

## Did Industrial Labor Influence Jacksonian Land Policy?

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There is an effort being made to revolutionize the story of the age of Andrew Jackson. Criticism is directed from many sides against the old familiar account, which explained the politics of that generation in terms of sectional forces. The great geographical divisions of East, South, and West, with their internal conflicts and subregions and their spokesmen, John Q. Adams, Daniel Webster, John C. Calhoun, Henry Clay, Andrew Jackson, and Thomas H. Benton, are now supposed to obscure rather than to illuminate an understanding of the period.

In their place a new version is being developed, employing a class analysis, and emphasizing especially the role of the industrial labor movement of the 1830's and 1840's. Major topics all the way from banking to philosophy have been restudied from this approach, often with good results. The question of the public lands, which has always been considered one of the chief political issues of the Jacksonian years, has drawn particular attention.<sup>1</sup>

But there is a crucial unsolved problem in the reinterpretation of Jacksonian public land policy. Research during the past fifty years, and especially the past fifteen, has brought to light a great deal of new evidence, and a fairly complete picture of labor's position on public lands is now

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<sup>1</sup> John B. Sanborn, "Some Political Aspects of Homestead Legislation," *American Historical Review* (New York, 1895- ), VI (1900-1901), 19-37; Payson J. Treat, *National Land System, 1785-1820* (New York, 1910); Raynor G. Wellington, "The Tariff and Public Lands from 1828 to 1833," *American Historical Association Annual Report for 1911* (2 vols., Washington, 1913), I, 177-185; Raynor G. Wellington, *The Political and Sectional Influence of the Public Lands, 1828-1842* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1914); George M. Stephenson, *The Political History of the Public Lands from 1840 to 1862* (Boston, 1917); Roy M. Robbins, "Preemption—a frontier Triumph," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* (Cedar Rapids, Iowa, 1914- ), XVIII (1931-1932), 331-349; Louis M. Hacker, "Sections—or Classes?," *Nation* (New York, 1865- ), CXXXVII (1933), 108-110; John D. Hicks, "The 'Ecology' of Middle-Western Historians," *Wisconsin Magazine of History* (Madison, Wisconsin, 1917- ), XXIV (1941), 377-384. The effort at revision has culminated in Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Age of Jackson* (Boston, 1945).

available. Many labor leaders were intensely interested in achieving a more liberal land policy.<sup>2</sup> Such a policy was adopted, and some historians now suggest that its adoption was a result of labor's demand. Yet no direct relation has been shown between the Jacksonian labor movement and national legislation concerning the public domain.

Industrial labor leaders who were interested in land reform, one writer recently has observed, were insignificant at the polls.<sup>3</sup> Since no direct relationship between national land legislation and labor parties, labor candidates, or labor votes has been established, interest has turned to two other possible connections.

On the one hand, it has been suggested, the ideas about land reform that were advanced by labor leaders may have been sufficiently persuasive, especially when backed by the existence of an industrial labor problem, to compel changes in land policy. One of the favorite land reform ideas among Jacksonian labor leaders was the safety-valve thesis, the view that westward emigration of labor was an outlet for social pressure and unrest and a means of attaining high industrial wages. The idea was advanced in Congress at the same time, and the revisionist historians have suggested that this was the vital contribution made by the labor movement to the formation of public land policy. If it was, the use made of it by congressmen should be examined to see whether it was decisive or important in the action they took to change the land laws.

On the other hand, it has been noted that the existence side by side of unoccupied western lands and an industrial labor class implied some relationship between the two, and a number of studies in the past dozen years have explored the possibility that Eastern workingmen emigrated westward. The studies remain inconclusive for lack of adequate statis-

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<sup>2</sup> John R. Commons, "Horace Greeley and the Working Class Origins of the Republican Party," *Political Science Quarterly* (New York, 1886- ), XXIV (1909), 468-488; Roy M. Robbins, "Horace Greeley: Land Reform and Unemployment, 1837-1862," *Agricultural History* (Chicago; Baltimore, 1927- ), VII (1933), 18-41; Carter G. Goodrich and Sol Davison, "The Wage-Earner in the Westward Movement," *Political Science Quarterly*, L (1935), 161-185, and LI (1936), 61-116; Helene S. Zahler, *Eastern Workingmen and National Land Policy, 1829-1862* (New York, 1941).

