The Old Northwest and the Texas Annexation Treaty

Norman E. Tutorow
THE OLD NORTHWEST AND THE TEXAS ANNEXATION TREATY

NORMAN E. TUTOROW

On April 22, 1844, President Tyler submitted the Texas treaty to the United States Senate, sending with it scores of official documents and a catalog of arguments in favor of annexation. He offered evidence of popular support within Texas itself for annexation. He also argued that Britain had designs on Texas which, if allowed to mature, would pose a serious threat to the South’s “peculiar institution.” According to Tyler, the annexation of Texas would be a blessing to the whole nation. Because Texas would most likely concentrate its efforts on raising cotton, the North and West would find there a market for horses, beef, and wheat. Among the most important of the obvious advantages was security from outside interference with the institution of slavery, especially from British abolitionists, who were working to get Texas to abolish slavery. Tyler envisioned Texas as a center of agriculture, commerce, manufacturing, and navigation. Finally, the United States had the legal and constitutional right to annex Texas. As Eugene Barker has correctly pointed out, “There was nothing new in the President’s argument, but he made a capable summary of all the considerations involved.”

The annexation treaty provided that Texas should cede to the United States all public lands, mines, forts, barracks, magazines, public buildings, and archives, and that the United States should assume the public debt of the new territory. Texas citizens were to become American citizens. The former Republic of Texas was to join the United States as a territory and be guided by the same procedures in its subsequent bid for statehood as were western territories.

Although John Tyler saw only benefits in annexation, many other Americans were less sanguine. John Quincy Adams recorded in his diary: “The treaty for the annexation of Texas to this Union was this day sent in to the Senate; and with it went the freedom of the human race.” Opposition to annexation was at first bipartisan; both parties viewed it as a scheme on Tyler’s part to increase his own popularity. But as Democrats came to realize that annexation was a popular measure, and that its popularity could be transferred to their own candidate, their opposition almost disappeared, except for a few anti-slavery members unwilling to accept their party’s platform. Many Whigs who probably would have favored annexation under normal circumstances now turned against it as a Tyler measure.

Much of what was published by the press concerning Texas had little bearing on the central issue and was designed primarily for public consumption. But the key figures and their arguments showed ingenuity and
political resourcefulness. The New York Tribune, for example, called the annexation proposal an "unprecedented and unwarrantable outrage." The Tribune reported that in New York City on April 24, 1844, a meeting of 3,000 people, presided over by Albert Gallatin, passed resolutions condemning the annexation of Texas. Since the United States had recognized Texas as a Mexican province, the resolution declared, annexation of the rebellious province would violate our treaties with Mexico. It would result in a dishonorable war and the extension of slavery.  

During the early months of 1844, the Democratic Washington Globe remained conspicuously silent on the Texas issue. But on April 15 the editor, attributing his "failure in our duty" to a six-week-long illness, made it clear that his paper would "earnestly advocate the reannexation of Texas to the Union." The Globe took a strong pro-Texas, party line, maintaining that the "separation" of Texas from the United States in 1819 had been unconstitutional and that the exclusion of Texas would probably cause it to come under British influence.

Many Northern state legislatures passed and sent to Congress anti-annexation resolutions. In March, 1843 the Massachusetts legislature had passed a resolution contending that annexation was dangerous to the continuance of the peace. Exactly a year later, this legislature passed another anti-Texas resolution, arguing that annexation would amount to a dissolution of the Union. The Connecticut legislature concurred by resolving that annexation was unconstitutional and would amount to a declaration of war.

There was mixed reaction in Congress to the signing of the treaty. One memorial from 216 citizens of Maine, signed by people of both parties, was strongly against annexation, arguing that the existence of Texas as an independent nation would become troublesome, if not dangerous, to the United States. But a number of Kentuckians petitioned Congress to act in favor of annexation, as did some Virginians, South Carolinians, Tennesseans, Georgians, and Hoosiers.

