

THE KENTUCKY COLONEL: RICHARD M. JOHNSON AND THE RISE OF WESTERN
DEMOCRACY, 1780-1850

by

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Introduction & Historiography

Set along the Missouri River fifty miles northwest of Kansas City, Atchinson, Kansas' 15,000 residents worked for railroads, farmed, worked in small factories, and managed artisan shops. The presence of the river and the railroad caused rapid growth in Atchinson. A center of violent Democratic proslavery agrarianism in the late 1850s, Atchinson transformed into a business center with the arrival of the railroads after the Civil War. Great names in industry such as John Murray Forbes and Benjamin Pierce Cheney owned the railroads that departed west from town. Burgeoning industry in the 1880s made Atchinson a prosperous town in many ways representative of the many boomtowns sprinkled across the American West. Large enough to support five or six newspapers, the city sported two Republican organs and two for the Democrats. The *Daily Globe* and another paper purported independence. Atchinson's citizens, no matter their politics, lived in a bustling time. The Atchinson Merchants and Manufacturers Bureau, confident of the city's future as a major transportation depot for Americans traveling, published adulatory reports extolling the city's business climate.¹

¹ David M. Potter, *The Impending Crisis: America Before the Civil War, 1848-1861* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), 200-216; Eleanor L. Turk, "The Germans of Atchinson, 1854-1859: Development of an Ethnic Community." *Kansas History* 2 (Autumn 1979): 146-156; Richard White, *Railroaded: The Transcontinentals and the Making of Modern*

Capitalist Republicans replaced slave-running Democrats in Atchison, but residents loved an American hero, no matter the party. So on Tuesday, May 8, 1887, the *Atchinson Daily Globe* ran an article certain to interest its readers. The paper labeled the feature “A FORGOTTEN HERO.” Curious subscribers read that the forgotten hero, a Col. Richard M. Johnson of the state of Kentucky, died nearly forty years earlier but lived a heroic and worthy life. Johnson, the paper informed its readers, killed Tecumseh, rose to the Vice Presidency under Martin Van Buren, and figured prominently in the rise of Kentucky and the “great northwest territory.” The paper lamented that “few readers in this swiftly moving age have paused retrospectively long enough to value his services or wonder at his feet.” Kansans, situated at the eastern edge of what nineteenth century Americans called the Far West, appreciated Johnson as an example of an American who confronted the same issues that contemporary westerners encountered. He fought Indians, most famously claiming to have killed Tecumseh at the Battle of the Thames. He supported laborers and gained enormous popularity among urban workers when he championed eradicating imprisonment for debt. To a Kansan in 1887, Johnson looked very much like a forerunner to Gilded Age Populists. But few westerners or even Johnson’s own Kentuckians knew anything at all about Johnson. Americans interested in the spread of American democracy and society into the West assumed that Jefferson and

America (New York and London: W.W. Norton and Co., 2011), 51; F.L. Vandegrift, *The Advantages of Atchison, Kansas as a Commercial and Manufacturing Centre* (Atchison, KS: Haskell Print Co., 1887); *The Atchison Daily Globe*, (Atchison, KS) Tuesday, May 03, 1887.

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Jackson carried the standard. The *Daily Globe*, keenly aware of Atchison's understandable ignorance of who exactly Johnson was, used the feature to remind the readers that Johnson exemplified what America became as much as, if not more than, the usual democratic American heroes.²

In the mid-nineteenth century no two political figures represented the culmination of western democracy more than Thomas Jefferson and Andrew Jackson. Hezekiah Niles, editor of the popular *Niles Weekly Register*, specifically stated that Jackson "followed the course" of Thomas Jefferson in his political life. Therein lay a very substantive difference between himself and Jefferson or Jackson. Richard Johnson imbibed the ideology of the Kentucky frontier in the 1780s and 1790s. And no man impacted that generation of Kentucky settlers more than Thomas Jefferson. Known in his own day as a democrat, Jefferson lived the life and lifestyle of a Virginia aristocrat. Johnson, born into relative affluence for the Kentucky frontier, maintained frontier habits. Jefferson valued patrician manners and preferred to keep the company of cultivated intellects. Johnson kept a tavern. Both men genuinely empathized with poor farmers; to Jefferson's credit, he interacted with them socially, especially in his capacity as a neighboring farmer.³

² *The Atchison Daily Globe*, (Atchison, KS) Tuesday, May 03, 1887; Charles Postel, *The Populist Vision* (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 2009).

³ *Niles Register*, June 20, 1835; Robert G. Gunderson, "Rumpsey, Dumpsey, Colonel Johnson Shot Tecumseh," *Bulletin of the Cincinnati Historical Society* 14 (October, 1956), 302; Dumas Malone, *Jefferson the Virginian* (New York: Little, Brown Co., 1948).

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Critics accurately questioned Jefferson's democratic credentials and did so quite often while he hobnobbed with French aristocrats, he shot back that he usually courted associations with "gardeners, vigneron, coopers, farmers, etc." Yet Jefferson's actions told a different story. He virulently despised Patrick Henry, his predecessor as governor. Henry warned of tendencies toward aristocracy among Virginia's elites. Although both Henry and Jefferson enjoyed wealth and station, Henry lived frugally, paid down his debts, and publicly derided the opulence that Jefferson and his Monticello estate ostentatiously represented. Still, Jefferson's association with the long Whig political tradition in Britain left him with distaste not only for monarchy but for empowered government in general.⁴

Chronically in debt, Jefferson looked toward and longed for a place nearly untouched by civilization. Therein lay his fascination with the American West. But despite this longing, Jefferson never embraced the reality of democracy. He lived in his giant unfinished mansion, kept a massive wine cellar, and drove up debts throughout his life. He never reconciled his life to his politics. While certainly an ideological partisan of democratization in American politics, Jefferson remained, in the words of historian Fawn Brodie, an unconscious aristocrat. Jefferson never trusted the people, despite his political rhetoric. Jefferson's views and actions on race also lacked democratic backbone. He

⁴ Noble E. Cunningham, *In Pursuit of Reason: the Life of Thomas Jefferson* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987), 108; Michael Kranish, *Flight from Monticello: Thomas Jefferson at War* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 91.

never acknowledged his Hemmings relations. He lacked what Brodie called the “bulldog courage” Johnson exemplified when he publicly recognized his two daughters by Julia Chinn. Unlike Jefferson, Johnson’s base beliefs mandated equality even at personal cost. Jefferson feared losing his aristocratic station in life. He never compromised that for anything more than the political aesthetic of democratic progress. For Johnson, the culture of democracy demanded that his daughters be given same rights as any other attractive child of a prosperous farmer.⁵

The only other political figure that influenced Johnson as much as Jefferson did was Andrew Jackson. The American backcountry produced both men; Jackson in South Carolina and Johnson in Kentucky. Jackson also saw himself as a disciple and follower of Jefferson, who reportedly thought he was dangerous. Jackson believed in the people, and he believed they chose him to be their anointed mouthpiece. Jackson signified the supremacy of white manhood democracy. The movement’s popularity lay not just in the emphasis on democratic innovation but in the idealized co-joining of the concepts of democracy and progress. Democracy bred progress. Farmers in Kentucky and Tennessee, the nation’s 1830s political frontier, experienced the challenges and benefits of egalitarian politics. Likewise the idea of the West, democracy, and progress also became intertwined. Democracy convinced farmers and settlers that they might rule ably themselves. As the frontier moved West throughout the first half of the nineteenth

⁵ Joseph J. Ellis, *American Sphinx: The Character of Thomas Jefferson* (New York: Vintage, 1998), 162; Fawn Brodie, *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History* (W.W. Norton and Co., 1974), 193.

century, Americans set up territorial governments, an indication in their minds of progress. So the small farmer, democracy, the frontier West, and progress all interwove during the era supposedly defined by Jackson. Those ideas created the defining narrative for the nineteenth century American nation.⁶

Jackson articulated democracy and the West for political purposes, but he replicated the lifestyle of the great southern planters he so despised and emulated their culture. Born into Carolina's rough-hewn backcountry society, Jackson enjoyed neither gentility nor education in his adolescence and early adulthood. He consciously worked to learn and later affect the manners of southern gentry. Desire for wealth and affluence consumed Jackson's ambitions. He used politics and ideology to further his ambitions, both material and political. But Jackson never claimed nor acted the part of an ideologue. Property and status propelled Jackson's political existence. Democracy became a part of Jackson's mantra because it was the mantra of Tennessee's elites, whom Jackson desperately hoped to ingratiate himself with. His actual politics and style of governance actually corresponded more closely to Napoleon Bonaparte's (whom Jackson respected). He presumed to speak for laborers, mechanics, and small farmers. Their "overwhelming numbers" represented the "bone and sinew" of the country. More importantly, Jackson claimed that the small farmer and working classes owned "the

⁶ H.W. Brands, *Andrew Jackson: His Life and Times* (New York: Doubleday, 2005), 97; Jon Meacham, *American Lion: Andrew Jackson in the White House* (New York: Random House, 2008), 3; John Ashworth, *Agrarians and Aristocrats: Party Ideology in the United States, 1836-1846* (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 1983), 9.
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great mass” of The United States’ national wealth. Jackson claimed that the era’s wealth was “distributed in moderate amounts among the millions of free men who possess it.”⁷

Jackson no doubt sincerely hoped that United States might one day become more egalitarian. Planter elites however, not small farmers and laboring Americans, defined the policies of the Jacksonians and their successor, the Democratic Party. Throughout his administration Jackson balked at implementing the type of reforms urban workers clamored for. Urban workers only embraced the Democratic program after Jackson’s veto of the Bank of the United States. Despite urban workers’ wide support of the Bank veto, the major beneficiaries of Jackson’s veto. Southern aristocrats’ language stemmed from an agrarian order. Bankers, capitalists, and financiers who made their fortunes on the movement of capital seemed thoroughly un-republican to southerners educated revering Cincinnatus and other classical republicans. John Taylor of Caroline, a Virginia planter and partisan of rigid republicanism during the Early Republic, argued that “the power of despotism or aristocracy” inevitably controlled banks and their interests.

Monarchies and aristocracies created banks.⁸

⁷ Andrew Jackson to Willie Blount, May 29, 1823 in Harold D. Moser, David R. Hoth, and George Hoeman eds., *The Papers of Andrew Jackson: Volume V, 1821-1824* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press), 278-279; Andrew Burstein, *The Passions of Andrew Jackson* (New York: Random House, 1999), 25; Edward Pessen, *Jacksonian America: Society, Personality, and Politics* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 79.

⁸ Edward Pessen, *Most Uncommon Jacksonians: The Radical Leaders of the Early Labor Movement* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1969), 31; Harry Watson, *Liberty and Power: The Politics of Jacksonian America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006), 21; Bray Hammond, *Banks and Politics in America from the Revolution to the Civil War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960), 328; John Taylor of Caroline, [Type text]

Attacking banks became a major tenant of Jeffersonian and subsequently Jacksonian orthodoxy. Jackson and the Democratic Party attempted stop the increased power of capitalists in American society. Inspired by men like Taylor and John Randolph of Roanoke, Jackson agreed that most capitalists lived by the maxim, “Get money; fairly if you can, but get money.” Jacksonians gleaned their entire governing philosophy from republican aristocrats like Jefferson and Taylor. The Democrats (so named after Martin Van Buren commandeered the Jacksonian electoral mantle in 1832 and created a working political party) who assumed power during the antebellum era rarely came from working class or middle class elements, from the people they claimed to speak for. More often than not, planters used the articulation of democratic values to hold power. James K. Polk, a disciple of Taylor and Randolph, blustered a great deal about the insidious machinations of an “aristocratic few” in Nashville when he ran for office as a Tennessee Jacksonian in the mid 1820s. Yet Polk’s aims and interests, his social connections and culture, never strayed from those of a slave owning planter.⁹

Richard Johnson’s importance and uniqueness lay in his willingness to depart from the orthodoxy ascribed by Jefferson and Jackson. He championed congressional compensation, generally seen by doctrinaire Jeffersonians as a harbinger of creating a

Construction Construed and Constitutions Vindicated (Richmond, VA: Shepherd and Pollard, 1820), 183.

⁹ Taylor, *Construction Construed and Constitutions Vindicated*, 238; Charles G. Sellers, *James K. Polk: Jacksonian* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 172; William Dusenberre, *Slavemaster President: The Double Career of James K. Polk* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 3-5.

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feared professional political class. Early congresses included a diverse collection of northern merchants, lawyers, southern gentlemen of leisure, and not a few middle aged ex-soldiers, men generally secure in their fortunes and respectable enough to take seats in Congress. Since congressional leadership originated from within the United States' elite families, Jefferson's hopes for a political class disinterested in using politics for monetary or social gain enjoyed security.¹⁰

The admission of western states, beginning with Kentucky in 1792, changed the social composition of Congress. Young, ambitious, and talented, young western Congressmen made up for their lack of fortune with their remarkable abilities and energy. Henry Clay, the son of a Baptist minister, explained that he and his fellow westerners arrived in politics "without the favor or countenance of the great or opulent, without the means of paying my weekly board." Clay and Johnson disagreed with Jefferson's fears that a better paid Congress heralded onset of a political aristocracy. In fact paying congressmen made the chambers more democratic. The tiny congressional salary barely covered living expenses. As late as the 1840s, western congressmen like Abraham Lincoln often slept two or three to a bed in cramped Washington boarding houses. Paying the congress better ensured that the best men ran for office. Since many representatives from the West lived less lavishly than great eastern burghers and

¹⁰ Joanne B. Freeman, *Affairs of Honor: National Politics in the New Republic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 2;
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southern planters, some augmentation to congressional compensation became a necessity to maintain the republic.¹¹

Johnson's commitment to an actual democratic polity, rather than merely democratic propaganda used for electoral purposes, drove him to embrace political positions at odds with Jeffersonians. He continued to exercise political independence during the era defined by the emergence Andrew Jackson and the political movement he symbolized. Jackson distrusted government in every form not originating from his own person. He violently disliked banks and paper money after losing a fortune on land speculation in the Old Southwest. Johnson deviated from Jackson twice; once of the Bank of the United States and again on the Maysville Road. In both cases Jackson's position allied him with the interests of the South's great planters. Only three southern senators voted to re-charter the Bank of the United States. The average American knew little about high finance. The Bank's tangible benefits, such as a stabilized currency and prudently regulated credit system, stood little chance surviving the sustained Jacksonian assault.¹²

¹¹ Matthew G. Schoenbachler, *Murder and Madness: The Myth of the Kentucky Tragedy* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2009); David Herbert Donald, *Lincoln* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 119-140; Robert V. Remini, *Henry Clay: Statesman for the Union* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1991), 18.

¹² William W. Freehling, "Andrew Jackson, Great President(?)" in Paul Finkleman and Donald R. Kennon eds., *Congress and the Emergence of Sectionalism: From the Missouri Compromise to the Age of Jackson* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2008), 135-36; William J. Cooper Jr., *Liberty and Slavery: Southern Politics to 1860* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2000), 171; Elizabeth R. Varon, *Disunion!: The* [Type text]

Out of Congress at the time of Jackson's veto, Johnson nevertheless voiced his support for the Bank. His opinion became public, adding to the perception that Johnson could and would not necessarily be an orthodox Jacksonian Democrat. No ideological or cultural inhibitions stymied Johnson's commitment to the United States' western expansion. Agrarian or commercial, Johnson believed that Americans needed whatever tools they desired to make new lives. His own experience showed him that banks could provide financial salvation from debt. In 1819, he foolishly but innocently drew on government contracts he procured and placed the funds in banks, salvaging his personal finances from what had been a precarious debt.¹³

Later Johnson joined forces with the nascent Whig Party, composed of northern industrialists and anti-Jackson southerners, to defend the Maysville Road from a Jackson veto. They failed. Jackson's veto stood. But Johnson showed a willingness to listen to the people even when it conflicted with his own party's ideology. Dominated by the interests of planters, the Democrats never seemed to totally trust Johnson. His total devotion to the cause of who he perceived as the people meant infinitely more than a similar statement from Jefferson or Jackson. Johnson lived on a relatively modest farm, fought Indians, ran a tavern, doted on his daughters, and fought to have his family respected. Americans saw Johnson as a hero for killing Tecumseh, but his electoral appeal

Coming of the American Civil War, 1789-1859 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 94.

¹³ *Niles' Register*, June 6, 1835; Richard Mentor Johnson to Andrew Jackson, April 26, 1819 in Harold Moser, David R. Roth, and George H. Hoeman eds, *The Papers of Andrew Jackson* Vol. IV: 1816-1820 (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1994), 292. [Type text]

comprised more than simply Indian-killing. Johnson represented true democracy, one not tethered to the coattails of the South's great planters and rigid ideologues. And he believed that this democracy would thrive in the West, where its early practice became an American ideal.¹⁴

II.

Richard Johnson's legacy has never been seriously noted or debated. The coverage he received usually noted that the Kentucky planter enjoyed a reputation in the West as an Indian fighter and in the urban Northeast as a democrat and friend of the workingman. Johnson's Vice Presidential aspirations famously ran into considerable obstacles, and his quiet legacy continues to be debated in footnotes and endnotes. Most historians researching Richard Johnson immediately analyze the impact his unorthodox private life and relationship with mulatto slave Julia Chinn had on his electoral success. Some use the relationship as a useful prism for gender studies. Neither his interracial relationship's effects on his politics or his ability to clarify gender relationships explain why a Kansas newspaper resurrected him in the 1880s, if only for a moment. Johnson appealed to Kansans because he appealed to the sense of destiny American placed in

¹⁴ Wilma King, *Essence of Liberty: Free Black Women During the Slave Era* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2006), 23; S. Antal, *Wampum Denied: Proctor's War of 1812* (Montreal: McGill University Press, 1997), 408.
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democracy and in the western frontier. From the outset of his political career, Johnson looked west from Kentucky.¹⁵

A War Hawk in the run-up to the War of 1812, Johnson believed that westward movement of the American people eventually would push white class inequality of all forms into the Pacific. The Far West, the ephemeral and yet unmapped territory Americans drove into during the first half of the nineteenth century, compelled him. His fascination with the West occasionally even caused him professional consternation, as when he fell afoul of John C. Calhoun over a contract to provision a Missouri River expedition. A truer democrat than Jefferson or Jackson, Johnson understood that the federal state could help create the Far West in the American image. To that end he departed from Jeffersonian and Jacksonian dogma. Never an ideologue, he supported the settlement and organization of the West at the expense of state rights (he supported internal improvements) and agrarianism (he thought banks useful). Although Jeffersonians and Jacksonians pathologically feared a standing army, Johnson broke ranks, calling for an expansion of the federal army throughout the 1830s. He even tried

¹⁵ *New York Times*, November 5, 1860; Jean H. Baker, *Affairs of Party: The Political Culture of Northern Democrats in the Mid-nineteenth Century* (Bronx, N.Y.: Fordham University Press, 1998), 325; Mary P. Ryan, *Civic Wars: Democracy and Public Life in the American City During the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 112.

to affect some form of racial equality for his mix-raced daughters by introducing them into Washington society.¹⁶

On several occasions, Richard Johnson attracted biographers. The first, written in 1834, concentrated largely on Johnson's supposed heroism. Written mainly as Jacksonian campaign propaganda, the author William Emmons termed Johnson a "philanthropist," "statesman," and "hero." Emmons paid tribute to Johnson's democratic convictions, telling his readers that Johnson sided with the democrat against the moneyed aristocracy. The Colonel, as contemporaries often referred to Johnson, made his name "pleading the cause of the poor against the rich, in the courts of law, without the least prospect of fee or emolument, and thus exposing himself to the ill-will of the wealthy."¹⁷

A typical work of antebellum political hagiography, Emmons biography listed Johnson involvement in the controversial issues of the times. "We find him the prominent, bold, ardent, and unwavering champion of liberal and national principles, espousing the cause of humble and friendless claimants." In his campaign against debtors imprisonment Johnson sustained "national honor and interests against the efforts of party zeal, combating the prejudices of ages, in favor of honest and oppressed debtors." Confronting sabbatarian influence, he stemmed, "by his personal influence and

¹⁶ Irving Bartlett, *John C. Calhoun: A Biography* (New York and London: W.W. Norton and Co., 1993), 94-95; *Army and Navy Chronicle* II (January-June, 1836), 286; Elizabeth Abbott, *A History of Mistresses* (Toronto: HarperFlamingo, 2003), 203-204.

¹⁷ William Emmons, *Col. Richard M. Johnson, of Kentucky* (Boston, 1834), 3-8.
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resistless eloquence the combined exertions of misguided religious enthusiasm.” On nullification he strongly discountenanced, “at the sacrifice of some personal partialities, the dangerous political heresy which lately threatened our Union.” Although overly adulatory, the author wrote with some truth when he pronounced Johnson “one of those men who planted civilization, and civil and religious liberty, in the magnificent valley of the Ohio.”¹⁸

A second but smaller biography of Richard Johnson appeared in 1843, when Richard Johnson made a last attempt to seek national office (preferably the presidency). Written by Kentuckian Asahel Langworthy, this monograph emulated William Emmons’s earlier glorification of Johnson but spoke more of the man than the Jacksonian movement he played a role in earlier in his career. Perhaps understanding Johnson’s need to appeal to more than western frontier farmers, Lang worthy wrote of Johnson’s pious heritage. His father Robert Johnson lived as a “consistent” member of the Church of Christ and “passed through life without a censure upon his religious character.” Johnson’s father “combined the strictness of Christian morality without austerity, dignity without haughtiness, suavity without lowness, and benevolence without ostentation.” Recognizing the strong advantage the Whigs had with Evangelical

¹⁸ Ibid.

