

Hoosiers and the Western Program, 1844-1848

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The western program of political action, thoroughly grounded in economic need, was repeatedly rejected by the Polk administration. There had been a traditional support of western interests by both parties for over a decade, but in many respects this support had been one of lip service and of intermittent character. In the period of 1844-1845, however, changes were taking place in the parties themselves and also in government policies, resulting in a growing suspicion in the Northwest that sectional needs were not being met with adequate measures to alleviate the stress and strain. Even the parties themselves were becoming distrustful. It is interesting to note that James K. Polk, a political dark horse, had become president because of the failure to resolve the cleavages of the faction.¹

Many factors contributed to Indiana's political action during this period. The Hoosiers' interests in the western program had certain elements in common with their neighbors; yet Indiana possessed no spokesmen for its needs with the enthusiasm of Jacob Brinkerhoff and Joshua Giddings of Ohio, or John Wentworth of Illinois. Unlike Ohio and Illinois, Indiana's wool and lead interests were not strong enough to be represented in the national halls. Neither was its lake trade as important as it was to the adjoining states. Michigan City was an enterprising center for the grain growers of northern Indiana, but it was not a Chicago or a Cleveland in importance for Indiana's trade was not concentrated in the direction of the lake. The peculiar boundaries of the state, determined in part by the sweeping northward bend of the Ohio River, gave central Indiana easy access to river trade, and the Wabash River, with its parallel canal opened from Toledo to Lafayette by 1843, provided further outlets to ports outside the state. In addition, there was the railroad from Madison that was to reach the rich farm lands around Indianapolis in the summer

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¹ Madison Kuhn, "Economic Issues and the Rise of the Republican Party in the Northwest" (Ph.D. dissertation, Department of History, The University of Chicago, 1940), 35ff discussed this growing distrust and the elements in the Northwestern Revolt of 1846.

of 1847. Economically, the state was rebounding from the financial doldrums of the early part of the decade. The state debt had been adjusted, and the work on the canals and railroads had been resumed. The character of the Indiana politician also played a part in determining the actions of the state. Unlike the other states of the Northwest, the men who were leaders in Indiana were not products of large settlements of New Englanders; they were representative of the conglomerate nature of the Indiana population. Here again, it seems, that out of diversity, there was much more unity. When Indiana's political behavior during the Polk administration is viewed in the light of its comparative position with respect to its neighbors, the treatment of the political questions of the tariff, internal improvements, and land become more understandable.

Starting in 1843, Indiana Democrats had attempted to indoctrinate their constituents with the evils of the protective tariff. Governor James Whitcomb, who had achieved political success through his widely distributed pamphlet, "Facts for the People," in which he sought to point out to the farmers of the state the evils of protection, had challenged an almost hitherto impregnable fortress. Whitcomb had made an effort in his pamphlet to show a connection between the southern markets of the Indiana farmer and the ruinous tariff which was hampering the southern planter. Written in simple language and using familiar hypothetical examples such as farmers selling potatoes to townspeople, the governor had created alarm among the Whiggery of Indiana. Senator Oliver H. Smith in an answer to this political textbook had claimed that: "This is the first time, it is believed, in the history of Indiana, that a political party has raised aloft, and flung to the breeze a flag inscribed with the Free Trade doctrines preached by Great Britain and South Carolina."² Whitcomb had appealed to the majority group of the state, the numerous and underpaid farmer.

The growth of free trade feeling in the state had reached strong proportions by the time the proposed Walker Tariff was placed before Congress. The Democracy had rejoiced

² Oliver H. Smith, *Early Indiana Trials and Sketches* (Cincinnati, 1858), 298; William W. Woollen, *Biographical and Historical Sketches of Early Indiana* (Indianapolis, 1883), 85-88, Logan Esarey, *A History of Indiana* (2d ed.; 2 vols., Indianapolis, 1918), I, 532. As late as 1882, Whitcomb's pamphlet was widely distributed in the tariff campaigns.

over the repeal of the Corn Laws and the *Sentinel* declared: "Give us now but a just modification of our own tariff, and a long vista of prosperity opens to our view. . . . To the people of Indiana in particular, this event is of especial interest. No state in the Union is more interested in the success of free trade, for by that alone can our people hope for general prosperity."³ But at the same time, Indiana's representatives had put a price on its advocacy of a lower tariff. First, Edward A. Hannegan had expressed his views to Duff Green, and then John Pettit in the House had also warned the South that it could not get the tariff until its support was given to river and harbor improvements in the Northwest.⁴ Although professing to their constituents back home great interest in the tariff, other sectional demands also had to be met. The question of the tariff was not so much a bargain in the sense of implying a sacrifice as it was a holding out to attain other sectional demands.

While Indiana's representatives were seemingly prepared to accede to the party pledges of 1844, some northwestern Democrats were turning away from the platform of the party. It was to round up these strays from party solidarity that Indiana's representatives entered the tariff debates.

Robert Dale Owen was an ardent advocate of tariff reform and took up the question as one of western as well as southern primacy. To him, there were certain progressive changes that must go on in society and government. Protection could not be perpetuated in a republican society, but for the sake of peace he was willing to abandon much which on the soundest principles of equity were just and right. In that spirit, he urged the manufacturing states to come half way to meet the West and the South.⁵

The representatives of special interests who were unwilling to consent to such a course, however, chose to air their objections to the administration's policy. The party strife that resulted prompted William W. Wick to call upon these discordant groups to mend their ways if they were to remain Democrats, and he specifically accused John W. Tibbatts of Kentucky, who sought to protect wool and hemp, of taxing the many to benefit the few. Pennsylvania, he declared, "had gone

³ Indianapolis, *Indiana State Sentinel*, June 27, 1846.

