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INDIANA'S SOUTHERN SENATOR:
JESSE BRIGHT AND THE HOOSIER DEMOCRACY

DISSERTATION

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the
Requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the
College of Arts and Sciences
at the University of Kentucky

By

John J. Wickre

Lexington, Kentucky

Director: Dr. David E. Hamilton, Associate Professor of History

Lexington, KY

2013

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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

INDIANA'S SOUTHERN SENATOR: JESSE BRIGHT AND THE HOOSIER DEMOCRACY

Without northern doughface Democrats, and northern states like Indiana, the South could not have held dominance in American politics during the sectional crisis. Anchoring the extreme end of the doughface North was Indiana's slaveholding senator Jesse Bright (his holdings were in Kentucky). Yet, he was no flailing radical pushed to the margins of northern politics. Bright was the chief party boss who by the mid to late 1850s controlled the state of Indiana. He was one of the most influential leaders getting James Buchanan into the presidency. He did this, in part, because Indiana was a conservative state that disliked anti-slavery agitators. Still, most Hoosiers were not partisans in favor of slavery.

Bright was able to lead Indiana politics during the 1850s because he had become a powerful political boss. American politics in the 1840s and 1850s was built around state level organizations. With elections going through constant and irregular cycles, hopeful candidates needed a strong organization capable of providing money, press literature and mobilization of voters. They needed someone with grit, savvy and energy to organize various groups, and no one was more successful at this in Indiana than Bright. Bright did this, in part, by understanding the baser motives of men, and more importantly, could satisfy these wants with graft, bribery, patronage and other inducements. If that was not enough to motivation, he used fear, bullying and good old fashioned steam rolling tactics to bludgeon his enemies into submission. Bright's extreme doughface attitudes did not make him popular, but his organizing skills made him a powerful leader. He helped prop the slave-power in American politics through the 1850s, but his efforts also alienated a wide swath of northerners, especially in Indiana.

By 1860, a northern Republican Party took control of American politics, as northerners came to reject the slave-masters and the slave-power. This dissertation argues that Bright played a pivotal role in propping the slave-power. But ultimately Bright's political downfall was part of a larger rejection of southern politics.

KEYWORDS: Jesse Bright, Doughface, Democrats, Indiana, Sectional Crisis

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JESSE BRIGHT AND THE HOOSIER DEMOCRACY

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Introduction

In early 1862, Massachusetts Senator Charles Sumner led the charge to expel Indiana's Democratic Senator Jesse Bright from the United States Senate. Over the previous year, thirteen southern senators had been expelled for supporting the rebellion. During that time, Union officials had captured a letter from Bright addressed to Confederate President Jefferson Davis recommending to Davis a fire-arms dealer. Most Republicans had suspected the Indiana Senator harbored disloyal sympathies, and here they had the proof. Bright, who had been Indiana's senator for about seventeen years, was a rarity among northern senators because he owned slaves (in Kentucky) and he ardently defended the institution. In calling for expulsion, Sumner claimed that the letter was "flat treason" according to the constitutional definition of treason. He charged that Bright had given "aid and comfort" in the Confederacy's efforts to prepare for war, and furthermore he had confessed his authorship openly to the Senate.¹

Bright offered his own defense. In a letter presented to the Senate, he explained that he merely opposed the coercive actions of the government. He furiously rejected the policy of "Abolitionism, which is seeking by every means in its power to 'crush out' every man who dares dissent from the policy it prescribes..." Bright insisted that he favored the maintenance of the Union, but it was the "unconstitutional doctrine" of the Abolitionists who were at work to "render disruption permanent and incurable."² As for the letter, he later claimed it

¹ *Congressional Globe*, January 21, 1862, 37th Congress, 2nd Session, 214.

² *Congressional Globe*, December 16, 1861, 37th Congress, 2nd Session, 89.

was merely a “matter of course” to a “friend who asked for it.” He insisted that he had not aided and abetted the enemy as the letter was written prior to the outbreak of war, and he had no “prophetic knowledge” that the United States could be at war with the Confederacy.³ Why Davis and the Confederacy might need arms, Bright did not explain. Some Republicans, like Pennsylvania Senator Edgar Cowan, were convinced that Bright’s actions did not “technically” rise to the level of treason since war had not been “imminent.” Cowan curiously added: “it will be observed” that Bright “gives no opinion upon” the nature of the firearms. “He does not allege that it is an improved fire-arm, he does not allege that he has any knowledge of it whatever,” but merely that “the bearer of the letter, thinks it is an improved fire-arm.” Apparently this splitting of hairs was to show that “to recommend a man having an improved fire-arm to the president of a new republic was quite as innocent as to recommend to him a new cotton-gin, or a new threshing machine.”⁴ The Senate Judiciary Committee apparently shared Cowan’s views and voted 6 to 1 against expulsion.⁵

Senate Republicans, however, pressed on. Bright, they insisted, should have recognized that conflict was imminent. In their minds, he had committed treason, but rather than debate what constituted a treasonous act, they opted to

³ *Congressional Globe*, December 16, 1861, February 5, 1862, 37th Congress, 2nd Session, 89, 651-654.

⁴ *Congressional Globe*, 37th Congress, 2nd Session, January 24, 1862, 471-473.

⁵ *Congressional Globe*, 37th Congress, 2nd Session, January 13, 1862, 287.

charge him with disloyalty. On February 5, 1862, the United States Senate voted to expel Jesse Bright 32 to 14.⁶

Moments before the vote, spectators witnessed a remarkable sight. The man who had wielded enormous power in the Senate gathered his personal belongings and left the chamber. Defiantly, Bright strode powerfully through the halls. He was an imposing man, full of girth, and was “imperious in...manner.” He “brooked no opposition...friend or foe.”⁷ Upon reaching a back room where his wife awaited, however, “the actor’s costume fell. The ruined politician sat down, and haggard and crushed, contemplated the wreck he had made of his fortunes.”⁸ He returned to Indiana and remained quietly at his home for “some time.”⁹

Humiliated in Washington, Bright still hoped for a return to power. When the state legislature convened to fill his seat in early 1863, he traveled to Indianapolis determined to win it back. Once the state’s most powerful Democrat, now, however, he found that politicians no longer feared him.¹⁰ His inducements no longer won him votes. Even his closest political friends kept their distance. Of the eighty-nine members of the legislature’s Democratic caucus, only twelve voted for Bright. Defeated, he left not just Indianapolis, but Indiana. He crossed

⁶ Ethan Lewis, “The Expulsion of Senator Jesse Bright.” *Ethan Lewis* <www.ethanlewis.org> (August 1, 2013). *Congressional Globe*, 37th Congress, 2nd Session, February 5, 1862, 655.

⁷ William Woollen, *Biographical and Historical Sketches of Early Indiana* (Indianapolis: Hammond & Co., 1883), 223.

⁸ Madison Courier, February 8, 1862 quoted in Wayne Van Der Weele, “Jesse David Bright: Master Politician from the Old Northwest” (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 1958), 288.

⁹ Woollen, 229.

¹⁰ William Woollen, *Biographical and Historical Sketches of Early Indiana* (Indianapolis: Hammond & Co., 1883), 223.

the Ohio River to his Kentucky farm, where he knew his slaves would still bow to his orders. A month later, still stewing, he declared Indiana's legislators a bunch of "miserable dogs" who were a "rotten class of Douglas Democrats & Abolitionists."¹¹

Of the fourteen senators who were expelled in 1861 and 1862, all were from southern slave states or the border slave state of Missouri except for Bright. He alone was from a northern free-state, but Sumner and the Republicans knew that Bright was a southerner at heart. He had acquired through marriage a Kentucky farm with slaves and over the years he had added steadily to the number of men and women whom he owned. In the Senate, his closest allies and friends were hardline southern senators such as John Slidell (Louisiana), John Breckinridge (Kentucky), and Jefferson Davis (Mississippi). Starting with the battle over the Wilmot Proviso, Bright had consistently sided with his southern Democratic brethren in each of the nation's great sectional crises. Northern Democrats who aligned with or appeased southern interests were known as doughfaces, and of all the northern doughface political leaders, no one was as pro-Southern and as pro-slavery as Jesse Bright. He was a conditional unionist who wanted a union that protected the rights of slave owners in the southern states and in newly formed territories if possible.

Bright had entered Indiana politics in the 1830s and his rise to political power coincided with the Democratic triumph over the Whigs in Indiana in the 1840s. He was crude, ambitious, virulently racist, but also highly intelligent. The

¹¹ Jesse Bright to William English, January 27, 1863, William English Family Papers, Indiana Historical Society.

latter quality was usually dressed in a rough sort of way. He was elected to the U.S. Senate in 1845 and he quickly began using his Senate office to advance his personal and his political fortunes. He expertly wielded the patronage that came his way to build a loyal base of men and newspapers within Indiana's Democratic Party. By 1853 or 1854, Bright was the acknowledged "boss" of a faction-ridden Indiana Democratic Party. His base of power in a key northern border state made him an important, if shadowy, figure nationally. In 1856, for instance, he was one of four Senate Democrats instrumental in securing the Democratic presidential nomination for James Buchanan.

Bright was a talented political manager, a self-serving opportunist, and a key figure of the "plundering generation."¹² He found no shame in padding his pockets or bribing fellow politicians. This was part of the political game, and better for him to benefit than others. In his early political career, he used his brother Michael Bright's savvy business skills and connections to gain financial resources and make money through investments. When Jesse was lieutenant governor, he had secured a position for Michael as Agent of the State, which enabled him to organize the state's finances. His brother was also personally invested in railroads, a gas company and the state bank. When Indiana established a state bank in 1855, Michael, Jesse and their cronies controlled about a third of its shares.¹³

Additionally, Jesse Bright used his position in the Senate to gain access to larger investments. As a member of the Committee on Territories, he had inside

¹² Mark Summers, *The Plundering Generation: Corruption and the Crisis of the Union 1849-1861* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), xi-xv.

¹³ Van Der Weele, 40-41.

information on the best land speculations. At the center of many deals was Bright's close friend William Corcoran. The pro-southern New York banker regularly provided Bright with initial investments where Bright could use his power to make money. Beginning around 1852, Corcoran began his financial relationship with Bright by helping him make \$35,000 through Texas bond speculation. Corcoran also gave Bright a \$5,000 front for a Lake Superior land speculation deal.¹⁴ As the *Indianapolis Journal*, a Republican paper, remarked in 1857, "It is generally understood that when J.D. Bright went to the U.S. Senate he was poor and about a third rate country lawyer...His friends now represent him to be worth about half a million of dollars. We'd like to know how his pockets have been lined..."¹⁵

Bright was a northern doughface, but his relationships with other doughface Democrats were, at best, complicated. Jesse Bright and Stephen Douglas were sometimes partners, but more often rivals. They were both young and ambitious northwestern senators, yet both were partisan Democrats who sometimes engaged in common causes. They worked together to promote popular sovereignty, particularly in 1850 and 1854. Douglas eventually aligned with Bright's Indiana rivals, but the two could still collaborate on land speculations. Bright, however, undermined Douglas's quest for the 1856 presidential nomination. (Although a few months later, he introduced Douglas to his second wife.) The bitterness generated by the nomination fight lingered, and

¹⁴ Henry Cohen, *Business and Politics in America from the Age of Jackson to the Civil War: The Career Biography of W.W. Corcoran* (Westport: Greenwood Publishing, 1971), 136, 163.

¹⁵ *Indianapolis Journal*, January 26, 1857.

Douglas voted against seating Bright in 1857 when Bright's irregular re-election to the Senate was contested. Finally, differences over sectional issues in 1858 obliterated any kind of working relationship. When Douglas broke with the Buchanan administration over the Lecompton Constitution, he was, in Bright's mind, no better than an abolitionist. The two men came to hate one another. Bright privately supported Abraham Lincoln over Douglas in 1858, and fought Douglas's campaign to win the Democratic nomination in 1860.¹⁶

Bright was closer to James Buchanan, but even this relationship was not always as straightforward as it seemed. His alliance with Buchanan was mainly a strategic one. Both men sympathized with and aligned with the South. They also both distrusted Douglas. Yet, Buchanan also feared that Bright would betray him should he find it advantageous to do so.¹⁷

When Bright entered the Senate in 1845, American politics was divided largely along partisan rather than sectional lines, and the fault lines of these partisan battles were shaped largely by differing views on economic policy and the role of the federal government in encouraging economic development. Generally, Democrats opposed centralized authority. Yet, they were not always in agreement about precisely what they opposed. For some it was federal

¹⁶ Robert Johannsen, *Stephen A. Douglas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 436, 509-510, 540, 649.

¹⁷ Michael Morrison, "President James Buchanan: Executive Leadership and Democracy." *James Buchanan and the Coming of the Civil War*, eds. John Quist and Michael Birkner (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2013), 161.

meddling in the economy, whether by federal banking, internal improvements, or tariffs. Some were leery of centralized money interests.¹⁸

John Tyler's efforts to annex Texas and then James K. Polk's decision to battle Mexico over the Texas boundary and the discovery of gold in California shifted the focus of American politics to sectional issues and especially the question as to whether new western states would permit slavery. Beginning with the debate over the Wilmot Proviso, the Whigs and Democrats increasingly divided into sectional wings. Border States such as Indiana mirrored the national divisions. In Indiana, Bright built a political base among the state's southern-leaning Democrats who despised anti-slavery agitators. All along, however, he faced challenges from the state's free-soil-leaning Democrats who were led by Joseph Wright, Indiana's governor from 1849 to 1857. The two men detested one another, and the two sides fought for years for control of the Indiana Democratic Party. In time, Wright and his supporters allied with Stephen Douglas and they embraced his proposal to resolve the fate of slavery's extension by way of popular sovereignty. As one Indiana senator loyal to Bright confessed, "[Douglas] has, perhaps, more influence among my people than I have myself."¹⁹ Bright initially tolerated popular sovereignty, but his was entirely a political accommodation.

¹⁸ Roy Nichols, *The Democratic Machine 1850-1854* (New York: Columbia University, 1923), 13; Joel Silbey, *Party Over Section: The Rough and Ready Presidential Election of 1848* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2009), 6-8; Joel Silbey, *The Partisan Imperative* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 38-39; Jonathan Earle, *Jacksonian Antislavery & the Politics of Free Soil, 1824-1854* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 6-8.

¹⁹ *Congressional Globe*, 35th Congress, 1st Session, December 22, 1857, 139.

Many Indiana Democrats also came to share the fears of northern voters about the southern “slave-power.” They feared the corrosive, aristocratic influence of southern extremists who demanded that slavery expand to the west. These fears intensified with each of the sectional crises—from the debate over the Wilmot Proviso to the crisis of 1850 to the battle over the Kansas-Nebraska Act to the furor over the Lecompton constitution. And yet after 1850, and especially from 1853 to 1857, the slave-owning Bright tightened his hold on Indiana politics.²⁰ His influence culminated in 1856-1857 when he first denied Stephen Douglas Indiana’s convention votes and then engineered his own re-election through a divided state legislature and also the election of a loyal subordinate to Indiana’s other Senate seat. And a few months later he happily exiled Joseph Wright out of the country by securing him a ministerial position.

By the mid-1850s, Bright was in control of the Indiana Democracy even though he seemed to embody some of the worst features of the slave-power. He was corrupt, authoritarian, and ruthless.²¹ He was a slave-master who demanded subservience from one and all. Stephen Douglas, at least until 1857, might placate southerners, but Bright fully allied with them. But if Indiana’s Democrats favored Douglas and believed in popular sovereignty, and if they feared the slave-power, then how and why was Jesse Bright able to gain control of the party and, for a time, bend it to his will? This dissertation will explore this question. The dissertation is not a formal biography but a study of Bright’s relationship to

²⁰ Leonard Richards, *The Slave Power: The Free North and Southern Domination, 1780-1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000), 175.

²¹ Mark Summers, *The Plundering Generation: Corruption and the Crisis of the Union 1849-1861* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 203-204.

Indiana's Democratic Party. It aims to examine the nature of politics in a key northern border state, to shed some light on the ruptures within the northern Democratic Party after 1845, and to help explain how a political figure like Bright could ally northern Democrats to southern interests.

Here I briefly suggest the major reasons for Bright's ability to command the Democratic organization in Indiana. First of all, there was Bright himself. He is often labeled a doughface Democrat (a term synonymous with weak-willed northerners), but there was nothing weak about him. He was a skilled political warrior who kept to the backrooms, where he excelled at winning his way. He rarely made public speeches, but he won a loyal following by handing out patronage, distributing favors, and aiding his supporters while punishing his enemies. Occasionally, he might compromise or tolerate dissent, but more often he treated disagreement as disloyalty. It was a crude sort of politics, but it was a sort of politics at which Bright was a master.

A second reason was the nature of the Indiana electorate, and especially its Democratic voters. Bright lived in Madison, which was in southern Indiana near the Ohio River. This region had been settled by southerners from Virginia and Kentucky. They may not have cared for slavery, but they were sympathetic to the South and they despised antislavery agitators. The northern region of Indiana was much different, with a smattering of Quaker communities and its Yankee settlers. These Hoosiers were far more conflicted about the morality of slavery and far more fearful of the intentions of the slave-power.

A third factor was the state's pervasive racism. Bright was a man of visceral racial prejudices. He could be amused playing "civilities" with his "niggers and dogs" as long as his Kentucky slaves remained slaves.²² Slavery, he believed, was a means to maintain control over a people who were perceived as racially inferior. Many, perhaps most, Indiana Democrats harbored similar racial views. They wanted no interaction with blacks—either slaves or free-blacks—, and they detested the idea of racial egalitarianism. Theirs was a white man's democracy—pure and simple. The fear of racial mixing, for much of the 1850s, far exceeded their fear of slavery or the slave-power.²³

Finally, the nature of American politics in the 1850s was also critical to explaining Bright's commanding position. The very different political calendar of the mid-nineteenth century, with elections and conventions almost every year, demanded party machinery, which in turn required political professionals. Bright was most certainly a professional party man. His version of politics was serious business mixed with lucrative rewards. It was a type of politics that demanded loyalty and fostered a closed organization. It was also a political system rooted in an intense partisanship. This intensely partisan political environment meant that however much the rank-and-file might dislike a party leader, they were still likely to follow his lead. Bright knew this; he expected it, and he exploited it for years.²⁴

²² Jesse Bright to William Corcoran, May 5, 1857, W.W. Corcoran Papers, Library of Congress.

²³ G.R. Tredway, *Democratic Opposition to the Lincoln Administration in Indiana* (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Bureau, 1973), 1-5.

²⁴ Joel Silbey, *The Partisan Imperative: The Dynamics of American Politics Before the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 50-68. Joel Silbey, *The American Political Nation, 1838-1893* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 46-71.

By understanding Bright and the Indiana Democratic Party, we can appreciate how the South was able to dominate national politics up until the Civil War. His efforts to bully newspaper editors, bribe politicians, steamroll his opposition, and protect slavery made him a feared, respected, and hated political figure. Both his political style and his determined support of the South and of slavery, however, reveal an important side of northern border state politics in the 1840s and 1850s.

One of the difficulties in examining Bright was his secretive nature. While he regularly spoke on the Senate floor on procedural and other mundane matters, he rarely gave extended remarks shedding light on his views. Also, relatively few of his letters have survived. The Lilly Library in Bloomington, Indiana contains some copies of his letters from scattered collections, but there is no major collection of his papers. Deeply distrustful by nature, Bright went to unusual lengths to keep his correspondence from circulating. Many of his letters were marked “private” and “confidential,” but sometimes he commanded his recipient to “burn this.” Once, at least, but probably more often, he commanded a recipient to “re-mail [the letter] to me” as he was “afraid of letters out.” (Fortunately, the recipient complied, but not before making a “literal copy.”)²⁵ The best sources for investigating Bright are Indiana’s newspapers. When Bright’s machinations came to light, certainly his rivals—Whig/Republican or Democratic—were not shy about reporting on them. Additionally, Bright often

²⁵ Jesse Bright to William English, December 21, 1850, November 21, 1852, William English Family Papers, Indiana Historical Society.

promoted his positions through the pens of loyal editors, and hence their editorials reflect his views.

In historical accounts of American politics in the 1840s and 1850s, Bright is rarely a central figure. Sean Wilentz, for instance, ignores him entirely in his massive account of the Democratic Party up until the Civil War. Older accounts such as *Disruption of American Democracy* by Roy Nichols pay more attention to Bright. But clearly historians who write about northern Democrats have devoted more attention to Stephen Douglas, James Buchanan and Lewis Cass. When historians focus on Bright, they often emphasize “his career as a bully” and “belligerent personality.”²⁶

While Bright is frequently mentioned in general works on Indiana politics, there are no published works devoted to his life. Indiana Republicans like George Julian and Schuyler Colfax have garnered more attention. When they have studied Bright, historians of Indiana politics have tended to portray him in one of two ways. One of these first appeared in Logan Esarey’s *A History of Indiana from 1850 to the Present* in 1918. Esarey emphasized the divisions between “pro-slavery Democrats” led by Bright, and the state’s more numerous “anti-slavery Democrats.”²⁷ Bright, he emphasized, was very much the leader of the state’s pro-southern, pro-slavery Democrats. Some years later Kenneth Stamp’s *Indiana Politics During the Civil War* (1949) seemed to accept this view

²⁶ William Gienapp, *The Origins of the Republican Party, 1852-1856* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 107; Roy Nichols, *The Disruption of American Democracy* (New York: MacMillan Co., 1948); Sean Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2005).

²⁷ Logan Esarey, *A History of Indiana from 1850 to Present* Vol. 2 (Indianapolis: B.F. Bowen, 1918), 652.

by arguing that in 1861 Indiana Democrats had grown tired of their party's "pro-southern" leadership. Elmer Elbert's "Southern Indiana Politics on the Eve of the Civil War: 1858-1861" (1967) argued that Bright's "southern sympathy was notorious." Beyond this, Elbert focused more on a conflict of personalities struggling for personal political power than providing an ideological context for their differences.²⁸

Other Indiana historians portrayed Bright in light of the "blundering generation" argument about extremist politics. These scholars glorified moderate political leaders, and criticized both pro-slavery and anti-slavery agitators. Two older and unpublished works on Bright, Charles's Murphy's "Jesse D. Bright" (1927), and Wayne Van Der Weele's "Jesse David Bright: Master Politician from the Old Northwest" (1958), were part of this tradition.²⁹ For these scholars, Bright was less a pro-slavery partisan than a compromising hero, who resisted the extremist politics of both fire-eating southerners and northern abolitionists. Bright's background, argued Murphy, gave "him an unusually good opportunity to face the great national problems" with an "ability to sympathize with, and understand the attitude of both sections."³⁰ In the case of the Lecompton controversy, for instance, Murphy accepts Bright's argument that admitting Kansas as a state under the pro-slavery constitution was the quickest way to end agitation.

²⁸ Elmer Elbert, "Southern Indiana Politics on the Eve of the Civil War: 1858-1861," (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 1967), 28-29; Kenneth Stampp, *Indiana Politics During the Civil War* (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Bureau, 1949).

²⁹ Charles Murphy, "Jesse D. Bright" (M.A. thesis, University of Chicago, 1927); Wayne Van Der Weele, "Jesse David Bright: Master Politician from the Old Northwest" (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 1958).

³⁰ Murphy, "Jesse D. Bright," 1.

Van Der Weele offered a slightly more nuanced argument. He did not take all of Bright's assertions at face value, but he minimized the divisions between Bright and the larger Indiana Democracy. Bright's pro-slavery views, he acknowledged, were at odds with those of most Indiana Democrats, who would leave the question of slavery to local communities. Van Der Weele, however, portrayed the conflict as a largely personal grudge between Bright and Douglas. He also argued that in 1861 and 1862, Bright was a peace Democrat who had been "one of the many who [were] treated rather arbitrarily by the general government during this period."³¹ Emma Lou Thornbrough's *Indiana in the Civil War: 1850-1880* (1965) relied heavily on Van Der Weele to understand Bright. She did not explore Bright's battle with the Douglas Democrats over Lecompton. Bright was expelled in 1862, she suggested, for no other reason than the manner in which he had addressed Jefferson Davis. Her account failed to explain Bright's sympathies for slavery or the Confederacy.³²

More recent works focusing on Hoosier politics have downplayed the importance of Bright within the Indiana Democratic Party. Richard Nation's *At Home in the Hoosier Hills* (2005) and Gregory Peek's "Upland Southerners, Indiana Political Culture, and the Coming of the Civil War, 1816-1861" (2010) slight the conflict between Bright and his Democratic challengers.³³ Both works focus on the influence of southern upland culture and the broad political ideology

³¹ Van Der Weele, "Jesse David Bright," 225, 289.

³² Emma Thornbrough, *Indiana in the Civil War: 1850-1880* (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Bureau, 1965), 115-116.

³³ Richard Nation, *At Home in the Hoosier Hills: Agriculture, Politics, and Religion in Southern Indiana, 1810-1870* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005); Gregory Peek, "Upland Southerners, Indiana Political Culture, and the Coming of the Civil War, 1816-1861," (Ph.D. diss., University of Houston, 2010).

of localism on Indiana's Democratic Party. In emphasizing the importance of common cultural and ideological values, these works tend to minimize the divisions over sectional issues among Indiana Democrats, and instead, emphasize the conflict between Whig/Republicans and Democrats. Bright plays only a relatively minor role in the narratives.

Scholars who have dealt with sectional politics, and the Democratic Party in general, have also mentioned Bright in their accounts. Some of these earlier works also insisted that a "blundering generation" of politicians chose political calculation over statesmanship. Roy Nichols's *The Democratic Machine, 1850-1854* (1923) and *The Disruption of American Democracy* (1948) represented this view when he juxtaposed moderate conservative leaders of the Democratic Party with radicals on both sides. He argued that the Democratic Party in the 1850s consisted of three factions: radical southerners like John C. Calhoun who wished to expand slavery, free soilers like Martin Van Buren who wished to contain slavery, and conservatives like Stephen Douglas who desired an end to agitation over slavery. The vast majority of Democrats, from both sections, he argued, were conservatives who loved the union. According to Nichols, James Buchanan and Stephen Douglas were both conservatives, and he probably saw Bright as one as well. Nichols argued that Bright's willingness to work with southerners earned him enmity from northern "agitators."³⁴ His works suggests that the differences that eventually developed between the Buchanan and Douglas factions over Lecompton were merely political calculations by Douglas to

³⁴ Roy Nichols, *The Disruption of American Democracy*, 5.

maintain power.³⁵ Stamppp's later work, *America in 1857 A Nation on the Brink* (1990), explicitly described Bright as an "ardent Southerner." He juxtaposed Bright as a "pro-southern party boss" in his rivalry with the anti-slavery expansionist Governor Joseph Wright.³⁶

More recent works of the national Democratic Party have not appreciated the depth of the divisions in states such as Indiana. Joel Silbey's *The Partisan Imperative* (1985) argued there was broad agreement among Democrats. While some northern Democrats occasionally engaged in "tactical" "rhetorical flourishes" against slavery, "mainstream Democrats" were less concerned about the slave-power than they were with anti-slavery Republicans.³⁷ Northern dough-faced Democrats play a significant role in Leonard Richards's *The Slave Power: The Free North and Southern Domination 1780-1860* (2000), but Bright plays only a small part. Richard's repeatedly endorses Lincoln's view that Stephen Douglas was "the worst doughface of them all."³⁸ But certainly Bright ought to be a larger contender for that title.

Others have emphasized divisions among the northern Democrats. Jonathan Earle, in *Jacksonian Antislavery and the Politics of Freesoil* (2004), suggested that antislavery Jacksonians were a significant faction among northern Democrats. But he pits these Democrats against the broad northern conservative Democrats, without distinguishing conservative Democrats like Douglas from

³⁵ Nichols, *Democratic Machine*, 17-18; Nichols, *Disruption of American Democracy*, 173-174.

³⁶ Kenneth Stamppp, *Indiana Politics*, 16; Kenneth Stamppp, *America in 1857: A Nation on the Brink* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 47, 51.

³⁷ Silbey, *The Partisan Imperative*, 113.

³⁸ Richards, *The Slave Power*, 109, 175.

more ultra-northern dough-faced Democrats like Buchanan and Bright.³⁹ Additionally, Earle gives practically no attention to the Hoosier Democratic Party. Sean Wilentz's *The Rise of American Democracy* (2005) divides the Democratic Party into even broader camps. On one side was the "southern democracy" that "enshrined slavery as the basis for white man's political equality." On the other were the "northern democrats" who saw "slavery as a moral abomination that denied the basic humanity of blacks."⁴⁰ Both John C. Calhoun and Martin Van Buren play central roles representing these respective factions. Conservative northerners such as Stephen Douglas, who had little regard for moral questions over slavery, play a small and perfunctory role within the story, and Jesse Bright is not to be found anywhere in the massive tome.

One of the more recent works dealing with the Democratic Party unsuccessfully attempts to place Bright within the broader Democratic Party. Yonatan Eyal's *The Young American Movement and the Transformation of the Democratic Party* identifies Bright as a member of the "New Democrat" movement. He argues that these were "progressive and forward-looking" Democrats who believed in "a more activist federal state" to facilitate "economic growth and...social reform." His purpose was to dispel "the recurrent stereotype of Democrats as racists..."⁴¹ Specifically, he argued that Bright was a progressive who sought "to bring order and transparency to civil

³⁹ Earle, 6-8.

⁴⁰ Sean Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2005), 791.

⁴¹ Yonatan Eyal, *The Young America Movement and the Transformation of the Democratic Party, 1828-1861* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 12-13.

administration.”⁴² Eyal is correct to suggest Bright was no advocate of *laissez faire* economics, but nor was he a reformer. Bright, in fact, ruthlessly used the patronage system to reward friends and punish enemies.

* * * * *

The basic organization of this dissertation will be chronological. Chapter one will look at the early history of Indiana as well as the career of Jesse Bright up to 1845. It will examine how the state developed its racial and sectional outlook, and describe the Democratic Party’s rise to political dominance in Indiana in the 1840s. It will also examine Jesse Bright’s early life, his start in Indiana politics, and his rise to political prominence.

Chapter two will look at how the debate over slavery and territorial expansion in the 1840s began to strain and divide the party system. One important development was the emergence of the Free Soil Party in 1848 and

⁴² Eyal, 179-182. Eyal uses three examples to promote Bright as a civil service reformer. He notes that in 1850 Bright sought to place term limits upon assistant post-masters suggesting, strangely, that “term limits would reduce their political nature and make them more authoritative.” Secondly, Bright fought the Pierce administration and sought to require the assistant secretary of the Treasury, in 1853, be confirmed by the Senate. Finally, Bright attacked the Millard Fillmore administration for removing the territorial governor of Oregon “without cause.” Eyal concedes that “critics could easily ascribe Bright’s stance to his own partisanship,” but that “his action cast a different light when contextualized within the broader array of civil service reforms championed by New Democracy.” In fact, Bright’s actions should be contextualized through the prism of partisanship, ideology and cronyism. With the first example, certainly Bright wished to place limits on the appointments of a Whig administration, and requiring term limits would allow for more, and not less, opportunity for political spoils. With regard to the assistant secretary of the Treasury, this was during a Democratic administration. As this dissertation will later show, however, this was in the context of Bright joining hard-line southerners to oppose free-soil Democrats appointed by the Pierce administration. Finally, Eyal fails to note that the territorial governor of Oregon was Joseph Lane. Lane was a pro-southern Democrat originally from Kentucky and Indiana. Bright was close political friends with Lane, and loyally backed him in his bid for the presidency in 1852. His interest in Lane had nothing to do with civil service reform. This dissertation will show that far from being “progressive” on social service reform, or indeed even pretending to be such, Bright masterfully, and ruthlessly, used the spoils system to enhance his political power.

1849. Fearing defections, some Indiana Democrats embraced the free soil position. Bright deferred to political realities at this time to ensure that both he and his party could cultivate power.

Chapter three examines Bright's involvement in crafting the Compromise of 1850, and his efforts to commit the Indiana Democratic Party to the agreement. He insisted that the party support the controversial Fugitive Slave Act, and he set out to steamroll Democrats who opposed this provision. This chapter will also examine Indiana's constitutional convention and ratification of a new constitution in 1850-1851. Racial issues were a crucial part of the convention debate. Paradoxically, the debates over excluding the immigration of blacks would both temper free soil politics, and strengthen resistance to the encroachment of slavery. In other words, Hoosiers saw exclusion from the state and from the western territories as a means of maintaining racial control without accepting slavery.

Chapter four will focus on how Indiana's Democratic Party achieved a dominant position as the state's Whig Party disintegrated. As it gained power, however, factional divisions threatened to tear it apart. Bright fought with popular Democratic Governor Joseph Wright and for a time it seemed as if Wright might undermine his powerful position. This changed with the battle over the Kansas Nebraska Act. Anti-slavery-extension Democrats bolted from the party, which helped Bright to consolidate his control over it. Still, his position remained tenuous as his party sustained heavy losses during the 1854 congressional elections.

Chapter five will show how a divided opposition allowed Indiana Democrats to recover from the disaster of 1854. Democrats used racial prejudice to drive a wedge between their opponents and bring moderate Democrats back into the fold. Because many anti-slavery-extension Democratic leaders had left the party, Jesse Bright was able to work with a more conservative Democratic Party to build a base of support within the state. The chapter will also examine Bright's role in nominating James Buchanan over Stephen Douglas for the presidency in 1856.

Chapter six will look at how the debate over the Lecompton Constitution set into motion Bright's fall from political power. Most Indiana Democrats had supported Stephen Douglas and popular sovereignty, and rejected James Buchanan's policy to force a pro-slavery constitution on Kansas. Bright however, kept control of the party machine through the 1858 congressional races. Though a core group of anti-Lecompton Democrats remained opposed, Bright appealed to party loyalty to retain power. Most Indiana Democrats reluctantly returned to the fold.

Chapter seven will focus on the ouster of Bright from party leadership. Douglas Democrats were able to use their vast numerical superiority to gain control of the party apparatus. With the national Democratic Party split, Bright embraced an alliance with his long time political friends John C. Breckinridge and Joseph Lane to support the southern Democratic ticket. Republicans were then able to consolidate support and win enough Democratic votes to sweep the statewide offices and carry the state for Lincoln. They did this by embracing a

moderate anti-slavery message built on fears of an encroaching despotic slave power. Indiana's experience with Jesse Bright played no small part in this perception.

Finally, this dissertation will provide a brief epilogue resolving how Bright's pro-southern ideological commitments led to his expulsion from the United States Senate. It will also provide a brief overview of his subsequent career.

When clouds are seen, wise men put on cloaks;
When great leaves fall, then winter is at hand;
When the sun sets, who doth not look for night?
Untimely storms make men expect a dearth.
All may be well; but if God sorts it so,
'Tis more than we deserve or I expect
-*Richard III* Act 2, Scene 3

Chapter 1

Jesse Bright and Indiana Politics: 1812-1845

When Indiana was admitted to the union as a state in 1816, it was part of the rapidly growing American West. From 1810 to 1820, the region's population jumped from 25,000 to nearly 150,000, and it continued to grow in the years ahead. Much of Indiana's early settlement was centered in the southern portion of the state along the Ohio River. Many of these settlers had arrived after having first settled in Kentucky and moved across the Ohio River. One famous example, of course, was that of Thomas and Nancy Lincoln, parents of the future 16th president, who left Kentucky for Indiana in 1816. A few years later in 1820, David Bright moved his family from northern Kentucky to Madison, Indiana, a small town that was situated on the river about halfway between Louisville and Cincinnati. Madison served as the county seat for Jefferson County, which in 1820 had a population of about 8,000.

As did other western states, Indiana faced the challenge of establishing systems of transportation and banking to boost its developing economy. What role the state and federal government should assume in developing these systems divided Indiana's Whig and Democratic parties. The state also

contended with the question of slavery and race. Some of the settlers who had left Kentucky were eager to live in a state free of the institution of slavery.

Thomas Lincoln was one such example, but other Indiana settlers had no qualms about slavery. What was clear, however, is that the white settlers and citizens of Indiana—and southern Indiana in particular—held to a deeply embedded racism. They wanted a state settled by white men and women and only white men and women. Understanding this racial context is important for understanding the career of Jesse Bright and the fate of Indiana’s Democratic Party in the 1840s and 1850s.

* * * * *

Well before Indiana was admitted to the union as a state in 1816, its citizens had debated whether to accept or reject slavery, and whether to include or exclude blacks from settling. The region that became the state of Indiana had been part of the Northwest Territory. The Northwest Ordinance of 1787 had barred slavery in the region, but the territory’s settlers contested the prohibition. A few had arrived from southern states with slaves and with southern views on slavery. These pro-slavery settlers, who lived largely just north of the Ohio River, petitioned Congress to remove the ordinance’s anti-slavery provisions. Making slave property illegal, they argued, was a violation of the principle of *ex post facto*. Congress was acting “contrary to an express fundamental principle in all

free countries.”¹ Later, in 1806, both houses of the territorial legislature petitioned Congress for repeal of the provision for ten years.²

The legislature also sought to circumvent the prohibition. In 1803 it adopted Virginia’s legal codes, which included a provision stating, “All negroes and mulattoes...under contract to serve another...shall be compelled to perform such contract.” These codes stipulated that “any such servant being lazy, disorderly, guilty of misbehavior to his master or his masters family shall be corrected by stripes...” Two years later the legislature passed a new series of laws that included provisions for indentured servitude. These laws allowed a black bondsman to either agree to a certain period of servitude, or in cases where there was no consent, allowed the owner sixty days to remove the bondsman from the territory.³ Over the next few years, more such laws created a state of virtual slavery.⁴

The campaign to lift the ban on slavery eventually fizzled. By 1809, when Congress created the Indiana and Illinois territories, the Indiana territory had been settled by easterners and Kentucky immigrants, and many of these settlers now hoped to avoid competition with slavery.⁵ Those early settlers who moved across the Ohio River did so for many reasons, but a desire to be free of slavery

¹ *Slavery Petitions and Papers*, ed. Jacob Dunn (Indianapolis: The Bowen-Merrill Company, 1894), 5.

² *Annals of Congress*, January 20, 1807, 9th Congress, 2nd Session, 375-376.

³ *The Laws of Indiana Territory, 1801-1809*. ed. Francis Philbrick (Springfield: Illinois State Historical Society, 1930), 136-138.

⁴ *Laws of Indiana Territory, 1809-1816*. eds. Louis Ewbank and Dorothy Riker. (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Bureau, 1934), 21.

⁵ Richard Nation, *At Home in the Hoosier Hills* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 187; Philip Schwarz, *Migrants Against Slavery: Virginians and the Nation* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2001), 3; David Donald, *Lincoln* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 24.

was one powerful factor. In the case of Abraham Lincoln's family, their Baptist congregation in Kentucky had divided over slavery, with the Lincolns joining the anti-slavery faction. This, and conflicts over land titles, prodded the family to move into southern Indiana.⁶ Wealthy planters in Kentucky had driven up land prices, which made settlement for poor whites difficult. As one migrant noted, "My daughters would soon be grown up. I did not see any probable means by which I could settle them around near us." Beyond economic motives, the same settler cited his own free labor attitudes fearing "they might marry into slave families" as "there was a marked distinction made...between young people raised without work and those that had to work for their living."⁷

By 1810 the Indiana territory had begun to repeal most of its laws relating to indentured servitude.⁸ When Indiana achieved statehood in 1816, most Hoosiers wanted to enter the union as a free state. In fact, Indiana's first constitution explicitly stated that since slavery "can only originate in usurpation and tyranny, no alteration of this constitution shall ever take place so as to introduce slavery or involuntary servitude in this State."⁹ The white men and women who settled Indiana, especially southern Indiana, opposed the introduction of slavery. They did so, in part, because many were virulent racists who wanted to live in a state free of both slavery and free of blacks.

⁶ Donald, *Lincoln*, 23-24.

⁷ *Autobiography of Peter Cartwright*, ed. W.P. Strickland (New York: Carlton & Porter, 1857), 244; John Barnhart, "Sources of Southern Migration into the Old Northwest" *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 22 (June, 1935), 49-62.

⁸ *Laws of Indiana Territory, 1809-1816*, 22.

⁹ Indiana Historical Bureau, "Constitution of 1816." State of Indiana, <http://www.in.gov/history/2875.htm> (accessed November 3, 2012)

Throughout the state's early years, Indiana remained predominantly white. Logan Esarey noted that the "predominating strain in this population is the English Scotch and Irish peasantry."¹⁰ In each of the censuses from 1820 to 1860, blacks comprised only about one percent of the population. In 1820, 190 slaves resided in Indiana, but by 1830 the number had fallen to three and by 1850 no slaves were listed in the census. Indiana discouraged blacks from settling in the state by curtailing their civil and political rights. The state's first constitution allowed only white male citizens of age to vote and serve in the militia, and it reaffirmed this in the 1824, 1831, 1838, and 1851.¹¹ An 1831 law limited blacks to testifying in court cases in which "negroes, mulattoes or Indians alone are parties." It defined "mulatto" as "Every person" who had "one fourth part of more of negro blood, or any one of whose grandfathers or grandmothers shall have been a negro."¹² In 1853, the legislature voted to exclude testimony from persons "having one-eighth or more negro blood" in cases where a "white person" was "a party in interest."¹³

One of the persistent fears of white Indianans was "amalgamation." Most whites believed that blacks were biologically inferior and hence intermixing would degrade the white population.¹⁴ These fears sometimes initiated ugly acts. In 1840, for instance, John Wilson, a former slave living in Indiana, had married a

¹⁰ Esarey, *A History of Indiana*, 418.

¹¹ *The Revised Laws of Indiana, Adopted and Enacted by the General Assembly at their Eighth Session* (Corydon: Carpenter and Douglass, 1824), 46; *The Revised Laws of Indiana*, 1831, 50; *The Revised Statutes of the State*, 1838,

¹² *The Revised Laws of Indiana* (Indianapolis: Douglas and Maguire, 1831), 407.

¹³ *The Statutes of the State of Indiana* (Indianapolis: J.J. Bingham, 1870), 166.

¹⁴ George Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1971), 321.

white woman. When this was discovered, a mob surrounded their home. Wilson barely escaped, but his bride, Sophia Speers was paraded through the streets and dragged over rails. She signed a petition for divorce, which the legislature quickly granted. The couple, to the astonishment of most white Hoosiers, had not violated any laws. They had, however, violated stringent social conventions. Even the abolitionists who courageously rescued Wilson seemed to accept these conventions. In tolerating the situation, Levi Coffin argued that the “mulatto man...was really almost white and possessed none of the negro features...” Coffin asserted that Wilson was “several shades lighter than” many within the mob who had hounded him.¹⁵

The fear of miscegenation spurred legislation to prohibit interracial marriages. One Indiana state senator conjectured that this oversight likely owed to the legislature supposing “that no circumstances could arise to make legislation” necessary. Most of Indiana’s white citizens had assumed “that this subject was sufficiently controlled and regulated by public opinion.”¹⁶ Shortly after the Wilson incident, a bill “to prohibit the amalgamation of whites and blacks” was enacted, and it was reaffirmed in 1852.¹⁷ When the law was challenged, the State Supreme Court ruled: “Personally considered, such a marriage would be a mere matter of taste; but the state deems the product of such marriages...an

¹⁵ Levi Coffin, *Reminiscences of Levi Coffin* (Cincinnati: Western Tract Society, 1876), 155-160.

¹⁶ *Journal of the Senate of the State of Indianan*, Indianapolis: Douglass and Noel, 1839), 261.

¹⁷ *The Revised Statutes of the State of Indiana*, 1:361.

undesirable class of persons, and will yield no clamor in favor of unalienable rights which shall override the public good.”¹⁸

Indiana’s white citizens also sought to keep blacks from entering the state. Early legislation required black immigrants to post a \$500 bond. Those who did not comply were to be hired out for six months with proceeds going to the local county “for the use of such negro or mulatto” as “directed by the overseers of the poor.” Few blacks, of course, could afford the bond. The law seems to have been enforced only when there was a desire to exert racial control.¹⁹ Its constitutionality was challenged on the grounds that it violated the United States Constitution’s provision that “citizens of each state shall be entitled to all privileges and immunities of citizens in the several states.” The Indiana State Supreme Court, however, ruled that it could not overturn a statute “unless its unconstitutionality” was “so obvious as to admit no doubt.”²⁰ In 1851, Indiana’s constitutional convention sought to outlaw the further settlement of all blacks into the state. When this provision was submitted for ratification, 86 percent of Indiana voters favored it.

White racial attitudes became harsher over time. A black family in southern Indiana noted that in the early 1820s they “had been well received and well treated.” Yet by the early 1830s, as the abolitionist movement attracted more support, blacks were “met with so much scorn and disdain” by their white

¹⁸ *Judicial Cases Concerning American Slavery and the Negro*, ed. Helen Tunnicliff Catterall (Washington D.C.: Carnegie Institution of Washington, 1937), 39.

¹⁹ *The Revised Laws of Indiana* (Indianapolis: Douglas and Maguire, 1831), 375-376.

²⁰ Quoted in Emma Thornbrough, *The Negro in Indiana: A Study of a Minority*. (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society, 1957), 59.

neighbors who were constantly inducing them to colonize to Liberia, less they should “increase so much faster than” the whites and “eat” them “out soon.”²¹ In time, blacks who settled in the state chose to live in or near the state’s Quaker settlements. In these communities, recently freed slaves often found men and women willing to offer charitable assistance.²²

Eventually, the state developed a regional division over race and slavery. In southern Indiana, racial attitudes hardened but the northeastern settlers who dominated the northern portion of the state tended to be milder in their racial views. These Yankee settlers began arriving in large numbers in the 1830s and 1840s. One Indiana politician noted the regional divide when he observed that in northern Indiana the “enterprising Yankee” held “patriotic sentiments” about the universality of liberty which those in the southern portion of the state equated with fanaticism and foolishness.²³ This may have overstated the divisions. Few in the north were racial egalitarians. Most white Hoosiers wanted Indiana free of both slavery and blacks.

By the 1840s colonization to Liberia had become a popular cause in Indiana. Yet, it was not until the state constitutional convention in 1850-1851 that Indiana seriously sought to encourage it as an official policy. The state’s exclusion article included a provision whereby the fines generated by the law would go into a fund that would promote colonization. Indeed, Governor Joseph

²¹ Edward Aaby, *A Journal of a Residence and Tour of the United States of North America* 3 Volumes, (London: John Murray, 1835), 2:366.

²² Thornbrough, *The Negro in Indiana*, 31-54.

²³ Godlove Orth to Schuyler Colfax, August 16, 1845, in Schauinger “The Letters of Godlove Orth: Hoosier Whig,” 367.

Wright became a vocal champion of the cause, and couched his advocacy in the typical mixture of prejudice and benevolence. In 1853, Indiana created a state board of colonization. The state thus became directly involved in the management—including authorizations to purchase of land in Liberia—of colonization. From 1853 to 1854, only 47 black Hoosiers immigrated to Liberia. Afterwards, the state had difficulty finding blacks willing to emigrate, and when they did, the state had trouble providing money for the endeavor.²⁴

* * * * *

Jesse Bright's family settled in southern Indiana in 1820 when Jesse was seven-years-old. Born in upstate New York on December 18, 1812, he was the son of David Bright, a Virginian who had moved to New York. David Bright was politically active and he had close friendships with Governor Dewitt Clinton and Thurlow Weed, which helped him secure various local appointments.²⁵ According to family lore, David also provided the funds that allowed Thurlow Weed, the future Whig and Republican boss, to establish his first newspaper.²⁶ The two men became close friends, and Weed later wrote: "I passed many leisure hours pleasantly with Mr. Bright, who had seen a good deal of life, and was an intelligent, close observer of men and things."²⁷ These long hours of conversations between David Bright and Weed, one of the nation's foremost

²⁴ Eugene H. Berwager, *The Frontier Against Slavery: Western Anti-Negro Prejudice and the Slavery Extension Controversy* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1967), 55-58.

²⁵ Wayne Van Der Weele, "Jesse David Bright: Master Politician from the Old Northwest" (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 1958), 1; Charles Murphy, "Jesse D. Bright" (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1927), 1.

²⁶ Murphy, "Jesse D. Bright," 1.

²⁷ *Autobiography of Thurlow Weed* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1884), 79.

political organizers, suggest that the family had a strong background in understanding the art of politics.

In his youth Jesse Bright was exposed to both ambition and slaveholding culture. In 1819, when he was six, his family moved to Kentucky and lived there a year before moving across the Ohio River to Madison. His father worked as a hat maker, but he also secured political appointments and had various investments that may have included land in Kentucky.²⁸ Jesse's boyhood friendship with Norvin Green, a young entrepreneur and future president of Western Union Telegraph, would suggest that Bright's earliest inclinations were to associate with those who were talented and ambitious.²⁹ As a young man, Bright studied law and was admitted to the bar in 1833. He soon secured a position as a junior law partner to United States Senator and former governor William Hendricks.

In 1835, Bright married Mary Turpin of Kentucky. She came from "a rather distinguished family" with slave holdings in Gallatin County. A biographer has indicated that Bright likely met his bride while managing property owned by his father in Kentucky. In marrying Turpin, Bright acquired 448 acres of land and five slaves. Over many years Bright would come to own twenty-one slaves.³⁰

²⁸ Van Der Weele, "Jesse David Bright," 4, 10; Murphy, "Jesse D. Bright," 2.

²⁹ Murphy, "Jesse D. Bright," 3.

³⁰ *Gallatin County Estates: Wills, Administrations, Guardianships and Settlements 1799-1838* edit. Carl Bogardus (Warsaw, KY: Gallatin County Historical Society, 1985), 37. Van Der Weele, "Jesse David Bright," 10, 42.

Bright's passion was not the law but politics. Unlike his father and his senior law partner, who were both Whigs, Jesse was a devoted Democrat.³¹ Bright's decision to join the Democratic Party is curious. While the Whigs tended to represent capital investment, banking and internal improvements, Democrats largely eschewed the centralized use of the government to support these activities. They desired a limited government, opposed federal internal improvement projects, and distrusted the money interests. Bright was an unlikely Democrat in many of these respects. Yet in the age of Jackson, many young men saw the Democratic Party as a stronger vehicle to pursue personal ambitions. Additionally, a new faction emerged within the party to challenge the Jacksonian orthodoxy of *laissez-faire* and simple agrarian economic policies. A large number of Democrats, notably Bright and Stephen Douglas, were born around the War of 1812 and came to embrace the market revolution and the role of the federal government in helping to promote commercial development.³² By 1853, Bright was closely associated with William Corcoran, a powerful New York banker who helped Bright make handsome profits from different financial schemes. Indeed, Bright's daughter eventually married the brother of George Riggs, Corcoran's banking partner. He was also a strong supporter of federally financed internal improvement projects for his home state. Bright's signature even once found its way onto a petition calling for the renewal of the United

³¹ In addition to a close friendship with Thurlow Weed, Jesse's father, David Bright, received a local appointment from the John Tyler administration as Receiver and Depositary of Public Money with the Land Office. Van Der Weele, "Jesse David Bright," 5.

³² Yonatan Eyal, *The Young America Movement and the Transformation of the Democratic Party, 1828-1861* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 10-11.