Protestants voters in 1840, Langworthy reported that the Johnsons “strictly adhered to the tenets of the Baptist church.”¹⁹

Johnson faded from history for nearly a century until Leland Meyer, a graduate student in history at Columbia University, wrote his dissertation on Johnson in 1932. That dissertation became printed biography that provided the basis for any scholarly research on Johnson. However definitive and useful the work was, it was written well before the new perspectives of the mid-twentieth century made their way into U.S. historiography. In 1932, southern historians like U.B. Phillips still dominated the historiographic debate over race and slavery. Phillips understood the relationship between master and slave as fundamentally “amiable” and “easy going,” an assertion challenged by Kenneth Stampp in *The Peculiar Institution*. Johnson, as a slave-owner, indeed collaborated in a system that favored or at least upheld “ruthless exploitation” of enslaved African Americans. Women’s history lay largely untapped. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese’s benchmark study of black and white southern women and their gender relations, gender roles, and gender identity, still lay nearly over fifty years away in 1932,

¹⁹ *Niles Weekly Register* Vol. 66 (March 9, 1844), 23; Asahel Langworthy, *A Biographical Sketch of Col. Richard M. Johnson, of Kentucky* (New York, Saxton and Miles, 1843), 6; Richard Carwardine, “Evangelicals, Whigs and the Election of William Henry Harrison,” *Journal of American Studies* 17 (April, 1983): 47-75.

so Meyer limited his discussion of Julia Chinn to noting that she held a “conspicuous place” in the Johnson household.²⁰

Another change in the historiography of the Old South society that Johnson lived in came in 1990, when William Freehling’s first volume of the *Road to Disunion* added nuance with his study of the many “Souths.” Freehling showed that southern meant many things, even in the antebellum era; he argued further that huge economic and social differences existed between the Upper South where Johnson’s Kentucky lay and the Deep South states along the Gulf of Mexico, perhaps explaining Johnson’s cultural anomalies.²¹

Johnson appeared in surveys and monographs devoted to the Jacksonian Era. Frederick Jackson Turner believed that Johnson’s attachment to democracy both sincere and enormously influential (as well as detrimental) in the man’s political life. Turner also accurately portrayed Johnson an exemplar of a new and democratic western political reality between the Appalachians and the Mississippi. Turner’s portrayed Johnson as intricately concerned with the rights of the people.²²

²⁰ Leland W. Meyer, *The Life and Times of Colonel Richard M. Johnson of Kentucky* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1932), 317; U.B. Phillips, *American Negro Slavery* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1966), xxiv; Kenneth Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-bellum South* (New York: Alfred K. Knopf, 1982), 84; Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 29.

²¹ William W. Freehling, *The Road to Disunion: Secessionists at Bay: 1776-1854* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 3-7.

²² Frederick Jackson Turner, *Rise of the New West, 1819-1829* (Middlesex, MA: Echo Library, 2006), 145.

Turner's *Rise of the New West*, explains Johnson's involvement in an unsuccessful attempt to remove many of the Supreme Court's rights of review. In Johnson's mind, the Senate, a body of democratically elected members, should try cases in which a state was a party. Johnson feared the tendency toward consolidation shown by the Marshall Court. Johnson, Turner explained, mirrored the convictions of Thomas Jefferson, who feared that the judicial consolidation ultimately represented an attack of federalism. Johnson never feared federal power over sectional interests in the same fevered manner that Jefferson did; Turner's association falls particularly flat, especially given Jefferson's increasingly reactionary state rights politics. Jefferson alone feared that the Missouri Compromise represented the "knell of the Union." Johnson, who "considered all men by nature equal," worried the judiciary might infringe on democracy. R. Kent Newmyer's definitive book on the Marshall Court concurred with this standard interpretation of Johnson's dislike of the High Court.²³

Arthur Schlesinger portrayed Johnson as largely out of touch with the economic niceties of the Early Republic. His naïveté kept him from embracing the American system of Henry Clay. Schlesinger also thought Johnson considerably more radical than Jackson (which was true), simply an ideologue indifferent or unaware of the political

²³ Turner, *Rise of the New West*, 145; Paul L. Ford, *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson* Vol. IX (London and New York: G.P. Putnam, 1893), 184; Thomas Jefferson to John Holmes, April 22, 1820 in Thomas Jefferson Randolph, *Memoirs, Correspondence and Private Papers of Thomas Jefferson* Vol. IV (London: Henry Colburn and Richard Bentley, 1829), 332; Emmons, *Authentic biography of Col. Richard M. Johnson*, 52; R. Kent Newmyer, *John Marshall and the Heroic Age of the Supreme Court* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 2001), 381.

realities of the day, hence his radicalism and his anti-judiciary ideology. Schlesinger described Johnson's relationship with Julia Chinn and hailed the Kentuckian as someone with "pervading kindness." Johnson's very real courtesy and kindness, according to Schlesinger, caused many of his political problems. He treated his slaves and his mixed-raced children with affection, costing him valuable support in the South Atlantic States. Schlesinger praised him as the "one Senator who consistently advocated the rights of the common man." Schlesinger portrayed Johnson as a man of "genial in consequence," arguing that Johnson's lifestyle and temperament made him a less influential than he otherwise might have been during the democratization of the United States.²⁴

Most historians accepted Schlesinger's interpretation of Johnson's pleasant personality and politics. But Jon Meacham's Pulitzer-winning presidential biography of Jackson's White House, *American Lion*, included certain salacious details about the Johnson household other historians omitted, purposefully or not. When Julia Chinn died of cholera in 1833, Johnson took up with another slave. Upon discovering his concubine's infidelity, he sold her and began a relationship with her sister. Daniel Walker Howe's *What Hath God Wrought* agreed with Schlesinger regarding Johnson's political troubles. Howe saw Johnson's domestic reality as the overriding factor in his electoral troubles; "genteel" southerners found the Kentucky soldier coarse and vulgar, as well as dangerously radical, given his lack of religiosity and campaign to eradicate

²⁴ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Age of Jackson* (New York: Little, Brown, and Co., 1953), 140-141.

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imprisonment for debt. Howe also questioned Johnson's political acumen in the abstract, calling the Kentuckian "out of his depth" in an office as politically benign as the Vice Presidency.²⁵

Turner's famous *The Frontier in American History* gave the seminal contribution to the understanding of Richard Johnson in the historiography of western expansion. Turner's work explored the influence of westward expansion of the United States in the nineteenth century, and Turner argued that the frontier drove the progressive spirit of the country; western politicians typified the democratic spirit sweeping the United States between the Battle of New Orleans and Andrew Jackson's election. What Turner called "western radicalism" rose out of the new states west of the Appalachians. Rhys Isaac's work on colonial Virginia argued that religious democratization played an equally important role; the power of new Baptist western Virginia and Kentucky challenged the largely Anglican Tidewater gentry's political power. Johnson's western principles appear to confirm both Turner and Isaac; Johnson worshiped with Baptists and politicked with democrats.²⁶

²⁵ Jon Meachum, *American Lion: Andrew Jackson in the White House*, 88; Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 459, 587.

²⁶ Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Henry Holt, 1920), 192; Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740-1790* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1999), 310-316; John H. Spencer, *A History of Kentucky Baptists: from 1769 to 1885* (Cincinnati: J.R. Baumes, 1885), 96.
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Western radicalism found a proponent in Richard Johnson. Historian Richard Slotkin noted that radicalism from western democrats like Johnson made older conservative states in the South Atlantic and Northeast increasingly “anxious.” Much of the eastern gentry’s anxiety stemmed from the cultural and social differences inherent in the new western population. The frontier ideal westerners epitomized clashed with two established sociological notions: puritan religiosity in New England and southern cavalier romanticism. Westerners’ hard scrabble life, typified by Indian wars and domestic utilitarianism, contradicted Northern Evangelicals and southern planters. The lack of social respectability galled both groups. Bertram Wyatt-Brown explained that Johnson’s miscegenation, while annoying, only became controversial because it was done publicly. Johnson also introduced his daughters into Washington society. This action cost Johnson politically. Evangelical marital realities became the norm in the decade preceding the election of 1836. Wyatt-Brown wrote that had Johnson “left his daughters on the Kentucky estate the issue might never have become a scandal, although by the mid-1830s marital regularity had become an evangelical prescription for public office.”²⁷

²⁷ Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration through Violence: the Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2000), 395, 468; William R. Taylor, *Cavalier and Yankee: The Old South and American National Character* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 37-66; Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 311-312
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Harry Watson echoed Wyatt-Brown in *Liberty and Power*, his treatment of Jacksonian politics. Watson argued that while Johnson's relationship with Julia Chinn cost him votes in the older southern states, he remained unequivocally popular in the West because of his reputation as an Indian fighter and frontier democrat. Additionally, Watson noted that Johnson's support for egalitarian policies earned him the admiration of eastern workingmen. Arthur Schlesinger offered an early and authoritative view of Johnson, looking especially at the Kentuckian's status as the darling of radical Democratic journalist William Leggett. He and other supporters threw Johnson a banquet for in the fall of 1835. Interestingly, Schlesinger noted Leggett's vehement criticism of pro-slavery moderate editor Amos Kendall, a Kentucky Democrat and associate of Richard Johnson. Because the national Democratic Party pro-slavery and firmly against abolitionism, New York radicals accepted Richard Johnson as the best possible political ally of urban radicals. A generation after Schlesinger's work debuted, novelist Gore Vidal fictionalized Leggett and the radicals' preference for Richard Johnson in his historical novel *Burr*.²⁸

Johnson's popularity in the urban Northeast encouraged the Democratic Party machine to enforce discipline among voters, most of who accepted Johnson as the choice of urban laborers. Sean Wilentz explored the appeal of Richard Johnson among the urban workers and immigrants in *Chants Democratic*, his monograph of antebellum

²⁸ Harry Watson, *Liberty and Power*, 199, 222-223, 226; Schlesinger, *Age of Jackson*, 190-191; Gore Vidal, *Burr* (New York: Vintage, 2000), 19.
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New York City. In Wilentz's work Johnson garnered support of immigrants often through his staunch anti-sabbatarian views on government. Wilentz, consistent with other earlier historians like Turner, argued that Johnson represented a significant departure from the middle-class domesticity of urban evangelicals. Nonreligious workers, Catholics, and other groups outside the protestant milieu saw Johnson as a protector against wealthy evangelical northern capitalists. Watson argued that Johnson exemplified the Democrats identification with specifically secular politics. The 1836 campaign featured William Henry Harrison, who enjoyed a reputation as a devout Christian; Evangelical voters saw Johnson as explicitly non-Christian and Watson termed him a "champion of the separation of church and state." Wilentz also pointed out that Johnson's support began much earlier than 1836. During the presidential election of 1832 some New Yorkers hoped to see Johnson nominated in the place of Martin Van Buren.²⁹

Jonathan Earle expounded on Johnson's appeal to urban workers in *Jacksonian Slavery and the Politics of Free Soil, 1824-1854*. Earle argued that the workers saw Johnson not necessarily as a defender or sympathizer but as a counterweight to Andrew Jackson. Many artisans and laborers feared that Jackson would fall increasingly under the influence of Martin Van Buren, who headed the conservative Albany Regency in New York. Powerful in New York's Democratic party, Van Buren's policies garnered

²⁹ Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 210, 226, 296.
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support in the aristocratic and agrarian Hudson Valley but ostracized working New Yorkers in the state's metropolis. Richard Johnson originally offered a counterweight both to Jackson and Van Buren. Support for the Kentuckian ran high in 1832, but by the time of the election most democratic New Yorkers had swung their support back to Andrew Jackson.³⁰

In *Rise of American Democracy* Wilentz gave Richard Johnson considerable treatment (the fullest in any large work on the period). Wilentz considered Johnson to be an important figure in the development of American democracy. He agreed with Turnerian historians that Johnson stood for the type of western radicalism that frightened eastern elites, but he also explored Johnson's credentials; Wilentz, for example, doubted Johnson's claim to have shot Tecumseh, calling it "dubious" but allowing that the assertion had great political affect. One historian of the Battle of Thames devoted an entire chapter to the controversy of whether Johnson killed Tecumseh, calling the matter "confused" but offered considerable (but not conclusive) evidence in Johnson's favor. Arthur Schlesinger acknowledged that Johnson killed a chief, "later supposed to have been Tecumseh."³¹

³⁰ James C. Curtis, *The Fox at Bay: Martin Van Buren and the Presidency, 1837-1841* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1970), 11-12; Jonathan H. Earle, *Jacksonian Slavery and the Politics of Free Soil, 1824-1854* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 29.

³¹ Sean Wilentz, *Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2005), 164-165, 167, 289; John Sugden, *Tecumseh's Last Stand* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1985), 136-181; Schlesinger, *The Age of Jackson*, 141, 68.

Ultimately, the reality of Johnson slaying Tecumseh mattered little, because Wilentz saw Johnson as more than a simple western radical or frontiersman. Like William Henry Harrison and Andrew Jackson, Johnson captured popular imagination through his feat (real or not). Wilentz records Johnson's quick use of his new fame. Johnson became involved in Kentucky politics by 1816, when he befriended nascent Kentucky newspaperman Amos Kendall. Johnson's election to congress and influence encouraged Kendall to found his newspaper, the *Argus of the West*, in 1816. Kendall's support proved pivotal for many later western politicians, notably Henry Clay, Johnson, and even Andrew Jackson. Arthur Schlesinger allowed Johnson even more influence than in Wilentz's work, calling Johnson the man who "actually started Kendall as an editor."³²

Johnson's relationship with Andrew Jackson hinged largely on their similar convictions on democracy, but there were political moments when they diverged. Jackson's Maysville Road veto presented the first serious political difference between Johnson and the seventh president. Robert Remini's biography of Andrew Jackson recognized the close (and personally amiable) relationship between Jackson and Johnson, so much so that supporters of the Maysville Road, to be built in Kentucky and through Henry Clay's home district, delegated Johnson to speak with Jackson. Remini's (perhaps sensationalized) account of Jackson's meeting with Johnson traversed their political differences. Jackson refused to sign a large appropriations bill; Johnson wanted

³² Wilentz, *Rise of American*, 165.
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the road built for his constituents. But when Jackson, forcefully (according to Remini) broached the subject of borrowing to pay for the road, Johnson balked, declaring that debt would be worse than a veto.³³

Richard Ellis painted Johnson as considerably more resolute against Jackson's pending veto. In Ellis' interpretation, Johnson warned Jackson that there might be considerable political consequences in the West, perhaps costing Jackson numerous votes. Ellis saw Jackson and Johnson as essentially arguing over politics versus constitutionalism; Johnson spoke politically, on a question Jackson saw through an essentially constitutional lens. The difference between Remini and Ellis, while seemingly limited to tone, actually differed significantly over Johnson as a politician and Jackson's ability to dominate him. Other authors interpreted Jackson and Johnson's disagreement as a test case for federalism, with Johnson supporting his state, and Jackson representing a tight-fisted federal government. Daniel Walker Howe's anti-Democratic scholarship argued that Johnson never understood how powerful Jackson's influence was in the West, especially since Howe contended that Jackson's continued popularity even in the wake of the veto surprised Johnson.³⁴

³³ Robert V. Remini, *Andrew Jackson: The Course of American Freedom, 1822-1832* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 252-253.

³⁴ Richard E. Ellis, *Union at Risk: Jacksonian Democracy, States' Rights, and the Nullification Crisis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 22; Finkleman and Kennon, *Congress and the Emergence of Sectionalism*, 176; Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 359.

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Whatever political differences Johnson had with Jackson disappeared when the President's volatile tempter interfered in the political process. No more famous instance occurred during Jackson's presidency than the Petticoat Affair involving former Tennessee and Cabinet member John Eaton and his new wife, the vivacious Margaret "Peggy" Timberlake Eaton. When some Cabinet wives balked at befriending and socializing with the supposedly uncouth Peggy, Jackson erupted. Equating Peggy's persecution with that of his beloved late wife, Jackson precipitated a crisis. In John Marszalek's work, he illustrated that Richard Johnson maintained enough good will from all parties to serve as the intermediary between the President and his perceived errant secretaries. Humorously, Marszalek noted that Johnson was somewhat of an off choice of person to arbitrate a situation involving social acceptability, especially given Johnson's unorthodox domestic arrangement.³⁵

Johnson's close personal political attachment to Jackson meant that their respective views attached to the other, sometimes inaccurately. To be sure, Johnson enjoyed Jackson's political support during close elections, a fact the biographer of their mutual friend Duff Green recalled. Sean Wilentz pointed out the negative inverse; Evangelical voters associated Jackson's public and vocal support for Margaret Eaton during the Petticoat Affair with Johnson's rabidly anti-sabbatarian report of the delivery of Sunday mail. But Wilentz overlooked Jackson's own waxing piousness. Robert Remini

³⁵ John Marszalek, *The Petticoat Affair: Manners, Mutiny, and Sex in Andrew Jackson's White House* (New York: Free Press, 1997), 116, 117, 178.

described Jackson's emotional conversion to devout Presbyterianism in the summer of 1838, a public act of piety Johnson never emulated. But Arthur Schlesinger argued that the association was inevitable. "Social radicalism had long been tinged with anticlericalism," he wrote. While Schlesinger believed that Johnson's work on the abolition of debt gave him the "special confidence of the working class," his fight against evangelical sabbatarians established him "more than ever as their faithful champion."³⁶

Other facets of Richard Johnson's interesting later life remain understudied. Newspapers and magazines recorded his intense desire to see Texas annexed. He wrote James Polk, volunteering to fight the Mexicans when war broke out. For over seventy years, Johnson the man has remained lost in the myriad of different interpretations and facts expounded on by successive generations of historians. A new biography is not only needed but also vital to the understanding of a fascinating and misunderstood man who has been known, if at all, simply as curious footnote in books on the United States' Vice Presidents.³⁷

³⁶ Wilentz, *Rise of American Democracy*, 322; W. Stephen Belko, *Invincible Duff Green: Whig of the West* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2006), 92; Robert Remini, *Andrew Jackson: The Course of American Democracy, 1835-1854* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998) 434-447; David S. Reynolds, *Waking Giant: America in the Age of Jackson* (New York: HarperPerennial, 2009), 123; Schlesinger, *Age of Jackson*, 136-139.

³⁷ *Niles Weekly Register*, 64 (issue of July 22, 1843), 327; *The Cleveland Herald*, (Cleveland, OH) Monday, May 27, 1844; *Mississippi Free Trader and Natchez Gazette*, (Natchez, MS) Wednesday, June 5, 1844; Richard M. Johnson to James K. Polk, September 1, 1845 in Wayne Cutler ed., *Correspondence of James K. Polk: July-December 1845* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee, 2004), 200-201; Jody C. [Type text]

Baumgartner, *The American Vice Presidency Reconsidered* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2006), 15-20.

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Chapter 1: Kentucke Childhood

Kentucky in 1780 held promise and danger. Richard Mentor Johnson, the son of Robert and Jemima Johnson, yeomen Virginia Baptists, grew up in a paradoxical society, at once pristine and crowded, at once bucolic and violent. The promise of Kentucky lay in its vast tracts of unsettled land. The Johnsons and other settlers knew that the land might or might not be claimed by an absentee landowner in the Carolinas or Virginia Tidewater. As with their defense against Indians, the backcountry settlers took legal matters into their own hands. They settled, farmed, and improved the land they owned, or at least they believed they should own it.

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The roots of Kentucky's explosive growth in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century lay in settlers like the Johnsons. Energy and industry promised Kentucky's settlers land without the need for legal confirmations, so long as one else claimed their plots. Backwoods farmers became large farmers and even planters; the size of their landholdings depended solely on the indifference and distance from the laws of the Commonwealth of Virginia. Landholding size mattered for an ambitious settler, but

¹ Stephen Aron, *How the West was Lost: The Transformation of Kentucky from Daniel Boone to Henry Clay* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 58-65
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so too did the quality of the land a farmer owned. Robert Johnson's homestead on boggy Beargrass Creek sufficed him and his five dependents for the time being, but his ambitions stoked his desire for better lands. By the fall of 1780, Robert decided to pack up his wagons, along with his considerable herd of cattle, and take his family to Bryant's Station.²

Although it later became the social hub for Kentucky's Bluegrass gentry, the Johnson's home at Bryant's Station and the vicinity of what became Lexington looked like a log fortress in 1782. Despite its rudimentary construction, Bryant's Station incorporated sophisticated design elements for defense; a moat, interior well, and the fort's parallelogram palisaded interior gave the settlers a sense of security against marauding Indians. The town's very security, however, meant that it was fairly exposed. The station presented an inviting target for Indian raiders. Foodstuffs in the fort combined with easily traded household objects made it a worthwhile conquest. A victory might also remove another invasive white community. Earlier in the summer a conference in Ohio between Mingo, Lenape, Shawnee, and Wyandot Indians led to the creation of a large raiding party.³

The Johnsons, Bryants, and other families living in and around Bryant's Station knew the danger, which materialized late on the night of August 15th, 1782. The nearly

² Aron, *How the West was Lost*, 75-81; Meyer, *Col. Richard M. Johnson of Kentucky* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1932)21.