⁴ *Congressional Globe*, 29 Cong., 1 Sess., 462.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 1005-6.

a whoring after false gods. . . . Her Democracy must redeem itself from idolatry, and divorce itself from an adulterous connexion with the lords of the furnace and the rolling mill, and look to the tillers of the soil for voices and votes, or she will soon cease to be the keystone of the Democratic arch."⁶ The few Democrats from New York who strung along with the opposition were accused of seeking clerkships which had been refused by the administration. The day before Wick spoke, Brinkerhoff of Ohio had attacked the provisions placing a heavy tax on coffee and tea; this Wick claimed was an attempt of the Ohioan to become a special defender of the old ladies' tea and coffee pots. Brinkerhoff's state had fared badly at the hands of Polk when the federal patronage was distributed to the faithful of the party, and Wick referred to this by sarcastically bringing out in his speech the fact that the Ohio Democratic electoral vote in 1844 had failed to appear. He further reminded Brinkerhoff of his opposition to the annexation of Texas. Then Wick proceeded to upbraid those Democrats who were trying to bully the administration for personal favor, and those who were decrying the Oregon settlement in order to create further dissatisfaction in the party. Finally, the Indiana Democrat attacked those who were trying to defeat the proposed tariff by whispering into the ears of the northwestern leaders that it was a southern bill. Wick, like Owen, claimed it was a western measure.⁷

The day after Wick's speech, Joseph K. McDowell of Ohio attempted to explain Wick's outburst to the House by saying Wick was trying to use others in order to express his "admiration for the Administration and advocate its principles."⁸

There were no more outpourings on the subject of the tariff from the Indiana Democrats in the House, and when the vote was taken, their support, along with that of the rest of the Northwest, was unanimous. Several explanations were offered for this solid support, some saying that the amendments fixing higher schedules for wool and flaxseed had made the bill acceptable, others saying they felt that sufficient concessions had been forced from the South.⁹

In the Senate, the course of Hannegan and Bright was for

⁶ *Ibid.*, Appendix, 1041.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 1041-43.

⁸ *Congressional Globe*, 29 Cong., 1 Sess., 1046-47.

⁹ Kuhn, "Economic Issues and the Rise of the Republican Party in the Northwest," 50.

the most part one of inactivity. The former as senior senator from Indiana accepted the bill in principle and found it needless from his point of view to continue the discussion of it. He told the Senate that enough had been spoken in every town, village, and hamlet on this subject, but that he would listen with pleasure to the speeches of the gentlemen of that body who felt called upon to deliver them for the benefit of the other senators or the constituents back home.¹⁰

Hannegan, no longer an enthusiastic supporter of the issues of 1844, said he would vote according to his principles, but the fiery oratory that he had lent to the cause of manifest destiny no longer spurred the Democracy on.

The tariff issue in Indiana did not blow up a political storm within the Democratic party, and there was no apparent sign of revolt in its congressional delegation. Wick's attack of the discordant elements in the other states of the Northwest that were attempting to satisfy local interests, apparently met with the approval of his Democratic colleagues, for they did not trouble themselves to dissent.

The appeal of Whitcomb to the common folk of the state in terms that were comprehensible to them had probably prepared the way for this apathy, but coupled with this was the fact that Hoosiers had little to protect—special interests had not developed in Indiana. Governor Whitcomb congratulated the party on its success with the tariff issue, declaring in his address to the legislature that the tariff revision had been made in accordance with the spirit of the age.¹¹

The Whigs, who were quick to take up the issue, appointed a special committee to draft a reply to the governor's message, and in his report, George B. Thompson harangued the governor for his views on the tariff. This reply, which leaned upon many of the stereotyped phrases of the Whigs, was used in their defense of protection. It is interesting to note that the Whigs of Indiana sought to array Sir Robert Peel, James K. Polk, and the governor of Indiana in the same school. Referring to the so-called bargains of the Democracy, Thompson wrote: "Well might the British Parliament bestow upon the report of Secretary Walker an honor never before conferred

¹⁰ *Congressional Globe*, 29 Cong., 1 Sess., 1056.

¹¹ "Governor's Message Delivered to the General Assembly of the State of Indiana, December 8, 1846," *Indiana Documentary Journal*, 1846, p. 84; "Report of Mr. George Burton Thompson, of Perry, . . . January 6, 1847," *ibid.*, 193-200.

upon an American State paper, to direct it to be printed at the expense of the British nation. Well may they afford to give Oregon, and tacitly submit to our conquering and annexing province after province of Mexico."¹² The "Southern Administration," he declared, with the aid of Indiana Democrats, was thus systematically ruining the nation through its party schemes. Whitcomb, who had apparently aroused the members of the legislature, did not mention the tariff in his inaugural address to the people; he concentrated on the matter of relieving the oppressing state debt.

The South and the Indiana Democrats at least seemed to be treading on common ground on the tariff. Unfortunately, on the other issues of conflict, the dilemma was not so easily resolved. The free movement of agricultural products required rivers and harbors as well as favorable tariffs. It was at this point that mutual interest ceased to be a binding force drawing the West and the South together.

