American value system of the 1850s guaranteed that they would do so.

The Politics of Impatience: The Origins of Know Nothingism

Although historians still disagree over the ultimate causes of the Civil War, most of them would concur that a major proximate cause was the political realignment of the 1850s. The collapse of the national Whig party snapped a crucial bond of union between North and South. Its replacement in the North, the Republican party, provided a powerful political vehicle for sectional hostility to the South, and Republican victory in 1860 provoked secession.

Viewed with hindsight, the reason for this political reorganization seems clear and compelling. The fragile national coalitions of Whigs and Democrats could not withstand the sectional pressure of the slavery extension issue. When that pressure was reaggravated by the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854, the old parties fragmented, and the northern Republican party emerged as the major opponent of the prosouthern Democratic party. Without the slavery issue, the old parties would not have split along sectional lines, the Democratic party would not have been the target of such great northern anger, and the Republican party would never have been formed.

If, however, one asks why voters deserted the Whig party at the state level, rather than why the national Whig organization was destroyed or why the Republican party emerged, it becomes apparent that the slavery issue alone cannot account for the process of realignment in the 1850s. Although the slavery issue divided northern and southern Whigs, it did not necessarily have to drive Whig voters from the party in the North, especially in the states where the Whigs were competitive with the Demo-

most northerners had achieved through their realignments of the 1850s. Whether this theory has wider applicability will only be determined by intensive investigations of political developments during the 1850s in other southern states. Evitts has provided a fine model for such studies.

The Problem of Civil War Causation

Long before David Potter died in 1971, historians had impatiently awaited his volume on the coming of the Civil War for the New American Nation Series. Widely admired for the sagacity of his judgments, the clarity of his mind, and his awesome ability to dissect and simplify complex problems, Potter was without peer in the historical profession as a pure logician. He had devoted more than a decade of reading and reflection to the preparation of this study. Now, five years after his death, edited and ably completed by his colleague at Stanford University, Don E. Fehrenbacher, the product of that effort has finally appeared, and we can all be grateful. *The Impending Crisis, 1848–1861*, is the fairest and most intelligent history of the antebellum period yet to appear in print. Because it both synthesizes and comments upon a vast body of scholarship and because it is literally crammed with penetrating insights and perceptive judgments about a host of events and controversies, it should be the first place that one looks henceforth for an assessment of those troubled years.

At the outset, Potter shrewdly evaluates the lengthy historiographical debate over the nature of the sectional conflict and clearly stakes out where he stands. Though that debate has gone in cycles, essentially there have been two sides. Fundamentalists argued that basic and irresolvable

This essay originally appeared as a long review of David M. Potter, *The Impending Crisis, 1848–1861*, completed and edited by Don E. Fehrenbacher (New York, 1976). Page references to this book will appear in the text.

ideological, economic, and cultural differences between North and South produced the conflict that led to war. Though they have disagreed among themselves, most have insisted that slavery was the crucial issue. Opposing revisionist historians insist that neither the slavery issue nor economic and cultural differences were sufficiently serious to cause war. Instead, they blame the mistakes of political leaders and the agitation of sectional extremists for blowing inherently manageable problems out of proportion. Recently, neofundamentalists like Eugene Genovese and Eric Foner have reasserted the importance of slavery in generating antithetical cultures, economies, and ideologies in the North and South. Unlike earlier fundamentalists like James Ford Rhodes and Dwight L. Dumond, however, they have not attributed the war to disagreement over slavery's morality or immediate pressures for its abolition.[1] Rather, they have argued that because each section viewed the extension of the other's civilization to the West as a threat to its own, the sections went to war over the question of slavery extension.

Since the publication of his *Lincoln and His Party in the Secession Crisis* in 1942, David Potter has normally been consigned to the revisionist side of this debate, but here he emphatically embraces fundamentalism, and the older version at that. He flatly rejects the notion that slavery was not basic to all other sectional differences. Echoing Rhodes and Dumond, moreover, he insists that a profound disagreement over the morality of slavery was the core of the sectional conflict. "A conflict of values, rather than a conflict of interests or a conflict of cultures, lay at the root of the sectional schism" (46). Potter admits that the main political goal of the North was prevention of slavery expansion, not abolition, and that many northerners were racists. Still, he explicitly rejects the arguments recently advanced by historians like Eugene Berwanger, James A. Rawley, Chaplain Morrison, and others that these facts indicated that overt dedication to white supremacy in the West and antipathy toward white slaveholders, not sympathy for black slaves, impelled northerners. Instead, he endorses the old argument of Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., that