³ Craig Thompson Friend, *Kentucke's Frontiers* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2011), 99;
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three hundred warriors arrived quietly, but the next morning the settlers saw the Indians' fires. The Kentuckians gauged the Indians' numbers and realized an attack was eminent. A few men quickly rode several miles to Lexington, where fifty or so men agreed to relieve their embattled neighbors. Legend says that the men and women fought bravely during the attack. Jemima Johnson and Betsy Johnson put out fires from flaming arrows throughout the ordeal. One arrow hit the wooden cradle that the toddler Richard Johnson lay in, but Betsy put out the flames and the baby remained unscathed.⁴

The families in Bryant's Stations counted themselves fortunate. The Indians, surprised by the resistance and resilience of the defenders, gave up and retreated north. Despite the white's victory over the Indians, violence continued in varying degrees until the War of 1812. Still, victories afforded settlers some peace. Robert Johnson, ambitious and hoping to give his family more comfort, sought employment as a surveyor. He prospered, and his children grew up in moderate comfort compared to their neighbors.

II.

The history of Kentucky, the West, and the political life of Richard M. Johnson hinged on the powerful and enduring tensions between the elites in and around eastern cities, and frontier Americans. Different religious confessions, varying levels of affluence, opportunity, and different visions of progress differentiated frontier

⁴ "The Attack of Bryant's Station, *The Western Monthly Review* 3 (July 1829-June 1830), 113-121; Thomas D. Clark ed., *The Voice of the Frontier: John Bradford's Notes on Kentucky* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1993), 50-55; Meyer, *Col. Richard M. Johnson*, 23-24.

Americans, variously described as backcountry, backwoods, and western, from their urban and eastern counterparts. Not all easterners dwelled in cities, but eastern farmers' proximity to market towns and their relative stability suggested a level of cultural commonality with city dwellers. Throughout American history the divide between urban and rural exerted a powerful influence on the cultural and political formation of colonial American society and later the United States.⁵

Although variously articulated as rural, agrarian, anti-modern, and in the later nineteenth century as populist, the politicization of Americans on the economic, geographic and cultural periphery never encompassed all three articulations at any given time. Frontier westerners in Richard Johnson's era, the early and mid-nineteenth century, associated their politics with the idea of democracy, rule by the people. The people's desires and wishes governed politics. Indian wars, violence between kinship groups, duels, and a lack of institutional political control transmuted an orderly process into the rough and tumble reality that was the West. Still Americans moved West throughout the eighteenth and later the nineteenth century.⁶

III.

⁵ Ray Allen Billington, *Land of Savagery Land of Promise: The European Image of the American Frontier in the Nineteenth Century* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1985).

⁶ Barnard Bailyn, *The Barbarous Years: The Conflict of Civilizations, 1600-1675* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012), 365-416; Patricia Watlington, *The Partisan Spirit: Kentucky Politics, 1779-1792* (New York: Athenuem, 1972).

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In the Fall of 1779 Daniel Boone led a party of settlers from North Carolina through the Blue Ridge into Kentucky. They established a settlement, Boone's Station, not far from Boonesborough. Boone and the settlers worked quickly. Winter's cold made its presence felt as early as November in the mountains of Eastern Kentucky. Boone's party of settlers represented the raw yeomen and frontiersmen associated with the American backcountry. Many however joined Boone not to further the advance of the nascent American republic, but to escape it. That the settlers came from North Carolina lent credence to suspicions that the settlers included not a few Tories. The following years brought hardship and tragedy.⁷

Amidst the tumult of 1779-80, a small party of Virginians from Orange County arrived in Kentucky via the Cumberland River. Two brothers, Robert and Cave Johnson, and their friend William Tomlinson left Orange County, Virginia on April 1, 1779. Their trek covered two hundred miles and took them south or "up" Shenandoah Valley towards the modern cities of Bristol, Virginia and Kingsport, Tennessee. They then followed the Holston and Cumberland Rivers, travailing the Cumberland Gap into southeast Kentucky. In spring, both the Cumberland and Holston tended to flood and the water remained cold enough to kill from exposure. Their party, only three men, afforded them no protection against Indian attacks and the elements might still bring snow in the high passes. Along the way they met up with a clan of North Carolinians,

⁷ Meredith Mason Brown, *Frontiersman: Daniel Boone and the Making of America* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2008), 171; Friend, *Kentucke's Frontiers*, 101-109

the Bryants. A group of interrelated families, the Bryants founded Bryant Station on the Elkhorn River. Cave Johnson and William Tomlinson threw in their lots with the Bryants. Robert Johnson left the two for Lexington, the territory's only real settlement but still not much more than a fortified group of log houses.⁸

Robert Johnson left Lexington during the summer of 1779. He was lucky, because Lexington endured a particularly pitiless winter in 1779/80. Snow fell constantly between November and March. Corn, the major foodstuff, ran low. Cattle died and when the hungry Kentuckians tried butcher the frozen animals, they found the meat inedible. Game became nonexistent. Frozen ground as late as April forced farmers to delay planting during the spring of 1780. Robert Johnson wisely spent the preceding summer in Lexington reviewing surveys of Kentucky made by the Virginian John Floyd.⁹

Johnson purchased two sizeable tracts of land near Beargrass Creek. During the Fall of 1779, he traveled back to Virginia to gather his family. His wife Jemima, hailed from similar Orange County Baptist stock. Their two small children, six year old Betsy and four year old James, filled out their household. The Johnsons's enjoyed some affluence because they traveled by water, safer but more expensive than the overland sojourns poorer families took. They arrived at the Falls of the Ohio in late Spring and

⁸ William Darlington, *Memorials of John Bartram and Humphry Marshall* (Philadelphia: Lindsay and Blackinton, 1849), 423; Cave Johnson, "Reminiscences from the Life of Col. Cave Johnson," *Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 20 (January, 1922), 207-212; John Dean Wright, *Lexington: Heart of the Bluegrass* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1982), 4.

⁹ Wright, *Lexington*, 4.
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moved to Beargrass Creek. Eager to feed his family and plant a crop, Robert chose to sow corn. Hundreds of miles away from Virginia's Tidewater and Piedmont Anglican elites, the Johnsons settled into an experience shared by thousands of Americans who dared the dangers of the frontier.¹⁰

During the years preceding the American Revolution second-born sons of the Virginia gentry legally bought tracks of land in Kentucky and set up *de facto* baronies. Kentucky's aristocracy, if it could be called that, accused the new settlers of being nothing but poor malcontents seeking to escape the American Revolution and leech free lands. Longtime Kentuckians warned that such inferior colonists shirked their duties, both civil and military. Many suspected Tories also immigrated during the Revolution. Kentuckians like Johnson abhorred British sympathizers, and most Kentuckians fought for the new United States in the Revolutionary War.¹¹

A large number of Kentuckians fought with American general George Rogers Clark, whose main target in the West at the time was a British force led by Captain Henry Bird, a noted Indian leader. Rogers' forces massed at the Falls of the Ohio. Bird also made the Falls his objective. With a contingent of the British Army over a thousand men strong bearing down on the Beargrass and its vicinity, Robert Johnson and six hundred of his neighbors joined Clarke to defend their homes. Clarke recognized the

¹⁰Cave Johnson, "Reminiscences," 207-208; *Genealogies of Virginia Families: From Tyler's Quarterly Historical and Genealogical Magazine* (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., 1981), 43-44.

¹¹Lowell H. Harrison, *George Rogers Clark and the War in the West* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1976), 70-71
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dangers. He confided to George Mason how much he feared “wandering in a Country where every Nation of Indians could raise three, or four times our Number, and a certain loss of our enterprise by the Enemies’ getting timely notice.”¹²

Robert returned from campaigning in the summer. The dates are sketchy, but it was most likely the morning of October 17 when the baby, a boy christened Richard Mentor Johnson, was finally born. Johnson’s early experiences occurred in an atmosphere of militant democracy. White Kentucky society in the 1780s formed a largely unified cultural milieu, Although some families enjoyed more material prosperity than their neighbors, most white Kentucky families fit the description of yeomen farmers.¹³

Like other rising property holders, Robert Johnson joined the militia as an officer and joined the force led by George Rogers Clark arrayed against the Indians of the Ohio Valley. Clark’s campaign in 1782 inflicted the death blow to major Indian resistance to Kentucky’s settlement. From 1783 on only small raiding parties attacked white Kentuckians. Officers often traveled to Richmond (Kentucky remained part of Virginia until 1792) on militia business and to report on surveys. When his father traveled, command of the Johnson household fell to Jemima. Unlike more isolated families, the

¹²Ibid; Johnson, “Reminiscences,” 207-208; George Rogers Clarke to George Mason, November 19, 1779 in James Alton James ed., *George Rogers Clarke Papers, 1771-1781* (Springfield, IL: Illinois State Historical Library, 1912), 114-154.

¹³Johnson, “Reminiscences,” 209; Ella H. Ellwanger, “History of the Frankfort Cemetery,” *Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 7 (January, 1909), 34; Otis K. Rice, *Frontier Kentucky* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky), 114-15.

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Johnsons and families living in the vicinity pooled their resources to provide for basic social needs. Normally children found rudimentary schooling in nearby forts. A surprisingly high number of Virginians outside the colonial elite attended university in Great Britain prior to the American Revolution and created a culture of literacy in Kentucky. Likewise many Kentuckians kept a bible in their homes, and family readings often provided a major source of literary learning for young Kentuckians.¹⁴

As a child Johnson saw the beginnings of cultural, political, and social trends he eventually inherited and defended as a western congressman. With Clark's defeat of Indians in 1782 settlers began to settle larger tracts of Kentucky land. Robert moved his family from Bryant's Station the Great Crossings, on Elkhorn Creek in what became Scott County. Robert enjoyed prominence; when he asked his neighbors for assistance in building his station, they made the fifteen mile trek from Lexington and joined him in constructing his fort. Young Richard enjoyed much human contact. Workers and friends constantly come through the Johnson household. His uncle Cave Johnson came to live with Robert's family, and eventually Robert prevailed on other area families to make their homesteads near Great Crossings. Other families came to live in Johnson's fort, which consisted of a series of connecting log cabins surrounded by a palisade of varying

¹⁴ Johnson, "Reminiscences," 209; Harrison, *George Rogers Clark*, 86-99; Mary Newton Stanard, *Colonial Virginia: Her People and Customs* (Philadelphia: J.P. Lippincott, 1917), 295.

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height. He located near a water source, Elkhorn Creek, and in the rich bottomlands that surrounded Elkhorn Creek and other tributaries of the Kentucky River.¹⁵

Richard Johnson in many ways bridged two eras. As a child he witnessed migrations of American Bison cross a trace near his childhood home. He drank from a spring and lived on a farm, but his father Robert saw no reason to remain simply a sustenance farmer. A man of considerable ambition, Robert built a mill on the Elkhorn. He harvested buffalo wool and wild nettle in order to make and sell cloth. He kept a large assortment of hand-made tools in the fort. The Johnson's enjoyed the use of comparatively luxurious items such as tin cups and iron forks. In the house Johnson saw his father's rifle, probably placed on two parallel pegs when not in use. Most cabins in Kentucky held several weapons, often placed under the beds.¹⁶

Richard grew up with considerable cultural commonality with his neighbors. His Baptist family practiced low-church Protestantism and came from yeomen stock, but his family's wealth also created the seeds of what became the planter class in Kentucky. For starters the Johnsons enjoyed access to hams and tobacco shipped from Piedmont Virginia. They apparently owned cattle, for they enjoyed milk and butter at most meals. They also ate beef, a relative delicacy. Young Richard apparently ate huge portions as a child. Family tradition holds that Robert often held the Richard back in order to let his

¹⁵ Gilbert Imlay, *A Topographical Description of the Western Territory of North America* (London: J. Derbett, 1792), 165; Daniel Drake, *Pioneer Life in Kentucky: A Series of Reminiscent Letters* (Cincinnati: Robert Clarke and Co., 1877), 20.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

siblings receive some of the food. Richard developed into a young man of “rather heavy make.” He had “large masculine prominent features, with a robust constitution and excellent health.” Additionally, Richard developed a cheery disposition and seems to have been a generally happy and content child.¹⁷

The size of the Johnson family holdings precluded Jemima from overseeing work on all the land. Johnson hired an overseer. His travel increased because the House of Burgesses passed laws in 1782 liberalizing the sale of land in Virginia and Kentucky, thus creating more work for surveyors. Johnson enjoyed full-time employment. While his surveys kept him from his cabin on Elkhorn Creek, his financial compensation provided his family with an exemplary lifestyle for their place and time. He worked with early Kentucky luminaries such as Daniel Boone to cut roads connecting distant mills to each other. Johnson, unlike Boone, spent little time hunting and in the woods. Keenly interested in growing his own land holdings, Robert worked constantly in order to buy new land. His position as a surveyor allowed him to select the best land for himself.¹⁸

From 1783 to 1812, Robert Johnson acquired nearly one-third of Scott County. He saw commerce as an avenue to affluence. His interest in land, mills, and roads showed his ability to look beyond the strictly agrarian outlook of many Kentucky smallholders.

¹⁷ James H. Perkins ed., *Annals of the West* (Pittsburgh: James R. Albach, 1858), 265; Meyer, *Col. Richard M. Johnson of Kentucky*, 27.

¹⁸ John Mack Faragher, *Daniel Boone: The Life and Legend of an American Pioneer* (New York: Henry Holt Co., 1992), 177-234; B.O. Gaines, *History of Scott County* (Georgetown: Frye Printing Co., 1981), 49; H. Marshall, *A History of Kentucky I* (Frankfort: George S. Robinson, 1824), 164.

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He passed this along to Richard, who never embraced the total agrarianism of the Jacksonians and Democrats. Still, father and son sought large landholdings.¹⁹

The frontier still required vigilance from occasional marauding Indians. Men in the area scouted regularly. Kentucky's Indians, despite their greatly weakened power, remained a problem authorities in Richmond hoped to resolve. James Madison wrote in May 1786 "savages" continued to "disquiet" Kentuckians.²⁰

Instead of attacking white homesteads, Indians stole horses, cattle, and slaves, a new form of property recently introduced into Kentucky. Richard Johnson grew up with slaves from as early as he could remember. His father complained that rogue Indians attacked his negroes as early 1787. Enslaved Americans in Kentucky experienced hardships and feared Indian attacks along with their white masters, and while not necessarily ameliorating the brutality of chattel slavery, Kentucky's experience with slavery differed from the experience of Virginia. Kentucky eventually held more slaveholders than any state save Virginia and Georgia, but most Kentucky slaveholders owned less than five slaves. The slaves of Richard Johnson's childhood worked fields and likely doubled as household servants. No record of Richard Johnson's childhood

¹⁹ Marshall, *A History of Kentucky*, 164.

²⁰ James Madison, *Letters and Other Writings of James Madison* (Philadelphia: J.P. Lippincott, 1865), 238.

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interactions with slaves exist, but he generally treated his slaves with moderation in later life.²¹

Richard Johnson's family was a political family in every sense. His father's reputation allowed him to translate his personal prestige into political office. He served as a member of Kentucky's Constitutional Convention and as a judge of newly formed Scott County. He served as the state Director of Public Buildings and helped bring the capital of Kentucky to Frankfort, a settlement on the Kentucky River fifteen miles from Johnson's farm at Great Crossings. Richard saw his father interact with great men in their home and probably traveled to Frankfort with his father on certain occasions. What is certain is Richard exposure to his father's Jeffersonian Francophilia. In 1793 elite men of the Bluegrass Region founded the Lexington Democratic Society. Very quickly Georgetown's men founded a similar club. Robert Johnson associated with both groups, and his sons imbibed the ideals of Jeffersonian democracy. One of the most powerful ideas Richard inherited from his father was a vision for the West as a place of liberty and economic possibility. In 1794 Robert Johnson pushed members of the Lexington Democratic Society to embrace exploration of the Mississippi River. His son urged Congress towards a similar goal even farther west twenty-five years later. Robert served in the Kentucky legislature intermittently until 1812, where he generally supported the policies of Jefferson and then Madison. He served in the late 1790s as a trustee of what

²¹ Meyer, 29; Marion B. Lucas, *A History of Blacks in Kentucky: From Slavery to Segregation, 1760-1891* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1992), xi-xxii.
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became Transylvania University, his son Richard's alma mater. Johnson joined the group of wealthy Kentuckians who began the school's endowment.²²

Richard Johnson lived with his parents until he turned fifteen years old. He passed the time in relative affluence, but he also worked along with his father's workers. His labors included felling trees, making fence rails, and doing work alongside enslaved field-hands. He plowed, sowed seeds, and joined the reapers at harvest time. For his entire life, he remained a farmer and enjoyed the labor involved. Even as Vice President, he remained particular about certain tasks.²³

Johnson's farm chores occurred along with basic education received from his parents. Robert was literate and probably taught his son considerably, for just after Richard turned fifteen Robert sent him to a country school in order to further prepare him for university entrance exams. His secondary education took place in the Bluegrass vicinity, for he eventually matriculated at Transylvania University. Johnson's later political persona cast him as a scarcely educated frontier farmer who spoke like common people. Johnson self-consciously identified as a member of Kentucky's landed elite; but he retained the habits and lifestyle of a common farmer throughout his life. Nonetheless, he was excellently educated for his place and time. He used impeccable

²² *Col. Richard M. Johnson*, 36-38; Robert W. Tucker and David C. Hendrickson, *Empire of Liberty: The Statecraft of Thomas Jefferson* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1990); Robert Peter & Johanna Peter, *Transylvania University: its Origin, Rise, Decline, and Fall* (Louisville: J.P. Morton and Co., 1896), 29.

²³ Longworthy, *A Biographical Sketch of Col. Richard M. Johnson*, 7.
[Type text]

grammar in his letters (but on the stump he exaggerated his Kentucky frontier accent). He spoke Latin passingly.²⁴

The curriculum at Transylvania in the 1790s focused on the classics, but also included the burgeoning study of natural sciences. Johnson excelled at Transylvania. Severe Presbyterians ran the school during Johnson's time there in the mid-1790s. Presbyterian rigidity and frontier isolation kept the students from enjoying too much leisure. Transylvania in the 1790s trained men to be both learned and devout. Johnson learned the classics but apparently stood firm in his views on religion and society. He embraced none of the Presbyterian moralism so prevalent at Transylvania yet remained friendly to religion throughout his long public life.²⁵

Transylvania prepared Richard for his chosen profession, the law. In 1799, he began study with the corpulent, slovenly, but intelligent Col. George Nicholas. While he appeared disheveled, Nicholas's possessed one of the keenest legal minds in Kentucky. Nicholas' impressed more than simple legal teaching to Johnson. The elderly Nicholas deplored the frontier violence that typified Kentucky during the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century. He especially detested dueling, and some of this conviction influenced Richard Johnson. Johnson never resorted to dueling, and adopted an

²⁴ Lewis Collins, *History of Kentucky* (Covington, KY: Collins & Co., 1882), 40; Asahel Longworthy, *A Biographical Sketch of Col. Richard M. Johnson, of Kentucky* (New York, Saxton and Miles, 1843), 7.

²⁵ Peter and Peter, *Transylvania University*, 77; Robert Davidson, *The History of the Presbyterian Church in the State of Kentucky* (New York: Robert Carter, 1847), 84. [Type text]

aesthetic of self-deprecation in his public speeches. He disarmed opponents with humility.²⁶

After Nicholas died in the summer of 1799, Johnson sought out James Brown, a lawyer in Franklin. Born in Virginia, Brown served as Kentucky's Secretary of State in 1796. Brown's professional friendships included most of Kentucky's political class. Wealthy and ambitious, Brown moved to Louisiana but not before helping Richard Johnson. Robert Johnson clearly used his influence to procure the assistance of a man of Brown's stature. Johnson learned well, passed the bar, and opened up a law practice in the fall of 1799. He serviced local peoples' basic legal needs. Most men seeking legal help in 1799 Kentucky needed the assistance of a lawyer to decipher the byzantine network of conflicting land claims, titles, and wills. Johnson used his vocation to build a base of support for a potential political campaign. He often took cases for the poor. Barely twenty years old, Johnson ingratiated himself to his clients. He reportedly refused payment from poor clients on several occasions.²⁷

Johnson entered the legal profession at an auspicious moment for a well-placed, ambitious young Kentuckian. Just after he set up his law practice in Georgetown, presidential politics again captured the mind of the American public. White males prepared to cast their votes, but for the first time many states allowed propertyless white

²⁶ William B. Allen, *A History of Kentucky* (Louisville: Bradley & Gilbert, 1872), 241.

