

The Hoosier Politician of the 1840's

Roger H. Van Bolt*

As the soil of Indiana produced corn and wheat, so the Hoosier neighborhood generated Whigs and Democrats. The farmer and the politician alike anxiously hoped for a bountiful harvest in the fall, whether it be grain or ballots. Both labored long to satisfy the demands of their respective crops, and both had memories of bumper seasons and years of failure. Both put faith and hope in his god, whether it be nature or the party, to provide that which his personal effort could not guarantee.

The character of the Hoosier politician in the decade of the forties was molded by the world in which he lived. He not only represented his county, state, or district: he was representative of it. As it changed, so must he, to maintain his political availability. Uprooted from his environment and replanted in Washington, he often became an incongruous figure in his new locale.

At home, he was much like his constituents in many ways. Since Indiana had not entirely passed from its age of personal politics when voters were more often known as one of "Noble's boys" or "Tipton's boys" rather than Whig or Democrat,¹ the common touch was often all important. Candidates doffed their ruffles at convention time, and they were careful not to be labeled as among those who spent "too much time at the 'toilet' to suit . . . agrarian & leveling notions."² Their habits were in many cases copied from those of their constituents. The Brookville *American* in 1845 reported that the governor, in his recent message, had spit eighty-two times during the course of his speech.³ The use of plain "Jo Wright" or the nickname "Tom, the tanner" [Henly] added to the common touch. Drinking habits were usually determined in proportion to the strength of the "cold water boys" in the constituency.

* Roger H. Van Bolt is director of the Illinois Junior Historian of the Illinois State Historical Library, Springfield, Illinois. This article is a chapter of his Ph.D. dissertation at the University of Chicago, 1950, written under the direction of Avery O. Craven.

¹ Adam A. Leonard, "Personal Politics in Indiana 1816 to 1840," *Indiana Magazine of History* (Bloomington, 1905-), XIX (1923), 1-56, 132-68, 241-61.

² Godlove S. Orth to Schuyler Colfax, Lafayette, October 25, 1845, in J. Herman Schauinger (ed.), "The Letters of Godlove S. Orth, Hoosier Whig," *ibid.*, XXXIX (1943), 371, 377.

³ As quoted in the Indianapolis, *Indiana State Sentinel*, January 2, 1845.

The personal touch of the "old hoss" greeting and the back slapping often puzzled the staid old New Englanders visiting Indianapolis in 1845. Indeed, even the character of the legislature shocked some of its own members. Young George Julian, already reading William E. Channing, wrote to Isaac Julian: "[The legislature] . . . is composed of the most unthinking and uncultivated dunces or the most reckless and unprincipled demagogues. The Senate is much worse than the House, a majority of the members being perfect animals. . . . What a Burlesque on republican institutions!"⁴

Indiana representatives in the national Congress during the decade 1840-1850 illustrate further the nature of the Hoosier politician and likewise reflect the character of the population of the state. Only two out of fifteen representatives had been born in Indiana. Three were natives of Kentucky and four were from Pennsylvania and Ohio. Only one had come from New England. Yet in their congressional speeches, these men acted as true sons of Indiana—they pled for the interests of their districts or sections as representatives of the West.

The politician of Indiana usually earned his living as a lawyer. In many cases he had learned the intricacies of politics on the court circuit where he had observed the people, the land, and the culture of the district and had swapped tales of experiences with his legal companions, thus adding to his store of political knowledge. Frequently, the courthouse crowds became grass-roots meetings of a sort. A few men drifted into politics from the farm, the store, or medical practice—some of the more versatile had tried several professions. Schoolteaching to medicine to law to politics was possible in this changing society.

If the nature of the electorate conditioned its representatives, it also limited their sphere of action. The Indiana farmer firmly believed in his own practical-mindedness, born out of his own experiences. His vision was limited by the isolation of his world, and by the impact of his trials and tribulations in establishing a home in the wilderness. Although the frontier was passing, one editor noted its effects when he wrote: "The great mass of her [Indiana's] citizens are democratic in their feelings and habits. The old pioneers who struggled with the

⁴ George to Isaac Julian, Indianapolis, January 8, 1846, Julian MSS, Indiana State Library, Indianapolis.

savages for a home in the western wilds have not yet disappeared; and they give tone and character to this generation.”⁵