1. Eugene Genovese, *The Political Economy of Slavery* (New York, 1965); Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party Before the Civil War* (New York, 1970); James Ford Rhodes, *History of the United States from the Compromise of 1850* (7 vols.; New York, 1892–1906); Dwight L. Dumond, *The Antislavery Origins of the Civil War* (Ann Arbor, 1938).

because northerners venerated the Constitution, they felt powerless to attack slavery within southern states no matter how much they despised it.[2] The emergence of the territorial issue in 1846, however, unleashed their genuine "moral indignation" from its constitutional restraints.

Although Potter resurrects the earliest fundamentalist belief about the crux of the sectional conflict, he wisely rejects the corollary assumption of historians like Rhodes that such a value conflict made war inevitable. Moral differences over slavery had long existed, he correctly recognizes, and their presence alone did not produce war. The central question concerning the coming of the Civil War is not what caused sectional conflict but why that conflict became so disruptive in the 1850s when it had not been earlier. The key to the war's coming, he insists, was the process by which sectional conflict became politicized. Only when it did so could it rend the nation. Thus *The Impending Crisis* is primarily an analysis of political developments from the outbreak of the Mexican War to the firing on Fort Sumter, and his most important contributions come as insights into particular events along the way.

For one thing, Potter provides perhaps the best account of the last years of the Polk administration we will have until the third volume of Charles Sellers' biography of Polk is published. His handling of the stalemate over the disposition of slavery in western territories during the late 1840s is especially adept. Here he makes the brilliant point that extension of the Missouri Compromise line to the coast was potentially a better compromise solution than popular sovereignty until the separate organization of Oregon in 1848 destroyed its utility. By reducing the area north of 36°30′, the Oregon bill rendered extension of the line too advantageous to the South to be acceptable any longer in the North. Thus the Democrats resorted to the dangerously ambiguous popular sovereignty formula as a middle ground between the Wilmot Proviso and the Calhounite position of unlimited expansion.

2. David M. Potter, *Lincoln and His Party in the Secession Crisis* (New Haven, 1942); Eugene H. Berwanger, *The Frontier Against Slavery: Western Anti-Negro Prejudice and the Slavery Expansion Controversy* (Urbana, Ill., 1967); Chaplain W. Morrison, *Democratic Politics and Sectionalism: The Wilmot Proviso Controversy* (Chapel Hill, 1967); James A. Rawley, *Race & Politics: "Bleeding Kansas" and the Coming of the Civil War* (Philadelphia, 1969); Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., "The Causes of the Civil War: A Note on Historical Sentimentalism," *Partisan Review*, XVI (1949), 969–81.

Potter follows Holman Hamilton in arguing that Democratic votes and leadership were more important than Whig oratory in securing the passage of the Compromise of 1850. Yet, anticipating the arguments of recent historians like Robert F. Dalzell, Jr., he insists that there really was no compromise between the opposing sections; the measures of that year constituted an armistice at best. Potter breaks sharply with the revisionist orthodoxy as to what the compromise actually said concerning slavery in Utah and New Mexico Territories, however. Disagreeing with Robert Russell and Hamilton, he argues that the laws did not explicitly give territorial legislatures the authority to rule on slavery during the territorial stage. Here I think Potter would have benefited from Robert Johannsen's biography of Stephen A. Douglas, which appeared after his death. Douglas was the chief manager of the legislation in the final stages, and Johannsen presents impressive evidence that explicit popular sovereignty was indeed incorporated in the territorial laws.[3]

Johannsen's biography also probably would have forced a reworking of Potter's chapter on the Kansas-Nebraska Act, surely the most curious in the book. Ignoring the political pressures that contributed to the framing of the law and that are stressed by both Johannsen and Roy F. Nichols, Potter once again returns to a much older interpretation.[4] Douglas' chief goal, he asserts, was building a Pacific railroad on a central route, and he agreed to the overthrow of the Missouri Compromise ban on slavery in Nebraska as part of a logrolling operation to win southern votes for the railroad scheme he favored. Where Potter does accept Nichols is in his insistence that once Douglas introduced the bill, he lost control of events and was forced beyond his initial concessions by southern pressure. Johannsen argues compellingly, however, that Douglas from the first intended to apply popular sovereignty in the territorial stage to the Nebraska bill; he wasn't forced to. He makes clear as well that while Douglas was genuinely interested in western development, he was equally interested in using that program, not to forward his presidential candidacy in 1856, as

3. Holman Hamilton, *Prologue to Conflict: The Crisis and Compromise of 1850* (Lexington, Ky., 1964); Robert F. Dalzell, Jr., *Daniel Webster and the Trial of American Nationalism, 1843–1852* (Boston, 1973); Robert Russell, "What Was the Compromise of 1850?" *Journal of Southern History*, XXII (1956), 292–309; Robert W. Johannsen, *Stephen A. Douglas* (New York, 1973).