States national bank charter, which was anathema to most Democrats.³³ Beyond sectional questions, another issue that would fuel the rivalry between Bright and Joseph Wright would be the state bank. Wright represented the simple agrarian wing of the party that opposed state banking, while Bright battled for it.³⁴

During the 1830s, the Whigs dominated Indiana politics. Indiana was an underdeveloped frontier state, and Whig policies seemed to promise economic growth. Settlers from Virginia, Kentucky and the Carolinas moved into the river regions of southern Indiana. The early economy almost exclusively revolved around agriculture. Surplus agricultural goods were transported down the Ohio and Mississippi River. The bulk of these goods came in the form of corn, pork and other livestock. Hoosiers needed reliable roads, river improvements—and eventually canals and railroads—to promote further settlement and economic opportunities.³⁵ Whigs were especially popular in Bright's hometown of Madison. With the town's Democrats in the minority and disorganized, Bright quickly established himself as their local leader. Yet he remained personally popular with local Whigs, and was elected probate judge in 1834.³⁶

Internal improvements played a key role in reelecting the Whig incumbent governor Noah Noble in 1834. Whig fortunes continued to rise as Indiana voters gave their enthusiastic support to William Henry Harrison, the hero of Tippecanoe, in both the 1836 and 1840 presidential elections. During the 1836

³³ Van Der Weele, "Jesse David Bright," 23-24. Bright would later claim that "his name was placed there by a friend who was studying law in the same office with him."

³⁴ Roy Nichols, *The Disruption of American Democracy* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1948), 88.

³⁵ Esarey, *A History of Indiana from its Exploration to 1850*, 254-277.

³⁶ Van Der Weele, "Jesse David Bright," 13.

election, Whigs also gained decisive majorities in both houses of the Indiana legislature. Bright's personal ties to Hendricks served him well as the Whig senator recommended his junior partner for the post of United States marshal to the Democratic administration of Martin Van Buren. Bright, Hendricks wrote, was "in every respect well qualified and would in my opinion make an excellent officer and one acceptable to the people."³⁷

Bright used this appointment as marshal to travel the state making political contacts. Unfortunately for the ambitious lawyer, Martin Van Buren lost his bid for reelection to William Harrison, which meant that Bright lost his federal appointment when the Whigs took over in 1841. But as would often characterize Bright's political life, good timing, luck, and his own skills advanced his career. The Whigs in Madison had nominated Williamson Dunn for a state senate seat, but divisions among the Whigs over Sunday mail delivery caused some of the less religious and more business-minded Whigs to support Shadrach Wilber as an independent candidate. With the Whigs divided, Bright organized his partisans and won the seat.³⁸

When Bright arrived in Indianapolis, the state Democratic Party was in turmoil. The Democrats had largely been swept from power as a result of Harrison's 1840 "hard cider" campaign and the appeal of Whig proposals for internal improvements and economic development. But Whig success depended

³⁷ William Hendricks to John Tipton, June 14, 1837 quoted in Van Der Weele, "Jesse David Bright," 14.

³⁸ William Wesley Woollen, *Biographical and Historical Sketches of Early Indiana* (Indianapolis: Hammond & Co., 1883), 225-226.

on a stable economy, and when the panic of 1837 struck, the Whigs faced political disaster.³⁹ Democrats seized on mismanagement and massive state debt and near bankruptcy to take power. Bright quickly threw himself into the mix and was a crucial figure in rebuilding his party. During this time, political parties required strong organizing talent. As Joel Silbey has noted, “The fragmented calendar...ensured that Americans were caught up in semi-permanent and unstinting partisan warfare somewhere throughout the year.” As such, parties desperately needed “increasingly elaborate organizational structures to manage their affairs and to mobilize voters and legislators and instruct them in their partisan duty.”⁴⁰ Bright proved especially adept at this process. His efforts were rewarded in 1843 when he was selected as a nominee for lieutenant governor along with gubernatorial candidate James Whitcomb (D).

In the campaign, Whitcomb and Bright charged the Whigs with corruption and fiscal irresponsibility. Democrats ran on a platform strongly condemning the national bank as a “Bankrupt Law,” and supported tariffs for revenue purposes only.⁴¹ With the economy struggling, Whitcomb and Bright were elected.⁴² Bright’s position as lieutenant governor gave him new opportunities. The state senate was divided equally between Whigs and Democrats, which meant that Bright would cast tie-breaking votes. No less important, Bright proved to be a loyal and industrious party operative. He helped finance the printing of campaign

³⁹ *Indiana Election Returns 1816-1851* Eds. Dorothy Riker and Gayle Thornbrough (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Bureau, 1960), 229-235; Kit Carson Carter, “Indiana Voters During the Second Party System, 1836-1860” (PhD Diss., University of Alabama, 1975) 9-10.

⁴⁰ Silbey, *The American Political Nation*, 46-48.

⁴¹ *Indiana State Sentinel*, January 17, 1843

⁴² *Indiana Election Returns: 1816-1851*, 152, 175; Van Der Weele, “Jesse David Bright,” 24-25.

materials and knew how to draw upon the strengths of others to organize political mobilization efforts. During this era, campaigns needed structure and “close-knit, partisan networks.” They needed men at the precinct level who could ensure that fellow party members got to the polls. Bright was an expert at making sure the system worked smoothly.⁴³

* * * * *

The triumph of Whitcomb and Bright in Indiana’s 1843 gubernatorial election came at a time when nationally the Democratic Party was struggling and torn by divisions. The collapse of the economy in 1837 and Martin Van Buren’s defeat to William Henry Harrison in 1840 had undermined the party’s dynamic strength derived from the Jacksonian presidency. The old issues of tariffs and national banking had grown old and stale. Issues of western expansion, especially Texas annexation, now generated new excitement. But it exacerbated divisions.⁴⁴

When Texas declared itself an independent republic in 1837, many Americans wanted it to become part of the United States. Andrew Jackson and Martin Van Buren, however, realized that southern territorial expansion might reopen sectional divisions, especially in light of the growing anti-slavery sentiment in the North. Harrison, a loyal Whig, was committed to internal improvements and had little interest in expansion. When Harrison died shortly

⁴³ Silbey, *The Partisan Imperative*, 99; Silbey, *The American Political Nation*, 52.

⁴⁴ James Paul, *Rift in the Democracy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1951), 5-32.

into his term, Vice President John Tyler (Virginia), a nominal Whig, assumed the presidency. Tyler abandoned Whig orthodoxy, and soon alienated most of the party. This was especially the case when he pursued territorial expansion and, specifically Texas annexation. Tyler was a devout nationalist who passionately embraced “manifest destiny.” He was also a southerner who felt little discomfort about the expansion of slavery. And he was closely allied with John C. Calhoun, who became his Secretary of State in 1844. Fearful that Great Britain might acquire Texas and promote abolitionism, Calhoun, as the South’s leading advocate of slavery, committed the Tyler administration to acquiring Texas and promoting slavery’s western expansion.⁴⁵

Tyler hoped to use the Texas issue to build a coalition—either of Democrats or a third party—to gain another presidential term. Southern Democrats quickly embraced Texas annexation, but in the northeast, especially once Calhoun linked Texas to slavery, it created bitter opposition. New York’s Martin Van Buren had long battled Calhoun and he had grown weary of pro-slavery expansionists. He declared his opposition to acquiring Texas as a slave state. The fissures that would eventually destroy the American party system were just beginning to emerge.⁴⁶

Western Democrats were just as devoutly committed to expansion as were southern Democrats. They feared that an isolated Texas might succumb to

⁴⁵ John Schroeder, “Annexation or Independence: The Texas Issue in American Politics, 1836-1845” *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 89 (October, 1985), 148-149; Freehling, *Road to Disunion: Secessionists at Bay*, 358-359; Oliver Chitwood, *John Tyler: Champion of the Old South* (1939; repr., New York: Russell & Russell, 1964), 342-366.

⁴⁶ Paul, *Rift in the Democracy*, 62-93.

British influence.⁴⁷ Expansion in Oregon, meanwhile, offered settlers new economic and social opportunities. The idea of the west as a source of opportunity resonated with voters in western states like Indiana. For the most part, the western Democrats assumed that region would remain free of slavery.⁴⁸ Though they placed greater emphasis on Oregon than Texas, they wanted to acquire both. Indiana Democrats were among the region's most committed expansionists, leading the Oregon fight were Indiana Democrats such as Edward Hannegan. Hannegan believed that the Oregon territory, from 42 degrees latitude up through 54° 40", "indisputably" belonged to the United States, and he was prepared to battle Britain for it. If "war must come, let it come; it will not find us unprepared." This was more than "a question of dollars and cents" but "a question of national honor or national shame."⁴⁹

As territorial questions re-opened sectional debate, the Democratic Party worked to unify itself for the 1844 presidential election. It could not alienate its southern wing, but it also had to rally northern Democrats. While some northern Democrats, particularly those allied with Van Buren, opposed Texas annexation, western and southern Democrats favored annexation. To these wings of the party, Martin Van Buren was a problematic candidate, despite his popularity with northern Democrats.⁵⁰ Western Democrats, including Bright and most of the

⁴⁷ Lew Wallace, *Lew Wallace: An Autobiography* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1906), 102; Sean Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005), 571.

⁴⁸ Michael Morrison, *Slavery and the American West: The Eclipse of Manifest Destiny and the Coming of the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina Press, 1997), 4-5.

⁴⁹ *Congressional Globe*, 28th Congress, 1st session, February 23, 1844, 313-314

⁵⁰ Michael Holt, *The Fate of their Country: Politicians, Slavery Extension, and the Coming of the Civil War* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2004), 10-12.

Hoosier Democracy, supported instead the pro-expansionist candidacy of Lewis Cass (D) the senator from Michigan. Cass not only favored expansion but he was friendly to commercial interests.⁵¹

As lieutenant governor from 1843 to 1845, Bright emerged as both a state and national political organizer by the 1844 convention. Silas Wright, a New York supporter of Van Buren and a respected figure in the party, observed of Bright that his political talents for “mischief” made him an attractive leader for the Cass campaign. In fact, the Cass men wanted Bright to be made chairman of the Democrat’s national Baltimore Convention. Instead, he was named a member of the rules committee.⁵² In Wright’s view, Bright was the leader of “the ‘madmen’ from Indiana” who were “loud” and “impassioned” for Cass.⁵³ Wright’s comments may have been inspired by Bright’s willingness to work with southern Democrats to thwart Van Buren’s candidacy by re-establishing the famous two-thirds rule. This required a Democratic nominee to garner two-thirds of the convention’s delegates, and it in effect gave the South a veto over the party’s nominating process. As a member of the rules committee, Bright supported the change, which marked the beginning of a collaboration with southern Democrats that continued for the rest of his political career. The Indiana delegates fell in line behind both Cass and the cause of expansion. Indeed, Edward Hannegan inserted in the party platform a provision calling for “the whole of the Territory of Oregon,” and “no portion...ought to be ceded to England...” During the presidential balloting, nine of Indiana’s delegates supported Cass and three

⁵¹ Morrison, *Slavery and the American West*, 50-51.

⁵² Quoted in Paul, *Rift in the Democracy*, 147.

⁵³ Paul, *Rift in the Democracy*, 147.

supported Van Buren. Eventually, all twelve voted by acclamation for Tennessee's James Polk.⁵⁴

Polk was the first "dark horse" candidate in American political history, and he won the nomination because he was the only candidate who could unite all the party's factions. He was a southern slaveholder who favored western expansion, but he also shared the economic views of the Van Buren Democrats.⁵⁵

The Whig Party, meanwhile, nominated Kentucky Senator Henry Clay for the presidency. Although a slaveholder from Kentucky, Clay was uneasy about slavery, and in his 1844 campaign he courted northern voters. Years later, Abraham Lincoln would refer to Clay as his "beau-ideal of a statesman." Clay opposed Texas annexation, believing it likely to provoke sectional agitation. He would support annexation only on the condition that it receive "general concurrence" from both sections. As William Freehling has observed, this was the "gospel" of Calhoun turned toward the benefit of the North.⁵⁶ Clay was also less hawkish on the Oregon question, hoping to compromise with Britain. Such views made it more difficult for Clay to carry a pro-expansionist western state like Indiana.

⁵⁴ Roger Van Bolt, "Sectional Aspects of Expansion, 1844-1848." *Indiana Magazine of History* 28 June, 1952, 126-127; Van Der Weele, "Jesse David Bright," 29-32; Charles Sellers, *James K. Polk Continentalist, 1843-1846* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), 85-100.

⁵⁵ Sellers, *James K. Polk*, 85-100; Michael Holt, "James K. Polk: 1845-1849" in *The Reader's Companion to the American Presidency*, eds. Alan Brinkley and Davis Dyer, (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2000), 142-144.

⁵⁶ Freehling, *Road to Disunion*, 427.

Democrats were able to forge a united party over Texas annexation. Michael Holt has noted: “[p]arty affiliation, not section, dictated the stands of newspapers and politicians on the expansion issue.”⁵⁷ While some Democrats had initially objected to annexation, many began to fall in line behind Polk and the party platform. One example was Jacob Chapman, the editor of the *Indiana State Sentinel*, the state’s main Democratic Party organ. Formerly from Massachusetts, he was among the Democrats in the state who opposed slavery’s expansion. Chapman was no radical, but he was decidedly against the expansion of slavery, and he had supported Martin Van Buren in his opposition to annexation. The *Sentinel* initially suggested that annexation was merely a “New Theme for Agitation” and blamed the nominally Whig Tyler administration for stirring up trouble. Chapman wanted Congress to focus on the “Oregon question,” which was more popular with Democrats, rather than “agitating” on Texas.⁵⁸ With Polk’s nomination, however, the *Sentinel* began to reexamine its stand. It had hoped to minimize the differences between Van Buren and the rest of the party. It printed a Robert Owen speech indicating that Van Buren was open to considering Texas annexation. It was possible that “time and circumstances” might allow for annexation. Finally, the paper acquiesced to the pro-expansionist forces, noting that Texas was a region of 318,000 square miles. “This is worth having” especially as “Uncle Sam” can get it “offered to him for nothing...”⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Michael Holt, *The Political Crisis of the 1850s* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1978), 43.

⁵⁸ *Indiana State Sentinel*, March 28, 1844.

⁵⁹ *Indiana State Sentinel*, June 6, 13, 1844.

In 1844, Texas annexation played a prominent role in the Indiana campaign. Bright tried to allay fears that annexation might provoke a war with Mexico. Bright desired the expansion of territory into Oregon, Texas or wherever; he was not especially choosy, and he was certain of the capacity of the United States to accomplish it. He also assured voters that annexation could be accomplished peacefully. Bright believed Mexico was weak and he had no inhibitions about war. The United States, Bright declared, would “undertake to clean out Mexico with a regiment of women armed with broomsticks.” When actual war broke out, a friend poked fun at Bright’s statement in print with mild humor, but went to lengths to conceal his identity fearing the senator’s wrath.⁶⁰ War was not the only concern. Many Indiana Democrats worried that annexing Texas was merely a means to expand slave-holding territory. The *Sentinel* sought to dispel such fears by reprinting an article that challenged Calhoun’s expectations. “So far from perpetuating slavery in the United States, the annexation of Texas,” the article contended, “gives the only well-grounded hope...for its ultimate extinction.” This “paradox” was the “sober truth,” as slavery could more easily evanescent when it was spread, or diffused, so as to lower the concentration of slaves, making eventual emancipation possible.⁶¹

Indiana Democrats also tried to place expansionist policies in a national context. As Joel Silbey observed, “western Democrats” believed that the acquisition of both Texas and Oregon was a “quid pro quo” action to promote

⁶⁰ Woollen, *Biographical and Historical Sketches*, 370.

⁶¹ *Indiana State Sentinel*, July 18, 1844.

sectional harmony.⁶² The *Sentinel* charged that Clay would give “Great Britain all that portion of Oregon Territory” north of 49 degrees, and his “doctrines in relation to Texas will lose us command of the Gulf of Mexico, and bound our country on every side by British territory.”⁶³ Polk, meanwhile, implied that the United States would claim all of the Oregon territory, and many Democrats assumed he meant to acquire all the land up to the 54° 40’. This helped Polk win a narrow 2,000-vote majority in Indiana.⁶⁴

* * * * *

The ambitious Bright was eager to use his post as lieutenant governor to seek a higher office, and he soon aimed for a U.S. Senate seat. In December 1844 the legislature met to fill the state’s open seat. With the state senate split evenly and Whigs having a majority in the House, a joint session would have elected a Whig. The House voted for a joint session, but the senate vote was a tie, which allowed Bright to cast the deciding vote against a joint session. As a result of the deadlock, the seat went unfilled for a year. When Indiana held legislative elections in August 1845, the Democrats gained a majority in the House. While Governor Whitcomb had ambitions for the seat, he was stymied by internal party divisions. These divisions were an extension of the Barnburners and Hunkers feud centered in New York, which had broken out in the early 1840s when New York’s Democratic Party split over economic policy. The Hunkers

⁶² Joel Silbey, *Storm Over Texas: The Annexation Controversy and the Road to Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 114.

⁶³ *Indiana State Sentinel*, September 12, 1844.

⁶⁴ Riker and Thornbrough, *Indiana Election Results*, 38-52.

supported modest state sponsored internal improvements, while the Barnburners wanted to restrict these projects. Eventually slavery would also divide the two factions, with the Barnburners opposing its expansion and the Hunkers tending to oppose anti-slavery agitation.⁶⁵ As somewhat of a Barnburner, Whitcomb represented the wing of the Democratic Party that sought to restrict state-sponsored enterprises. The governor had also antagonized some Democrats when he refused to re-nominate old-guard Democratic judges. Bright, on the other hand, represented the attitudes of the Hunkers. He supported banking and internal improvements. Most importantly, Bright's Hunker position was based on his pro-slavery attitudes. Hence, he opposed Whitcomb's nomination because the governor represented Indiana's free soil Democrats who desired to contain slavery's expansion.⁶⁶

Bright delicately navigated these feuds by making political friends. He did this in part through his financial resources and the help of his brother Michael who had large financial assets and who used them to advance Jesse's rise in politics. In 1843, while running with Whitcomb, Bright had financed a Whitcomb pamphlet opposing protective tariffs with a hefty \$200 donation. As William Woollen, a Bright contemporary and future Indiana historian, recounted that, "his two hundred dollars contribution brought its reward" two years later when Bright sought the Senate nomination.⁶⁷ It appears that Bright also made promises for unspecified favors. One member of the legislature wrote privately after the

⁶⁵ Wilentz, *Rise of American Democracy*, 530-531, 608.

⁶⁶ Esarey, *A History of Indiana*, 477; Woollen, *Biographical and Historical Sketches*, 89.

⁶⁷ Woollen, *Biographical and Historical Sketches*, 84.

election: "Our new Senator Bright will do all in his power to aid us...he owes much to me for his election but this in confidence."⁶⁸ Bright proved adept at outmaneuvering his rival. The Democratic caucus voted in his favor over Whitcomb by a margin of 24-16. This time when the House voted for a joint session, Bright cast the tie-breaking vote in the Indiana Senate. On December 6, 1845, just shy of thirty-three, Jesse Bright was elected to the United States Senate.⁶⁹

* * * * *

Bright's rapid climb to power owed to his well-connected family and his talents as a political organizer. He knew how to build and mobilize political support. At the precise moment he sought federal office, Bright found the nation just beginning to enter into a frenzy of sectional conflict. Questions over how to handle the issue of slavery in the western territories vexed the nation. Northerners would grow concerned that the expansion of southern territory merely served slave-holding interests, and sought to restrict slavery in the territories. Southerners, meanwhile, came to resent northern meddling on the issue. Bright would play an important role in trying to shape how the Democratic Party and the nation would come to terms with this volatile issue.

⁶⁸ Cyrus Tabor to William G. Ewing, December 31, 1845, William G. and George W. Ewing Papers, Indiana State Library, quoted in Van Der Weele, "Jesse David Bright," 40.

⁶⁹ *Indiana State Sentinel*, December 11, 1845.

*Dive, thoughts, down to my soul. Here Clarence comes.
Richard III, Act 1 Scene 1*

Chapter 2

The Rise of Sectional Divisions: 1845-1849

At the close of 1845, Jesse Bright became a newly elected slave-owning senator from a free state. When he entered the Senate, the most pressing matters facing the nation were questions of territorial expansion. These included the annexation of Texas, the Oregon question, and the dispute with Mexico over the Texas boundary that led to war. Expansion inevitably raised the divisive issue of whether slavery would be allowed into the western territories. Bright and his home-state Democrats were reluctant participants in this fight. Most Indiana Democrats were mild opponents of the expansion of slavery, but they detested radical abolitionists. They found in the election of 1848, however, that they could not avoid the issue of slavery in the territories.

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James Polk had come into office with a broad base of Democratic supporters. He had gained support from southern expansionists by his commitment to Texas annexation and his endorsement from Andrew Jackson. He had also gained the support of Martin Van Buren's followers for his anti-bank views. Additionally, he had promised Pennsylvanians that he would promote protectionism, while promising southerners the opposite. Once elected, however, Polk alienated Van Burenites by appointing their hated enemies to the cabinet,

and he disappointed Pennsylvania Democrats by siding with southerners to lower tariff rates with the Walker Tariff.¹

Territorial expansion worsened the divisions. In late 1844 and early 1845, outgoing president John Tyler lobbied Congress to admit Texas by way of a joint resolution rather than a formal treaty. In order to gain support from some northern Democrats and Whigs, the Texas annexation resolution was amended to allow the president the choice of either admitting the whole of Texas as a state or admitting a smaller portion, with the remaining territory free of slavery. Many northern Democrats, led by Martin Van Buren, believed Polk would choose the latter option. They were wrong. When Polk entered office, he pushed ahead with Tyler's annexation policies, which infuriated the Van Buren wing of the party.²

Polk secured Texas's admission to the Union in December 1845, but this was just the beginning of his grand ambitions for national expansion. He wanted to establish the Texas boundary at the Rio Grande River—even at the expense of a war with Mexico. He also wanted the territories west of Texas—New Mexico and California. The situation grew tense as Polk ordered troops to cross the Nueces and camp along the Rio Grande. On April 25, 1846 Mexican troops crossed the Rio Grande and attacked a United States detachment. This enabled Polk on May 11 to call for a declaration of war.³

¹ Michael Holt, "James K. Polk: 1845-1849" in *The Reader's Companion to the American Presidency* eds. Alan Brinkley and Davis Dyer, (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2000), 143-144.

² Holt, "James K. Polk," 145.

³ Michael Holt, *The Political Crisis of the 1850s* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1978), 43.

As Polk agitated for war with Mexico, he also negotiated with Great Britain over the Oregon territory. The British desired to divide the territory between the United States and Britain at the Columbia River. Polk was willing to compromise, but he wanted a division at the 49th parallel to ensure U.S. possession of the deep water ports of the Puget Sound around present-day Seattle. He threatened war, but in June of 1846 he backed down and agreed to divide the territory at the 49th parallel. This compromise outraged many western Democrats, who believed that Polk had employed a double standard. He had compromised over Oregon, yet he was willing to go to war with Mexico over Texas. Michael Holt has noted that the “false belief that Polk was the puppet of the Southern slave power would have serious consequences for his presidency.”⁴

Polk aroused further suspicion about his motives when he directed the military into New Mexico and to ports along the California coast. It became clear that Polk hoped to control large parts of these areas before subduing Mexican forces and then negotiating for peace with a strengthened hand. This became especially clear by August of 1846 when Polk sent a request to Congress for \$2 million to negotiate peace. Few doubted that he intended to compel Mexico to sell New Mexico and California to the United States as a part of the settlement. Many northerners saw this as a means to bolster the southern slave-power and expand slavery.⁵

⁴ Holt, “James K. Polk,” 146; Michael Holt, *The Fate of their Country: Politicians, Slavery Extension, and the Coming of the Civil War* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2004), 12-15.

⁵ Holt, “James K. Polk,” 148; Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America 1815-1848* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 766-767.

Polk was an aggressive nationalist with an expansive vision of an American empire stretching from the Atlantic to the Pacific. But by compromising with Oregon while pursuing war with Mexico over Texas and seeking the New Mexico and California territories, Polk alienated many northern Democrats. The Van Burenites in particular feared a backlash from northern voters, but they were also angry at Calhoun and the southerners who seemed determined to push slavery into the western territories. Angry with what they saw as Polk's duplicity and determined to separate western expansion and the extension of slavery, the northern Democrats, led by first term Congressman David Wilmot of Pennsylvania, responded by attaching a proviso to Polk's request for a \$2 million appropriation. The proviso called for banning slavery from all territory acquired from Mexico.⁶ Such a measure, its proponents insisted, was a legitimate use of congressional power. It would apply to the western territories the principle established by the Northwest Ordinance of 1787.

Wilmot himself was no abolitionist. He and most of the other northern Democrats who supported what became known as the Wilmot Proviso did not object to slavery where it existed. But they objected strongly to slavery's extension. Their aim was to sustain the west for the white working class and white farmers. Wilmot referred to his measure as the "White Man's Proviso" and made clear that its aim was to "preserve for free white labor a fair country, a rich inheritance, where the sons of toil, of my own race and color, can live without the

⁶ Holt, *The Fate of their Country*, 19-22.

disgrace which association with Negro slavery brings upon free labor.”⁷ Slavery, they thought, had rendered the south a backward, even feudal society, and they were determined to stem its westward advance.⁸

Southerners, again led by Calhoun, were bitterly hostile to the measure. Even though slavery did not exist in the southwestern region, Calhoun argued that the constitution guaranteed the right to own slaves in the western territories. Slaveholders had as much a right to the new lands as non-slaveholders and they should not have to forfeit their property in order to settle in the territories. The proviso would also establish the ability of Congress to regulate slavery, which set off furious alarms.⁹ It incited intense competition between Whigs and Democrats as the two parties vied to claim which party could protect slavery from northern abolitionists. For southern Whigs, who had been tarnished by their opposition to Texas annexation, the Wilmot Proviso allowed them to pillory Democrats as the party of abolition. Southern Democrats, as a result, had to demonstrate their own opposition to any control of slavery in the territories. Regardless of party, however, southerners saw the attempt to regulate slavery as an attack on southern honor. Even if only symbolic, they would never tolerate it.¹⁰

When Wilmot’s amendment was first voted on in August of 1846 (in the first session of the 29th Congress), it carried in the House of Representatives by a

⁷ Quoted in Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 767-768.

⁸ Chaplain Morrison, *Democratic Politics and Sectionalism: The Wilmot Proviso Controversy* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina Press, 1967), 17.

⁹ Potter, *The Impending Crisis*, 64; Holt, *The Fate of their Country*, 19-20.

¹⁰ Holt, *Fate of their Country*, 30-32; William Cooper, *The South and the Politics of Slavery, 1828-1856* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980), 225-238; Morrison, *Democratic Politics and Sectionalism*, 38-51.

largely sectional vote. Southern Whigs and Democrats voted no, while northern Whigs and Democrats largely voted yes. In the Senate, however, the measure was filibustered by a sympathetic northern Whig who did not want the appropriation returned to the House stripped of the ban on slavery. In 1846, the legislative battle attracted little attention in the party newspapers, but when a similar measure was introduced in the second session of the 29th Congress in 1847, it incensed southerners and emboldened northerners who opposed slavery's extension. The House again approved it, but in the Senate, where slave states outnumbered free-states 15 to 14 and where some conservative or "doughface" Democrats sided with their southern brethren, the Wilmot proviso had no chance. Eventually, Congress approved Polk's request for an appropriation to settle the Mexican War without the Wilmot Proviso. But by the time it did, the debate over whether to allow slavery's extension to the west was fully joined and bitterly inflamed.¹¹

The debate incited by the Wilmot Proviso had many consequences for northern Democrats. These Democrats, but especially those allied with Van Buren, had come to resent the power of the party's southern wing and to believe that any expansion of slavery was immoral. But some northern Democrats were pro-southern doughfaces who were loath to alienate southern Democrats. And most northern Democrats were also overwhelmingly white racists who wanted to work and farm in communities of white men and women. Most northern Democrats also wanted to extend the nation's western boundaries as far as

¹¹ *Congressional Globe*, August 8, 1846, 29th Congress, 1st session, 1217-1218; February 15, 1847, 29th Congress, 2nd session, 425.

possible to the west. These conflicting tensions strained party loyalties, but they also prompted a search for compromise and alternatives that might sustain the Democratic Party at the state and national level. This was the case in Indiana where Jesse Bright had just begun his career in the Senate.

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In the months before Jesse Bright took his Senate seat in December of 1845, the Polk administration had pressed ahead with the annexation of Texas and on December 29, 1845 Texas became the nation's twenty-eighth state. Meanwhile, western Democrats, led by Indiana's Hannegan and Michigan's Lewis Cass, demanded that Polk battle Britain for all of the Oregon territory. The call for "Fifty-Four Forty or Fight" briefly inspired a war scare in early 1846, but Polk eventually compromised on the 49th parallel and the Senate accepted the agreement in June.

The Hoosier Democrats were nationalists who saw western lands as a source of economic opportunity and democratic promise. In the case of Oregon, they were furious at what they saw as Polk's betrayal over the disputed boundary. Hannegan tried to thwart the agreement, but few senators supported him. On the final vote, Bright joined Hannegan and a few other western Democrats in voting no.

The outcome of the Oregon fight also generated some bitterness among Indiana Democrats over the willingness of southerners to compromise over Oregon while they supported war with Mexico over the Texas-Mexico boundary.

Democrats such as Hannegan had believed that Polk had committed himself to a Texas-Oregon *quid pro quo*, which meant that if Texas entered the union as a slave state, the administration would demand that Britain cede to the U.S. the whole of the Oregon territory. Hannegan railed against the “peculiar friends of Texas” who had “turned, and were doing all they could to strangle Oregon!” He was bemused that John C. Calhoun had been willing to risk going to war with Mexico to acquire Texas but wanted to conciliate the British over Oregon. Oregon, of course, was likely to be a free territory and Hannegan declared that the country was “not blind, or deaf. The people see, they comprehend” and “they would speak.”¹²

Inevitably, Texas annexation and the Oregon fight raised for Indiana Democrats the question of slavery’s extension. As early as February 1845, many Indiana representatives in Congress had voted to bar slavery in the Oregon territory. William J. Brown, a congressman from Indianapolis, voted against it, not because he was a partisan for slavery, but because he disliked anti-slavery agitation and wanted to avoid alienating southerners with a federal prohibition.¹³ In the case of Texas, however, Congressman Robert Owen from southern Indiana, argued that annexation would not “reduce a single human being” to bondage. While it would certainly add to the number of slaves within the United States, Owen noted that in “this world of imperfections,” the “practical question” was “whether the good” of annexation would “preponderate over the evils.” For whites in Texas, joining the Union would bring “peace and safety under the

¹² *Congressional Globe*, December 30, 1845, 29th Congress, 1st Session, 110.

¹³ *Congressional Globe*, February 3, 1845, 28th Congress, 2nd Session, 236.

shelter of our republican institutions” with “its prospective extension to millions more yet to live.” As for the slaves, Owen suggested that territorial expansion would reduce the number of slaves in the upper South as they would become diffused into Texas. This would mean, of course, shifting slaves away from Indiana’s borders.¹⁴

In the case of the supposed Oregon betrayal, Democratic editors such as Jacob Chapman of the *Indiana State Sentinel* blasted Calhoun for his apparent “zeal to give away all of Oregon.” Calhoun, he charged, was only willing to accept lands that would be “subjected to the extension of negro slavery!” Indeed, the slave driver was back to his old game of shouting “disunion” to further “his policy, his interests, and his ambitious projects,” placing the interest of the South over that of “the nation.” Chapman assured his readers that he had no sympathy with abolitionism, but he likened Calhoun’s sectional fanaticism to those of the “ultra abolitionist fanatics.” Both groups, the organ insisted, were diametrically opposed to the nation’s interests.¹⁵

The reaction of Indiana’s Democrats to the Wilmot Proviso ranged from committed opposition to ambivalent support. Jesse Bright and Edward Hannegan consistently voted against it in the Senate. In the House, the conservative Democrat William Wick opposed it as well. When Wilmot first submitted his amendment in 1846, Wick labeled it premature and “arrogant” on the grounds that the U.S. did not control the disputed territories with the war underway. He

¹⁴ *Congressional Globe*, January 8th, 1845 28th Congress, 2nd Session, Appendix, 100.

¹⁵ *Indiana State Sentinel*, March 4, 1847.

also tried to substitute for it a proposal calling for extending the Missouri Compromise line further west, but this was rejected by an 89-54 vote.¹⁶ Robert Owen had been present the steamy Saturday night where Wilmot and other northern Democrats had debated whether to submit the proviso. He had agreed with the principle of the measure, but he had also warned that it would endanger party unity. Still, on the first Wilmot Proviso vote in the House, he had voted for it. But later he changed to a “no” vote. This changing of positions on the Wilmot Proviso by Indiana’s Democrats was not unusual. In early 1847, five Indiana Democratic congressmen voted in favor of the Wilmot Proviso. A month later on another vote only three did. A year later on yet another vote not a single Indiana Democrat in Congress voted for it.¹⁷

Rather than embrace or oppose the Wilmot Proviso, many Indiana Democrats argued the measure was unnecessary because the new territories should be organized to allow the legal precedents established by Mexico to continue in place. And since Mexico had prohibited slavery, this would keep the region free once it became part of the United States. The *Sentinel* established this argument with a reprinted article on August of 1846 that declared that the proviso was “wholly unnecessary, as slavery did not exist in any part of Mexico.”¹⁸ In addition, both Robert Owen and Governor James Whitcomb advanced a similar argument. The appeal of this argument, of course, was that it side-stepped the question of whether Congress *could* or *should* regulate slavery

¹⁶ *Congressional Globe*, August 8, 1846, 29th Congress, 1st session, 1217-1218; Potter, *The Impending Crisis*, 22.

¹⁷ *Congressional Globe*, August 8, 1846, 29th Congress, 1st session, 1217-1218; February 15, 1847, 29th Congress, 2nd session, 425.

¹⁸ *State Sentinel*, August 27, 1846.

in the territories while also appeasing northerners who opposed slavery's extension.

Initially, the Indiana newspapers paid little attention to the Wilmot Proviso. In 1846, in particular, the state's newspapers were far more excited about Polk's decision to compromise on the Oregon boundary. The *Logansport Democratic Pharos* expressed its befuddlement that "we have yet to see the evidence which proves the claim of Great Britain, north of 49, as good as that of our Government." Indiana's Democratic senators, the paper noted, had both voted against the treaty.¹⁹ Its Whig rival, *Logansport Telegraph*, taunted the Polk administration over "the amount of American territory surrendered" in Oregon. The Whig paper continued, "If the people wish to preserve the national faith, truth, and dignity pure, let them hereafter beware of the promises of the leaders of the 'Democratic' party."²⁰

In 1847, the Wilmot Proviso gained more attention, especially from the Whig papers. The *Register*, led by the younger and more idealistic Schuyler Colfax, was a bit more enthusiastic, declaring that regardless of whether the measure was merely abstract in its practical application, the Proviso was still "True to the impulses of freedom." It was a "manly stand" for "those who hope yet to see the day when the chain of human bondage shall be broken."²¹ The *Logansport Telegraph*, another Whig paper, rebuked Bright and Hannegan for opposing the Wilmot Proviso, and asserted that even though it had appeared the "northern branch [of Democrats] had broken the chain that enslaved them to the

¹⁹ *Logansport Democratic Pharos*, April 29, 1846.

²⁰ *Logansport Telegraph*, August 29, 1846.

²¹ *St. Joseph Valley Register*, February 26, 1847.

present administration,” it was clear that Indiana’s senators were under “the influence of John C. Calhoun.”²²

* * * * *

The larger consequences of the Wilmot Proviso debate were soon evident as the Polk administration and congress tried to secure the legislation necessary to organize the Oregon territory. The effort to resolve this issue marked Jesse Bright’s first major involvement at the national level in the politics of slavery.

Polk had requested from Congress the legislation necessary to organize a territorial government as early as August of 1846, and the House had produced a bill that also imposed restrictions regarding slavery. It was unlikely, of course, that slavery would ever take root in the Pacific Northwest, but now the need to codify an antislavery position was increasingly important for some northern members of Congress. The bill languished in the Senate, but in early 1847 James Buchanan put forth the compromise position of extending the Missouri Compromise line to the West, which would have permitted the organization of territory without creating any precedents for the southwest territories. But southerners in the House objected that any restrictions on slavery were unconstitutional, and the measure died.²³

In the Senate, responsibility for territorial legislation fell to the territorial committee, which was chaired by the ambitious senator from Illinois Stephen

²² *Logansport Telegraph*, March 27, 1847.

²³ Potter, *The Impending Crisis*, 69-73.

Douglas. Bright, however, was the committee's second-ranking Democrat, and during one of Douglas's absences, he seized the moment to send forth his own bill. Realizing that it was pointless to defend the principle of slavery for a territory that would never admit slaves, Bright tried to sidestep the question of accepting or rejecting slavery in the Oregon territory. Senators from both the South and the North, however, came forth with amendments that pressed the issue. John Hale of New Hampshire proposed to bar slavery from the territory. Predictably, Calhoun objected. Like the hated Wilmot Proviso, Hale's amendment would establish the precedent that Congress possessed the authority to regulate slavery in the territories. Bright made clear to Calhoun that he would "most assuredly vote against the amendment," but this could not salvage the bill.²⁴

Eager to resolve the issue, President Polk met with Bright to suggest an alternative. Polk now embraced the idea of extending the Missouri Compromise to the West.²⁵ But what had worked in 1820 was no longer viable. Northern senators would not be party to an agreement that tolerated slavery in the southwest and southern members of Congress wanted to insist on legislation guaranteeing the right to own slaves where slavery would never be. Meanwhile, settlers in Oregon had raced ahead without congressional sanction and formed a rudimentary territorial government that outlawed slavery.²⁶ The Senate then moved to create what became known as the Clayton Committee with equal

²⁴ *Congressional Globe*, 30th Congress, 1st Session, March 31, 1848, appendix, 684-685.

²⁵ *The Diary of James Polk*, vol. III ed. Milo Quaife, (Chicago: A.C. McClurg & Co., 1910), 504-505; Potter, *The Impending Crisis*, 75.

²⁶ Paul Bergeron, *Presidency of James K. Polk* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1987), 204-205.

representation from both sections to work out a compromise. Bright was one of the eight members, and he worked with Calhoun to produce a bill that would accept the laws of the provisional government. Such a strategy avoided establishing Congress's power to regulate slavery in the territories. The measure passed the Senate, but it was tabled in the House as southern Whigs sought to establish their pro-slavery credentials.²⁷

Eventually, the question of the Oregon territory was resolved by the House of Representatives, which sent forth a bill organizing the territory and barring slavery. The bill passed in the Senate with Bright voting for it. Undoubtedly, he realized that slavery would never take hold in Oregon and it was pointless to fight over the issue.²⁸

California and New Mexico remained vexing issues. Polk had hoped to bring California in as a state, and organize the New Mexico territorial governments. In February 1849, grasping for a way to avoid sectional agitation, Senator Isaac Walker of Wisconsin inserted an amendment to give the president broad powers to regulate territorial laws of the southwest. Southerners generally supported it, and it barely passed the Senate. Interestingly, Bright voted against most of his southern colleagues, while Hannegan voted in favor. The House, however, insisted on attaching the Wilmot Proviso to the New Mexican territory

²⁷ Charles Wiltse, *John C. Calhoun: Sectionalist, 1840-1850* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1951), 350-351; Don Fehrenbacher, *The Dred Scott Case: Its Significance in American Law and Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 148-151; Michael Holt, *The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 335; Christopher Childers, *The Failure of Popular Sovereignty: Slavery, Manifest Destiny and the Radicalization of Southern Politics* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2012), 160.

²⁸ *Congressional Globe*, 30th Congress, 1st Session, August 14, 1848, 1077-1081. Van Der Weele, "Jesse David Bright," 60-61.

proposal, and voted down the Walker Amendment. As a result, the southern-dominated Senate and northern-dominated House remained deadlocked over organizing the southwest territories.²⁹

* * * * *

At the start of 1848, northern Democrats faced a difficult presidential contest. The Mexican War had dragged on longer than Polk (or Bright) had foreseen, and hence it had become a far less popular cause. Indiana's Democrats, however, remained committed to expansion and they rallied in support of the war. At one local Democratic event, party members praised the president and brought forward a "veteran and soldier in the cause of his country" who spoke of the gallantry of his fellow soldiers in the Mexican War. In their platform resolutions, Bartholomew County Democrats reasserted that Mexico was the aggressor in the conflict, and that it had been the duty of the United States to protect its sovereign territory.³⁰ Traditional Democratic issues also worked to unite the party. It championed repeal of the 1842 protective tariff and touted the success of the revenue-generating Walker Tariff. Democrats also reiterated their opposition to a national bank and insisted on "the sovereignty of the States, against Centralization."³¹

The Wilmot Proviso, however, was a more contentious matter. At the January 1848 state convention, the party platform, while it offered mild planks

²⁹ Bergeron, *Presidency of James K. Polk*, 209-210.

³⁰ *Indiana State Sentinel*, April 13, 1848.

³¹ *Indiana State Sentinel*, April 12, 1848.

against slavery's expansion, opposed the Wilmot Proviso on the grounds that it would "foment local or personal jealousies" and "array the people of one section of the Union in an attitude hostile to those of any other section."³² Any kind of proviso, they insisted, would not "make these territories more free..."³³

Democratic Congressional candidate Graham Fitch, from the northern-most section of the state, declared the Proviso "would weaken, if not impair, the Union of the States; and would sow the seeds of future discord." As for fears that slavery still might not be contained, Fitch suggested that the "diffusion" of slavery would not create an additional slave, nor would its restriction free any chattel.³⁴

Some Indiana Democrats opposed the Wilmot Proviso but also spoke out against slavery. For example, the *Goshen Democrat's* E.W. Ellis disliked slavery and declared "It ought to be got[ten] rid of," he also believed that the Wilmot Proviso was too radical and unnecessary.³⁵ Others were determined to maintain a white man's world. Speaking in Congress in April of 1848, William Wick observed that "an increase of area of slavery" would not "of necessity, increase its volume." The congressman understood that Hoosiers "dread[ed] the presence of a numerous colored population among us." Having masses of slaves populated closely "together in a small compass," Wick observed, might "accelerate emancipation" and "bring upon us...an avalanche of colored population." Like many Indiana Democrats, Wick believed that the "continuance of slavery" was an evil to be feared. But he also insisted on the sanctity of limited

³² *Logansport Democratic Pharos*, January 26, 1848.

³³ quoted in *Indiana State Sentinel*, September 21, 1848.

³⁴ quoted in *St. Joseph Valley Register*, August 4, 1848.

³⁵ *Goshen Democrat*, July 26, 1848.

government and states' rights. The federal government, he said, had no "constitutional power...to legislate [the] prevention of that evil."³⁶

As the 1848 presidential campaign neared, the Democrats realized that a candidate who endorsed the Wilmot Proviso would face massive southern defections. But a candidate who demanded slavery's extension to the West would face northern defections. Polk had been unable to win acceptance of his preferred solution to extend the Missouri Compromise to the West. Was there another alternative? Lewis Cass, Michigan's doughface senator and ardent expansionist, offered one. The answer, he said, was to embrace popular sovereignty. By this he meant that the decision to accept or prohibit slavery should be a local one. In a series of letters, Cass denied the right of Congress to legislate over slavery in the territories. Instead, he was in "favor of leaving to the people of any territory...the right to regulate it for themselves, under the general principles of the constitution." There was, however, some ambiguity in how to interpret popular sovereignty. For northerners, it meant that locals could exclude slavery as soon as they gained territorial status. The southern interpretation suggested that slavery could not be decided until the territory convened a constitutional convention. Cass, of course, deliberately kept vague his interpretation of popular sovereignty.³⁷

Cass's embrace of popular sovereignty enabled him to win the 1848 Democratic nomination. The Whigs responded by trying to straddle the slavery

³⁶ *Congressional Globe*, April 25, 1848, 30th Congress, 1st secession, 667.

³⁷ Childers, *The Failure of Popular Sovereignty*, 138-140; James Huston, *Stephen Douglas and the Dilemmas of Democratic Equality* (Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007), 63-65.

issue in their own way. They nominated Zachary Taylor, the Mexican war hero and owner of a Louisiana plantation with as many as 300 slaves. Taylor, who until 1847 had never identified with a political party, was a Whig of uncertain principles on nearly every issue, including the extension of slavery. For Whigs seeking an attractive candidate, however, Taylor's lack of any clear record was an asset. They gambled that as a slave-owner he would appeal to southerners and as a war hero he would appeal to northern nationalists. In addition, Taylor refused to take a clear stand on the Wilmot Proviso, which raised the hopes of some northern Whigs that he would accept it should Congress approve it.

Initially, it appeared that the campaign would pit a northern Democrat who opposed the Wilmot Proviso against a southern Whig who owned slaves. This changed, however, when Martin Van Buren bolted from the Democratic Party. Fearing that the southern slave power intended to use western expansion to create new slaveholding states, Van Buren and his followers met in Buffalo where they formed the Free Soil Party.³⁸ The new party was dedicated to maintaining "the rights of free labor against the aggression of the slave power." It opposed allowing more slave states or territories to enter the union, believing the federal government could not deny "any person of life, liberty, or property..."³⁹

In Indiana, Van Buren's Free Soil candidacy posed a difficult challenge to the two major parties. Four years earlier, James Polk had barely carried the

³⁸ Sean Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005), 615-615.

³⁹ *National Party Platforms of the United States*, ed. J.M.H. Frederick (Akron: J.M.H. Frederick, 1896), 23.

state for the Democrats and any significant loss of the party base would doom Cass's hopes of winning the state's twelve electoral votes.

In Indiana, Democrats could turn Taylor's war record against him because of an incident at the Battle of Buena Vista involving the Indiana Second regiment. The state's sense of honor had been wounded when the general issued a report on the Battle of Buena Vista during the Mexican War that suggested that the regiment had behaved cowardly. In the battle, four hundred Indiana volunteers had faced four thousand Mexican soldiers. At a critical point, General Joseph Lane had ordered some artillery to be repositioned, but in the confusion, the regiment's commander assumed that this signaled a retreat, and therefore ordered his men to withdraw. Lane rushed to the scene and had 200 men reform to fight. But he also sent a report to Taylor highly critical of the "disorder" among his retreating soldiers. In Taylor's official report, he observed that "The 2d Indiana regiment, which had fallen back, could not be rallied, and took no further part in the action, except a handful of men..."⁴⁰ Lane subsequently investigated the matter further, and eventually offered a more sympathetic account, but this clarification was never made official. As such, Taylor did not amend his own report.⁴¹

During the fall campaign, Democrats exploited the issue. The state Democratic Party declared: "That notwithstanding the stigma attempted by Gen. Taylor...the conduct, skill, and bravery displayed by her volunteers, both officers

⁴⁰ quoted in Henry Viola, "Zachary Taylor and the Indiana Volunteers," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 72 (Jan., 1969), 335.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 343.

and privates, showed them not inferior to those of any other State.”⁴² Senator Edward Hannegan addressed an Indianapolis crowd, with the flag of the regiment waving and asked “Could this standard, rent and tattered in the fight have been born and sustained by cowards and fugitives?” *The Western Republican*, added: “Many of the audience wept like children, and a simultaneous shout went up to heaven.”⁴³

A no less troubling issue for Indiana Whigs was Taylor’s “supposed devotion to the interests of the slaveholders.”⁴⁴ Indeed, Indiana’s few avowedly antislavery editors and political figures were quick to make the point. The editor of the *Free Territorial Sentinel*, a former Democrat, asked rhetorically, “Will [the Whigs] consent to entrust the power to decide the question [of slavery] to doubtful hands?”⁴⁵ George Washington Julian, a former Whig with radical anti-slavery convictions, was even blunter, claiming the party’s nomination of Taylor was “an exhibition of shameless political prostitution.”⁴⁶ Democrats made this charge as well. The *Sentinel* mocked the Whigs for allowing themselves “to be lashed back to the support” of the slaveholding candidate “by the negro whip of the slave driver.”⁴⁷ The Logansport *Democratic Pharos* remarked that “with a southerner and a slaveholder for the Whig Candidate” the party was “no more for the Wilmot Proviso than the Democrats.”⁴⁸ The *Goshen Democrat* hammered

⁴² *Indiana State Sentinel*, April 12, 1848.

⁴³ *The Western Republican*, October 21, 1848.

⁴⁴ A.B. Conditt to George Dunn, September 1, 1848, George Dunn MSS, Lilly Library

⁴⁵ *Free Territorial Sentinel*, August 16, 1848.

⁴⁶ Julian, *Political Recollections*, 55.

⁴⁷ *Indiana State Sentinel*, July 13, 1848.

⁴⁸ *Logansport Democratic Pharos*, June 28, 1848.

away at the inconsistency of Whigs who supported the Proviso while backing Taylor, who wanted the votes of anti-Proviso southerners.⁴⁹

Whigs tried to counter these charges by alleging that Cass would push slavery further West. When Democrat Graham Fitch of northern Indiana suggested that Cass was “friendly to the principles of [the] Wilmot Proviso,” the *Register* countered that “there is no foundation in truth for his assertion...”⁵⁰ They also argued that Taylor was above all a nationalist not beholden to region. Initially, they declared Taylor a “*Southern man with Northern principles*,” but an editor suggested that a better tact would be to describe him as “Southern man with *National Whig* principles.”⁵¹ Eventually, the message was further refined to read: a “southern man with broad and liberal national principles.”⁵² Sectional partisanship, as one editor privately noted, was purely a manifestation of the “encroaching and exacting demands of the South.”⁵³

If the Democrats battled Taylor, they detested the Free Soil challenge. As one conservative Democrat explained, no one with a “spark of patriotism left” would rally to the free soil forces.⁵⁴ In fending off the Free Soilers, Bright’s passionate partisanship was obvious. The editor of Bright’s hometown paper, the *Madison Courier*, complained to Bright that “lethargy and apathy” prevailed among the ranks of local Democrats. Bright advised: “Despair not, appeal to their

⁴⁹ *Goshen Democrat*, February 9, July 26, 1848.

⁵⁰ *St. Joseph Valley Register*, August 4, 1848.

⁵¹ Daniel Jones to George Dunn, June 24, 1848, George Dunn MSS, Lilly Library.

⁵² *Madison Dailey Banner*, June 24, 1848.

⁵³ Daniel Jones to George Dunn, June 24, 1848, George Dunn MSS, Lilly Library.