²⁷ Bayless Hardin, "The Brown Family of Liberty Hall". *Filson Club Historical Quarterly* 16 (April 1942); Emmons, *Authentic Biography of Col. Richard M. Johnson*, 9-11.

males to vote in general elections. Small farmers idolized the Vice President, Thomas Jefferson. The rapid expansion of the West and the admission of new states created reelection difficulties for the sitting President, John Adams. A Federalist and therefore largely identified with the urban East, Adams' loss to Jefferson in 1800 boded well for Jefferson's agrarian-based Republicans. Most of the new settlers in Kentucky were small farmers from the Carolinas or Virginia who identified far more with Jefferson than Adams. Johnson actually had little in common with the patrician Jefferson, but they shared animosity for cities and love of farming.²⁸

Johnson knew Kentucky better than the new generations of settlers, enabling him to take advantage of the political reality then forming in the West. Farmers, mostly non-slaveholders (but including a few who owned a handful of slaves) predominated Kentucky's politics. Johnson courted them enthusiastically. Around Lexington a nascent planter class emerged as an alternative political power center to Kentucky's small farmers. A young Virginia-born Kentuckian, Henry Clay, attached his political fortunes to wealthy gentry in Lexington and Fayette County. Clay and Johnson represented conflicting visions for the West. Although Jefferson influenced both men, Clay distrusted unrestricted democracy; Johnson embraced it to a degree unparalleled by his peers. Although the passage of time magnified their differences, Clay and Johnson formed an important partnership and friendship during the first years of the new

²⁸ John Ferling, *Adams vs. Jefferson: The Tumultuous Election of 1800* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 14.
[Type text]

century. But even in their early years Johnson and Clay made very different choices that foreshadowed their later politics. Clay married Lucretia Hart, started a family, and maintained an entirely orthodox domestic life. Clay's wealthy father-in-law Thomas Hart sustained a long-time friendship with James Brown, Johnson's former law tutor, which gave Clay much-needed contacts in Kentucky society. Johnson needed no introduction among Kentucky's elites, but he didn't rush to marriage or seek other hallmarks of respectability. Johnson's romances, if they exist, made no impact worth recording. There is no reason to suspect Johnson maintained a slave mistress at this time. Although he was a serial monogamist with enslaved women later in life, Johnson's relationship with Julia Chinn, began sometime after 1810, was probably his first.²⁹

Between 1800 and 1804 Johnson, still in his early twenties, made his initial foray into Kentucky state politics by running for State Representative from Scott County to Kentucky's General Assembly. Kentucky's politicians represented a unified political front. Jefferson's Republicans dominated the General Assembly. Kentucky's governor, James Garrard, happily told Kentuckians that "the commonwealth is in a happy and flourishing state." Kentucky, according to Garrard, enjoyed "harmony with her sister states" and like them pursued "genuine republicanism," an Early Republic euphemism for agrarianism and rejection of capitalism. Garrard, a manor-born son of a Virginia colonel, appealed to a sense of unity with small farmers. More than Jefferson, he

²⁹ Jon Meacham, *Thomas Jefferson: The Art of Power* (New York: Random House, 2012), xx; David S. Heidler and Jeanne T. Heidler, *Henry Clay: The Essential American* (New York: Random House, 2009), 29, 39.

embraced yeomen farmers because he disliked slavery and hoped to prevent a planter class from developing in Kentucky. The farmer ideal, universal as it was in 1800 Kentucky, masked any real class conflict. City versus farm seemed far more important than rich versus poor.³⁰

When wealthy planters like Jefferson, Garrard, and Johnson spoke of democracy and the people, they did so sincerely, assuming (with some accuracy) that small farmers shared their political culture. However, unlike Thomas Jefferson and Garrard, Johnson shared more than simply agrarianism with small farmers. He lived simply, in a relatively modest home, and believed that the people had a right to pursue prosperity, whether farming or a commercial pursuit. He rejected the doctrinaire constitutionalism of true Jeffersonians and took positions according to what his constituents typically supported. This meant that he supported tariffs, opposed them, supported banks when Jacksonians uniformly didn't, and other seemingly contradictory positions.³¹

Johnson won his first election. In his first incarnation as a politician the young Kentucky assemblyman supported the Jeffersonian program loyally. In the Spring of 1804 Republicans exulted in Jefferson's stunning purchase of Louisiana from France. Jefferson's realpolitik shocked some committed Republicans who insisted that the Constitution forbade Jefferson's executive actions, but most toed the party line enthusiastically. Richard Johnson saw the purchase as an opportunity for the West. At an

³⁰ Marshall, *A History of Kentucky* Vol. II, 368.

³¹; H.E. Everman, "James Garrard," in Lowell H. Harrison ed., *Kentucky's Governors* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2004), 7-11.
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outdoor party held by Republicans in Scott County, he spoke of the Louisiana Purchase as having moral and political importance because it ensured “Republican” government’s advance westward. Throughout his life Johnson viewed the West as the culmination of the American experiment His defense of the West was grounded in his nationalism. On July 4th, 1804, Johnson spoke to his assembled constituents, telling them “the accursed trains of evils which threatened to precipitate America from her elevated rank in the scale of nations no longer exist to disturb the public tranquility.” Those accursed strains included, according to Johnson, the Federalist Party, for he gloated that “Republican economy,” a byword for Jefferson’s anti-debt and anti-tax platform, had replaced “taxation.” With massive Republican majorities controlling western states and a sympathetic President in Washington City, Johnson and the West rode high. “Patriotic zeal,” extolled Johnson, pervaded “the different ranks” of Americans in the West.³²

Although he later played on the supposed humble nature of his upbringing, Richard Johnson in fact grew up in relative affluence. He enjoyed more educational opportunities than most of his contemporaries and hailed from a family with considerable political and social influence. His father’s considerable patronage in the Bluegrass Region allowed him opportunities for advancement. When later asked about his childhood in Kentucky, Johnson gave a political but telling answer. He “imbibed the free spirit of democracy. The principles of civil and religious liberty were unfolded to

³² Alexander DeConde, *This Affair of Louisiana* (New York: Scribner’s, 1976); *Kentucky Gazette*, May 22, 1804 in Meyer, 50.
[Type text]

our youthful minds, as we regaled ourselves at the family board, or sat by the social fire." His father and his early life in Kentucky, Johnson said, engraved the sentiments of democracy, liberty, and the West upon the "tablets of our hearts."³³

Johnson's early life undoubtedly left a powerful mark, but he never embraced an intellectual system or political ideology with the consistency of his contemporaries like Henry Clay (state buttressed capitalism), John C. Calhoun (slavery), John Randolph of Roanoke (state rights), or Daniel Webster (unionism). Rather Johnson imbibed an aesthetic. His childhood experience where Bluegrass families lived with each other and protected each other enforced the notion that social cooperation joined political cooperation. The commonality of purpose among pioneer Kentuckians formed the kernel of Johnson's populist conception of frontier democracy.

³³ *Extra Globe*, August 4, 1840.
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Chapter 2: Foray into Politics

The first decade of the nineteenth century saw an unprecedented migration of Americans from the eastern states across the Appalachian Mountains to the West. Although limited by the Mississippi River until the Louisiana Purchase of 1803, the West nonetheless offered bountiful cheap lands for men and women brave enough and hardy enough to carve a new life from a literal wilderness. These new Americans settled in what later became the heartland of the United States: the Ohio River Valley. Ohio and Kentucky bounded the river on the north and south respectively. The new state of Tennessee, not even a decade old in 1803, enjoyed a connection to the Ohio via that river's largest tributary, the Tennessee River. The largest settlement on the Ohio, Pittsburgh, sat where the river formed, literally on top of the old French Fort Duquesne. Since the time of Boone, most of Kentucky and Ohio's settlers came from Virginia and the Carolinas. Boisterous, divorced from class distinctions prevalent in Virginia and Carolina planter-controlled society, and violent, Kentucky's new settlers militantly supported expansion, affirmed uninhibited democracy, and harnessed the powerful social energies of their families and their neighbors to create a new piece of the American federation. A group of equally vibrant, expansionist, and violent men

represented these new westerners in the halls of state governments and in the federal Congress in Washington City.

¹

In Frankfort, Kentucky, 24-year-old Richard Johnson represented a relatively established western community, Georgetown and surrounding Scott County. Young and convinced of the righteousness of Jeffersonian Republicanism, Johnson eagerly launched his political career in the state house. In order to reinforce western political unity, young western politicians in Kentucky and Tennessee downplayed the facts that the new state's origins lay in southern states like Virginia and the Carolinas. They highlighted the Atlantic states' (North Carolina and Virginia especially) resistance to the creation of new western states from their former territories. Johnson joined the westerners in denigrating the aristocratic southern states to their east. While tied by kinship and slaveholding, the West nevertheless represented a very different political reality than the southern states along the Atlantic, and Johnson represented a very different strand of democratic republicanism than the patricians in Virginia. Johnson's conception of democracy stemmed from true egalitarianism that hoped for the social and political participation of all white men.²

Populism, instead of strict Jeffersonian democracy, played a hand in Johnson's practice of democracy. While Jefferson seemed to think of democracy as politically

¹ Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1921), 166.

² Frederick Merk, *History of the Westward Movement* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978), 136; Meyer, 49.

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incorporating white non-property holders while reinforcing manorial agrarianism, Johnson's democratic thought tended toward populism. Johnson, probably not self-consciously, practiced the political theory of Jeremy Bentham. Utilitarianism, Bentham's great theory of politics, proposed that politics should try to do the most good for the most people. Since the great mass of the western populace remained smallholding farmers, their desires provided the best gauge on what "the most good" was in early republican Kentucky. Johnson continually relied on popular opinion to guide his own politics during his political career; this diverged considerably from the political giant of early republican democratic practice, Thomas Jefferson.³

Jefferson's powerful imprint on Johnson remained steady during Johnson's early years in politics. Both men exploited enslaved Americans, but Johnson approached white political involvement very differently from the third President. Democracy, in his view, attached itself firmly to the idea of justice, and he continually backed the politics of what the people (Jeffersonian small farmers, that is) considered just. Jefferson relied on democracy for social control and aristocratic preservation. During Jefferson's presidency Johnson fought vigorously to expand the legal and political rights of small farmers, squatters, and western settlers. Cheap and easy access to public lands, the removal of property requirements for the suffrage, and alleviating debt all played into how he practiced democracy. Jefferson, for all his democratic rhetoric, lived in a lordly fashion

³Jeremy Bentham, *Utilitarianism* (London: Progressive Publishing Co., 1890);
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at his unfinished mansion. Democracy (admittedly buttressed by slavery) meant protection for the planter class.⁴

An inevitable by-product of democracy in Jefferson's view was upward mobility for ambitious middling farmers, but Jefferson retained the aristocratic penchant for self-preservation. Men like Johnson actually formed the vanguard of democratic politics in the United States, for unlike Jefferson, they never tied themselves totally to the landed planter as the political and societal ideal. Historians, such as Richard Hofstadter, argued that Jefferson was both aristocrat and democrat. Jefferson, according to Hofstadter, was an aristocrat who believed in democracy but proved unable to push his views due to his shy temperament. More accurately, Jefferson was an aristocrat who coopted true democrats like Johnson into support for an agrarian order.⁵

Like most freshmen state representatives, Johnson accepted relatively unimportant posts from party leaders. Nevertheless, Johnson's assignments dovetailed nicely with his own political ambitions. He first became interested in the workings of the American justice system. Although his distaste for judicial power more fully manifested itself later in his career (earning him the sneering derision of John Marshall), Johnson clearly disliked appointed judges exercising their constitutional prerogatives. He therefore relished being assigned to the committee investigating Kentucky courts. He

⁴ Henry Wienczek, *Master of the Mountain: Thomas Jefferson and His Slaves* (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 2012), 3-11.

⁵ Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition: And the Men Who Made it* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1973), 22-57.

and his colleagues inspected laws passed by the Kentucky legislature and the decisions rendered on those laws by Kentucky courts. The committee's findings apparently proved unremarkable, but the experience reinforced Johnson's early-acquired dislike for the less than democratic American judiciary.⁶

In 1804, Johnson got his first look at a subject that later brought him his grandest political acclamation and public approbation: penal reform. Johnson also served on a committee that considered a bill to fund removing obstructions from the Ohio River. The Ohio served not only large planters along the river, but small farmers as well. Liquor especially came from the east on river flatboats. When keelboats replaced their smaller and simpler flatboat cousins, local boys joined up as crewmembers. Still, the shallows of the river often held up commerce and employment for young farmers, so Johnson and his committeemen urged the removal of rocks and sandbars. What had been a seasonal route of transport and commerce became a yearlong highway for western enterprise.⁷

For Kentuckians in 1804, no legislation assumed more importance than the possible reforms to the government's system of selling public lands. Johnson, in his freshmen term, took up the question along with his committee. Many Kentuckians lived on land of disputed ownership. Others knew they squatted on the land while someone else (probably an absentee Virginia planter) owned the plots they built homes on.

⁶ Meyer, *Col. Richard M. Johnson*, 50.

⁷ Meyer, *Col. Richard M. Johnson*, 50-51; Archer Butler Hulbert, *The Ohio River: A Course for Empire* (New York and London: G.P. Putnam & Sons, 1906), 226-48, 249-79.
[Type text]

Johnson supported liberalizing the regulations of ownership, thereby making it easier on squatters and poor claimants. While practicing law Johnson overwhelmingly tailored his services toward poor and middling farmers. They provided a reliable political base, and he understood their needs better than other established Kentuckians in Lexington and the surrounding Bluegrass.⁸

The growth of Lexington pulled talented lawyers into the city. Wealthy merchants and the growing Bluegrass planter class paid better than poor farmers who barely understood their own land titles. The tensions between Kentucky's small farmers, and the planters and merchants of Lexington increased as the new century progressed. In 1803, a group of poor farmers indebted to Levi Todd, one of Kentucky's earliest and wealthiest aristocrats, marched on his manor house and threatened to burn the house. Johnson cast his lot with the poor and not the manor-born. He maintained friendships with wealthy people, but never came to see himself as one. To protect Kentucky's poor land claimants, Johnson pushed for legislation mandating that local state courts, not their federal counterparts, should decide the outcome of Kentucky land cases. The distinction was important. In 1804 Kentucky still relied heavily on common law. In Virginia, North Carolina, and all of New England, planter and businessman-dominated

⁸ Meyer, Col. *Richard M. Johnson*, 53.
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legislatures passed coopted statute law to protect their property. Yeomen stood a better chance with Kentucky judges than federal judges from elsewhere.⁹

The judiciary particularly rankled Johnson. The very nature and position of appointed federal judges seemed incompatible with democratic government. Worst still for Republicans, outgoing President John Adams appointed an entire slate of Federalist judges in the final weeks of his presidency. Most infuriating of all, Adams appointed John Marshall, a Virginia Federalist (and cousin of Thomas Jefferson) to succeed Oliver Ellsworth as Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court. Marshall stood at the head of a branch of government that, according to Johnson, was characterized by drunkenness, infamy, corruption, and “insatiate judicial vengeance.” Jefferson despised his cousin. In 1802, he orchestrated a partial repeal of the Adams’ judiciary act of 1801 strictly on the power of a massive Republican majority in the U.S. House of Representatives. For a passionate democrats like Johnson, Jefferson’s repeal fell short of the mark. Marshall accepted a truce with Jefferson, but Johnson hoped to dismantle the American judiciary more completely. He lacked power as a Kentucky representative, but when he eventually became a U.S. Representative from Kentucky he fought the federal judiciary at every opportunity.¹⁰

⁹ Stephen Berry, *The House of Abraham: Lincoln & the Todds, A Family Divided by War* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2007), 7; Morton J. Horwitz, *The Transformation of American Law, 1780-1860* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977), 61.

¹⁰ James Grant, *John Adams: Party of One* (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 2005), 429; *Kentucky Gazette*, July 10, 1804 in Meyer, 297; Jon Meacham, *Thomas Jefferson: The Art of Power* (New York: Random House, 2012), 375; Ignatious Loyola [Type text]

Kentucky state politics allowed Johnson to develop his political style, as well as his speechmaking. Even in 1804, fellow politicians and the public attested to his remarkable affability. Almost no one in American politics or public life disliked Richard Johnson. Johnson managed to please everybody, a contemporary observer wrote. To his credit, Johnson stayed away from the high-flying oratory common amongst the American political class. His speeches never epitomized “eloquence or learning” but Johnson’s listeners applauded his directness and apparent honesty.¹¹

In 1805, Johnson joined a draft committee for a proposal to reform how the Kentucky House paid its members. Previous increases in compensation for members took effect almost immediately. Other issues surrounded the fact that many members, former Virginians with mountains of money tied up in Kentucky land-speculation, presented a conflict of interests when the Kentucky Legislature took up land issues. Johnson backed a bill that automatically recused Kentucky legislators who were owed money on public lands from voting on bill pertaining to those same lands. Although a small-scale planter himself, Johnson stood with small farmers and workers from the

Robertson, *Sketches of Public Characters Drown from the Living and the Dead* (New York: E. Bliss, 1830), 55.

¹¹ *A Collection of all Such Acts of the General Assembly of Virginia, of a Public and Permenement Nature, as are Now in Force* (Richmond: Samuel Pleasants, Jun. & Henry Pace, 1803), 399-400.

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outset of his political career. He entered federal politics in April 1807, one of four Representatives from Kentucky.¹²

II.

During the summer of 1807, word reached Washington City that A British warship, *Leopard*, attacked the U.S. naval vessel *Chesapeake* after the latter's ship's commanding officer, James Barron, refused the British demand to search the ship for British deserters. His Majesty's Navy, since the end of the American Revolution, regularly boarded American merchantmen searching for British subjects. But Barron's honor and that of the United States Navy and the Union would not allow such a search. British aggression wore on American patience, and although his Federalist opponents drew attention to Jefferson's woeful neglect of the fledgling American Navy, the public demanded more vigorous action than simple diplomatic protests. In Jefferson's political backyard, the citizens of Richmond and Manchester, Virginia, called on the administration to avenge the "murder and "flagrant outrage" committed by Britain. HMS *Leopard's* guns finally drove Jefferson to action.¹³

¹² Bill and Resolution on Coercing Payment for State Lands, Nov. 26, 1805 in James Hopkins ed., *The Papers of Henry Clay: The Rising Statesman, 1797-1814* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1959), 212.

¹³ Spencer Tucker and Frank T. Reuter, *Injured Honor: the Chesapeake-Leopard Affair, June 22, 1807* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1996); *The National Intelligencer and Washington Advertiser* (Washington, DC) Wednesday, July 8, 1807. [Type text]

In December Congress passed the Embargo Act, which prohibited American ships from sailing for foreign ports. In a furiously speedy execution of legislation, the Senate passed the measure after barely a day of debate. The more contentious House deliberated. Westerners in general disliked what they perceived as reluctance for war among eastern merchants and the “money-power.” In Kentucky a sizable number of slaveowners lived and cultivated their plantations along the Ohio and Tennessee Rivers, but democratically minded small farmers predominated numerically and set the tone politically. Some Kentuckians, like Henry Clay, tempered their radicalism during Jefferson’s presidency in order to establish themselves as aristocratic planters in the mold of Tidewater Virginia. But most remained committed to the yeomen ideal and trusted Jefferson’s statecraft. Both carried a healthy dose of Anglophobia, so support for a potential war against Britain proved popular among Kentuckians.¹⁴

In one of his first votes on an issue of national import, Richard Johnson voted for the Embargo. Of his fellow Kentuckians, only Matthew Lyon voted against Jefferson’s measure. Born in Ireland in 1765 and filled with an unquenchable hatred for Britain (Lyon’s father was executed for unlawfully inciting evicted Irish peasants to rebel against the Anglo-Irish aristocracy), Lyon became a committed democrat and agrarian,

¹⁴ Bradford Perkins, *Prologue to War: England and the United States, 1805-1812* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961), 107; Thomas Abernathy, *The South and the New Nation, 1789-1819* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1961), 318-319; *The Farmer’s Magazine: A Periodical Work Exclusively Devoted to Agriculture and Rural Affairs* II (1801): 38-39; Aron, *How the West Was Lost*, 96, 123-125; Doron S. Ben-Atar, *The Origins of Jeffersonian Commercial Policy and Diplomacy* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1993).

settling first in Vermont and then moving to Kentucky in 1801. Despite being a leading Democratic-Republican, Lyon held political ideals closer to the Old Republican, or Quid faction of the Republican Party.¹⁵

Among the vocal Old Republicans who refused to countenance Jefferson's executive overstepping, none commanded the interest (or anger, or awe, or exasperation, depending on the case and person) as much as John Randolph of Roanoke. Randolph's republicanism relied on the power of agrarian aristocrats to govern their states almost autonomously from the federal government. Johnson rejected the Quids largely because the essence of their vision lay in institutional and social power wielded by the gentry; the Quids never threatened Jeffersonian political strength in Kentucky. Congressmen from eastern cities and New England allied with southern Quids against Jefferson's bill. Acutely aware that their livelihoods depended on unregulated maritime commerce, Federalists in New England and the Mid-Atlantic states tried another tactic. In order to ameliorate the effects of the embargo, they proposed certain exemptions for ships carrying certain cargoes, mainly foodstuffs.¹⁶

While the embargo sailed through Congress without a serious obstacle, the place of merchants who followed the letter of the law before passage became tenuous. They

¹⁵ *U.S. House Journal*. 1807. 10th Cong., 1st Sess., December 21; Bernard Mayo, "The Lyon of Democracy," *The North American Review*, Vol. 244, No. 2 (Winter, 1937/1938): 251-269.

¹⁶ Adam L. Tate, "Republicanism and Society: John Randolph of Roanoke, Joseph Glover Baldwin, and the Quest for Social Order," *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, Vol. 111, No. 3 (2003): 263-298.