The politician's task was to meet the demands of the electorate. Unfortunately for the former, the local problems of an Indiana farmer often required national solutions. More specifically, a mudhole in the National Road or a snag in the Ohio River was a very real matter to certain Hoosiers, and it must have been difficult for them to comprehend that the filling in of the hole and the removal of the snag were constitutional questions. The same could be said for problems concerning land, money, and prices. In a like manner, the Scots-Irish squatter must have been hard put to envisage the relationship between fertile land in Oregon and British diplomacy, although since he had fought the Indians for a home, he might not have been reluctant to engage the British for the same reason. In general, the people of Indiana were concerned with local matters. The politician, often returning to Indiana from across the mountains with a bag full of legislative remedies compounded to act as national sedatives, found that what his constituency wanted was a cure for a local pain.

The extent of illiteracy in Indiana also exerted an effect on the Hoosier politician. In the decade 1840-1850, a few residents of the state were conscious of the almost unique position of their state and its educational policy. One editor pled with his readers: “Tell it not on the other side of the Allegheny mountains that there are in the State of Indiana, 40,000 adults, and 50 or 60,000 between the age of 5 and 21 years, that can neither read or write. There are fourteen States in this union ahead of this in point of education. It is alarming to reflect that only about one half of the 300,000, or upwards, of those between the age of five and twenty one attend school at all.”⁶ Caleb Mills, a Yankee schoolmaster transplanted to Wabash College, led the battle for common free schools in the state. Beginning in 1846, he attempted to arouse the citizenry with a series of addresses to the legislature. In the first of these he sarcastically pointed out to the members of that body: “a humiliating fact, that *one-seventh* part of the adult population of a great and flourishing State is not able to read the charter of her liberties, or the votes they cast in the exercise of their election franchise! . . . There are gentlemen on this floor representing rich and populous counties, who perhaps never

⁵ New Albany, Indiana, *Democrat*, August 29, 1845.

⁶ Lawrenceburg, *Indiana Register*, April 3, 1847.

dreamed that a *sixth*, or a *fourth*, or a *third* of their constituents could not read the record of their legislative wisdom, nor peruse the eloquent speeches delivered in these halls and spread over the State at the expense of the commonwealth."⁷ Not until 1852 was the success of this mission assured with the establishment of the first free schools.

Even if no other implications are drawn, the illiteracy of the Hoosiers cannot be discarded as a limiting factor to the *modus operandi* of the Indiana politician of the period. At the same time, it might well have given wider berth to the demagogic spellbinder so common in an opportunistic near-frontier society.

In general, these were some of the prevailing winds of the Indiana political climate affecting equally those in or out of power. All parties and politicians had to set their sails accordingly either to be pushed along or to tack against the breezes.

With the parties, there was the problem of tactics on the local political battle scene. These maneuvers were complicated by the necessity of fitting the situation into the grand strategy that emanated from the national party councils. Of course, the resulting complexities were not unique to Indiana; they are found in any political organization that attempts to bind together a bundle of divergent interests into a workable combination.

Availability alone was not enough to capture a plurality of votes; there remained the matter of political issues—the weapons of the campaign. The politicians seeking to win the elusive maiden fair—the electorate—tried, whenever possible, to fight with issues of their own design. Not infrequently, they found it was their opponents who selected the weapons, and on occasion, both sides were forced to employ the missiles furnished by the voters.

Whig party leaders were filled with stratagems for solving the electoral riddle; one of the more important was the appeal to section and class. One Whig politician stated the problem and a possible solution as he saw it when he wrote in 1845: "In this State, we have various phases of public opinion; the enterprising Yankee of Northern Indiana, despises the sluggish and inanimate North Carolinian, Virginian, and Ken-

⁷ Indianapolis, *Indiana State Journal*, December 8, 1846, reprinted in Charles W. Moores, "Caleb Mills and the Indiana School System," *Indiana Historical Society Publications* (Indianapolis, 1895-), III (1905), 401-02.