⁵⁴ James Ferguson to Austin Brown, September 27, 1848, Austin Brown Papers, Indiana State Library.

love of principle, and duty to Country and Party. A little thumbing & gouging, with some coaxing, will bring them up to fever heat...”to guard against complacency and warning that the Whigs were making a stronger than usual push to win the state.⁵⁵ The editor did just this. He attacked Taylor as a slanderer of Indiana’s veterans. Appealing to Indiana’s Irish voters, the *Courier* observed that Cass had supported a bill for Irish relief. Scratching for something, it listed all the ways in which the Whigs and their nominee were antagonistic to foreigners.⁵⁶

The Whig newspapers, particularly in the northern sections of Indiana, made Bright a target as they defended Taylor. Bright, they noted, held “a large slave interest in Kentucky” and had ably “represented the slave interests, to the detriment of those of his own State.”⁵⁷ Bright paid them little attention. He campaigned in the critical state of New York, where Democratic defections to Van Buren threatened to hand the state to the Whigs. Cass, Bright said, was a man who stood “pledged to a set of certain measures.” (But if these “certain measures” included Cass’s position on slavery, Bright did not say.) He touted Democratic opposition to the national bank (something he had once supported) and the revenue-generating Walker Tariff of 1846.⁵⁸

He attacked Taylor as “a man who is himself among the largest slaveholders within the limits of the union”—without mentioning his own slaves in Kentucky. In attacking Van Buren, Bright made the dubious, if not completely

⁵⁵ Jesse Bright to S.F. Covington, July 4, 8, 1848 quoted in Van Der Weele, “Jesse David Bright,” 91.

⁵⁶ *Madison Weekly Courier*, October 18, 25, November 1, 1848.

⁵⁷ *Fort Wayne Times*, July 27, 1848.

⁵⁸ Jesse Bright, *The Albany Ratification Meeting 1848* (Washington: Library of Congress, 1848), 1-4.

false claim, that he had “voted for him in the Convention of ’44, when others deserted him. He was then my model of a Democrat...” Bright continued, “Mr. Van Buren was my choice for the Presidency; but a majority of the Convention of that year declared that another individual should be the nominee.” By suggesting that he supported Van Buren, Bright could claim that he made noble efforts to “yield to the majority of the party...”⁵⁹ The contrast with Van Buren’s defection was obvious. As Bright finished his speech the purple prose grew stronger as he suggested “It was within the limits of New York that the light of Heaven first beamed upon my eye. I naturally feel no small degree of attachment to my native State and the Democratic citizens.” Though his father was a Whig and he had moved to Kentucky at the age of seven, Bright claimed “It was here that I received my early impressions of the truth and value of Democratic principles.”⁶⁰

Bright’s partisanship permeated his being, and he especially made it known by his presence overseeing Madison voters as they went to the polls. Watching in dismay at the disloyalty of Democrats who cast Free Soil ballots, he snarled: “G-d damn you—I wish you and they were in Hell...If I had the power I’d send you there.”⁶¹

On election day, Taylor carried the electoral college by a comfortable margin. He won a similar number of northern and southern states, mostly located in the East. Cass won nearly all of the western states of both sections. These

⁵⁹ Bright, *The Albany Ratification Meeting 1848*, 4-6.

⁶⁰ Bright, *Albany Ratification Meeting*, 6-8.

⁶¹ John Lyle King, November 8, 1848, Diaries, MSS, Indiana Historical Society, Indianapolis. quoted in Roger Henry Van Bolt, “The Rise of the Republican Party in Indiana 1840-1856” (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1950), 107.

western states, however, were less populated and not enough to swing the election. Taylor won the popular vote by roughly five percentage points. Taylor easily won New York's massive thirty-six electoral votes, with Cass finishing just behind Van Buren.

Despite losing the national election to Taylor, Cass had carried Indiana with 49 percent of the vote, to Taylor's 46 percent. Van Buren and the Free Soil Party won about five percent.⁶²

* * * * *

In Indiana in 1848, Jesse Bright and the state's Democrats had defeated Taylor and the Whigs and the Free Soil threat. But in the aftermath of the election, they faced difficult challenges. Taylor's election, of course, would mean less in the way of patronage for Bright and statewide Democratic officeholders. A more serious matter was the frustration of many Indiana Democrats with the South. It galled Hoosier Democrats that some party members in the South had betrayed the Democratic cause to vote for a slaveholder. Graham Fitch spoke for many when he explained that he now supported the Wilmot Proviso because he felt less beholden to "professed Democrats" in the South who had "deserted us

⁶² *United States Presidential Election 1788-1860: The Official Results by County and State* Ed. Michael Dubin (London: McFarland & Company, Inc, 2002), 86, 102; *Indiana Election Returns 1816-1851* eds. Dorothy Riker and Gayle Thornbrough (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Bureau, 1960), 155; Holt, *The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party*, 377-378. Michael Holt utilized regression statistics to show movement of voters in 1848 as measured by the 1844 election. These statistics suggest that in Indiana the Free Soil Party drew about ten percent of Democratic strength.

by the thousands” during the presidential election.⁶³ The *Goshen Democrat* added that southern “zeal for the institution of slavery” had allowed the Whigs to take the presidency. Indiana Democrats were miffed they had carried so much water to protect the “just rights of the South” only to be betrayed. Southerners in the party had “made their own bed” and were “welcome to occupy it.”⁶⁴ Even the *New Albany Democrat*, a paper just across the river from Louisville, asserted that the Democratic Party of the North had “yielded much to the south,” but in spite of their compromises, the editor explained, southern Democrats had completely failed to do their equal part.⁶⁵

Meanwhile, there was the Free Soil Party danger. Van Buren may have thrown New York’s thirty-six electoral votes to Taylor, which rankled northern Democrats. The Free Soilers were also attempting to build a permanent party in Indiana and with this in mind they nominated James H. Cravens for the 1849 gubernatorial race. Both the Democrats and the Whigs knew that a third party would destabilize Indiana politics, and hence both parties moved to win back voters who had supported Van Buren in 1848.

The Whigs grappled with these issues by presenting themselves as pro-union, anti-slavery advocates. When they met at their state convention on January 3rd, 1849 the delegates voted unanimously for a platform denouncing slavery, but they were careful to express “affections” for “the glorious American

⁶³ quoted in William Lynch, “Anti-Slavery Tendencies of the Democratic Party in the North West, 1848-1850,” *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 11 (Dec., 1924), 326.

⁶⁴ *Goshen Democrat*, February 14, 1849.

⁶⁵ *Daily New Albany Democrat*, January 2, 1849.

Union.” Their platform quoted George Washington’s call to frown on “every attempt to alienate any portion of our country from the rest, or to enfeeble the sacred ties which now link together the various parts.” Most Indiana Whigs saw their opposition to slavery as part of “the great interests of the whole Union” rather than as a way to imperil it.⁶⁶ According to Colfax, the Whigs were for “The Union, however bounded, now and forever, one and inseparable.”⁶⁷ For the next five months the South Bend paper emblazoned atop its editorial page the fervent quote, “The UNION in any event to the last drop of my blood, and the last beat of my heart.”⁶⁸

Indiana Democrats responded as well and they quickly began to embrace the cause of opposing the extension of slavery. The *Indiana State Sentinel* began to distance itself from Lewis Cass’s principle of popular sovereignty.⁶⁹ Another Democratic paper played upon northern Whig fears that Taylor would “veto the Wilmot Proviso.”⁷⁰ Democrats in the state legislature bolstered their anti-slavery credentials by declaring to Indiana’s congressional delegates that slavery should be prohibited in the southwest because of previous Mexican law. This was problematic as there was no guarantee that Mexican law carried over into the territories.⁷¹ The state party platform became decidedly more anti-slavery. The previous year’s statement of principles had appealed to preserving the union, but the 1849 platform stated: “That the institution of slavery ought not to be

⁶⁶ *Madison Daily Banner*, January 8, 1849.

⁶⁷ *St. Joseph Valley Register*, January 25, 1849.

⁶⁸ *St. Joseph Valley Register*, January 11-May 31, 1849.

⁶⁹ *Indiana State Sentinel*, July 12, 1849.

⁷⁰ *Fort Wayne Sentinel*, January 13, 1849.

⁷¹ Van Bolt, “Rise of the Republican Party in Indiana,” 111.

introduced into any territory where it does not now exist.” It also declared: “That inasmuch as New Mexico and California are, in fact and in law, free territories, it is the duty of Congress to prevent the introduction of slavery within their limits.”⁷²

Indiana’s House Democrats reversed course on the Wilmot Proviso. On December 13, 1848, four of six Hoosier Democrats voted in support of the proviso on a procedural vote, while John Pettit and William Wick abstained.⁷³ Indiana Congressman John Robinson explained that he felt “compelled” to switch his vote as he feared southerners would otherwise disregard the territories’ free status.⁷⁴ Graham Fitch, the Democratic congressional candidate for one of the state’s northern districts, became a supporter of the proviso as well.⁷⁵ Some Hoosier Democrats also came to support Whig Congressman Daniel Gott’s resolution to abolish the slave trade in the nation’s capital. Among Indiana’s U.S. House delegation, five Democrats supported the bill, while William Wick refused to vote.⁷⁶

The response to Wick’s action reveals much about how the Indiana Democrats were determined to beat back the Free Soil challenge. Wick’s opposition to the Gott resolution left him too unpopular to run for reelection.⁷⁷ Still, Indiana Democrats did not want to be identified with the Free Soil Party. When the *Baltimore Sun* referred to James Whitcomb as a Free Soil Party

⁷² *Goshen Democrat*, January 24, 1848.

⁷³ *Congressional Globe*, December 13, 1848, 30th Congress, 2nd session, 39.

⁷⁴ *Congressional Globe*, December 18, 1848, 30th Congress 2nd session, 54.

⁷⁵ *Logansport Journal*, June 23, August 11, 1849.

⁷⁶ *Congressional Globe*, December 21, 1848, 30th Congress, 2nd session, 84.

⁷⁷ William Lynch, “Anti-Slavery Tendencies of the Democratic Party in the North West, 1848-1850,” 327; Van Bolt, “The Hoosiers and the ‘Eternal Agitation,’” 343.

member, the *New Albany Democrat* quickly set the record straight about his Democratic loyalties.⁷⁸

Edward Hannegan's term had expired, and the legislature had to decide whether to return Hannegan or send former Governor James Whitcomb instead. The legislature required the two men to disclose their position on slavery in the new territories. Each agreed that Congress had the power to prohibit slavery in newly acquired territories. On whether he would support such a restriction, Hannegan hedged. "Upon all questions of this character," he said, "I have ever held my final action open and liable to the control of circumstances."⁷⁹ Meanwhile, Whitcomb asserted "that every constitutional and legal means should be adopted to continue" the preservation of freedom in the territories.⁸⁰ Ultimately, this helped ensure Whitcomb's selection.

Whig and Democratic papers began sniping at each other over which side was more authentically anti-slavery. The *Sentinel* assured its readers that it had always supported "Cass and free soil," and it attacked Taylor as "confessedly in favor of slavery extension."⁸¹ Indiana Whigs, meanwhile, asserted they were the party with the "doctrine" of preventing the "extension of slavery." The Democratic leaders, they charged, "will not deceive all the rank and file of the Democracy" about their refusal to exclude slavery from the territories.⁸²

⁷⁸ *Daily New Albany Democrat*, March 12, 1849.

⁷⁹ Van Bolt, *The Hoosers and the 'Eternal Agitation,'* 339.

⁸⁰ *Journal of the House of Representatives of the State of Indiana, During the Thirty Third Session*, (Indianapolis: John Defrees, 1849), 19

⁸¹ *Indiana State Journal*, July, 16, 23, 30, August 10, 1849; *Indiana State Sentinel*, July 19, 1849.

⁸² *Indiana State Journal*, July 23, 1849.

The efforts of the two parties to fend off the Free Soil challenge shaped the 1849 governor's race. The two parties both sought to nominate candidates who had free-soil records. The Whigs tried to nominate Elisha Embree, a congressman from southwest Indiana who had voted for the Gott resolution. He was, one Whig editor claimed, "as good a free-soil man as can be found in the State."⁸³ But Embree declined to accept, and the party instead settled on Joel Matson, a candidate whose early advocacy for Taylor did not appeal to Free Soilers.⁸⁴ At the same time, the Taylor administration had not explained how it would deal with slavery in the recently acquired territories, which made it difficult for Indiana Whigs to take an aggressive antislavery stand.⁸⁵

On the Democratic side, two candidates with antislavery records sought the nomination. One was Joseph Wright, a former Indiana congressman who had built a popular following within the party as a charismatic orator. He had also long opposed the extension of slavery in the territories. In 1844 Wright had supported Cass over Van Buren because of western expansion, but he was the only Indiana Democratic congressman to vote against tabling a petition for gradual emancipation in federally controlled lands.⁸⁶ The second candidate was Ebenezer Chamberlain, who was originally from Maine and who opposed slavery's extension.

⁸³ *Indiana State Journal* January 22, 1849.

⁸⁴ *Daily New Albany Ledger*, March 24, 1849.

⁸⁵ Holt, *The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party*, 441, 443. Philip Crain, "Governor Jo Wright: Hoosier Conservative" (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 1963), 120.

⁸⁶ *Congressional Globe*, December 23, 1844, 28th Congress, 2nd session, 64.

For Jesse Bright, the embrace of free soil-leaning candidates may have been necessary for the Indiana Democratic Party, but it was also distasteful for Bright personally. In the Senate race, he supported Hannegan, but conceded that Whitcomb “having been fairly chosen, all ought to acquiesce to his selection.”⁸⁷ In the gubernatorial race, he backed Chamberlain, perhaps because Chamberlain was a pliable candidate who, as a biographer of Joseph Wright put it, could “recognize an indebtedness” to Bright.⁸⁸ Unfortunately for Bright, Wright was simply too popular to be denied the nomination. For Bright, this was to prove a major misfortune. He soon came to despise Wright, and the two men and their respective factions would struggle to control the Indiana party for the next eight years.

In the campaign the Whigs tried to assert that Wright had vacillated on the Wilmot Proviso. The *Journal* needled the *Sentinel* for trying to “play the Joe Wright game” of obfuscating its position.⁸⁹ The issue of the Wilmot Proviso was still controversial. The *Logansport Pharos* was indignant that the *Logansport Journal*, its Whig competitor, should demand its opinion on the proviso and ambiguously replied, “democrats are opposed to the extension of slavery into free-territory—and that we hope to see freedom extending into slave territory—and that we ‘train in that company.’”⁹⁰

⁸⁷ Jesse Bright to S.F. Covington, January 15, 1849 quoted in Van Der Weele, “Jesse David Bright,” 96.

⁸⁸ John Stoll, *History of the Indiana Democracy, 1816-1916* (Indianapolis: Indiana Democratic Pub. Co., 1917), 106; Crane, “Governor Jo Wright,” 120.

⁸⁹ *Indiana State Journal*, July, 16, 1849.

⁹⁰ quoted in *Logansport Journal*, June 23, 1849.

Wright won a decisive victory with 77,000 votes to 67,000 for Matson. No less important, James Cravens the Free Soil candidate won just 3,000 votes. By nominating candidates such as Wright and by vocally taking up the cause of opposing the extension of slavery, the Indiana Democrats kept their party base intact. As one historian has observed, with both parties “firmly committed to non-extension and the divorce of slavery from government as any Free Soiler...many third party men slipped quietly back into the traditional organizations.”⁹¹ Partisanship had prevailed.

In the congressional campaign of 1849, both parties tried to appeal to voters opposed to the extension of slavery. Democrats sometimes battled to out-free soil each other for party nominations. In the 8th congressional district, for instance, a candidate named Daniel Mace was vulnerable because he had supported Cass and popular sovereignty in 1848 and had refused to endorse the Wilmot Proviso. His opponent Joseph McDonald declared his full support for the proviso and went on to win the nomination and election.⁹²

In other districts, Democrats outmaneuvered Whigs. In the 4th district, which Whigs usually dominated, the Democrats threw their support behind Free Soil candidate George Julian. The Whig candidate Samuel Parker was a relative of the Whig Congressman Caleb Smith, who had refused to vote for the Gott resolution. The *Free Territorial Sentinel*, Indiana’s major Free Soil Party organ,

⁹¹ Richard Sewell, *Ballots for Freedom: Antislavery Politics in the United States 1837-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 214.

⁹² *Congressional Globe*, February 14, 1854, 33rd Congress, 1st Session, appendix, 163; *Indiana Daily Journal*, February 22, 1854.

wrote there was “no evidence that [Parker] is any more honest or any less Selfish than was Mr. Smith.”⁹³ It also questioned Parker’s commitment to anti-slavery principles since he had supported Zachary Taylor. Julian eked out a narrow win in the Quaker-dominated district by 150 votes.

Even Graham Fitch, one of Bright’s political allies, embraced free soil tactics. Facing William Wright, a staunch anti-slavery Whig, Fitch sought to assure free soilers that he supported the Wilmot Proviso. As the election approached Whig leaders in the district grew worried that Free Soil Party supporters with old Democratic ties were being won back over.⁹⁴ In spite of Whig taunts over his pandering, Fitch was able to consolidate Democratic support by minimizing divisions over slavery. Whig party observers lamented that “Our Free Soil friends [up] north, it seems, went over body and breeches for” Fitch.⁹⁵

Indiana Democrats won a substantial victory in the 1849 elections. In the gubernatorial race, the party increased its margin of victory over the previous year’s presidential contest, and in the congressional races, the Democrats captured all but one seat. James Whitcomb was ecstatic. He noted that “while other states have been changing to every point in the compass,” Indiana Democrats had grown stronger.⁹⁶ They did this by co-opting the slavery issue from their opponents. Whigs were further weakened because they controlled the presidency, which out of necessity required ambiguity over slavery at the national

⁹³ *Free Territorial Sentinel*, June 27, 1849.

⁹⁴ *St. Joseph Valley Register*, July 12, 1849.

⁹⁵ *Logansport Journal*, June 23, August 11, 1849; *St. Joseph Valley Register*, August 16, 1849.

⁹⁶ James Whitcomb to William English, September 3, 1849, William English Family Papers, Indiana Historical Society.

level. Slavery alone did not propel Indiana Democrats. They dominated the debate on economic issues, and their position on the Mexican War excited a western population that believed in the virtues of an expanding a democratic nation.⁹⁷ However, beginning with their general support for the Gott Resolution and greater emphasis on free soil principles, Democrats were able to present themselves as legitimate opponents to the expansion of slavery. They were thus able to undercut the one issue that might otherwise have allowed a Whig triumph.

* * * * *

How involved Jesse Bright was in the political skirmishes of 1849 is difficult to say. His few surviving letters pertain to matters of patronage and his business ventures. Still, his support for Edward Hannegan and Ebenezer Chamberlain suggests that he favored a more conservative set of candidates. Undoubtedly he realized, however, the need to fend off the Free Soil challenge and to protect the place of the Democratic Party in Indiana. Very likely, he hoped to put to rest the divisive politics of territorial expansion. The events of 1850, however, only intensified the bitter nature of the sectional divisions.

⁹⁷ *Daily New Albany Democrat*, August 11, 1849; Holt, *The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party*, 441, 443; Crain, "Governor Jo Wright," 120.

*O Buckingham, take heed of yonder dog!
Look when he fawns, he bites; and when he bites,
His venom tooth will rankle to the death.
Have not to do with him. Beware of him.
Sin, death, and hell have set their marks on him,
And all their ministers attend on him.
-Richard III, Act 1, Scene 3.*

Chapter 3

The Border-State: Jesse Bright and Democratic Politics in 1850-1851

Sectional issues had risen to the forefront of American politics in the 1840s. The annexation of Texas, war with Mexico, the debate over the Wilmot Proviso and the rise of the Free Soil Party had all intensified sectional tensions. At the national level, the candidates for the two parties had tried to finesse these issues in 1848, but questions remained about the Texas boundary. California, meanwhile, wanted to enter the union as a free state. The New Mexico territory had yet to be organized, which again raised the question of the expansion of slavery. Increasingly, southerners of both parties perceived an anti-slavery North eager to deny southern rights and northerners of both parties came to fear the existence of an undemocratic, even malignant, southern slave-power. Such divisions made compromise difficult and threatened to tear the nation apart.

Indiana Democrats were divided between those who feared the slave-power and wanted to end slavery's expansion and those who sympathized with the South. Most Indiana Democrats, however, shared a racist desire to keep the state overwhelmingly white. In 1849, both major Indiana parties had courted free

soil elements by co-opting a number of their issues. This trend began to reverse in 1850. In 1850, as the sectional crisis intensified, Indiana Democrats—even those opposed to the expansion of slavery—rallied to a new cause: the preservation of the union.

The crisis of 1850 placed Jesse Bright in a good strategic position in national politics, but it also placed him in a difficult position in Indiana. A southern-sympathizing senator from a northern border state, Bright assumed an important role in pressing for passage of what became known as the “Compromise of 1850.” Bright detested anti-slavery agitators of all kinds and he wanted to end the sectional debates, but he also knew that appearing to ally completely with the southern slave-power might leave him vulnerable to challenges from Joseph Wright and from Democrats in the northern half of Indiana. Hence, he had to exercise some political caution on controversial issues.

This chapter begins by examining Bright’s role in the Compromise of 1850 and also the response among Indiana Democrats to the compromise measures. But it also examines Bright’s efforts to make the compromise a test of party loyalty, and his efforts to bully and coerce Democratic editors who dared to question the compromise package. In addition, it explores Indiana’s pervasive racism by studying the state’s constitutional convention of 1850-1851 and the outcomes of Bright’s reelection bid and the congressional elections of 1851.

* * * * *

Sectional divisions intensified in 1849 and in early 1850. One reason for this was the discovery of gold in California, which set off a rush of settlers who provided a population large enough for statehood. Most came from the north and wanted California to enter the union as a free-state, which would tip the balance of power in the Senate against the South.¹ There were other divisive issues as well. Texas's boundaries were ill-defined, and southerners wanted its border to include present day New Mexico and Colorado. Others hoped to reduce its size, and proposed to assume some of its debts in exchange for less territory. The nation's capital was another issue. Some northern anti-slavery advocates wanted Congress to abolish slavery in the District of Columbia. Moderate voices called for ending the district's slave-trade instead. Finally, there was the issue of fugitive slaves. The Supreme Court's *Prigg vs. Pennsylvania* (1842) ruling made the capturing of fugitive slaves a prerogative of the federal government. While the ruling seemingly favored southern interests, northern states realized they could use this principle to deny state resources in the capturing of fugitives. Many southerners, therefore, demanded that Congress expand the powers of the federal government to enforce the fugitive slave clause of the Constitution.²

Zachary Taylor hoped to find a way around sectional agitation. Taylor was a wealthy slaveholder from Louisiana, but his experience in the military had made him an ardent nationalist. He desired to settle the issue of slavery with minimal controversy. His solution, known as the no territory plan, was for newly

¹ William Freehling, *Road to Disunion: Secessionists at Bay, 1776-1854* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 490-493.

² Freehling, *Road to Disunion: Secessionists at Bay*, 488-489.

acquired territories such as California and New Mexico to be admitted immediately as states, which in turn would allow state constitutional conventions to decide the fate of slavery rather than Congress. His proposal, however, angered southerners and provoked threats of disunion. Few southern slaveholders desired to take slaves into New Mexico or California where the legal status of slaves remained uncertain. Consequently, Taylor's plan, the South feared, would almost certainly guarantee the creation of two new free-states.

Angry southerners responded by debating how best to protect southern rights. They met at the Mississippi Slaveholders Convention to debate how to respond to the sectional controversies. Previously, such conventions had found little appeal outside of South Carolina. Now southerners from across the south and from different parties drew together. The issue was not merely California. Other territories, Oregon and Minnesota among them, were likely to become free-states soon. Southerners worried they would lose their balance of power in the Senate for good. Among the topics discussed was disunion. Nothing definitive was decided at the gathering, but an agreement to meet later at Nashville raised new concerns about the nation's future.³

In Congress, Taylor's plan was pushed aside as an aging Henry Clay sought to resolve the sectional tensions on his own. Clay proposed eight compromise resolutions. He ignored the president's no territory plan, and proposed instead a series of measures that he hoped would appeal to both sections. California would enter the union as a free state. New Mexico would be

³ Freehling, *Road to Disunion: Secessionists at Bay*, 480-481.

organized without “restriction or condition on the subject of slavery.” While the wording was ambiguous, this meant, most assumed, that popular sovereignty (the will of the voting population as determined by the territorial legislature) would decide the fate of slavery. Clay further proposed trimming the borders of Texas, in return for the assumption of some of its debts. He proposed a resolution declaring the abolition of slavery in D.C. “inexpedient,” but agreed to compromise and support the abolition of the slave-trade in the capital. Finally, Clay offered a federal fugitive slave law that declared Congress could not interfere with the interstate slave-trade.⁴

For the next several months, Clay’s proposals faced opposition from both sections. Southerners, led by John C. Calhoun, opposed the admission of California, desired federal protection for slave property in the territories, and opposed the abolition of the D.C. slave-trade. William Seward, speaking for the northern free soil elements, objected to the fugitive slave law and desired the federal government prohibit slavery in the territories. Since the resolutions were not presented as formal bills, Clay formed a Select Committee in hopes of building broader support. Clay would chair the committee, which was made up of six Whigs and six Democrats and also divided by six southerners and six northerners. Jesse Bright secured a seat on the committee.

As a member of the Committee of Thirteen, Bright played a prominent role in helping shape the compromise package. The Committee was formed on April 18th and completed its work by the end of the month. The plan had been agreed

⁴ David Potter, *The Impending Crisis: 1848-1861* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), 99-103.

upon by a majority of the Committee, and on May 8 Clay presented its work to the Senate. It contained three measures; one became known as the “omnibus” because it incorporated the issues of California, New Mexico and Texas into a single bill. Separate bills dealt with fugitive slaves and the D.C. slave-trade. Against the objections of Clay, a majority of the committee agreed to bar the New Mexico territorial legislature from prohibiting slavery.⁵ Bright’s role in shaping this portion is not known, although to gain a majority the committee needed at least one northern vote.

Bright strongly supported the compromise measures, but in doing so he had to violate the instructions of the Indiana legislature. In January 1850, shortly after the free-soil dominated 1849 elections, Joseph Wright had backed a resolution instructing Indiana’s congressional members to support excluding slavery from the newly acquired Mexican territories. Bright refused to abide by the resolution.⁶ If he “pandered to this one idea,” Bright said, he would “have failed in the performance of [his] duty.” Voting to contain slavery would extinguish his “own self-respect.” There had been “much unpleasant criticism,” he acknowledged, from his fellow Hoosiers about his position. Perhaps because of this criticism, he expressed unreserved support for admitting California as a free state. He suggested that he did not personally agree with all the “arguments and

⁵ Robert Remini, *At the Edge of the Precipice: Henry Clay and the Compromise that Saved the Union* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 122-123.

⁶ *Indiana State Sentinel*, February 7, 1850; *Congressional Globe*, 36th Congress, 2nd session, February 6, 1861, appendix, 186.

conclusions contained in the report,” but he nonetheless would “endorse it, broadly, distinctly, and emphatically.”⁷

Bright’s defense of the compromise was founded on his hopes that it would end anti-slavery agitation and keep the union together. “All parties” in the western states, he said, “are tired of this eternal agitation. The public mind is wearied and worn out with it, and every voice that reaches my ears...confirms me in the opinion that it is due alike to the Union...”⁸ In private, he expressed similar views. He informed one friend, “If this bill fails, than fanaticism North and South, will commence their work in real earnest, and it remains for the future to recall [the] results.”⁹

For the next two months, Congress debated and voted on amendments to the compromise packages. In the various votes, Bright sometimes sided with the southerners. For instance, on a vote to amend the omnibus so that the New Mexico territory would be allowed to prohibit slavery, Stephen Douglas and most northern senators (including Indiana Senator James Whitcomb) voted in favor of the amendment. Bright was one of the few northern senators to vote with the South against it. But he did not always vote with the southerners. When Jefferson Davis introduced an amendment allowing the New Mexico legislature to make laws introducing slavery, he voted against it with his northern colleagues.¹⁰

⁷ *Congressional Globe*, 31st Congress, 1st Session, May 9th, 1850, 956.

⁸ *Congressional Globe*, 31st Congress, 1st session, June 13, 1850, 1202.

⁹ Jesse Bright to Caleb Lodge, June 22, 1850 (Copy), Jesse Bright Papers, Lilly Library.

¹⁰ *Congressional Globe*, 31st Congress, 1st Congress, June 5, 1850, 1134-1135.

Bright's purpose was to keep the omnibus bill intact as it faced opposition from both sections.

While national party leaders struggled to craft a compromise, the situation in Indiana remained in flux. The Wright wing of the party was opposed to allowing the expansion of slavery. The *Indiana State Sentinel*, edited by a Wright ally, expressed these views during the early debate over the compromise. The editor was not especially radical, but he had long maintained a commitment to free soil principles. With Bright seemingly in mind, he warned, "we do not mean to be driven from [our principles] to further the exclusive interests of the 'South,' or of any man or body of men whatever." These principles were based on questions involving "human rights" emanating from "conscientious scruples" and the "cardinal principles of our own Declaration of Independence."¹¹ As was often the case when free-soil rhetoric might be misconstrued, the editor was sure to invoke racist language. He explained that the "nigger interest" belonged, and ought to remain, confined to the South.¹²

For many Democrats, and especially Indiana's conservative Democrats, preserving the union was the fundamental issue. Willis Gorman was typical of many of these Democrats. Privately he asserted, "*This Union must be preserved!*" He vowed not to foment anti-slavery agitation and provoke disunion, and if he did, he declared, "*damn me, and my political career forever.*" On the other hand, the Democrat assured that he would "never vote to send slavery one

¹¹ *Indiana State Sentinel*, February 14, 1850.

¹² *Indiana State Sentinel*, February 14, 1850.

foot further,” and would “never vote a pro slavery vote.” The congressman reasoned should slavery be “likely” to enter the territories he would “*vote to arrest it.*” Being that it was unlikely, however, he objected to joining the northern crusaders in applying “the incendiary torch to the magazine...”¹³ Many Democrats were turning away from free-soil politics. At the same time, they remained leery of the slave-power.

Many Democrats feared the divisive consequences of a continued battle over slavery. One lamented “I fear that I have lived to see the day when my country begins to die.” Then through poem he expressed:

Oh! Draw aside the curtain fate,
And bid my dark forbodings flee,
Is Anarchy to rule the State,
Or Union and Sweet Liberty!¹⁴

Another Hoosier living in Washington wrote, “There is a very bad state of feeling in the Capitol now, more than I have ever known: Clouds and shadows rest upon the future.”¹⁵ Increasingly the Wright wing of the party began to lose influence on the issue. Colfax’s paper noted that “Two years ago, a large minority, at least, if not a majority” of Democrats “insisted” upon the Wilmot Proviso. Now, “Scarcely a Democratic paper in the North now favors” it.¹⁶

Cyrus Dunham, a Democratic congressman from the second congressional district, made similar arguments in favor of the compromise. He

¹³ Willis Gorman to William English, January 17, 1850, William English Family Papers, Indiana Historical Society.

¹⁴ Enoch Thornley to James Whitcomb, March 22, 1850, James Whitcomb Papers, Indiana Historical Society.

¹⁵ Joseph Brown to Austin Brown, August 2, 1850, Austin Brown Papers, Indiana State Library.

¹⁶ *St. Joseph Valley Register*, September 12, 1850.

conceded slavery was “wrong” and “detrimental to the prosperity of any country where it exists.” Playing to the racial attitudes of his southern Indiana constituents, however, he denied having the “pharisaical piety” or “sickly sentimentality” that would “preach a crusade against the wickedness and oppression of others.” Dunham argued that the black slaves of the South were outsiders. Concerns for basic welfare were best reserved for whites within Indiana. He then criticized southerners for enslaving blacks who were legally freed. Above all, he feared that the Republic was in danger. “If this Union is destroyed,” insisted the congressman, along with it would go “the liberties of this people.” Dunham later elaborated, “I love this Union, not for itself, but as a means of securing and preserving what I hold dearer...the liberties of the American people; and when it shall fail to secure these, not only for the people of my section, but of all sections, my affection for it will cease.”¹⁷

In Congress, however, Clay’s plan faced serious opposition. Some opponents attacked the omnibus by inserting amendments to poison it. Disaster struck when Senator James Pearce of Maryland sought to modify an aspect of the Texas boundary issue, which required removing the New Mexico provision. Clay objected, and both he and Bright voted against the move. The removal of New Mexico, however, passed. When Pearce sought to insert a modified version, the supporters of compromise, Bright and Clay included, supported Pearce’s efforts. The amendment failed. Immediately opponents of the compromise gathered enough southern support to remove the Texas and California provisions

¹⁷ *Congressional Globe*, 31st Congress, 1st session, June 5, 1850 appendix, 836-839.

of the omnibus.¹⁸ After this, the compromise completely collapsed. Exhausted and ill, Henry Clay left the capital. At about the same time Zachary Taylor suddenly died and Millard Fillmore ascended to the presidency. At this point Stephen Douglas took charge of crafting the compromise provisions.

Douglas wisely abandoned the omnibus and instead put forth six separate bills. In this way, he succeeded in restoring the popular sovereignty provision to the New Mexico bill. The territorial legislature would no longer be prohibited from legislating against slavery.¹⁹ The five other bills were to organize the Utah territory without restricting slavery, assume Texas debts and establish its territorial limits, admit California as a free state, abolish the slave-trade in the District of Columbia, and implement a federal fugitive slave law. Between July 31 and September 16 the Senate voted to pass each of these bills, and the House followed shortly after the Senate votes.

Bright did not vote on the Fugitive Slave Act. That day he had been in the Senate chamber, but he was apparently absent when it came time for the vote. Bright insisted that his absence was merely accidental. Bright had reasons to be in favor of the bill. Few slave owners had actually had slaves escape to the north. As William Freehling observed, “Only a thousand or so fugitives a year successfully escaped to the North, and those mostly from the Border South.” Bright, however, was one of them.²⁰ Some years earlier, he had brought one of his Kentucky slaves to Madison, Indiana, where the slave was able to escape

¹⁸ *Congressional Globe*, 31st Congress, 1st session, July 31, 1850, appendix, 1470-1488.

¹⁹ Remini, *At the Edge of the Precipice*, 134-135.

²⁰ Freehling, *Road to Disunion: Secessionists at Bay*, 503.

along the underground railroad.²¹ Hence, along with many border state southerners, he saw the need for a federal fugitive slave law. Regarding his missed vote on the Fugitive Slave Act, he later asserted, "I supported those measures, each and every one of them, separately and collectively, in committee and before the Senate, from the beginning to the end of the controversy..."²²

Perhaps this was the case, but Bright also had reasons to worry. He realized that the Fugitive Slave Act was unpopular and would tie him to the southern slave-power.²³ Voting for it might complicate his reelection bid in 1851. Indeed, while both Cass and Douglas were able to get their state's Democratic House members behind the bill, they had more difficulty gaining the support of newspapers and Democratic voters.²⁴ Of the three northern Senators who voted for the Fugitive Slave Act, only one returned to the Senate. Among the Indiana House Democrats, only two of the five voting in favor of the bill returned to Congress.

Bright was among the few senators to vote for each of the other compromise bills. Only the New Mexico territory garnered majorities from both sections (11-10 from northern senators and 16-0 from southern senators). Every other bill required a majority from one section and a few cross-over votes from senators like Bright. He voted with most northern senators to admit California as

²¹ William Woollen, *Biographical and Historical Sketches of Early Indiana* (Indianapolis: Hammond & Co., 1883), 228.

²² *Congressional Globe*, August 26, 1852, 32nd Congress, 1st Session, appendix, 1123; Wayne Van Der Weele, "Jesse David Bright: Master Politician from the Old Northwest" (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 1958), 72.

²³ *Indiana State Sentinel*, August 8, 1850.

²⁴ Leonard Richards, *The Slave Power: The Free North and Southern Domination, 1780-1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000), 181-183.

a free state and to abolish the slave-trade in D.C. Bright also voted with a majority of southern senators to organize the Utah territory under popular sovereignty. He also supported New Mexico and Texas. All of the senators from Illinois and Michigan, including Douglas and Cass, followed the same pattern as Bright. They supported all of the compromise measures, but failed to vote on the Fugitive Slave Act. In all, four senators, two from each section, voted aye on each of the compromise bills. The northern senators were Democrats from Pennsylvania and Iowa. Bright was one of seven senators (six from the north) to support five of six bills. The two northern senators who voted aye on all the measures did not return to the Senate for another term.²⁵

Democrats in the Indiana congressional delegation had mostly supported the compromise. Indiana Senator James Whitcomb was one example. Whitcomb had won his seat by taking a free-soil position. Once Bright's rival in the 1840s, he now supported Bright on the compromise. Part of this evolution, it seems, came from Bright's willing to deal in "some money matters" with Whitcomb.²⁶ He abstained from the Fugitive Slave Act and the Utah territory question, but voted in favor of the other bills. Indiana's House members generally supported the compromise as well. Every Indiana House member—Democrat, Whig and Free Soil—voted to admit California as a free state and abolish the slave trade in D.C. On Texas, six Indiana Democrats voted in favor, a northern Indiana Democrat voted against, and another abstained. On the bill to form the Utah territory, six Democrats voted in favor, and the two northern Indiana

²⁵ Holman Hamilton, *Prologue to Conflict: The Crisis and Compromise of 1850* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1966), 143, 191-192.

²⁶ Jesse Bright to Caleb Lodge, January 15, 1850 (Copy), Jesse Bright Papers, Lilly Library.

Democrats voted nay. On the most controversial measure, the Fugitive Slave Act, five Indiana Democrats voted in favor, and three voted against. Two of the no votes came from northern Indiana. In spite of the early hesitation by Indiana Democrats, generally all but the northern-most Democrats fell in line.²⁷

The passage of the compromise bills received mix reactions. For moderates who hoped to end the agitation, the moment was cathartic. The issue of slavery in the territories had seemingly been settled. On the other hand, this was a limited “compromise” at best. Relatively few in either section supported the entire package. Indeed, some historians have referred to it as the “Armistice of 1850.” At the very least, serious threats of disunion were held at bay, but clearly the sectional differences remained.²⁸

In Indiana, many Hoosiers were relieved. The *Indiana State Sentinel* declared the “struggle ended.” It now believed that “peace and harmony will again reign triumphant in this land of freedom...”²⁹ Though the *Madison Courier* had qualms about the Fugitive Slave Act, it hailed the compromise as something to satisfy “all reasonable men in every section, and give peace and quiet to the country.” The *Fort Wayne Sentinel*, a moderate northern Indiana Democratic paper, did not “fully approve” of the compromise measures as they “conceded more to the South than it was entitled to in justice.” Nonetheless, it spoke for most Indiana Democrats when it expressed relief that “the matter [was] settled.”³⁰ The political situation in Washington had produced a dramatic shift in attitudes

²⁷ Hamilton, *Prologue to Conflict*, 195-200.

²⁸ Potter, *Impending Crisis*, 114-120; Freehling, *Road to Disunion: Secessionists at Bay*, 509-510.

²⁹ *Indiana State Sentinel*, September 12, 1850.

³⁰ *Fort Wayne Sentinel*, September 14, 1850.

among Indiana Democrats. Most opposed the expansion of slavery, but they were now increasingly fearful of agitation. On this issue, they shared a common bond with Jesse Bright.

* * * * *

The battle over the compromise package—particularly the Fugitive Slave Act—had other important consequences for Bright. By 1850 and 1851 he had established a base of power within Indiana’s Democratic Party. He was not yet the party’s boss, but he was one of its most powerful figures, and he was determined to use his influence to make support for the compromise a test of party loyalty. Bright particularly sought to silence editors of the state’s Democratic newspapers who objected to the Fugitive Slave Act and who expressed free soil sympathies. Gaining control of these papers would both solidify Bright’s influence and impose a consensus within the state in favor of the Compromise of 1850.

One of Bright’s targets was the *Indiana State Sentinel*, the state’s leading Democratic organ. Its editor Jacob Chapman had infuriated Bright by challenging the compromise measures. In Bright’s mind, Chapman’s free soil leanings made him an abolitionist who could not be tolerated. Possibly working with Michigan’s Lewis Cass (or so it was rumored), Bright arranged for the takeover of the *Sentinel* by Indiana congressman William Brown and Brown’s son Austin. William Brown was a somewhat curious choice to run the paper as he had ties to free soil congressmen and in his 1849 campaign for the House speakership he pledged to name Free Soilers to House committees. He was also leery of what he saw as

the fanaticism of southern Democrats.³¹ Still, in 1850 he had supported the compromise package and he tended to get along with all sides.

From the start, however, the Browns faced suspicions about whether Bright actually ran the *Sentinel*. Brown tried to assure readers that the paper would “be the organ of the party and not any man, clique, or faction.”³² There were many who thought otherwise. The Whig *Journal* seized upon this, suggesting the Democratic organ had been taken over by the slaveholding interests.³³ Indeed, William Brown spent much time assuring his readers that Jesse Bright had no financial interest in the paper. Whether Bright’s own money was involved in the transaction, clearly his influence was important.³⁴

Brown hoped to convince his readers that the paper met “the approval of the Democratic party and the people,” but his ties to Bright resulted in large numbers of canceled subscriptions.³⁵ The *Fort Wayne Sentinel*, a local Democratic paper, suggested the organ had become “a little too southern in its tone and feelings.”³⁶ William Brown privately confided that he was “anxious” to “get out of the hards” as his paper was “loosing 20 subscribers a day.” Brown

³¹ William Brown to _____, December 13, 1849 quoted in *Madison Courier*, June 18, 1851.

³² *Indiana State Sentinel*, May 16, 1850.

³³ *Indiana State Journal*, May 18, 1850.

³⁴ Emma Thornbrough, *Indiana in the Civil War: 1850-1880* (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Bureau, 1965), 46; *St. Joseph Valley Register*, September 5, 1850. There were rumors at the time that Bright and Lewis Cass helped finance the unusually large financial transaction in purchasing the *Indiana State Sentinel*. Eventually Austin Brown issued a statement claiming that “It is untrue that either Mr. Bright or Gen. Cass have any special interest in the *State Sentinel*.” As Colfax observed, Brown’s insertion of the word “special” into his statement adds a certain level of ambiguity. About a year and a half later the *Sentinel* reiterated its denial that “one cent” had been “contributed by any political friend, as has been represented.” (*Indiana State Sentinel*, January 29, 1852)

³⁵ *Indiana State Sentinel*, September 5, 1850

³⁶ *Fort Wayne Sentinel*, November 23, 1850.

was also worried over rumors that a statewide free-soil Democratic paper would be established.³⁷

Meanwhile, Bright was trying to silence the editor of the *Goshen Democrat*, which was a northern Indiana paper with a strong free soil bent. Its editor Erastus Ellis railed against “Bill Brown and his masters,” and took special note of “Jesse D. Bright” as “a slaveholder of Kentucky.” In order to silence Ellis, Indiana Democratic leaders found him a lucrative position as state auditor, and then arranged for a new editor to take over the *Goshen Democrat*. In his inaugural edition, the editor remarked that “there are some things that, of late years, have crept into the party...which are calculated to destroy its harmony, and sacrifice, upon a fanatical altar its identity.”³⁸

Erastus Ellis, however, did not remain silent for long. Shortly after moving to Indianapolis, he began publishing the *Indiana Statesman*, which was established to challenge the *Sentinel* and Jesse Bright. In the inaugural edition, the *Statesman* declared its fidelity to the Democratic Party, but rejected “blind submission” to “any man.” The main issue of contention, Ellis noted, was slavery. The editor believed that “while a northern Democrat may vote in Congress or advocate at home the surrender of a portion of our territory to the institution of slavery, without losing caste, so may another contend that such territory shall forever remain free and pure.”³⁹ The paper was free soil but not radical in its

³⁷ William J. Brown to Austin H. Brown, June 24, 1850, Austin H. Brown Papers, Indiana State Library.

³⁸ *St. Joseph Valley Register*, September 5, 1850

³⁹ *Indiana Statesman*, September 4, 1850.

advocacy. It could tolerate slavery, but not what it believed to be the authoritarian dictates of a party boss who was going to infringe on their rights to speak and believe. Many of the Democratic papers in the state agreed.

Ellis was a loyal supporter to Governor Joseph Wright. Judging by the patronage he received, the governor must have reciprocated the friendship.⁴⁰ With Wright's backing, the *Statesman* soon had 2,000 subscribers and it would challenge Bright for the next two years.⁴¹ Bright would later groan over the prospects of having to swallow "such a dose as Jos A. Wright & Dr. Ellis," and implored William English, an up-and-coming member of the state legislature, "For Heavens sake English, do all in your power to save me, and those of our Party who know these Creatures, as well as you and I do; from passing such an ordeal."⁴² Eventually, Ellis was silenced when the party denied him re-nomination as auditor but named him instead as commissioner to the Institute for the Education of the Blind. In its farewell editorial, he noted that the *Statesman* had endured a "full measure of abuse" and had "been hunted and proscribed wantonly" in its efforts. Ellis claimed that he had sold his paper to promote the greater "harmony and prosperity of the democratic party." He added, cryptically, that "other occupations, more congenial, presented themselves."⁴³ He would

⁴⁰ *General Laws of the State of Indiana Passed at the Thirty-Fifth Session of the General Assembly* (Indianapolis: J.P. Chapman, 1851), 24; *Indiana Statesman*, August 25, 1852.

⁴¹ Erastus Ellis, "Autobiography of a Noted Pioneer: Written by E.W.H. Ellis, of Goshen" *Indiana Magazine of History* 10 (March, 1914), 68.

⁴² Jesse Bright to William English, December 16, 1851, "Some Letters of Jesse D. Bright to William H. English (1842-1863)" *Indiana Magazine of History* 30 (December, 1934), 374-375.

⁴³ *Indiana Statesman*, August 25, 1852.

eventually bolt the Democratic Party in 1855 in protest of the “Border Ruffian policy” that had become the test of “party fealty.”⁴⁴

Another of Bright’s newspaper wars became so heated that it nearly claimed the life of an unfriendly editor. When Garber took control of Bright’s hometown paper the *Madison Courier* in 1849, he and Bright professed warm relations, and Garber consistently endorsed him. Garber’s moderate free soil attitudes, however, did not sit well with Bright. Although the editor proclaimed that his devotion to the union was more important than agitating over slavery, he still hated “slavery as much as man can hate sin.”⁴⁵ The *Courier* supported most of the compromise measures, but not the Fugitive Slave Act, which Garber had opposed because it contained no safeguards to protect those who were legally free. Garber, nonetheless, tried to maintain peaceful relations with Bright. “We differ with [Bright] on many questions of public policy,” he wrote, “yet we are friends—political and personal.” He added, “In all of our intercourse with Mr. Bright, we have ever found him careful of the rights and privileges of others.”⁴⁶

Garber’s efforts to defuse his differences with Bright had no impact, as Bright bitterly resented any kind of criticism. He retaliated by securing a resolution in the state legislature instructing “the Door-keeper...not to distribute any more numbers of the ‘Madison Courier’ to members of this House.”⁴⁷ A furious Garber fired back. The powers of the state, he wrote, had “willfully shut

⁴⁴ Erastus Winter Hewett Ellis, “Autobiography of a Noted Pioneer” *Indiana Magazine of History* 10 (March, 1914), 69.

⁴⁵ *Madison Courier*, February 20, 1850.

⁴⁶ *Madison Courier*, December 11, 1850.

⁴⁷ *Journal of the house of Representatives of the State of Indiana During the Thirty-Fifth Session* (Indianapolis: J.P. Chapman, 1851), 478.

their doors against light and truth. This body, had it the power, would establish a censorship over the Press of the State, and would forbid every article that in the least related to their 'high mightiness,' except in terms of praise." Alluding to the outrages committed against Elijah Lovejoy, Garber declared that they could not summon the power to "prevent the people from reading; that they have not the power to send their sergeant-at-arms and doorkeeper to Madison and throw our press and materials into the Ohio river."⁴⁸

Soon the state's Democratic newspapers were taking sides as well. The Browns sided with Bright. In attacking Garber, the *Sentinel* declared itself part "the organ of [a] whole...National Democracy...broad and comprehensive as the Union." Rather than being partisans of slavery, the editor insisted that it desired to lock "our doors against sectional animosities and local divisions."⁴⁹ Men who refused to toe the line on all the provisions of the compromise were "enemies of the Constitution, and the enemies of the Union."⁵⁰

The *New Albany Ledger* criticized the *Sentinel* for raising the "wretched humbug" of making the Fugitive Slave Act the test of Democratic loyalty.⁵¹ The *Rushville Jacksonian* railed against the *Sentinel's* "driver-ship of the whole democratic party." Meanwhile, the *Richmond Jeffersonian* unearthed some of William Brown's earlier remarks against the slave power. He quoted Brown's

⁴⁸ *Madison Courier*, February 4, 1851.

⁴⁹ *Indiana State Sentinel*, March 12, 1851.

⁵⁰ *Indiana State Sentinel*, March 26, 1851. Generally the abolition label was hurled at any political foe whose anti-slavery tendencies were greater than the accuser. Michael Garber was not an abolitionist. He generally favored some type of legal mechanism for returning fugitive slaves, but believed that the Fugitive Slave Act, as written, lacked the necessary safeguards against the wrongly accused, especially whites, from being subjugated to slavery.

⁵¹ *New Albany Daily Ledger*, March 11, 18, 26, 1851.

refusal to “bow” his “neck to the Slaveocracy of the South,” and taunted Brown for doing just that for Bright. In a swipe directed at the party boss, the *Ledger* noted that “people, now-a-days, don’t look to members of Congress as the only source of political wisdom. A caucus of Congressmen used to tell the people whom they should support for President.” Yet, the editor warned that such a politician “who would attempt such a thing now would find their position anything but a pleasant one.”⁵²

The war between Garber and Bright became more personal and heated. A letter from Bright to a William Taylor was inadvertently delivered to a Whig partisan of a similar name. In the letter Bright dismissed Garber’s protestations of personal support noting that “from his peculiar position” as editor, he had made “war with democratic principles over my shoulders.” Bright intended “to bring about a short peace,” that would “result in the expulsion of this dam’d scoundrel from our ranks.”⁵³ In response, Garber began to attack Bright asking “what right has he to crush us? Have we no rights as citizens? Is every press and every publisher to be silenced because he cannot square his opinions to the standard of Jesse D. Bright and W. J. Brown?”⁵⁴

By the summer of 1851, Bright had had enough. At a July 8th meeting of his supporters, Garber was “read out” of the party. Bright declared that he wanted no part conciliating or buying up his competition. He wanted to drive

⁵² *New Albany Ledger*, March 11, 1851.

⁵³ *Madison Courier*, June 3, 1851.

⁵⁴ *Madison Courier*, June 18, 1851.

Garber out of business.⁵⁵ To do this, he and his allies formed a rival paper, the *Madisonian*. In its inaugural edition, the *Madisonian* accused Garber and his paper “of abolitionist affinities,” and of deviating from Democratic principles.⁵⁶ In response, Garber held his own mass meeting of Democrats who reaffirmed their support for him. At the meeting Garber also touted a letter from Governor Wright, which called the editor “a consistent Democrat.”⁵⁷

Garber was especially bitter at being described by Bright as an abolitionist. Bright had attacked him, he said, for “daring to stand erect and claim the attributes of freemen.” He added: “The Senator could not have taken a more arbitrary course on his plantation, and among his slaves in Kentucky.”⁵⁸ In a private letter, the editor fumed:

I offered him, Bright, a fight over and over but could not get it, nor could I find him at any time on the street. To have fought with his hired man would not have been very creditable, and would have afforded him and the press of the State a pretext for throwing me off by saying it is only a personal quarrel between the editors. I have whipped them out in their own way, and my friend, Gov. Wright will be renominated which will be driving the last nail into the political coffin of Jesse D. Bright.⁵⁹

Eventually, the war of words turned violent. Hamilton Hibbs, a Bright ally, was appointed to the welcoming committee for Louis Kossuth, a liberal Hungarian revolutionary. Since Garber was also appointed, Hibbs chose to publish a notice in the *Madisonian* claiming he “would rather be associated with a

⁵⁵ *Madison Courier*, June 3, 1851.