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tolerated the Republicans so long as they upheld some protection for American merchantmen. Jefferson argued that American shipping deserved protection, but played to Republican stalwarts by politically attacking the Navy wherever possible. The Jefferson administration's uneven record on maritime policy meant that real protection of American shipping remained theory more than practice.¹⁷

Despite the lack of encouragement from Jefferson, many American merchantmen put to sea legally and in good faith before the passage of the Embargo Act. John Porter, representing Pennsylvania's First District (which included Philadelphia, the Union's second largest city and port), proposed that "such vessels as had taken in their cargoes, and received regular clearances from the custom house, previous to any notice of the passage of the Act...may be permitted to proceed to the places for which they respectively cleared." The proposition struck most members of the House as reasonable. Johnson diverged again from Jeffersonian orthodoxy, probably from his sense of fair play, and voted with the majority.¹⁸

American anger over the British Navy's apparently unstoppable dominance of the North Atlantic continued unabated. Despite Republican wariness over the United States' relationship with Great Britain, the American economy depended on trade with the

¹⁷ Harold H. Sprout and Margaret T. Sprout, *The Rise of American Naval Power, 1776-1918* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, original 1939), 91-93; Gene A. Smith, *For the Purposes of Defense: The Politics of the Jeffersonian Gunboat Program* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1995); Ian W. Toll, *Six Frigates: The Epic History of the Founding of the U.S. Navy* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2006), 170-180.

¹⁸ *U.S. House Journal*. 1808. 10th Cong., 1st Sess., January 4.
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mother country, and Jefferson's government protested actions of the French Navy. Most congressional Republicans viewed Britain as the source of most all the problems of the American State. In January of 1808, Napoleon's foreign minister, Jean-Baptiste de Nompère de Champagny, Duc de Cadore, sent U.S. Minister to France General John Armstrong, Jr. a letter calculated to incite American opinion against the United Kingdom and to cool American passions against the French Empire.¹⁹

Cadore's letter stoked an already roaring blaze into an outright political firestorm. The French letter incensed the Republican-dominated Congress. France declared "the proceedings of England towards all governments are so contrary to the law of nations, and to all the rules so constantly observed, even among enemies, that no recourse against this power is any longer to be found in the ordinary means of repression." Necessity demanded that the French turn against England "the arms which she makes use of herself; England alone shouldered the blame if transient inconveniences result therefrom." Since England refused to respect maritime law, Cadore asked why France should respect England's maritime rights or the rights of states that traded with her? The maritime laws which she violates, ought they still to be a protection to her?" If the United States tolerated "the infractions committed on their

¹⁹ George C. Daughan, *If By Sea: The Forging of the American Navy--from the Revolution to the War of 1812* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), 346-375, 376-395; Sam W. Haynes, *Unfinished Revolution: The Early American Republic in a British World* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2010), 153-176; Henry Adams, *History of the United States of America during the Administrations of Thomas Jefferson* (New York: Library of America, 1986), 1079.

independence, could they have the right to require that France alone should restrain herself within the limits which her enemy has everywhere overleaped?"²⁰

Cadore's letter was read before a closed session of the House. During the morning session the clerk received a note from the Executive Mansion. Seeing that the letter blamed Britain more than it exonerated France, Jefferson asked Congress to publish it. Congress, dominated by Republicans, agreed nearly unanimously. Johnson and most other westerners cast their votes with a prescience New Englanders and Tidewater southerners lacked or disregarded: any conflict between Britain and the United States meant a probable alliance between Native Americans and the British military. Just over a decade earlier Native American forces commanded by Weyapiersenwah, known to Anglo-Americans as Blue Jacket, clashed with Mad Anthony Wayne at Fallen Timbers. Blue Jacket's warriors fought vigorously but Wayne's army won. A decade later Blue Jacket ceded more territory in Ohio by the Treaty of Fort Industry. Barely three years removed from Blue Jacket's reluctant cession, Johnson cast his votes on U.S. naval policy with an eye to what might occur in the West.²¹

²⁰ "Letter from H. Champagny to General John Armstrong Jr.," in *The American Register: Or General Repository of History, Politics, and Science* III (1808), 441-442

²¹ Connor Cruise O'Brien, *The Long Affair: Thomas Jefferson and the French Revolution, 1785-1800* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 199; *U.S. House Journal*. 1808. 10th Cong., 1st Sess., April 2; John N. McClintock, *Colony, Province, State, 1623-1888: History of New Hampshire* (Boston: B.B. Russell, 1889), 734; Gregory Evans Dowd, *A Spirited Resistance: the North American Indian Struggle for Unity, 1745-1815* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993); Samuel G. Drake, *The Book of Indians: Or Biography and History of North America, from its Discovery to the Year 1841* (Boston: Antiquarian, 1841), 79-80.

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Five days after Congress voted to make Cadore's letter public, the House took up a Senate bill proposing an enlargement of the U.S. military. John Randolph, archconservative and fearful of any expansion of federal power, motioned to table the bill quickly in hopes of stopping the measure. Johnson and other young members agitated for an expanded military and by proxy an expanding United States. Fiercely aristocratic and disdainful of Napoleon, Randolph represented a dying vestige of Old Republicanism. Randolph's ideological brethren included John Taylor of Caroline, another Virginia planter. Randolph and Taylor distrusted any further federal intrusion into American life. They practically worshiped farmers and the Piedmont countryside and fiercely defended Virginia's patrician agrarianism against any sort of political or social modernization.²²

Farmers always garnered Johnson's support, but he rejected the agrarian ideological conservatism of Randolph and Taylor. Johnson enjoyed making money, and never limited himself to agricultural pursuits alone to do so. More importantly, the new breed of Republicans, Johnson among them, believed that the United States' could and

²² *U.S. House Journal*. 1808. 10th Cong., 1st Sess., April 7; David Johnson, *John Randolph of Roanoke* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2012), 1-7; Russell Kirk, *John Randolph of Roanoke: a Study in American Politics* (The Liberty Fund, 1997); Patrick Allitt, *The Conservatives: Ideas and Personalities Throughout American History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 28-32.

even should fight Britain. Their belief in the United States' potential for greatness lay not only in ideology or sentiment, but also in what they saw as empirical proof.²³

Republican papers in 1807-8 routinely circulated Thomas Malthus' *Treatise on the Principles of Population*, which documented both the stunning American birth rate and the geographic ability of the American continent to absorb a quickly multiplying Anglo-American population. Doubly convinced that American destiny lay in uninhibited expansion, western and southern Congressmen saw Britain as the chief obstacle to fulfilling the new nation's destiny. This expansionist-minded Representatives quickly became known as the War Hawks. Some, like Johnson, John Calhoun, Henry Clay, and Felix Grundy rose to prominence in later years. They built their early reputations off their belligerence, and they supported raising an additional military force to supplement the tiny regular army. The bill to raise troops contained subtle but important language. "Standing army" was substituted for "Troops," a change that Johnson affirmed but a majority of his colleagues--many of them Republicans indoctrinated by Randolph and the Quids--feared that an army would quickly become an instrument of tyranny.²⁴

Yeoman farmers in the West drowned out the prudent but admittedly aristocratic and unpopular voices of Randolph and Taylor. Support for Jefferson's assertive measures

²³ Henry Adams, *John Randolph* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1883); Nicole Eustace, *1812: War and the Passions of Patriotism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 17.

²⁴ Donald R. Hickey, *The War of 1812: The Forgotten Conflict* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 29-30; *U.S. House Journal*. 1808. 10th Cong., 1st Sess., April 7; Norman K. Risjord, *The Old Republicans: Southern Conservatism in the Age of Jefferson* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965).

came naturally to westerners already enthralled with the promise of Jefferson's agrarian and expansionist policies. He reduced the price of western land and outfitted the Lewis and Clark Expedition, indicating his interest in the West. In the legendarium formed in the Jeffersonian psyche, western settlers represented the democratic American vanguard against Britain, France, and Spain. ²⁵

Although not great bankers or planters, western farmers played an important role in the defense and formation of their country, something the increasingly enfranchised yeomen were not likely to forget. Enthusiasm for war in Kentucky was predicated on the idea that war would be prosecuted as it always was on the frontier, through the fighting prowess of state militiamen. Armed yeomen, according to republican orthodoxy, voluntarily but willingly formed localized militias and served as the most effective deterrent to foreign invasion and to domestic tyranny. Jefferson soured on this particular facet of republican ideology. From his experience as governor of Virginia Jefferson understood how ineffective local militias were. True national security, he understood, required some sort of standing army. Jefferson's diverged so significantly from other Republicans on the use of militias that he once proposed a draft for Virginia to fill her quota to the Continental Army. Westerners, Johnson included, disliked standing armies and accepted them reluctantly. ²⁶

²⁵ Lawrence S. Kaplan, *Thomas Jefferson: Westward the Course of Empire* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 1999), 125.

²⁶ Michael Kranish, *Flight from Monticello: Thomas Jefferson at War* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 127.

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Over a multitude of Republican fears, Johnson accepted a professional army as an inevitability. But few wanted the substantive organizational, logistical, and command necessities that accompanied a regular army. Johnson's deep-seated hatred of judges reappeared when Congress debated the role of military courts. Regular armies and the federal justice system both formed aristocratic intrusions into a republican society. When Congress debated the form the courts might take, Johnson warned that if the bill organizing military courts "extended military powers," he would oppose it. But any military court by nature extended military powers, a fact not lost on purist Republicans in the House. New Jersey's James Sloan said he could not understand Johnson's declaration. "If I understand the subject right," said Sloan, "the power of military courts is at present confined within the lines the army. This bill extends their power to six million peoples, to every inhabitant of these states." Sloan jested that he would have to go back to school in order to understand Johnson's logic.²⁷

Considerable disagreement over emerging American militarism mirrored a nascent division between Republicans. Sloan, Matthew Lyon, and other conservative Republicans voted against the Jeffersonian embargo, viewing it as another unwarranted federal incursion into American life. These "Old Republicans" joined forces politically with the Federalists to oppose any belligerent measure. Arrayed against this motley

²⁷ *Annals of Congress*, 10th Cong., 1st sess., 1808; Thomas Hart Benton ed., *Abridgment of the Debates of Congress, from 1789 to 1856*, Nov. 7, 1808-March 3, 1813 (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1857), 4: 94.

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coalition of Federalists and Old Republicans were Western republicans of the Jeffersonian school who opposed anything less than total war with England.²⁸

More specifically, Johnson blamed the East, the geographic synonym for Federalism, as a cultural whole for Britain's belligerence. In November 1808, Johnson rose in the House and pointed his finger at easterners. He announced himself "astonished to see this House inundated by every mail with publications, from the East, declaring that we have no cause of complaint against Great Britain." The very thought that eastern merchants hoped "we should rescind the proclamation of interdict against British armed vessels; that we should repeal the nonimportation law; that the embargo should be taken off as to Great Britain; that we should go to war with France," disgusted Johnson. Eastern actions invited "the people to violate and disregard the embargo, to put the laws and the constitution at defiance, and rise in rebellion." Johnson believed that he should "prove to every honest American, what we all believe in this place, that the object of one power," the Federalists, was "to destroy our neutrality and involve us in the convulsing wars of Europe." "The object of the other," Great Britain, centered on holding "a monopoly of our commerce, and the destruction of our freedom and independence."²⁹

Johnson viewed both the Federalists and the British as antagonistic to American interests. Jefferson's, and by extension, Johnson's vision for America, now being pursued

²⁸Benton ed., *Abridgment of the Debates of Congress, from 1789 to 1856*, 4: 94.

²⁹ Richard M. Johnson, Wednesday, November 30, 1808 in Thomas Hart Benton ed., *Abridgment of the Debates of Congress, from 1789 to 1856* 4 (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1858), 50.

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by the Democratic-Republican majorities in Congress and Madison hinged on eradicating the institutional excess inherent in the Federalists conception of the American state. Federalists hoped to use cities, technology, finance, and industry to perfect society. Jeffersonians wished those modern intrusions into man's natural relationship with the land never existed at all.³⁰

Eastern complaints about the constitutionality and economic effects of the embargo irritated westerners. On the floor of the House in November 1808, Johnson pronounced himself "more than astonished to see this House inundated by every mail with publications, from the East, declaring that we have no cause of complaint against Great Britain; that we should rescind the proclamation of interdict against British armed vessels." His disbelief extended to the very notion that his colleagues might find expediency in the repeal of the nonimportation law or that the embargo should be removed. "That punctilio," Johnson warned, "prevents a settlement of our differences with Great Britain; inviting the people to violate and disregard the embargo, to put the laws and the constitution at defiance, and rise in rebellion."³¹

Jeffersonian Republicans like Richard Johnson, ensconced on farms far away from American ports, misunderstood universal American anger at Britain to be a vote of confidence for the embargo. Madison's election only furthered Jeffersonian delusions.

³⁰ Joseph J. Ellis, *American Sphinx: The Character of Thomas Jefferson* (New York: Vintage, original 1996), 37.

³¹ Richard M. Johnson, November 30, 1808 in Benton ed., *Abridgment of the Debates of Congress, from 1789 to 1856*, Vol. IV, 51-58; George C. Daughan, *1812: The Navy's War* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 25.

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Even in the West, the embargo's effects began to be felt. One Ohio newspaper complained that the price of salt doubled in 1808, and that pork, dry goods and other groceries rose in price between fifty and one-hundred percent.³²

Western politicians appeared willing to absorb any public dissatisfaction concerning the embargo. Britain made an excellent political ruse; by inspiring dread of Britain on the frontier, Jeffersonians easily found local and state support for aggression in the name of defense. But when New England Federalists, whose ships and livelihoods actually came under constant British attack, asked Congress for help in the form of increasing naval expenditures, Johnson and other Jeffersonians expressed astonishment. In front of the House of Representatives, Johnson argued that a more robust navy was hardly necessary; after all, Jefferson just authorized the construction of twelve new revenue cutters to protect American merchant ships. Johnson accused the navy of being "incompetent, and inefficient." Still, the American Navy and Marines in the Mediterranean proved quite competent when they secured Jefferson's international legitimacy with their victory over Barbary pirates in 1805. Supporters of the Navy, Johnson warned, spoke "lightly of economy." Johnson did see some use in pro-navy policies. He agreed that the two thousand new sailors proposed in the naval bill should be authorized-to be used as soldiers to fortify New Orleans.³³

³² *The Supporter*, (Chillicothe, OH) Thursday, January 5, 1809.

³³ *Annals of Congress*, 10th Cong., 2nd sess., 1063-1064; Frank Lambert, *The Barbary Wars: American Independence in the Atlantic World* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2005), 123-156

In March of 1809 Congress finally realized the economic harm produced by the Embargo. The Republican Congress annulled the Embargo and non-importation laws. In their place Congress substituted a non-intercourse act. This prohibited trading with Britain, France, or their colonies but placed no other restrictions on U.S. maritime commerce.³⁴

Exultant over what they perceived as a diplomatic victory for the United States, congressmen still made time for politics. Virginians, led by John Randolph, introduced a measure of approbation for Jefferson. Madison replicated Jefferson's foreign policy, and Johnson took to the floor to object to Randolph's political maneuvering. The opposition, Johnson said, "modestly" took all the credit for the restoration of Anglo-British commerce. This was disingenuous, complained Johnson. The opposition, as he termed the Federalists, argued against any measure that harmed maritime commerce; this included the embargo. Johnson accurately accused John Randolph of blocking any substantive action against Great Britain. Instead, Johnson sneeringly reminded the House that Randolph's fanciful ideas included arming Spanish partisans fighting Napoleon and the slightly more realistic notion of simultaneously invading Canada.³⁵

The threat from Indians and the British served as the politically expedient rationale for western support of an invasion of Canada. In reality, expansionistic western

³⁴ Hickey, *The War of 1812*, 21.

³⁵ Robert Allen Rutland, *James Madison: The Founding Father* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1987), 203-234; *Annals of Congress*, 11th Cong., 1st sess., 158-159.

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settlers threatened Indians and British Canada more than the British and Indians did the Americans. Johnson testified to western intransigence over whether Britain actually constituted a real threat. Jeffersonian politics typically sided with France in the European conflicts, but Johnson argued for true neutrality.³⁶

Neutrality differentiated Johnson from other westerners such as Andrew Jackson. In 1798, then Senator Jackson wrote to a friend, expressing his hope that the French would invade Britain, and humble England's "tyranny." Jackson's politics tended toward a high degree of authoritarianism; Johnson embraced democracy, even if it meant supporting positions he had earlier dismissed, or even supporting a measure he openly disagreed with. In December 1811, the House debated U.S. policy toward Britain. The Representatives considered, specifically, "The expulsion of the British from their North American possessions, and granting letters of marque and reprisal against Great Britain."³⁷

Westerners coveted British territory, and Johnson dropped his earlier protestations of strict neutrality. Johnson noted that "at a moment least to be expected, when France had ceased to violate our neutral rights, and the olive branch was tendered to Great Britain, her orders in council were put into a more rigorous execution." Britain, Johnson told his peers, refused to redress the wrongs "committed on our coasts and in

³⁶ Julius W. Pratt, *The Expansionists of 1812* (New York: MacMillan, 1925).

³⁷ Andrew Jackson to James Roberston, January 11, 1798 in Sam B. Smith and Harriett Chappell Owsley eds., *The Papers of Andrew Jackson*, Vol. 1: 1770-1803 (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1980), 165.

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the mouths of our harbors.... our trade is annoyed, and our national rights invaded." By Britain's "insolence and injury, regardless of our moderation and our justice, she has brought home to the " threshold of our territory measures of actual war." Americans, said Johnson, must oppose Britain by force or annul the Declaration of Independence. Johnson's strict neutrality rapidly gave way to rapid Anglophobia, and he could now agree with Andrew Jackson and Jefferson on the "wonderful" French Revolution.³⁸

Britain so dominated American maritime trade, Jefferson theorized, that no American merchant could trade on equal terms. Johnson agreed; just before Christmas, 1809 he stood on the House floor and panned the entire history of American acquiescence to Britain in the name of commercial expediency. He transformed impressment, regarding the *Chesapeake* affair, into a case of Britain murdering young American sailors. The situation might have been remedied earlier, said Johnson, but internal divisions like the Federalist reluctance for war prohibited Congress from protecting Americans who experienced disgrace at the hand of Great Britain.³⁹

Johnson's comments were political hyperbole, but also a testament of loyalty to the Jeffersonian political program. He exhibited a remarkable amount of often-

³⁸ Richard M. Johnson, December 11, 1811 in Benton ed., *Abridgment of the Debates of Congress* Vol. IV, 442-443; Andrew Jackson to Edward Livingston, May 17, 1815 in Harold D. Moser, Sharon McPherson, and David R. Hoth eds., *The Papers of Andrew Jackson, 1814-1815* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991), 3: 357.

³⁹ Norman Graebner, *Foundations of American Foreign Policy: a Realist Appraisal from Franklin to McKinley* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 1985), 115; Tucker and Hendrickson, *Empire of liberty*, 25-32; *Annals of Congress*, 11th Cong., 2nd sess., 158-159.

unintentional candor. Johnson's defense of Jeffersonian foreign policy confirmed what Federalists knew and feared: Johnson openly admitted that Jefferson's Francophilia affected his politics, although perhaps seeing his blunder Johnson quickly reminded the gathering that Jefferson was not a French "partisan."⁴⁰

Johnson's own feelings about Britain remained far from clear in 1809 and 1810. He coveted an American imperium in the West, but his scruples on war were not easily overridden. On more than one occasion, he appeared hesitant, even reticent regarding congressional action leading to war. He voted with John Randolph and the Quids throughout much of the Eleventh Congress. Johnson's fears about war's consequences might have motivated this momentary political alliance with Virginia aristocrats. But by the beginning of 1812 Johnson appeared more willing to go to war. Western War Hawks clamored *en masse* for action against Britain exercised enough influence to make the region's voice impossible to ignore in the Halls of Congress.⁴¹

Western political solidarity complemented Johnson's growing political reputation. James Madison took notice of Johnson, and invited him to the White House. The Kentuckian joined other budding politicians who surrounded the Executive Mansion looking for the favor of the President. Johnson made some mark on Madison, because contemporary westerners believed the young Kentuckian enjoyed some standing. In the spring of 1809, recently appointed Illinois Territorial Governor John Boyle resigned his

⁴⁰ *Annals of Congress*, 11th Cong., 2nd sess., 158-159.

⁴¹ Norman K. Risjord, "The War Hawks and the War of 1812," *Indiana Magazine of History*, 60 (June 1964): 155-158.

seat suddenly without ever assuming his office. Embarrassed at renegeing on his acceptance and worried over who his successor might be, Boyle recommended Ninian Edwards, a future Illinois political luminary and noted friend and political ally of Richard Johnson. Boyle knew that Edwards's name was unknown in the capital. Johnson, on the other hand, knew both Madison and Edwards. Boyle informed the President that Johnson appreciated Edwards's talents and would provide any of the information and assurances needed. Whatever assurances Madison received from Johnson proved sufficient. The President appointed Edwards, who became Illinois' first Territorial Governor.⁴²

Johnson's political ambitions rose with his ability to charm many of the men and women he met. Kentucky aristocrat James Taylor Jr. entrusted him with a letter for Madison in the summer of 1809. Taylor noted that Johnson's "warm" friendship with he and Madison made Johnson the perfect courier. Taylor thought Johnson "a sound republican, an excellent officer and very much the gentleman." More importantly, however, Johnson had "useful information" for Taylor and President Madison. Johnson's demeanor and likeability allowed him to gather political information others might not receive. The simple fact that so many fellow politicians liked Johnson allowed him to

⁴² Ralph Ketcham, *James Madison: A Biography* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1990), 107; Richard M. Johnson to Ninian Edwards, July 31, 1819 in Elihu B. Washburne ed., *The Edwards Papers* (Chicago: Fergus Printing Co., 1884), 162-163; John Boyle to James Madison, April 6, 1809 in Robert A. Rutland and Thomas A. Mason eds., *The Papers of James Madison: Presidential Series*, Vol 1: 1809 (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1984), 101-102
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become what James Taylor called “a man of considerable information and observation.” Johnson’s friendships tended to last. Taylor remained close to Johnson and campaigned for him later in his career. Johnson shored up his political base during the Madison presidency by serving as an intermediary for the President and by dispensing what patronage that came his way to his friends. Loyalty ensured him lifelong friends politically. His acted vigorously on behalf of those friends.⁴³

Kentucky’s close relationship with and kinship ties to Virginia meant that other westerners, from the Northwest and Southwest, curried favor with Kentuckians in Congress. In 1810, as Madison considered appointing a circuit judge in Mississippi, Johnson recommended a fellow Kentuckian, John Monroe of Lexington. When that position fell through, Johnson took up Monroe’s cause again by putting his name forward for U.S. Attorney in Ohio.⁴⁴

Politically, relative quietude settled over the American West in the years that preceded the War of 1812. The political formation of Ohio, a state for only seven years in 1810, held only 250,000 people. Kentucky far outpaced its northern neighbor in population and influence. Kentucky’s commercial power increased as well. Johnson’s

⁴³ Lewis Collins, *Historical sketches of Kentucky* (Cincinnati: J.A. and U.P. Mays, 1848), 227-228; James Taylor to James Madison, August 11, 1809 in Rutland and Mason eds., *The Papers of James Madison: Presidential Series*, 1: 325-326.