Thomas Hart Benton, believing that most Americans favored annexation, suggested to the Senate the annexation of the old province of Texas, rather than the Republic of Texas, which claimed boundaries extending to the Rio Grande in the southwest and to the mountains of Colorado in the north. He wanted the old Texas—the Texas of LaSalle and Jackson—but he opposed immediate annexation, which would disregard the probable effects upon American-Mexican relations. His arguments, somewhat altered, were repeated in Congress and in the press of all sections of the country between May and June, 1844. His position was more Whig than Democratic. Few people, Whig or Democrat, rejected annexation; they simply differed on the conditions under which they would be willing to accept annexation.

The Texas question split Northwestern anti-slavery forces. Many anti-slavery men feared that annexation would inevitably extend the area of slavery; others were either more strongly expansionist than anti-slavery
or were convinced that annexation would not necessarily extend slavery. Annexation quickly became a partisan issue, with Whigs solidly opposed to annexation. The Democrats, though not united, were generally in favor of annexation.

The Whig press of the Old Northwest was firmly opposed. The *Ohio State Journal* called President Tyler a desperate man, recklessly bent upon accomplishing his pet project of annexation in order to recoup the political power lost when he broke with the Whigs. He and his equally desperate supporters, driven by “unholy ambition,” closed their eyes to the probable consequences of annexation, which included “disunion and a sanguinary war, with the ten thousand evils that must follow.” The editor charged that, while the balance of power was very likely held by the two Ohio Senators, there were not “twenty thousand men in the State of Ohio who would openly and boldly favor annexation.”

In late April and early May, 1844, a meeting was held at Warren in the Western Reserve to examine the economic factors involved in the acquisition of Texas. It was decided that the numerous liabilities associated with annexation would outweigh any assets; the Southern economy would be expanded without any corresponding growth in the North to preserve the existing balance. The delegates predicted an inevitable increase in public expenditures to govern and protect that country, without any appreciable financial return. No matter how the issue was regarded, annexation was economically “a decidedly bad bargain.”

Thomas Corwin of Ohio argued that war with Mexico would be inevitable if Texas were annexed and that the United States could not bear the financial strain which this war would place upon it. He revealed his major concern and that of most Ohio opponents of annexation when he warned that a majority of the people of the nation disapproved the addition of further slave territory to the Union.

As the press campaign against annexation intensified, the extension of slavery emerged as the primary objection. The *Ohio State Journal* spoke of the “sin of slavery,” pointing out that Mexico had abolished slavery in its province of Texas, and that, ironically, as part of the “liberty-loving” United States, Texas would by choice re-establish that heinous institution.

The *Journal* was sure that the “real object in annexation was the PERPETUATION AND EXTENSION OF SLAVERY, and of the political power of the slave states.” The authors and supporters of the treaty were engaged in a conspiracy to strengthen the grip of Southern slavemasters over national legislative processes by adding to their numbers. Corwin hurled the epithet “SLAVE BREEDING ANNEXATIONISTS” at the defenders of the treaty.

The Indiana press did not deal with the annexation treaty except as an issue in the presidential campaign. Many Indiana papers were still weeklies in 1844, and by the time they became aware of what was happening, the Senate debates on the treaty were well under way. It may be,
as Eric Bradner has suggested, that the Old Northwest did not really understand what was going on. He said that Illinois, at any rate, "heard little of the treaty that was under discussion during the spring of 1844." But when annexation was formally proposed in April, it immediately became a partisan issue in Illinois.

The Whig press claimed that the proponents of annexation were influenced by alleged Texas investments. The Alton Telegraph declared that Baltimore was "an immense exchange for the disposal of Texas lands, bonds, and script" and charged that many Democratic delegates in Baltimore wanted to violate their pledges to vote for Van Buren in the spring of 1844 "in order to get into the grand Texas market." After publishing the full text of the "Raleigh Letter," in which Henry Clay disavowed immediate annexation, the Telegraph asserted that every right-minded man not blinded by passion or self-interest must recognize that the measure in question was absolutely forbidden by every consideration which should influence "a Christian, a statesman or a patriot."