Polk's veto of the Rivers and Harbors Bill in August of 1846 was a bitter blow to the Northwest. It had been disappointed before, but since the days of the campaign of 1844 there had been the feeling that the South and West could ameliorate sectional differences of opinion. The Memphis Convention in 1845 had led the Southern Democrats to a rather strange interpretation of the Constitution, and the expectation of lower hurdles in the House and Senate had stimulated in the Northwest a greater hope of settlement.

Indiana had its interest in internal improvements as did the rest of the section, even though its geography made her self-development less urgent. The federal government had spent enough funds in Indiana to begin several projects; the problem now was to complete them. The river interests were concerned in improving the Ohio River, while central Indiana was determined that the National Road be completed across the state. When John Tyler in 1845 had vetoed the Harbor Bill with its attached appropriation for the road, the *Sentinel* had reacted bitterly.¹³ Michigan City, in the northern part of

¹² *Ibid.*, 195.

¹³ "We must get up a small chunk of a war, when the government will desire to transport western soldiers and munitions of war over roads three feet deep with mud. . . . Money enough is every year fooled away on West Point Academy to finish the road without difficulty. But that is a mill for the manufacture of Aristocrats and must be sustained, whether we have a military road or not." Indianapolis, *Indiana State Sentinel*, March 13, 1845.

the state, was becoming more and more important as an outlet for Indiana's surplus commodities and as a shelter during the lake shipping season, and even though appropriations had been granted to construct a breakwater and \$135,733.00 had been spent, the work was not complete, and the timbers of the project rotted away while politicians debated the constitutionality of further expenditures. The interest of the army engineers in Michigan City centered more on its location than on its commercial possibilities, for it was a last resort during storms for ships to seek a refuge on the eastern shores of the lake. Indiana, however, stressing its value as a shipping point, had claimed as early as 1842 in the resolutions of the General Assembly that there were over sixty thousand dollars of exports each year through this lake port, in spite of the fact that prior to improvement, a rowboat often could not get into the sand-filled harbor.¹⁴

The southern reluctance to give its legislative support in the improvement of western rivers and harbors nurtured in the Northwest continued distrust of its neighbors. The bill of 1846 was of large proportions, filled with provisions that were targets for the cries of porkbarrel legislation. Pettit of Indiana was the only congressman from that state who spoke on the subject of rivers and harbors legislation, and it was he who made the threat to the South that the tariff would not be supported by the Northwest unless appropriations were made for internal improvements. The Lafayette politician chided R. Barnwell Rhett of South Carolina for attacking the western program at the same time when he was advancing the cause of Charleston harbor improvements.¹⁵

The votes on individual provisions of the bill did not bring forth any clear pattern of legislative behavior. All of Indiana's congressmen voted for the improvement of the harbor at Michigan City, though one congressman who had voted in favor of the previous provisions, saw fit to vote against the proposal to improve the St. Clair flats. All but one Democrat supported the final bill.¹⁶

¹⁴ "Resolutions of the General Assembly of Indiana, February 14, 1842," in *Senate Documents*, 27 Cong., 2 Sess., No. 87 (serial no. 402), 1; "Report of Bureau of Topographical Engineers, January 12, 1848, Commerce of the Lakes and Western Rivers," in *House Executive Documents*, 30 Cong., 1 Sess., No. 19 (serial no. 516), 43.

¹⁵ *Congressional Globe*, 29 Cong., 1 Sess., 462.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 375, 524, 525, 527, 529, 530.

It is not surprising, then, that the veto message of President Polk generated a storm of protest in the Northwest. Owen and Wick, however, declined to override the veto; in fact, the New Harmony Democrat had voted against the bill just as he had against all others based on a strict constructionist stand. When John Wentworth and Wick were debating on the floor of the House some months later, the Chicago Democrat reminded Wick of this failure to support the interests of the Northwest. Lumping together the political misdoings of Wick as he saw them, Wentworth accused Wick of back tracking to the administration point of view after voting for the Harbor Bill. Furthermore, he said, Wick had changed his position on Oregon and left the 54° 40' camp to support the administration compromise. He had supported the tea and coffee provisions of the tariff and changed his stand on rivers and harbors. Wentworth, who was now convinced that the southern leaders were attempting to rule the nation in order to maintain their peculiar institutions castigated all men such as Wick who boldly followed the Polk administration. How could Wick explain his apparent lack of sectional interest?

The Hoosier politician replied that his constituents had sent him to Congress to carry out executive policy, and furthermore, his position was clear on each of the issues under attack. The Oregon question was now dead and past. As for the coffee and tea tax, it was merely a temporary measure to finance the Mexican War, and like any direct tax, he declared, it would fall hardest on the laborers of the North. Concerning the Harbors Bill, when he had found out that this measure would put harbors where God had not intended them, he had supported the President's veto.

The Democrats of the Northwest were beginning to establish loyalty checks on their fellow party members. Collectively, the support given each measure in Congress spotlighted the faction to which each House member belonged. Those who supported the Polk administration became, in the eyes of the insurgents, mere tools of the southern politicians, whereas northwestern Democrats opposed to the President were evolving into a new species of Democrats.

Although Indiana party members opposed the President's policy, they apparently did not see fit to rise up in wild protests comparable to those of the neighbors of the Northwest. The Upper West was breaking away from the Lower, as Hub-

bart has pointed out, to make a section within a section,¹⁷ but the political manifestations of this process were not clear-cut in Indiana, probably because the Hoosiers did not have the factors present in an appreciable quantity that would tend to create a strong upper West.