⁴⁴ Richard M. Johnson to James Madison, February 19, 1810 in J.C.A. Stagg, Jeanne Kerr Cross, and Susan Holbrook Perdue eds., *The Papers of James Madison: Presidential Series*, Vol. 2: 1809-1810 (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1992), 242.

personal relationship with Madison during his presidency became closer than it had ever been with Thomas Jefferson, but Johnson nevertheless revered the third President.⁴⁵

Republicans demonstrated a consistent loyalty to Jefferson's policies. This displayed an early form of party discipline. Johnson's habitual acquiescence to anything proposed by Jefferson or the major Republican leaders originated not from a lack of thoughtfulness but a belief that Republican policies almost always represented a more palatable alternative than those proposed by the Federalists. The Republicans especially counted on the constancy of Johnson and other western members. When Congress recommended dispatching armed warships with merchant convoys, Federalists and Old Republicans initiated their obligatory opposition, Old Republicans on the basis on constitutionalism and Federalists on the grounds that this would only provoke Britain. Even when his comments held no political substance, Johnson's near constant presence on the House floor boded well for his political prospects. He came to the attention of Jefferson and Madison and they depended on him. He served as moral encouragement for both Republican presidents, often rising simply to exhort the members to vote on presidential pet projects tabled earlier in the congressional session.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ James A. Ramage and Andrea S. Watkins, *Kentucky Rising: Democracy, Slavery and Culture from the Early Republic to the Civil War* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2011), 1-16; W.H. Perrin, J.H. Battle, and G.C. Kniffin, *Kentucky: A History of the State* (Louisville: F.A. Battey and Co., 1888), 890.

⁴⁶ James Sterling Young, *The Washington Community, 1800-1828* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1966), 112; *Annals of Congress*, 11th Cong., 2nd sess., 1790. [Type text]

Johnson's simplicity in political rhetoric affected how he interacted with the electorate. Known to the public as a consummate democrat, Washington's citizens asked him to inquire about using the House of Representatives chamber for the Fourth of July celebrations in the summer of 1809. Johnson carried the idea to his peers. If Congress was not in session, why shouldn't the capital's revelers be allowed to enjoy the nation's birthday in the halls of its government? Ostensibly, some members already decided to make some patriotic speeches, and Johnson saw no reason why the public should not be allowed to attend "the delivery of any discourse prepared for that day." Almost immediately, Joseph Lewis Jr., Matthew Lyon, and Josiah Quincy III sprang from their seats. They opposed such an event as inappropriate for the House Chamber. The House was set apart for the sacred purpose of debating and enacting legislation. Furthermore, the chamber's furniture might be harmed by the "indiscriminate admission of persons." Lastly, they considered it improper for the House "in any way to give encouragement to any party celebrations of that or any other day."⁴⁷

None of the speakers surprised Johnson. Lyon's severe republicanism led him to denigrate anything associated with frivolity. Quincy and Lewis, both Federalists, viewed the celebrations as another layer of manufactured Republican patriotism contrived for the purposes of distracting the populace from Jefferson's and Madison's foreign policies. Earlier, as Jefferson prepared to leave office, Quincy openly accused Jefferson of

⁴⁷ *Annals of Congress*, 11th Cong., 1st sess., 416-417; Richard J. Purcell, "An Irish Crusader for American Democracy: Matthew Lyon, 1750-1822," *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 25 (Mar., 1936): 47-64.

deceiving the House into voting for the embargo. He and the other Federalists in the House, still embittered from their inability to halt Jefferson and subsequently Madison, were not about to let the ruling party sponsor use the capitol for what would amount to a fête for Jeffersonian self-adulation.⁴⁸

Johnson scoffed at the Federalists, and declared that “no building, raised by mortal hands was too sacred for the celebration of that day; that there was no intention to foster party spirit, and that sufficient reliance might be placed on the good order of the citizens that they would not injure” the House’s furniture. Another Representative, disenchanted Maryland Republican Archibald Van Horne, rose to oppose Johnson’s party. In disgust, Johnson withdrew the measure, to avoid taking anymore of the House’s time.⁴⁹

Republicans counted on Johnson to support the party and the party leadership. Even after leaving office, Jefferson as well took Johnson’s confidence as a given. The West and westerners formed the vanguard of the American imperium, a fact not lost on Jefferson or Johnson. Johnson faithfully presented petitions from Kentuckians to Congress, and he faithfully answered when Thomas Jefferson called for help. In 1810 Edward Livingston, the lawyer for a wealthy Creole planter named Jean Gravier proposed the destruction of a sandbar often used by Kentucky flatboat’s as their primary

⁴⁸ Josiah Quincy, Speech on the Bill for holding an Extra Session of Congress in May Next, January 19, 1809 in Edmund Quincy ed., *Congressional Speeches of Josiah Quincy, 1805-1813* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1874), 129-156.

⁴⁹ L. Marx Renzulli Jr., *Maryland: the Federalist Years* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1972), 241; *Annals of Congress*, 11th Cong., 1st sess., 416-417.
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portage. Granvier claimed ownership of the area along the New Orleans Mississippi River frontage known as Batture Saint Marie, but Jefferson contested Gravier's claim and argued that the U.S. owned the tract. Livingston sued Jefferson. The ex-President sprang into action and recruited Richard Johnson, along with Henry Clay, to publicly support his cause. He knew that westerners, Johnson and Henry Clay, would provide moral support for the government's position.⁵⁰

Kentucky's riverine connections to the Southwest provided vital commerce to the Bluegrass Region and the state as a whole. Louisiana Creoles disliked the rough-hewn "Kaintuck" boatmen. As aristocratic as any Tidewater Virginian and firmly ensconced on their plantations, the Creoles found the backcountry Kentucky flatboat-men nothing more than brutish and drunk braggadocios. Anglo-Americans like Livingston cooperated with the Creoles in order to create another Anglo-American planter society. Livingston hailed from one New York's aristocratic families, married into Louisiana's Creole gentry, and quickly moved to quash any obstacles to the power of the planter-elite. He challenged the Congressional ban on importing slaves. Livingston and Granvier made inviting targets for Johnson, who saw Kentucky's boatmen as democrats and republicans under attack by a decadent elite. The case made its way to the Supreme Court. John Marshall dismissed the suit against Jefferson. The victory proved important

⁵⁰ Thomas Jefferson to John Wayne Eppes and William B. Giles, Nov. 12, 1810 in J. Jefferson Looney ed. *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson: Retirement Series* Vol. 3, 1810-1811 (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006), 203-205.
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not only for Jefferson, but for the ability of the United States to protect public lands from domination by economic elites in the Southwest and West as well.⁵¹

Johnson found ample opportunity to use his office to further the cause of the West. His farsightedness concerning the peopling of the American West led him to take up the case of John and Edward Tanner, two American residents in the Louisiana Territory. The Tanners hoped to secure the government's financial support to build a canal between the St. Francis River in southwest Missouri and the Mississippi River. In addition to their interest in riverine transit, the Tanners asked Congress for the rights to build a road between New Madrid, in what is now southwest Missouri, and Nashville. Their proposal included a provision that designated the new road as the postal route from Nashville into the Louisiana Territory.⁵²

In their search for an enthusiastic sponsor for their application to Congress, they found Richard Johnson, who promptly read their petition to the House on December 12, 1810. The House appointed a select committee of three members to consider the petition: Jacob Swoope, Virginia Federalist, Matthias Richards, a Republican from Pennsylvania, and Richard Johnson. Johnson's disregard for the ascetic of an apparent

⁵¹ Charles Havens Hunt, *The Life of Edward Livingston* (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1864), 135-183; William C. Davis, *A Way through the Wilderness: The Natchez Trace and the Civilization of the Southern Frontier* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), 243; Adam Rothman, *Slave Country: American Expansion and the Origins of the Deep South* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 79; Dumas Malone, *Jefferson and His Time: Sage on Monticello* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1981), 55-71.

⁵² Bernard DeVoto, *The Course of Empire* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, original 1952), 528-539; John W. Jordan, *Encyclopedia of Pennsylvania Biography* Vol. II (New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Co., 1914), 437.

conflict of interest mattered little. The cause of the West outweighed the appearance on strict legality. Jacob Swoope might raise some questions on the committee, but Richards was a reliable Republican farmer who could be counted on to support Johnson, and thus the Tanners.⁵³

Americans debated geographic and political expansion throughout the 11th Congress. In December 1811, Congress debated the potential incorporation of Catholic Franco-Canada into the United States. John Randolph argued with such vehemence that Johnson felt compelled to draw attention to the Virginian's rancor. Randolph, said Johnson, "has a dislike to the Canadian French. French blood is hateful to him." With farsightedness that boded well for the democratic tradition in the United States and the for American imperial destiny, Johnson declared that the "Canadian French are as good citizens as the Canadian English." Johnson urged the members to not "think so meanly of the human character and the human mind. We are in pursuit of happiness, and we place a great value upon liberty as the means of happiness." In his most eloquent statement ever he posed a question to his colleagues

What, then, let me ask has changed the character of those people, that they are to be despised? What new order of things has disqualified them for the enjoyment of liberty? Has any malediction of Heaven doomed them to perpetual vassalage? Or, will the gentleman from Virginia pretend to more wisdom and more patriotism than the constellation of patriots who conducted the infant Republic through the Revolution? In point of territorial limit, the map will prove its importance. The waters of the St. Lawrence and the Mississippi interlock in a number of places, and the great Disposer of Human Events intended those two rivers should belong to the same people.

⁵³ *Annals of Congress*, 11th Cong., 3rd sess., 390.
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Johnson envisioned an American empire of unlimited territorial and civic expansion. Democracy ensured Americans the right to grow and prosper the continent. Democracy guaranteed the people of this empire their rights as given by God and more directly by the U.S. Constitution. Johnson believed fervently that the Founders designed the United States as a commonwealth of liberty for all men. Future interactions with Indians, slaves, free blacks, and urban Irish affirmed Johnson as a rare but necessary American of the early nineteenth century less tainted by the era's virulent racism.⁵⁴

On June 4th, 1812, the House voted to declare war. The Senate debated the war declaration for two weeks. Influential Senators from New England hoped to limit the conflict to a naval war. That proved impractical and unpopular so on June 18, the Senate affirmed the House's declaration. Richard Johnson and the War Hawks voted *en masse* for the declaration. John Randolph and a few southern ultra-conservatives joined New England's Representatives voting against war, but the vote's lopsided tally indicated widespread (but in no way unanimous) national public support. The war declaration set off a flurry of military activity. Local aristocrats and militia leaders formed their own companies, each applying to the War Office to have their company incorporated into the Army.⁵⁵

⁵⁴Benton ed., *Abridgment of the Debates of Congress, from 1789 to 1856*, Vol. IV, 442-444.

⁵⁵Richard Buel, *America on the Brink: How the Political Struggle over the War of 1812 Almost Destroyed the Young Republic* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), 153; *U.S. House Journal*. 1812. 12th Cong., 1st Sess., June 4; Harry L. Coles, *The War of 1812* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), 25.

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Johnson began angling for a command immediately. He left the capital for Kentucky in June 1812. He traveled through Pittsburgh, where he wrote a letter to Madison. Soldiering seemed to him his only real desire, and associates who volunteered benefited from Johnson's own impatience to find his way into battle. On July 4th, he reminded the President that a volunteer company had already been formed by Kentuckians. They tendered their services to Madison six weeks earlier, and had yet to receive an answer. "I can inform you," wrote Johnson, "that this day I have seen the officers and company all mustered in uniform. They are fine men to look at and I have no doubt of their efficiency." Johnson implored Madison to act swiftly. "They are now anxiously expecting an answer and in fact an acceptance on the part of the government, and orders to march. Indeed they complain of suspense."⁵⁶

Madison's unwillingness or inability to use the Kentucky militia during the first summer and autumn of the War of 1812 exasperated Johnson. He returned home from Washington during Congress's summer recess, eager to join the fight. By the end of July no word from Washington arrived authorizing the Kentucky Militia to enter battle, so Johnson (ostensibly prompted by militia officers but no doubt acting on his own accord) wrote to Madison, imploring him to call the Kentucky militia to arms. Madison's perceived dithering may in fact have been astute political patience. Kentucky state

⁵⁶ Richard Mentor Johnson to James Madison, July 4, 1812 in J.C.A. Stagg ed., *The Papers of James Madison: Presidential Series*, Vol. 4: 1811-1812 (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1994), 558.

politics underwent a rather tumultuous change in the summer of 1812. Isaac Shelby, Kentucky's popular first governor, resumed the office after a retirement of nearly fifteen years. He waited until a month before election day to announce his candidacy. Two days before Shelby's inauguration, outgoing Governor Charles Scott appointed William Henry Harrison Major General of the Kentucky Militia, a breach of the state's constitution, which mandated that a Kentuckian command the state troops.⁵⁷

The Kentucky legislature adored Shelby, a Revolutionary War hero, and passed a resolution requesting the Governor to assume command of Kentucky's troops if the situation demanded. That left William Henry Harrison, already prickly about affronts to his vanity, out of a true command. Shelby convinced Madison to give Harrison the command of all U.S. troops in the Northwest. Harrison tactfully appointed Shelby senior general over Kentucky troops; both men believed this arrangement removed military and political difficulties from them. Harrison remarked haughtily that the "troops which I have with me and those which are coming on from Kentucky are perhaps the best materials for forming an army that the world has produced." Harrison, scion of an aristocratic Virginia family, pompously derided the Kentuckians soldiering abilities. "No

⁵⁷ Pattie Burnley, "Biographical Sketch of General, Afterward Governor, Charles S. Scott," *Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 1 (1903): 11–18; William B. Allen, *A History of Kentucky* (Louisville: Bradley and Gilbert, 1872), 61-78.
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equal number of men were ever collected who knew so little of military discipline. Nor have I any assistant who can give me the least aid in training them.”⁵⁸

While Harrison struggled to embrace his charges, Richard Johnson suffered no such lack of enthusiasm for the quality of Kentucky’s fighting men. On July 24, he wrote to Madison begging the President to order Kentuckians immediately into battle. After talking with the officers and soldiers of the Kentucky militia, Johnson felt “induced to suggest the propriety of calling into actual service at least a portion of our quota composed of volunteers and me.” Johnson related his positive perception of Kentucky soldiers to Madison, a far cry from Harrison’s snobbish appraisal. The “meritorious” militiamen, promised Johnson, “would do honor to any cause worthy to be defended by freemen.” He assured Madison that the citizens of Kentucky “supported with a zeal” the actions of the government. While engaging in a war of nationalism, Johnson exclaimed that the western states’ “military ardor” needed the war to manifest itself.⁵⁹

Johnson’s war was for the West, and the United States. In his mind, the former was simply the culmination of the latter. Johnson’s belief in democracy distinguished itself in another way: whereas the aristocratic Harrison saw Kentuckian’s lack of discipline as a major handicap to their fighting ability, Johnson praised his people’s

⁵⁸ William Henry Harrison to William Eustis, August 28, 1812 in Logan Esarey ed., *Messages and Letters of William Henry Harrison*, Vol. II (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Commission, 1922), 98-101.

⁵⁹ Richard M. Johnson to James Madison, July 24, 1812 in J.C.A. Stagg ed., *The Papers of James Madison: Presidential Series*, Vol. 5: 1812-1813 (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2004), 67-68.

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restlessness as their great quality. “The people of this state,” he explained to Madison, “are accustomed to prompt and active measures; they are a spirited people and nothing can satisfy them but some military enterprise to engage at least a part of our men.”

Johnson disregarded logistical concerns and worries over volunteer discipline. “All the objections considered, I do not hesitate to advise an immediate call for a part; one regiment if no more.”⁶⁰

The objectives Johnson hoped to accomplish dealt less with attacking the British military and more with removing Indians as a threat to western settlers. Johnson and Kentucky’s soldiers preferred to move west and north. Johnson told Madison that the soldier’s health played a part in their wish not to move south, but the real reason was that an Indian supply depot at Fort Malden (in modern Ontario) lay to the north and west of the majority of settlements in Kentucky. “It forms the point of rendezvous for Indians to get supplies of arms, etc. and the hot bed of incitement to murder our families.” Although the national articulation of “Manifest Destiny” lay two decades in the future, Johnson made one statement that foreshadowed the Democratic program that he would champion in his final years. “The heart of our troops are fired upon such an enterprise and the officers stand pledged that no scruples will be made on account of

⁶⁰ Johnson to Madison, July 24, 1812 in J.C.A. Stagg ed., *The Papers of James Madison*, 5: 67-68.

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boundary.” Natural borders, instead of arbitrary lines agreed to by distant government, would be the only obstacles to America’s western expansion.⁶¹

During the War of 1812 Americans disregarded legal boundaries at will. Johnson (and most Jeffersonians in the South and West) regarded American expansion as a national right and necessity. Basic national security drove many western settlers to embrace this nascent imperialist ideology. So too did economic opportunity. But Johnson sincerely believed that the promise of American liberty lay in the ability of the individual, without regard to their economic station, to carve his personal dominion out under the auspices of free republican government. The West fit within that vision. Jefferson, upon being asked why he was leaving the comforts of Philadelphia for Virginia, answered that “the brilliant pleasures of this gay Capital” covered urban squalor and social failings. Jefferson found new appreciation for his “native country, with new attachments, and with exaggerated esteem for its advantages; for though there is less wealth there, there is more freedom, more ease, and less misery.”⁶²

Johnson’s loyalty to Jeffersonian democracy marked him as a confirmed Democratic Republican and friend to Jefferson’s ideas, if not the man himself. Jefferson

⁶¹ Ibid; Richard W. Van Alstyne, *The Rising American Empire* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1974), 78-99.

⁶² Walter Nugent, *Habits of Empire: A History of American Expansion* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008), 73-74; William C. Davis, *Lone Star Rising: The Revolutionary Birth of the Texas Republic* (New York: The Free Press, 2004), 22-23; Thomas Jefferson to Baron Geismer, September 6, 1788 in H.A. Washington ed., *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson* Vol. 1 (New York: Edwards, Pratt, and Foster, 1858), 427-428.

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felt comfortable enough to write Johnson a letter in January of 1813 asking then Col. Johnson to find a place in the army for his neighbor, James McKinney. Jefferson's letter revealed much about both men. McKinney was a tenant of Jefferson and not a large landholder. Jefferson's acquaintance with McKinney began when the latter directed the mills Jefferson built at Monticello. Jefferson described McKinney as an "honest man" whose other qualification was being "well acquainted with business." Although such simple qualifications earned scorn from some quarters of the army, Jefferson knew Johnson harbored none of the class prejudice that lingered among not a few southern planters.⁶³

Jefferson reconsidered McKinney's suitability and wrote a few days later that he did not think McKinney fit for a combat command, but that a position in the commissary or quartermaster's department would fit McKinney's "habits and manners." Jefferson then considering commanders realized that Johnson's devotion might place McKinney and Johnson in the uncomfortable position of putting a clerk in command of troops. Jefferson worried that the Kentuckian's "kind disposition" might give "greater weight" to the application than its "subject would justify." McKinney, Jefferson assured Johnson, should not be a part of the "military class" of the army. Johnson appreciated the letter enormously on the simple merit that it came from Jefferson's hand. Jefferson

⁶³ Thomas Jefferson to Richard M. Johnson, January 26, 1813 in J. Jefferson Looney ed., *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson: Retirement Series* Vol. 5, 1812-1813 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 586.

assured Johnson he and his neighbors supported their efforts in the War (he excepted a few Federalists, such as Chief Justice John Marshall).⁶⁴

Johnson, flattered by Jefferson's letter, wrote Jefferson the day he received the letter. In his reply Johnson practically gushed. Jefferson's retirement, said Johnson, showed just how much he was needed. It was no disparagement to anyone, Johnson said, for Jefferson to know that he alone enjoyed Johnson's greatest confidence. Would it be possible for Jefferson to somehow be "brought back again into public life in the present crisis of the United States?" Almost as a postscript, Johnson added that he had procured a place for James McKinney in the army. Whether to impress Jefferson or by sincerely hoping to help, Johnson already had written to James McKinney with his appointment.⁶⁵

Besides working out the finer details of appointments to the sundry positions available in the expanding wartime army, Johnson wrote a detailed plan of a proposed military campaign to defend the Northwest, from Fort Wayne to the Mississippi. A few weeks before Jefferson wrote Johnson, the Kentucky Congressman-turned soldier sent a plan to Madison. The plan's original objectives called for securing the Northwest's frontier and protecting the necessary supply convoys moving through the region.