The Michigan press was preoccupied with the coming election; the annexation treaty appears to have gone almost unnoticed. The editorial columns of the Detroit Advertiser and the Detroit Free Press remained silent on the pending treaty and its defeat in June. Their readers would have scarcely learned of the treaty's existence.

All four states of the Old Northwest participated in the annexation agitation in Congress. That section was as divided over the issue as was the rest of the nation, with the balance slightly in favor of annexation.

In the debates on the annexation treaty, no other Northwestern Representative was as determined, as uncompromising an opponent of annexation as was Joshua Reed Giddings of the Western Reserve. As early as April 14 Giddings had urged a strong press campaign against Texas, advising his colleagues: "Nothing will save us from annexation and dissolution except bold and determined ground." He optimistically observed: "The prospect of Whig success still continues and increases daily."

One month later Giddings condemned Southerners for their persistence in the annexation business: "They have resorted to the old Missouri plan of threatening to dissolve the Union if we do not submit to the annexation." The whole question of slavery, he told his friend Oran Follett, depended upon annexation, for, "If they do not obtain Texas as a place to transfer their slaves, they will soon be compelled to give up the institution and surrender to the voice of the civilized world." During the course of the Senate debate. Giddings sat in silence and listened to six speeches in favor of annexation, four of which put the policy of annexation distinctively upon the perpetuation of slavery." He felt constrained to answer the annexationists himself. On May 21, 1844, Giddings spoke against slavery, slave breeders, the extension of slavery, the proposed annexation of Texas, Democratic politicians in general, and Southern Democrats in particular. He opened with the charge that the President, his cabinet, and Southern Democrats averred that the United States should take upon itself the support
and perpetuation of slavery in Texas, and of the slave trade between the "slavebreeding states." He condemned the Tyler administration for its willingness to make the United States a nation of political and moral hypocrites by violating its treaty obligations with Mexico and abandoning its "principles in favor of human liberty."

Giddings excoriated those who would burden the country with a debt of ten to twenty million dollars to satisfy the debts of "slaveholding, repudiating Texas." He described as a "ridiculous inconsistency" the appropriation of one million dollars per year to destroy the slave trade in the eastern Atlantic and of a dozen times that amount to protect it in Texas. He challenged proannexationist Robert D. Owen, an Indiana Democrat, to demonstrate the precise line of longitude on which the slave trade changed its moral character, on the east side of which it was the "most detestable of crimes," and on the west side of which it became a "laudable commerce, worthy of our fostering care."

Giddings repeated the argument that annexing Texas necessitated annexing the Texas war with Mexico, which would undoubtedly lead to war with Britain. Nor did he overlook the political implications of annexation, pointing to the relative balance of power between the two sections as a stabilizing state of affairs.

By this point in Giddings' speech, Southerners were rising frequently to interrupt him, but he refused to yield. He ridiculed a Southern Representative who, when challenged to identify that section of the Constitution which allegedly stated that the institution of slavery enjoyed the protection of the federal government, could reply only: "I don't refer to any section in particular, but to the whole instrument." Giddings retorted: "I have finally chased this notable guaranty into the wild regions of southern abstractions."

As the day of the vote on the annexation treaty drew near, petitioners from the Old Northwest stepped up their activity. Democrat Edward Hannegan of Indiana presented to the Senate a petition signed by 200 of his constituents calling for ratification of the treaty then before the Senate. Albert S. White, his Whig colleague, countered with a memorial of a meeting of the Society of Friends from the states of Indiana, Illinois, and western Ohio, remonstrating against the annexation of Texas. The memorial claimed to represent 25,000 members of the society. Senator White said that these petitioners "had not only spoken the virtuous sentiments of 25,000 Quakers, but of a very large portion of the intelligence and respectability of the West." He predicted that within 18 months these would be the sentiments of a vast majority of American citizens everywhere.