tuckian in the Southern part of the State, while the latter in return regarding the 'patriarchal institution' as the direct gift of God to man, looks upon the freeman who toils with his own hands and proclaims a belief in the patriotic sentiments of his fathers, as a fanatic and a fool. So on the question of State policy, one section is Improvement, the other Anti—one portion is willing and able to submit to a taxation sufficient to redeem our ruined credit—another portion, who have no avenue to market for their produce, will not yet submit to anything of the kind. In fact they are unable to bear their present burthen. Again the Wabash & Erie—& Wabash & Ohio Canal questions, the different grants of land & their proper disposition, are intricate and troublesome questions, upon which Democracy must act—and on which they will stand. These are a few instances of the diversity of opinion that cannot be reconciled by any *address*, and no one universal policy should be adopted by our party in the next campaign. Instead of drawing an elevated line, unbending and unchangeable, and battling to raise public opinion to its level, we must come down a little, slacken the stern rule when necessary, meet public opinion, even if only midway at the desired goal—in a word, we must 'stoop to conquer.' This, I confess, is not, high-strung Whig doctrine, but the rising generation of young & ardent Whigs, if ever they desire to participate in the honors and emoluments of their country, must deviate, for a time at least from the track, so often trod, and that so inevitably leads to defeat. . . . every local prejudice or sectional jealousy must be appeased and brought to operate in our favor."⁸

This appraisal is not all-encompassing in its scope, yet certain phrases and words ring a familiar note in the realm of political controversy. "Enterprise and sluggishness"; "patriarchal institutions and free men"; "improvements and avenues to market"; "taxation and ruined credit"—all these carry with them deeper connotations than do local differences of opinion. The fact that the interplay of these conflicting ideas reached across state boundaries added to their complexities. Furthermore, the necessity of appeasing the local prejudices and sectional jealousies required more than local measures. This complicated the problem for the party at the national as well as the local level. The views of the Whig stalwart expressed above apparently represented a greater political dilemma than even

⁸ Orth to Colfax, Lafayette, August 16, 1845, in Schauinger, "The Letters of Godlove S. Orth, Hoosier Whig," *Indiana Magazine of History*, XXXIX, 367-68.

he realized—he saw the fundamental problems that faced the people of his state in a moral and social context, but his solution to them was merely political appeasement. There was room for all in this Whig's political home.

Three years later, however, one Hoosier editor illustrated the uncomfortableness of the Whig position for some of its members: "The electoral ticket—what a piece of patch work. There is Holloway of Wayne, as arrant an old federalist as ever burned blue lights during the last war. In him those whigs who go with Corwin and Abbey Kelly, Cole Smith and Garrison, the *half-breeds* and abolitionists, will find a fitting stool pigeon for their 'moral treasons.' The availability whigs—the men who strain at a gnat and swallow a camel—will find in such men as Orton, the contingent elector, a man who can drum up army recruits. Fish, flesh and fowl are all combined in this Whig salmagundi. They are all things to all men.—Each Whig elector and contingent, should wear in the coming campaign a Joseph's coat (which we are told was of many colors,) as a distinguishing badge of and guide board to whig principles!"⁹

Some Whigs were thus straining at the leash either to pull away from the party mass or to rid themselves of those discordant groups with whom they could no longer dwell in comfort. Near the end of the decade, the mortar that had held the conglomerate together showed signs of crumbling. George W. Julian, erstwhile Whig, wrote in a letter to the *National Era*: "There is a moral in every political duty. I am willing to acknowledge the reasonable claims of party, but its claims must be reasonable. I repudiate the idea that my right to think and act for myself on political matters is utterly gone the moment my party shall issue its decree. . . . Shall I allow a set of men like myself to say to me, 'You are a Whig and we have determined upon the course Whigs ought to pursue.'"¹⁰

Although Julian was concerned with his moral obligations in the political sphere in the light of the antislavery cause, his brother-in-law, H. G. Finch, urged him to form a coalition with the Democracy of his district and justified his changed position thus: "I have become about half a democrat in my principles, as recent reflection has convinced me that some of their measures are more for the interest of the mechanical and la-

⁹ Michigan City, Indiana, *News*, February 4, 1848, quoted in the *La Porte County Whig*, February 19, 1848.