Johnson also hoped that forceful action against the Native Americans in Illinois would

⁶⁴ Jefferson to Johnson, January 26, 1813 in *Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, 5: 586; John Hope Franklin, *The Militant South: 1800-1861* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 63-79; Thomas Jefferson to Richard M. Johnson, January 29, 1813 in Looney ed., *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson: Retirement Series*, 5: 591; Newmyer, *John Marshall and the Heroic Age of the Supreme Court* 267-268.

⁶⁵ Richard M. Johnson to Thomas Jefferson, January 30, 1813 in *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson: Retirement Series*, 5: 592.

“furnish some inducement” for Indian neutrality in the future. Many Americans, not just frontier westerners, shared Johnson’s paranoia over Indians. Hezekiah Niles’s Baltimore-based *Niles’ Weekly Register* featured an article declaring Britain and the Indians firmly in an alliance to destroy the United States. British traders enjoyed an exclusive trade relationship with the Indians of the old Northwest. That trade relationship, *Niles’ Register* averred, obscured a deeper relationship aimed at undermining the security of the United States. This justified the American government’s aggressive execution of the war, in this case specifically the capture of British subjects.⁶⁶

Johnson preferred not to wait and find out the limits of the Anglo-Indian relationship. His detailed plan indicated a thoughtful analysis of the relative strengths and weaknesses of the U.S. Army in the Northwest. The local Indians lost several skirmishes in the fall of 1812. Weakened Indians, said Johnson, might not stay weak. Native warriors anxiously waited for the spring to take revenge; the time to act, Johnson declared, was now. Johnson’s plan called for a new army of volunteers from the western states to meet in Fort Wayne before the spring. Aware that the costs of such a campaign might prove prohibitive, Johnson explained to Madison that he expected the expense to be under \$80,000. He promised it would not exceed \$100,000. But the expedition’s success, Johnson pleaded, was surely more useful than keeping troops inactive on the border. Although a nationalist War Hawk, Johnson spoke for the West when he sent his plan to Madison. “The force here contemplated will be valuable if raised, not a moment

⁶⁶ *Niles Weekly Register* 3 (September 1812-March 1813), 106.
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ought to be lost. The proposition for this campaign has made the West rejoice. They expect something to be done.”⁶⁷

The expected something came in the form of an expedition led by William Henry Harrison. Harrison sometimes exasperated Jefferson’s Republicans but in the West, where settlers so vocally expected something to be done about their security, they relied on him out of necessity. In Philadelphia, Irish-American politician William Duane, a true believer in republican austerity and simplicity, despised Harrison and wrote as much to Jefferson. Johnson became an idealized counterweight to the haughty Harrison in Duane’s conception of American soldiery, but Johnson’s “gallantry” could not compensate for the later “shameful transactions” under William Henry Harrison’s command. ⁶⁸

Johnson’s enthusiasm manifested itself in tireless efforts to materially support the war effort. Kentuckians followed his example. During the spring and summer of 1813 Johnson used his influence in Kentucky to enlist his neighbors and his influence in Washington to ensure their provisions. In Georgetown, Kentucky, the local paper not only extolled the patriotism of the local soldiers and militiamen. These men formed the bulwark of the western reliance on the public trust. They exhibited true democratic feeling and an early version of populism. Many, said the paper, left their own rifles at

⁶⁷ Richard Mentor Johnson to James Madison ca. December 10, 1812 in Stagg ed., *The Papers of James Madison: Presidential Series* Vol. 5, 491-494.

⁶⁸ Allen C. Clark, *William Duane* (Washington, DC: W.F. Roberts and Co., 1905), 28.

home and accepted the rifles the government provided, at an obvious setback to their considerable skills with their own rifles.⁶⁹

The Early Republican American military lacked a disciplined bureaucracy, often leaving questions over who commanded who, or who actually commanded at all. The addition of militia as the foremost auxiliary fighting force further exacerbated U.S. military dysfunction. Richard Johnson's commission as a colonel came from the Kentucky Legislature. His disregard for legalism at the state and federal level, and his reliance on political will emerged in his recruiting drive. The people demanded war; he answered their call, quickly raising 600 men. Of these, 140 made their homes in Scott County.⁷⁰

While Johnson sent letters to every corner of Kentucky raising troops, his ostensible commander-in-chief, Kentucky Governor Isaac Shelby, wrote a letter to William Henry Harrison expressing some confusion. Shelby "received no communications from the president of the U. S. nor from the Secretary of War, relative to the authority, said to be given to Mr. Johnson to raise a Regiment of mounted Infantry; newspaper publication is all I have seen on that Subject." Johnson's popularity prohibited Shelby from censuring him in an official correspondence with Harrison, but

⁶⁹ William Duane to Thomas Jefferson, August 11, 1814 in J. Jefferson Looney ed. *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson: Retirement Series* Vol. 7, 1813-1814 (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2010), 530; *Daily National Intelligencer*, (Washington, DC) Wednesday, May 19, 1813.

⁷⁰ William B. Skelton, *An American Profession of Arms: The Army Officer Corps, 1784-1861* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1992).

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nevertheless the governor's annoyance with Johnson's cavalier and independent style manifested itself. "I do not know what law that Regt. is said to be raised under, or its object And I have no reason to believe that it is organized." More importantly, Shelby drew Harrison's attention to Kentucky's laws. "The State Constitution forbid the appointment of a member of Congress to any office or Trust or Profit under its authority." Nor did Kentucky stipulate the measure alone. "The Federal Constitution," Shelby lectured Harrison, "is equally cautious as to [Congressmen] holding any office under the General Government."⁷¹

Kentucky riflemen experienced war elsewhere in the summer of 1813. Many were garrisoned at Fort Meigs, on the Maumee River in northwestern Ohio. In their march north, the Kentuckians happened upon on a gruesome harbinger: a nearly three-mile stretch of their comrade's dead bodies. Britain's most aggressive and expert ally, the Shawnee chief Tecumseh, had attacked and annihilated an American column earlier in July. The Kentuckians comprised one part of a force numbering over four thousand men. The preceding fall Harrison planned to attack Britain and their Indian allies at Fort Malden. Poor weather forced him to cancel the attack. The enlistments of the Ohio and Kentucky expired in the interim, leaving Harrison with a skeleton force to defend his fort. His appeal to western frontiersmen for new recruits lacked as capable a messenger as Richard Johnson had been earlier, and few rallied to the cause. Acutely

⁷¹ Isaac Shelby to William Henry Harrison, April 18, 1813 in "Correspondence between Governor Isaac Shelby and General William Henry Harrison during the War of 1812," *The Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 20 (May, 1922), 136-137.
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aware that his soldiers and politicians in Washington might consider further dalliance akin to cowardice, Harrison decided to further his reputation and ensure some semblance of military activity in one stroke. In September of 1813, Harrison moved north with his integrated command of regular soldiers and Kentucky militia. Richard Johnson led nearly one thousand vengeful mounted riflemen to join him.⁷²

⁷²John Sugden, *Tecumseh: A Life* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1997), 340-354; Freeman Cleaves, *Old Tippecanoe: William Henry Harrison and His Times* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1939), 170-185; Reginald Horsman, *The War of 1812* (New York: Knopf, 1969), 110.

Chapter 3: “The Soldier’s Wealth is HONOR”

Americans effectively fought a second war of independence from 1812 to 1815. The War of 1812 fundamentally changed the United States’ place in the geo-political world. The United States forced Great Britain to abandon any designs on reacquisition of American territory. The relationship between the two Anglo powers stabilized, and the United States enjoyed years of international peace. The war affected the American political milieu. For the first time men and women from the eastern states and western states fought together to defend their mutual patrimony. The Army’s leadership included westerners and westerners sacrificed along with the citizens of Baltimore, Washington City, and other locales affected by the fighting. The war created heroes. Richard Johnson, William Henry Harrison, Stephen Decatur Jr., Andrew Jackson, Oliver Hazard Perry, and Winfield Scott all gained their national exploits from their service in the War of 1812.

Few Americans benefited from their wartime service more than Richard Johnson. But few suffered as much as he did as well. His home state of Kentucky invested heavily in the fight against the British. The commander of the American army in the West, William Henry Harrison, appealed constantly to the patriotism of Kentucky’s women; he begged them to send blankets, overalls, jackets, shoes, socks, and mittens. No one,

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claimed Harrison, could rest in comfort if they considered the deprivation soldiers in the field suffered. In Scott County, Kentucky, local women responded. The county's most prominent citizen remained in the field. Some of the twenty-four blankets, 286 pair of socks, nine coats, forty-six pair of mittens, and fifty-five shoes made by the women of Scott County made their way to Fort Wayne, Indiana Territory at the end of January 1813. There, waiting in the snow for orders from General Harrison, was the scion of Scott County's most prominent family, Major Richard M. Johnson.

1

Within the United States, deep divisions existed over the necessity conduct of war with Britain. Federalists, based largely in New England and Mid-Atlantic cities, opposed the conflict. The war wrecked their livelihoods, which relied heavily on exports and British maritime trade. The Old Republicans also opposed the war. Disaffected by what they perceived as Jefferson's executive overreach, the Old Republicans viewed the War of 1812 as statist intrusion into a conservative agrarian order. Before Johnson left for the front, Old Republican leader John Randolph mocked him by saying he would join the army in the West and fight the British if Johnson offered any substantive proof of British abuses. Johnson reminded Randolph of his promise before he left Congress to fight again in 1813. Randolph never joined the army, and never accepted Johnson's basic assertion that the war in the West represented national interests. Johnson tried

¹ "Harrison to the People of Kentucky," *Kentucky Reporter*, September 25, 2012; William Henry Harrison, "Messages and Papers of William H. Harrison," *Indiana Historical Collection* 9.

throughout the war to further the interests of the West and westerners. He battled entrenched prejudice against the militia, even after his own Kentucky mounted troops proved their effectiveness repeatedly. He repeatedly fought with the aristocratic and opportunistic General William Henry Harrison, who saw the West as a place to burnish his reputation.²

Johnson's service in theater began in August, 1812. William Henry Harrison needed soldiers, westerners if possible, to command the units of his assembling army. Harrison appointed Johnson to command his personal cavalry detachment. Politics, not Johnson's knowledge of cavalry tactics, played into Harrison's decision. Johnson's popularity legitimized Harrison's controversial command of Kentucky's troops and helped ensure popular opinion. At the end of August, Harrison published an address to the people of Kentucky exhorting them to support the war effort. Harrison also knew that Johnson's popularity made him a useful tool for recruiting in Scott County and its environs. Harrison ordered Johnson to linger in Georgetown where he drummed up horsemen to join volunteer cavalry units. The kinship and social connections of the Johnson family proved critical to Harrison's command. Richard's brother, James, raised another cavalry regiment from Scott County and Harrison County. Richard's popularity, combined with western enthusiasm for the war, created an initial manpower surplus.

² Buel Jr., *America on the Brink*, 155-88; Norman K. Risjord, *The Old Republicans: Southern Conservatism in the Age of Jefferson* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965), 4-6; *Niles' Weekly Register* 7 (Sept. 1814-March, 1815), 24-25; Harry S. Laver, *Citizens More Than Soldiers: The Kentucky Militia and Society in the Early Republic* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), 34.

Westerners heartily believed they fought for the nation. President Madison and a majority of Congress agreed with them.³

President Madison, although not as adamant a warmonger as the congressional War Hawks, believed Britain incited violence among Indians in the Northwest. Frightened settlers stopped traveling west, and Native American leaders refused to cede more territory. Madison, infuriated by new obstacles to the United States' western expansion, supported the war as a national expedient. Indiana's Territorial Governor, William Henry Harrison, agreed with Madison. Over-eager to engage an enemy he knew little about, Harrison ordered his army to assemble near the St. Marys River in northern Indiana. Johnson's political and social connections spread across the Northwest. Harrison's cavalymen also respected Johnson, and they elected him their commander in the fall of 1812. Throughout the war Johnson served exclusively as a mounted soldier assigned to the command of the wing Harrison's army.⁴

The war became a family affair for Johnson. His younger brother, John, served as one of Harrison's aides. John's industriousness served Harrison well. John Johnson collected supplies for Harrison's army and ferried them across Lake Erie. British gunboats attacked Johnson's ferries but instead of trying to escape he tossed some

³ Robert Breckinridge McAfee, *History of the Late War in the Western Country* (Bowling Green, OH: Historical Publications Co., 1816), 125-126; David S. Heidler & Jeanne T. Heidler, *The War of 1812* (Westport, CT & London: Greenwood Press, 2002), 38.

⁴ Hugh Howard, *Mr. and Mrs. Madison's War: America's First Couple and the Second War of Independence* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2010), 21-22; McAfee, *History of the Late War*, 140-42.

supplies overboard in order to save at least a portion of his cargo. He succeeded (although he lost 600 cannonballs and a few barrels of gunpowder) with the assistance of patrolling American gunboats. Harrison learned from the episode that the Johnsons worked courageously (true) and dependably (sometimes true). He imputed John's virtues to his brother, which turned out to be a reasonable assumption. Bravery especially seemed in short supply amongst American commanders. The Republican press attributed Johnson's willingness to fight to an innate sense of duty energized by Isaac Hull's "shameful and traitorous sacrifice of his army." Johnson, according to Niles, bravely put aside his Congressional duties after Hull surrendered and led a company of Kentucky volunteers under to the relief of Fort Wayne. Johnson's bravery left his mark on his subordinates. Harrison added more companies to Johnson's battalion and upgraded Johnson's command to a regiment. Again, Johnson's soldiers elected him their commander. In the process Johnson gained a colonelcy, a rank he used as his titular for the rest of his life.⁵

By the beginning of 1813, Harrison and Johnson began to clash over the prosecution of the war. Harrison preferred to target small bands of Indian raiders. Victories over these marauders looked impressive for the papers and added to Harrison's reputation and ego. Harrison rode to the relief of Fort Wayne when Indians besieged it in the September 1812. An enraged Harrison arrested the post commander, James Rhea,

⁵ *The Scioto Gazette*, (Chillicothe, OH) Thursday, August 19, 1813; *Niles' Weekly Register* 7 (Sept. 1814-March, 1815), 24-25; McAfee, *History of the Late War*, 162.
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and not only lifted the siege but also dispatched several expeditions designed to punish local Indians. While helping the vainglorious Harrison boost his ego, this expedition against Indians only included small forces of infantry. Johnson felt convinced that the war in the West should be prosecuted with more vigor. Convinced that his Kentucky cavalymen represented the elite of Harrison's forces, Johnson proposed a massive cavalry raid, led by himself, from the Ohio River to Fort Wayne. Indian raiders would be confronted as they were encountered, but Johnson's real targets were Indian crops and livestock. Johnson believed that this campaign could clear Indiana and much of Illinois of Indians, forcing the battle to the British in Ontario.⁶

Johnson and Harrison differed on the war's prosecution. Johnson was far more willing to fight a brutal total war than was Harrison. Johnson grew up in the West when Indians conflict with whites was commonplace. Harrison, reared on a Virginia estate, was never exposed to the frontier violence between whites and Indians. Harrison attempted to minimize violence toward Indians, whereas Johnson believed force an absolute necessity. In Congress at the end of 1812 he urged people the United States to use their "power and will to break up and extirpate those hostile savages, to desolate their country, or compel them to surrender at discretion. It was, he urged, "the imperious duty of Congress so to organize this power, and so to direct this will, as to

⁶ *Raleigh Register, and North-Carolina Gazette*, (Raleigh, NC) Friday, October 23, 1812; Charles Poinsett, *Outpost in the Wilderness: Fort Wayne, 1706-1828* (Fort Wayne: Allen County, Fort Wayne Historical Society, 1976), 210-18; McAfee, *History of the Late War*, 307.

make it effectual and most destructive to the enemy.” Kentucky mounted militia, fighting in winter and “restrained on their part by no ties of religion, by no rules of morality, by no suggestions of mercy, by no principles of humanity,” Johnson suggested, would defeat an Indian force in sixty days. Johnson left no room for doubt about the inhumanity of western Indians. They roasted whites over fire pits, tortured women and children, and murdered in cold-blood. Only a coordinating degree of violence and the capture of “their squaws and children” ensured peace between Indians and whites in the West. If the mounted soldiers failed in battle, they might easily find the Indians winter stores and starve the Indians during the winter. Upon every other principle other than force, claimed Johnson, “we give the savage foe every advantage.”⁷

Madison and Acting Secretary of War Monroe favored the idea, Monroe especially so. A former soldier, Monroe’s fervent Jeffersonian politics admired the West and the expansion of Anglo-American political hegemony. He hated Britain and offered to raise a volunteer regiment from among his friends in western Virginia. Monroe still entertained hopes of assuming command of the western army, but he took it upon himself to sponsor the best ideas for the war’s prosecution from his post in Washington City. He hastily wrote Harrison, telling the general that Madison wished to know if

⁷ *Annals of Congress*, 12th Cong., 2nd sess., 1812.
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Johnson's raid was feasible or not. Harrison balked at Johnson's idea. His major excuse objection was the lateness of the season and the onset of winter.⁸

Harrison said he was "sorry not to be able to agree with my friend, Colonel Johnson, upon the propriety of the Contemplated expedition." He appeared to have little interest in energetic prosecution of the war. Harrison's letter offered excuses. The Indians wouldn't be there, he claimed. This he wrote while planning an expedition to burn Indian villages in the same region. Johnson's horses, according to Harrison, were "not like those of the early settlers, which Indians and traders now have. They are accustomed to corn and must have it." Harrison also claimed that the "Indian towns cannot be surprised in succession." Johnson aimed not to surprise the Indians, but to overwhelm and starve them. Harrison knew this because he received a letter from Monroe stating the size of the force Johnson proposed, nearly 1,300 horsemen, far too many soldiers to surprise a town but more than enough to fight, absorb a few casualties, and move on. Indians buried their corn at the approach of American troops. This hindered the Indians more than the troopers, for Johnson's Kentuckians would never be far from either Kentucky or Northwestern forts and could carry on their mounts most of their provisions. Monroe relied on Harrison's argument and reluctantly agreed to cancel Johnson's expedition.⁹

⁸ Harry Ammon, *James Monroe: The Quest for National Identity* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1990), 313-16.

⁹ Leland Meyer, *Col. Richard M. Johnson*, 101; McAfee, *History of the Late War*, 308-10.

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Johnson viewed the failure of his proposal as a set-back, but not a final decision. He knew allies in Washington might yet listen, for not every general agreed with Harrison. Madison's Secretary of War, General John Armstrong Jr., liked westerners and liked Johnson. He owed his office to Kentucky's two senators. Madison proposed Monroe serve as full-time War Secretary, but the Kentuckians and their two Tennessee counterparts voted no. Western unwillingness to accept another Virginian allowed Armstrong to emerge from his mediocrity as a field commander and head the War Department. Johnson guessed that Armstrong might be more amenable to his military ideas.¹⁰

Johnson wrote Armstrong at the beginning of 1813 and proposed to raise two regiments of fighting cavalymen. Their enlistments would only last four months, and they were to rendezvous within 300 miles of Cincinnati. Johnson believed that Kentuckians could best protect Kentucky and the West, hence his desire to limit the geographic use of his potential force. The corps was, according to Johnson, "to be completely organized upon the principles of men choosing their own officers as far as practicable. Their commissions would come from the governor of Kentucky. Johnson assured Armstrong that no difficulty will exist as to the militia laws. Johnson's best argument for his force was that it would not only provide tactical assistance but would "kindle the flame of military ardor and introduce military discipline" in the men

¹⁰ Richard M. Johnson to John Armstrong, January 1813 in Meyer, *Col. Richard M. Johnson of Kentucky*, 100-101.