⁵⁶ *Daily Madisonian*, July 26, 1851.

⁵⁷ *Madison Courier*, July 12, 1851.

⁵⁸ *Madison Courier*, June 25, 1851. (Emphasis mine).

⁵⁹ Michael Garber to Sandy____(copy), November 1851, Jesse Bright Papers, Lilly Library.

negro than such men” as the *Courier’s* editor.⁶⁰ This sent Garber into a rage. Upon passing Hibbs on the street, he spat on Hibbs’s face. A carpenter by trade, Hibbs had a chisel in hand and stabbed Garber several times. The attack left Garber close to death, but after a few weeks, he recovered and returned to the *Courier*. The shock of the incident seemed to cool passions somewhat, as even Hibbs appeared to display remorse over the incident. The underlying tensions, however, were to remain, as Garber eventually bolted the Democratic Party in 1854.

The incident enhanced interest in the *Madison Courier*. While Garber eventually reported a circulation of about five to six thousand readers, Bright’s mouthpiece floundered under a “sickly existence” before folding.⁶¹ Bright’s ability to garner popular support for himself and his pro-southern policies had limitations.⁶²

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Indiana’s Democrats may have split over the Fugitive Slave Act, but this should not obscure a fundamental truth. Indiana’s Democrats were generally united in their racist beliefs and anxieties. In the early 1840s Indiana had been

⁶⁰ *Madisonian*, January 28, 1852

⁶¹ *Madison Courier*, November 1, 19, 1853 quoted in Mildred C. Stoler, “Insurgent Democrats of Indiana and Illinois in 1854” *Indiana Magazine of History* 33 (March, 1937), 6; Woollen, *Biographical and Historical Sketches*, 540.

⁶² James Whitcomb to Austin Brown, August 29, 1850, Austin Brown Papers, Indiana State Library.

among the free-states most resistant to developing an anti-slavery movement.⁶³
This reality provides context to understanding Indiana politics in the 1850s.

The state's racial attitudes were clearly evident when Indiana convened a constitutional convention in Indianapolis on October 7, 1850 to draft a new governing charter. The demand for a new constitution had become a major issue in the late 1840s. Democrats in particular objected to the 1816 constitution as outdated and undemocratic because it had established numerous appointed positions. After their sweeping win in the August 1850 elections, they pushed through legislation convening a constitutional convention.⁶⁴

Racial issues had not figured prominently in the call for the convention, but they gained salience when the neighboring states of Kentucky and Illinois placed residency restrictions on free blacks. Blacks comprised only about one percent of Indiana's population, but most white Hoosiers nonetheless feared an influx of black immigrants. Many now looked for ways to discourage settlement.

Throughout the convention, Democrats often displayed a virulent racism. One example of this was a cynical ploy by George Berry, a Democrat from central Indiana, who offered an amendment that would instruct "the committee on the elective franchise...to report a provision for the new Constitution, providing that negroes and mulattoes shall be voters at all elections in this state." Berry had no intention of granting black men the right to vote. Rather, he hoped to

⁶³ Theodore Clarke Smith, *The Liberty and Free Soil Parties in the Northwest* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1897), 44

⁶⁴ *Indiana State Journal*, August 31, 1850.

“enable gentlemen to vote on the question, in so tangible a manner, that their constituents could properly understand them...” Edward May, a Democrat from northern Indiana, did support black enfranchisement. Black Americans, he argued, had “the attributes of humanity” and “if not for his, for consistency’s sake, ever recognize him as a man and treat him as a man.”⁶⁵ There were many white Hoosiers, particularly in northern Indiana, who sympathized with this view. They, however, objected to enfranchising blacks out of political expediency and fears that such advocacy would prejudice other rights for blacks.⁶⁶ His plea had no impact as the delegates voted 61-1 against the proposal, with May its lone supporter.⁶⁷

Another delegate not only voted against extending the vote, but called for denying the vote to any white citizen who might vote in favor of extending the franchise. The delegate thundered, “Sir, whenever you begin to talk about making negroes equal with white men, I begin to think about leaving the country.” His resolution stated: “That all persons voting for negro suffrage shall themselves be disfranchised.”⁶⁸ Immediately, delegates objected. Joseph Robinson, a central Indiana Whig, admitted that he “never can, and never will, vote for negro suffrage,” but he objected to the notion that “our fellow-citizens,” merely “because

⁶⁵ *Report of the Debates and Proceedings of the Convention for the Revision of the Constitution of the State of Indiana* 2 volumes. eds H. Fowler and Austin Brown (Indianapolis: Austin Brown, 1850), 1:245.

⁶⁶ *St. Joseph Valley Register*, July 4, 1850

⁶⁷ *Report of the Debates*, 1:253-254.

⁶⁸ *Report of the Debates*, 1:232-233.

they entertain their sentiments honestly,” are thus to be “disfranchised and placed in the same condition with the African!”⁶⁹ The resolution was defeated.

The delegates did protect the rights of the state’s black residents in one instance. They opposed political and social equality, but they did believe in the sanctity of the right of property. This issue arose when a committee introduced a prohibition of “any negro or mulatto from purchasing or otherwise acquiring real estate hereafter.”⁷⁰ Henry Thornton of Floyd County proposed to change this to “purchasing or holding” on the ground that such wording removed the ambiguous term “acquiring” and thus enabled descendants to inherit property. Thomas Gibson of Clark County proposed that the provision merely prohibit the “purchasing any real estate hereafter.” The original proposal, he argued, would unjustly rob the heirs of property, while Thornton’s proposal would strip black Americans of their property. He was content to insist that if blacks were to sell property, they could only transact with whites so that “in the course of a very short time” few black Americans would hold property in Indiana.⁷¹ Another delegate objected to any kind of restrictions on property. He believed it “wrong in principle” as “many of them have been born here” and declared it to be “an outrage upon the feelings of the community...to deprive them of this right.”⁷² Still another found depriving black Americans of property ill-advised. He desired to have “inducements” for those who remained in the state “to hold property, for the

⁶⁹ *Report of the Debates*, 1:234.

⁷⁰ *Report of the Debates*, 1:226.

⁷¹ *Report of the Debates*. 1:445.

⁷² *Reports of the Debates*, 1:460.

purpose of giving them an incentive to suppress disturbances and maintain order in the community.”⁷³

Jacob Chapman ridiculed the idea of protecting property rights. He denied any desire to “publicly kick ‘a nigger,’” but he wanted to restrict property rights in order to encourage blacks to settle elsewhere. As for the rights of property, Chapman remarked “Negroes are already divested of other rights of which nothing is said—they are taxed without being represented, they are deprived of the right to testify in our courts, they have extended to them none of the privileges and advantages of public schools, they cannot exercise the elective franchise, they are ineligible to the pettiest office; we deprive them now of all rights but the one of acquiring and possessing property.” Chapman queried that if giving property rights should create good public order, “why not grant them all” rights?⁷⁴

Some of the delegates who joined this debate demonstrated their extreme racism. One went so far as to declare free blacks as “vermin.” James Foster noted that he had observed large numbers of blacks in both Philadelphia and St. Domingo, and the “vast numbers of them” were “a more miserable race of beings” that “scarcely ever existed.” In his estimation the model example was “the Island of Cuba” where the slavery had produced a “much happier” population than where freedom existed. He contended that the “negro race” was “under the bane of Heaven—a curse that was pronounced upon them by

⁷³ *Reports of the Debates*, 1:462.

⁷⁴ *Reports of the Debates*, 1:591-592.

Almighty God...and it was declared that they should be the servants of servants. That curse has never been removed.”⁷⁵

The convention ultimately chose not to restrict property rights. It stated “No additional disability, not found in the old Constitution, is imposed” upon black Americans and “their descendants, who may be in the State at the time of the adoption of the amended Constitution.”⁷⁶ The right to acquire property and to be secure in the fruits of one’s own labor was a principle the delegates would extend regardless of race. Indeed, the right of property was a fundamental element to northern free labor ideology. It was part of the economic individualism and social mobility that helped distinguish northerners from their southern counterparts.⁷⁷

The most important and revealing issue pertaining to race was whether to prohibit the immigration of free blacks. The demand for such a prohibition had become a popular cause after Illinois had done this in 1848 and Kentucky had adopted a law in 1850 placing severe penalties on emancipated slaves who remained in the state.⁷⁸ Whites in Indiana feared that their state would now attract more black settlers. A delegate remarked, “We were told some ten years ago, that no sane man would have thought of” excluding black Americans from Indiana. Yet there had become “a change of circumstances. The actions of the other States” he claimed, had compelled Indiana to act. The delegate compared the actions of Kentucky to that of a “neighbor” who “turns out his old horse to die”

⁷⁵ *Report of the Debate and Proceedings*, 1: 451.

⁷⁶ *Report of the Debates*, 2:2045.

⁷⁷ Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party before the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 18-19.

⁷⁸ *Indiana State Journal*, August 31, 1850.

by releasing it into one's garden. The delegate reasoned that one should not have "any moral obligation" to "suffer him to remain there...None—none in the world."⁷⁹ Democrat James Read from southern Indiana claimed "great sympathy for the negro race." Still, he represented a "constituency which has a stronger feeling, perhaps than any other in the State against the enfranchisement or even the immigration into the State of Negroes." Read desired a means to provide "self-defense" from black settlement. He reasoned there were three ways to deal with the issue. One was "amalgamation." For Read, this was no option at all. He said: "aye, sir, I repeat it, amalgamation." His second option would be to "give up the State to the possession and rule of the black population." Hence, the only reasonable option would be "to prohibit the immigration of negroes to the State, to give no encouragement to those that are here that they can ever enjoy equal social or political privileges." He hoped, as well, that this would encourage blacks currently living in the state to leave.⁸⁰

Delegates such as Robert Owen favored exclusion on the grounds that the massive inequalities between blacks and whites would undermine democratic ideals. He did not desire to have his "children...grow up side by side with men like themselves, yet without the rights of freemen." While Owen was not unsympathetic to granting fuller rights, he felt doing so was impractical. Owen declared that "those who speak as the especial friends of the African" claim that such prejudices "ought not to exist! So be it. But it does exist. Can you alter it?" He was convinced that the "prejudice" and "tyranny" of such sentiments and

⁷⁹ *Report of the Debates*, 1:446.

⁸⁰ *Report of the Debates*, 1:247.

practices could not be eradicated. His solution was to bar further immigration of blacks into the state and work to colonize those that remained so they could have a “free home elsewhere.”⁸¹

The convention’s vote to bar black immigration was a decisive 94-37. Delegates from southern Indiana supported exclusion by a vote of 38-2. Delegates in the central region favored it by a vote of 46-14. The northern Indiana delegates opposed it 21-9. Democrats favored exclusion by a total of 67-14, while Whigs narrowly favored it by a vote of 24-20. Among northern delegates, Democrats opposed the measure 9-8, while northern Whigs opposed it 11-0.

More extreme delegates wanted to combine exclusion with support for the Fugitive Slave Act. Thomas Gibson, a southern Indiana delegate, proposed penalizing anyone who would harbor blacks entering the state with property forfeiture. Ever fearful of amalgamation, Dobson supported the proposal. He wanted to ensure that the “stronger race will keep itself clear of the weaker and thereby keep the blood pure.”⁸² But Othniel Clark, a northern Indiana Whig, objected. It was a virtuous person, he said, who would help a “sick and destitute” slave “trying to escape from his pursuers—fleeing from slavery” who might be “Worn with fatigue, fear, and hunger” and having fallen “down by the road side.”⁸³

⁸¹ *Report of the Debates*, 2:1792-1793.

⁸² *Report of the Debates*, 2:1790-1791.

⁸³ *Report of the Debates*, 2:1789.

This measure was voted down 95-35, and the margin offers some basis to the observation that 90 percent of Hoosiers would “give a crust of bread and a cup of water to a weary fugitive.”⁸⁴ It further suggests that many of those who supported exclusion did so out of fear of a broad influx of blacks. Individual slaves escaping from their masters evoked sympathy, even from racist Democrats such as Lew Wallace, who believed that “[i]n all nature there was nothing more natural than the yearning for freedom.”⁸⁵

Once approved by the convention, the exclusion provision, separately along with the rest of the constitution, was presented to the voters in a referendum held August 4, 1851. The *Perrysville Eagle*, an independent paper, suggested that many of the arguments “in favor of that clause...do utter violence to the spirit of freedom.” The proponents of exclusion offered arguments of mere “expediency.” The political class, the editors wrote, had “no heart to recognize those rights in others that they demand for themselves.”⁸⁶ These observations were mostly correct. Some leaders advocated exclusion out of explicit bigotry, but others clearly held moral doubts. The *State Sentinel* likened the exclusion of black Americans to the situation of “two brothers” thrown from a shipwreck “clinging to the same plank.” If the plank “is unable to sustain the weight of both, the law of self-preservation, which knows no sympathy, will justify the stronger to break the grasp of the weaker to save himself.” Still, the editor concluded that the races could “never occupy the same domiciles, or stand on the same level of

⁸⁴ quoted in Thornbrough, *Indiana in the Civil War Era*, 50.

⁸⁵ Lew Wallace, *An Autobiography*, 239.

⁸⁶ quoted in the *Daily Journal*, April 30, 1851

equality.” “Amalgamation,” the *Sentinel* insisted, would “degrade the whites” and do little to improve blacks.⁸⁷

Racial anxieties often overrode otherwise humane attitudes. The *New Albany Ledger* typified this when it was “ready to admit” that the exclusion clause was against the “requirements of justice, and is a violation of the Golden Rule.” Still, it had a higher duty to the “law of self-defense and of self-preservation.” It was not the individual or intelligent black American that bothered the editor so much as fears that a massive influx of black populations. They feared that blacks would be driven out of Kentucky, barred from Illinois and possibly excluded from Ohio. If Indiana did not take action, proponents feared Indiana would become the “receptacle” of what it perceived to be the masses of “wandering, worthless, and corrupting negro population of the surrounding States.”⁸⁸ The editors saw little room for reform or improvement. The idea that blacks could achieve equality was “perfectly futile” and the “chains” would be “drawn tighter around them” until they could see that colonization was their only true option.⁸⁹

Advocates of exclusion often coupled it with voluntary colonization. In his advocacy for the scheme, Samuel Parker suggested: “Our hearts bleed because of the thralldom in which our poor black brother is kept.” The Whig congressman explained that even in the North, “through the lanes and highways, the filthy hovels, damp cellars, and dirty sculleries of our own free land, and we will find

⁸⁷ *Indiana State Sentinel*, November 28, 1850 quoted in Donald Carmony, *The Indiana Constitutional Convention of 1850-1851*(Indianapolis: Indiana Supreme Court, 1931), 86.

⁸⁸ *New Albany Ledger*, August 5, 13, 1851.

⁸⁹ *New Albany Ledger*, August 13, 1851.

that poor, forlorn, outcast, downtrodden, disfranchised people still enslaved, and in a desperate thralldom, that would freeze our pure Christian blood.” While Parker expressed sympathy with the plight of black Americans, finding a solution that would allow them to remain in Indiana was out of the question: “None but crazy people think of amalgamation.” As if to underscore his fears of racial mixing, Parker declared, “We will never give our daughters to them in marriage...We are of different races. God has made the difference, and we should act as wise men.”⁹⁰

Popular prejudice was indeed strong. The statewide referendum upheld the exclusion clause by a resounding 84 percent of the voters, which was an even more lopsided outcome than the 70 percent vote in Illinois three years earlier.⁹¹ Although support for exclusion was strong, the law itself was rarely enforced. Few blacks were prosecuted for entering the state. The law also required blacks who were already residing in the state to register, but only a small percentage did this. White Hoosiers, for the most part, ignored these violations of the law.⁹² By 1860, with Indiana’s overall population growing by nearly 400,000, Indiana’s black population grew by only 166. In discouraging blacks from moving into Indiana, the law had served its purpose. It also had one unintended consequence. By discouraging the immigration of blacks, it actually encouraged the free-soil movement later in the decade because Indiana’s small

⁹⁰ *Congressional Globe*, April 23, 1852, 32nd Congress, 1st Session, Appendix, 505.

⁹¹ *Indiana Election Returns 1816-1851*, eds. Dorothy Riker and Gayle Thornbrough (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Bureau, 1960), 390; Charles Zucker, “The Free Negro Question: Race Relations in Ante-Bellum Illinois, 1801-1860” (Northwestern University: Ph.D. Dissertation, 1972), 311.

⁹² Thornbrough, *Indiana in the Civil War Era*, 69-70.

black population reduced fears of amalgamation and of an increase in the number of black residents.

* * * * *

The year following the 1850 crisis was an election year in Indiana for Bright and for all ten of Indiana's members of the House of Representatives. These elections produced two important results. One was to solidify Bright's position within the Indiana Democratic Party and the second was to make acceptance of the compromise package a test of party loyalty.

Bright had spent much time in the fall of 1850 building, and perhaps buying, political support for his reelection. The key to his hold on power was his ability to exert leverage, even if it meant resorting to bribery with members of the state legislature. He was challenged by former Democratic congressman Robert Dale Owen. Early in the campaign, Owen raised charges of legislative vote-buying. A friend of Owen was aboard a steamer in late December discussing the upcoming senate vote with state representative George Graff of Gibson County. Though Owen had represented Gibson County as a member of Congress where an "overwhelming majority" of local Democrats favored the free-soil-leaning representative, the friend was mystified to learn that Graff intended to vote for Bright. Graff explained that he could "not expect any favors from" Owen "in way of appointments." When Owen and a number of his friends confronted Graff for clarification, he informed them that a friend of Bright had offered him a bribe relating to a land speculation deal. Graff continued, "I could make more between

this and Saturday night by voting for Jesse D. Bright than I could by my profession, in a whole year.”⁹³

When Owen made these charges public, there was an immediate excitement. When Joseph Chapman, one of Bright’s “confidential friends,” questioned Graff about his statements, Graff quickly back pedaled. “No Bribe or other improper inducement,” he wrote, “has ever been offered or held out to me by any one—to vote for Mr. Bright, or to use my influence for his election.” Graff now contended merely that “a friend” had convinced him that there would be “political advantages to myself” if he supported Bright.⁹⁴ Soon he changed his story yet again and claimed that Owen had tried to purchase his vote. Eventually, Bright sought out Owen, and the whole affair, they agreed, had been a “misunderstanding.”⁹⁵ Soon Owen wrote to the *State Sentinel*, rather dubiously, explaining that he “could not vouch for the truth of the report” he had earlier offered.⁹⁶ When the Democratic caucus of the legislature met, it nominated Bright for another term. On January 11, 1851, the senator received the votes from all the Democratic members of the legislature as well as five Whigs from the southern Indiana. The five Whig votes may have been obtained through political favors. With wry cynicism, while discussing financial matters, Bright thanked a leading southern Indiana Whig organizer for his “*disinterested* efforts to procure

⁹³ *Indiana State Journal*, January 6, 1851.

⁹⁴ *Indiana State Journal*, January 6, 1851.

⁹⁵ Woollen, *Historical Sketches*, 226-227.

⁹⁶ *Indiana State Sentinel*, January 9, 1851. Jacob Piatt Dunn, *Indiana and Indianans: A History of Aboriginal and Territorial Indiana and the Century of Statehood* (Chicago: The American Historical Society, 1919), 464-465.

my reelection.”⁹⁷ Following his victory, Bright and Robert Owen walked side by side at a dinner celebration.⁹⁸

Later in 1851, Bright and the Democrats prepared for the August congressional races. By this time, both parties largely accepted the “finality” of the compromise measures. In preparation for the Fourth of July celebrations, the *Journal* reprinted the Declaration of Independence. In light of the recent crisis, the Declaration, the *Journal* argued, presented “new beauties” and would “strike the mind with more force than on ordinary times.”⁹⁹

In the campaigns, Bright pressed to make a commitment to the compromise a test of party loyalty. The Democratic platform stated that “any action...that tends to weaken or estrange our high allegiance to its solemn provisions” are to be regarded “as faithless and treasonable.”¹⁰⁰ In the northern region of the state, however, Democrats had difficulty navigating the stronger free-soil inclinations of the electorate.

This proved especially true in the tenth congressional district. Democrats resolved at their district convention to secure for “the people of every State all the rights and privileges guaranteed” by the Constitution. These northern Indiana Democrats offered hints of the conservative refrain “That every friend of the Union should deprecate all efforts, either North or South, tending towards

⁹⁷ Jesse Bright to Allen Hamilton, December 20, 1850 quoted in Van Der Weele, “Jesse David Bright,” 114.

⁹⁸ Murphy, “Jesse D. Bright,” 32.

⁹⁹ *Indiana State Journal*, July 3, 1851

¹⁰⁰ *Democratic Pharos*, July 16, 1851.

dissolution of this glorious Union.”¹⁰¹ The district convention alluded to the fugitive slave provision of the constitution, but made no specific mention of the 1850 act. The nomination of James Borden, a fierce opponent of the Fugitive Slave Act, suggested that Democrats in this district were not entirely ready to surrender their free-soil views. Hoping to maintain party unity, the *Indiana State Sentinel* played a double game of opposing any candidate for Congress who refused to support the compromises, while feigning ignorance of Borden’s position on the issue. This was made somewhat plausible, as neither party made much mention of the sectional issues. While both parties nominated men with solid free-soil credentials, judging by the extensive coverage of the campaign by the local party papers, one would scarcely know that slavery had ever been an issue.¹⁰² For Democrats this overt double game hardly inspired confidence and many stayed home on the day of the election. The Whigs, meanwhile, successfully won in the tenth by playing upon Reverend Brenton’s emphasis on religion and anti-party themes. These issues all seemed to signal a kindred spirit with the free soil element without overtly emphasizing slavery. The *Fort Wayne Times*, the district’s major Whig organ, hoped to appeal to both elements by emblazing on each of their editions the rallying slogan “Liberty and Union.”¹⁰³ After Borden’s defeat, the Democratic state organ was less encumbered as it

¹⁰¹ *Indiana State Sentinel*, June 19, 1851.

¹⁰² *Indiana True Democrat*, July 10, 1851.

¹⁰³ *Fort Wayne Sentinel*, July 12, 19, 1851; *Fort Wayne Times*, June 12, 1851.

charged that Borden had lost because of his “spirit of fanaticism” in opposing the Fugitive Slave Act.¹⁰⁴

A similar concern developed in Indiana’s ninth congressional district. Both candidates had strong free-soil credentials, but in the campaign they moderated their message. Graham Fitch, the Democratic incumbent, tended to sway with the political winds, and was thus a likely ally for Bright. Fitch had previously switched from opposing the Wilmot Proviso to supporting it and thereby had won over free-soil voters. Even though he had voted against the Fugitive Slave Act, Fitch, Bright realized, would be reliable. And indeed Fitch refused to commit in favor of the act’s repeal. As for the containment of slavery, he agreed to enact federal legislation “if such law were necessary,” but he expressed doubts that such laws were needed. Schuyler Colfax, the Whig nominee, was strongly identified with anti-slavery politics, but in the campaign he declared that while he had disliked the Fugitive Slave Act, he now accepted it as a means to preserve national harmony. On the territorial questions, Colfax backed away from his earlier support for the Wilmot Proviso on the grounds that slavery was unlikely to enter the remaining territories. Sectional issues consequently played a minor factor on the stump. In one instance, Fitch briefly attacked Colfax for some of his more egalitarian racial attitudes. This was apparently in violation of an agreement

¹⁰⁴ *Indiana State Sentinel*, August 21, 1851.

between the candidates and Fitch quickly backed off from such attacks. Both parties wanted to reduce sectional tensions.¹⁰⁵ Ultimately, Fitch was reelected.

In the seventh congressional district the Whigs nominated incumbent Edward McGaughey. In this race, however, many Whigs were dissatisfied since McGaughey had voted for the Fugitive Slave Act, and party leaders rightly feared a low Whig turnout. It was one thing to have opposed the unpopular bill and then to accept it, but it was entirely different to have supported it from the start.¹⁰⁶

Democrats nominated John G. Davis, a moderate free-soil-leaning Democrat, who captured the seat.¹⁰⁷

In the eighth congressional district, Democrat Joseph McDonald was denied re-nomination. McDonald had won the nomination in 1849 by pledging to support the Wilmot Proviso, but he then voted for popular sovereignty in New Mexico and for the Fugitive Slave Act. He lost to Daniel Mace, who had earlier declared the Fugitive Slave Act as an “outrage upon the statutes of heaven, and the rights of humanity.” Mace ultimately bowed to state party dictates and accepted the compromises as settled law. The key in the eight district race, as well as many of the others, was to have a candidate who fundamentally opposed strident pro-slavery measures, but who could also present himself as prudent and patriotic enough to accept compromise.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁵ Willard Smith, *Schuyler Colfax: The Changing Fortunes of a Political Idol* (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society, 1952), 41.

¹⁰⁶ *Indianapolis Daily Journal*, July 24, 1851; *The Indiana True Democrat*, July 3, 1851.

¹⁰⁷ *Perrysville Eagle*, April 10, August 11, 1851.

¹⁰⁸ *Daily Indiana State Journal*, July 25, 1851.

In the fourth congressional district, Indiana Democrats repudiated George Julian. This was especially emblematic of the dramatic shift in how the party presented itself. In 1849, party leaders had acquiesced to the nomination of Julian so that they could expand their appeal to free soil elements. As the party moved toward stamping out agitation, repudiating a radical abolitionist was a given. The *Sentinel* expressed mortification that “his views and opinions would be regarded abroad as the sentiments of Indiana,” especially because they made “war on the fugitive slave law, the fugitive slave clause” and indeed nothing less than “the Constitution and the Union itself.”¹⁰⁹ Julian’s speeches, the *Sentinel* noted, talked openly of resisting the fugitive slave law. For Julian, the law itself was a debasement of what the American Union stood for, as it required “us to take side with the oppressor” and “become the miserable flunkies of a God forsaken Southern slave hunter.”¹¹⁰ Julian’s opponent, Samuel Parker, was a moderate free-soil Whig, who accepted the finality of the compromise.¹¹¹ On August 14th, the *Sentinel* ran two pages of stories covering the defeat of Julian, with the second story rather insincerely asserting, “He has fallen, and we have no disposition to triumph.”¹¹²

In southern Indiana, sectional issues were virtually non-existent. River harbor improvements tended to be the greatest subject of interest. Otherwise, there was little to separate the opposing candidates beyond personalities and

¹⁰⁹ *Indiana State Sentinel*, June 12, 1851.

¹¹⁰ *Indiana State Sentinel*, June 12, 1851.

¹¹¹ Julian, *Political Recollections*, 117.

¹¹² *Indiana State Sentinel*, August 14, 1851.

party identification, and Democrats easily swept the first, second and third districts with candidates who were all loyal to Bright.¹¹³

The impact of the 1850 Compromise on the 1851 congressional elections was complex. On one hand, a number of congressmen who sold out to the slave-power by supporting the Fugitive Slave Act, namely northern Indiana Democrat Joseph McDonald and Whig Edward McGaughey, were punished by voters. Democrats Graham Fitch and John Robinson saved themselves by voting against it. On the other hand, both Whigs and Democrats generally accepted the finality of compromise. Several months later when the House decided to sustain the Fugitive Slave Act and “deprecate agitation on the subject,” the entire Indiana House delegation, except northern Indiana Whig Samuel Brenton, voted in favor. In Indiana politics there was a delicate balance between checking the slave-power and resisting anti-slavery agitation. In 1851, Indiana political leaders threaded a small needle. Democrats were also able to maintain their political dominance. Previously they held nine of ten congressional seats. Now they held eight of ten seats. The loss of Indiana’s fourth congressional seat was merely a political quirk. After Democrats jettisoned support for free soil Democrat George Julian, the fourth shifted back to its usual Whig dominance.

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¹¹³ *Evansville Daily Journal*, July 19, August 13, 1851.

Bright was far more active in 1850-1851 than he had been in 1849. Perhaps the sectional crisis had emboldened conservative Democrats. In the aftermath of the 1851 elections it seemed that sectional issues had finally been resolved. Both major parties and their newspaper allies seemed to accept the finality of compromise. The outcome of the exclusion referendum showed that while Indiana was generally opposed to the extension of slavery, it also desired to keep Indiana free of blacks. Certainly most Hoosiers were leery of radical agitators. With Indiana Whigs becoming less competitive and sectional issues held in check by the Compromise of 1850, Bright was in a powerful position. While renegade Democratic newspapers continued to stir popular resentments against the overbearing senator, few ambitious politicians desired to cross him. Bright seemed ready to rule Indiana politics.

*Clarence still breaths; Edward still lives and reigns.
When they are gone, then must I count my gains.
Richard III, Act 1, Scene 1*

Chapter 4

Jesse Bright and the Breakdown of Party Politics: 1852-1854

In the wake of the turmoil of 1850, Indiana's political leaders in both parties came to accept the compromise package in hopes that it would defuse the bitter sectional tensions. The wobbly armistice, however, did not bring an end to the factional division within Indiana's Democratic Party as Jesse Bright continued to battle Joseph Wright for control. The Whigs, meanwhile, struggled to remain a viable northern party and the Free Soil movement seemed to be fading away.

For Bright, the immediate challenge was to control the party delegation to the presidential nominating convention in Baltimore in 1852. The result, he hoped, would be the nomination of a pro-southern Democrat who would sustain the compromise of 1850 and steer patronage to his supporters in Indiana. Such hopes, however, were not to be realized. Instead, the old Missouri Compromise of 1820 was ripped apart, party politics entered a period of upheaval, and the debate over slavery's expansion reemerged in ways that profoundly disrupted American politics.

* * * * *

Following Bright's reelection to the Senate and the near-sweep by the Democrats of Indiana's congressional seats, Bright turned his attention to the 1852 elections. Within the state, the Democrats enjoyed a commanding position. The new constitution had liberalized voting requirements for foreign voters, which made it easier for the state's Democratic-leaning German and Irish immigrants to cast ballots. Meanwhile, the Whigs in Indiana suffered from the disarray of their national party. The state's Free Soil movement in Indiana was weakening and showed no signs of regaining its strength of 1848 and 1849.¹

Within the Democratic Party, Bright continued to fight for control. Erastus Ellis still published the *Statesmen* and Michael Garber the *Courier*. And Governor Joseph Wright had formed an alliance with the *Indiana State Sentinel*. In February of 1852, the *Indiana State Sentinel* said of Wright: "The hearts of the people are with him and for him."² Wright had previously worked with Robert Dale Owen to help the Browns negotiate a merger with the *Statesman*. The Browns turned down the offer claiming they objected to terms that would have made them "second fiddle" in the partnership.³ Still, the *Sentinel* had increasingly demonstrated its independence from Bright. When Bright supplied Whig editors with embarrassing information on Joseph Wright, the *Sentinel* defended the governor.⁴ Such independence angered Bright, who wrote his political lieutenant:

¹ Richard Sewell, *Ballots for Freedom: Antislavery Politics in the United States 1837-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 214-215; Michael Holt, *The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 663-664.

² *Indiana State Sentinel*, February 26, 1852.

³ *Indiana State Sentinel*, January 28, 1852.

⁴ *Indiana State Sentinel*, May 6, 1852.

“You ask me if [I] get the *Sentine*[,] !!! I do !!!”⁵ Wright hoped for a second term as governor, but Bright pleaded: “I do not wish to see...voters...asked to...swallow such as dose a Jos A Wright & Dr. Ellis at our October Elections in 1852.” He added, “For Heavens sake English, do all in your power to save me, and those of our Party...from passing such an ordeal.”⁶

The alliance between the *Sentinel’s* editors and Governor Wright posed another threat to Bright because of their support for Stephen Douglas. In April of 1852, the *Sentinel* reprinted an article that described Douglas as a “gallant young Senator from Illinois” whose “nomination at the Baltimore Convention would be cordially responded to by the people.”⁷ Wright also hoped Douglas would win the Democratic nomination. Bright had other ideas. He and his supporters realized that if Douglas should win the presidency then Joseph Wright would obtain most of the state’s patronage. But Bright also questioned whether Douglas was sufficiently pro-southern.⁸ Douglas, like Bright, was a slave owner through marriage. Douglas’s first wife, Martha, came from a slaveholding family in North Carolina. Upon their marriage, Douglas’s father in-law had offered Douglas a

⁵ Jesse Bright to William English, February 16, 1852, English Family Papers, Indiana Historical Society.

⁶ Jesse Bright to William English, December 16, 1851, “Some Letters of Jesse D. Bright to William H. English (1842-1863)” *Indiana Magazine of History* 30 (December, 1934), 374-375.

⁷ *Indiana State Sentinel*, April 22, 1852; Jesse Bright to William English, December 21, 1850, “Some Letters,” 237-238; Wayne Van Der Weele, “Jesse David Bright: Master Politician from the Old Northwest” (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 1958), 120; William Wesley Woollen, *Biographical and Historical Sketches of Early Indiana* (Indianapolis: Hammond & Co., 1883), 224. As Woollen describes in his sketch of Bright: “One evening in 1852 the editor of a Whig paper was in Mr. Bright’s parlor on invitation, when the door-bell rang, and Mr. Bright said: ‘I must ask of you the favor to step into another room; that is John A. Hendricks at the door; I don’t want him to meet you here; he wants my influence for Congress; I must humor him, but I can not trust him; is uncertain anyhow, and if he is not nominated by the Democrats will leave us and go over to the opposition; if he sees you here he will suspect where you get some of your items about Joe Wright.’”

⁸ Woollen, *Biographical and Historical Sketches*, 419-420.

plantation with slaves. Douglas refused upon the grounds that he was a northerner and was ill-equipped to manage such a property. When his father-in-law died, Martha became owner of the slaves because Douglas, according to the will, “does not desire to own this kind of property.”⁹ Douglas, in other words, preferred to keep his distance from the slave-power.

Bright’s first choice for the nomination was former Oregon Territorial Governor Joseph Lane, a southerner by birth who had served in Indiana politics before moving to Oregon.¹⁰ Realizing that some Democrats who publicly supported Lane privately favored Douglas, Bright carefully picked his delegates to the national convention.¹¹ Bright’s second choice was Lewis Cass, Michigan’s reliably conservative doughface Democrat.¹²

At the Baltimore convention, Bright kept Indiana behind Lane through about thirty ballots, but when Stephen Douglas took the lead, he switched his support to Cass. Eventually, the dark horse candidate Franklin Pierce won the nomination. Pierce’s position on slavery was ambiguous, but by accepting the finality of the compromise, he was able to consolidate support of Democrats from David Wilmot to ardent southern slaveholders.¹³ In the campaign that followed,

⁹ Quoted in Robert Johannsenn, *Stephen A. Douglas* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 209-211.

¹⁰ In 1860 Joseph Lane would receive the nomination for Vice President, alongside John C. Breckenridge, as the southern Democratic nominee.

¹¹ John L. Robinson to unknown, March 28, 1852, quoted in Woollen, *Biographical and Historical Sketches*, 419.

¹² Jesse Bright to William English, May 15, 1852, “Some Letters,” 377.

¹³ Larry Gara, *The Presidency of Franklin Pierce* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1991), 35.

Pierce faced the Whig candidate Winfield Scott and John Hale, the Free-Soil nominee from New Hampshire who was running with Indiana's George Julian.

In the campaign in Indiana, there were three significant developments. One was the extent to which both major parties embraced the compromise. The Whigs, appealing to their "great conservative principles," produced a platform that "received and acquiesced" to the Fugitive Slave Act "in principle and substance." It called for strict enforcement and deprecated "all further agitation" that could endanger the national character of the "Whig party and of the Union." On economic issues, the Whigs, merely endorsed harbor improvements that were "national and general in their character."¹⁴

Speaking for Indiana's Democrats, the *Indiana State Sentinel* accepted the 1850 Compromise as well. Throughout the fall campaign, the paper emblazoned above its editorials Franklin Pierce's proclamation that there was "No North, no South, no East, no West under the Constitution; but a sacred maintenance of the common bond and true devotion to the common brotherhood."¹⁵ The *New Albany Ledger*, a paper Bright sometimes denounced, supported Pierce. It rebuked "the spirit of fanaticism" that existed among "certain New England abolitionists." Pierce, the *Ledger* said, was "sound on the compromise and opposed to slavery agitation."¹⁶

¹⁴ *Indiana State Journal*, June 22, 1852.

¹⁵ *Indiana State Sentinel*, August 19, 26, September 2, 9, 16, 23, 30, October 7, 21, 1852.

¹⁶ *New Albany Ledger*, June 7, 1852.

During the campaign, in fact, rival editors squabbled over which party was the most conservative as they appealed for less “agitation.” John Defrees, the Whig editor of the *Indiana State Journal*, taunted: “The ‘*Sentinel*’ is still in trouble because the Whigs did not see proper to agitate the slavery question at their late State Convention.” The *Sentinel* jested, “Oh no! ‘the Whigs did not see proper to agitate the slavery question at their late State Convention.’ Whilst Defrees, permits the feline ‘critter’ to show only a portion of its body, he takes care not to let the cat quite out of the bag.”¹⁷

A second development was the weakness of the Free Soil movement. In stark contrast to 1848 and 1849, the free soilers had almost no impact on party positions. Andrew Robinson, the Free Soil candidate for governor, won only two percent of the vote, and when he campaigned in Terre Haute, he was mobbed by ruffians when he tried to speak.¹⁸

A third major development was the weakening of the Whig Party. Schuyler Colfax tried to claim that the Indiana Whigs were in the minority because of immigrant voting. He wrote William Seward that had Indiana been composed of the same voters as in the 1848 election, the state “would be safe for Scott.” Instead, the new constitution had “made voters” among German and Irish immigrants who largely voted Democratic.¹⁹ But in reality, the Whigs were in decline. As the election approached, Whig leaders lamented that Scott would

¹⁷ *Indiana State Sentinel*, April 1, 1852

¹⁸ Dale Beeler, “The Election of 1852 in Indiana” *Indiana Magazine of History* 12 (March, 1916), 40-48.

¹⁹ Schuyler Colfax to William Seward, July 24, 1852.

probably be “unsuccessful in our own state.”²⁰ The *Journal*, sensing the hopelessness among its faithful, exhorted Whigs to get to the polls “whatever the result,” but such pleas did not work.²¹ In Indiana, Franklin Pierce outpolled Winfield Scott by nearly 15,000 votes, which was a massive increase from the 5,000 vote margin the Democrats had enjoyed in the 1848 election. The gubernatorial race was even more decisive as Wright won by about 19,000 votes. The Whig *St. Joseph Valley Register* lamented that its home county had lost to the Democrats in a presidential election for the first time. With a bit of ethnic tinged bitterness, the paper lamented that many voters had been “bought, bribed [and] drunk on hard cider or whisky.”²² The Free Soil Party earned a thousand fewer votes going from about 5.3 percent of the vote in 1848 to 3.8 percent in 1852.²³

In the congressional elections, the Democrats gained seats. Because of reapportionment, Indiana now had eleven congressional districts and Democrats won back the northern tenth district and also the newly established eleventh to claim a 10-1 majority. Samuel Parker, of the Quaker dominated fifth district (previously drawn as the fourth), became the state’s lone Whig congressman.

The commanding victories did not heal the state’s internal party divisions. When James Witcomb died in 1852, Wright and Bright both pushed favored candidates for the senate seat. Bright wanted Graham Fitch for the position, but

²⁰ Henry S. Lane to D.P. Holloway (Copy), February 4, 1852. Henry S. Lane Papers, Lilly Library.

²¹ *Indiana State Journal*, October 30, 1852.

²² *St. Joseph Valley Register*, December 2, 1852.

²³ Patrick Riddleberger, *George Washington Julian: Radical Republican* (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Bureau, 1966), 80-89.

Wright pressed for John Pettit. When the legislature voted, Pettit, who was perceived as an opponent of the expansion of slavery, won 54-47. Initially, this seemed a setback for Bright, but Bright soon won Pettit to his side. Working with Bright, Pettit realized, could be profitable, and once in the Senate he became an ultra-doughface Democrat.²⁴

Bright found it more difficult to work with the new presidential administration. With the help of Joseph Lane and others, he pursued a cabinet appointment, but Pierce rebuffed his efforts. In rejecting Bright, Pierce told Lane that he would select his cabinet based on “Acknowledged ability—integrity—peculiar fitness for various positions” as well as “soundness and unity in principle...”²⁵ Shortly afterward Bright wrote to Senator James Buchanan: “your friends have generally favored my claims,” but he also acknowledged “I have never felt that there was much prospect of my having a place offered me...”²⁶ Writing to William English, he said he was content to “dismiss the Cabinet from my mind.”²⁷

Bright may have claimed to have given up on the cabinet post, but he soon developed a strained relationship with Pierce. Bright’s growing ties to doughface northern and hard-line southern Democrats help to explain this. One of his most important allies was James Buchanan, the Pennsylvania doughface

²⁴ Philip Crain, “Governor Jo Wright: Hoosier Conservative” (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 1963), 237-239.

²⁵ Franklin Pierce to Joseph Lane, January 28, 1853, Joseph Lane MSS, Lilly Library.

²⁶ Jesse Bright to James Buchanan, February 6, 1853 quoted in Van Der Weele, “Jesse David Bright,” 137.

²⁷ Jesse Bright to William English, January 25, 1853, William H. English Family Papers, Indiana State Historical Society.

who believed the key to Democratic fortunes was to court the party's southern wing. Bright also maintained close relations with Joseph Lane and John C. Breckinridge, the Kentucky congressman who represented the district containing Bright's farm. Another important ally was northern banker, philanthropist and political financier William Corcoran. Corcoran, who would eventually become a fervent confederate sympathizer, offered Bright financial support, but reading through the senator's letters, one has the sense that Bright's attachment to Corcoran extended beyond the financier's bank account. But Corcoran's wealth was an important asset. In order to boost Breckinridge, Bright introduced him to Corcoran and he assured Breckinridge that Corcoran would supply \$1,000 for his campaign.²⁸

Bright had become particularly close to Mississippi Senator Jefferson Davis. An incident early in Pierce's presidency suggests the extent of Bright's loyalty to Davis. Davis had played an important role in developing Zachary Taylor's report on the Battle of Buena Vista, which glorified the role of a Mississippi rifle company at the expense of the Indiana volunteers. When some Indiana Democrats produced a petition hoping to deny the Mississippi senator a

²⁸ Jesse Bright to William Corcoran, May 5, 1857, September 16, 1853; Jesse Bright to John C. Breckinridge, May 10, 1853, W.W. Corcoran Papers, Library of Congress. Bright was especially thankful for Corcoran's financial assistance when he informed his friend, "I am unwilling to trouble you about my domestic affairs, for I have already been the recipient of favors at your hands that must necessarily go unrequited through life..." Bright also seemed to form an unusually close attachment as he would write his friend, "I consider a residence in Washington, with you absent, stript (sic) of many of those attractions that makes life desirable," though quickly added, "in this sentiment I know that I am joined by all my family." In another letter he expressed, "After much meditation, as is how I can spend the evening most profitably, I have come to the conclusion in writing to absent friends; and of course, I begin with that nearest my heart; which my Children would interpret, means Mr. Corcoran... I leave here tomorrow for my residence in Indiana where I hope to find a line from you, but whether a no—will write again from there. Very Truly & Sincerely Yours, J.D. Bright."

cabinet position, Bright was asked to present the petition to the president. Instead, the Indiana senator pocketed the petition and privately showed it to Davis. This infuriated some Indiana Democrats, but their anger did not stop Bright from maintaining close ties to Davis, who became Secretary of War.²⁹ Bright also formed close ties to Southern Democrats such as the so-called “F Street mess” senators who were led by the hard-line Missourian David Atchison.³⁰

Early in his presidency, Pierce’s political appointments became a contentious issue. With the Whig Party disintegrating, the Democratic Party no longer faced an external foe. As a result, the Democrats found it more difficult to unite their many factions. These divisions were based upon ideology, local rivalries, and sectional issues. The president had hoped to evenly distribute patronage in order to foster unity. Hence he rewarded supporters of the 1850 compromise, free soil Democrats who had opposed it, and hard-line southerners who had also refused to back the compromise. In the South, especially, the free soil appointments gave southern Whigs ammunition to claim Democrats were not reliable defenders of southern rights. As Michael Holt observed, “Pierce’s appointments...were catastrophic; by trying to please everybody, he alienated all factions.”³¹ Bright attacked the administration’s actions by introducing a

²⁹ Wendell Stephenson, *The Political Career of James H. Lane* (Topeka: Kansas State Printing Plant, 1930), 35.

³⁰ Michael Holt, *The Political Crisis of the 1850s* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1978), 142. At the time, David Atchison served as the president pro-tempore of the Senate. Since the vice-president had died earlier, Atchison was second in-line to the presidency. He would also be remembered for calling upon his Border Ruffians to “Kill every Goddamned abolitionist in the Territory.”

³¹ Holt, *The Political Crisis of the 1850s*, 141.

resolution that would have required Senate confirmation for the assistant-secretary of state—thereby limiting presidential control of a major appointment.³²

Bright was especially disdainful of the president's attempt to appease free soil Democrats. This came about through Pierce's handling of the fight within the New York Democratic Party. The state's three factions included the Barnburners who had previously bolted to the Free Soil Party in 1848, the Softs, who welcomed the Barnburners back into the fold, and the Hards, who opposed all reconciliation with former Free Soilers. Pierce tried to curry favor with all three. One of the president's more controversial appointments was John A. Dix of New York as assistant treasurer. The Barnburner had run for governor in 1848 as a Free Soil candidate. There were many Democrats who still smarted over this, believing he had drawn enough votes to hand the election to the Whig Party. Bright was contemptuous that the president would appeal to these disloyal elements.

Almost from the start, Bright was critical of Pierce. He would later refer to him as "weak and imbecile."³³ But Bright's opposition to Pierce cost him important sources of patronage which in turn frustrated his Indiana supporters. One Democrat in central Indiana observed that Bright's early opposition to the administration was "a source of considerable annoyance to his friends in this part

³² Holt, *The Political Crisis of the 1850s*, 142-143; Franklin Pierce: *Young Hickory of the Granite Hills* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1931), 255; Gara, *The Presidency of Franklin Pierce*, 76.

³³ Jesse Bright to Edmund Burk, November 12, 1856 quoted in Gienapp, *The Origins of the Republican Party*, 440.

of the state.”³⁴ While Bright alienated many Democrats, he also had difficulty managing the state organ. As the *Indiana State Sentinel*’s William Brown exerted more independence, Bright privately groaned, “Lord deliver me from the painful operations of sitting with Jos A. Wright...or Bill Brown as Colleagues.” Later he wrote again, “I am distinctly against any negotiations with Bill Brown. *I bid him defiance*. I would not contribute a Dime toward purchasing him out he will find his level soon & have to sell out or be driven out.”³⁵ The *Sentinel* never directly challenged Bright in its pages. Still, anything short of full cooperation did not sit well with the Indiana senator. Bright, as always, refused to back down. Writing to his friend John C. Breckenridge, the senator explained that he was concerned that President Pierce favored Governor Wright and his allies in the distribution of patronage. Bright added that he was headed back to Indiana “to make ‘the crooked strait’ (sic) so far as relates to Indiana, which I intend to do, or die trying. I have got matters about right, I think.”³⁶

* * * * *

Jesse Bright’s battles with the Pierce administration over patronage suggest how sectional issues were reshaping American politics. But as historians have long noted, other issues were also vital to the politics of the early 1850s.

³⁴ Daniel Farley to John G. Davis, January 21, 1854, John G. Davis Papers, Indiana Historical Society.

³⁵ Jesse Bright to William English, November 21, 1852, January 25, 1853, in “Some Letters of Jesse D. Bright to William H. English (1842-1863),” *Indiana Magazine of History* 30, (December, 1934), 379-380.

³⁶ Jesse Bright to John C. Breckenridge, June 5, 1853 quoted in Van Der Weele, *Jesse David Bright*, 139.

Two of these were temperance and the rise of anti-Catholic nativism. Both would play an important role in Indiana politics.

Temperance was a critical issue by the early 1850s. In 1851 Maine had outlawed the sale of alcohol intended for consumption, and temperance supporters in other states followed with similar campaigns. By 1853 it became a popular issue in Indiana. One estimate found that as many as one hundred of Indiana's one hundred and ten newspapers supported temperance in some form.³⁷ Temperance supporters held a statewide convention in August of 1852, and by the autumn of 1853 there were county organizations across the state holding meetings.³⁸

Temperance touched a reformist impulse often associated with religious Whigs, and drew much of its support from them. Among Democrats, however, temperance was a divisive issue. Key constituencies within the party, especially Irish and German voters, resented New England-style laws to impose moral values. Most party leaders opposed stringent liquor laws, but many Democrats, including Joseph Wright, were moderate temperance men. Wright had pledged to support legislation that would regulate the sale of liquor and outlaw drunkenness, but hoping not to offend the pro-liquor elements of the party, he urged the

³⁷ Charles Zimmerman, "The Origin and Rise of the Republican Party in Indiana from 1854 to 1860" *Indiana Magazine of History* 13 (September, 1917), 215. Ultimately both major parties in Indiana would take 1854 platform positions in favor of temperance. While the People's Party took a hard line stand on the issue, the Democrats took a far more modest stance suggesting that while "legislative interposition is necessary and proper," the party was opposed to any kind of legislation that would be invasive and cause destruction to private property.

³⁸ *Fort Wayne Times & People's Press*, October 5, 1853; *Logansport Journal* 8, 1853; Zimmerman, "The Origin and Rise of the Republican Party in Indiana from 1854 to 1860," 214-215.

legislators to avoid “ultra measures.”³⁹ Many Democrats who supported temperance, including Wright, belonged to the Methodist Church. According to one account, “it appeared as if the whole Methodist Church was present at the convention,” and many of these Methodists also happened to be Democrats.⁴⁰ Additionally, the president of the state temperance convention in January 1854 was Edward Ames, who was a Methodist minister and Democrat.

The division over temperance posed a danger to the party. The *Sentinel* warned against the seductive machinations of the party’s enemies who “may love temperance some,” but it warned that this movement “hate[d] Democracy more.”⁴¹ The party organ emphasized that Democratic Governor Wright was a man of personal temperance, even if the party generally opposed stringent temperance legislation.⁴² The party had hoped to resolve the question of temperance laws through a popular vote or through local option laws. True to the ideology of localism, the Democratic legislature had finessed the issues by enacting an 1853 law to prohibit the sale of intoxicating liquor in quantities smaller than a gallon*, but it had also given local communities the option to

³⁹ *Journal of the Indiana State Senate During the Thirty-Seventh Session of the General Assembly Commencing January 6, 1853* (Indianapolis: J.P. Chapman, 1853), 20-21.