With one sand-filled harbor on its forty miles of Lake Michigan shoreline that as yet had not developed a hinterland from which it could drain off surplus commodities, the lake area was in many ways the least developed section of Indiana. The residents of La Porte and South Bend, anxious for improvements at Michigan City as well as at St. Joseph, in Michigan, were represented in Congress by a Democrat (whose district also included the Upper Wabash Valley), who faithfully supported the national administration. He deplored the Polk veto of lake improvements, but he did not offer much encouragement to the politically aroused of La Porte. When the citizens adopted a resolution that they would vote for no man as their representative in Congress who would not approve bills for harbor improvements, Charles W. Cathcart told his constituents that no appropriations could be expected during the present administration, for there was little chance that a two-thirds vote could be secured. He suggested this remedy: "if they expected their representative to procure such an appropriation, they had better secure another man."¹⁸

It was during the first week of August, 1846, that the Northwest received another disappointment. It was oppressively hot and muggy in Washington, and the members of Congress who had been at their seats for nearly two hundred and fifty days labored feverishly over the remaining tasks of the session. Saturday was set for adjournment. By that time, the first session of the Twenty-ninth Congress would have been the longest in history.¹⁹ On Wednesday, the Graduation Bill came from the Senate with amendments and the House proceeded to vote on whether to lay it on the table. Although the members from Indiana could not agree to this proposition,

¹⁷ Henry C. Hubbart, *The Older Middle West, 1840-1880* (New York, 1936), 88-103, *passim*.

¹⁸ William M. Hall, *Chicago River-and-Harbor Convention: An Account of Its Origin and Proceedings* (Chicago, 1882), 34-37; Memoirs of Charles W. Cathcart, in La Porte Historical Society Collection, La Porte, Indiana. Hall gives the impression in his quotation from the *La Porte County Whig* that this was meant to mean a new president. Cathcart, in his memoirs, wrote that this would mean another representative in Congress.

¹⁹ *National Intelligencer*, August 4, 1846.

they were defeated.²⁰ On Thursday, Polk submitted to the House a copy of the convention settling the Oregon difficulties and requested that a territorial government be established as quickly as possible along with liberal grants of land to aid settlement. Representative James Thompson of Pennsylvania offered an amendment prohibiting slavery in the new territory. The bill and the proposed amendment were discussed, and all of the Indiana congressmen agreed that the slavery amendment, which evoked little comment, should be in the bill; it passed by a vote of 108 to 43. On Friday the House worked on the business of appropriations bills until 10:30 P.M., and on Saturday, as the time for adjournment approached, the House continued to discuss appropriations, including Polk's request for two million dollars to promote peaceful negotiations with Mexico; work continued on into the evening session. According to his biographer, Owen during the afternoon recess learned of David Wilmot's intention to inject the slavery prohibition into the debate, and he warned Wilmot that this was no time to bring up the issue. Yet late on Saturday evening, Wilmot did just that.²¹

Owen, the first Democrat of the Northwest to gain the floor of the House, declared that peace was the primary consideration, virtually ignoring the impending sectional conflict over slavery. Wick quickly added an amendment to extend the Missouri Compromise line into any future territory acquired out of the Mexican War.²² When the entire measure came to a vote, Wick asked to be excused from casting his vote, pleading that although he supported the administration plan, to add provisions regulating a land which we did not as yet own was in bad taste, arrogant, and indecent. His request was denied by the House. The individual votes on the proviso itself were unrecorded in *The Congressional Globe*, but Owen seems to have been one of the few northwestern Democrats who did not support the proviso.²³ On the whole bill, no Indianan was found in the opposition, but only Thomas Henley, Jr., and Owen were recorded in favor of the bill.²⁴ Apparently most of

²⁰ *Congressional Globe*, 29 Cong., 1 Sess., 1195-96.

²¹ Richard W. Leopold, *Robert Dale Owen* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1940), 208-9.

²² *Congressional Globe*, 29 Cong., 1 Sess., 1216.

²³ Leopold, *Robert Dale Owen*, 209.

²⁴ *Congressional Globe*, 29 Cong., 1 Sess., 1218.

Indiana's representatives did not see fit to express their views either way.²⁵

The Wilmot Proviso by bringing into the political arena a new ingredient—the expansion of slavery—tested the versatility of the Hoosier politician. Limited by experience and the will of his constituents, he was forced to rummage through his political baggage to find the proper political adhesive to apply to this new crack in the party structure.

The average Hoosier was not very hospitable to abolitionism, with the result that the movement took root slowly and only in particular localities. The Quakers of the Whitewater Valley offered perhaps the most fertile field of endeavor. In 1839, the Friends of Newport had organized an Anti-Slavery Library Society. One of the Friends, Levi Coffin, had been aiding fugitive slaves for years, having begun the task in North Carolina many years previously. It is interesting to note that in 1840, Arnold Buffum of Rhode Island, a charter member of William L. Garrison's society in Boston, had lived with the Coffins while lecturing on the subject of abolitionism.²⁶ The turn that abolitionism had taken was giving the Friends in Indiana cause for alarm. The Yearly Meeting in 1841 had warned against opening meeting houses for anti-slavery meetings, and the following year several Friends were "disqualified" for usefulness in the body presumably for anti-slavery activity. Benjamin Stanton, who edited the *Free Labor Advocate*, and Charles Osborn, one of the most famous of the abolitionists, were among those who were asked to leave.²⁷ In 1843, the Society went on record warning its members not to join antislavery societies. Thus the Friends were splitting not over slavery per se, so much as over the method of handling it.