4. Roy F. Nichols, "The Kansas-Nebraska Act: A Century of Historiography," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, XLIII (1956), 187–212.

some historians charge, but as a way to reunite the disintegrating Democratic party in 1854. The political purposes of the bill were just as important to Douglas as the program itself.

If Potter's account of the framing of the Kansas-Nebraska Act is questionable, his succinct analysis of events in "Bleeding Kansas" is the finest brief treatment I have ever read. Agreeing with revisionists that conflicting attitudes toward slavery did not produce the strife among settlers in the territory, he brilliantly shows how the politicization of the slavery issue was crucial "in structuring and intensifying the friction." Sectional conflict outside of Kansas worked "to polarize and organize all the diffused and random antagonisms, which might otherwise have remained merely individual and local" (203–204).

Similarly, Potter's chapter on the political realignment of the 1850s is generally first-rate. Here again he focuses on exactly the right question—why the northern Whig party disappeared after 1854 rather than benefiting from the renewed antislavery sentiment sparked by the Nebraska Act. As Potter notes, other historians have insufficiently appreciated the critical difference between the sectional rupture in the national Whig party caused by slavery and the disintegration of state Whig parties in the North after 1852 even when they tried to exploit the slavery issue against the Democrats. Logically, antislavery sentiment alone cannot account for the death of the Whigs. Utilizing recent scholarship, Potter argues that the surge of anti-Catholic, nativist, and prohibitionist sentiment reflected in the phenomenal rise of the Know Nothing movement in the mid-1850s is what really gutted the Whig party in the North and later contributed significantly to the triumph of the Republicans. Potter calls the Republicans' merger with the nativists in 1856 the most critical event in the history of the party. More than the sudden salience of ethnocultural issues produced the Whig collapse, but Potter's sophisticated account marks a great advance over simplistic theories that the slavery issue alone destroyed the Whig party and shaped the realignment from which the Republican party emerged.

Potter's chapters on the Dred Scott decision, the Lincoln-Douglas debates, and John Brown's raid are also gems, but because Potter was one of the foremost students of the elusive problem of southern identity, his judgments about the impulse behind secession especially merit attention. He argues cogently that secession did not result from a preexisting south-

ern nationalism based on cultural affinities and common values—in short, on a distinct southern identity. "The Civil War did far more to produce a southern nationalism which flourished in the cult of the Lost Cause than southern nationalism did to produce the war" (469). Fear of the North, not some positive affirmation of culture, produced secession. Potter, however, rejects the notion advanced by Genovese and iterated since Potter's death by William L. Barney that what the South feared was that the Republicans would successfully prevent slavery's extension, which southerners by 1860 regarded as a social, economic, political, and racial necessity. Instead, Potter argues in the vein of Stephen Channing that the South seceded because it was terrified that Republican propaganda and Republican toleration of the circulation of abolitionist literature in the South would provoke slave insurrection.[5] By 1860, southerners were not united culturally, but they "*were* united by a sense of terrible danger. They were united, also, in a determination to defend slavery, to resist abolitionism, and to force the Yankees to recognize not only their rights but also their status as perfectly decent, respectable human beings" (478).

It would be an injustice to end this summary without including the final two chapters on the secession crisis written by Professor Fehrenbacher. They sustain the same high literary and interpretative quality that graces the rest of the book. Particularly noteworthy is Fehrenbacher's stunning insight that secession, the Deep South's refusal to tolerate Lincoln's election, abruptly transformed the entire sectional issue and ensured that the North would be much more united in resisting the South than it ever had been before. "Here is the key to understanding why many Republicans seemed to become more intractable as the danger of disunion became more palpable. . . . . The main problem at hand was no longer the expansion of slavery, but the survival of the United States, and the most pressing moral issue was not now slavery, but majority rule" (527). What motivated northerners during the ultimate crisis, in short, was not moral antipathy to slavery but determination to preserve the principles and existence of republican government itself.