⁴⁰ Van Bolt, “Fusion out of Confusion,” 355-356.

⁴¹ *Indiana State Sentinel*, January 12, August 10, 1854.

⁴² *Indiana State Sentinel*, February 2, 1854.

* The theory behind this restriction was that a consumer purchasing a gallon would have to spend more money and more likely utilize it for home personal use, rather than allowing the mischievous poor a quick convenient drink.

exempt themselves from such restrictions. This attempt to straddle the issue failed, however, when the Indiana Supreme Court nullified the law.⁴³

More potent and more divisive was the nativist movement that erupted in the early 1850s. Generally speaking, the movement opposed immigration. Foreigners, the nativists believed, were morally corrupt and lacked American democratic values. Nativists especially opposed Catholic immigrants. Nationally, the movement had become especially strong in 1852 and 1853, and had become known as the Know Nothings. The name came about when members were instructed to proclaim that they knew nothing about the organization when questioned by outsiders. It had grown as a result of concerns about the perceived moral vices of the new immigrants, and the fear that the immigrants would displace workers and bid down wage rates.⁴⁴

These social, economic and political forces shaped the nativist movement in Indiana. Recent immigrants who intended to become citizens were eligible to vote after residing in the state for six months. In 1850, those who were foreign born comprised about 5.6 percent of Indiana's 988,416 residents. By 1860 this percentage had increased to about 8.8 percent of Indiana's 1,350,428 residents, and these voters were overwhelmingly Democratic. Toward the end of 1853 and beginning of 1854, Know Nothing sentiment began grow in Indiana. In February 1854 the first Know Nothing chapter officially formed in Dearborn County. Over

⁴³ Emma Thornbrough, *Indiana in the Civil War: 1850-1880* (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Bureau, 1965), 58.

⁴⁴ Michael Holt, *The Fate of their Country: Politicians, Slavery Extension, and the Coming of the Civil War* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2004), 113-114.

the next couple months, chapters sprang up throughout the state. Contemporary accounts estimate that between May and July 1854 Know Nothing membership grew from 30,000 to 60,000.⁴⁵ Occasionally, nativism was connected to the temperance issue. When the *Fort Wayne Times* took up the temperance cause against “intoxicated rowdies on the streets,” the paper made an explicit connection by observing that “burley Irishmen” ruffians were assaulting temperance advocates.⁴⁶

In Indiana, nativists attitudes were directed largely at Catholic immigrants. Schuyler Colfax’s Whig party organ suggested that “Americanism, rightly interpreted, is in accordance with the genius of our Free Institutions.” The paper rejected “sentiment which makes distinction on account of birth place.” Instead, it was a “wise and beneficent” movement intending to take the foreigner “by the hand” and to “Let them understand our Institutions, become familiar with our laws, before they exercise the rights of ‘citizens.’”⁴⁷ As the *Register* assured its readers, “Principles and character, not birth place” were “the true test of genuine Americanism.”⁴⁸ Yet, Colfax declared, only “Protestant foreigners” could be accepted as true Americans.⁴⁹ Another former Whig paper was more explicitly anti-Catholic. It accused the “papal system” as being a threat to “religious liberty” and “freedom of the individual man to think and act for himself.”⁵⁰

⁴⁵ Carl Brand, “The History of the Know Nothing Party in Indiana,” *Indiana Magazine of History* 18 (March, 1922), 58-61.

⁴⁶ *Fort Wayne Times*, November 9, 1853.

⁴⁷ *St. Joseph Valley Register*, July 26, 1855.

⁴⁸ *St. Joseph Valley Register*, June 21, 1855.

⁴⁹ *St. Joseph Valley Register*, June 21, 1855.

⁵⁰ *Fort Wayne Times*, December 14, 1853.

The number of Democrats the Know Nothing movement drew is unknown. Membership generally remained a secret and few people admitted to being members of the organization. Most of the known members had been former Whigs. William Cumbback, who became a Know Nothing, was among the small number of Democrats known to have joined the movement.⁵¹ Yet as one historian has suggested, most Democrats involved in temperance “likely...seized upon the secret society as a device to ensure a consolidated prohibitionist vote in October.”⁵²

With many Democrats favoring temperance and nativism, these issues threatened to destabilize the party system. John Defrees understood this, and began agitating on behalf of temperance, as this had the added benefit of appealing to the nativists. Rather than openly proclaiming support for any party, the Whig leaders within the temperance movement advised their supporters to vote only for candidates who committed to a strict anti-liquor law.⁵³ The old Whig state organ insisted it would “rather have a Democratic Legislature” that would support a temperance law, “than a Whig Legislature that would not.”⁵⁴ These Whigs also gave Democrats top leadership positions in the hopes of drawing more support away.⁵⁵ Though the movement was largely Whig, the leaders realized that they could not rally voters around the old Whig Party. Previous attempts to court Catholics had soured nativists on the Whig Party. Additionally,

⁵¹ Brand, “The History of the Know Nothing Party in Indiana,” 69.

⁵² Holt, *The Rise and Fall*, 864.

⁵³ *St. Joseph Valley Register*, December 29, 1853, January 5, 1854; *Indiana Morning Journal*, December 21, 1853-January 9, 1854.

⁵⁴ *Indiana Morning Journal*, January 24, 1854.

⁵⁵ Roger H. Van Bolt, “Fusion Out of Confusion, 1854” *Indiana Magazine of History* 49, (Dec. 1953), 355.

the Whig label was an anathema to those with Democratic ties. These leaders hoped to build a new political system under a different party banner.

The Whigs by 1853 were in disarray nationally and in Indiana. During the 1840s, Whig economic policies had become a liability in Indiana. By the early 1850s this was made worse by national trends. Michael Holt has observed that the demand for government investment declined as access to private capital increased. The gold rush of 1849 increased money circulation, and the European revolutions of 1848 diverted European investments to the New World. The American economy was expanding and there was less need for Whiggish economic policies to provide a guiding hand.⁵⁶ Indiana Democrats could argue that the revenue-generating Walker Tariff of 1846 coupled with their hands-off policies had been the key to the economic prosperity.⁵⁷

Even before the 1852 campaign, most Indiana Whigs were pessimistic about their party's future. One prominent Whig asked, "Are not the Whigs of Indiana and the free negroes put...substantially on a par? No virtues in the one can secure them office; the others are ineligible. What is the difference?" The comparison made clear the depths of Whig despair. There was also the Irish problem: every "bog trotting Irishman in the land voting—the Whigs in the minority by more than 10,000...What can I, what can you, what can any Whig hope under such circumstances?"⁵⁸ It was more than just foreigners. Whigs

⁵⁶ Holt, *The Political Crisis of the 1850s*, 110.

⁵⁷ *Indiana State Sentinel*, December 11, 1851.

⁵⁸ David McDonald to Henry S. Lane (Copy), January 17, 1852 Henry S. Lane Papers, Lilly Library

attempted to run a military general campaign as they had in 1840 and 1848, but in 1852 it took more than hard cider and gun powder to excite voters.⁵⁹

Earlier Whig attempts to pull German voters away from the Democratic Party proved just as abortive. The 1852 visit from the liberal Hungarian leader Louis Kossuth had highlighted these difficulties. Kossuth was a foreign political leader who enchanted Hoosiers with his efforts to bring American liberal democratic values to Europe. While nearly all factions in America admired the champion of freedom, German Americans held a special reverence for him.⁶⁰ Whigs had hoped to ingratiate themselves to Germans by expressing support for Kossuth. Indiana Democrats, however, had seized upon Whig uneasiness over foreign entanglement to claim that Whigs did not support Kossuth. Indiana Whigs opposed the Hungarian's call for the United States to support Great Britain in Britain's conflict with Russia. Democrats were able to use this to suggest Whigs were secretly hostile to Kossuth.⁶¹

The new opposition party tried again to appeal to German Protestants. Godlove Orth, an important leader among the Whigs and Hoosier Know Nothings, maintained close ties to his family's German heritage, and often used his language skills to campaign in German communities. Orth also cultivated ties to the German community by lobbying for public documents to be translated into

⁵⁹ *New Albany Ledger*, November 6, 1852.

⁶⁰ *Indiana State Sentinel*, March 18, April 1, 1852. Both Whigs and Democrats at various county conventions, including Vigo, Franklin, Wayne and Marion passed resolutions lauding the visit of the great Hungarian liberal.

⁶¹ *St. Joseph Valley Register*, March 18, 1852.

German.⁶² In spite of these efforts, Irish and German voters remained leery of the social morality preached by the Whigs. In particular, Germans disliked the temperance crusades. Although German immigrants tended to share the anti-slavery sentiments of most Indiana Whigs, they generally found Democratic commitment to social freedom more congenial.

Even without sectional issues, the political situation in the early 1850s was volatile. Party loyalties were challenged by temperance and by nativist issues. These strains, however, were soon supplanted by even more divisive issues.

* * * * *

In 1854 Stephen Douglas ripped apart the American political landscape when he introduced legislation to organize the land west of Missouri and Iowa. Douglas, to be sure, was responding to popular pressures. Many Americans wanted new land to settle, but they could not legally move onto the land until it was organized and parceled for distribution. Settlers, however, were already pushing west regardless of legalities, and this increased the urgency to act. Likewise, railroads desired to construct lines to the Pacific West, but this required land grants and with the territories unorganized land grants could not be distributed. As chairman of the territorial committee, Stephen Douglas believed it was essential to American progress to populate the prairies with white Americans and build a railroad to the Pacific Ocean. While this plan offered potential political

⁶² Gregory Peek, "Upland Southerners, Indiana Political Culture, and the Coming of the Civil War, 1816-1861," (Ph.D. Dissertation: University of Houston, 2010), 213.

and financial advantages to Douglas personally, certainly he viewed this as a means to build a strong, unified nation.⁶³

Organizing the territory was certain to provoke controversy. Attempts in 1853 to pass necessary legislation had failed in the Senate, as the southern-dominated body bottled up the legislation. The Missouri Compromise's prohibition of slavery threatened to kill Douglas's efforts right from the start. Caught between southern demands and northern suspicions of the slave-power, Douglas hoped to straddle the two sides by using language similar to the Compromise of 1850. On January 4, he proposed the creation of the Nebraska territory. The territory "when admitted as a State or States...shall be received into the Union with or without slavery, as their constitutions may prescribe at the time of their admission." Southern hard-liners grew concerned that the bill made no explicit mention of slavery during the territorial stage. Douglas insisted this was merely due to a "clerical error," and on January 10 amended the bill to include that "all questions pertaining to slavery in the Territories, and in the new states to be formed therefrom are to be left to the people residing therein, through their appropriate representatives." Southerners still objected, fearing that if the Missouri Compromise remained in effect until the creation of a legislature, few slaveholders would settle in the new territory. Finally, Douglas again acceded to southern demands, and on January 23 he presented a modified Kansas-Nebraska Act, which declared the Missouri Compromise "inoperative and void." The bill also created two distinct territories. As Michael Holt noted, "Whatever the

⁶³ Freehling, *Road to Disunion: Secessionists at Bay*, 546-547.

reason for this decision, it gave the impression to outraged Northerners that a deal had been cut. Kansas was to be given to slave-holders while Nebraska would remain free soil.”⁶⁴

Pierce had initially supported Douglas’s Nebraska bill as he felt it was in the same tenor as the Compromise of 1850, but the explicit repeal of the Missouri Compromise was a tougher sell. Even Lewis Cass had warned the president that repeal would tear the northern Democracy apart. Douglas, on the other hand, knew that repealing the Missouri Compromise was the only way to gain the southern support essential to passing the bill. The Illinois Senator thus gathered a group of southern congressmen to persuade Pierce to back the new bill. The president then made it a test of party loyalty, ensuring those who supported the bill were rewarded with patronage.⁶⁵

Bright quickly embraced the Nebraska bill. He shared Douglas’s views about economic development and westward expansion, and he had no qualms about appeasing southern interests. In addition, supporting the bill allowed Bright to cultivate ties with both Douglas and the Pierce administration.⁶⁶ Hence, Bright was determined to make Nebraska a test of party loyalty for the Hoosier Democracy. Those who refused to support the Kansas-Nebraska Act would be punished and potentially expelled. Distributing patronage and rewarding

⁶⁴ Holt, *The Fate of their Country*, 102.

⁶⁵ Nichols, *Franklin Pierce*, 320-324.

⁶⁶ Robert Johannsen, *Stephen A. Douglas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 407; George Milton, *The Eve of Conflict* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1934), 214-215. Allan Nevins, *Ordeal of the Union* vol. 2 (New York: Scribner, 1947), 318.

newspaper editors with government advertisements would allow Bright to use Nebraska to enhance his power within the state party.

The Kansas-Nebraska Act immediately injected the debate over slavery's expansion back into American politics. Douglas hoped that it would strengthen the Democratic Party by rallying its members around popular sovereignty in the face of Whig opposition. Instead, it created a firestorm throughout the North. Stephen Douglas would later state, "I could travel from Boston to Chicago by the light of my own effigy."⁶⁷ Most northerners were furious about the repeal of the Missouri Compromise, and the bill had such far reaching consequences that it would turn the northern Democratic Party into a political minority for decades to come.⁶⁸

The Kansas-Nebraska Act divided the Democratic Party in Indiana. Some saw the repeal of the Missouri Compromise as a blatant appeasement of the slave-power that threatened to allow the expansion of slavery. On the other hand, it was backed by the national administration and it embraced the principle of popular sovereignty. The *Indiana State Sentinel*, for instance, feared the bill would encourage agitation, but it also recognized the importance of the legislation to the Pierce administration. Hence, it argued that "postponement" would "only delay agitation." In his support of the administration, Brown defended the repeal of the Missouri Compromise on the grounds that the old measure lacked sectional balance. The policies enacted during the Compromise of 1850

⁶⁷ Johannsen, *Stephen A. Douglas*, 451.

⁶⁸ Holt, *The Fate of their Country*, 109.

had required that popular sovereignty be applied to southern territories, while automatically barring slavery in the North. Brown rationalized that the Nebraska bill would bring parity between the two sections.⁶⁹

The *New Albany Ledger*, a southern Indiana paper that had been ambivalent about the Compromise of 1850, hesitated to support the 1854 bill. Like the *Sentinel*, it did not want a new round of agitation. “If Nebraska is to be organized,” the paper suggested, it preferred “to see the Missouri Compromise applied to it.”⁷⁰ A few weeks later the paper reiterated its opposition on the grounds that it “renders the Missouri Compromise inoperative.”⁷¹ In private, the editor insisted the “wholesale denunciation of the opponents of the bill as ‘abolitionists’ and nigger sympathizers will avail [Douglas] but little, [p]eople are not to be frightened from their propriety by such epithets now-a-days, whatever may have been their effect a few years since.”⁷² *Chapman’s Chanticleer* noted that the popular reaction to Douglas’s bill had excited more reaction among the local populace than the entire 1850 controversy. For Chapman, the “pro-slavery bill” was couched in ambivalent language as the proponents were “too cowardly” and “dishonest to acknowledge” their true designs.⁷³

The uncertainty and divisions persisted. Some claimed Democratic opposition to the bill was widespread. A pro-Nebraska Democrat lamented, “I find

⁶⁹ *Indiana State Sentinel*, February, 9, 13, 1854.

⁷⁰ *New Albany Ledger*, January 17, 1854.

⁷¹ *New Albany Ledger*, February 8, 1854.

⁷² John B. Norman to William H. English, February 8, 1854 quoted in “Fusion out of Confusion,” 363.

⁷³ *Chapman’s Chanticleer*, March 9, 1854.

myself rather isolated on this question.”⁷⁴ Yet another supporter from Rockville claimed the “Dems are *ten to one* for the bill. You may rely upon it, a vote against it would be absolutely fatal to any Democrat.”⁷⁵ A Democrat from the same city highlighted this confusion. A friend informed him that “all the Democrats in his neighborhood are for the bill...” But he added he had talked with another Democrat who “says he is opposed to the bill” along with “all his neighbors.” The writer lamented, “It is damned hard to please all.”⁷⁶ Eventually more Democrats came to accept it. One Democrat believed the Douglas bill “sufficient” to be accepted by both sections of the country.⁷⁷ Another claimed “slavery cannot exist in those territories without a positive act.” If the “principles of nonintervention” were to succeed, these territories would remain free.⁷⁸ Many Democrats, it seems, came to rationalize Kansas-Nebraska as consistent with free-soil principles.

Indiana’s Democratic congressmen were pressed to decide how they would vote on the bill. Ebenezer Chamberlain tried to assure his constituents that “the Indiana delegation in the House at this moment unanimously disapprove of the bill in its present form.”⁷⁹ Even William English, a Bright ally, initially hedged. The southern Indiana representative quibbled over some of the boundary issues,

⁷⁴ John Wadding to John G. Davis, April 24, 1854, John G. Davis Papers, Indiana Historical Society.

⁷⁵ A. Rouche to John G. Davis, March 1, 1854, John G. Davis Papers, Indiana Historical Society.

⁷⁶ Samuel Fisher to John G. Davis, March 4, 1854, John G. Davis Papers, Indiana Historical Society.

⁷⁷ J. Brown to John G. Davis, February 27, 1854, John G. Davis Papers, Indiana Historical Society.

⁷⁸ William Wick to John G. Davis, March 2, 1854, John G. Davis Papers, Indiana Historical Society.

⁷⁹ Quoted in *St. Joseph Valley Register*, March 2, 1854.

but accepted the bill's popular sovereignty provisions. While he was content to see the Missouri Compromise "superseded" by the Nebraska bill, he was opposed to an outright repeal that would make "war upon a lifeless body" by "mutilating the slain."⁸⁰ From his home district, English heard distressing reports that the "popular voice is strong against any & every measure" that would repeal the Missouri Compromise. His correspondent added that "While all seem perfectly willing to abide in good faith by the acts of 1850, & give the South all of its benefits, no one is willing to [have] an additional foot of slave Territory..."⁸¹

Bright wrote English that because he was concerned for his "political positions and future successes," he should not "make any committals against the bill now in Congress." The congressman complied.⁸² While most of Indiana's congressional Democrats initially opposed the measure, the political pressure was heavy. In order to run for office in the 1850s, politicians needed the support of state parties. These organizations controlled the presses and secured the financial resources to run campaigns. Politicians also needed the support of party managers such as Bright. With the national administration and Bright applying pressure, the *Journal* estimated that by March at least four of Indiana's Democratic Congressman were in favor of the bill, and two more were leaning toward it.⁸³ Though many of his supporters hoped he would oppose it, Indiana governor Joseph Wright defended the bill as an "administration measure." Just

⁸⁰ *Congressional Globe*, 33rd Congress, 1st Session, January 31, 1854, 295.

⁸¹ J.B.A. Archer to William H. English, February 23, 1854 quoted in Mildred C. Stoler, "Insurgent Democrats of Indiana and Illinois in 1854" *Indiana Magazine of History* 33 (March, 1937), 5-6.

⁸² *Congressional Globe*, January 31, 1854, 33rd Congress, 1st session, 295; Jesse Bright to William English, January 31, 1854, "Some Letters of Jesse D. Bright to William H. English," *Indiana Magazine of History* 30, December 1934), 381.

⁸³ *Indiana Morning Journal*, March 15, 1854; Van Der Weale, "Jesse David Bright," 143.

as Democrats had survived Polk's opposition to the Wilmot Proviso, he reasoned they would survive the repeal of the Missouri Compromise.⁸⁴

As the Kansas Nebraska Act became tied to the national party, and as Bright began to demand support for it, Indiana's Democratic presses fell into line as well. The *Sentinel* became forceful in its support. Douglas's bill, it claimed, was yet another union-saving compromise like those of 1820 and 1850. These bills, the paper insisted, were intended to calm the "hatred of one section against another" and resume "a fraternal feeling" between the sections.⁸⁵ The *Ledger* had a change of heart as well. It was surely no coincidence that this occurred just as a top Bright lieutenant began directing that advertisements be purchased in the New Albany paper.⁸⁶ While the *Ledger's* editor had previously balked at the idea that racial demagoguery could work, the paper now asserted that a "mongrel whig-abolition ticket" opposed to the bill would "convulse the country with anti-slavery agitation" and "dissolve the Union."⁸⁷ The paper's local opposition editor noticed both the advertisements and the new stand on the Nebraska bill. It mocked: "If you want to know the reason why Mr. Norman 'jumped Jim Crow' on the Nebraska question, just look at the first and second pages of his paper yesterday and you will see a big fat paying Navy advertisement." The *Ledger*

⁸⁴ Fletcher, 276.

⁸⁵ Indiana State Sentinel, January 26, 1854.

⁸⁶ William H. English to Unknown, April 27, 1854, William English Family Papers, Indiana Historical Society.

⁸⁷ *New Albany Ledger*, June 8, 1854.

responded tartly that the advertisement “was sent to us without any solicitation on our part.”⁸⁸

Still, deep divisions remained, and opposition was especially strong in the northern half of the state. Congressman Daniel Mace fiercely opposed it on the grounds that it opened the door for slavery to enter the free territories. He cared little about slaves and their rights, but rather focused on the “enormous outrage upon the rights of the people of the non-slaveholding States.” He continued: “no poor man desires to live in a slave State, and socially and politically occupy no higher position than a slave.”⁸⁹ Andrew Harlan, another northern Indiana Democratic congressman, made the same argument. He objected to seeing “slave labor in competition with the free labor and industry of my own race.”⁹⁰

Others took a different approach to the question of slavery. Speaking on the floor of the Senate, John Pettit adopted a pro-slavery position. Once a free-soil ally of Joseph Wright, Pettit was now a doughface who used extreme arguments to support the Kansas Nebraska Act. Pettit stated that he would not be “constrained” by the “dogma” propagated by Thomas Jefferson and the Declaration of Independence that “all men are created equal.” In his mind the Virginian never intended to suggest that the races had been created equal—even if this was the wording of the document. Such an idea, for Pettit, was simply a “self-evident lie.” Pettit went further to suggest that intellectual differences were

⁸⁸ quoted in *New Albany Ledger*, May 30, 1854.

⁸⁹ *Congressional Globe*, 33rd Congress, 1st session, appendix, 163.

⁹⁰ *Logansport Journal*, March 18, 1854.

not merely between “the white or the black race,” but among superior and inferior whites.⁹¹

Pettit’s outspoken support of southern rights was a political blunder. It was one thing to oppose the idea of racial equality, but quite another to claim that the Declaration of Independence was a “self-evident lie” and to suggest that even white men were inherently unequal. When a fellow senator objected to his remarks, Pettit tried to explain that “if it had said...that they ought to have been created equal, I would have made no issue.”⁹² In supporting the slave-power, Pettit was attacking white man’s democracy. The *Journal* took full advantage. It reprinted of the Declaration of Independence and suggested these were Pettit’s “self-evident lies.”⁹³ The *Sentinel* hoped to shift the focus to the question of “popular sovereignty.” This principle, it argued, was embodied in the Declaration and it was the same principle that “animated our fathers” in their “protracted struggle” against the far off “King of Great Britain.” It was for the cause of popular sovereignty that these “patriots of the revolution freely shed their blood and expended their treasure.”⁹⁴ The debate continued, but Pettit suffered badly from the speech and was passed over for another candidate when he sought re-election in 1855.⁹⁵

⁹¹ *Congressional Globe*, February 20, 1854, 33rd Congress, 1st session, appendix, 214.

⁹² *Congressional Globe*, 33rd Congress, 1st session, appendix, 310.

⁹³ *Indiana Morning Journal*, July 4, 1854.

⁹⁴ *Indiana State Sentinel*, May 25, 1854.

⁹⁵ Charles Zimmerman, “The Origin and Rise of the Republican Party in Indiana from 1854-1860,” *Indiana Magazine of History* 13 (September, 1917), 248. While Pettit failed to advance his political career in Indiana, he was eventually appointed by the Buchanan administration as the Chief Justice of the U.S. Court in the Kansas territory.

The debate became heated with little room for compromise. Democratic leaders were peeved when a number of church organizations opposed the bill. At one point during the convention state convention, former Congressman John L. Robinson blasted Methodist ministers as “3000 Abolitionists sent out of New England” as “non-tax-paying itinerant vagabonds.”⁹⁶ The *Sentinel* blasted them over carrying their political activities “in the name of Almighty God.” The paper suggested the “union of the Church with the affairs of State, has proved a most terrible engine of despotism, in the world. Its history is traced in blood.”⁹⁷ The *Journal* seized upon this language and tied it to the slave power arguments when it suggested Democrats were at war with the clergy and the freedom of individuals of the cloth to “express an opinion.” Democrats “would deny them the exercise of the elective franchise if they had the power.”⁹⁸ The issues of slavery and temperance had driven a number of Methodist church members from the Democratic Party. Chagrined Democrats worried about fraying party loyalties.

Bright was not active in the Senate debates over the Kansas-Nebraska debate. On procedural votes, Pettit consistently voted with Douglas while Bright declined to vote. Perhaps he did so because the bill was hardly in danger in the Senate, where southerners and a sufficient number of northern Democratic senators could carry the day. Bright’s only important vote came on February 6 when Salmon Chase offered an amendment giving the territorial legislature the power to prohibit slavery. Proponents of the Kansas-Nebraska Act opposed this

⁹⁶ Quoted in Van Bolt, “Fusion out of Confusion,” 373.

⁹⁷ *Indiana State Sentinel*, March 30, 1854.

⁹⁸ *Indiana Daily Journal*, March 29, 1854.

amendment believing it would offend the South, and both Bright and Pettit voted against it. Otherwise, Bright failed to vote on the Kansas-Nebraska Act on March 3 and again on March 25, when the Senate passed the House version. On the latter vote, he had already left for Indianapolis to organize the state Democratic convention. He was in Indiana to ensure that the Kansas-Nebraska Act was a test party loyalty.⁹⁹ In spite of Bright's clear stance on the bill, he avoided tough political votes.

Ultimately, the core of Indiana's congressional delegation rallied around the bill, even in the face of its widespread unpopularity. On the final vote, seven Indiana House Democrats voted for it. Only Mace and Harlan, from northern Indiana, did not. As for Ebenezer Chamberlain, the congressman was absent at the time of voting because of "family sickness."¹⁰⁰

Bright was instrumental in winning support for the bill in Indiana, and in doing so he tightened his grip over the party. By allying with the Pierce administration, he gained control of patronage, which he could distribute as he saw fit. Newspapers and politicians who had fallen into line behind the Kansas-Nebraska Act could expect advertising revenue, appointments, nominations and campaign support. Those who refused were brushed aside. By the time of the state Democratic convention on May 24, the few anti-Nebraska Democrats who were willing to challenge party leadership were decidedly unwelcome. When he

⁹⁹ *Congressional Globe*, February, 6, May 25, 1854, 33rd Congress, 1st Session, 343, 1321; Van Der Weele, "Jesse David Bright," 143; Govtrack.us. "Congressional Votes Database," <http://www.govtrack.us/congress/votes#session=86&chamber=1> (accessed May 28, 2013).

¹⁰⁰ *Congressional Globe*, May 22, 1854, 33rd Congress, 1st session, 1254; Charles Zimmerman, "The Origin and Rise of the Republican Party in Indiana from 1854-1860," *Indiana Magazine of History* 13 (September, 1917), 224.

arrived in Indianapolis for the convention he set about finding the right men to place on the various committees, and the right men were those who had endorsed the Kansas Nebraska Act. Most of the delegates, in fact, had supported the Act. When Oliver Morton, an anti-Nebraska Democrat pleaded with him not to force the issue at the convention, Bright reportedly replied that the “Indiana Democracy was strong enough to carry any measure.”¹⁰¹ As president of the convention, Bright controlled its proceedings. Before a committee was supposed to have been officially selected, the convention clerk inadvertently read a list of Bright’s handpicked members. Realizing this blunder, Michael Bright hastily interrupted the speaker to the amusement of the wiser delegates.¹⁰² At least one opposition paper conjured an image of the slaveholder wielding a “lash.”¹⁰³ When it came time to produce a state platform, delegates overwhelmingly approved it and denied that Congress had the power to regulate slavery.¹⁰⁴ The few anti-Nebraska Democrats at the convention felt as if they had been read out of the party. Years later, one would claim he had been taunted with catcalls to the effect “go and equalize yourselves with niggers.”¹⁰⁵

The political shake-up over the Kansas-Nebraska Act continued. A “Free Democratic Convention” met shortly after the state convention and passed its own set of resolutions. In addition to calling the Kansas-Nebraska Act a “crime

¹⁰¹ William Dudley Foulke, *Life of Oliver P. Morton* (Indianapolis: The Bowen Merrill Co., 1899), 38-40

¹⁰² J.A. Wright to J.G. Davis, May 25, 29, 1854, Davis Collection quoted in Crain, “Governor Jo Wright,” 251; *Indianapolis Daily Journal*, May 25, 1854.

¹⁰³ *Indiana Daily Journal*, May 24, 1854; *Chapman’s Chanticleer*, June 1, 1854.

¹⁰⁴ State Platforms, 9.

¹⁰⁵ Foulke, *Life of Oliver P. Morton*, 39.

against God,” the renegades vowed they would not be “white slaves.”¹⁰⁶ One of the most prominent Democrats to leave the party was Oliver Morton. The Wayne County politician was hardly a radical. He was leery of joining any organization that was too closely associated with “Free Soilers” and “abolitionists” whom he believed “imperil[ed] the Union by senseless agitation[.]” The renegade Democrat had hoped to receive the Democratic nomination for the 5th congressional district. He claimed he would only do so if his district produced an anti-Nebraska platform. When the district narrowly voted to support the Kansas Nebraska Act, Morton abandoned the Democratic Party to find a new political home.¹⁰⁷

Bright’s strong-armed tactics made bitter enemies among the bolting Democratic leaders and forced some leaders out of the party. Hendricks County Democrats who opposed the Kansas Nebraska Act denounced the attempt by state party leaders “to bind and sell us to the slave drivers of the South...”¹⁰⁸ As one historian has noted, it was because the state “convention dictated party orthodoxy on the Nebraska question” that many left the party. He further noted, “most of them would have returned to the fold when the election was over had” the party not made the issue a strict party test.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶ *Chapman’s Chanticleer*, June 1, 1854.

¹⁰⁷ Foulke, *Life of Oliver P. Morton*, 38-40. William Foulke, who claimed he attended the state convention with Oliver Morton, insisted the anti-Nebraska Democrats were ejected by resolution. He further claimed that they were greeted cat calls of “Your heads are getting kinkey,” and “Go and equalize yourselves with niggers.” None of the contemporary newspaper accounts allude to this event. Additionally, Austin Brown indicated privately that “Our convention was very harmonious—the only difficulty being a difference of opinion as to the propriety of anything being said on Temperance.” Austin Brown to William English, May 26, 1854, William English Family Papers, Indiana Historical Society.

¹⁰⁸ Quoted in Stoler, “Insurgent Democrats of Indiana and Illinois in 1854,” 16.

¹⁰⁹ Stoler, “Insurgent Democrats of Indiana and Illinois in 1854,” 14.

Anti-Nebraska Democrats met a similar reception at district conventions in the state. Thomas Smith, a former congressman, was expelled from the 4th district convention, and in the northernmost 11th district Andrew Harlan, who had voted against the Douglas bill, was forced to withdraw his name for re-nomination. One anti-Nebraska Democrat who avoided expulsion was Congressman Ebenezer Chamberlain. Although he had spoken against the Kansas-Nebraska Act, he avoided voting on the bill, but he ingratiated himself with Bright by declaring the Kansas Nebraska act “final” and opposing its repeal.¹¹⁰ This saved him from the party purge, but in the general election he found that voters in his district were eager to be rid of him as he lost the election.¹¹¹

* * * * *

The Hoosier Democracy had grown too southern for northern Indiana. For the duration of the 1850s, Democrats were politically dead in that part of the state. Jesse Bright used the Kansas-Nebraska battle to impose his will on the Indiana party, but he did so at a heavy price. Initially, it seemed that the disintegration of the state’s Whig Party would allow Democrats political control of the state. But anger at overturning the Missouri Compromise, at what seemed to be the pernicious influence of the “slave power,” and the heavy handed way in which Bright had demanded unity made possible a sudden fusion of old Whigs, anti-Nebraska Democrats, Free Soilers, and Know Nothings. Old-line Whigs

¹¹⁰ *Indiana State Sentinel*, October 5, 1854.

¹¹¹ Stoler, “Insurgent Democrats of Indiana and Illinois in 1854,” 13-15.

sensed the opportunity for a political revival, but they also knew that the “Whig” label was too unpopular for renegade Democrats.

Leaders such as John Defrees understood the need for delicate maneuvering. He and other Whigs proposed holding a “People’s Convention” to form an anti-Nebraska fusionist party. He suggested to Schuyler Colfax that the call for a convention should be made by former Democrats or otherwise it “would have been set down as a Whig movement.”¹¹² “The Whigs” Godlove Orth schemed, “must control that convention without seeming so.”¹¹³ The *Journal* proposed that three former Democrats and two former Whigs be nominated for state offices. This would “unite all the friends of freedom,” and ensure that there would be less jealousy if nominees were roughly equally drawn from the “principal political parties.”¹¹⁴

The fusionists, saw themselves as a movement supported by those “regardless of former party divisions but resolved to unite now as Freemen.”¹¹⁵ The convention was held on July 13th, the anniversary of the Northwest Ordinance and its promise of “Perpetual Freedom for the North Western States” like Indiana.¹¹⁶ This allowed the party to insist it was following “the path in which our forefathers trod, when the extension of Freedom, and the Restricting and Diminishing of Slavery was the avowed policy and the noble desire of the

¹¹² Quoted in Willard Smith, *Schuyler Colfax, The Changing Fortunes of a Political Idol* (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Bureau, 1952), 50.

¹¹³ Godlove Orth to Schuyler Colfax, July 4, 1854 in “The Letters of Godlove S. Orth, Hoosier American,” *Indiana Magazine of History* 40 (March, 1944), 54.

¹¹⁴ *Indiana Daily Journal*, July 10, 1854.

¹¹⁵ *St. Joseph Valley Register*, June 29, 1853.

¹¹⁶ *St. Joseph Valley Register*, June 29, 1854

Nation.”¹¹⁷ When the convention met in Indianapolis, between eight and ten thousand Hoosiers showed up to observe the proceedings. Many political observers were shocked at the number of Democrats among them.¹¹⁸ Even the *Sentinel* was forced to concede that Democrats formed a sizable number of the delegates.¹¹⁹

Bright’s enemies were vital to the new party. Chairing the convention was none other than Jacob Chapman, who had been the editor of the *State Sentinel* until 1850 when his free-soil editorials ran afoul of Bright.¹²⁰ Next to him, as convention secretary, was Michael Garber, who still bore the wounds from the chisel attack that had nearly killed him.

Containment of slavery was the convention’s unifying theme. The platform observed that the Northwest Ordinance was clear evidence that it was the “fixed policy” of the founders to oppose “the extension of slavery.” The Kansas-Nebraska Act, its platform declared, was a “wanton violation of the faith of the Union” as “a solemn compact,” as it repealed the Missouri compromise. The People’s Convention also offered a gesture to the temperance movement with a resolution stating that intemperance was “a legitimate subject of legislation,” and that legislation should be made to “effectually suppress the traffic in intoxicating liquors as a beverage.” In a reference to earlier attacks by Democrats against churches that had been agitating against the Nebraska bill, the convention

¹¹⁷ *St. Joseph Valley*, July 6, 1854.

¹¹⁸ *Indiana Daily Journal*, July 13, 1854.

¹¹⁹ Stoler, “Insurgent Democrats of Indiana and Illinois in 1854,” 20.

¹²⁰ *St. Joseph Valley Register*, July 20, 1854.

“utterly condemn[ed] the abusive attacks which have recently been made, from various quarters, on the Protestant ministry of the country.”¹²¹

Organizers also worked to gain Know Nothing support, but they did this without formally allying with the nativist movement.¹²² Instead, the Know Nothings nominated a set of candidates who were then in turn nominated by the People’s Party convention. This helped the fusionists gain Know Nothing support without repelling those who were opposed to Know Nothing principles.¹²³

Some Democrats considered joining the fusionists cause, but pulled back. Lew Wallace was one such example. Years later he wrote that he “had grown restive under the dominion of the Southern leaders” over their “arrogant, selfish, and inconsiderate of the feelings” toward the North. In opposing the slave power, the young Hoosier noted that there were “appeals to my manhood and my pride of section.” Yet he was not about to join a revamped Whig Party, nor the “fanatics and wild men” among the abolitionists. “Worse” than some of their peculiar beliefs, was the fact that “while enemies of slavery, they were also conspirators

¹²¹ *State Platforms of the Two Dominant Parties in Indiana, 1850-1900*. ed. W.E. Henry (Indianapolis: Privately Printed, 1902), 10.

¹²² Brand, “The History of the Know Nothing Party in Indiana,” 63.

¹²³ Smith, *Schuyler Colfax*, 54-55; Brand, “The History of the Know Nothing Party in Indiana,” 69-71. *St. Joseph Valley Register*, October 26, 1854; David Turpie, *Sketches of my Own Times* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1903), 153. Richard Sewell, *Ballots for Freedom: Antislavery Politics in the United States: 1837-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 272. Sewell argued that in “Indiana the Know-Nothings seized control of the anti-Nebraska movement from the very beginning.” The implication was that anti-Nebraska movement was secondary to the Know Nothings within the fusionist movement. Yet, it seems clear that the foremost leader of the two movements, Schuyler Colfax, placed the strongest emphasis on the Nebraska issue. Had the Know Nothing movement been the dominating force, certainly it would have received a stronger plank within the fusionist platform. The only thing remotely nativist in the platform were the criticisms of the Democratic Party for their attacks against the “Protestant ministry.” A more likely narrative is that anti-Nebraska fusionists leaders, like Colfax, gained control of the Know Nothing movement. They chose anti-Nebraska candidates loyal to the Know Nothings to ensure cooperation from the nativists.

against the Union.”¹²⁴ So long as he perceived the opponents of slavery, with their seemingly peculiar attitudes toward race, to be the greatest threats to the Union, he would remain a regular Democrat.

Racial prejudice kept some Democrats, such as Wallace, from joining the fusionists, but even so the Democrats were losing support. To counteract the growing opposition, the party tried to recycle the same arguments used against the Wilmot Proviso and for the Compromise of 1850. Slavery, they argued, could not exist without positive law. As the *Bluffton Banner*, a Democratic paper in the northern portion of the state, tried to argue, “The moment a slave-holder sets foot within the Territory of Nebraska and Kansas with his slaves,” they become free. The paper insisted, “Slaves cannot breathe in that Territory. The moment they touch that soil, with the consent of their owner...their shackles fall—they are free men, and no subsequent legislation can bind them to slavery.”¹²⁵ Democrats insisted that anti-Nebraska sentiment was all humbug. The idea of popular sovereignty appealed to their sense of local control.

The turmoil in Kansas undercut Democratic assurances. Democrats might dismiss sectional differences as mere abstraction. They might insist that slavery could not be introduced into Kansas without positive law. Yet as the *Journal* ominously noted, “ten thousand people” from Missouri were “on the move” in a “determined effort” to “introduce slavery into Kansas.” The paper remarked: “And

¹²⁴ Lew Wallace, *An Autobiography*, 241.

¹²⁵ Quoted in the *Indiana Daily Journal*, July 21, 1854.

yet we are told by Northern Dough-faces that slavery won't go into Kansas."¹²⁶ Later it added: "Whether with, or without law, slavery does exist in Kansas now....Slave-holders are there with their property, and determined to remain there with it at the hazard of their lives."¹²⁷

During the fall canvassing, Democrats sensed doom. While many Democrats would loyally support the party-line, even to the point of repealing the Missouri Compromise, others would not go along. Lew Wallace was deflated that at "the turn of every point" he had to offer "a dodge, a denial, a deprecation, or a begging the question."¹²⁸ Norman Eddy, who faced a strong challenge from Colfax, was despondent about his "pretty fix" over his vote for the Kansas-Nebraska Act. It did not help when in arguing for popular sovereignty he was forced to admit that he would allow Utah to enter the union with polygamy.¹²⁹

When all else failed, many hoped to use anti-black sentiment to bludgeon the anti-Nebraska fusionists. The *New Albany Ledger* continued to refer to the fusionist ticket as the "mongrel party."¹³⁰ Democrats also hoped to hold onto immigrant voters by highlighting anti-immigrant elements of the fusionist party. The *New Albany Ledger* continually reminded its readers that the fusionist nominees had been secretly selected at the Know Nothing convention. The

¹²⁶ *Indiana Daily Journal*, July 4, 1854.

¹²⁷ *Indiana Daily Journal*, July 20, 1854.

¹²⁸ Wallace, *An Autobiography*, 237.

¹²⁹ Ovando Hollister, *Life of Schuyler Colfax* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1886), 76. *St. Joseph Valley Register*, October 5, 1854.

¹³⁰ *New Albany Ledger*, August 30, October 12, 23, 24, 1854

secret nature of the convention, the Democrats charged, showed they were the true threat to American democracy.¹³¹

The fusionists, however, blunted this by using anti-Nebraska Democrats in the fall campaign. Oliver Morton ridiculed “the silly cry of Abolitionism raised by the Slaveites to scare partisans into the ranks...” He “exhorted the North to stand together and resist once for all the aggressions of the slave power.” Charles Test, a former Democratic Indiana Secretary of State, “brought down the House” with a speech in which “he cut the Slaveites with a depth and skill considerably enhanced by his acquaintance with them.”¹³²

The fall congressional elections turned into a massive defeat for Democrats across the northern United States. Among northern seats in the House of Representatives, Democrats went from 93 members to 23. In Indiana, Democrats lost eight congressional seats, and won only the two districts bordering on Kentucky. In the legislature, fusionists scored massive victories. Fusionists claimed a commanding 58-41 majority in the lower house. In the Senate, Democrats were able to maintain a slim majority because only about a half of the seats were contested, but fusionists won thirteen of the twenty-two senate elections.¹³³

Racial demagoguery could only go so far to help Democrats. Godlove Orth believed that fusion victory showed “a deep seated feeling in favor of

¹³¹ *New Albany Ledger*, September 22, 1854.

¹³² *Indiana Daily Journal*, September 19, 1854.

¹³³ *Indiana State Journal*, October 17, 1854; *St. Joseph Valley Register*, November 2, 1854.

Human Freedom that demagogues cannot quench.” The head of the Know Nothings in Indiana, however, also attributed victory to nativism, as he remarked that “hereafter none but Americans in principles as well as by birth, shall rule America.”¹³⁴ In the aftermath of defeat, the *Sentinel* diagnosed their party’s problems as a combination of ant-slavery, anti-liquor and anti-immigrant forces combined together. It bitterly lamented that such a coalition had triumphed “over the doctrine that the people of every State and Territory are the proper judges of their own affairs.”¹³⁵ The *Journal* attributed their victory to the exact same elements. One Democrat later summed up the election: “We were beaten on the state ticket, in the legislature, in almost two-thirds of the counties, and if there had been anything else to lose we should have lost it.”¹³⁶

* * * * *

Two years earlier, Indiana Democrats had seemed poised to form a permanent majority. Now, there was fear they could be swept away like the Whig Party. Bright battled for control of the Hoosier Democracy. Whig efforts to facilitate a permanent split among the Democrats altered the party system and unwittingly cleared the way for Bright to solidify power within the Democratic Party. The bolting Democrats allowed him to take control and align it with southern interests. Yet questions remained whether an Indiana Democratic Party could exist for Bright to lead.

¹³⁴ Godlove Orth to Schuyler Colfax, October 14, 1854, “The Letters of Godlove S. Orth,” 55.
¹³⁵ *Indiana State Sentinel*, October 19, 1854.
¹³⁶ David S. Turpie, *Sketches of my Own Times* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1903), 154.
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*O Buckingham, now do I play the touch
To try if thou be current gold indeed
Young Edward lives: think now what I would say...
Why, Buckingham, I say, I would be king,*

-Richard III Act IV Scene II

Chapter 5

Jesse Bright: The Doughface Manager, 1855-1856

In the aftermath of the 1854 congressional elections, the national Democratic Party had emerged severely weakened. Democrats were especially wounded in the North where the party went from holding 93 seats in the House of Representatives to 22 after the 1854 congressional elections.¹ While the Whig Party had practically dissolved, the Democratic Party maintained a core of support in the South, but it had a declining presence in the North. Much of the northern opposition to the extension of slavery began to form around the Republican Party. Composed of northern Whigs, anti-Nebraska Democrats, and free-soilers, the party rallied around the containment of slavery. Democrats faced additional challenges from the Know Nothing movement whose voters continued to agitate about immigrants. As the Democratic Party cultivated ethnic voters, the American Party arose as a powerful source of opposition.

The demoralization of the Democratic Party in the North actually bolstered Jesse Bright's ability to dominate the Indiana party and to assume a major role

¹ Leonard Richards, *The Slave Power: The Free North and Southern Domination, 1780-1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000), 191.

on the national level. He had ruthlessly tightened his grip over his state party through the purging of anti-Nebraska Democrats. Working with like-minded doughface Democrats, Bright sought to align Indiana with the interests of the South. Many Democratic leaders understood that to win the 1856 presidential contest they would need to carry at least a few northern states. Hence Indiana, as a northern border-state, would be a key battleground for Democrats. Many pro-southern Democrats understood that Bright was among the very few northerners who shared their commitment to slavery, and they appreciated his ability to wield control over his state party. Thus, Bright became an important national political manager.

Bright would play a key role in the 1856 presidential contest. He controlled the Democratic Party in one of the nation's most conservative northern states. While most Hoosiers opposed the expansion of slavery, many also detested northern agitators and any hint of racial equality. Bright would exploit the fear of racial equality to unite Indiana's Democrats behind James Buchanan in 1856.

* * * * *

Sectional anger intensified in 1855. Unlike the Compromise of 1850, the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act did not even temporarily quiet agitation. Questions over the fate of slavery in the Kansas territory rested on the outcomes of local elections. During the November elections to select delegates to Congress in 1854, legitimate Kansas voters, originally from Missouri, outnumbered their free-state counterparts. Pro-slavery partisans in Missouri, however, were

unwilling to leave the situation to chance. Gathering a force of about 1700 voters, pro-slavery Missourians crossed the border into Kansas to elect illegally a pro-slavery legislature.

The fraudulent elections of 1854 were not an isolated incident. By the spring of 1855, Missouri settlers still outnumbered northerners among legitimate Kansas voters. Even so, David Atchison, former Missouri Senator and leader of the border ruffians, was still not satisfied. When it came time to elect a territorial legislature in March, the Missourian called for 5,000 illegal voters to swarm the Kansas elections, declaring it “enough to kill every God-damned abolitionist in the Territory.”² Election fraud was so massive that the number of ballots cast was more than twice the territory’s eligible voters. The result was a pro-slavery legislature, and when it convened, it secured slavery for the territory. It also passed laws that stripped away traditional American rights. These laws prevented opponents of slavery from holding office, speaking against the institution or serving on juries in cases involving slavery. Kansans could lose their right to vote if they opposed the Fugitive Slave Act and they faced capital punishment if they actually aided fugitive slaves.³ While Missourians sought to convert Kansas into slave territory, northern free-soilers mobilized to send anti-slavery settlers into the region. Armed with new breech loading rifles supplied by abolitionist leaders, the free soilers in the autumn of 1855 called for new elections. Proponents of slavery, of course, boycotted this new election leading

² Quoted in James McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 147.

³ William Freehling, *Road to Disunion: Secessionists Triumphant* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 75.

to a competing free soil legislature in Topeka. The volatile situation led to small skirmishes of violence that threatened to ignite all out war within the territory.⁴ In May of 1856 the news became grimmer. Under the authority of the Lecompton government, a militia of pro-slavery forces was deputized to arrest members of the Topeka legislature. These forces arrived at Lawrence with little resistance, and proceeded to ransack the city, destroying newspaper offices, homes, stores and a hotel.⁵

Meanwhile, tempers exploded in the halls of Congress. The day after the sack of Lawrence, Massachusetts Senator Charles Sumner was beaten unconscious with a cane by South Carolinian House member Preston Brooks. A few days earlier, Sumner had made his famous “Crimes against Kansas” speech in which he lashed out at slavery and personally attacked southern members of congress with bitter ad hominem. In the wake of Brook’s attack, citizens across the South cheered the beating as redemption to southern honor, fueling deeper suspicions from northerners about the depths of the southern slave-power.⁶

The situation in Kansas caused much consternation for Indiana Democrats. Douglas had intended to end agitation by giving voters control over their locality. Instead, local voters were overwhelmed by the southern slave-power. Far from ending agitation, Kansas had become an actual battle ground. Thus, many Democrats tried to strike a moderate balance. The *Sentinel* had sought to cast blame on both sides for the Kansas troubles. It had conceded the

⁴ McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 147-149.

⁵ McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 149.

⁶ David Herbert Donald, *Charles Sumner and the Coming of the Civil War* (New York: Fawcett Columbine: 1960), 302.

“invasion of Kansas by armed men was an undoubted violation of the letter and spirit of the Nebraska bill.” Still, it had blamed “Emigrant Aid Societies from New England” for rushing “their miserable cargoes to storm the Territory by the force of numbers.” The difference between the two groups, legalities apparently aside, was that “The Missourians were not so smart; they acted the ruffians out and out” while the former acted with “knavery” in winning over Kansas.⁷ In the aftermath of the attack on Charles Sumner, the *New Albany Ledger* acknowledged its vast differences with the Massachusetts Senator, but insisted “when an attempt is made by violence to suppress the liberty of speech, it is not the individual Senator but the State he represents, and indeed every State, which is insulted.”⁸ Among northern states Indiana was particularly resistant to radical anti-slavery rhetoric. Yet, while most Hoosiers cared little for radicals, many also objected to southern fanatics. When Governor Wright spoke of the situation in Kansas, he criticized both sides for enabling a “spirit of propagandism which seems to be increasing in the South and the North...”⁹ Most Indiana Democrats held contempt for all agitators. Indeed, an Indiana Democrat living in Kansas expressed displeasure for “either Party in Kansas.” While he “could not act with the Free State party,” he was at the very least “opposed to Slavery.”¹⁰

Occasionally, an Indiana Democrat openly embraced the slave-power South. Jephtha Garrigus, former member and door keeper of the state legislature, was one Indiana Democrats who had no ambivalence about Bloody Kansas.

⁷ *Indiana State Sentinel*, June 21, 1855

⁸ *New Albany Ledger*, May 23, 1856.

⁹ Quoted in *National Intelligencer*, February 25, 1856.

¹⁰ James Lucas to John G. Davis, December 28, 1857 in “Some Letters to John G. Davis, 1857-1860,” *Indiana Magazine of History* 24 (September, 1928), 202.

Concern about Border Ruffians was a lot of “fuss...about nothing,” Garrigus insisted. He thought it better to “kill off all the black party.”¹¹ Most Indiana Democrats, however, were not so extreme. They disliked blacks and northern fanatics, but most also disliked southern fire-eaters.