<sup>3</sup> Zahler, *Eastern Workingmen and National Land Policy*, 81.

tics.<sup>4</sup> But historians have begun to say that even though the public domain may not have been a safety valve for labor through emigration, the belief that it offered a solution to the labor problem may have compelled legislative changes in national land policy.<sup>5</sup>

From either approach, one arrives at the same questions. What was the safety valve idea? How was it expressed in congressional speeches in relation to land questions? Did statements of belief lead to corresponding action? How significant was this idea in the logic of those who held it, and how significant was it in the enactment of national land reform legislation? The answers to those questions will indicate whether this crucial idea may provide the bridge to connect the Jacksonian labor movement with national land policy.

The classic definition of the safety valve was offered by Caleb Cushing, the Massachusetts Whig who apparently introduced the phrase in Congress, in his speech of June 13, 1838.

I honor the enterprising men who carry their stalwart limb and free-spirited hearts into the Western woods and prairies . . . . If among them be some of less orderly tempers, the better for us who remain behind. Western emigration is the safety-valve of the Union. It serves to relieve the more crowded population of the old States; to relieve them of those evils of a condensed society, with crime and extreme poverty in its train, which are the curse of so many parts of Europe; to relieve us of all the uneasy and exuberant spirit which is compressed and fretted in populous communities, but which finds ample scope for the beneficial expansion of its energies in the wide West.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Fred A. Shannon, "The Homestead Act and the Labor Surplus," *American Historical Review*, XLI (1935-1936), 637-651; Joseph Schafer, "Some Facts Bearing on the Safety-Valve Theory," *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, XX (1936), 216-232; Joseph Schafer, "Was the West a Safety Valve for Labor?," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, XXIV (1936-1937), 299-314; Joseph Schafer, "Concerning the Frontier as Safety Valve," *Political Science Quarterly*, LII (1937), 407-420; Rufus S. Tucker, "The Frontier as an Outlet for Surplus Labor," *Southern Economic Journal* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 1933- ), VII (1940), 158-186. Shannon at least considers the question as settled conclusively, see his "A Post Mortem on the Labor-Safety-Valve Theory," *Agricultural History*, XIX (1945), 31-37.

<sup>5</sup> Murray Kane, "Some Considerations on the Safety-Valve Doctrine," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, XXIII (1936-1937), 169-188; Zahler, *Eastern Workingmen and National Land Policy*, 81 ff; Clarence H. Danhof, "Farm-making Costs and the Safety Valve," *Journal of Political Economy* (Chicago, 1892- ), XLIX (1941), 317-359.

<sup>6</sup> *Congressional Globe*, 25 Cong., 2 Sess., appendix, 494.

The idea was not new in the Jacksonian period. It was at least as old as Benjamin Franklin,<sup>7</sup> and it may have been first expressed in Congress by Albert Gallatin of Pennsylvania in 1796.<sup>8</sup> Its employment in continuous debate seems to have started with Henry Clay's speech on the tariff on March 30, 1824. During the next twenty-five years it was introduced repeatedly by Thomas Ewing of Ohio, Clay of Kentucky, Thomas H. Benton of Missouri, Clement C. Clay and John McKinley of Alabama, Jacob Thompson of Mississippi, and other congressmen.

With respect to the public domain the idea was used on both sides of the argument. Priority seems to lie with the legislators who proposed it as a reason for restricting western land sales. Henry Clay opposed further liberalizing of land laws in order to encourage the formation of an industrial labor supply in the East and advocated a protective tariff to counteract the influence of western lands in scattering the population.<sup>9</sup> Richard Rush, a Philadelphian who became Secretary of the Treasury, provided in his report in 1827 a detailed argument along the same lines as Clay's.<sup>10</sup> Thomas Ewing, a Whig senator from Ohio, was a third outstanding proponent of this view, which he advanced on a number of occasions.<sup>11</sup> A few other Whigs, all from the Atlantic coast, used the same or similar logic.<sup>12</sup> After having stated the safety-valve idea, however, they showed no significant voting on public land bills except the distribution bills of 1832, 1835,

<sup>7</sup> Benjamin Franklin, "Observations on the Peopling of Countries," quoted in Schafer, "Concerning the Frontier as Safety Valve," *Political Science Quarterly*, LII, 409-410.

<sup>8</sup> *Annals of Congress*, 4 Cong., 1 Sess., 411-412.

<sup>9</sup> Frederic L. Paxson, *History of the American Frontier, 1763-1893* (Boston, 1924), 246; *Register of Debates in Congress*, 22 Cong., 1 Sess., 1099, 1111-1112.