Hannegan followed with another pro-Texas document, containing the proceedings of a large public meeting held at Indianapolis. Next came Whig Senator William Woodbridge of Michigan, who presented the proceedings of a similar meeting in Hillsdale, Michigan, declaring against annexation as an unconstitutional measure. These petitions were indicative of the emerging partisan division: Whigs, anti-Texas; Democrats, pro-Texas.
This partisan alignment in the Old Northwest was reflected in several speeches in Congress in May and June of 1844. On May 21, Democratic Representative Robert Dale Owen claimed that the border of the Louisiana purchase in the southwest was the Rio Del Norte, and that until 1819 Texas residents were American citizens. If the United States were concerned about treaty obligations, Owen contended, the treaties of commerce and amity with Mexico were no more important than the treaty which included Texas in the United States.82

Indiana Representative William J. Brown penned one of the clearest expressions of Old Northwest Democratic sentiment.83 In his plea for annexation, Brown repeated arguments used by Andrew Jackson and quoted Henry Clay over a period of years, to show that the Whig presidential candidate had always favored annexation until it became politically expedient not to do so. Brown’s appeal was eloquent and persuasive:

The contiguity of Texas to the United States, her broad and fertile valley and salubrious climate, have invited the western emigrant to her country. The spirit of patriotism, which now burns so brightly upon her altars, was caught from our forefathers, and is peculiar to the Anglo-Saxon race that now inhabit [sic] her wide frontier. Her people speak our own language, profess our holy religion, and are united to us in sentiment and feeling, and by the still stronger ties of consanguinity.84

He warned that if Texas was not annexed, she would fall into the hands of Mexico and Protestants would be driven from the land. Moreover, “The eagle eye of Great Britain” had been upon Texas for some time; British political control would result in heavy immigration from that island nation until Texas would become a mere colony of the British Empire.85

Brown attempted to forestall antislavery outbursts by explaining that he was not an advocate of slavery and that annexation would only extend slavery over a larger surface, without materially increasing the number of slaves.86 Parroting what by 1844 had become a favorite Democratic rationalization for those who favored annexation and opposed the extension of slavery, he said that slave labor could be employed more profitably in the culture of cotton and sugar in Texas than in the growing of grain in many other States.87

Brown also discussed the economic advantages of annexation. His description of the economic blessings accruing to the United States by the acquisition of Texas brought him to the heart of his case. “Texas is a desirable acquisition.” All else was superfluous.88

Illinois Democrats steadfastly supported Texas annexation, as evidenced by an eloquent speech by Senator Sidney Breeze. But in Michigan there was at first a great deal of uncertainty over the question.89 Democratic Representative Lucius Lyon had expressed himself mildly against the treaty of annexation. He approved of annexation, but did not believe that the interests of Michigan would be promoted by it or that his constituents would favor it.90
After visiting President Tyler on the evening of April 27, Lyon was pessimistic about the possibilities of an early adjournment of Congress. He feared that the Senate would reject the treaty and that Tyler would then resubmit it to both houses of Congress for passage by joint resolution. Lyon wrote:

There will be no use in doing so unless there is a majority of the Senate in favor of the treaty and that will be ascertained during discussion in secret session. I do not believe there will be more than ten or twelve Senators in favor of it, and probably not more than half that number.¹¹

Another Michigan Democrat, William Hale, admitted that annexation was at first not well-received by the Democrats of that state, but explained that now almost the entire state Democratic party was committed to its support.¹² He confessed that Michigan Democrats had come to regard annexation as beneficial to the country and the only means “to save the Democratic party from defeat in the coming contest.” Hale pledged the undivided support of the western Democracy for annexation.