Other churches in Indiana in the early forties were also

²⁵ The origin of the proviso has been the subject of some historical controversy. Charles W. Cathcart claimed in his memoirs that as a member of the House, his recollection was that Brinkerhoff drew up the amendment and passed it around to Wilmot "who was addressing the House in his usual animated strain." *Memoirs of Charles W. Cathcart*.

²⁶ When Buffum founded the *Protectionist* and espoused a third party policy in the cause of abolition, his daughter wrote that she was sorry that her father's paper was political in nature. She agreed with her father as to what constituted a spiritual or carnal weapon to be used in the overthrow of the institution of slavery. "Is not a ballot a carnal weapon?" she asked. *Life of Elizabeth Buffum Chace*, 90, quoted in Jacob P. Dunn, *Indiana and Indianans* (5 vols., Chicago, 1919), I, 510.

²⁷ George W. Julian, "The Rank of Charles Osborn as an Anti-Slavery Pioneer," in *Indiana Historical Society Publications* (Indianapolis, 1895-), II (1895), 262; Dunn, *Indiana and Indianans*, I, 515-16.

troubled by the antislavery impulse. In 1842, the *True Wesleyan*, a Methodist paper, withdrew from the church, but the Methodist church as a whole, perhaps the largest denomination in the state, was not yet ready to follow the extremists. If it can be interpreted as a reflection of the opinion of its members, the attitude of the majority of its leaders was much like that of the Hoosier politicians who took the position that the Northwest had a special role to play as a great middle force in the Union. The church and state, although separated, were nevertheless influenced by the same social forces. In 1844, when the Methodist church was brought face to face with the question of secession induced by the stumbling block of slavery, the Indiana Conference of the church deplored the action of the national body. In resolutions adopted by the Northern Indiana Conference, it declared that "we do in fear of God protest against all efforts by whatever source proceeding, to divide the Methodist Episcopal Church."²⁸

Later, when the Erie Conference of Ohio resolved that the next General Conference add the rule that holding of slaves was to be outside the tenets of the church, the North Indiana Conference by a vote of 60 to 2 refused to concur. At the same session, an agent of the colonization society attempted to address the conference, but he was stopped by some members who were determined not to arouse any excitement on the subject of slavery. Later, the conference voted to hear him, but the speaker declined to continue.²⁹

These men of the church were not proslavery-minded; like their brother politicians, they were merely attempting to place themselves between the extremes. As practical men, they prided themselves that this was the western approach to action. The future middle ground stand of the politician had a forerunner in the actions of the church leaders of 1844. While at the Convention of Southern Methodists at Louisville, Bishop Matthew Simpson of Indiana wrote to his wife: "I learn that seventeen brethren of the Kentucky Conference have declared themselves openly Northern men, and a number are undecided; that an effort will be made to postpone action until the next General Conference, and that Northern men may make

²⁸ *Western Christian Advocate*, November 1, 1844, quoted in H. N. Herrick and William W. Sweet, *A History of the North Indiana Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (Indianapolis, 1917), 8.

²⁹ Herrick and Sweet, *History of the North Indiana Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, 17.

terms of compromise, etc. If any effort should be made to get Northern men to pledge themselves, my stay at Louisville will be short, as I shall compromise nothing by any act or word of mine."³⁰ This was the rather reluctant and distrustful view of the Indiana Methodist leader. Quakers and Methodists alike were finding that the slavery question complicated church structure and undoubtedly slowed down the spirit of the church in its mission, but Hoosier churchmen were reluctant for the most part to take a stand on either side of the controversy.

The attitudes of the Hoosier laymen toward the Negro also contributed to the political climate typical of Indiana. The legal framework of the state placed very definite restrictions on the Negro. He was treated as a vagrant in most localities. In the constitution of 1816, the only restriction placed upon the Negro was that he could not vote or serve in the militia. In the same year, legislative permission was asked to settle a group of emancipated slaves in the state; the committee of the legislature to which the request was referred replied that it "would be impolitic to sanction by any special act of the general assembly the admission of emancipated Africans into this state; the reasons are that the Negroes being a distinct species, insuperable objections exist to their participation in the rights of suffrage, representation in government or alliance by marriage, and that in consequence, they could never feel themselves completely free."³¹

The citizens of Indiana took pride in the adjective "free," giving it a wide connotation. It was applied to labor, the West, and the people. Occupied with local problems and the business of establishing themselves, the agrarian desire to be left alone, whether it be from taxation, reformers, free education, or meddling neighbors, was very evident. The farmers were not particularly concerned over slavery—they just did not like Negroes, slave or free. William W. Wick seemingly did not exaggerate the feeling of many when he said: "We have our antipathies in Indiana; but they are not local antipathies. I will name three of them . . . they are abolitionism, free-niggerism, and slavery."³²

It was characteristic of the citizenry to be reluctant to change its attitude with the result that the abolitionist not

³⁰ George R. Crooks, *The Life of Bishop Matthew Simpson* (New York, 1891), 243-44.

³¹ Dunn, *Indiana and Indianans*, I, 348.