¹⁰ Grace Julian Clarke, *George W. Julian* (Indianapolis, 1923), 77. This is volume XI of the *Indiana Historical Collections* (Indianapolis, 1916-).

boring classes than those of their opponents—and their views on the tariff is one of them.”¹¹

Within the party framework, there was even a broader cleavage than that caused by antislavery. In 1849, Julian himself was to see this. He explained his position when he complained that Free Soil men should no longer fasten themselves to the Whigs as in the past. They had been blinded to the encroachments of the slave power in the party. Furthermore, he added, the Free Soil element had allowed itself to be pitted, Whig against Democrat, on such issues as the bank and the tariff. There was the intense desire to maintain the national party organization at all hazards even after “most of its leading doctrines have been swept away by the lapse of time and the progress of events.” Julian, former Whig, was opposed to the bank, was a low tariff advocate, was against the distribution of the proceeds from the sale of public lands, and was a proponent of the Buffalo platform on internal improvements.¹²

The national views of the Whig party did not coincide with those of its component parts; in fact, to some at least, the national policy seemed actually to be a handicap. One party leader wrote: “we cannot disguise the fact that a majority of the voters of Ind[iana] are against us, especially on general policy. And this brings me to say that we must avoid as much as possible all merely national politics.”¹³ On the other hand, failure to stress the national policy could also be disastrous, as evidenced in the rather famous congressional campaign in 1847, when Robert Dale Owen was defeated by Elisha Embree. The former explained his defeat by the fact that he was attacked with different fringe issues in each neighborhood, in a typical smear campaign. He frankly admitted his failure to stress national political issues as a strong contributing factor to his defeat.¹⁴

To sum up the Whig strategy—it was characterized by appeasement and availability, and by the tendency to cling to the more slender threads of party loyalty rather than to project itself positively in a dynamic sense. The energy expended

¹¹ H. G. Finch to George W. Julian, Indianapolis, December 2, 1848, in Julian MSS.

¹² George W. Julian to G. C. Starbuck, Centerville, June, 1849, in *ibid.*

¹³ Orth to Colfax, Lafayette, January 27, 1846, in Schauinger, “The Letters of Godlove S. Orth, Hoosier Whig,” *Indiana Magazine of History*, XXXIX, 379.

¹⁴ Princeton, Indiana, *Clarion*, August 7, 1847, quoted in New Albany, Indiana, *Democrat*, August 19, 1847, and Indianapolis, *Indiana State Sentinel*, August 21, 1847.

in the task of maintaining itself robbed the party of the necessary power to battle its adversaries. Richard W. Thompson noted this dissipation of its potential force when he wrote John Crittenden: "But you know the disadvantages under which we must labor, when, instead of attacking the enemy . . . we are compelled to spend our time to keep our own party together. You will see therefore that we can promise nothing."¹⁵

The Democracy of Indiana was also faced with the political realities of life during the decade. It, however, had one advantage of no mean proportion: the party was in power locally, if not nationally, much of the time. In a sense, its problem resolved itself, in many instances, to fighting for the reins of party control.

Factionalism was a product to a large degree of personal ambition and a fight over party control. Yet there were other factors that made for strife within the party. One of these was the sectional and local character of party organization. Along the Ohio River, urban centers formed the nuclei of party baronies. These centers themselves, as often as not, were Whig strongholds, yet by linking themselves with the farmers in the neighboring counties, the Democratic politicians of the towns were frequently able to control the districts. The few early letters of Jesse Bright to the politicians and editors of the small back-country communities seem to indicate this fact. The court circuit furnished the lawyer-politicians an additional opportunity continually to mend the political fences of the area. The Wabash Valley formed another such area controlled by the lawyer-politicians of Terre Haute, Lafayette, Bloomington, and Vincennes. Finally, the Indianapolis politicians controlled the central domain of the Democracy.

Thus the combinations became geographical in character so that the Wabash Valley, the Ohio River counties, and the central Indiana plains became party units of power as well as social and economic entities. Control within the party hinged upon the success or failure of combination. The strategy of the politician and the merchant of the older sections of the state were in some respects similar—both desired to strengthen their ties with the rich plains of central Indiana.¹⁶

¹⁵ "Letter of a Conservative Whig of 1848 [Richard W. Thompson to John J. Crittenden]," *Indiana Magazine of History*, XXXI (1935), 252.