William Woodbridge and Augustus S. Porter, Michigan’s Whig Senators, did not speak out against the annexation treaty. With Woodbridge, this was very likely due to the circumstances surrounding his election. In 1841 he had been the choice of the conservative Whig faction in Michigan, but the “radical” favorite had received five times as many votes. The conservative Whigs and the Democrats, whose candidate had no chance of winning, united and elected Woodbridge.¹³ He was not disposed to offend those who had helped elect him. Since annexation was a popular Democratic measure, Woodbridge saw fit to remain silent during the debates. But when annexation came to a vote in the Senate, he joined the majority in voting against it.

Porter’s reasons for avoiding speaking out on the issue of annexation are less clear. He was once described by Lucius Lyon as “a consistent Whig,” but not much of a speaker.¹⁴ Perhaps this caused his silence. He had very little to say on the floor of the Senate throughout his period in office.

The Senate debated the annexation treaty in secret session until nine o’clock on the evening of June 8, 1844. When the vote was taken, not only did the pro-Texas forces fail to muster the needed two-thirds, but the opposition got over two-thirds. The treaty was defeated 35 to 16.¹⁵ Slave-state Whigs, following their party leader and presidential nominee, Henry Clay, accounted for 15 of the 35 opposition votes. Party unity and regularity were more important to them than sectional interests or desire to extend the area of slavery.

The vote was partisan, with the Whigs more solidly opposed than were the Democrats in favor. The Whig vote was 96% against; the Democratic vote was 65% in favor. In the Northwest the Whigs were unanimously against annexation, while the Democrats were badly split, 40% against, 40% in favor, 20% abstaining (Hannegan).

The vote also indicated an emerging sectionalism. Four of the six states in which both Senators cast pro-Texas votes were slave states.¹⁶ Of the
states in which both Senators voted against annexation, nine were free and six were slave. Only Louisiana of the deep South voted unanimously against annexation.

The prediction of the National Intelligencer that pro-Texas forces would attempt annexation by joint resolution if the treaty failed proved accurate two days after its rejection. Senator Thomas H. Benton introduced the bill for annexation by joint resolution. He argued that the permission of the entire Congress, not of the Senate alone, was needed in order to add a new state to the Union. His bill offered several modifications of the terms of the defeated treaty. It rejected the extreme boundaries claimed by Texas and required Mexico's consent before annexation could be consummated. Moreover, Benton insisted that the new state not exceed the largest of the other states in area. A partisan vote killed his bill in the Senate. Every Democrat except Hannegan of Indiana, who did not vote, supported it; every Whig except Tallmadge of New York voted against it. With the exception of Hannegan, all of the Senators from the Old Northwest followed party lines. There was little if any sectional division on the vote.

A few days later the House received a letter from Tyler calling for annexation by joint resolution. On the same day a proposal introduced by George McDuffie of South Carolina was the first order of business in the Senate. McDuffie's resolution, which was originally moved on May 23, read:

The compact of annexation made between the executive government of the United States and that of Texas, and submitted to the Senate for confirmation by the President of the United States, be, and the same is hereby, ratified as the fundamental law of union between the United States and Texas, as soon as the supreme executive and legislative power of Texas shall ratify and confirm the said compact of annexation.

While defending his resolution, McDuffie ridiculed Benton's claim that he was a long-standing friend of annexation. McDuffie's proposal was more favored by annexationists than was Benton's because it did not require the permission of Mexico, but it too failed by a solidly partisan vote.

In its stand on the Texas annexation treaty, the Northwest showed itself to be representative of the nation. The national Whig press opposed annexation; the Democratic press supported it. The same alignment held in the party press of the Old Northwest.

Ohio led the opposition, denouncing annexation as a Tyler project, a war measure, an economic blunder, a means to extend slavery, and a part of a conspiracy to strengthen the political power of the South. Newspapers of both parties in Indiana and Michigan failed to deal with the treaty as a separate issue. The Illinois press reflected some interest in it as a separate problem, but the Whig press tended to treat the question as one campaign issue among many, no more important than a number of other partisan measures.