³² *Congressional Globe*, 29 Cong., 2 Sess., Appendix, 159,

only had difficulty in arousing the church, but he had an equally difficult time in a court of law. When some boys were indicted in Rush County for disturbing an abolition meeting, the jury acquitted them on the ground that an abolition meeting was not a lawful assemblage, peaceably assembled for a lawful purpose. The members of the jury considered themselves as the judges of the law and the evidence. It must be noted, however, that this verdict was not universally accepted, for one editor wrote: "If it should be sustained, it would establish a *white* slavery much worse than any black slavery we know of."³³

Indiana politicians had not been troubled to any great extent by the politically inclined antislavery groups. The Liberty party had run a slate in the state election of 1843, with Elizur Deming and Stephen S. Harding, both capable men, as its candidates, but it had not been able to garner any more than twenty-six hundred votes. The canvass for James G. Birney in 1844 had been of no special significance, either.³⁴ In the major parties, politicians, always willing to use expediency in appealing to voters, were not hesitant to play on the local attitudes in order to gain an extra pocketful of antislavery votes. This could mean anything from making a diversion with the Liberty party to employing such devices as one Whig suggested when he wrote: "It might not be amiss to tell the folks that Joe Marshall [Whig candidate for governor] had a considerable patrimony in *slaves* left him—all of whom he has emancipated & provided for in this State."³⁵

Indiana politicians, despite these few flirtations, were unwilling to relax the laws of the state dealing with the Negro. In 1841-1842, when a bill was put before the legislature providing that fugitives be given jury trials and be allowed to testify in court, Hannegan, then a member of the state legislature, protested "the presumption of negro virtue." A law of 1831 that had required Negroes to give bond of five hundred dollars for their good behavior before receiving permission to settle in the state was also under fire, and Hannegan asked his

³³ Brookville *American* quoted in *Indiana State Sentinel*, June 26, 1845.

³⁴ *The Whig Almanac and United States Register for 1845* (New York, 1845), 52.

³⁵ Godlove S. Orth to Schuyler Colfax, Lafayette, August 16, 1845, January 27, 1846, in J. Herman Schauinger (ed.), "The Letters of Godlove S. Orth, Hoosier Whig," *Indiana Magazine of History* (Bloomington, 1905-), XXXIX (1943), 367, 368, 380.

fellow members not to stimulate Negro immigration or join the abolition ranks "to make *our* beloved State the theatre of their efforts to annoy our slaveholding neighbors, and sow the seeds of dissension between brethren and friends, in open violation of the letter and spirit of the Constitutional Compact which united us together as one people." It was the duty and honor of the free states to help make their neighbor's property secure. Furthermore, cried the Indiana orator, he would "not hesitate to shoulder my musket in defense of the Constitutional rights of those States upon whom Slavery has been entailed and whose misfortune, in that respect, has been construed by folly into crime."⁸⁶ Hannegan treated the institution of slavery as a misfortune that had befallen his neighbors, much as if they had begot idiot children.

Jesse Bright, unlike Joseph Marshall, had not freed his slaves and continued to hold them in Carroll County, Kentucky. Much of his time between his political labors in Indiana and Washington was spent there on his farm. It would be difficult to determine how many more men of the bustling Ohio River towns lived in Indiana and held slave property in Kentucky, for the Ohio River world included both shores of that stream. Although Hannegan and Bright both deplored abolitionism, the former, at least before the storm broke over the Wilmot Proviso, gave tacit approval to his neighboring slaveholders. In March, 1845, Hannegan criticized the New Englanders in the Senate who were complaining of the southern laws regarding the Negro. Indiana, he declared: "lay side by side of Kentucky, where slavery existed, and yet the people of Indiana did not complain of any of the laws of Kentucky affecting the intercourse between the two States. On the contrary, it was beautiful to contemplate the relation in that gallant State between master and servant."⁸⁷ Hannegan, in his eloquence, may have been carried away again by the wondrous flow of his utterances; yet the fact remains that he did make such statements. These excursions of the politicians into the slavery question, however, were put in the past when David Wilmot threw slavery and expansion into one basket and handed it to an already disgruntled Congress.

⁸⁶ Indianapolis, *Indiana State Sentinel*, January 20, 1842, quoted in Frankie I. Jones, "Edward A. Hannegan" (Master's thesis, Department of History, The University of Chicago, 1940), 63.

⁸⁷ *Congressional Globe*, 28 Cong., 2 Sess., 382,

Early in 1847, the congressmen of Indiana began to air their views as to slavery in general and the proviso in particular, using much the same treatment everywhere. They were reluctant to take any extreme position. John Pettit of Lafayette, who felt called upon to explain his actions, gave two reasons for voting for the proviso: first, to make the appropriations bill so odious to the South that its congressmen would vote it down; second, "because it was my firm, well-settled, and conscientious opinion that we ought not, under any circumstances, to allow what I conceive to be a moral, political and physical evil, to be extended under the authority of this government." But Pettit did not want to be misunderstood. "I've no sickly sympathy with the negro. . . . I believe that it [slavery] is a blessing to the entire black population."⁸⁸

A few days later, Wick expressed his views of the proviso in terms of the party. Wick's criterion for judging every practice was to test its merits in relation to the Democratic party. He was frequently engaged, it seems, in acting as a self-appointed party whip to remind his colleagues of the necessity for party unity. He took this occasion to deplore the impracticability of the Democratic majority in the House, with a speech that exemplified the western desire to act in the Democratic mechanism as the great balance wheel over-riding sectional friction. His observations were typical of those who were unwilling to recognize any disruptive forces that would strain the national unity of the party and who religiously preached the central themes of party loyalty and practical politics. Wick castigated the rising factional spirit thus: "Perhaps some of that majority are but half-baked Democrats—need grinding over again. To this may be added a little individual ambition disappointed. State feuds and factious jealousy may come in for a share, and President-making in 1848 operates, mayhap, to clog the wheels. Such things I leave to be reproved and punished by the people, posterity, history, and God. Sometimes it seems to me as if some of us forget that we are members of one great firm, each bound to exert himself for the common account; and that there is a kind of peddling in small wares—such as Abolitionism and Nullification, for instance—on individual account. It was but the other day that we contrived to get up a tempest in a teapot on the subject of the kind of municipal laws to be established in the territory

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 29 Cong., 2 Sess., 180-81.

which it is assumed we *are* to acquire, by cession or by force, as an indemnity from our unjust neighbors, the Mexicans! As if it were reduced to a certainty that wisdom will die with this Congress, and that no subsequent Congress will have the temerity to upset matters of our ordaining. . . . Hereupon, some of our southern friends, feeling that they have as good a right, and as good a will, to expand themselves . . . made this Hall ring with threats of disunion and secession—threats from which I must be excused for withholding my respect, whether they come from Boston or Charleston—the Bay State or the Old Dominion.