¹⁶ A frequently applied division of political parties in the state has been to use the National Road as a man-made point of cleavage. It would seem that the validity of this could be questioned. This highway not only divides a political unit north and south, but parallels to a rather startling degree the rugged upland of the state. As it has been pointed out in "The

Factionalism also grew out of the enviable position of party success. An editorial squabble which arose between the *Indiana State Sentinel*, the *Indiana Democrat*, and the *Lawrenceburg Beacon* in 1845 illustrated well the many facets that this type of factionalism exposed. When the Lawrenceburg newspaper first questioned Democratic appointments, it was accused of supporting the "junto." Then a competing journal was established in Indianapolis to support Lewis Cass for the presidency; the *State Sentinel* took grave offense and pled that there was no room for another Democratic newspaper in the capital city. The tariff policy next became an issue, mainly as an attack on the governor. Countercharges were then hurled by the insurgents at the "Old Junto." The *Washington Union* entered the dispute shortly thereafter and urged the *Sentinel* to drive the "partisans" out. When the legal advertising of the state sinking fund was thrown to the new *Democrat*, the cry of "Bank Organ" was raised. Gradually the journalistic bombardment ceased, and the columns were devoted again to other offenders of the Democratic ideals. Incidents such as these, however, illustrate, it would seem, the dangers arising out of the division of political spoils. Not a unique phenomenon, this was more the problem of the Democrats who at least had gained enough plunder over which to fight.¹⁷

The party battles of the Democrats, however complex, centered also about the conflict of leadership and personal ambition. Rather than a hand-to-hand encounter of the Democratic infantry, it was more a battle of the party generals and their aides. These battles shaped the nature of the party as a whole and to a degree determined its course.

The major divisions within the Democratic party during the period were led by James Whitcomb, Jesse Bright, Edward Hannegan, and Joseph Wright. The elements that went into

Indiana Scene in the 1840's," *Indiana Magazine of History*, XLVII (1951), 333-56, the factors of terrain, soil, and drainage, as well as the rate of settlement, brought about diversity in the character of the state. As the migration of the forties brought about a change in the pattern of population, it may well have carried political change in its movement. The farmers of central Indiana were from the same democratic corridor to the south. Many seem to have been Democrats whether they came from Ohio and Pennsylvania or Kentucky. The southern Indiana politician was probably well aware of the growing importance of central Indiana, politically as well as economically. The political rule of the older sections of the state was undoubtedly challenged. On a much lesser scale than its national counterpart, the older elements of the Democracy of Indiana were confronted by the problem of adjustment brought about by unequal growth.

¹⁷ Indianapolis, *Indiana State Sentinel*, March 27; August 20, 23, 27; September 3, 24; October 22; December 18, 1845.

the political careers of these leaders were representative of the various aspects of political behavior, collected together under the banner of the Democracy. No single one of these men was a composite of the Hoosier Democrat—rather, the interests and background of each formed a segment of the whole. They require individual study to throw light on the larger stage of state politics.

James Whitcomb was the governor of Indiana from 1843 to 1849. Although he was born in Vermont, he was brought to southern Ohio by his farmer parents at an early age. Following in his father's footsteps, he became a struggling small farmer, but his career soon turned to law, and he was admitted to the bar in Kentucky. He then moved to Bloomington, Indiana, where within a few years he seems to have become prosecuting attorney and state senator. By 1836 he had been appointed to the post of Commissioner of the General Land Office by President Andrew Jackson. The political whirlwind of 1840 carried him back to Terre Haute and law, and three years later he became the governor of the state. Whitcomb's political availability had been determined to a significant extent by his opposition to the Mammoth Internal Improvements Bill of 1836. By 1843, the state was in the financial doldrums, the canal works were halted, and its creditors were knocking at the door. Whitcomb by now had escaped the anathema of internal improvement support. His pamphlet attacking the Whig tariff policy in 1843 was widely distributed and became the standard text of the Indiana Democrats; protection became unpopular in Indiana. By 1845, Whitcomb was a candidate for the Senate, but he was halted by Jesse D. Bright, another rising politician.¹⁸

It was rather natural for Baynard Hall to caricature mercilessly this rather strange politician as Insidias B. Cutswell, for Whitcomb must have seemed an unusual man even to his neighbors. A poor farmer turned politician, he did not quite fit into the rough and tumble politics of the day. His contemporaries were impressed by the fact that he was "a cold—old batchelor."¹⁹ Well-groomed, frugal, widely read, an amateur musician, and an inveterate user of snuff, he seemingly was to many the gentleman in politics—a respected even if

¹⁸ William W. Woollen, *Biographical and Historical Sketches of Early Indiana* (Indianapolis, 1883), 80 ff.