Coming in as election year, the Texas treaty could not escape becoming
a political football. J. P. Henderson and Isaac Van Zandt, Texas charges d'affaires in Washington, sent to Anson Jones, the secretary of state of Texas, a highly plausible explanation of the Senate's action. They pointed out that many of those who voted against Texas favored annexation but thought that it should be put off until after the election. "It cannot be disguised," they wrote, "that party considerations influenced many of those who voted against the ratification. . . . The question of the annexation of Texas has . . . become strictly a party question between the democrats and Whigs in the pending contest for the next Presidency." By June, 1844, Texas annexation and politics could not be separated.

FOOTNOTES

1Tyler believed until after the treaty was signed that both Clay and Van Buren would support it. Lyon G. Tyler, The Letters and Times of the Tylers (Richmond, 1884-1885), II, 306.
2Senate Document 1, 28 Cong., 2 sess., contains over 100 pages of miscellaneous correspondence of the United States, Texas, and Mexico for the years 1843-1844.
5John Quincy Adams, Memoirs of John Quincy Adams (Philadelphia, 1876), XII, 13-14 (April 22, 1844).
6New York Tribune, April 29, 1844.
7Ibid., April 25, 1844.
8Washington Globe, April 15, 1844.
9Senate Document 61, 28 Cong., 1 sess. (January 23, 1844).
10Senate Document 219, 28 Cong., 1 sess. (March 25, 1844).
11Senate Document 402, 28 Cong., 1 sess. (June 17, 1844).
14Ibid., Appendix, pp. 474-486 (May 16, 18, 20, 1844).
15Ohio State Journal, April 23, 1844.
17Ohio State Journal, May 13, 1844.
18Ibid., May 16, 1844.
19Ibid., May 29, 1844.
20Ibid., June 6, 1844.
"Alton Telegraph, June 8, 15, 1844.
22"Ibid., May 11, 1844.
23Giddings to Follett, April 14, 1844, in L. Belle Hamlin, "Selections from the Follett Papers, III." Quarterly Publication of the Historical and Philosophical Society of Ohio, X (1915), 15.
24Ibid., May 12, 1844, p. 16.
25Ibid., June 6, 1844, p. 17.
27Ibid., 28 Cong., 1 sess., p. 619 (May 24, 1844).
28Ibid., p. 647 (June 6, 1844).
29Ibid., p. 652 (June 8, 1844).
30Ibid., Appendix, pp. 696-701 (May 21, 1844).
31William J. Brown, To the People of the Fifth Congressional District of the State of Indiana (8 pages), dated Washington City, April 24, 1844. Located in the New York Public Library and at the University of Texas.
32"Ibid., p. 4.
33Ibid., p. 5.
34Ibid., p. 6.
35Ibid.
36Ibid., p. 7.
39Ibid., April 28, 1844, p. 576.
41Floyd B. Streeter, Political Parties in Michigan, 1837-1860 (Lansing, 1918), p. 40.
42Lyon to Edward Lyon, January 24, 1840, in Thayer, "Life and Letters of Lyon," pp. 408 and 529.
43Cong. Globe, 28 Cong., 1 sess., p. 652 (June 8, 1844).
44Mo., Miss., Ala., and S. C. The free states were Ill. and Pa.
46The Baltimore Sun had reported a great deal of opposition in the South to annexation. Not only would annexation be destructive to Southern sugar interests, it would seriously threaten that section's position in the cotton market. This paper also reported widespread fear that land in Louisiana, Arkansas, and Mississippi would depreciate if Texas joined the Union. Cited in Richmond Palladium, May 3, 1844.
"National Intelligencer, April 14, 1844.


51 Ibid., p. 673 (June 13, 1844).

52 Ibid., pp. 662-663 (June 11, 1844).

53 Ibid., p. 661 (June 11, 1844).

54 Ibid., and Appendix, pp. 588-590 (June 15, 1844).