Bright, meanwhile, continued to work to control the party machinery and its newspapers. He desired editors who would support southern interests. At the start of 1856, the *Sentinel* was owned by John Norman and John Spann. The former was editor of the *New Albany Ledger*, which during the previous years had been a reluctant supporter of the 1850 compromise and the Kansas Nebraska Act. Spann had previously managed the *Sentinel* when the paper was under the ownership of the free-soil leaning Jacob Chapman. Shortly after taking control of the *Sentinel*, however, Norman found that “he did not like the position of ‘party organ’ and returned to New Albany in about six weeks.”¹² The reason these men no longer cared to control the *Sentinel* is not clear, but Bright’s penchant for pressuring newspaper editors was likely a factor.

By February 1856 the paper was sold to William Larrabee and C.W. Cottom and Larrabee assumed editorial duties. Born and educated in Maine, Larrabee had been a college instructor in Connecticut and New York. In 1841 he had moved to Indiana to teach at Indiana’s Asbury College, and in the early

¹¹ Jephtha Garrigus to John G. Davis, January 11, 18, 1858, John G. Davis Papers, Indiana Historical Society.

¹² William Robeson Holloway, *Indianapolis: A Historical and Statistical Sketch of the Railroad City* (Indianapolis: Indianapolis Journal Print, 1870), 155.

1850s he was appointed state superintendent of education.¹³ His early background does not suggest an especially pro-southern orientation. Nonetheless, he took the paper in a blatantly pro-southern direction. This time Bright finally had a favorable state organ. The fusionist presses teased that Bright had become a “silent partner” as he had “been for some time endeavoring to get hold of the *Sentinel*.” The *Sentinel* insisted, as it usually did during these acquisitions, “Mr. Bright had nothing to do with the change in the *Sentinel*, and knew nothing of it until the whole matter was consummated.” Whatever the details of the purchase, the paper began to assert a pro-southern tone. Instead of condemning pro-slavery activities in Kansas, it denied many of the abuses and suggested that the despotic territorial laws were being “misrepresented.”¹⁴ As the situation grew worse, its arguments became strained. The *Sentinel* printed a letter from a correspondent named “Hoosier” explaining the situation on the ground with disjointed explanations. First, the paper sought to sow doubts about the accuracy of the reports suggesting its readers “sift such news thoroughly” as “perhaps...not one-tenth part” of the stories out of Kansas were accurate. The Democratic partisan also suggested that “three-fourths” of Lawrence residents “wanted to resist, but their leaders overruled them” and allowed the attack hoping to provoke sympathy and gain political advantage.¹⁵ While Wright and many of his supporters criticized both radical northerners and southern fire-eaters, Bright and his allies desired to keep the focus on northern agitators.

¹³ Carl Kaestle, *Pillars of the Republic: Common Schools and American Society, 1780-1860* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1983), 188.

¹⁴ *Indiana State Sentinel*, February 28, 1856.

¹⁵ *Indiana State Sentinel*, June 5, 1856.

Additionally, the *Sentinel* now defended the slave-power in other ways. When a convention in Virginia resolved to engage in a partial boycott of northern industry, the *Sentinel* opposed it as “impractical,” but sympathized that “the Abolition agitation, so rife in the North, and the insults heaped on the South, and on Southern institutions by Northern fanatics, has tended to induce, among the Southern people, a strong disposition to non-intercourse...with the North.”¹⁶ On the day of the Sumner attack, the *Sentinel* defended the “flogging” of A.G. Patrick, an anti-slavery activist in Kansas. It was against the “true interests” of the nation for an anti-slavery agitator to indulge “very freely in his remarks.” The *Sentinel* remarked that had Patrick “governed his tongue, and used respectful language, his hide would not have felt the indignant lash of an insulted community.”¹⁷ Under the new editors, the *Sentinel* was committed to defending the use of the “lash” to support southern interests.

As the situation in Kansas unfolded, Indiana was filled with political uncertainties. The old party system was dissolving, and few knew for certain what would emerge in its place. Democrats, at times, attempted to make appeals for party unity. Now party leaders began to denounce the habit of “friends who ‘smile and smile,’ and yet carry daggers under their cloaks.”¹⁸ Bright even offered friendly letters of support to Stephen Douglas, and he went so far as to join the

¹⁶ *Indiana State Sentinel*, March 6, 1856.

¹⁷ *Indiana State Sentinel*, May 22, 1856.

¹⁸ *Indiana State Sentinel*, October 27, 1854.

Little Giant in a Minnesota land speculation venture.¹⁹ Bright and the Hoosier Democracy also found common cause against their anti-Nebraska foes.

The first test of party strength came with the selection for Bright's junior partner in the Senate. With Pettit's term expiring, Indiana Democrats faced the possibility of losing the seat. The 1854 elections for the state legislature had been abysmal for the Indiana Democracy, and they were lucky to hold a slim majority in the state senate. Typically, when electing a United States senator, the Indiana legislature had met in joint session. This would have given the fusionists a twelve-man majority. This practice, however, was not a constitutionally mandated procedure. Consequently, Indiana Democrats in the Senate insisted on separate votes. Democrats hoped to gain support of old Whiggish elements by throwing their support behind Isaac Blackford, a former state Supreme Court justice who had made inroads with the more conservative Whigs. Fusionists, meanwhile, were divided over their candidates. Hence, the legislature adjourned without selecting a senator.²⁰

In the meantime, it remained unclear if the opposition forces to the Democratic Party could coalesce into a single party. The American Party, also known as the Know Nothings, emphasized nativist issues. A major advantage for this faction was their ability to gain southern supporters and build a national coalition. But the situation in Kansas had intensified sectional issues. The

¹⁹ Van Der Weele, "Jesse David Bright," 159-160.

²⁰ *St. Joseph Valley Register*, March 8, 1855; Zimmerman, "The Origin and Rise of the Republican Party in Indiana," 248; "The Letters of Godlove S. Orth, Hoosier American," 60-65; Peek, "Upland Southerners," 217-218.

sacking of Lawrence and the brutal beating of a United States Senator at the hands of the slave-power proved decisive events and ensured that the newly formed Republican Party, which was dedicated to opposing slavery's westward extension, would become the prime opposition party in the North.²¹

In Indiana this required a careful balance. Expressing the predominant racial and sectional outlook of southern Indiana, one Indiana scholar has noted, "A careful investigation of contemporary newspapers and letters reveals that both major parties south of the National Road frequently opposed the spread of slavery into the territories, disliked association with the Negro...and sought to preserve the Union."²² Indiana fusionists understood the power of this. In order to appeal broadly to Hoosier opinion, they sought to frame their opposition to the slave-power as a defense of white man's democracy. In a speech before Congress, Colfax displayed an iron ball to represent the shackles used against whites in Kansas who violated the territory's peculiar pro-slavery laws. These laws prohibited freedom of expression, and punished transgressions with involuntary servitude. Kansas had been so infected by the slave power that it had established a system of "WHITE SLAVERY" among those who dared to speak out for freedom.²³ White man's democracy was the issue at stake, and Schuyler Colfax often emphasized the "monstrous outrages in Kansas" against white voters.²⁴

²¹ Holt, *Fate of their Country*, 117-118.

²² Elmer Elbert, "Southern Indiana Politics on the Eve of the Civil War" (Indiana University: PhD. diss., 1967), vii.

²³ *Congressional Globe*, 34th Congress, 1st session, appendix, 641-645.

²⁴ Schuyler Colfax to William Cumbback, April 16, 1855, William Cumbback MSS, Lilly Library.

* * * * *

As the 1856 presidential election neared, the old party system was dead. The Democratic Party had survived, but in place of the Whig Party, the Republicans stood squarely against the expansion of slavery, while the American Party was the vehicle for the Know Nothing movement. Because it was the only opposition party in the South, the American Party refused to take a decisive stand on the slavery fight.²⁵ In Indiana, the People's Party continued to function, but most of these fusionists would support the Republican Party in the presidential election. Nativists in southern Indiana chose to support the American Party.

In the 1856 campaign, Jesse Bright emerged as a major political operator. He worked at the national level to nominate Pennsylvanian James Buchanan, and he managed the Indiana campaigns to win electoral votes in the November election. In 1856, northern Democrats had to strike a balance between the southern wing of the party, while assuring northern constituencies that the party was not in the clutches of the slave-power. Crucial to this strategy was the need to carry northern border-state such as Indiana.

There were three main contenders for the nomination in 1856. Franklin Pierce hoped for a second term, but he had proven weak and vacillating, and Bright did not want him. While Pierce had ultimately aligned with southern interests, Bright knew that his involvement in the Kansas Nebraska Act made him

²⁵ Anbinder, *Nativism and Slavery*, 220-221; Holt, *The Fate of their Country*, 117-118.

un-electable in the North. Stephen Douglas also sought the nomination and although he had doughface tendencies, Bright disliked and distrusted him. He was too closely aligned with Bright's enemies in Indiana, and he was a crafty midwestern political fighter whose political machinations sometimes conflicted with Bright's. The Senate was not big enough for these two personalities, and certainly Bright did not wish to see Douglas controlling presidential patronage. Finally, there was James Buchanan, who was a reliable doughface. Additionally, he had served as a diplomat abroad during the Kansas-Nebraska Act, and hence while he had defended the act, he had not been involved in its passage.

Throughout that spring, the Indiana boss worked behind the scenes to build support for James Buchanan. He was joined by John Slidell of Louisiana. Slidell had been disappointed by the quality of Buchanan's managers until he learned of Bright's support. He and other southern Democrats realized that they needed to find a candidate who was aligned with their interests, but who could appeal to enough northern voters to win some of the northern border-states.²⁶ In addition to Bright and Slidell, Judah Benjamin, also of Louisiana, and James Bayard of Delaware worked for Buchanan. All of these men dabbled in financial pursuits and were closely tied to William Corcoran. As one historian has noted, these four senators were "well endowed with the talents necessary for winning and holding power in politics" and were "masters...in the operation of political machinery."²⁷ Eventually, the four men running Buchanan's convention campaign

²⁶ Nichols, *The Disruption of American Democracy*, 13.

²⁷ Nichols, *The Disruption of American Democracy*, 4-5.

would identify with the Confederacy, but in 1856, they constituted a formidable team of skilled and ruthless political managers.

The Buchaneers, as the Buchanan men were called, succeeded first in selecting a pro-Buchanan chairman of the convention. They then passed a platform endorsing popular sovereignty in order to conciliate Douglas supporters. Bright used his skills in dispensing patronage to peel away some of the Douglas backers. Other delegates were reminded that Douglas was young and would be a viable candidate in 1860. They also exploited factional divisions in various state parties to damage Pierce and Douglas. Through all of the balloting, Buchanan held at least a plurality of votes, but he held only a simple majority when Pierce withdrew and threw his delegates to Douglas. Finally, Douglas's managers conceded the nomination to Buchanan but only after receiving pledges to support Douglas in 1860.²⁸

Bright had played a critical role in denying Douglas the nomination. A major strategy of the Douglas campaign had been to align the old northwest behind the Little Giant. But Lewis Cass denied Douglas Michigan's votes, and Bright did the same with Indiana. Although Douglas was very likely the favored candidate among most of Indiana's Democrats, Bright controlled the state machinery and lined up delegates for Buchanan. At the state convention, he had played a double-game against Douglas by pledging to have the Indiana delegation cast a token first round vote for himself, and then align with Douglas.

²⁸ James Rawley, *Race & Politics* (New York: J.B. Lippincott Co., 1969), 138; Nichols, *The Disruption of American Democracy*, 15-17.

Pro-Douglas Democrats within the state had grown concerned when Bright's men had avoided explicit references to Douglas at the state convention. These Democrats were generally in the pro-Wright camp. They were either mildly free-soil in sentiment, or, at the very least, leery of the slave-power and they saw popular sovereignty as a desirable compromise. They knew Bright, and they suspected that he intended to support Buchanan. Austin Brown had rightfully warned Douglas that Bright was not to be trusted.²⁹ Indeed, Douglas's advisors sent numerous reports indicating Bright intended to betray him to Buchanan.³⁰

At the national convention in Cincinnati, Bright carried the Indiana delegation for Buchanan by 16 voters to 10. As the editor of the *State Sentinel* slyly observed, "it is well known that my warmest feelings are with Douglas, but I shall feel no mortification if Mr. Buchanan shall be the choice of the Convention...Indiana is governed by principles instead of preferences for men."³¹ Bright sent a communication to Douglas that Indiana was for Buchanan "from beginning to end." A Bright loyalist insisted that "39 out of every 40" Hoosiers backed Buchanan's candidacy.³² In truth, however, few found such a statement credible. Some Illinois Douglas men were astonished by the intensity of feelings when their train stopped in Indiana and they heard: "Damn Buchanan, hurrah for

²⁹ State Platforms, 12; William Lynch, "Indiana in the Douglas-Buchanan Contest of 1856," *Indiana Magazine of History* (June, 1934), 123-124, Philip Crain, "Governor Jo Wright: Hoosier Conservative" (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 1963), 273.

³⁰ Johannsen, *Stephen A. Douglas*, 509-513.

³¹ *Indiana State Sentinel*, June 2, 1856.

³² Lynch, "Indiana in the Douglas-Buchanan Contest of 1856," 129; Van Der Weale, "Jesse David Bright," 176; John Pettit to S.A. Douglas, June 10, 1856 quoted in Crain, "Governor Jo Wright," 274.

Douglas.”³³ As Phillip Crain has noted, “Douglas might have had the people, but Bright had the organization...”³⁴ As one of Wright’s backers noted, the “advocates of slavery” had turned “Honorable men” to support Bright with the most “base and dishonorable acts to obtain office and money.”³⁵ Still, with Buchanan the nominee, the Indiana party could unite against the newly formed Republican Party.

Though Bright had betrayed Douglas at the Cincinnati convention, they were still Democrats with a common purpose: beating the Republicans. That summer Bright and Douglas visited a number of times while in Washington to coordinate the campaign. During that time Bright may have hoped to take the sting out of Douglas’s defeat by introducing him to Adele Curtis, and recommending her as a suitable wife. Douglas agreed, and they were soon married. It did not cause Douglas, however, to forget the events in Cincinnati.³⁶

In Indiana in 1856, the People’s Party fielded its own slate of candidates for the state elections in October, but supported John C. Fremont, the Republican presidential nominee, in November. In addition, the American Party

³³ Isaac R. Diller to S.A. Douglas, June 10, 1856 quoted in Lynch, “Indiana in the Douglas-Buchanan Contest of 1856,” 132.

³⁴ Crain, “Governor Jo Wright,” 276.

³⁵ John Hunt to Joseph Wright, August 6, 1856, Joseph Wright Papers, Indiana State Library. While most of Wright’s supporters had backed Douglas, Wright’s position is harder to determine. He had sent letters to Buchanan indicating his support for the Pennsylvanian. The letters, marked private, suggest Wright believed Buchanan the most electable candidate in the general election. Yet, Wright also sent letters to Douglas indicating support for the Little Giant. Ironically, Wright himself was likely concerned about future office. Wright’s gubernatorial term was coming to an end and he hoped to either enter the Senate, receive a vice-presidential nomination, or a presidential cabinet position. Not knowing the potential nominee, Wright was likely hoping to please both candidates. Joseph Wright to James Buchanan, January 14, May 26, 1856, James Buchanan Papers (microfilm), University of Kentucky Library; Crain, “Governor Jo Wright,” 264-265.

³⁶ Johannsen, *Stephen A. Douglas*, 540.

operated separately as a smaller third party hoping to elect Millard Fillmore. Both parties competed throughout the northern United States. Bright worried about Republican strength in the north and in Indiana. He pleaded with vice-presidential candidate John C. Breckinridge to campaign in Indiana, noting “If we do not give Buchanan and yourself Indiana, you will not get a State North of [the] Masons and Dixons Line...”³⁷ For the Democrats to lose Indiana, he thought, would mean losing the election to an anti-slavery party. The emotional fervor of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, however, had lost some of its potency over time. Democrats also had an advantage since their opponents were divided between anti-slavery and nativist factions. Many of the old-line Whigs, particularly in southern Indiana, remained leery of joining the Republicans. Democrats needed to assert that they defended the rights of white men while avoiding association with the slave-power.

In the campaign, Bright exploited racial issues to pillory the opposition. Democrats insisted that northern “black Republicans” wished to impose racial egalitarianism on the nation. The Republican/People’s Party warned of an encroaching slave-power bent on destroying white man’s liberty. Democrats cast their opponents as radical agitators. They paid a black man to follow the People’s Party gubernatorial candidate around the state so as to pretend to be a spokesman for the “black Republican” cause.³⁸ Democrats rarely referred to their opponents simply as Republicans. They usually attached racial epithet. Additionally, one Republican commentator claimed, a Democratic stump speaker

³⁷ Jesse Bright to John C. Breckinridge, July 26, 1856 quoted in Van Der Weale, 184.

³⁸ *St. Joseph Valley Register*, June 11, 1857

“made a speech here at the same time in which he said Abolition 642 times...disunion 350 times, sectional 219 times and National Democrats 480 times.” Such “a speech of about two hours...is a fair sample of the old line speeches we have in this section.”³⁹ Even in northern Indiana, the *St. Joseph County Forum*, a local Democratic publication, insisted that it belonged to the party of freedom for “the white man,” while castigating its opposition in crude racial terms.⁴⁰

The Democratic campaign in Indiana mirrored the party’s national efforts. The Democrats knew they would carry most of the southern states. They understood that the upper northern states would likely go to Fremont. In concentrating on lower northern and border-states like Pennsylvania, Indiana, Illinois, New Jersey and Maryland, they focused on a conservative message. Republicans, they claimed, were agitators who would provoke disunion. They printed quotes from Republicans such as William Seward (New York) who proclaimed there was a “higher law” than the Constitution, and Joshua Giddings (Ohio) who advocated a “servile insurrection” and “war of extermination against” southern slaveholders.⁴¹ Buchanan, meanwhile, was presented as a reasonable northern Democrat who would uphold the principles of popular sovereignty.

Recognizing the dangers of appearing as racial egalitarians, Indiana fusionists sought to assuage voters that they were merely for protecting white-

³⁹ Samuel Harlan to Henry S. Lane, September 13, 1856 (copy), Henry S. Lane Papers, Lilly Library.

⁴⁰ Quoted in *St. Joseph Valley Register*, August 7, 1856.

⁴¹ Quoted in Roy Nichols and Philip Klein, “Election of 1856” in Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., ed., *History of American Presidential Elections* (New York: Chelsea House, 1973), 2:1028.

man's democracy. They did this, in part, by trying to minimize the presence of radicals like George Julian.⁴² They also made racist arguments designed to appeal to Indiana voters. The *Rushville Republican*, a central Indiana publication, framed their agenda as one to preserve the territories "for the use of the white man" against the "Negro Oligarchy."⁴³ The *St. Joseph Valley Register* defended itself with its own racial appeals. Colfax's paper offered a hypothetical conversation between a Republican and Democrat arguing over which party properly deserved designation as the "nigger party." The imaginary Republican assailed his Democratic counterpart as they wanted to allow "slaves—the worst class of niggers," to come "into possession of every foot of territory that properly belongs to the free white citizens of the country."⁴⁴ As a congressman running for reelection, Colfax willingly employed racial tactics. Although he had previously campaigned for the rights of black Americans, he was quick to realize that fusionists were vulnerable to Democrats on the issue. Hence he asserted that "Republican institutions" were at stake not "so much" on the question of "whether black men shall be slaves, *but whether white men shall be free.*"⁴⁵

The People's Party, meanwhile, sought to cast the Hoosier Democracy as a party caught in the clutches of the slave-power. In particular, it took aim at Bright. During the campaign Bright, let slip that the election was a "contest between the North and South." The *Indiana State Journal* suggested that "Mr.

⁴² Julian, *Political Recollections*, 154.

⁴³ *Rushville Republican* quoted in *St. Joseph Valley Register*, July 24, 1856.

⁴⁴ *St. Joseph Valley Register*, August 14, 1856.

⁴⁵ *St. Joseph Valley Register*, July 31, 1856.

Bright is making the admission...that he and his whole party are for *Slavery*.”⁴⁶

The *State Sentinel* insisted that Bright “said nothing of this kind.” Instead, he “spoke of the aims and purposes of the Abolitionists—of their sectional views and acts... sectional platform and sectional candidates” and “so far as they were concerned...the present contest was one between the North and South.”⁴⁷

Whatever Bright intended to say, his association with southern slaveholding made him a polarizing figure. He gave Republicans fodder for suggesting Democrats were pro-slavery. As the *St. Joseph Valley Register* charged:

Jesse D. Bright is a Slaveholder; he voted to repeal the Missouri Compromise; he has voted in every instance with the South in favor of the interests of the slaveholder and against the rights and interests of the free white laborer of the North; he voted against the administration of Kansas as a *Free State*; he voted to sustain the Border Ruffians in the invasions of Kansas, in their carrying the elections by fraud and violence, and in their human warfare upon the Free State settlers; he voted against the repeal of the infamous laws of the fraudulent Missouri-Kansas Legislature; he voted against supplies for the Army unless that Army could be used to enforce those pretended laws.

It further noted that Bright’s close associate was Graham N. Fitch. “If elected” the paper warned, he “will also be a willing tool in the hands of the Slave Power.”⁴⁸ While Bright had actually avoided most of the votes to enact the Kansas Nebraska Act, during the summer of 1856 Bright voted with most northern dough-face and southern senators to sustain pro-slavery measures in Kansas.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ *Indiana State Journal*, September 4, 1856.

⁴⁷ *Indiana State Sentinel*, September 6, 1856.

⁴⁸ *St. Joseph Valley Register*, October 9, 1856.

⁴⁹ Govtrack.us. “Congressional Votes Database,” <http://www.govtrack.us/congress/votes#session=86&chamber=1> (accessed May 28, 2013).

Democrats, meanwhile, were careful to deny these associations. The *New Albany Ledger* insisted that the “Abolitionist demagogues” were lying when they claimed the Democrats “a slavery-extension party.” It denied the party had any connection with the “wild ravings” of the *Charleston Mercury*, the ultra pro-slavery South Carolina paper. The paper further insisted that the Kansas-Nebraska bill was never intended to introduce slavery into Kansas. It practically excluded slavery while adhering to the “principle adopted by Congress in the compromise measures of 1850.”⁵⁰

One advantage for Bright and his party was the divided state of the opposition, which could not even unite under a single name. In 1854 they had run as the People’s Party, colloquially known as the fusionists. In 1856 the People’s Party ran a slate of state-wide candidates with Oliver Morton the candidate for governor. Morton was a former Democrat who had bolted the party in 1854 over the Kansas-Nebraska Act. For the presidential election, the opposition threw their support behind that Republican Party, but they refused to identify themselves as Republicans. Additionally, a smaller contingent of American Know Nothings, uncomfortable with the anti-slavery leanings of the Republican Party, formed yet another party during the presidential contest.⁵¹

⁵⁰ *New Albany Ledger*, September 10, 1856.

⁵¹ Brand, “History of the Know Nothing Party in Indiana,” 277-279. The three delegates who originally bolted were editors of the *Terre Haute Express*, *Vincennes Gazette*, and *Jeffersonville Republican*. The four others were the *Fort Wayne Times*, *Greencastle Banner*, *Rockford Herald* and *Worthington Times*. Of the papers that remained loyal to Fillmore, they were located in the cities of New Albany, Corydon, Evansville, Paoli, Washington, Rising Sun, Vevay, Newburg and Terre Haute.

Generally, however, nativism was on the decline. As the situation in Kansas deteriorated, the nativist movement lost its momentum. One Republican explained: "Neither the Pope nor the foreigners ever can govern the country or endanger its liberties...but the slave-breeders and slave-traders do govern it..."⁵² With the attention of voters focused on slavery rather than temperance and nativism, fusionists hoped to appeal to the anti-slavery impulses of Democratic voters such as German immigrants. One Indiana fusionist strategist hoped to distribute copies of Charles Sumner speeches in German.⁵³ It was estimated that Indiana fusionists had gathered 2,000 of these anti-slavery pamphlets.⁵⁴

The Hoosier Know Nothings generally appealed to conservative Whig elements leery of the Republican Party and their People's Party allies. Indiana Americans portrayed themselves as the middle ground between the supposed abolitionists of the People's/Republican Party and the pro-slavery fringes of the Democratic Party. Richard Thompson, conservative leader of the Know Nothings, blasted both major parties for "weakening the bands that bound together in one common brotherhood, this union of states."⁵⁵ Another factor that helped strengthen the American Party in Indiana was the rumor the Fremont was a Catholic. As one fusionist leader lamented, "The infernal Catholic lie prejudices [many] against Col. Fremont, and it will be hard to get them to vote for him."⁵⁶

⁵² Quoted in Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, and Free Men*, 234.

⁵³ J.D. Howland to William Cumbback, June 7, 1856 (copy), William Cumbback MSS, Lilly Library.

⁵⁴ Zimmerman, "The Origin and Rise of the Republican Party in Indiana," 251.

⁵⁵ *Terre Haute Express*, July 16, 1856 quoted in Roll, 151.

⁵⁶ Quote in Tyler Anbinder, *Nativism and Slavery: The Northern Know Nothings and the Politics of the 1850s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 241.

Bright hoped to exacerbate the divided nature of the opposition by encouraging Millard Fillmore's American Party to draw conservative Whig votes away from the fusionists/Republicans. Concerned that "The Fillmore party in Ind[iana] is rapidly being absorbed by the Fremont & Abolition party," Bright supported Indiana American Party leader Richard Thompson in a legal case against the federal government.⁵⁷ The case stemmed from Thompson's role representing a group of American Indians who had received a favorable judgment for damages caused by their relocation. A disruption in payment to the natives from the government meant the old line Whig could not collect on his fee. During the summer of 1856, Bright took an unusual interest in Thompson's personal difficulties by speaking of the issue on the floor of the Senate a number of times.⁵⁸ This produced speculation that Bright had pursued a financial settlement for Thompson in exchange for Thompson campaigning on behalf of Fillmore, which would divide the Democratic opposition. The speculation was likely valid. Thompson was usually a conservative opponent of slavery, but in the 1856 election he noted: "[A] planter has the same right to occupy the Territories with his slaves" as "the northern farmer has with his horses."⁵⁹ On why he took an interest in helping Thompson, Bright insisted, "I [have] never aided a man from purer motives than I have Thompson in this case, and have never been so spoiled for any act of my life as in this case."⁶⁰ Bright, of course, never precisely

⁵⁷ Jesse Bright to William Corcoran, October 12, 1856, W.W. Corcoran Papers, Library of Congress.

⁵⁸ *Congressional Globe*, July 31, August 1, 4, 8, 34th Congress, 1st Session, 1846-1847, 1883-1890, 1901-1903, 1980-1984.

⁵⁹ J.O. Jones to Henry S. Lane, June 25, 1856 (copy), Henry S. Lane Papers, Lilly Library.

⁶⁰ Jesse Bright to George Ewing, April 17, 1857, Ewing Papers (microfilm), University of Kentucky Library.

explained what he meant by “purer motives.” As one historian observed, “The rather sudden enthusiasm exhibited by Jesse Bright for an old Whig enemy is difficult to explain. However, this was an age of practical politics and of practical men.”⁶¹

Most Whigs would eventually join the Republican cause, but some southern Indiana Whigs disliked agitation over slavery and feared racial egalitarianism.⁶² Bright reached out to these “old line Whigs” in hopes of bringing them over to the Hoosier Democracy. He secured the nomination of Abram Hammond for lieutenant governor. Once an old line Whig from Vermont, Hammond came to work with Bright, lobbied for Buchanan, and in 1857 would favor the Lecompton Constitution. Allen Hamilton was another former Whig who allied with Bright to further himself financially and politically.⁶³

These efforts succeeded. When Indiana held its state elections on October 14th, Democrats triumphed. In the gubernatorial race, Democrat Ashbel Willard was elected over Oliver Morton by 6,000 votes. In the state legislature, Democrats took the House by a 63 to 35 margin, although in the state senate, fusionists clung to a four seat advantage. The November election proved even more successful for Democrats. Buchanan triumphed over Fremont in Indiana by 118,670 to 94,375. Even with the 22,386 votes that Fillmore received, Democrats still received a majority of the votes cast. The gubernatorial race was significantly

⁶¹ Van Bolt, “Fusion out of Confusion,” 275.

⁶² *Logansport Journal*, April 26, May 17, 1856; Zimmerman, “The Origin and Rise of the Republican Party in Indiana,” 250; Woollen, *Biographical Sketches*, 114-115.

⁶³ Jesse Bright to Allen Hamilton, June 16, 1856, Allen Hamilton Papers, Indiana State Historical Society.

closer since most of the American Party votes that had gone to Fillmore in the presidential race went to Morton, as he was a more conservative anti-slavery candidate. This was particularly true in the southern counties where conservative old line Whigs did not vote for Fremont. Some party leaders believed the presence of Joseph Wright helped stem the flow of disaffected Democrats from supporting the People's Party tickets, and the presence of Fremont discouraged old-line conservative Whigs from supporting the national party.⁶⁴

The congressional races also went well for Indiana Democrats. The party was able to pick up four of the seats it had lost two years earlier, which gave them a 6-5 advantage in the state's congressional delegation. Democrats controlled all congressional districts south of Indianapolis, while the opposition party won every congressional district to the north of the state capital.

Most importantly, Buchanan won the presidency. He carried all of the southern states, and Fremont carried most of the free-states. The difference was that Buchanan also carried five northern states. With a third party in the race, Indiana was only one of two northern states in which Buchanan pulled a majority. He won 50.41% of the vote in Indiana, and 50.14% in his home state of Pennsylvania. In Indiana, Bright had successfully maintained the intersectional alliance between southern Democrats and conservative northern Democrats.

* * * * *

⁶⁴ Peek, "Upland Southerners," 234.

With the election over, and most of his political enemies gone from the party, Bright had established himself as Indiana's most powerful Democratic leader. He had the patronage, the power, and the will to dominate the party. He had ousted the anti-Nebraska Democrats in 1854, and then in 1856 he had fended off the fusionist/People's Party/Republican challenge. He had also helped a northern doughface win the presidency. His hold on the Indiana party seemed secure, but this assumed James Buchanan could skillfully navigate the nation's sectional divide.

*I will converse with iron-witted fools
And unrespectful boys. None are for me
That look into me with considerate eyes.
High reaching Buckingham grows circumspect.*

Richard III Act IV Scene II

Chapter 6

The Lecompton Crisis: Bright and the Hoosier Democracy, 1857-1858

In 1857 Jesse Bright had reached the height of his power. He reigned as the leader of Indiana's Democracy, and he was an important advisor to James Buchanan. Along with John Slidell (Louisiana), Howell Cobb (Georgia), and Henry Wise (Virginia), Bright encouraged Buchanan to select a Cabinet of southerners or southern-leaning northerners. Bright's close ties to Buchanan had the advantage, of course, of increasing Bright's access to administration patronage.¹

Bright hoped Buchanan could resolve the bitter sectional issues. If the party could sustain its hold on southern politics and maintain sufficient support in northern states such as Indiana, the Democrats believed they could hold power and deny it to the reckless Republicans. This path would not be simple. The Indiana senator knew that his position as a slaveholder and his sympathies for the South were at odds with his fellow Hoosiers, who feared the slave-power. The vast majority of Indiana Democrats supported popular sovereignty. They wanted white men to control their own destinies. Most did not mind that Bright

¹ Elbert Smith, *The Presidency of James Buchanan* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1975), 17-19; Roy Nichols, *The Disruption of American Democracy* (New York: MacMillan Co., 1948), 56.

was a slaveholder *per se*. But they opposed limiting the rights of white men in order to serve the slaveholding interests.

Bright was a conditional unionist. His devotion to the Union was contingent upon being able to protect slavery. If this could be accomplished without alienating too many northern Democrats, it would strengthen the Democratic Party and the Union. Hence Buchanan entered office hoping to quell the agitation over slavery. Instead, Buchanan's actions, and Bright's staunch support, would completely alienate the North. It would draw the nation into a dangerous fight. Bright's efforts to control Indiana became more unyielding, even vicious. The coming political storm would also show that there were limits to Bright's ability to shape and manage Indiana politics.

* * * * *

At the start of 1857 Jesse Bright was a key advisor to James Buchanan (but even Buchanan did not always trust the ambitious Bright). Unlike Franklin Pierce, Buchanan chose a cabinet entirely aligned with southern interests. The cabinet included Robert Walker (Mississippi), Howell Cobb (Georgia), John Floyd (Virginia), Aaron Brown (Tennessee) and Jacob Thompson (Mississippi)—all from slave states. There were two northerners—Isaac Toucey (Connecticut) and Jeremiah Black (Pennsylvania)—but both were doughface Democrats sympathetic to the South. Bright may have been offered a cabinet post as well,

but he apparently declined in order to stay in the Senate.² The distribution of high-level appointments followed a similar pattern as most were either southerners or doughface supporters of Buchanan.³

Buchanan and the Democrats also had reason to be optimistic about their party in 1857. In addition to recovering from the Kansas-Nebraska Act and winning the 1856 presidential election, Democrats would score off-year election victories later in 1857. Republican gains seemed to have stalled as Democratic promises to ensure fair Kansas elections had undercut opposition claims.⁴

The improved political outlook was important for Bright who needed to secure his reelection to the Senate in 1857. The other Indiana senate seat also remained empty from two years earlier. To Bright's dismay, Joseph Wright desired it. He wanted Graham Fitch. As a Democrat privately observed of the senator and his lackey, "neither of them has any principle. Fitch I know has none...He would be an abolitionist if it was profitable."⁵ To solve the issue, party leaders worked out a deal that would allow Bright to select his own nominee for the senate seat, and he in return agreed to use his influence to win Wright a cabinet position.⁶

Securing reelection and the election of Fitch required heavy-handed political deal-making. Republicans had a slight majority in the state Senate while

² Wayne Van Der Weele, "Jesse David Bright: Master Politician from the Old Northwest" (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 1958), 203-207.

³ Smith, *The Presidency of James Buchanan*, 21-22.

⁴ Kenneth Stampp, *America in 1857: A Nation on the Brink* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 277

⁵ C. Carter to John G. Davis, June, 26, 1857, John G. Davis Papers, Indiana Historical Society.

⁶ *Indiana State Journal*, January 31, 1857.

Democrats had a solid majority in the House, but overall the Democrats had numerical superiority. Hence, Bright and the Democrats now wanted a joint legislative session. Setting up headquarters in the Palmer House, Bright had to overcome the Republican four-seat advantage in the senate.⁷ He did this by recruiting two nativist senators to his side on procedural matters, which split the vote into equal factions.

Bright was now ready to enact his plan. When the legislature met in joint session on February 2 to certify the election of the governor and lieutenant governor, the Republicans bolted before there could be a vote to elect a United States senator. Democrats, however, pressed for an interpretation of the rules that required a quorum of both the House and Senate, which meant they needed a majority of the combined members present. Upon this basis, Democrats in the House and Senate, along with the two Americans, voted 83-2 to elect Jesse Bright and Graham Fitch to the United States Senate. Some Democrats privately worried about the legitimacy of their actions. Even Michael Bright, Jesse's older brother, privately observed the vote had not been "very *formal*." "Even if illegal," he said, with Indiana's new governor allied with Bright and the United States Senate in the hands of Democrats, "there will be no haste in ousting the present incumbents."⁸

⁷ *Indiana State Journal*, January 26, 1857.

⁸ Michael Bright to George Ewing, February 16, 1857 quoted in Van Der Weale, 201.

In the view of some historians the vote was “blatant fraud.”⁹ And indeed, when the U.S. Senate convened in late 1857, both Bright and Fitch faced election challenges. After a delay of some months, a senatorial committee packed with Democrats issued a report declaring: “Graham N. Fitch and Jesse D. Bright...are entitled to the seats which they now hold in the Senate.” The report was challenged by Republicans who protested the dubious manner in which the Indiana legislature had been convened. Ultimately, the Senate voted 30-23 to accept the results, but four Democrats, including Stephen Douglas, voted with the Republicans. Most Southern Democrats willingly ignored the irregularities because Bright and Fitch appeased southern interests.¹⁰ The vote, however, revealed the extent of the rift between Bright and Douglas over slavery and personal jealousies. Indeed, this was Douglas’s opportunity to return the favor for Bright’s betrayal in Cincinnati.¹¹

Bright was now able to push aside Joseph Wright, but as he often did, Bright handled this in a way that antagonized many Indiana Democrats. When Democrats met to draft a petition for Buchanan to appoint Wright to the cabinet, Bright’s men altered the language to recommend a “first class appointment.”

⁹ Smith, *The Presidency of James Buchanan*, 103.

¹⁰ Nichols, *The Disruption of Democracy*, 176; Van Der Weele, “Jesse David Bright,” 198-200; Peek, “Upland Southerners,” 241-243. The question over whether to seat Bright and Fitch received considerable debate within the United States Senate, with opinion generally falling along party lines. The mutual hatred between Stephen Douglas and Jesse Bright was evident when the Little Giant went against his party in the seating of Bright.

¹¹ Some scholars, most notably Wayne Van Der Weele, emphasize this event to suggest Bright’s subsequent actions were less out of pro-southern proclivities than personal hatred for the man who voted to unseat him. Less noted is the fact that James Mason of Virginia voted against seating the Indiana senators as well. The Virginian never earned the same wrath that Douglas received from Bright. Not coincidentally, he was pro-southern and had voted for the Lecompton Constitution. Van Der Weele, “Jesse David Bright,” 211; *Congressional Globe*, June 11, 1858, 35th Congress, 1st Session, 2981.

They justified this revision on the grounds of delicacy, but once the resolution had been adopted, Bright's men secretly attached an addendum specifying they desired an appointment for Wright outside of Washington. Bright then communicated to the president that he desired Lewis Cass to be appointed to the Cabinet instead of Wright. Eventually, Wright was appointed Minister to Prussia, a position he reluctantly accepted.¹² A giddy Bright noted there were "shouts and cheering" from within in his camp. He was now finally "rid of the low demagogue."¹³ He had rammed through the state legislature not just his own reelection but also secured a senate seat for one of his trusted lieutenants. Joseph Wright, his long-time nemesis, had been exiled to Prussia. By summer Bright exalted to William English:

Everything looks well for our Party in this State. A few Traitors have been trying to raise some excitement, but their efforts have proven a *dead failure*. In short, the Wright & Co. concern have failed, and in the absence of their cowardly leader, the other Partners have gone into liquidation.¹⁴

Bright, although more powerful than ever in Indiana, still had to contend with a fractious party. The continuing sectional controversy exacerbated personal animosities with some party leaders. His handling of Joseph Wright had left many Democrats bitter. Gordon Tanner, editor of the *Columbus Democrat* and an outspoken opponent of Bright, denounced Bright's "political jugglery" of "the last

¹² Crane, "Governor Jo Wright," 278-296; Van Der Weele, "Jesse David Bright," 194-195; Peek, "Upland Southerners," 237-238.

¹³ Jesse Bright to William Corcoran, January 30, 1857, W.W. Corcoran Papers, Library of Congress. While Bright intended to date his letter "January 30, 1857," the number "7" was squiggled in an ambiguous way so that it has been filed among the Corcoran Papers chronologically as if it was written "January 30, 1853."

¹⁴ Jesse Bright to William English, August 19, 1857, quoted in "Some Letters of Jesse D. Bright," 382-383.

year or two.” Bright and his loyalists had sold “themselves and their constituency for place, and...trade in the offices of the country, to secure political influence and power...” Bright had brought “deep disgrace upon our party and our state.” The *Rockport Democrat* noted that “Jesse is not the man to hesitate at any meanness, when an object is to be accomplished.”¹⁵ Democratic Congressman John G. Davis who was an ally of Wright and Douglas, denounced Bright for being “abusive of those in the party who differ with him.”¹⁶

The insults went back and forth. The Bright mouthpieces used vicious racial language to attack critics and dissidents, and his opponents attacked him as a slave-master of both black and white men. The *Sentinel* charged renegade Democrats with being in league with the “woolly-head-ed *State Journal*” out of their “Failures to get places under the government.”¹⁷ Congressman Davis, it claimed, had “the ‘scent of niggerism’ upon him” as a result of his vacillation over the Kansas Nebraska Act. The Douglas Democrats shot back by accusing the Bright machine of serving the slave power. One of the editors wrote to Bright in rage, “The ear-marks of these newspapers show, that instead of being devoted to the interests of the Democratic party, they are entirely devoted to your personal interests.” The editor added: “They are but servants—slaves—you are their master.” He likened Bright to how a “Brazilian planter treats his slaves,” being able to “rule the timid and the base” and to turn their “malignant passions

¹⁵ Quoted in the *St. Joseph Valley Register*, June 4, 1857.

¹⁶ *Indiana State Sentinel*, June 16, 1857.

¹⁷ *Indiana State Sentinel*, June 9, 1857.

of the human breast against your foes.”¹⁸ A central Indiana Democrat wrote, “There is but one sentiment, and that is d—n J.D. Bright.” Were they to run against each other, “Wright would beat Bright [by] 25,000 votes...The people feel indignant...Unless Bright exculpates himself...his political star is setting...”¹⁹ The opposition presses noted that there was “warm opposition to the Bright rule.” Hoping to shame the Hoosier Democracy’s pride as free-men one newspaper added: “We have no hope...that it will amount to anything more than a refusal of the slaves on the farm in Kentucky to work; a touch of the whip will bring all the refractory editors and small politicians into the traces as readily as the lash subdues the slave on the said farm.”²⁰

* * * * *

Just as Buchanan began his presidency, the Supreme Court issued its landmark decision on slavery, *Dred Scott v. Sandford*. Buchanan hoped that the court might blunt Republican efforts to restrict slavery in the territories. Buchanan had gone so far as to inquire with one of the southern Supreme Court Justices about the status of the case. It involved a slave, Dred Scott, who had been taken by his owner into a territory of the United States where slavery had been prohibited. Buchanan was concerned that the case might be settled narrowly without deciding the larger question of the constitutionality of slavery in the territories. If the Supreme Court declared slaveholding in the territories a

¹⁸ Gordon Tanner to Jesse Bright, July 2, 1857 (copy), Jesse Bright Papers, Lilly Library.

¹⁹ D. Hasselmans to John G. Davis, May 20, 1857, John G. Davis Papers, Indiana Historical Society.

²⁰ *Madison Courier* quoted in the *St. Joseph Valley Register*, June 4, 1857.

constitutional right, Buchanan believed that the slavery issue would cease to burden American politics. It was clear that the Court was going to deny Scott his freedom, but some of the justices were leery of making a far-reaching decision. Realizing that such a decision would need some northern support, Buchanan had gone so far as to write Justice Robert Grier, a fellow Pennsylvania Democrat, imploring him to join the southern majority.

The Court's ruling, which in addition to denying citizenship to blacks, prohibited Congress from regulating slavery in the territories. The decision cast doubts on the constitutionality of Stephen Douglas's conception of popular sovereignty. Both Buchanan and Chief Justice Roger B. Taney, the author of the decision, hoped that the court's ruling would end the agitation over slavery. Instead, the decision provoked a political crisis. Buchanan had badly misjudged northern opinion. The decision allowed Republicans to claim that Democrats, as the stooges of the slave-power, intended to push slavery into the territories, even regardless of popular sovereignty. It also created fears that a future ruling might even push slavery beyond the territories and into the northern states.²¹

In Indiana, the Democratic Party sought to minimize the ruling's impact. It generally sidestepped the thorny issue of whether the decision undermined the principle of popular sovereignty. The party platform eventually praised the decision for preserving constitutional rights, and portrayed those who opposed the decision as disloyal Americans who subscribed to "the loathsome doctrine of

²¹ Leonard Richards, *The Slave Power: The Free North and Southern Domination, 1780-1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000), 203-204.

'negro equality...'”²² The platform, presumably with the blessing of Bright, asserted the justness of the ruling by emphasizing its definition of citizenship, while avoiding any mention of its consequences for territorial government. The *Sentinel* told its readers that the decision merely affirmed that blacks were not citizens and that all other portions of the decision were *orbiter dicta*. In other words, the opinion rejecting popular sovereignty in the territories was not legally binding. The organ would continue to argue that the only point of contention between supporters and opponents of the decision were on whether “the negro” was “politically or socially [equal] with the white race.”²³

Most Democrats in Indiana chose to accept the ruling. In part, they did so because Stephen Douglas declined to oppose it. Douglas feared that the decision threatened his quest for the presidency. On the one hand, it seemed to nullify his case for popular sovereignty. If the Constitution guaranteed the right of slaveholding in the territories, then local populations, acting through territorial legislatures, could no longer outlaw slavery. And yet to oppose the ruling would ruin his chances for winning southern support. Hence, Douglas chose to embrace the decision. He argued that it not only conformed to popular sovereignty, but it was the triumph of the doctrine. By denying that a black man could be a citizen, the court, Douglas claimed, had affirmed his long held belief that popular sovereignty merely applied to white men. Regarding slavery in the territories, Douglas's arguments grew more strained. He suggested that a slaveholder, even while the Missouri Compromise had been in place, had always

²² *State Platforms*, 14.

²³ *Indiana State Sentinel*, March 25, June 3, 1857.

enjoyed the right of slaveholding in the territories. He argued, however, that it had been a “barren and worthless right, unless sustained, protected and enforced by appropriate police regulations and local legislation, prescribing adequate remedies for its violation.”²⁴

Had Dred Scott been the only controversy of 1857-1858, the northern Democratic Party likely could have weathered the furor. Events in Kansas had turned the debate over slavery into terms favorable to the northern Democracy. Because a majority of Kansas voters desired a free-state, the fight had become one between pro-slavery election fraud and fair elections to exclude slavery. Hence, popular sovereignty became the stronger anti-slavery-extension position. Also, while Dred Scott barred the prohibition of slavery in the territories it was generally agreed that an entering state could prohibit slavery.²⁵ Soon, however, Kansas erupted again in turmoil over what became known as the Lecompton constitution. In June 1857, the pro-slavery Kansas legislature organized elections for a constitutional convention as the territory moved toward statehood. Distrusting the electoral process, free soil Kansans largely boycotted the election, which ensured that the convention was dominated by pro-slavery delegates. When the convention insisted on a pro-slavery Lecompton Constitution, national Democratic leaders hoped to smooth the issue by encouraging a referendum on the question. Instead of sending the entire constitution to the voters for ratification, the convention responded by offering a pro-slavery and “anti-slavery”

²⁴ Quoted in Robert Johannsen, *Stephen A. Douglas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 569.

²⁵ Stamp, *America in 1857*, 278

option, with the latter merely outlawing the further importation of slaves and allowing slavery to continue indefinitely. Outraged by these choices, free soil Kansans boycotted the referendum. This, combined with another 2,720 fraudulent votes, ensured that the more expansive pro-slavery provisions overwhelmingly passed.

James Buchanan now had to make a decision. He had been able to appease northern Democrats by insisting that the Lecompton Constitution be submitted to the voters for ratification. Originally the Lecompton convention sought to send the pro-slavery constitution directly to Congress. Instead, moderate Lecompton leaders had been able submit a second constitution to voters restricting the further importation of slaves, while protecting existing slave property. As far as Buchanan was concerned, this was a reasonable choice. It allowed Kansas voters to become a free-state, in a similar manner as years before when some northern states had gradually phased out slavery. That existing slaveholders should have their slave property protected seemed only reasonable to Buchanan. He had run for the presidency as a conservative Democrat who intended to end sectional agitation. The issue of Kansas-Nebraska had incited sectional agitation over slavery in the territories, and Buchanan hoped for no further eruptions. At the same time, Buchanan's decidedly southern sympathies weighed heavily in his decision. Undoubtedly he was influenced by his intimate ties to former Vice-President William Rufus King, an Alabama slaveholder. Buchanan, moreover, had no qualms about slavery.²⁶

²⁶ Smith, *The Presidency of James Buchanan*, 15-16; Stamp, *America in 1857*, 285.

In his mind, the voters in Kansas had been offered a fair choice of either allowing slavery or restricting it to the few hundred slaves already present. By late 1857, he had decided to accept the Lecompton Constitution. Once again, a Democratic administration sought to appease southern slaveholders.

As Kenneth Stampp has noted, Buchanan's decision stood "as one of the most tragic miscalculations any President has ever made."²⁷ Although the Dred Scott decision had settled the legal right to slaveholding in the federal territories, it had little to say about how a state might organize its local institutions. If popular sovereignty meant anything, certainly the people of a state had a right to exclude slavery. Instead, President Buchanan decided to take the pro-southern position. Though the citizens of Kansas overwhelmingly opposed the introduction of slavery, the administration threw its muscle behind admitting Kansas as a state under the pro-slavery Lecompton Constitution.

From the start, the Buchanan administration made Lecompton a test of party loyalty. Democrats in Congress had to unite the party behind Lecompton much as they had done in 1854. Such a course, Buchanan undoubtedly hoped, would stifle dissent and keep the party from tearing itself apart. The administration's chief weapon was its control of patronage. Appointments were delayed until views on Lecompton were clearly established. But in addition to

²⁷ Stampp, *America in 1857*, 282.

patronage, there were bribes in the form of printing contracts to papers that agreed to endorse the administration.²⁸

Most northern Democrats, however, would have none of it. It is unknown what might have been the southern reaction had Buchanan rejected Lecompton. Northern reaction, however, was emphatic. Buchanan did not realize the uproar his policy would produce and the result was a northern Democratic disaster. The vast majority of rank-and-file northern Democrats, northern Democratic newspaper editors, and politicians furiously rejected the Lecompton Constitution. It made such a mockery of Douglas's popular sovereignty that they could no longer stomach any more concessions to the slave-power. Stephen Douglas understood northern attitudes on this issue. Local populations, most northern Democrats believed, should decide the fate of slavery in the territories. Now southerners were demanding more, and neither Douglas nor his constituents would yield any further. Douglas broke with the president, and vowed to fight him in Congress. He did not just oppose Lecompton, but he embraced the fight with gusto. Working sixteen-hour days, he took to the Senate floor to fight it at every turn.²⁹ In this moment, few northern Democrats, outside of federal appointees and office holders, could accept Lecompton.³⁰

There was one northerner Buchanan knew he could count on, and that was Bright, who loyally threw his support behind the administration. It is unlikely

²⁸ Stamp, *America in 1857*, 311.

²⁹ Sean Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2005), 718.

³⁰ Stamp, *America in 1857*, 307.

that Bright, as a master political organizer, did not realize the unpopularity of the measure in the North. Indeed, he was remarkably accepting when William English, his young protégé, broke ranks to oppose Lecompton. Yet his southern attitudes were so rigid that he refused to acquiesce to popular will. His loyalties were to slavery, the South, and Buchanan. His bitterest enemy was Douglas. He could take no other course but to support Lecompton. Despite Lecompton's unpopularity, Bright likely had the hubris to believe he could drag Indiana with him. After all, he had done it before.