¹⁹ Charles H. Test to [Miles Murphy], Centreville, Indiana, December 16, 1845, in Test MSS, Correspondence Book, 1840-1845, Indiana University Library, Bloomington.

cold bachelor.²⁰ His political acumen seems to have been that he not only waited for the tide to turn but as the Hall caricature portrayed it, "he turned a little *before* the tide."²¹

Charles Butler, New England financier, described Whitcomb thus: "He is one of the most cautious and timid men in the world; at the same time he is, I think, entirely honest and would be glad to have right done."²²

To those of the party who sought a safe and reluctant leadership, the broad appeal of James Whitcomb seems to have matched their political desires.

In Edward A. Hannegan, the Indiana Democrats found a political leader of a more vociferous nature. He added the western touch to Hoosier politics. Hannegan was born in Ohio and was educated in Kentucky. His alma mater, Transylvania University, a citadel of education in the West early in the century, provided him with an ample background in the classical tradition which he called upon frequently in his oratory. Among his fellow students were Jefferson Davis of Mississippi, David R. Atchison of Missouri, George W. Jones of Iowa, and Solomon W. Downs of Louisiana. Later these men were all colleagues in the Senate of the United States.

Soon after graduation from college, Hannegan came to Indiana. Steeped in the Jacksonian politics of the courts and the state legislature by the early thirties, Hannegan became a member of Congress. He soon was a champion of his section for pensions and lands. As one Whig editor in Indiana put it, his stump speeches back in Indiana seemed to fly off in the deeds and exploits of General Andrew Jackson.²³ The less colorful Martin Van Buren afforded him fewer opportunities to display his skill. The Whig victory in 1840 had brought dark days for the Indiana Democrats, but by 1843, the party of Jackson was able to elect Hannegan to the United States Senate, and the fiery orator of the Wabash was riding the crest of the wave.

²⁰ Whitcomb was supposed to have carried a nightshirt with him on the circuit, which aroused one innkeeper to battle when he took it to be a reflection on the cleanliness of his hostelry. Woollen, *Biographical and Historical Sketches*, 91.

²¹ Baynard R. Hall, *The New Purchase*, ed. James A. Woodburn (Princeton, New Jersey, 1916), 274.

²² Butler to Wife, Indianapolis, November 29, 1845, in G. L. Prentiss, *The Union Theological Seminary* (Asbury Park, New Jersey, 1899), 455.

²³ *La Porte County Whig*, May 6, 1840, quoted in Frankie I. Jones, "Edward A. Hannegan" (Master's thesis, Department of History, The University of Chicago, 1940), 14.

It would be difficult to label Hannegan a party stalwart, in the organizational sense; rather, he was a sectional partisan. His election as reported by the press of the opposition would seem to indicate his popular appeal: "It will be far from displeasing to the great mass of the people, who only look to the incumbents for an honest discharge of duty. The extreme *leaders* of both parties will probably feel a little *sore* . . . he is more a People's Man than his defeated competitors, and will make up, by securing the popular approval, what he lacks in the endorsement of party leaders."²⁴

Hannegan's exploits in the Senate, for they had an element of daring, were filled with an emotional appeal which made him amazingly popular throughout the West. Impetuous and flamboyant, Hannegan was to fade quickly when other politicians in the state and nation decided to play the game with new rules emphasizing party rather than personality, thus limiting Hannegan's opportunity to use his particular talents.

While Hannegan was hotly debating the position of the West on the floor of the Senate, Jesse D. Bright seems to have been in the capitol cloak rooms attending to party matters. As one Whig expressed it, "Mr. Bright has been rather a business than a speaking member of the Senate."²⁵

This Hoosier Democrat's rise in the state and national party was meteoric. His qualifications for political leadership were law and physical strength, the latter of which shows the more interesting side of Senator Bright. As a youth he was reputed to have been one of the healthiest and strongest men in the hustling Ohio River town of Madison, and he was not reluctant to test his manly prowess. Bright never outgrew the arrogant and overbearing attitude of his youth. He was always prepared to flex his political muscles and he was unable to tolerate any show of opposition, especially if it occurred within the Democracy. One of his contemporaries described him thus: "he classed every man as foe who would not do his bidding, and made personal devotion to himself the test of Democracy."²⁶

Jesse Bright was a probate judge at the age of twenty-two and ten years later he was a United States Senator. Politics

²⁴ Terre Haute, Indiana, *Wabash Express* as cited in Indianapolis, *Indiana State Sentinel*, February 6, 1843, in Jones, "Edward A. Hannegan," 19.