"The result seems to be that the Democratic party in this Hall is incapable of united action, more because of certain local and personal peculiar idiosyncracies, which the owners nurse as the nurseryman nurses his vegetable pots, from habit, rather than any rational preference, or respect for them."³⁹

Hannegan in the Senate treated the proviso in much the same manner as Wick, as if it were a mere disturber of the peace. There was time enough, according to the Senator, to talk of slavery when the new territory gained from the Mexican War was actually part of the Union.⁴⁰

Robert Dale Owen also preferred to support an appropriation bill without the nuisance of considering an antislavery proviso. Owen claimed that it was only common sense to vote against "a clause, which every one knew must, if persisted in, defeat it; no matter how much opposed that man might be to domestic institutions, which the progress of improvement must soon sweep away."⁴¹

These legislators of Indiana represented the feeling of their constituents in several ways. They were puzzled in the sense that they could not comprehend any political sagacity in bringing slavery into the party battles, remembering that the Liberty party had not been able to throw a scare into the politicians of the old parties in Indiana. Yet they were reluctant to take a stand against the slavery question and thereby lose a degree of availability. Their middle ground position was becoming more hazardous for it was increasingly difficult to stand on the plateau of neutrality and watch it slowly crumb-

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 264.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 516.

⁴¹ *New York Tribune*, March 13, 1847, quoted by Leopold, *Robert Dale Owen*, 211.

ling under their feet, being washed away by the action of the cross currents. When Wick and his colleagues attempted to castigate wavering Democrats, they found their weapons were rather limited, so they centered their arguments around blind loyalty to party. The solution, however, was not as simple as that; political tongue-lashings were not enough to restore complete accord because party unity, per se, did not change the social and economic realities of the growing sectionalism of the nation. It was more comfortable for the party stalwarts of Indiana to assume the role of purveyors of expediency than for Democrats like John Wentworth of Illinois or Jacob Brinkerhoff of Ohio, who were plagued by constituencies that were pulling apart from the West represented by the Indiana politicians.

The Hoosier press gave some indication that for practical reasons it would also take the high middle ground on the slavery issue. The *New Albany Democrat*, for example, expressed a southern Whig view in its own statement concerning the extension of the institution of slavery, prefacing its remarks with the inevitable disarming introduction: "None can be more opposed to the principle of slavery than we are; none would rejoice more than in the triumph of Northern principles in the settling of this question, but so far as the practical effect of the prohibition of slavery in the newly acquired territory is concerned, we have good authority—Whig authority—for saying that it is of but little moment. Slavery cannot be made profitable there; and when it ceases to be profitable, it will cease to exist."⁴²

One of the few who favored the proviso was Schuyler Colfax up in South Bend, who believed that by girdling the slaveholding states with a belt of freedom, slavery would be choked out.⁴³ There was thus a fumbling about by politicians and editors who were unable to gauge the prevailing political winds. As election days came one upon another, the political pots were kept constantly boiling, the fires never having a chance to die down.

The congressional elections of 1847 were in reality a prelude to the coming presidential campaign of the following year. Many of the congressmen had just cause for concern as

⁴² *New Albany Democrat*, August 21, 1847.

⁴³ Willard H. Smith, "Schuyler Colfax: Whig Editor, 1845-1855," *Indiana Magazine of History*, XXXIV (1938), 270.

to their political futures. The Mexican War had drained the treasury; appropriations for the western program had not been forthcoming; the Oregon controversy had not completely satisfied the expansionist demands; and above all, what would be the reaction of the voters to the attitudes of her congressmen on slavery?

The difficulties of the Democratic party permeated all levels. There were some purely local squabbles, during which Robert Dale Owen and John Pettit were faced with the charges of being infidels. John W. Davis, speaker of the House, was the victim of a three-way Democratic race, and Hannegan devoted himself to a bitter fight with Joseph E. Wright in the Terre Haute district. In the lake region, Cathcart was forced to carry the burden of the Democratic internal improvement policy into his campaign for re-election.

The Rivers and Harbors Convention at Chicago, July 4, 1847, which excited the Northwest generally, failed to arouse much interest in Indiana except in the northern section of the state. Although La Porte and St. Joseph counties both sent large delegations (La Porte County alone sent 110 delegates) only 13 of the state's 92 counties were represented. La Porte had prepared for the convention at a meeting in April when it was voted that no man would be nominated for office who did not support the rivers and harbors bills.⁴⁴

Many of the leading Whigs of the state were present. Schuyler Colfax, at that time a young Whig editor acting as a secretary, was disappointed at the outcome of the convention, claiming it did not go far enough in demanding funds to improve the lakes.⁴⁵

The Democrats joined some of the national Whigs in exhibiting reluctance as being identified with the movement. The *Sentinel*, as spokesman for the Hoosier Democrats, reported the affair as a Whig attempt to make political capital, but its editor assured the party stalwarts that the attempt had failed.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Hall, *Chicago River-and-Harbor Convention*, 34-37. The fact that Wayne County sent a delegation raises the question of the role of the Whigs in the protest. *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Smith, "Schuyler Colfax," *Indiana Magazine of History*, XXXIV, 268; Ovando J. Hollister, *Life of Schuyler Colfax* (New York, 1886), 42.