<sup>10</sup> *Register of Debates in Congress*, 20 Cong., 1 Sess., appendix, 2825-2826.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 22 Cong., 1 Sess., 1142; 22 Cong., 2 Sess., 167-169; 24 Cong., 2 Sess., 539.

<sup>12</sup> Daniel Webster (Massachusetts), *Register of Debates in Congress*, 21 Cong., 1 Sess., 39, 40; Erastus Root (New York), 22 Cong., 1 Sess., 1852; John Robertson (Virginia), *Congressional Globe*, 25 Cong., 3 Sess., appendix, 306-307; Tristram Burges (Rhode Island), 23 Cong., 2 Sess., 240-241. See also David Barton (Missouri), *Register of Debates in Congress*, 20 Cong., 1 Sess., 495; Tristram Burges, 22 Cong., 2 Sess., 1358-1411, 1785-1786; Richard Bayard (Delaware), *Congressional Globe*, 25 Cong., 2 Sess., appendix, 136; Charles Hudson (Massachusetts), 27 Cong., 2 Sess., appendix, 932; John Chapman (Maryland), 29 Cong., 1 Sess., appendix, 1159.

and 1839, which they supported, and the Pre-emption Bill of 1839, which they opposed. There is, of course, the possibility that other Whigs who voted against land reform thought as Clay, Rush, and Ewing did, but were dissuaded from stating their reasons, perhaps by the frequent warnings from Democratic congressmen that they would not dare let such views be known publicly. Evidence is lacking.

But as an argument in favor of land reform the safety-valve idea was advanced by a much larger number of congressmen.<sup>13</sup> A more detailed examination may, therefore, be made of the ways in which it was presented, who made use of it, and the extent to which it was significant in the political thought of its users.

The safety-valve idea as it was presented by supporters of land reform in Congress from 1824 to 1849 may be analyzed into eight elements. First the advocates of a more liberal land policy made two accusations against their opponents. Through land legislation, they said, Eastern interests wanted to compel the poor, or city dwellers, or the population in general, to remain in Eastern states for work in factories, or to tenant great farms, or to supply the labor market.<sup>14</sup> And, second, Easterners wanted to maintain a large labor market through restrictive land legislation in order to keep factory wages at a low level.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> All but four of those who used the safety-valve argument in support of a more liberal land policy were Westerners, and all but two were Democrats. The four Eastern exceptions were Robert Y. Hayne (South Carolina), *Register of Debates in Congress*, 21 Cong., 1 Sess., 34; Levi Woodbury (New Hampshire), 21 Cong., 1 Sess., 180-184; Caleb Cushing (Massachusetts), *Congressional Globe*, 25 Cong., 2 Sess., appendix, 494; Hannibal Hamlin (Maine), 29 Cong., 1 Sess., 1072. The two Whigs were Caleb Cushing and Charles A. Wickliffe (Kentucky), *Register of Debates in Congress*, 21 Cong., 2 Sess., 477.

<sup>14</sup> From 1828 to 1849 this charge was made in Congress in public land debates about two dozen times (fourteen times from 1828 to 1832), more often (seven times) by Senator Benton of Missouri. One southeastern senator used it, Robert Y. Hayne (South Carolina), *Register of Debates in Congress*, 21 Cong., 1 Sess., 34. It was used seventeen times by southwesterners, five times by northwesterners. *Ibid.*, 20 Cong., 1 Sess., 502, 518-519, 621-622; 21 Cong., 1 Sess., 4, 24, 34, 212; 21 Cong., 2 Sess., 477; 22 Cong., 1 Sess., 785, 1149-1150, 1151-1152, 1174, 2265-2266, appendix 122; 22 Cong., 2 Sess., 158, 225; *Congressional Globe*, 25 Cong., 2 Sess., appendix, 139, 399; 25 Cong., 3 Sess., appendix 45, 59; 28 Cong., 2 Sess., appendix 55, 207; 29 Cong., 1 Sess., appendix 777.

<sup>15</sup> This charge was made less often from 1824 to 1849 than the preceding one. It was offered once by a southeastern speaker, six times by men from the southwest, and five times by those from the northwest. The congressmen from the northwest seem to have been

As alternatives to those conditions western Democrats offered four counter-objectives to be achieved through land legislation: protection of the natural right of the people to live wherever they might choose,<sup>16</sup> escape for the poor from oppression and dependence in the East,<sup>17</sup> escape from the necessity of working in factories, and escape from the necessity of working for low wages. Those four proposals were stated negatively, as matters of escape from the East and from oppression.