Bright, who rarely gave extended remarks on the floor of the Senate and who was especially loath to speak out on controversial issues, cast off his reticence to defend Buchanan. And in defending Buchanan, Bright now finally exposed the depths of his commitment to the white South. In his speech, he repudiated the principle of popular sovereignty and claimed that he had previously supported it only out of expediency. The Senator had “never entertained a doubt” about the power of Congress to legislate for the territories. Bright suggested that with all of the agitation over Lecompton, it was “better” not to refer such a question “to the vote of the people.”³¹

Jesse Bright exposed himself as a man whose commitment to white man's democracy was secondary to securing the institution of slavery. Bright's speech on the Lecompton measure was so peculiar to traditional Democratic ideals that Wayne Van Der Weele, in his highly sympathetic dissertation on Bright, was

³¹ *Congressional Globe*, March 20, 1858, 35th Congress, 1st Session, appendix, 163-165. Van Der Weele, 218.

forced to argue: “This type of speech is so far out of character for the Indiana Senator that one can legitimately surmise that it represents the ‘official line’ direct from the Executive Mansion; and Jesse simply had been chosen to carry the message.” Obviously Bright was touting the official administration line, but it was also clear that he was no mere lackey taking orders from the administration. Bright backed down to no one, and if any northern politician was more sympathetic to the South than Buchanan, it was certainly the Indiana senator. As one early historian of Indiana more accurately commented on the speech, Bright had “drank the pro-slavery cup to its dregs.”³²

Graham Fitch likewise defended the administration. Fitch, who was from northern Indiana, occasionally pandered to free-soilers. Now he took his orders from Bright, who had orchestrated his election to the Senate. As such, he objected to allowing the voters of Kansas to vote on the entirety of the constitution, noting that popular sovereignty provisions were merely tools used to deal with slavery. He acknowledged that the territorial legislature that had produced the constitution was not truly representative of Kansas voters, but he recognized it as legitimate nonetheless. Ignoring the massive voter fraud, Fitch noted there had been election boycotts by free-soilers. He explained, “You cannot compel men to vote...If a part...neglect or reject the invitation, and will not vote, is the machinery of Government hence to stop, and society to resolve itself in anarchy?” The pro-slavery legislature had submitted to the voters two options regarding slavery. One accepted slavery. The other barred the further importation

³² Jacob Dunn and William Kemper, *Indiana and Indianans: A History of Aboriginal and Territorial and the Century of Statehood*, Vol. 2 (Chicago: American Historical Society, 1919), 557.

of slaves, but allowed slavery to remain for the foreseeable future. Neither option had been agreeable to those who wished to keep slavery out of Kansas, and thus they had refused to participate in an election. Fitch ignored this. The senator insisted that those who refused to vote had allowed the electoral outcome by default.³³

Both Bright and Fitch voted along with thirty-one other senators to admit Kansas under the Lecompton Constitution. Twenty-five voted no. The Senate was always the body that was dominated by pro-southern interests. Although rank-and-file northern Democrats overwhelmingly opposed Lecompton, most northern Democratic senators, as they were not directly elected by the people, aligned with Buchanan and voted for Lecompton. Northern Democrats voted 7-4 in favor of Lecompton. The twenty-three southern Democrats voted unanimously in favor. Consequently, much of the subsequent action, and uncertainty, was in the House of Representatives.³⁴

The House of Representatives was harder for the administration to control, as members answered directly to the voters. Most importantly, the North had a larger population, which gave the House a larger proportion of northern members. Bright had a tall order getting northern House Democratic politicians to go along. William English, the normally reliable Bright lieutenant, had no desire to buck popular opinion by following Buchanan on Lecompton.³⁵ Recognizing his

³³ *Congressional Globe*, 35th Congress, 1st Session, December 22, 1857, 137-142.

³⁴ Stamp, *America in 1857*, 303.

³⁵ J. Huckleberry to William English, February 22, 1858; M.W. Sellers to William English, March 31, 1858, English Papers, Indiana Historical Society.

difficult political calculations, Bright assured English “I know you have not sought by anything you have said or done, to embarrass or strike at me. It is to be regretted that you & I could not have harmonized on this question.” Still he implored English “to conform as near as you can, to the views of the great Democratic Party, which is now assailed fiercely enough, God knows, by its ancient enemies.”³⁶ Bright could count on Fitch in the Senate, and also three southern Indiana House members. But three other Democratic members, all from districts predominantly south of Indianapolis, refused to support Buchanan.

As things stood in the House, all 75 southern House Democrats backed Lecompton. All 92 Republican House members opposed it. Hence, the Buchanan administration had to appeal to 53 northern Democratic members. The debate was furious. At one point, when the proceedings had stretched late into the night, a Pennsylvania Republican House member walked over to the Democratic side at 2:00am to confer with some northern Democrats. A bare-footed Laurence Keitt of South Carolina shouted for “the Black Republican puppy” to return to his side of the chamber. The Republican angrily responded, “No Negro-driver shall crack his whip over me!” Tempers quickly snapped and dozens of House members converged into a melee of violence. While the physical decrepitness of the combatants quickly turned the fight into a farce, few could doubt their raw emotions.³⁷ On April 1, the House voted 120 to 112 to defeat the bill through

³⁶ Jesse Bright to William English, March 9, 1858, in “Some Letters of Jesse D. Bright,” 383; *Congressional Globe*, 35th Congress, 1st Session, February 2, 8, 1858, 536, 622; Roy Nichols, *The Disruption of American Democracy* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1948), 160-161.

³⁷ Robert Remini, *The House: The History of the House of Representatives* (Washington: Library of Congress, 1996), 155.

amendment. Northern Democrats voted 31-22 with the administration on Lecompton.

The Buchanan administration now had to find a way out of the situation. It turned to Indiana's William English, in part because of his close relationship with Bright. English's district was decidedly anti-Lecompton, but he also wanted the party to save face.³⁸ The congressman offered what became known as the English Bill. Instead of admitting Kansas immediately as a slave state, Congress would send the Lecompton Constitution back to the territory where the people could hold a referendum to accept or reject the document. The bill did this in the guise of submitting the constitution to the people on the question of a land grant. The original Lecompton constitution requested 23 million acres of federal land. Congress thus pared it down to the usual four million acres offered to a new state to be accepted or rejected. If rejected, Kansas would remain a territory until it reached a population of 90,000.³⁹

English's bill mostly garnered pro-southern supporters. If Kansans failed to endorse the Lecompton Constitution in referendum, at the very least it would prevent a free state from entering the union. For some anti-Lecompton Democrats, its virtue was that it guaranteed Kansans would have a choice in the matter.⁴⁰ Still, it held the immediate statehood of Kansas hostage to supporting Lecompton, and Douglas therefore opposed it. Of Indiana's three anti-Lecompton Democrats, two came to support the bill. John G. Davis, Indiana's leading anti-

³⁸ Nichols, *The Disruption of American Democracy*, 167.

³⁹ David Potter, *The Impending Crisis: 1848-1861* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), 323-324.

⁴⁰ Potter, *The Impending Crisis*, 324.

Lecompton Democrat, remained in opposition.⁴¹ When the compromise came to the Senate, Bright supported it, even though it was the kind of retreat that Bright was loath to accept.⁴² There were concerns that allowing the people of Kansas to vote on the issue might rally the free-soil elements.⁴³ However rotten the compromise might be, he could at least hope that it would end the debate. When the Lecompton Constitution reached Kansas voters in August it was soundly defeated 11,300 to 1,788. Kansas would remain a territory until 1861 when it entered the Union as a free-state.⁴⁴

* * * * *

For several years Bright had held political control over the Indiana Democratic Party—and by extension the state. His control over the party machinery had allowed him to bring the state along on most of the national party's policies to conciliate the South. He had fought the Wilmot Proviso, had won support for the Compromise of 1850, and had aligned the state party behind the Kansas-Nebraska Act. Each of these actions had weakened the party, yet it had still survived. Bright intended to play the same game in 1857 and 1858. When it came to placating the slave-power over Lecompton, however, the Hoosier Democracy had finally had enough.

⁴¹ Stamp, *America in 1857*, 327-328; Nichols, *The Disruption of American Democracy*, 173.

⁴² *Congressional Globe*, 35th Congress, 1st Session, April 30, 1858, 1899-1906.

⁴³ Simon K. Wolf to William English, January 12, 1858, English Papers, Indiana Historical Society.

⁴⁴ Stamp, *America in 1857*, 329.

Early in the Lecompton drama the *Sentinel* had taken a critical stance. It denounced the convention's actions as "an act of despotism."⁴⁵ But when the administration came to support Lecompton, the *Sentinel* attempted to downplay the crisis by attacking the lurid reports as rumors. As for the proposed constitution, the paper stated, "While we would condemn any attempt to force a Constitution upon the people of Kansas, it is wise policy to await their own action upon the matter."⁴⁶ Ever loyal to Bright and Buchanan, the *Sentinel* was soon defending Lecompton. The difference between Douglas and Buchanan, it argued, was merely in the "application of the principle" of popular sovereignty, rather than the "principle itself." Ignoring the massive voter fraud, the *Sentinel* rationalized that the Lecompton legislature should be regarded as "the sense of the people."⁴⁷ The *Register* cynically observed that the *Sentinel's* malleability on popular sovereignty was precipitated by "the powerful influence of a \$750 government advertisement."⁴⁸

Even for some of the most conservative Hoosiers, Lecompton was a fraud. It made a mockery of popular sovereignty by forcing slavery on a population that clearly rejected it. Bright and his Democratic newspapers were badly out of step with most of Indiana's Democrats and the local party presses.

⁴⁵ Quoted in Stampp, *America in 1857*, 289.

⁴⁶ *Indiana State Sentinel*, December 3, 1857.

⁴⁷ *Indiana State Sentinel*, December 28, 1857.

⁴⁸ *St. Joseph Valley Register*, February 18, 1858.

Over thirty Democratic newspapers—three-fourths of the total statewide—opposed the Lecompton Constitution.⁴⁹

Most Indiana Democrats rejected the Lecompton swindle. A Democrat from Clay County, a more conservative region of western Indiana, observed that he had “not seen a Democrat here in favor of admitting Kansas with the Lecompton Constitution.” This was because “the people are the sovereign power not only in a state but in a Territory. The voice of a majority fairly expressed must be supreme.”⁵⁰ Even in southern Indiana, Democrats opposed the Lecompton Constitution where seventeen out of twenty-one newspapers spoke out against it.⁵¹ The *New Albany Ledger* was one of the seventeen. It had hoped to maintain a working relationship with Bright and the administration, but popular opinion forced its hand. The editor noted,

The Democracy of this portion of Indiana care nothing about the slavery clause of the Kansas constitution—they care little whether Kansas is made a free State or slave State; but they care a great deal for the great principle involved in the settlement of the matter, they care a great deal for the good name and fame of the Democratic party, which has not yet, and we hope never may, become a synonym for broken promises.⁵²

The editor, a federal appointee himself, privately explained to a Bright lieutenant that he was acquiescing to popular sentiment. Partly apologizing, he noted, “As matters now stand, we know not what to say or do—at least that is my fix.” He

⁴⁹ Charles Zimmerman, “The Origin and Rise of the Republican Party in Indiana from 1854 to 1860” *Indiana Magazine of History* 13 (December, 1917), 354.

⁵⁰ James Lucas to John G. Davis, December 28, 1857, “Some Letters to John G. Davis, 1857-1860,” *Indiana Magazine of History* 24, September, 1928, 202.

⁵¹ Duane Elbert, “Southern Indiana Politics on the Eve of the Civil War, 1858-1861,” (Ph.D. Diss., Indiana University, 1967), 32.

⁵² *New Albany Ledger*, March 30, 1858.

hoped that Bright would recognize his “warm friendship” and support for the party boss “personally and politically...when occasion shall arise.”⁵³

It is important to understand that what was at stake in the Lecompton crisis for Indiana’s Democrats was the issue of popular sovereignty. As Austin Brown observed, questions over popular sovereignty were more “fundamental than mere [concern for] niggers.”⁵⁴ Another Democrat, who believed the Lecompton Constitution ought to “go to the Devil,” still believed it could become an acceptable document should a majority of white voters in Kansas sustain it.⁵⁵

John Davis, Indiana’s top elected anti-Lecompton Democrat, was bombarded with fervent letters opposed to the “Lecompton swindle.”⁵⁶ It was the “only thing that the people seem to talk about” reported a central Indiana Democrat.⁵⁷ In Bright’s hometown of Madison, a correspondent observed that “nearly all the Democrats [are] taking sides with Douglas in his opposition to the Lecompton Constitution and it is generally thought here by nearly all the Democrats that [allowing the measure to pass] will injure our political prospects in the state...”⁵⁸ An “old line Democrat” who had moved to Kansas reluctantly joined the free state party suggesting “they are willing to do more than our leaders are

⁵³ John Norman to William English, December 21, 1857, English Papers, Indiana Historical Society.

⁵⁴ Austin Brown to John G. Davis, December 20, 1857, John G. Davis Papers, Indiana Historical Society.

⁵⁵ Michael C. Kerr to William English, January 23, 1858, English Papers, Indiana Historical Society.

⁵⁶ R.S. Stevens to John G. Davis, December 14, 1857, John G. Davis Papers, Indiana Historical Society.

⁵⁷ James Hood to John G. Davis, December 11, 1857, John G. Davis Papers, Indiana Historical Society.

⁵⁸ Michael Hammon to John G. Davis, December 15, 1857, John G. Davis Papers, Indiana Historical Society.

willing to acknowledge.” The “fire eaters” had made this association necessary.⁵⁹ Many Indiana Democrats who cared little for anti-slavery agitation now turned against the slave-power.

As popular opposition mounted, Bright faced a threat to his political power. One Democrat called for an end to the senator’s political “dynasty.” Another Democrat noted that with exception of an appointed postal agent, all Democrats at their local convention opposed Lecompton.⁶⁰ Those few who supported the Lecompton Constitution were either “sly” or low “drunken” fellows.⁶¹ Austin Brown contemptuously referred to them as Bright’s “slaves.”⁶² Yet, it was precisely these men, appointed office holders and leaders who could keep Bright’s political machine afloat in the face of popular opposition.

John L. Robinson, editor of the *Rushville Jacksonian*, was typical of many Bright lieutenants. As a member of Congress, he had supported the Wilmot Proviso. Now Robinson was second in command of the Bright machine, and as part of the machine, he battled to ensure that slavery would be legal in Kansas. As one Democrat sarcastically observed of Robinson, his appointment as a United States Marshal “is, perhaps, the governing reason with him.”⁶³ Another Bright loyalist was former Senator John Pettit who eventually received a plum

⁵⁹ E.W. Hathaway to John G. Davis, December 14, 1857, John G. Davis Papers, Indiana Historical Society.

⁶⁰ Quoted in Peek, 257.

⁶¹ George W. Sample to John G. Davis, December 21, 1857, John G. Davis Papers, Indiana Historical Society.

⁶² Austin Brown to John G. Davis, November 23, 1857, John G. Davis Papers, Indiana Historical Society.

⁶³ Austin Brown to John G. Davis, December 22, 1857, John G. Davis Papers, Indiana Historical Society.

appointment from Buchanan. Petit led a group of Tippecanoe County Democrats in endorsing Lecompton, which they declared “compatible with the principles of the Kansas-Nebraska act.” Implausibly, Petit insisted that the administration’s actions did not violate the “great principles of popular sovereignty.”⁶⁴

With Lecompton now a test of party loyalty, Bright and his men became ruthless. Federal appointees were expected support the administration. Prior to the Lecompton debate, the administration had tried to reach out to Wright’s supporters, but when Lecompton became a test of party loyalty, Wright’s followers were vulnerable.⁶⁵ Postmasters, federal district attorneys, and other federal appointees who did not support Lecompton were systematically purged and replaced with loyal party members. As one Hoosier privately remarked “office Seekers and holders are trembling in their Boots. I do pity Poor Harry it is nearly death to him to be muzzled as he is. I advise him to keep Mum and I think he will do so.”⁶⁶ One of the postal officials who had been fired offered some more colorful language saying of one administration official, he can “kiss my ass...you... asshole of creation. Go ahead Mr. Hewitt put me out of office if you can and when you do all you can come up here and draw your teeth and sugar your gums and you may kiss my ass.”⁶⁷ While the “Bright faction are very anxious” to quiet the controversy, wrote an Indiana Douglas organizer, they are

⁶⁴ *New Albany Ledger*, December 18, 1857.

⁶⁵ David Meerse, “James Buchanan, the patronage, and the northern Democratic Party, 1857-1858,” (Ph.D. Dissertation: University of Illinois, 1969), 383.

⁶⁶ Elbert, “Southern Indiana Politics,” 34; Joshua Otey to John G. Davis, December 16, 1857, John G. Davis Papers, Indiana Historical Society.

⁶⁷ P.M. to Unknown, December 23, 1857, John G. Davis Papers, Indiana Historical Society.

all the time precipitating it by their harshness and intolerance of any difference of opinion.”⁶⁸

A few Indiana Democrats articulated pro-southern sentiments. One was Jephtha Garrigus who claimed to despise Douglas because he was dividing the party. The “Black party” was “exulting” over the course of the Little Giant, insisted the pro-southern Democrat. For Garrigus, “all of this fuss is about nothing.” The former state legislative door keeper thundered, “kill off all the black party..., congress better defend our country by killing off all the Mormons and the black party in Kansas than to be quarrelling about the Kansas constitution.” He wanted a “millstone” wrapped around Douglas’s “neck, and cast in the sea.” For months he stewed in a genocidal rage. He would rather “the angel Gabriel stand one foot on the land, the other on the sea, and swear that time should be no more” if the “black Party” should succeed. Garrigus’s racial designation of the Republican Party was not merely for rhetorical effect. In his mind, the Republicans threatened to unhinge the slaveholding racial order that kept in place vital racial hierarchies. The old line Democrat preferred death to the supposed equalizing effects of Republicanism.⁶⁹

Garrigus, however, was an exception. The anti-Lecompton, pro-Douglas forces grew confident they could gain control of the state party. As the 1858 state convention approached, they sought to gain control of the proceedings. One

⁶⁸ Gordon Tanner to John G. Davis, December 22, 1857, John G. Davis Papers, Indiana Historical Society.

⁶⁹ Jephtha Garrigus to John G. Davis, January 11, 18, February 2, March 3, May 10, 1858, John G. Davis Papers, Indiana Historical Society.

Douglas Democratic leader observed that the county conventions, where state convention delegates were selected, seemed to be going well for pro-Douglas Democrats.⁷⁰ A central Indiana Democrat reported nine out of ten Democrats were with Douglas and opposed to their slaveholding boss. He concluded, “Bright and Fitch are done sold [and] politically damned...I hear the Democrats speak...in tones not to be mistaken.”⁷¹ Another top leader dreamed, “I begin to have hopes, now that the scepter is to depart from Judea, i.e. that the Bright dynasty will cease to rule the Democracy of our state soon.” The pro-Douglas leaders grew more hopeful when Bright’s men discussed delaying the state convention. Nevertheless Austin Brown insisted, “the people will come here on the 8th,” and “nothing can or will prevent them.”⁷²

* * * * *

Few Indiana Democratic state conventions were as important as the one that met at the start of 1858. It would elect a slate of statewide candidates. Most importantly, however, it would submit a platform that would define the direction of the Hoosier Democracy. Bright wanted a platform endorsing Buchanan, while the Douglas Democrats hoped to affirm support for Stephen Douglas and popular sovereignty. It would decide, for the time being, who would control the state party. It pitted the organizing power of Bright against the groundswell of support for the Douglas Democrats. The pro-southern politics of the Buchanan

⁷⁰ Gordon Tanner to John G. Davis, December 22, 1857, John G. Davis Papers, Indiana Historical Society.

⁷¹ Daniel Hasselman to John G. Davis, January 1, 1858, John G. Davis Papers, Indiana Historical Society.

⁷² Austin Brown to John G. Davis, December 23, 1857, John G. Davis Papers, Indiana Historical Society.

administration were noxious to many Indiana Hoosiers. Bright, however, could still wield patronage.

When Democrats gathered in Indianapolis on January 8, 1858, they were bitterly divided over sectional issues. Bright kept tight control of the proceedings. Although Douglas Democrats were numerically strong throughout the state, Bright used his power of patronage with devastating effectiveness. Privately, Austin Brown grumbled that in spite of nearly all Hoosiers opposing the Lecompton, “Post masters, Government officials, and office expectants” were loyal “Bright men.”⁷³ The *Democratic Pharos* called the convention a contest “between Washington office-holders and office-seekers...and the Representatives of the Democratic masses on the other.” The Lecompton advocates were “sustained by the well-drilled satellites of Senator Bright,” while the popular sovereignty supporters “desired no favors from that source.”⁷⁴ Bright had packed the convention with his own loyalists, and his strategy was to finesse the Lecompton issue by offering a platform that denounced “Black Republicans” and rejected any interference with slavery where it existed. It made no mention of the Lecompton Constitution, but it declared Buchanan “the first choice of the Democracy of Indiana.” It also offered a full throated endorsement of the Dred Scott ruling, and its “legal exposition of the doctrines of the Constitution of the

⁷³ Austin Brown to John G. Davis, December 20, 1857, John G. Davis Papers, Indiana Historical Society.

⁷⁴ *Logansport Pharos* quoted in *St. Joseph Valley Register*, January 21, 1858.

United States.” Additionally, the platform lauded how it rejected the “loathsome doctrine of ‘negro equality.’”⁷⁵ The platform was adopted 274 to 186.

The endorsement of Buchanan and the Dred Scott ruling were too much for Douglas Democrats who wanted to amend the platform to endorse Stephen Douglas and popular sovereignty. When the moment arrived to offer this amendment, the delegate designated to introduce it grew timid. Realizing this, a thirty-year-old Lew Wallace climbed on top of a desk to gain the recognition of the chair. Immediately the convention burst into commotion. When Chairman John Pettit ruled him out of order, chaos ensued as a chorus of angry roars swept over the convention. (There may have also been a few Republicans in the gallery gleefully adding their voices to the uproar.) The young delegate was reportedly carried over the floor to confront the chair. After some minutes of intense discussions, largely drowned out by the noise from the floor, the exhausted men gave up and allowed the proceedings to recess. Later Wallace and Bright’s men worked out a resolution which expunged any reference to Douglas, but declared “the Doctrine of the Kansas Nebraska Act” was affirmed and that “now and hereafter no Territory should be admitted into the Union as a State without a fair expression of the will of the people being first had upon the constitution...” The amendment was approved 378 to 114. The next day the resolution was officially printed without the word “now.” It read, “hereafter no Territory should be admitted” without the support of the people. The change was slight, but gave the resolution an entirely different meaning. Wallace’s resolution

⁷⁵ *State Platforms*, 14.

had declared the Lecompton Constitution *non grata*. Years later, Wallace remarked that the culprit could only have been “the *brightest*, boldest, most unscrupulous of them all.”⁷⁶

Anti-Lecompton Democrats were furious, and charged that the Bright machine had turned the resolution into a pro-Lecompton document. Here was another example of white man’s Democracy suppressed by the interests of the slave-power. They were further angered when the Bright-controlled presses dismissed them as minor agitators who comprised only a twentieth of the convention.⁷⁷ They had comprised at least a third of the convention. Indeed, outside the smoky halls of party leaders their numbers were much larger.

Another controversy arose over Congressman James Hughes’s full-throated endorsement of the Buchanan administration. Throughout his address, anti-Lecompton Democrats jeered and interrupted. Finally, the congressman grew so frustrated that he threatened: “Governor Wright was not yet confirmed Minister to Berlin,” and “he might not be confirmed at all.” John Davis immediately took the stage and harangued Hughes for his blundering thuggery. As one Hoosier declared, “Jim Hughes made an ass of himself...”⁷⁸ The *Indiana State Journal* gleefully noted of Hughes’s threats against Wright: “The menace [was] so open, so taunting, and... foolish...”⁷⁹ It was yet another example that

⁷⁶ Wallace, *An Autobiography*, 248-251 (emphasis mine); *St. Joseph Valley Register*, January 14, 21, 1858. *Indiana State Sentinel*, January 9, 1858; *New Albany Ledger*, January 11, 12, 1858. In his autobiography Lew Wallace mistakenly claimed this incident occurred during an 1856 Democratic Convention. Newspaper accounts show it occurred at the 1858 convention.

⁷⁷ *New Albany Ledger*, January 13, 1858.

⁷⁸ W.W. Tuley to William English, January, 1858, English Papers, Indiana Historical Society.

⁷⁹ *Indianapolis Journal*, January 8, 1858.

the slave power, represented by Bright, would stop at no chicanery to achieve its ends. The *New Albany Ledger*, a loyal Bright paper, assured its readers that it opposed Lecompton, and characterized Hughes's speech as "conciliatory" and favoring the "doctrine of non-intervention."⁸⁰

Many Democrats, however, stewed over what had happened. Anti-Lecompton Democrats were stunned to have seen such a "strong hand" of "tricks" and "fraud."⁸¹ "Political excitement is quite warm," reported another Democrat. He noted, "the nominations do not take well because there is not Douglas men enough among them."⁸² Another yearned for a "Moral and Political triumph over the despotism of party leaders."⁸³ They grew angrier when they read the published version of the platform, which endorsed the 1856 national platform agreed to in Cincinnati. Upon closer inspection, a Democrat noted that it carefully talked about "each State" holding power of its realm, but made no mention of territories. In fact, "The word territory [was] carefully avoided in all of [the planks]."⁸⁴

The furious anti-Lecompton Democrats were ready to initiate an intraparty civil war, and called for a second convention on February 23. The chairman was Austin Brown, who with his father had once run the *Indiana State Sentinel* as a

⁸⁰ *New Albany Ledger*, January 9, 1858.

⁸¹ William Wick to William English, January 26, 1858; English Family Papers, Indiana Historical Society; Solomon Akers to John G. Davis, January 25, 1858, John G. Davis Papers, Indiana Historical Society.

⁸² John McNamara to John G. Davis, January 19, 1858, John G. Davis Papers, Indiana Historical Society.

⁸³ H. Cecrest to John G. Davis, January 14, 1858, John G. Davis Papers, Indiana Historical Society.

⁸⁴ Alexander Puett to John G. Davis, January 18, 1858, John G. Davis Papers, Indiana Historical Society.

pro-Bright organ. Now Austin Brown was ready to help lead the Douglas Democrats to defy the party boss.⁸⁵

The meeting of about eight hundred was large and enthusiastic. These Democrats finally removed their “gloves” and denounced Bright “as a tool of the South & of Buchanan.” They vowed not to “follow dictators any longer.” As the attacks continued, one convention spectator reported, except for the applause, “you could have heard a pin fall, so deep and intense was the interest they took in the subject and speaker.” The convention endorsed Stephen Douglas for the presidency and popular sovereignty. The delegates also read Jesse Bright and the *Indiana State Sentinel* out of the party. While the *Sentinel* hoped to downplay the numbers of the convention and dismiss it as the work of “Black Republicanism,” the Bright machine and its party organ were quickly finding themselves overwhelmed by popular opposition. As one Douglas Democrat noted, “The anti Lecompton fever here grows hotter every day, the more discussion, the hotter...”⁸⁶ While the convention opposed the state party leadership, no candidates were nominated to challenge the regular Democratic slate. The convention was more about building an acceptable platform than completely breaking ties with Indiana Democracy.

Not all anti-Lecompton Democrats were willing to join the insurrection. Some editors maintained support, albeit qualified, to Bright. The *Ledger* objected to the lack of “union and harmony” shown by many anti-Lecompton leaders. It

⁸⁵ *Indiana State Sentinel*, February 24, 1858.

⁸⁶ H.K. Wilson to John G. Davis, February 26, 1858, “Some Letters to John G. Davis,” 203-204; *Indiana State Sentinel*, February 24, 1858.

considered the “resolution in relation to the *State Sentinel*” in “bad taste.” It suspected “there was more of spite” about the convention’s proceedings “than anything else.”⁸⁷ Of course, these editors relied on patronage dispensed by Jesse Bright.

* * * * *

The English bill was critical to ensuring that the Indiana Democratic Party was not ripped apart. While it never fully healed the party divisions, it prevented a complete collapse of the state party. Generally, rank-and-file Democrats disliked the black Republican Party, and found the English bill a palatable alternative to Lecompton. Most Indiana Democratic newspaper editors ultimately embraced the English bill which helped pull the party back together. Desperate to square the differences with their readers and the administration, the compromise did the trick. The *New Albany Ledger*, hoping to mend fences with the Bright leadership, claimed that the compromise adhered to the principles of popular sovereignty and hence supported it.⁸⁸ Most of the anti-Lecompton editors who supported the English bill did so from a desire to restore party harmony. Pro-Douglas leaders lamented that nearly all the anti-Lecompton papers had “gone over to Lecompton.” These papers were not “decidedly in its favor,” but accepted “it as the best that could be done to save the party.”⁸⁹ As the *Indiana State Sentinel* insisted, “Lecompton has ceased to be a test of loyalty to the Democracy, and

⁸⁷ *New Albany Ledger*, February, 25, 1858.

⁸⁸ *New Albany Ledger*, May 11, 12, 13, 1858; J. Bacherman to William English, May 21, 1858, English Papers, Indiana Historical Society.

⁸⁹ Austin Brown to John G. Davis, May 12, 1858, John G. Davis Papers, Indiana Historical Society.

the Administration is showing a willingness to receive back to its fold the erring members of the flock who strayed into forbidden fields. We hear no more of the President's determination to crush the 'traitors,' and see no more heads of malcontents struck off by the official ax."⁹⁰ A Democrat gave English cautious praise when he declared the bill "the best that could be done under the circumstances."⁹¹

Not all anti-Lecompton Democrats opposed the English bill. Many had previously expressed support for the policy. Several months earlier, Spencer County Democrats had met in convention where they had offered praise for Stephen Douglas, Joseph Wright and popular sovereignty. Included in their platform was an assertion that "Congress should refer back to the people of Kansas" the question over "ratification or rejection" of the Lecompton Constitution.⁹²

The willingness to close ranks behind the English bill reflected a growing desire by rank-and-file Indiana Democrats to compromise. A lead Douglas organizer confessed: "Our anti-Lecompton people, who were at first an immense majority, seem to prefer adherence to party, and to fear 'disunion' above all things."⁹³ Another Democrat was frustrated that most Spencer County Democrats agreed with Douglas in principle but still supported Buchanan.⁹⁴ An Indiana

⁹⁰ *Indiana State Sentinel*, May 27, 1858.

⁹¹ Milo Stacy to William English, May 30, 1858, William English Papers, Indiana Historical Society.

⁹² *New Albany Ledger*, January 2, 1858.

⁹³ William Wick to John G. Davis, March 7, 1858, John G. Davis Papers, Indiana Historical Society.

⁹⁴ R. Meek to John G. Davis, March 10, 1858, John G. Davis Papers, Indiana Historical Society.

Democrat conceded that “the present position of Douglas may be correct,” but added that this was not the time to oppose the administration. The hardnosed politico reasoned: “The question is not whether the doctrine of Douglas or Buchanan is right and should be sustained but...whether the administration should be sustained, or the party divided...”⁹⁵

Yet, not all anti-Lecompton Democrats were mollified. Bright was not the kind of political leader one would desire to cross, and having organized against him, these Democrats had no future in a state party that he dominated. Hence, they needed the help of Republicans to survive. With English going over to the administration, many suspected fraud. An anti-Lecompton leader asked, “Can English really stand by Bright or is there money in it?”⁹⁶ The English bill remained suspect as well. Too many Southern Democrats rallied behind it and the bill seemingly gave inducements for Kansans to vote for the pro-slavery Constitution.⁹⁷ William Wick also worried about the political impact on northern Democracy should Kansas voters choose the Lecompton Constitution rather than remain a territory. Democrats had already been worried that many Democrats would go over to the Republicans should this happen.⁹⁸

⁹⁵ Simon K Wolf to William English, January 12, 1858, English Papers, Indiana Historical Society.

⁹⁶ A. Sovening to John G. Davis, May 2, 1858, John G. Davis Papers, Indiana Historical Society.

⁹⁷ A common charge among Republicans at the time was that the compromise bill offered a land grant that in essence bribed the people of Kansas to accept the Lecompton Constitution. The reality is that the bill's land grant structure was on par with other states at the time. Of greater legitimate concern was that Kansas would be denied the option of immediately becoming a state should they vote down the Lecompton Constitution.

⁹⁸ William Wick to John G. Davis, April 26, 1858; James Hood to John G. Davis, March 3, 1858, John G. Davis Papers, Indiana Historical Society.

Overall, however, the English Bill undercut much of the anti-Lecompton rebellion. In language indicative of desperation, Austin Brown assured Davis that the losses among the anti-administration ranks were of no concern because “We have now no *cowards in our ranks*.” The free-soil-inclined German community “remains steadfast, and fights manfully for the right.”⁹⁹ Brown even led a group of Democrats to start the *Weekly National Democrat* to oppose the administration.

* * * * *

William English’s Lecompton compromise made possible a legislative withdrawal, but it also meant that a divided Democratic Party would face a rejuvenated Republican challenge in the 1858 congressional elections. These elections would determine whether Bright could control his party and whether the party could retain its hold on Indiana politics. Douglas hoped to cultivate anti-administration Democrats to build his own alliance of supporters in Congress. Meanwhile, Republicans hoped to wrestle the state away from the Indiana Democracy.

The major difficulty for Douglas was that Bright still controlled the party machinery. The Indiana senator may have been too pro-slavery for the average Indiana voter, but these voters were loyal to regular Democratic nominees. So long as Bright could control the state and congressional nominations, most Indiana Democrats, even those sympathetic to Douglas, would remain loyal to the regular Democratic nominee. Hence, the Little Giant needed to mobilize

⁹⁹ Austin Brown to John G. Davis, May 11, 13, 1858, John G. Davis Papers, Indiana Historical Society.

Democrats who were unconditionally loyal to his cause and gain cooperation from Republicans in order to elect pro-Douglas congressional candidates.

Sensing an implosion within the Democratic ranks, Hoosier Republicans, as they were now officially called, sought an anti-Lecompton coalition with Douglas Democrats. While there was talk of merging the two factions into a single party, few thought this was practical. On December 14, 1857, only a few days after Douglas officially broke from the administration, Schuyler Colfax met with the Illinois Senator in a secret meeting. The two long-time political enemies now seemed to have a common purpose. Both men were skeptical they could form an alliance believing once “this issue was settled right, new issues would...divide all again.” They were still inclined to keep their options open believing “the future would decide our duties & our positions.”¹⁰⁰ As it became clear to the public that Colfax was working with Douglas, the *Register* assured its readers of the “maxim” that it was “our first duty...to that which lies nearest to us.” Mindful that Douglas had long been seen as the enemy, the paper reasoned, “even if his motives are purely personal and selfish, he hazards far more with his party by taking his bold stand, than the Republicans hazard, by co-operating with him on this single issue...”¹⁰¹ Even after the English bill, Douglas’s Indiana supporters and Republicans continued to cooperate as they viewed the slaveholding Bright and the administration as the enablers of the slave-power.

¹⁰⁰ Schuyler Colfax Memorandum, Colfax MSS, Indiana State Library.

¹⁰¹ *St. Joseph Valley Register*, January 7, 1858

The deal was not a formal alliance. Both sides agreed that their working relationship was only likely to last as long as the issue remained, rather than any kind of permanent political realignment. When Republicans organized at their state convention, their platform declared “freedom” was “national and slavery sectional,” and that “congress has the constitutional power to exclude slavery from the national territories.” It then added that the Republican Party “now” opposed “its extension into any of the territories” and would “use all proper and constitutional means to prevent such extension.”¹⁰² Douglas and Colfax were keen realists who knew that the Republicans were stronger in the north of the state and Democrats in the south. Hence to deny seats to pro-administration Democrats, Douglas pressed anti-Lecompton Democrats to support Republican candidates in the northern congressional districts, while the Republicans would rally around anti-Lecompton Democrats in most of the southern districts.¹⁰³ Ultimately, their alliance was an uneasy one. Anti-Lecompton Democrats were content to run their own candidates in the congressional races, while maintaining loyal support for the state ticket where national issues would be less important.¹⁰⁴

One exception to this coordinated effort was in the third congressional district, which encompassed the southeastern region of the state along the Ohio River. In the wake of the Kansas Nebraska Act, it had gone to a former Whig who had run as a fusionist. In the 1856 election, however, Democrats had used race

¹⁰² *State Platforms*, 16.

¹⁰³ Schuyler Colfax to Hannah Matthews, February 21, 1858, quoted in Smith, 95. In the letter to his mother on the subject of Douglas, Colfax wrote, “It will surprise you still more when I tell you that he is for my re-election!”

¹⁰⁴ Elbert, “Southern Indiana Politics,” 54.

to taint the Republicans, alienate old-line Whigs, and regain the seat. With the 1860 presidential election in mind, Republicans wanted to know if the Lecompton crisis had bolstered their strength in a district that could determine whether Republicans could capture the entire state. Therefore, anti-Lecompton and administration Democrats each ran their own candidates and the Republicans ran their candidate.¹⁰⁵

While voters in the third congressional district were opposed to the slave-power, they were equally suspicious of racial egalitarianism. To win this seat, Democrats had to paint Republicans as egalitarians, and the Republicans had to convince voters that they would uphold white supremacy. While administration Democrats insisted that their opponents were “mongrel Black Republicans,” Michael Garber’s *Courier* insisted that the Republican Party “WON’T have them in the State, free or slave.” Garber proclaimed, “Nigger! Nigger!! What would Mr. Buchanan’s people do without the eternal inevitable nigger?” The *Courier* hoped to blunt Democratic charges by claiming that the Dred Scott decision would open the door for blacks to enter the state.¹⁰⁶

Even in northern Indiana, Republicans found it necessary to blunt Democratic charges of racial equality. Schuyler Colfax’s paper was loath to directly engage in racial demagoguery. Instead, the paper copied material from other sources that engaged in coarse racial appeals. It reprinted one of Illinois Senator Lyman Trumbull’s more racially charged speeches. In attacking the

¹⁰⁵ Peek, “Upland Southerners,” 269.

¹⁰⁶ *Madison Courier*, August 11, 1858.

Dred Scott decision, the speech talked about slaveholders bringing their black slaves “with flat noses, thick lips, and woolly heads” into the territories. More than the mere presence of blacks, slaveholder amalgamation produced slaves “a little whiter” with “some of them...so white you can hardly distinguish the negro blood in them.” Republicans, on the other hand, stood for “free white men, who do not want anything to do with negroes [and] woollyheads.”¹⁰⁷

Republicans were also determined to battle for the votes of German immigrants. For years these immigrants had identified with the Democratic Party. They opposed the moral reform impulses prevalent among Whigs and Republicans, but German immigrants had often come to the United States in search of universal liberty. Less racist than many native-born Democrats, Germans were more receptive to the anti-slavery cause. Most had remained leery of Republican nativism. By 1858, however, Republicans had begun to downplay these issues and had nominated German candidates for key positions. The pro-slavery machinations of Bright also played a role alienating these anti-slavery voters. This transition was made all the more poignant when the *Evansville Volksbote* officially switched its allegiance to the Republican Party.¹⁰⁸

As Republicans and anti-Lecompton Democrats threatened to undercut the pro-Bright Democratic nominees, the *Sentinel* sought to claim the mantle of Douglas as it supported the Bright men. Throughout the fall canvass, the main Democratic organ reported on the debates between Douglas and his Republican

¹⁰⁷ *St. Joseph Valley Register*, September 16, 1858.

¹⁰⁸ Elbert, “Southern Indiana Politics,” 68.

rival. It reminded its readers that Illinois Republican Senator Lyman Trumbull had been stumping the state as a “bitter opponent of popular sovereignty” in his efforts to elect Republicans. Not only were “Black Republicans” against Douglas, but its “debauched” supporters favored allowing “free negroes to vote.”¹⁰⁹ Though Bright had become antagonistic to both Douglas and popular sovereignty, the party organ sought to profess alignment with the Little Giant.

Going into the congressional elections, Democrats focused much of their effort on winning the southern Indiana congressional seats. In the First congressional district, in the southwest corner of the state, Democrats either disdained anti-slavery agitation or were sympathetic to the South. The regular Democrats re-nominated William Niblack. The Bright Democrat had consistently voted to admit Kansas under the Lecompton Constitution before eventually agreeing to the English bill. At his nominating district convention, administration Democrats broadened their support by assuring voters that neither Lecompton nor the English bill would be a test of party loyalty. During the campaign, Douglas hoped to cobble a coalition of Republicans and loyal Douglas backers to support the “Independent, anti-Lecompton Democratic” candidate. With the English bill having passed, the first district, likely the most southern oriented district in Indiana, felt little need to agitate. The anti-Lecompton Democrat was made especially vulnerable as he had been a Whig in his younger years. Ultimately Niblack would secure reelection.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹ *Indiana State Sentinel*, September 1, 22, 23, 1858.

¹¹⁰ *New Albany Ledger*, July 20, September 22, 1858.

In the second district, regular Democrats re-nominated William English, who had craftily avoided supporting the Lecompton Constitution while maintaining his friendship with Bright. His leadership in providing the face-saving compromise bill for the administration boosted his status and gave him an opportunity to appeal to his constituents as a principled supporter of popular sovereignty. He would easily win reelection.¹¹¹

In the third district, incumbent pro-Lecompton Democrat James Hughes faced a three-way race. Party loyalty was enough for him to garner the bulk of Democratic votes. The anti-Lecompton Democrat, however, pulled in a significant enough amount of support to split the Democratic vote. Furthermore, Republicans had been able to successfully inoculate themselves to charges of racial equality. The Republican candidate, William Dunn, was easily able to carry the southern Indiana district. If Democrats could no longer exploit the issue of race, they would be in big trouble.

Throughout the northern portions of the state, anti-Lecompton Democrats threw their support behind Republicans to easily achieve victory over the regular Democratic nominees. The only exception was the sixth congressional district where Republicans united with anti-Lecompton Democrats to reelect Douglas Democrat John G. Davis. In all, only three regular Indiana Democrats were elected to Congress. The congressional elections showed the toll the intraparty

¹¹¹ *New Albany Ledger*, September 8, 18, 1858.

divisions had upon the Democrats. In all, Republicans secured seven congressional seats, up from five in the previous session.¹¹²

The election was a disaster for Indiana Democrats. They won only three congressional seats. Douglas Democratic leaders had helped a number of Republicans win, but were only able to secure a House seat for one of their own. The major winners were the Republicans. The American Party played little role as Republicans successfully consolidated much of their support. If they could continue their success in two years, Indiana would go against the Democratic Party in a presidential election for the first time in decades. Republicans had worked hard to shed the stigma of racial egalitarianism. If the national party could nominate someone who was careful not to offend the white racial order, he could be a threat to the Hoosier Democracy.

Clearly if Bright desired to keep power, he had to adapt. He needed to jettison his pro-southern loyalties and show that he was for the party of white men un-beholden to the dictates of the slave-power. Bright would have none of it. He defiantly wrote, "I have not, nor shall I ever regard a set of men in this Country who call themselves 'anti-Lecompton Democrats,' in any other light than Abolitionists, and most them rotten in every sense of the term." I would defy "every one of them, from the lying hypocritical Demagogical Master Douglas, down to the servant puppy in the kennel."¹¹³

¹¹² *St. Joseph Valley Register*, November 4, 1858; Elbert, "Southern Indiana Politics," 74.

¹¹³ Jesse Bright to Allen Hamilton, December 1858 (copy), Jesse Bright Papers, Lilly Library.

Most Indiana politicians who supported Bright were practical men. Few shared his overtly pro-southern attitudes. Bright's hold on power was based on his ability to convince political allies that he was powerful and could brighten their political or financial future. His weakness was now exposed and Bright's position as party leader was in serious jeopardy. The senator had weathered many political difficulties throughout his career, but now he set his political life upon a cast. Even he must have wondered whether he could survive.

*Slave, I have set my life upon a cast
And I will stand the hazard of the die.
I think there be six Richmonds in the field;
Five have I slain today instead of him.
Richard III, Act V Scene IV*

Chapter 7

The Political Downfall of Jesse D. Bright: 1859-1860

Jesse Bright had managed to hold onto control of the Indiana Democratic Party during the 1858 elections, but thereafter his power quickly evaporated. For years he had ruled in an uneasy coalition with conservative Democrats. Now many of them were his open enemies. The Republicans, meanwhile, were threatening to capture the state in the 1860 presidential election. William Seward seemed likely to win the Republican nomination, and Stephen Douglas was now determined to claim the Democratic nomination that Bright had helped deny him in 1856. As far as Bright was concerned, Seward was a “Black Republican” and Douglas was nearly the same. As much as he loathed the Republicans, his mission was to destroy Douglas. By 1860, Bright was a weakened figure, but he was not a man to go quietly. Never burdened by self-doubt, if he were to fail, he would do so in spectacular fashion.

* * * * *

Having lost badly in the 1858 congressional elections, many Indiana Democrats realized that they needed to regroup. The *Indiana State Sentinel* observed there was “no time for recrimination—we are free to confess that

neither the Lecompton nor the anti-Lecompton faction have manifested sufficient forbearance of each other's peculiarities of opinion." In language that Bright could never accept, the editor insisted that if Democrats were "obliged by a sense of duty to oppose [the] Administration on a particular point, [Bright] should respect their sincerity and applaud their independence. To exact a rigid conformity to his own standard of opinion, would be an excess of tyranny incompatible with the spirit of Democratic faith and practice."¹ The *New Albany Ledger* shared similar sentiments. Having recently backed the administration, it was now ready to support Stephen Douglas for the 1860 nomination. The paper criticized the "unnatural coalition" of doughface Democrats and "black Republicans" who sought to "crush" him.² If these Democrats thought Bright was inclined to follow, they were quickly disabused. Fitch, Bright's junior partner in the Senate, gave an early 1859 speech attacking the Little Giant. This prompted the *Ledger* to sneer that the effort was that of a "servant" pleasing "his master."³ There would be no reconciliation.

Both the Democratic presses and ambitious political leaders were now asserting their independence from Bright. Thomas Hendricks had served as a land commissioner under the Buchanan administration, but he shrewdly remained quiet during the Lecompton controversy. During the summer of 1859, as he gathered support for a gubernatorial nomination, Hendricks resigned his office in an effort to distance himself from Bright and the administration. As one

¹ *Indiana State Sentinel*, February 3, 1859.

² *New Albany Ledger*, January 1, 1859.

³ *New Albany Ledger*, January 10, 1859.

Douglas Democrat observed, those who sought statewide nominations sought to show themselves “the peculiar Douglas candidate.” Few desired to show “friendship or affinity with Mr. Bright” being that he represented “the setting sun.”⁴

The *Indiana State Sentinel*'s soon became outwardly hostile to Bright and his cronies. Former congressman John L. Robinson had become Bright's political enforcer, but the *Sentinel* was no longer taking orders. It declared, “We do not think a few men own the party or that it is an organization sustained for their particular benefit.” Referring specifically to Robinson, although obliquely to Bright, the editors declared that he had become “so dictatorial and overbearing in his manners as often to become obsolete.” Indiana Democrats were “disposed to do their own thinking, and determine for themselves the policy of the party.”⁵ By the end of 1859 the paper officially supported Douglas for the nomination.⁶ An editor for the *New Albany Ledger* flatly told a Bright lieutenant that his paper “was no man's organ.” While he denied loyalty to any particular faction, he declared that in regard to Lecompton “Douglas was *right*.”⁷

The John Brown raid that October caused some excitement in Indiana politics but it did little to change the shifting political alignments. Democrats, of course, seized upon the raid to suggest that Republican doctrines inevitably led to extremism. Republicans gleefully noted that Indiana Governor Ashbel Willard's brother-in-law had participated in the Brown raid. Still, even though Willard tried

⁴ *Indiana State Sentinel*, July 30, 1859.

⁵ *Indiana State Sentinel*, September 26, 1859.

⁶ Kenneth Stampp, *Indiana Politics During the Civil War* (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Bureau, 1949), 17, *Indiana State Sentinel*, December 14, 1859.

⁷ J. Bachman to William English, January 25, 1860, William Hayden English Family Papers, Indiana Historical Society.

to save his wife's brother from a death sentence, few Indianans believed that the pro-Bright governor had been involved in the affair.⁸

By the end of 1859 the more serious political question was whether Bright could once again dominate the state convention. With control of the party at stake, organizing became the chief occupation of the Democratic factions. The Douglas Democrats were initially disappointed to learn that the convention was to be controlled by selected delegates. In other words, each county would organize their own selection of delegates for the state convention. For years Bright had been the master at manipulating this process, but now his opponents were determined to beat him at his own game.⁹ Throughout the late summer and fall of 1859 as Democrats held county conventions, a consistent pattern developed. The pro-Bright conventions usually produced planks praising Buchanan. Some also endorsed Joseph Lane for the presidency. Nearly all of the pro-Bright platforms lauded the Dred Scott decision as the final arbiter of territorial disputes over slavery. While these platforms professed devotion to the 1856 national platform, they made no explicit reference to popular sovereignty. The county platforms controlled by Douglas Democrats had their own consistent message. Most endorsed Stephen Douglas, and they also endorsed popular sovereignty. Few mentioned the Dred Scott decision. While most ignored Buchanan, some

⁸ *New Albany Ledger*, November 4, 1859.

⁹ Charles Zimmerman, "The Origin and Rise of the Republican Party in Indiana from 1854 to 1860" *Indiana Magazine of History* 13 (September, 1917), 374.

condemned his actions regarding Lecompton. The anti-Lecompton Democrats also objected to federal mandates regarding slavery in the territories.¹⁰

Even in his home county of Jefferson, Bright faced challenges. When his supporters packed the delegate selection committee and tried to adjourn, a Douglas Democrat objected. The chair ruled him out of order, but the delegates overruled the selection committee chair. Douglas Democrats were then able to alter the selection process for a later county convention, which allowed the Douglas Democrats to wrestle control away from Bright.¹¹

In Lawrence County, where delegates were selected by township primaries, the pro-Bright forces were also outnumbered. In arguing that not enough delegates had been produced by the township elections, they succeeded in having the convention vote to choose delegates. When Bright's men quickly gained the upper hand, the Douglas delegates walked out in disgust, and organized a separate convention of their own to elect delegates. In fact, several counties sent competing delegations to the state convention.¹²

Douglas, it was soon clear, had gained the upper hand. Austin Brown reported to the Illinoisan, "From information obtained by personal interviews...from reports of the action of County Conventions, I am led to believe that your friends are at this time, in the majority—sufficiently so to secure them

¹⁰ *Indiana State Sentinel*, July 15, 20, August 6, 24, September 6, 12, October 1, 14, November 7, 22, 30, December 6, 7, 10, 12, 14, 15, 21, 22, 31, 1859, January 11, 1860.

¹¹ *New Albany Ledger*, September 23, 1859.