These and many other thoughtful insights evoke profound admiration from a reader, yet upon concluding the book one still has a vague

5. William L. Barney, *The Secessionist Impulse: Alabama and Mississippi in 1860* (Princeton, 1974); Stephen Channing, *A Crisis of Fear: Secession in South Carolina* (New York, 1970).

sense of disappointment and incompleteness. The sum of its parts seems stronger than the whole. In part, this uneasiness stems from Potter's failure to answer conclusively the questions he does ask. With all its extraordinary wisdom and learning, the book tells more about *how* the Civil War came than about *why* it came. It raises disturbing doubts whether any such broad-scale synthesis can ever satisfactorily unravel the greatest puzzle in American history—exactly what caused the Civil War? In part, however, disappointment arises because the book is almost defiantly old-fashioned. It is largely shaped and restricted by questions historians have been debating for almost a hundred years. One wishes Potter had gone beyond the traditional issues, broken new ground, and charted new approaches to the antebellum period. Only with fresh perspectives can we gain new insight into what caused the war in April, 1861.

Potter's traditionalism is perhaps best exemplified in his treatment of antebellum politics. In recent years, several political historians have argued that grass-roots voters were normally unconcerned with the great national issues that have dominated previous interpretations of politics. These studies of the 1850s and other periods vary in quality, but their central message is that one cannot possibly get an accurate picture of political development by focusing only on national politics—congressional debates, presidential elections, and so forth. Potter exploited these studies in his account of the realignment of the 1850s, but he is distressingly ambiguous on the crucial question of how much people really cared about national, slavery-related events. The series editors properly say that Potter recognized that slavery did not monopolize the politics of the period (xiv), and Potter himself argues that most people did not "have any fixation on the issue of slavery" (145). Yet elsewhere he seems to take precisely the opposite position. After 1846, he argues, "the slavery question would grow to dominate national politics, and Congress would become for fifteen years the arena of a continuous battle watched by millions of aroused sectional partisans. No other issue in American history has so monopolized the political scene" (49). Throughout the book, he stresses that "public attention was focused intently on events in Congress" (73, 320). Neither Potter nor any other historian has proved that millions of Americans were "aroused sectional partisans," but in that belief he devotes the book almost exclusively to national-level politics. Although he correctly notes that "state government rather than federal government symbolized

public authority for most citizens" in the nineteenth century (52), he ignores the state level of politics except to deal with local responses to the national slavery issue. But the slavery issue was not the major concern of state governments, and state-level political developments exclusive of slavery did as much to shape the political transformation that led to war as did the national events on which Potter focuses. Finally, Potter reflects the rather dismal state of political historiography when he does examine the voting realignment and political reorganization of the decade. Like most other historians, he deals almost exclusively with the North; we learn very little about what happened in southern politics between 1852 and 1860. One can argue, however, that the differing political experiences of southern states in those years helped determine which slave states seceded and which did not in response to Lincoln's election. It is difficult to fault Potter for this lapse, for with the exception of an excellent study of Maryland, which appeared after his death, we simply have no modern studies of southern politics in the 1850s. One might say, indeed, that it is unfair to fault Potter at all for his treatment of politics, for the real focus of the book is the escalation of sectional conflict between 1848 and 1861.

Yet it is fair to examine how cogently he answers the crucial question he raises at the beginning of the book—why the long-standing sectional conflict over slavery became so disruptive in the 1850s. Potter never provides an explicit answer to this question. One must infer what he thinks from the book as a whole. He does make clear from the beginning that the North and South were profoundly divided over slavery. Northerners condemned it as immoral, and southerners feared any antislavery agitation that might produce abolition or provoke slave revolt. What Potter seems to argue is that events between 1846 and 1861 intensified those basic emotions in both sections until they engendered the triumph of the antislavery Republican party in 1860 and southern secession in response to it. The problem is that he is again ambiguous or inconsistent about exactly what emotions were intensified. Put another way, it is unclear how the slavery issue was politicized, why it had the resonance with the northern electorate he claims it had. At places, he reasserts that moral antagonism was heightened by events, yet elsewhere he admits that northern propaganda about the Nebraska Act, Bleeding Kansas, and the Dred Scott decision focused on the iniquity of slaveholders, not slavery, and shrilly warned of the Slave Power's plot to subvert republican values of liberty,

equality, and self-rule. Even Lincoln depended upon such rhetoric in his debates with Douglas. Such accusations, he correctly states, had much more impact in the North than denunciations of slavery itself would have had (163–64). The distinction is absolutely critical, for Republican propaganda did not appeal to the moral concern for the Negro slave Potter says was the fundamental emotion. I think, in fact, that Potter is more accurate about the nature of Republican rhetoric than about the northern mind, but even then it is unclear exactly what the North was bothered about.