Finally, the congressional land reformers added two other related propositions that brought a positive eastern bearing to their plans. Cheap land in the West would, if made available (or did, since it was available, some said) raise wages in Eastern factories, or keep wages high, and westward migration would eliminate the evils of agrarianism, social unrest, and threats of revolution engendered in Eastern industrial centers.

The argument is an impressive one that congressmen were concerned with the problems of Eastern industrialism and the labor unrest of the times. Whether they borrowed their arguments from labor leaders or not, if those considerations were decisive in bringing about changes in the land laws, then the existence of industrial labor problems was more significant in the formation of land policy than the old view has recognized.

If the statements of opinion are significant, there should appear, in the first place, some relation between the way land reform exponents of the safety-valve idea spoke and the way they voted. What action did they take in Congress when

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a little more conscious than the southwesterners of the wage problem in relation to factory labor. *Register of Debates in Congress*, 20 Cong., 1 Sess., 518; 21 Cong., 1 Sess., 1174, 2265-2266; *Congressional Globe*, 25 Cong., 2 Sess., appendix 139, 399; 28 Cong., 2 Sess., appendix 55, 207; 29 Cong., 1 Sess., appendix 777; 29 Cong., 2 Sess., appendix, 39.

<sup>16</sup> This argument was advanced on many occasions, in this particular connection it appeared clearly five times and was used chiefly by Benton. *Register of Debates in Congress*, 19 Cong., 1 Sess., 730-731; 21 Cong., 1 Sess., 24; 22 Cong., 1 Sess., appendix 122; 22 Cong., 2 Sess., 225; *Congressional Globe*, 29 Cong., 1 Sess., appendix 777.

<sup>17</sup> From 1824 to 1849 this idea appeared in Congress sixteen times. Southwesterners outnumbered others who used it about two to one. *Register of Debates in Congress*, 19 Cong., 1 Sess., 732; 21 Cong., 1 Sess., 14, 24, 34; 21 Cong., 2 Sess., 477; 22 Cong., 1 Sess., appendix 122; 24 Cong., 2 Sess., 1249-1250; *Congressional Globe*, 25 Cong., 2 Sess., appendix, 140, 260, 293, 494; 25 Cong., 3 Sess., appendix 45; 28 Cong., 2 Sess., appendix 39; 29 Cong., 1 Sess., 1072, appendix 777.

land measures came to a vote? With one minor exception, they sustained their opinions with legislative action.<sup>18</sup> On each of the major issues that led them to introduce the safety-valve argument, those who urged land reform as a solution to the problem voted for such reform. They supported the graduation bills in 1826, 1828, 1830, 1839, 1844, and 1846, survey bills in 1831 and 1832, and pre-emption bills in 1837 and 1838, and they opposed distribution bills in 1832, 1833, and 1837.

In the second place, it should also appear that the labor problem held a primary position in the thought of those who referred to it, if it is to be accounted a primary explanation of their action. A broad view of the speeches, however, shows that land reform congressmen advanced the safety-valve argument and the labor problem as one of many reasons for promoting the economic development and peopling of the West. That much is indicated by the great number of speeches they made extolling the beauties of Western rural life and by their splendid tributes to the democratic existence in the West. Only occasionally did they refer to the possible reactions of their policies on the East. Their personal political motivation was further shown in a desire to obtain local or sectional advantage for themselves and their rural constituents. There is no reason to doubt that Western congressmen were sincere believers that good consequences would come to the East following the enactment of their land policies, or that they were genuinely interested in the welfare of Eastern workingmen. But the place that those arguments held in their speeches was distinctly subordinate to aims of more immediate significance for Western politics, and their tone was that of aiding the West (and themselves) rather than of concern for labor welfare.

The basic arguments about the oppression of the poor in the old Eastern states, the opportunities of escape from oppression and dependence, and the moral and natural rights of the people to the land were advanced on innumerable occasions by a great number of congressmen. The columns of the *Register of Debates in Congress* and the *Congressional Globe* are filled with such sentiments.

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<sup>18</sup> Senator George Poindexter of Mississippi spoke against a distribution bill but voted in favor of it. *Register of Debates in Congress*, 22 Cong., 2 Sess., 158.