⁴⁶ Indianapolis, *Indiana State Sentinel*, July 21, 1847. The activities of the Democrats in avoiding the convention in a sense closely followed Webster's fears that the internal improvements issue would lose its value. Daniel Webster to James A. Hamilton, Marshfield, June 17, 1847, quoted

Lewis Cass did not attend the convention, and his explanation for his absence occasioned the Whig comment that Cass could not support his section on improvements without turning a "cold shoulder" to the southern wing of the Democratic party.⁴⁷

After the convention ended, and the election took place, it was disclosed that the convention had had little effect on Indiana politics, for Charles Cathcart, the Democratic incumbent whose district bordered Lake Michigan, and who had shown so little interest in lake improvements, was re-elected to Congress.⁴⁸

Slavery and the Mexican War must also be considered in connection with the canvass. The "abolition committee" in Indianapolis, according to the *Sentinel*, asked Nicholas McCarty, the Whig candidate for Congress, for his views on these issues, to which he replied he would not vote for the admission of any slave territory where slavery did not already exist; he would reserve the right of expediency on any vote concerning territory where it already existed; and he favored the Wilmot Proviso. The *Sentinel* was quick to accuse the Indianapolis Whig of seeking a mixed vote.⁴⁹ McCarty, the opponent of William W. Wick, was an administration supporter par excellence; nevertheless, the Whig was defeated and Wick remained a congressman.

The war issue was a popular bludgeon for other Whigs. Although Elisha Embree used practically all of the mud slinging tactics available to him in an effort to defeat Robert Dale Owen, it was really the New Harmony reformer's advocacy of the Texas annexation which boomeranged and defeated him. Owen had told his constituents that he himself could do all the fighting that would ever grow out of annexation, and when news of the war reached the "pocket" district, one old Whig inquired, "Why aint he off and on the battleground." Owen was not the only Democrat who had made this sort of state-

in James A. Hamilton, *Reminiscences of James A. Hamilton* (New York, 1864), 355.

⁴⁷ *La Porte County Whig*, September 11, 1847.

⁴⁸ The pattern of voting in the election failed to show any reversal in political behavior. Cathcart carried all the counties bordering Lake Michigan, while the Whig opponent from the neighborhood of Logansport carried the neighboring counties. In Elkhart County, the domain of E. W. H. Ellis, Cathcart rolled up a huge majority. See the *Whig Almanac for 1848*, p. 48, for returns.

⁴⁹ Indianapolis, *Indiana State Sentinel*, July 3, 1847.

ment, and when the campaign began the next year, Embree's party friends took great delight in reminding Owen again and again of the boasts he and his colleagues had made.⁵⁰

Doubts were expressed by even a few Democrats as to whether the Mexican War had real support in Indiana. John Law, friend and correspondent of Martin Van Buren, wrote during the summer of 1847: "The Truth is the Mexican War is not popular in the thinking and reflecting majority of our party. . . . Who wins? and though we are very conservative sort of people—we want no addition of slave states."⁵¹

The canvass did not result in a clear mandate on these issues—it merely indicated that the "New Democracy" of 1843 had lost some of its momentum at an inopportune time, the eve of a presidential election. The Whigs had gained two seats in the House of Representatives, and the state-wide popular vote showed increasing Whig strength in Indiana. There were issues present that required solution, and no solutions were foreseeable. The Mexican War, the slavery question, and internal improvements continued to harrass the politicians of both parties.

John Law of Vincennes could not explain the inability of his party to cope with the situation. He wrote: "I have never seen more apathy and indifference in the democratic party—Why in Wherefore I cannot say."⁵²

Contrasted to the apathy of the Democrats was the activity of the Whigs, who, encouraged by the election results, began to cast about for a presidential hope. One of the early spokesmen for the party summed up the situation thus: "if peace is declared and that peace brings with it a portion of Mexican territory as indemnity we must have a Northern man for our candidate—as the question of slavery will then be presented to the people of this Union in a shape that cannot be avoided."⁵³ Here was the sectional view within the national framework.

⁵⁰ Samuel Frisbie to Elisha Embree, Rome, Indiana, June 20, 1846, May 15, 1847, Embree Papers, Indiana State Library, Indianapolis.

⁵¹ John Law to Martin Van Buren, Vincennes, August 2, 1847, Martin Van Buren Papers. Microfilm copy of these papers is at the University of Chicago.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Orth to Caleb Smith, Indianapolis, January 30, 1848, in Schauginger, "The Letters of Godlove S. Orth, Hoosier Whig," *Indiana Magazine of History*, XXXIX, 390.

The Twenty-ninth Congress had not succeeded in bringing any clarity to the confused and stormy political atmosphere of Indiana and the Northwest. Sectionalism continued to cloud the atmosphere, although Indiana had not reacted to the Polk administration to the same degree as had its neighbors. The stresses and strains pulling at the Union were not quite as apparent in the Hoosier political behavior, and Indiana's politicians were still able to chide those who threatened to stray either north or south—they continued to take seriously their role as "Borderers of the Republic."