There are two alternative interpretations of northern sentiment, as inferred from Republican rhetoric, that seem more persuasive than Potter's contention that northerners "accepted [the] doctrine that slavery was morally intolerable" and sincerely "opposed the oppression of a racial minority" (143, 251). Most simply, one can argue that the evidence supports the hypothesis Potter rejects. The basic northern sentiment may have been anti-southernism, opposition to white slaveholders, not sympathy for black slaves. Sheer hatred of the arrogance and aggressiveness of the Slave Power mobilized northerners.

It is possible, however, to extend Professor Fehrenbacher's brilliant observation about the secession crisis to the entire period covered in the book to arrive at a more complete understanding of the northern mind that incorporates its undoubted hostility to the Slave Power. From the northern point of view, what may have been at stake in the entire sectional conflict was not the moral wrong of Negro slavery but the continued viability of republican government itself, a much more basic issue. Since the Revolution, Americans in both sections had been obsessed with the fragility of republics, with the danger power in any form posed to liberty, and with the susceptibility of republican self-government to usurping conspiracies and plots. Thus the numerous accusations about tyranny-threatening plots and conspiracies that pervaded northern and southern rhetoric in the 1850s may have represented, not as Potter asserts, "the psychological tendency to interpret the behavior of the opposition in conspiratorial terms" (287), but the real and basic fears of Americans in both sections that powerful groups in the other section meant to subvert true republican government, to strip them of liberty and equality, and to make them figuratively slaves to the other's domination. As Bernard Bailyn has pointed out, the word *slavery* had a definite political meaning in the eigh-

teenth century that had little to do with the institution of Negro slavery.[6] It implied subjugation to another's power; it meant the absence of liberty; it was the antithesis of republicanism. The rhetoric of the 1850s suggests the possibility that the politicization of the slavery issue in this abstract sense best explains why the sectional conflict became more disruptive in the 1850s than it ever had been before. The basic issue, in sum, may have been the fear of white slavery, not the reality of Negro slavery.

If so, the task for historians is to look beyond the escalating sectional conflict itself to discover why fears for the security of the republic were more widespread and intense in the 1850s than at any time since the 1790s. To do that is precisely why one must look below the national level of politics when examining the antebellum period. What may have brought the sectional conflict to a point of crisis in 1861, in other words, was not simply the series of events that aggravated it but the development of a popular mood that made northerners and southerners much more responsive to sectional propaganda about threats to republicanism than they had previously been.

6. Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 1967).

Abraham Lincoln and the Politics of Union

One of the most stimulating analyses of Civil War politics ever written is a brilliant essay by Eric McKitrick called "Party Politics and the Union and Confederate War Efforts."[1] In it, McKitrick argues that the North had a decisive advantage over the South because it continued to have two-party rivalry during the war whereas the Confederacy did not. The presence of the Democratic party forced Republicans of all kinds to rally behind the policies of the Republican government to win elections. As a result, the North remained more united during the long ordeal than the division-plagued Confederacy.

According to McKitrick, party politics also made Abraham Lincoln a more effective presidential leader than his Confederate counterpart, Jefferson Davis. The organization and partisan needs of the Republican party provided Lincoln with guidelines, first to select and then to reshuffle his cabinet, with ways to ensure the loyalty of his vice presidents, with incentives to gain the cooperation of state governors, and with sanctions to punish political opponents both inside and outside his own party. In contrast, the hapless Davis lacked party lines to separate friends from foes and to generate institutional loyalty to his administration. Hence he could not control his cabinet, Vice President Alexander Stephens, obstreperous governors like Joe Brown of Georgia and Zeb Vance of North Carolina,

1. Eric McKitrick, "Party Politics and the Union and Confederate War Efforts," in *The American Party Systems: Stages of Political Development*, ed. William N. Chambers and Walter Dean Burnham (New York, 1967), 117–51.