²⁵ Oliver H. Smith, *Early Indiana Trials and Sketches* (Cincinnati, 1858), 373.

²⁶ Woollen, *Biographical and Historical Sketches*, 223.

became his ruling passion. Appointed United States Marshal for Indiana at the close of the Van Buren administration, he had an opportunity to build his political fences over the entire state. This effort resulted in his occupying the Lieutenant Governor's chair in 1843. Two years later Bright was senator. To many of the citizenry, his elevation to this high office was a surprise, and to others a shock.²⁷

Jesse Bright had thrust himself on the center of the political stage as a leader of the young Democracy. The tactics of this politician were rather simple, being based on loyalty to Jesse Bright. As Oliver H. Smith put it: "Nature has done much for him, and he has done much for himself."²⁸

The rival of Jesse Bright for the leadership of the Democratic party in Indiana for almost a generation was Joseph A. Wright. The son of a poor farmer who had emigrated from western Pennsylvania to the White River district, he was a self-made man. His struggles to obtain an education at the state university were legendary by the time of his death. After two years there, he studied law and was licensed to practice before he had reached the age of twenty. His political apprenticeship was served in the state legislature, and by 1843, Wright was in Congress. In 1849, he was elected governor.²⁹

Jo Wright was, according to his contemporaries, a capable stump speaker in a day when oratory was a prime political asset. His allusions to the classics when he was fresh from college and still filled with recollections of them were interesting even later to such men as Robert Dale Owen, who reported one of Wright's early speeches.³⁰

He seems to have been less popular with the party leaders than with members. A partial explanation may be found in his political appeal. Wright, the Methodist leader and temperance advocate, must have been viewed with a jaundiced eye by the less temperate Hannegan. As the scholarly farmer, he was continually the target for the barbs of his opponents; yet he did command respect as an intelligent campaigner. His religious attitude, although flaunted about somewhat, did rally supporters about his political banner. His geographical avail-

²⁷ J. H. Bradley to Samuel Judah, Indianapolis, December 7, 1845, in Judah MSS, Indiana University Library, Bloomington. Bradley tiraded to his fellow politician on the Whig support that had been a factor in Bright's success. Indianapolis, *Indiana State Sentinel*, December 9, 1845.

²⁸ Smith, *Early Indiana Trials and Sketches*, 373.

²⁹ Woollen, *Biographical and Historical Sketches*, 94-103.

³⁰ Robert Dale Owen, "Recallings from a Public Life," *Scribner's Monthly* (22 vols., New York, 1850-1881), XV (1877-1878), 260-61.

ability was also to be considered. At home in the heart of the rapidly growing and prosperous Wabash region, Wright had a fine opportunity to wield his power in the Democracy of the state. Jo Wright was representative of the factions in the party that included churchgoers, and those who were conscious of a need for moral reform as well as political betterment. Jesse Bright was determined that Joseph Wright should not gain a foothold in the Democracy.

This quartet—Whitcomb, Hannegan, Bright, and Wright—politicians all, although not always in harmony, did chant the same tune: the unterrified Democracy. Dissonance came through conflicting interpretation in regard to the proportions of the individual role.

Each of these politicians represented more than personal ambition as evidenced by factionalism; they reflected the political, social, and economic as well as cultural sentiments of their constituencies. The task of these party chieftains was to gather up these complexities in a bundle that would represent the political will of the Indiana Democrats. Fortunately for the politicians, they themselves, as well as the electorate, were in common agreement on many a political concept or problem. The completed result of the labor accomplished in the party councils was the Democratic doctrine as adapted to the political environment of Indiana.

In a federal union of states, where each one of them projects its political will through its representatives in the central legislature as its share in determining the course of the general government, it seems necessary to consider first of all the component parts of the Union: in this instance, the state of Indiana. This discussion of the Hoosier politician has dealt with those ingredients which seem to have some bearing on his political characteristics in the hope that they may lead to a better understanding of his course of action in national affairs. The Hoosier in Washington was as aware of the attitudes of the citizenry back across the mountains in Indiana as it in turn was interested in his political maneuvers in the capital. It was this interaction between the representative and the represented as well as between Indiana and the Union which became a part of the federal process. It was the degree of mutual satisfaction resulting from the relationship which measured the success or failure of the federal process.

It is necessary to consider next the role of the Hoosier politician in Washington and his contribution as a link in the chain of government.