When the arguments specifically concerning wage earners were brought forward in Congress, however, they were used by men whose political fortunes and interests were most remote from the labor movement. The view that workers would escape being driven into factories if western land were made cheap was advanced by eighteen congressmen, all Democrats, on twenty-four occasions in twenty-five years.<sup>19</sup>

The southwestern legislators, led by Senator Benton of Missouri, who formed the large majority of this group were evidently not thinking of those men in the East who already formed part of a wage-earning class and an organized-labor movement. They spoke of men who might be saved from that fate. But their primary object in each case was directed toward obtaining specific action on public land bills, and the arguments referring to labor were incidental.

The proposition that land reform would save the Easterner from having to work for low wages was also more closely associated with the West than with the labor movement. That aspect of the safety-valve idea appeared in debates on land questions fifteen times and was used by thirteen speakers during the period.<sup>20</sup> In the entire group, only two of the speakers intimated that actual rather than potential wage earners would seize the opportunity of escaping from low wages by emigrating to the West.<sup>21</sup>

The two ways in which congressmen argued that cheap western lands would effect a positive improvement of eastern

<sup>19</sup> It was used once by a southeastern speaker, Hayne (South Carolina), sixteen times by congressmen from the southwest, led by Benton (Missouri), Clement C. Clay (Alabama), and John McKinley (Alabama), and seven times by those from the northwest. *Register of Debates in Congress*, 20 Cong., 1 Sess., 502, 518, 519, 621-622; 21 Cong., 1 Sess., 4, 24, 34, 212, 425; 22 Cong., 1 Sess., 785, 1174, 2265-2266, appendix 122; 22 Cong., 2 Sess., 158; *Congressional Globe*, 23 Cong., 2 Sess., 241; 25 Cong., 2 Sess., appendix 139, 399; 25 Cong., 3 Sess., appendix 45, 59; 28 Cong., 2 Sess., appendix 55; 29 Cong., 1 Sess., appendix 777.

<sup>20</sup> The speakers from the southwest were chiefly from Mississippi and Alabama. *Register of Debates in Congress*, 20 Cong., 1 Sess., 518, 519; 21 Cong., 1 Sess., 24; 22 Cong., 1 Sess., 2265-2266; 24 Cong., 2 Sess., 1249-1250; *Congressional Globe*, 25 Cong., 3 Sess., appendix 45, 59; 29 Cong., 1 Sess., appendix 777. Congressmen from the northwest used this argument to about the same extent, chiefly men from Indiana and Illinois. *Register of Debates in Congress*, 22 Cong., 1 Sess., 1174; *Congressional Globe*, 23 Cong., 2 Sess., 241; 25 Cong., 2 Sess., appendix 139, 399; 25 Cong., 3 Sess., appendix 57; 28 Cong., 2 Sess., appendix 55; 29 Cong., 2 Sess., appendix 39.

<sup>21</sup> Edward A. Hannegan (Indiana), *Congressional Globe*, 23 Cong., 2 Sess., 241; Richard M. Young (Illinois), 25 Cong., 3 Sess., appendix 57.

conditions and operate as a safety valve should, finally, provide the most direct evidence that labor influence had an effective bearing on land policies in Congress. But in thirty years it was suggested four times in debates on land that westward migration would raise wages in the East,<sup>22</sup> and three times that it would avert social unrest.<sup>23</sup> Considering the millions of words spoken in Congress during those decades, it is not an impressive showing.

A few conclusions may be drawn from this analysis. The land-labor thesis was never advanced as a primary argument either for land reform or against it by congressmen in the Jacksonian period. When it was used, it was nearly always incidental to more emphatically western objectives with which it appeared to coincide. It seems reasonable to suppose that Western congressmen put the interests of their own constituents above the welfare of a numerically small group such as organized labor in remote parts of the country, but there is no need to raise the question, since a formula was at hand that reconciled those interests. Hundreds of congressmen supported and enacted land laws. Only a handful mentioned labor, and they did so only casually. Except Caleb Cushing, an Easterner and a Whig, who believed that the West was a safety valve and who supported land reform. No evidence has been found that any congressman in the quarter century from 1824 to 1849 was significantly influenced either by the safety-valve idea or by labor problems in acting to liberalize the land policy.

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<sup>22</sup> *Register of Debates in Congress*, 21 Cong., 2 Sess., 477; *Congressional Globe*, 28 Cong., 2 Sess., appendix 55; 29 Cong., 1 Sess., 1072; 29 Cong., 2 Sess., appendix 39.

<sup>23</sup> *Register of Debates in Congress*, 24 Cong., 2 Sess., 1249-1250; *Congressional Globe*, 23 Cong., 2 Sess., 241; 29 Cong., 2 Sess., appendix 39.