¹² *Indiana State Sentinel*, December 22, 1859.

the control of the State Convention...¹³ As Douglas Democrats gained success in the various county conventions, another correspondent wrote, “The press and the people are with us. I have no doubt as to the result of the January convention.”¹⁴ Bright seemed to have understood the political situation as well. Sensing his loss of control, he crossed over into Kentucky to lobby their county conventions. While Bright personally supported Lane for the nomination, he knew many Kentuckians favored their own favorite son, former Secretary of the Treasury James Guthrie. The Indiana senator encouraged this sentiment in order to stop Douglas.¹⁵

When Democrats met at their state convention on January 11, 1860, a bitter fight seemed imminent. Jesse Bright arrived at Indianapolis accompanied by an official from the Treasury Department. Rumors flared that the old party boss intended to bribe enough delegates to get his way. Douglas Democrats were confident in their numbers, but they were also nervous that Bright could instill enough fear—and make enough bribes—to get his way on the platform and the nominations.¹⁶ Because of disputes arising at the county level, delegates from Hancock, Jackson, Jennings, Laporte, Lawrence, Randolph and Spencer counties were initially left unseated as the convention met to elect a temporary chairman. The contest pitted Douglas partisans under the leadership of Lew Wallace against Bright’s loyalists who were led by John L. Robinson. The

¹³ Austin Brown to Stephen Douglas, November 28, 1859 quoted in Wayne Van Der Weele, “Jesse David Bright: Master Politician from the Old Northwest” (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 1958), 231.

¹⁴ Gordon Tanner to Stephen Douglas, November 5, 1859 quoted in Van Der Weele, “Jesse David Bright,” 231.

¹⁵ Van Der Weele, “Jesse David Bright,” 239.

¹⁶ *Indianapolis Daily Journal*, January 12, 1860.

Douglas forces prevailed by 189 ½ to 174 ½. With victory in hand, the convention voted to seat the Douglas delegates from the disputed counties.¹⁷

The rest of the convention proceedings signaled the collapse of the Bright political machine. While the convention offered token support for the Buchanan administration and parroted Stephen Douglas's finesse on the Dred Scott decision, the convention endorsed a resolution emphatically asserting the right of popular sovereignty. Bright's supporters tried to convince the Douglas Democrats to accept a "compromise." They desired to have the delegates pledged to former Indianan Joseph Lane of Oregon, or at the very least, leave the Indiana delegates unpledged. As one convention spectator observed of these maneuvers, "the whole Convention burst out in an uproarious laugh" that lasted "for several minutes." Indiana Democrats were well aware of how Bright had used this maneuver in 1856 to deny Douglas at the national convention. Instead, they nominated a slate of delegates to the national convention who were committed to giving Stephen Douglas the Democratic nomination for presidency. As one summed of Bright, "He is dead, and d—d in this state and none so poor as to do him rescue."¹⁸

After the convention, some Democratic newspapers tried to soften the rebuke. The *New Albany Ledger* asserted that it was "the misfortune of Senator Bright to have many indiscreet friends." It was these folks who had "deceived" the

¹⁷ Zimmerman, "The Origin and Rise of the Republican Party," 375. *Indianapolis Daily Journal*, January 12, 13, 1860.

¹⁸ Ezra Read to John G. Davis, January 15, 1860, John G. Davis Papers, Indiana Historical Society.

senator into believing public sentiment was with the administration. It was their blundering actions which had caused “many Democrats (and ourselves among the number) to speak of him in perhaps too harsh a manner.”¹⁹ If this was intended to placate the senator, Bright would have none of it. In refusing to accept the convention proceedings, he incredulously asserted, “Yes, the State Convention did instruct for Douglas,” but the leaders at the convention “consented to these instructions without consulting me.”²⁰

Bright, in fact, was now consumed with stopping Douglas. Unable to hold Indiana, he focused instead on lobbying the delegations of the other states at the Democratic National Convention in Charleston. As he had in 1856, the old party boss was assisted by the pro-slavery senators John Slidell of Louisiana and James Bayard of Delaware.²¹

Bright had many local allies in Charleston on whom he could appeal for assistance. He and his men quickly established a headquarters in the mansion of a wealthy friend. Here the Indiana Senator was in his prime. A contemporary described:

The heavy, closely-shaven gentleman, with yellow vest, open, that its wearer may have the benefit of the breeze—the gentleman leaning against the railing, in his chair, looking like a business man more than a Senator (if we may be allowed such a distinction), is Jesse D. Bright, who has long been the king caucus of Indiana. Mr. Bright’s hatred of Douglas is, perhaps, just now, the strongest passion of his soul. Douglas voted to exclude him from the Senate,

¹⁹ *New Albany Ledger*, January 16, 1860.

²⁰ William Woollen, *Biographical and Historical Sketches of Early Indiana* (Indianapolis: Hammond & Co., 1883), 230.

²¹ Roy Nichols, *The Disruption of American Democracy* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1948), 294.

and their relations are those of irreconcilable and deadly hate. It is reported that he swears he will stump Indiana, county by county, against Douglas, if he should be nominated.²²

Bright's determination to derail Douglas was more than a personal grudge match. He was determined to secure slavery as the United States formed states out of the territories. During the convention, William Yancey of Alabama spoke for the pro-slavery sentiment against Douglas when he observed that years earlier, an "abolitionist" would have been "pelted with rotten eggs" throughout the North. Today the abolitionist sentiment "has spread and grown into three bands—the Black Republicans, free soilers, and squatter-sovereignty men—all representing the common sentiment that slavery is wrong."²³

Bright and his southern compatriots had to find a candidate who could protect southern interests without alienating all of the North. Their initial choice was Senator Robert Hunter of Virginia, but Hunter lost favor when he made overtures to Northern Democrats by supporting the 1856 national platform and its popular sovereignty plank. Two other possible candidates who gained favor among the southern fire eaters were John Breckinridge and Joseph Lane, who were both close allies with Bright.²⁴

Also divisive was the challenge of producing a platform at the Charleston convention. Southern fire eaters wanted a plank endorsing congressional

²² Murat Halstead, *Caucuses of 1860: A History of the National Political Conventions of the National Political Conventions of the Current Presidential Campaign* (Columbus: Follett, Foster and Co., 1860), 12.

²³ Quoted in James Ford Rhodes, *History of the United States from the Compromise of 1850 to The McKinley-Bryan Campaign of 1896* vol. 2 (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1920), 404.

²⁴ Nichols, *Disruption of Democracy*, 294-295.

legislation to guarantee slavery in the territories. The Douglas men, however, wanted only to affirm the principles of the 1856 Cincinnati platform. This would endorse popular sovereignty without actually referring to the principle by name. Many southerners threatened to bolt if the Douglas platform was adopted, but Bright wanted to keep them at the convention in order to ensure the defeat of Douglas. Hence, he and his allies proposed a platform that required Democrats to “abide by the decisions of the Supreme Court of the United States on the question of Constitutional law.” By insisting on honoring the Dred Scott decision, the party meant to guarantee slavery in the territories in all but explicit language. The deep southern delegates, however, had little use for Bright’s cleverness. When the platform was adopted, 50 southern delegates bolted the convention.²⁵

If crafting a platform was difficult, agreeing to a nominee proved impossible. Through all 57 ballots, Indiana’s Democratic delegates stood firm behind Douglas. Bright and his southern colleagues, however, ensured that he failed to gain the necessary two-thirds majority. Consequently, the convention adjourned to meet six weeks later in Baltimore. Upon reconvening, the convention had to decide whether to seat the southern bolters. The Douglas forces seated new delegations for Louisiana and Alabama delegations, which gave Douglas another advantage. Still, most southern delegates refused to support him. Finally, the Bright men sent an ultimatum to Douglas’s floor manager demanding that Douglas withdraw in favor of either Georgia’s Howell

²⁵ Austin Venable, “The Conflict Between the Douglas and Yancey Forces in the Charleston Convention,” *Journal of Southern History* 8 (May, 1942), 226-241; Van Der Weele, “Jesse David Bright, 242-245.

Cobb or New York's doughface Democrat Horatio Seymour. Douglas's men believed neither man could win a northern state. When Douglas remained, the southern delegates, along with their most loyal northern supporters, bolted. Shortly afterward, Douglas received the Baltimore convention's nomination.²⁶

Southern Democrats were determined to set their own course. The core of the southern Democratic Party, as well as a few northern allies, met at a rump convention elsewhere in Baltimore. They quickly adopted a platform ensuring white citizens had "an equal right to settle with their property in the Territory," and that such property could not be infringed upon by "Congressional or Territorial legislation." In other words, slavery was guaranteed in the territories, and no entity, neither congress nor local populations, could infringe upon it. The platform additionally stated that it was the "duty of the Federal Government, in all its departments, to protect, when necessary," the rights of slave property in the territories. For its presidential ticket, the convention selected two Bright allies: John C. Breckinridge and Joseph Lane.²⁷

As the Democrats divided into two sectional parties, the Republicans in Indiana sought a candidate who could appeal to the Hoosier electorate. Initially Colfax believed Missourian Edward Bates was the best choice. The "main point" to rally a winning coalition, he thought, would be the stance that "the U.S. shall not extend slavery into any country where they do not find it already

²⁶ Nichols, *The Disruption of American Democracy*, 316-318.

²⁷ Nichols, *The Disruption of American Democracy*, 319-320.

established.”²⁸ William Seward, Colfax feared, would be perceived as a radical because of his advocacy of rights for blacks. This would “be a heavy dead weight” of “unjust” “prejudices” against the New York Senator.²⁹

Abraham Lincoln seemed a slim possibility. The Illinois Republican privately urged Colfax to encourage his state to “look beyond our noses” to ensure the party created a platform palatable to Republican factions in all parts of the North. The implication was that Edward Bates’s conservatism, particularly his support for forced colonization, would create problems in many of the northeastern states. In his response, Colfax agreed about the delicacy of the situation, offering that such “suggestions” had “already occurred to me.” He believed a majority of northerners were willing to support the Republican cause. “But it is equally evident” he continued, “that making up this majority, are men of all shades & gradations...” Finding a candidate who could unite these men would require skill and dexterity “worthier than Napoleon or [Victor] Emanuel (sic).”³⁰ The implication was that Lincoln lacked the credentials and political seasoning to perform such a delicate task.

The national Republican Party held its convention in May, and chose to meet in Chicago, thought to be a neutral site, in order to avoid favoring any of the major candidates. Additionally, Republicans hoped to build greater support in the old northwest, as this was the key to electoral victory. In addition to Seward and

²⁸ *The Diary of Edward Bates 1859-1866* Vol. 4. Howard K. Beale, ed. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1933), 11.

²⁹ Schuyler Colfax to Samuel Bowles, March 1859 quoted in Smith, *Schuyler Colfax*, 117.

³⁰ Abraham Lincoln to Schuyler Colfax, July 6, 1859, *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* ed. Roy Basler (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 3: 390-391.

Edward Bates, Simon Cameron (Pennsylvania) and Salmon Chase (Ohio) had strong support. And soon it became clear that Abraham Lincoln was also an acceptable candidate. He was moderate on slavery who was not known for being anti- or pro-nativist. The Indiana delegation was particularly receptive to the candidate who had spent his formidable years as a Hoosier. Seward, they feared, was too radical and Bates's nativism made him obnoxious to the state's German population. Hence, from the first ballot onward, the Hoosier Republicans backed Lincoln.³¹ On the first ballot, Seward received 173 ½ votes of the 233 needed to secure nomination. Lincoln stood at second place with a surprisingly strong at 102 votes. On subsequent balloting, Lincoln was able to pull ahead and win the nomination.

* * * * *

With the campaign underway, Bright continued his mission to destroy Douglas. He took charge of organizing Indiana for John C. Breckinridge. Bright was likely aware that Breckinridge had no chance of winning Indiana. Instead, he sought to divide the party and deny Indiana to Douglas. Of the state's sixty-nine Democratic papers, none were initially for Breckinridge. When the editor of the *Jackson Union* declared for him, the paper's owners had him removed. The editor of the *Warrick Democrat* personally favored Breckinridge, but endorsed Douglas as the better alternative to Lincoln.³²

³¹David Donald, *Lincoln* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 249.

³² Elmer Elbert, "Southern Indiana Politics on the Eve of the Civil War" (Indiana University: PhD. diss., 1967),128.

With the newspapers against him, Bright established his own paper, the *Old Line Guard*. According to one scholar, “there can be no doubt” that Bright was the paper’s main financier.³³ His choice of editor, A.B. Carlton, drew some derision from the pro-Douglas Democrats. As editor of the *Bloomington News Letter* in 1856, Carlton had been a pro-Douglas editor. At the time, he had given some perfunctory praise for Bright before boldly stating, “the heart of Indianians will leap with one accord to the young Giant of the West—the bold and unflinching advocate of the great Democratic principles of popular sovereignty...We believe the Democracy of this Union owe the Presidency to Stephen A. Douglas.” The *Old Line Guard* editor innocently explained that he had been “highly eulogistic of the Hon. Jesse D. Bright,” and Douglas, Carlton insisted, had merely been his second choice. Still, Bright and Carlton were practical men. The Indiana senator needed an editor, and as was usually the case, he found an editor who needed money.³⁴

On July 31, the pro-Breckinridge Democrats met in Indianapolis for a state convention. Bright’s men produced a platform that denied the right of popular sovereignty and guaranteed to slave-owners the “equal right to settle in” the territories “with whatever property they may legally possess.” It insisted that “the real aim of the Republican party” was to “destroy” slavery. The platform seemed to indicate the underlying source of Bright’s pro-slavery views. Freedom, the platform suggested, would likely “place four million negroes now in this county

³³ Van Der Weele, “Jesse David Bright,” 254.

³⁴ *Indiana State Sentinel*, August 21, 1860; *Old Line Guard*, August 23, 1860.

upon a legal and political equality with the whites, leading to a mixture of races and consequent social equality...”³⁵

It was indicative—and revealing—of Bright’s commitment to his cause that he stepped out from behind the scenes and took to the stump on behalf of Breckinridge to attack Douglas. In part, of course, he did so because he had few allies to assist him. His old manager, John L. Robinson, had passed away earlier in the year. Graham Fitch and William English remained the only other able Bright lieutenants. Initially, English sought to maintain “impenetrable silence” on the election, but he eventually backed Breckinridge.³⁶ As Bright toured southern Indiana, he pleaded with English, “You must meet us at New Albany on Wednesday and Seymour Thursday. I tell you now, it is important that you should.”³⁷

Republicans were largely amused by Bright’s efforts, but Douglas Democrats were bitter. The *New Albany Ledger* noted that the Indiana Democracy had been loyal to the Senator for years. It’s “Men [had] voted for him who at heart hated him,” but felt “bound to stand by the action of the caucus and the wishes of the majority.”³⁸ Now that he was no longer in control, Bright was engaged in a suicidal effort to split the vote and deny Douglas Indiana. Apparently there were some murmurings that Bright might be lynched along the canvas. He confessed “I do not know that I can protect myself against mobs, but

³⁵ *Old Line Guard*, August 2, 1860.

³⁶ quoted in Elbert, “Southern Indiana Politics,” 135.

³⁷ Jesse Bright to William English, September 23, 1860, William Hayden English Family Papers, Indiana Historical Society.

³⁸ *New Albany Ledger*, July 19, 1860.

I feel physically equal to any..." Throughout the speech Bright likened himself to a soldier, as a longtime political veteran "I have seen some service, and shrink not from the smoke and perils of the battle." Likening himself to Macbeth, Bright quoted from Shakespeare, "'Lay on, Macduff!' I court and defy your hostility, whether it comes from speakers or pensioned press." His martial language mostly avoided the political issues. The senator largely spoke of the processes by which the parties grew divided, blaming the Douglas supporters as those who originally bolted from the Democratic Party. Bright stated explicitly that he wished not to offer any "extended argument of the political issues, dividing the various parties." Bright seemed to recognize the sentiments arrayed against his pro-slavery candidates. He thus carefully phrased, "however much we may be opposed to the institution of slavery—however much we may sympathize with those in bondage, while the constitution remains as it is, and while the Supreme Court of the U[nited] States...is made the judge of rights arising under that Constitution, we must be governed by this decision." Speaking generally, Bright continued, "however much in principle he may be opposed to the decision of the Supreme Court, he is bound, nevertheless, to obey and stand by its judgment."³⁹ Later when Bright stumped in southern Indiana, he dropped his caveats to assert, "There are thousands of honest Democrats deluded by [Douglas], under his cry of Popular Sovereignty...but the Popular Sovereignty that you should adhere to, is that interpreted by the Supreme Court of the United States." Popular sovereignty had become such a shibboleth that Bright apparently hoped to redefine it to mean the right to carry slaves into the territories regardless of local

³⁹ *Old Line Guard*, August 9, 1860.

popular opinion. Bright insisted that Douglas's version of the term would inherently lead to Republicanism. The Little Giant was "a second edition of Sewardism."⁴⁰

While Bright avoided direct references to slavery, his loyal lieutenant offered a more candid view of the issues at stake. William English was one of the few politicians to remain loyal to the senator. The office seekers and job hunters had long moved elsewhere. Speaking as a hardened Bright loyalist, English declared earlier on the House floor: "in Republican minds, the freedom of the negro is inseparably connected with the idea of his right to be clothed with the privileges and immunities of the white man." For English, this was nonsense. He explained, "we have no 'holy horror' to express because they are held in a state of slavery in the South." Slavery in the South was essential as "[t]hey are better off there than they were in Africa; and, if set free, would be too worthless and improvident to take care of themselves, and would become a burden and a curse to the white people near whom they might reside."⁴¹ This last remark referred to southern Indianans. While English may not have owned slaves, he shared Bright's view that the preservation of slavery in the southern states was essential to maintaining race control.

As Democrats prepared for the election, English hoped to use racial antipathy to mobilize support. He wanted to document the ways Republicans favored "equalizing the two races." In a letter to a Massachusetts newspaper editor, English inquired about a number of racial issues. He queried whether

⁴⁰ *Indianapolis Daily Journal*, September 2, 1860.

⁴¹ *Congressional Globe*, 36th Congress, 1st Session, January 3, 1860, 316.

blacks could freely immigrate, serve on juries, vote, hold office, or engage in interracial marriage. English wanted to show that free blacks were fraught with “improvidence, immorality, pauperism and crime.” He desired confirmation that blacks were only useful when confined to “menial capacities under the eye and direction of white persons.”⁴² By extension, the Bright loyalists hoped to taint Douglas with the same stigma of racial equality. A delegation of Orange County Democrats refused to support the Little Giant as he had worked in “combination with Seward, Chase, Hale and all the other Black Republicans to defeat” Buchanan.⁴³ The *Old Line Guard* was even blunter, declaring its two major opponents the “Black Republican and Mulatto-Republican coalition.”⁴⁴

For most Indiana Democrats, the central issue in the sectional debate had always been popular sovereignty. The right of white settlers to determine their local institutions was absolute. They were especially bitter that Bright would place “slave property upon a higher ground than any other.” The *Sentinel* argued this position was a “dangerous and untenable” for any true Democrat to take.⁴⁵ Indiana’s Douglas Democrats portrayed themselves as the true national party. While Douglas Democrats were only marginally more competitive than Republicans in the South, the *Sentinel* insisted that Lincoln’s party appealed merely to the North, while the Southern Democratic Party appealed mainly to the interests of the South. Indiana’s Douglas Democrats believed their popular

⁴² William English to [Gassea?], February 1, 1860, William Hayden English Family Papers, Indiana Historical Society.

⁴³ J.N. Riley et al. to William English, August 8, 1860, William Hayden English Family Papers, Indiana Historical Society.

⁴⁴ *Old Line Guard*, July 26, 1860.

⁴⁵ *Indiana State Sentinel*, September 13, 1860.

sovereignty platform appealed broadly in all sections.⁴⁶ Their opposition to the expansion of the slave power was broadly shared by their Republican counterparts. The only differences lay in the means of checking the slave power and the extent of their prejudice toward blacks.

With Bright drawing some Democrats away from the northern Democratic presidential ticket, there was an open question whether they might unite in nominating candidates for statewide office. At times, the parties in Indiana would divide over a presidential contest, yet close ranks for a state-wide contest. Pro-Breckinridge Democrats in Indiana apparently hoped to work in similar fashion as they had done with anti-Lecompton Democrats in 1858. W.H. Talbot, the state chair of the southern Democratic Party, offered to create a joint statewide ticket. Douglas Democrats had already nominated their ticket and had little desire to accommodate Bright.⁴⁷ Humiliated, the pro-Breckinridge Democrats met in September to nominate their ticket. Once gathered, they realized the sober reality that such a ticket “would be inexpedient.” As they had no desire to support the Douglas men and “kiss the rod which will be used to smite us,” the Bright men refused to endorse any statewide ticket.⁴⁸

Some of Indiana’s pro-Breckinridge supporters also hoped to develop a joint electoral ticket with Douglas supporters. They reasoned that they ought to unite to ensure that Abraham Lincoln did not win the state’s electoral votes. Indiana Democrats would then be pledged to vote for the presidential candidate

⁴⁶ *Indiana State Sentinel*, November 6, 1860.

⁴⁷ *Indiana State Sentinel*, August 21, 1860.

⁴⁸ *Old Line Guard*, September 20, 1860.

receiving the most electoral votes throughout the Union.⁴⁹ With Breckinridge likely to win most of the South's votes, and the North divided between Douglas and Lincoln, Douglas Democrats had no desire to agree. Many believed that Lincoln would be preferable to Breckinridge. As one Democrat observed, several Douglas Democrats "have avowed their intention to vote for Lincoln, if a compromise ticket should be formed." He continued: "I doubt very much whether a union ticket would save Indiana from Lincoln. I am satisfied it would drive all the 'original Douglas men' into the Republican camp."⁵⁰

Bright had no interest in coordinating with Douglas Democrats at either the state or presidential level. Indeed, there is even some evidence that he voted Republican on the statewide ticket during the October elections. The gubernatorial election pitted Democratic nominee Thomas Hendricks against the staunch anti-slavery Republican Henry S. Lane. Even though Bright had no candidate of his own, a Douglas Democrat who attended one of his speeches on the eve of state elections reported Bright saying, "We must beat this anti-Lecompton Douglas Democratic party! You may begin tomorrow, if you please; but it must be done!"⁵¹ Another Democrat alleged that he caught a glimpse of Bright's ballot and claimed he voted for all but one Republican candidate. Shortly afterward the senator answered calling the accuser "a liar and a slanderer," claiming he was being "slandered into the support of that traitor to party and to

⁴⁹ *Old Line Guard*, October 11, 1860.

⁵⁰ *Old Line Guard*, October, 20, 1860.

⁵¹ *Indiana State Sentinel*, October 16, 1860.

principle, Stephen A. Douglas.”⁵² In spite of these innocent pleadings, the evidence suggests he was willing to do anything—even to vote for the hated Republicans—to defeat the Douglas forces.

In all likelihood, Bright was done with Indiana politics (or perhaps more accurately with northern politics). He offered no state-wide alternatives to the Douglas candidates, and he likely understood that Breckinridge had no chance to carry Indiana. Neither Douglas nor Lincoln were acceptable. With Lincoln and the “Black Republicans” winning, the South would more likely bring destruction to a Union ruled by northern agitators. Bright observed: “Mr. Lincoln’s doctrine we regard as dangerous—as destructive to the peace and quietude of the county.” The free soil doctrine “*can never be carried out peacefully in this country.*”

Perhaps beginning to recognize the hour, Bright declared:

The South has guaranteed rights under the Constitution, which she claims and will assert, *which she ought to assert. Her citizens would be unfaithful to the compact their fathers shed their blood for, unless they do assert those claims, and so long as they claim only what they are entitled to, they will find strong hearts and willing hands throughout the Free States to aid them* There are some of us who never bowed the knee to Baal, and never will. We will march with them in defense of their rights so long as they demand no more than is their due. ⁵³

Bright was careful to use qualifiers to conceal charges that he was fomenting rebellion. Nevertheless, he believed the South had a duty to honor the rights for which its fathers had “shed their blood,” and it was a duty “she ought to assert.” Few could doubt that Bright was advocating southern rebellion should Lincoln win the presidency. He viewed the doctrines of Douglas and Lincoln as nearly

⁵² *Old Line Guard*, October 27, 1860.

⁵³ *New York Times*, September 17, 1860. (emphasis mine)

one in the same. As the election approached, Bright seemed to believe Lincoln would more likely provoke the South to do its duty in protecting the institution of slavery. There was a general sense among the various Indiana political factions that the election of Lincoln would lead to southern secession. Certainly Bright believed this would be the result. As Douglas Democrats campaigned against Lincoln, they embraced this view as well.⁵⁴

In October Indiana held its state-wide and congressional elections. This proved ominous for Democrats. Lane, the Republican gubernatorial candidate, beat Hendricks by 9,000 votes. In the congressional races, Democrats kept the same four of eleven congressional seats they had won two years earlier. Republicans carried the other seven, all in central and northern Indiana. At this point most political followers realized the likely outcome of the November presidential contest.

On November 6, 1860, for the first time in twenty years, Democrats failed to carry Indiana in the presidential contest. Even with a four-way race between southern Democrats, northern Democrats, Constitutional Unionists, and Republicans, Abraham Lincoln was able to carry the Hoosier State with 51 percent of the vote. Republicans performed significantly better in southern Indiana where the American Party had secured many of the old line Whig votes in 1856. Stephen Douglas received slightly more than 42 percent of the vote. The Constitutional Union Party only received 2 percent. As for Breckinridge, even though Bright threw all of his political muscle into the campaign, the southern Democrat received only 4.5 percent of the Indiana vote. He eked out a plurality of

⁵⁴ *Indiana State Sentinel*, November 2, 1860.

29 votes over Lincoln in Joseph Lane's old home in Warrick County, while losing all the other Indiana counties.

* * * * *

The 1860 presidential election proved to be the most consequential in American history. Northerners finally united in overthrowing the southern slave-power, and installed a president devoted to keeping slavery contained. After more than a decade of sectional turmoil, it proved to be the final spark to ignite disunion. Starting with South Carolina, a total of seven southern states would declare secession and bolt the Union before Lincoln could take office. The only question left was whether it would be a peaceful dismemberment, or war.

By 1860, Bright's career in northern politics was effectively over. He remained a United States Senator, with his term set to expire in 1863. With both the Indiana and the national administration controlled by Republicans and a state Democratic Party that loathed him, Bright's influence was nil. In Bright's mind, the Black Republicans were preparing to make war on the South. Thus, he would grow increasingly frustrated and reckless. One thing was certain: Bright would not quietly serve out the rest of his term.

A horse, a horse, my kingdom for a horse!
Richard III, Act V Scene IV

Chapter 8

Epilogue and Conclusion

In the aftermath of the election, Indiana Democrats of all stripes were disappointed. After the campaign, Bright's newspaper organ changed its name to the *Indiana State Guard*. Its bitterness at the election of Lincoln was primarily directed at Douglas.¹ As talk of secession grew, the paper took a cautious approach. It believed some of the southern states were "a little too fast in their movements." It argued, as did many southern conditional unionists, that the South should act only if the incoming administration tried to infringe southern rights.² As secession fever grew, however, the paper became caught up in the excitement. When South Carolina declared secession on December 20, the *Indiana State Guard* gleefully announced, "The deed is done!" Commenting on the action, the paper called on the United States to offer "concession rather than coercion." The editor explained that the best way to restore the union would be for the federal government to guarantee the rights of slaveholders to carry slaves into the territories.³ The paper never explicitly advocated secession, but its demands for pro-slavery concession, and insistence that the southern states had been wronged, left no doubt as to its sympathies.

¹ *Indiana State Guard*, November 10, 1860.

² *Indiana State Guard*, November 17, 1860.

³ *Indiana State Guard*, December 22, 1860.

After South Carolina's action, President Buchanan surprised many when he broke with the South and declared secession unconstitutional. The president also infuriated Republicans and Douglas Democrats when he declared the federal government lacked authority to suppress such illegal actions. Many Douglas supporters were frustrated by Buchanan's course. A Democrat from southern Indiana spoke of the "great dishonor" the president had done when he made "the cowardly admission that the General Government cannot use force to prevent a State from seceding from the Union." It "almost" amounted to "an 'overt act' of treason!"⁴ While Republicans and Douglas Democrats criticized the Buchanan administration for not acting forcefully with the secessionists, Bright took the opposite view. When in December Buchanan refused to meet with some "self-styled Commissioners from South Carolina" who were hoping to gain a withdrawal of federal troops stationed in Charleston, Bright condemned him for not accepting southern demands.⁵

As the Senate neared adjournment in early March, Bright may have been filibustering in to prevent debate or other Senate action regarding secession. He gave a long-winded and rambling speech opposing the establishment of a metropolitan gas company in Washington. Spectators in the galleries had hoped to see a more interesting debate. Most Republicans, however, took the filibuster in stride, one asked Bright to read a portion of his address again. Laughter reigned throughout his address as Republicans offered more irreverent

⁴ O.J. Roberts to John G. Davis, December 12, 1860, John G. Davis Papers, Indiana Historical Society.

⁵ James Buchanan to Willard Saxilbury, February 8, 1862 in *The Works of James Buchanan* 11 James Bassett Moore ed. (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Co., 1910), 250.

interruptions. Bright seemingly remained serious. One senator alluded to the likelihood that Bright was financially interested in its competitor. As time came to adjourn, Bright vowed to finish his remarks in the next session, and vowed to kill the bill and do “a big job inside of it.”⁶

Bright was not entirely alone among those advocating a peaceful resolution. Many Hoosiers initially remained skeptical that the union could be held together by force. After South Carolina declared secession, the *Sentinel* advocated reconciliation by “honorable concessions.” If such could not be procured, it remained skeptical that the Union could “be maintained by blood.”⁷ The *Indianapolis Journal*, a solidly anti-slavery Republican state organ, insisted that the government could neither concede ground on slavery nor hold the union together by civil war. It was better to be rid of South Carolina and any other slave state that might join her, than having “enemies” within the Union.⁸ Most Indiana Republicans, however, believed the Union was indivisible and that force should be used to hold it together should it become necessary. The *Evansville Journal* declared that secession was akin to treason and advised that “the penalty of treason is death.”⁹

Many southern Indiana Democrats gathered in “pro-Unionist” meetings across the state. They generally blamed the Republican Party for giving the South legitimate grounds for grievances. Some endorsed the Crittenden Compromise, a proposal that would restore the Missouri Compromise line and

⁶ *Stephen A. Douglas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 843; *Congressional Globe*, 37th Congress, 2nd Session, March 4, 1861, 1413.

⁷ *Indiana State Sentinel*, December 22, 1860.

⁸ *Indianapolis Journal*, December 7, 1860.

⁹ *Evansville Journal*, December 18, 1860.

extend it to the Pacific. As far as the *Indiana State Guard* was concerned, this was not pro-southern enough “by a long shot.” The pro-Bright paper insisted that “It only gives such protection to the soil south of the old Missouri line, where the climate is too warm for white men to live. It yields all of the rest of the territory north of the line to free State advocates.”¹⁰

Some favored calling a national constitutional convention to resolve the conflict. If war broke out, some even suggested that Indiana “act, with other conservatives States, as a mediator between the contending factions.”¹¹ Some of these meetings tended to have a pro-southern tinge. Lew Wallace claimed that he attended one of these meetings where a speaker “cautiously” argued that Democrats “ought to be in sympathy with the brethren South.” Other speakers, the Douglas Democrat remembered years later, offered more explicit statements that they would “go with the South.” Southern Indiana Democratic Congressman James Cravens wrote to William English, his predecessor, that southern Indiana and Illinois ought to break away and form the state of Jackson.¹²

For Lew Wallace this was treason. He rebuffed efforts to recruit him to the southern cause. “This is my native state,” he later wrote. “I will not leave it to serve the South. Down the street yonder is the old cemetery, and my father lies there going to dust. If I fight, I tell you it shall be for his bones. In so much I am an Indianan.”¹³ He eventually informed Republican Governor Oliver Morton, himself

¹⁰ *Indiana State Guard*, March 2, 1861.

¹¹ Quoted in Logan Esarey, *A History of Indiana from 1850 to the Present* (Indianapolis: B.F. Bowen & Co., 1918), 675-676; Stamp, 55.

¹² James Cravens to William English, April 9, 1861, William H. English Family Papers, Indiana Historical Society.

¹³ Lew Wallace, *Lew Wallace: An Autobiography* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1906), 259-260.

a former Democrat, that he would serve the in defense of the Union should the need arise. On April 12, 1861, Confederate guns opened fire on United States forces stationed in Fort Sumter, and President Abraham Lincoln appealed to the states to supply 75,000 federal troops to suppress the rebellion. With war finally commenced, Governor Morton appointed Wallace adjutant general.¹⁴

At the start of hostilities, Bright seemed to have abandoned Indiana. When he was not in Washington or attending business in Indianapolis, he spent his time on his Kentucky farm. This provoked concerns in Indianapolis that the state's senator no longer resided within the state. By the spring of 1861 a resolution in the Indiana House of Representatives was proposed declaring "Bright was no longer an inhabitant of the state..."¹⁵ Bright's absence fueled speculation that he had thrown his support to the Confederacy. While most Republicans and Douglas Democrats suspected that Bright sympathized with the rebel cause, few knew for sure whether he had actively engaged in treason. As Bright kept conspicuously quiet on the matter, members of both parties demanded an answer. On May 21st the Indiana Senate adopted a resolution asking "whether Jesse D. Bright...is a citizen of Indiana; and further, whether he can and will represent the people of Indiana...whether his present position on the questions now engrossing public attention" is "inconsistent with public interests

¹⁴ Kenneth Stampp, *Indiana Politics During the Civil War* (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Bureau, 1949), 71.

¹⁵ Quoted in Wayne Van Der Weele, "Jesse David Bright: Master Politician from the Old Northwest" (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 1958), 270; Jesse Bright to William English, October 8, November 3, 1861, William Hayden English Family Papers, Indiana Historical Society. In his letters to English, during the fall of 1861 while on recess from the Senate Bright indicated he was "At My Farm."

and public safety.”¹⁶ Shortly afterward the Indiana House passed a similar resolution asking whether any “Senator or Representative in Congress, feels disinclined to give his support to such measures as may be necessary to put down treason and rebellion by force and arms.”¹⁷ Upon presenting the resolution, a member of the legislature stated bluntly, “I want to know how Jesse D. Bright stands. It is my business to know.” He wanted to know whether the senator “was mean enough to go over to Jeff Davis’ army.”¹⁸

Indiana soon discovered the truth. That August Union forces arrested an arms dealer named Thomas Lincoln. He was a confederate supporter attempting to cross Union lines. On his person was a March 1, 1861 letter addressed “To his Excellency Jefferson Davis, President of the Confederation of States.” Even more damning than the salutation was the substance of the letter:

Allow me to introduce to your acquaintance my friend Thomas B. Lincoln, of Texas. He visits your capital mainly to dispose of what he regards a great improvement in fire-arms. I recommend him to your favorable consideration as a gentleman of the first respectability, and reliable in every respect.

It was signed, “Very truly yours, Jesse D. Bright.”¹⁹

With these words, Bright’s fate was sealed. On August 23, the *New York Times* issues an article titled, the “Treason of Senator Bright.” The paper wrote, “The case of Mr. Bright is only illustration of the...great conspiracy, and of the shameless manner in which the oath of allegiance to the Constitution is habitually

¹⁶ *Journal of the Indiana State Senate* (Indianapolis: Berry R. Sulgrove, 1861), 138.

¹⁷ *Journal of the House of Representatives of the State of Indiana* (Indianapolis: Berry R. Sulgrove, 1861), 206.

¹⁸ Quoted in Van Der Weele, “Jesse David Bright,” 270.

¹⁹ *Congressional Globe*, December 16, 1860, 37th Congress, 2nd Session, 89.

violated.”²⁰ Even one of Bright’s closest doughface allies felt betrayed. James Buchanan privately wrote, “Whilst I had reason to believe, at the time, that Mr. Bright sympathized with the ultras of the Cotton States...I had no idea until I read his letter & late speech, that he remained in the same state of feeling after the inauguration of the hostile Confederacy.”²¹

The demand to know how Bright could explain himself was so great that on September 7, the senator offered a public letter. He claimed not to recollect writing the letter, but that “if Mr. [Thomas] Lincoln says I did, then I am entirely satisfied of the fact.” Bright went on to claim that such letters were common and “a matter of course,” suggesting it was innocently sent to “any friend who asked for it.” As for his position on policy, the senator stated that he opposed “the entire coercive policy of the Government,” and believed it was likely to “render the disruption permanent and incurable.” On the question of his loyalty, Bright asserted “I am, and always have been, for preserving the integrity of this Union.”²² A private letter hinted more closely to his attitude when he wrote, “I want no more real estate in a government where the Writ of ‘Habeas Corpus’ is ignored by a Military Mob.”²³ Later the senator privately declared, “I have not a word to say about Indiana politicks (sic), because I do not care a damn as

²⁰ *New York Times*, August 23, 1861.

²¹ James Buchanan to Willard Saxilsbury, February 8. 1862 in *The Works of James Buchanan* 11 James Bassett Moore ed. (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Co., 1910), 250.

²² Quoted in the *Congressional Globe*, December 16, 1861, 37th Congress, 2nd Session, 89.

²³ Jesse Bright to William English, July 7, 1861, William H. English Family Papers, Indiana Historical Society.

between Abolitionists & Douglasites I shall never vote or coalesce with either politically.”²⁴

On January 21, Bright was unrepentant when he gave a speech to the Senate. Even in hindsight, with the actual outbreak of war, Bright still would have written the letter of introduction to Thomas Lincoln. Shortly afterward Bright realized that his speech was more damning than exculpatory. Consequently he sought to suppress the transcript from being delivered to the *Congressional Globe* printer. Republican Senator Orville Browning attempted to locate the damning speech, only to discover that Bright “had suppressed it.”²⁵ The *Congressional Globe* simply noted, “The manuscript of the speech referred on page 418 was retained by Mr. B.”²⁶

As the Senate grappled over Bright’s expulsion, the question was whether he technically committed treason. Treason is one of the few crimes spelled out by the Constitution, and among the definitions is giving “aid and comfort” to the nation’s “enemies.” Furthermore, one could only be convicted of treason with “the testimony of two witnesses...or on confession in open court.” Bright had openly confessed to giving aid and comfort to the Confederacy. Since this was before the outbreak of war, could this also be construed as giving aid and comfort to the enemy? Most Republicans answered in the affirmative, but some retained doubts. Consequently, the Senate opted to try Bright expulsion on the grounds of disloyalty.

²⁴ Jesse Bright to William English, December 27, 1861, William H. English Family Papers, Indiana Historical Society.

²⁵ *The Diary of Orville Hickman Browning* James G. Randall ed. (Springfield: Trustees of the Illinois State Historical Library, 1925), 529.

²⁶ *Congressional Globe*, Index to 37th Congress, 2nd Session, 5.

On February 5, Bright gave his final remarks before the vote on expulsion. He began by noting, “my main object is to place myself right on the page of history.” The senator refrained from stating he would repeat his old actions, but sought to portray them as innocently as he could. Bright had “no recollection of “ever refusing “a letter of introduction to a friend or acquaintance.” Than manner in which he addressed Jefferson Davis was “a matter of courtesy.” Bright further noted that his letter had been written on March 1st, more than a month prior to the outbreak of war. While the old party boss seemed to have anticipated that the Confederate government was in need of arms, Bright insisted he had no idea that war could break between the two sides. Emphatically he insisted that he could not have had “prophetic knowledge” of the coming conflict. Addressing his previous comments that he would repeat his same actions, Bright qualified in, “I mean by this just this...that when I gave that letter to Mr. Lincoln, the idea of war or of a hostile collision with any one or more southern States never entered my mind. It could not; I know it did not.” In language that seems remarkably delusional, Bright continued, “If even a gleam of such a suspicion [of war] had entered my mind, every instinct of my nature would have deterred me...”²⁷

For seventeen years Bright had held a seat in the Senate. For many of these years he masterfully and shrewdly manipulated and controlled the party men of his state. “I know the Senator from Indiana,” Democratic Senator James McDougall of California noted. He continued, “[Bright] is a man of business; he is a man of system; he is a man of care.” No man could ever accuse Bright of being

²⁷ *Congressional Globe*, February 5, 1862, 37th Congress, 2nd Session, 651-654.

naïve or thoughtless about his actions.²⁸ In his last gasp in the Senate, Bright was willing to throw away his dignity for the slightest scrap of political power. The Senate was not persuaded; on February 5, 1862 they voted to expel Bright from the Senate.

For most Hoosiers, the event was cathartic. A Republican wrote to Indiana's new Republican Senator Henry Lane, "I am so grateful at the vote on the expulsion of Bright that I must say something or bust. When the Telegraph announced the vote I thought 'I beheld Satan as lightning fall from heaven.'"²⁹ The *New Albany Ledger* spoke for most Indiana Democrats when it declared that his "follies" had "produced an almost complete alienation of his earliest and best friends."³⁰ The *Madison Courier*, a publication that had long waged war with Bright, observed: "the actor's costume fell. The ruined politician sat down, and haggard and crushed, contemplated the wreck he had made of his fortunes."³¹ Even Bright's closest political ally in recent years had turned on him. Former President Buchanan bitterly noted that Bright "has got his reward" having been "alone of the Northern Senators" to sustain the ultra-southerners in their demands.³² As Bright political career came crashing down, his list of political enemies was a long one. Buchanan, Douglas Democrats and Republicans all immensely disliked the Indiana senator. Certainly personalities were involved. Jesse Bright was a man who "booked no opposition, friend or foe," yet it was

²⁸ *Congressional Globe*, January 31, 1862, 37th Congress, 2nd Session, 583.

²⁹ John Taryan to Henry Lane, February 6, 1862 quoted in Van Der Weele, "Jesse David Bright, 290.

³⁰ *New Albany Ledger*, February 12, 1862.

³¹ *Madison Courier*, February 8, 1862, quoted in Van Der Weele, 290.

³² James Buchanan to J.S. Black, March 4, 1862 in *Works of James Buchanan*, 261.

more than that. The old party boss had built a powerful party machine that worked with all sorts of Democrats willing to give their loyalty to Bright. The reality is that his imperious behavior merely exacerbated the underlying problems. As a political leader at this critical time, Bright's pro-slavery attitudes simply could not coexist with those of his fellow Hoosiers and northern Democrats.

* * * * *

With Bright's expulsion, his political career was essentially over. To add further insult, Governor Morton appointed Joseph Wright to take his seat. It was a savvy gesture to build support with Democrats, but the governor must have at least taken some satisfaction in needling Bright by replacing him with his long-time enemy. The old party boss returned home and seemed to divide his time between his southern Indiana residence and his Kentucky farm. The Indiana home would eventually be confiscated by the governor for use as a military hospital. Beyond that, Bright kept himself busy with business affairs. But when the Indiana State legislature convened in the fall of 1862, Democrats held a majority, Bright made a last effort to restore his honor by regaining the seat. He informed English that he still had "a move or two, to be made on the political boards."³³ Once again the old party manager found himself in business of political organizing. The *Logansport Democratic Pharos* observed, "No means were left untried to secure his return—no efforts but were made to effect his object—but his tears and dictation...all failed to influence the Democratic

³³ Jesse Bright to William English, November 9, 1862, English Family Papers, Indiana Historical Society.

members of the Legislature.”³⁴ Of the eighty-nine members of the legislature’s Democratic caucus, Bright received only twelve votes.

The results left Bright both furious and humiliated. His state of mind was further enhanced by the recently enacted Emancipation Proclamation. Lincoln’s famous military decree exempted slaves owned in Kentucky. With the bulk of slaves having been legally emancipated, however, few could imagine slavery surviving in Kentucky should the Union win the war. Bright vented with semi-coherent venom:

The miserable Dogs who opposed my restoration, both in and out of the Legislature were governed by *personal* malice and *envious* considerations, mainly. Some wanting brain to enable themselves to take an elevated view of the principle involved, made committals against me in advance, in order to gratify a rotten class of Douglas Democrats & Abolitionists, who having neither courage or honesty themselves, cannot appreciate such traits of character in others. You know that personally I cared nothing about a reelection to the Senate. The State would have been more honored in the eyes of all just men, than I would have been—I would rather stand upon my record as a Democrat and a man of courage, *opposed to all the damning heresies of such Abolitionists & rotten booring Democrats as now have power than to be in power by their favor.*³⁵

Bright’s close friend William Corcoran moved across the ocean to Paris during the American Civil War. He had joined his son-in-law, a secretary under Confederate Commissioner John Slidell. Bright informed his friend, “I wish I could sell every ‘Free hold’ interest I have in the U.S. I have no desire to be a Tax payer longer here...If we could have peace, I

³⁴ *Logansport Democratic Pharos*, January 14, 1863 quoted in Van Der Weele, “Jesse David Bright,” 297.

³⁵ Jesse Bright to William English, January 27, 1863, English Family Papers, Indiana Historical Society.

would select a permanent residence in one of the Southern States. I think Tennessee..." Bright mostly held to his sanity declaring, "With all the Tyranny and wrong practices upon persons and property in this locality...I am undisturbed; which is the wonder of many."³⁶

After the war Bright officially maintained residence in Kentucky. In 1866 he was elected to the Kentucky legislature. As a state representative, Bright seems to have played only a minor role and was often absent from proceedings. In 1868 Bright was considered for the United States senate. His name remained in contention through nine ballots at the Democratic caucus. Bright eventually withdrew his name, as he did not appear to have the same desire to keep the fight. He continually kept an interest in national politics, but generally from a distance. Certainly Bright was concerned about the direction of Reconstruction. On this matter Bright remarked, "Support Johnson...he is right in this fight with Congress." The President, of course, resisted congressional efforts to promote equal rights for black Americans. The former senator remained bitter with Johnson over his support of the Lincoln administration. When it came to protecting the white racial order Bright was emphatic, "God knows how I hate [Johnson], but I will stand by him in this fight."³⁷ He would also remark around the same time, "If there is any reliable democratic party left, within the limits of the U.S., they are only to be found in the Southern

³⁶ Jesse Bright to William Corcoran, January 25, 1865, W. W. Corcoran Papers, Library of Congress.

³⁷ Woollen, *Biographical Sketches*, 231.

States...I think you showed your sense by determining to get out of In-diana-na."³⁸

In the aftermath of war, Bright spent the bulk of his time attending to business affairs. He had numerous land holdings to manage, and began investment in coal mining. By 1871 Bright moved to Covington, Kentucky and became president of the Raymond City Coal Company. Three years later he moved to Baltimore, Maryland as he continued to manage his business enterprises. At the age of 62 on May 20, 1875, Bright quietly passed away having suffered a disease of the heart.

* * * * *

Jesse Bright played a key role in both Indiana and national politics in the 1840s and 1850s. Southerners, although a numerical minority, enjoyed political dominance in national politics up until the election of Abraham Lincoln. This was possible, at least in part, by the influence of northern doughface Democrats like Bright. While the House of Representatives often supported measures such as the Wilmot Proviso or would oppose the Lecompton Constitution, in the Senate members such as Bright helped ensure the protection of southern slaveholding interests. And among doughfaces, Bright was among the most committed to the South.

Indiana was among the free-states most accepting of doughface Democracy. The visceral racism that permeated the state, especially in its

³⁸ Jesse Bright to Phineas Kent, January 10, 1867 quoted in Van Der Weele, "Jesse David Bright," 303.

southern half, led most Hoosiers to oppose extreme efforts to attack slavery. Yet, even Indiana Democrats had their limits. As southern slave-masters sought greater control over the federal government, these Democrats would not be dragged any further into serving southern interests.

Bright entered the Senate just as the sectional issues were beginning to divide the nation. He was in 1850 a compromiser aligned with Henry Clay, and in 1854 with Stephen Douglas to keep the Union together. In 1858, he was a blunderer who aligned with Buchanan and the South in an attempt to force slavery into Kansas. Finally, he had been a plunderer who used power and graft to enrich himself and his friends. Bright could compromise, but with each crisis he became more rigid, more intransigent. Ultimately, he helped enable the Republicans to win in 1860. Bright could have allied with a more moderate Stephen Douglas, but there is little reason to believe that Bright found his Freeport Doctrine any more acceptable. Always hungry for plunder, he was willing to sacrifice it to fight Douglas and the Republicans. In his mind, they were abolitionists and rotten to the core. Defending southern institutions had become his overriding objective.

Bright certainly contributed to the breakdown of American politics in the 1850s. Indiana politicians and voters need not look only to southern fire-eaters in Congress or the Border Ruffians in Kansas to see evidence of the slave-power. They had Jesse David Bright ruling the Indiana Democratic Party—and by extension the state—with an iron grip. He exploited all of the undemocratic features of American politics in the antebellum era—patronage, graft, bribes, and

smoke-filled caucuses—to appease the South. Furthermore, he pursued this grubby side of politics with gusto and viciousness. This likely contributed to Indiana ending up in the Republican column in the 1860 presidential election. Perhaps without Bright Indiana Democrats could have united in 1860 and Stephen Douglas might have carried the state. It is not clear, however, that the results would have been any different in the other states, and hence Abraham Lincoln would still have won the election.

It is not clear that Bright could have easily chosen a different path either. Certainly he could have aligned with Douglas, and appeased northern outrage by becoming an anti-Lecompton Democrat. But it was simply not in his nature to appease the North at the expense of the South. His sympathies were with southerners, and he could not and would not change. Ultimately, Jesse Bright was both an enabler and a symptom of the forces ripping the nation apart on the eve of civil war.

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Education

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Thesis: "William H. Seward's American Exceptionalism in the Age of the Irrepressible Conflict." (August 2008)

B.A. Willamette University, History and Politics, Spring 2006

Senior Theses

History: "Abraham Lincoln: Liberty, Union and Slavery." (Fall 2005)

Politics: "The Great Moral Debate: The role of morality in the opposition to slavery and the coming of the Civil War." (Spring 2006)

Publications

"Unlocking Lincoln's Soul: Abraham Lincoln and William Shakespeare"
Lincoln Herald (Spring 2011)

"Antislavery" *The Political Lincoln* (October 2008)

"Seward, William" *The Political Lincoln* (October 2008)

"The Slave Trade" *Gale Library of Daily Life: Slavery in America*
(November 2007)

Presentations

"Indiana's Southern Senator: Jesse Bright and the Hoosier Democracy"
Blue Grass Symposium, Lexington, KY (February, 2013)

"Wayne County's Unionism on the Eve of War" Ohio University History
Graduate Student Association Conference, Athens, OH (April 16, 2011)

“Wayne County’s National Drive to War” Blue Grass Symposium,
Lexington, KY (February, 2010)

“Lincoln and Shakespeare: Reading the Bard During the Civil War” Ohio
Valley History Conference, Richmond, KY (October, 2009)

“Unlocking Lincoln’s Soul: Abraham Lincoln and William Shakespeare”
Blue Grass Symposium 2009 Lexington, KY (March 2009)

“William Seward: The Conservative Liberal” Phi Alpha Theta History
Conference, Grand Forks, North Dakota. (March 2008)

“William H. Seward’s American Exceptionalism in the Decade of the
Irrepressible Conflict” Northern Great Plains History Conference, Duluth,
MN (October 4, 2007) (**Winner of the “Graduate Student Prize” for best
graduate paper presented**)

“Abraham Lincoln and John Brown: Race and Slavery.” Phi Alpha Theta
History Conference, University of North Dakota. (March 2, 2007)

Research Assistantship

Advisor: Dr. Eric Burin, *University of North Dakota* (May 15, 2007-August
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Teaching Assistantships

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Related Experience

Special Collections Page, *University of Kentucky*, (May 2011-Present)

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