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forming it. The corps, Johnson attested, was a bargain for the government. “Should the force not be wanted, it will cost the government nothing.” It would also assist the regular army and “prevent U.S. [army] in the West from being troops from being surprised” by enemy forces. Johnson agreed to take “any place or situation that the men may give me.” He was probably both sincere and certain that his men would elect him their commander. Johnson wanted “nothing for my trouble or services.” He simply wanted to fight while Congress recessed.¹¹

Armstrong leapt at Johnson’s letter. A series of defeats and setbacks had hampered the *esprit de corps* of the American Army in the West, and Armstrong saw Johnson’s proffered corps as a boost to western manpower and morale. Pleased with Johnson’s eagerness, Armstrong told Johnson in a letter dated February 26, 1813, that the Kentuckian was “authorized to organize and hold in readiness a regiment of mounted volunteers.” Johnson received Armstrong’s letter and went to work. At the beginning of March he assured the Secretary of War that he returned home with confidence that their “labors will meet the expectations of the people.” Circumstances assisted Johnson’s recruiting drive. Just before New Year’s, 1813, Indians killed and mutilated the corpses of nearly 500 men along the River Raisin near where it flows into Lake Erie. Johnson appealed to Kentuckians’ sense of patriotism, but a desire for vengeance motivated many young men to join him. Johnson quickly filled his needed quotas by dispatching subordinates to other parts of the Bluegrass to recruit. Ever

¹¹ Ibid.

mindful that Kentucky fought for the Union as a whole, Johnson reminded his soldiers, half-heartedly, that they would patriotically be supporting the regular army.¹²

Dispirited support for the regular army was the best Johnson mustered, not from a lack of patriotism, but from distrust and escalating distaste for the commander of the regular Army in the West, William Henry Harrison. Johnson, tired of worrying whether Harrison would actually call the Kentucky cavalymen, went over the general's head and appealed directly to Armstrong. "From a variety of considerations," Johnson complained, "I am certain you will have to authorize Genl. Harrison to call for it. If you should think with me I should be glad you would give him authority as we shall not feel justified without an order from the war department." He assured Armstrong of the Kentuckians' readiness and of their necessity. "The Regt. Will be ready to march in 30 days from this time—I am convinced that [the U.S. Army] can scarcely maintain the ground we now hold without our forces, without volunteers & militia."¹³

Johnson continued to worry not only about Harrison's intransigence, but also about what to do with several thousand restless horse soldiers. "It is impossible to describe the sensation in this state from an intimation that the militia now called from this state would not [be] employed, or recognized by the government of the United States." Johnson positively mocked the idea that the federal army could raise the needed

¹² Henry Adams, *History of the United States during the Administrations of James Madison* (New York: Library of America, original 1889-1891), 707; McAfee, *History of the Late War*, 311.

¹³ Richard M. Johnson to John Armstrong Jr., March 24, 1813; Richard M. Johnson to John Armstrong Jr., March 31, 1813 in Meyer, *Col. Richard M. Johnson*, 102.
[Type text]

men, telling Armstrong that he was “certain you cannot rely upon the regts of 2,000 to be raised in the western country.” Johnson further insulted the army agents’ ability to entice soldiers into federal service by reminding Armstrong that “the recruiting service is very dull.” However, thousands of westerners, Johnson noted, willingly turned out to serve as mounted soldiers. “Nothing at this moment,” contended Johnson, “is so desirable as to authorize a large temporary force.”¹⁴

Governor Shelby shared Johnson’s faith in the Kentucky militia and his concerns about the safety of Kentucky and the western frontier. In a letter written at the end of March, 1813, Shelby told Johnson that he had received news of the attack on Fort Meigs by allied British and Indian forces. This information, said Shelby, “justified” Johnson’s belief that Harrison needed reinforcements whether he admitted it or not. The enemy, warned Shelby, could only be met by horsemen. “You have a regiment of mounted infantry nearly organized, the crisis will. . . justify its immediate march to the scene of operations. You have my entire approbation and sanction.” Shelby realized that the Kentuckians serving under Johnson’s command shared a desire to fight for their homes and allowed them to serve only the amount of time they originally enlisted for. He also knew that Johnson needed his political support in case Harrison caused problems, so Shelby issued commissions to the officers under the authority given to him by the Secretary of War. If Harrison chose to hoard glory for himself, he now had to contend

¹⁴ Ibid.
[Type text]

with Johnson, Armstrong, Shelby, and group of equally glory-seeking new Kentucky militia officers.¹⁵

Authority from Washington still had not arrived, so Johnson wrote to Armstrong telling the secretary he was forming the regiment anyway. “I enclose to you a handbill which will apprise you of the rendezvous of the mounted regiment.” Johnson offered his reasons, not all legal but good reasons nonetheless, for going ahead with his militia plan. “It is to be regretted,” lamented Johnson, “that a state of things should exist which leaves no doubt upon our minds as to the propriety of anticipating your wishes as to our march; at a crisis so momentous to the western country.” In a nod to frontier populism, Johnson told Armstrong that “public sentiment,” along with the advice of Isaac Shelby, led him to lead the militia into battle. Johnson believed the militia’s actions “would best support the exalted standing of the President, [Armstrong’s] well earned reputation, & the republican cause in the West.”¹⁶

Johnson issued the command for his soldiers to assemble at Newport, Kentucky, across the Ohio River from Cincinnati. His language is not unusual, but he did hint at the regular army’s incompetence and at their need to be relieved by Kentucky militiamen. “The regiment of mounted volunteers,” declared Johnson, “was organized under the authority of the war department, to await its call or to meet any crisis that might involve the honor, the rights, and the safety of the country. That crisis has

¹⁵ McAfee, *History of the Late War*, 312.

¹⁶ Richard M. Johnson to John Armstrong Jr., in Meyer, *Col. Richard M. Johnson*, 106.
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arrived.” The attack on Ft Meigs served as the Kentuckians’ summons. “The northwestern army is surrounded by the enemy, and under the command of General Harrison, is nobly defending the cause of the country against a combined enemy, the British and the Indians.”

On May 1st, 1813 a force of British soldiers and allied Indians under the command of Sir Henry Proctor and, the Shawnee war-chief Tecumseh laid siege to Fort Meigs. Harrison and 1,200 hundred soldiers and militiamen inside absorbed several days of artillery bombardment until they were relieved by General Green Clay and 1,600 Kentucky militiamen on May 4th. Johnson arrived too late to aid Harrison, but he seemed more interested in making a point to his men. He offered a swipe at Harrison and the regular army; the regular army, claimed Johnson, desperately needed the assistance of Kentucky mounted militia.¹⁷

Harrison’s troubles justified both Johnson’s belief in the superiority of cavalry and the abilities of the Kentucky militia. Johnson also presented the militiamen as explicitly defending the nation’s frontier when he warned that the western frontier might “be deluged in blood.” He emphasized the urgency inherent in their mission. “Every arrangement will be made—there shall be no delay. The soldier’s wealth IS HONOR—connected with his country’s cause it is liberty, independence and glory.” Without their help, Johnson warned, Raisin’s “bloody scene maybe acted over again; and

¹⁷ James P. Averill, *Fort Meigs: A Condensed History of the Most Important Military Point in the Northwest* (Toledo, OH: Blade Printing and Paper Co., 1886), 23-24. [Type text]

to permit it would stain the national character.” He therefore ordered his troopers to assemble at Newport on May 22, where their issued arms and ammunitions awaited them. Johnson’s summons made big news in Kentucky. Bluegrass newspapers reported on the cavalry’s movements, and Johnson rode to Newport confident that the Kentucky militia finally would fight.¹⁸

Unfortunately for Johnson’s Kentuckians and the war effort in the West, Harrison refused to make any offensive push against the British and Indians. He waited, hoping to gather provisions. In the spring, he theorized, he would take a well-stocked army and fight the British Army and its Indian allies. But as Secretary of War Armstrong noted, he neither collected provisions nor planned a spring campaign.¹⁹

Harrison exasperated Secretary Armstrong by his “crusade upon the elements and the treasury.” Armstrong, far from the western theater and unaware of the magnitude of Harrison’s inactivity, would have been furious to know that the 1,000 strong vanguard Harrison dispatched to scout ahead of his main force subsisted on nearly finished rations and began to starve. Harrison’s negligence led his army’s strength to dwindle. This emboldened Indian warriors, directly contributing to Harrison’s troubles. Johnson’s advanced units sped toward Harrison. On May 21, Johnson’s brother, John, Harrison’s aide, met them. He delivered a stunning report from the general. Harrison complained that he found roads “literally covered” with

¹⁸ McAfee, *History of the Late War*, 313; *Daily National Intelligencer* (Washington, DC) Wednesday, May 19, 1813.

¹⁹ *National Intelligencer* (Washington, DC) Thursday, December 24, 1812.
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militiamen “on whom, of course, there existed no legal claims for military services. He ascertained that that they were Ohio militia. But Harrison worried that similar efforts had been made by Kentucky militia to help his army. He offered “to all these brave men from both states his sincere acknowledgements,” but nevertheless he informed Johnson’s horsemen “that there is at present no necessity for their continuance in the field.” This was doubly irksome to the Johnson, for not only did Harrison desperately need horsemen, but he published handbills begging for horsemen over the fall and winter of 1812/1813.²⁰

Harrison dispatched letters claiming that he didn’t need help. Fed up, Johnson fired off a letter to Harrison directly on May 23, 1813. After relating a litany of rational military reasons for using the mounted Kentuckians, Johnson appealed to military legalize. “You are aware that the Gov. of the state of Kentucky also recommended the measure.” Not only had Shelby acceded enthusiastically to Johnson’s request, but so had the War Department. “I was happy to receive a letter from the Secretary of War in which he intimated that you were authorized to call the regt.” Johnson considered it his duty to help Harrison, but warned that if the general continued to spurn the Kentuckians, they might not help him later when he needed them. “If the regt. should now be dismissed, warned Johnson, “it cannot easily be collected.” Johnson told Harrison he would wait to hear if the General thought the service of the regiment “necessary and important.”

²⁰ John Armstrong, Jr., *Notices of the War of 1812* I (New York: George Dearborn, 1836), 84; McAfee, *History of the Late War*, 314; “More Horsemen Wanted,” *The Supporter*, (Chillicothe, OH) Saturday, September 26, 1812.
[Type text]

Johnson personally delivered a letter to Harrison from Armstrong, which trapped Harrison in his own web. Harrison reluctantly accepted the situation and incorporated the Kentucky militia into his plans. Harrison wrote to Armstrong that he was “persuaded that a demonstration in the direction of Ft. Wayne by such a body of mounted men would be attended with very happy affects.”²¹

Johnson’s men marched through central Indiana during the summer of 1813, happy to finally be in the war. Bound eventually for Cleveland, Ohio, they moved north and east, fully aware that their eventual objective lay not in freeing captured Detroit but in occupying Canada. Johnson cheerily wrote to Armstrong, telling the Secretary that “everything at the moment is favorable for a march to Canada. The day will be a jubilee to the West. Nothing under heaven would so animate their spirits.” Johnson looked forward “with anxiety for the moment which we may all rejoice together.” Rejoicing had to wait. On July 3, 1813, before he posted his exuberant letter to Armstrong, he added an ominous postscript. “We buried next morning [on the] Raisin about 12 of our slain fellow citizens.”²²

While Harrison’s army and the Kentucky militia traveled toward Detroit, their most talented enemy, the Shawnee war-leader Tecumseh began to exercise independence from his British allies. The local British commander, Henry Proctor,

²¹ Hickey, *The War of 1812*, 126; Richard M. Johnson to William Henry Harrison, May 23, 1813; William Henry Harrison to John Armstrong Jr., May 23, 1813 in William Henry Harrison, “Messages and Papers” II, *Indiana Historical Collection* 9, 459.

²² Richard M. Johnson to John Armstrong, July 3, 1813 in Meyer, *Col. Richard M. Johnson*, 113.

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refused to engage the Americans despite having a large army of 2,500 soldiers, additional militia units, and a fortified position. Even worse to Tecumseh, Procter appeared ready to actually retreat against an unproven American Army. Disheartened Indians on the south side of Lake Erie began to fall to an emboldened William Henry Harrison. The general still knew how to play the political game, and during the summer he began to machinate for greater control over the soldiers in the western theater. Henry Clay was one of Harrison's partisans in Washington City, and he told James Monroe that Harrison had the confidence of Kentucky Republicans. This wasn't true, but when Harrison met the other regular army commander in theater, James Winchester, he bullied Winchester into placing his command under Harrison. As he marched across Ohio Harrison defeated Miamis and Lenapes, both in confederation with Tecumseh and the British.²³

Harrison ran afoul of Johnson again in July. The Kentuckians' hoped to recapture Detroit and "avenging themselves on their cruel and relentless foes." They hoped to raid away from Harrison's army as a separate unit. Harrison ordered them to rendezvous immediately with his force, but the Kentuckians balked. They appealed to Johnson. Harrison, they complained, "cut off their high expectation" of seeing any action in the recapture of Detroit. They assured, Johnson, however, that they served under him with pleasure. Johnson allowed his men to go. Harrison complained. This bickering

²³ Adam Jortner, *The Gods of Prophetstown: The Battle of Tippecanoe and the Holy War for the American Frontier* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 212; John Sugden, *Tecumseh: A Life* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1997), 350-60. [Type text]

continued throughout the summer until late September, when Harrison and Johnson both agreed that the Kentucky militia's helpfulness would be increased by serving with Harrison's army. Their decision paid off. A sustained campaign on September 30, 1813, recaptured Detroit. Tecumseh, his warriors, and a few British soldiers retreated into Canada.²⁴

General Harrison chased Tecumseh and British General Proctor. On October 5, 1813 the Americans caught the Indians and British on the banks of Canada's Thames River, some thirty miles east of Detroit. Harrison decided to attack the combined Indian and British forces directly with Kentucky cavalrymen. Some Kentuckians, led by James Johnson, broke through, and the British soldiers fled. Those that didn't flee surrendered. Tecumseh and his warriors fought on. Noticing the Indians obliterating the American ranks with concentrated fire, Johnson charged the Indian's position head-on. Bullets cut down over a dozen of Johnson's men. "We met them and fought them," Johnson later related, "when [the Indians] learned that the British regulars had been demolished by my brother James, they began to retire. At this moment my body had been perforated by five bullets." Johnson's horse could only be kept on his legs by his constant bridling. The horse tried to jump a log, but collapsed and died, landing on Johnson. As Johnson sprawled on the ground trying to escape from under his horse, a "tall, good-looking Indian" approached him, his tomahawk raised. "My horse lay in a position that did not

²⁴ McAfee, *History of the Late War*, 45-6; William Henry Harrison to John Armstrong, Jr. July 12, 1813 in William Henry Harrison, *Messages and Papers II*, 490. [Type text]

permit me to be entirely dismounted. I pulled out a loaded pistol and shot him. They say it was Tecumseh I shot. I care not and know not.” He also revealed a surprising thoughtfulness. He believed he possibly “shot the best Indian that ever breathed under the circumstances, without inquiring his name, or asking the age of his children.”²⁵

After the death of Tecumseh Harrison’s army retreated out of Canada in good order. Of Johnson’s five wounds, four became seriously infected. Fortunately, his brother James supervised the convalescence of Johnson and other wounded officers. Twelve days after the Battle of the Thames, James Johnson began the journey with the wounded officers back to American territory. Delirium set in, and instead of riding back to Detroit on his horse, Johnson endured an open boat for four days. Storms made the journey uncomfortable, and the wetness obstructed the healing process. Concerns for his health forced him to take to bed for nine days in Detroit. Johnson’s journey back to Scott County remained arduous. Weak and feverish, he rode in a litter most of the way back to Kentucky. He arrived there the first week of November, 1813. Johnson recovered slowly at the Great Crossings. A friend, Captain Robert McAfee, traveled to Johnson’s farm for breakfast on November 25, 1813. They probably discussed Johnson’s imminent return to Congress. Johnson’s congressional colleagues passed a resolution celebrating Johnson’s “high sense of the gallantry and heroism.” Madison was “requested to present elegant swords” Johnson, his brother James, and Johnson’s staff. Johnson returned to Congress in

²⁵ John Sugden, *Tecumseh’s Last Stand* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995), 140-145; “Col. Johnson vs. Tecumseh,” *The Mississippian*, Friday, August 21, 1840; McAfee, *History of the Late War*, 425-426.

1814. The halls of the capital now served as the stage for his grand mission to defend the West and further American democracy.²⁶

Johnson's willingness to seize any opportunity to fight for the West lent an air of leadership to the Kentuckian. The sword he received indicated the thanks of not only Congress but the western people as well. William Henry Harrison waited for more years to receive a similar sword from Congress. Harrison's conduct seemed timid compared to Johnson's. Westerners believed that Johnson would do anything for them. Unlike Harrison, Johnson adopted any measure—even ones that crossed into bloodthirstiness—to defend the West.²⁷

²⁶ "Richard M. Johnson," *Daily National Intelligencer*, (Washington, DC) Tuesday, June 21, 1814; Emmons, *Authentic Biography of Colonel Richard M. Johnson*, 39; Meyer, *Colonel Richard M. Johnson*, 136-137; *House documents, otherwise publ. as Executive Documents: 13th congress, 2d Session* (Washington: A. & G. Way, 1814), 67.

²⁷ Francis B. Heitman, *Historical Register and Dictionary of the United States Army, from Its Organization, September 29, 1789, to March 2, 1903* (Genealogical Publishing Co., 1903), 47.

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Chapter 4 Western Democrat

The Treaty of Ghent signaled peace between the United States and Great Britain. On January 8, 1815, Andrew Jackson and his ragged army delivered the *coup de grace* to British military interest within the United States at Chalmette Plantation, just outside New Orleans. Peace and Jackson's victory proved harbingers of the rise of the West as a potent force in post-war politics. Western resentment of the East's domination boiled over during the so-called Era of Good Feelings. Richard Johnson constantly strove to give the West a voice during his time in Congress. From 1815 until his death, that voice proved to be a specifically democratic one, constantly extolling the rights of the people. Johnson's time as a Kentucky Congressman after the War of 1812 indicated his sincerity in defending and perpetuating a truly democratic society. His experiences reinforced his love of western democracy, and the people who practiced it. From this he never wavered; he supported Congressional pay raises, limited internal improvements, and traditional Jeffersonian societal tenets such as the militia and small farmers. When forced to choose between long-time political friends or a western hero, he chose the West.

I.

Johnson spent his first significant time back in Kentucky during the the winter of 1813/14 before he returned to Congress in 1814. It was during this period that he probably began his relationship with the woman who defined him for many years after his death: Julia Chinn. Much of what is known about Richard and Julia's relationship is conjecture patched together from small pieces of historical sources. What is certain is that the relationship on both sides remained monogamous until Julia's death in the cholera epidemic of 1833. Julia ran Johnson's household and estate, maintaining much the same control that a white plantation mistress wielded. The relationship also appears consensual as far as possible in a master/slave relationship, for it is an incontrovertible fact that Johnson owned Julia. A slave of his father's, Julia became Richard's property upon the death of Robert Johnson in 1815. Several theories exist as to why Richard and Julia began what became a two-decade long relationship. One tradition maintains that Richard's mother Jemima objected to her son courting a poor seamstress. The story goes that Jemima refused to receive the impoverished girl into the family. Resentful, Richard vowed to take revenge on his mother by consorting with a slave mistress. In another version, the seamstress was a northern schoolteacher. Neither version is likely. ²

¹ *Kentucky Gazette*, May 2, 1814; Meyer, 301; Robert V. Remini, *The Battle of New Orleans: Andrew Jackson and America's First Military Victory* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999); Meyer, *Col. Richard M. Johnson*, 136-188.

² Catharine Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress: Woman's World in the Old South* (New York: Pantheon, 1980), 215-217; Meyer, *Col. Richard M. Johnson*, 318-320
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The most likely scenario is that as Johnson convalesced from his wounds, he took comfort in the company of Julia, who by all accounts was an attractive woman of mixed-race. Johnson was still handsome and robust, despite being wounded. He lost his mother and brother during the year, and Julia provided companionship. Julia's feelings are not known, but a mix of power and potential privilege from being the master's mistress probably convinced her to endure the relationship if it began under duress. No indication exists that it did, and it is quite possible Julia was enthusiastic about the arrangement.³

Johnson also may have been attracted to Julia because she was pious and socially adept. She was literate and conducted Bible studies for Indian boys at the Choctaw Academy in the Johnson home and led a pious life. She raised their two daughters, Imogene, and Adaline, like ladies and saw to their education. Both girls proved to be apt learners and they were described as decent, modest, and unassuming. Their legal status remains somewhat of a mystery. Archibald Henderson, the director of the Choctaw Academy, taught the girls as well. This was common knowledge, so if they were slaves Johnson either used his prestige to shield himself from laws banning teaching slaves, or their father arranged their freedom; the latter is more likely, given that Imogene later married a white man and passed for white herself. Julia ran the estate, and served as

³ Meyer, *Col. Richard M. Johnson*, 136-188; Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage, original 1973).
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hostess as well. When Lafayette dined with Johnson in 1825, Julia presided as the lady of the house.⁴

Historians have attributed Johnson's later political struggles to his relationship with Julia. This is inaccurate. Amos Kendall believed that the relationship was common knowledge in Kentucky as early as 1815, yet Johnson remained popular. Julia was only a symptom of what eventually galled his political enemies: his belief in democracy. "Whether I put black or white to keep my house in my absence," proclaimed Johnson, the home still deserved the same respect "by the laws and the constitution as if I were in it myself." Johnson's democratic aspirations remained incomplete in his home and in his heart. He never struggled with slavery's legality of justice publicly, but his willingness to entertain even transitory equality revealed just how committed he was to democracy, and just how passionate he was about making the West a safe home for Democracy in the Early Republic.⁵

II.

The War Hawks in the South and West, however, saw their sacrifices being dithered away by northeastern fecklessness. During the war the West had offered up her sons to make an American nation, and too many Americans in eastern cities seemed worried only about shipping and trading with the enemy. Westerners argued for the

⁴ "Tanisha C. Ford and Carl R. Weinberg, *Interracial Marriage and the Election of 1836*," in *OAH Magazine of History* (April, 2009): 57; Meyer, *Col. Richard M. Johnson*, 320-22;

⁵ Donald B. Cole, *A Jackson Man: Amos Kendall and the Rise of American Democracy* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2010), 50.

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war's continuation, largely so the frontier would be fully protected from even the possibility of future British or Indian attack. A petition from westerners sent to Congress in the spring of 1814 begged for an "effectual and permanent plan" to protect their farmsteads. After the British burned Washington in September, 1814, Congress began to question the wisdom of a prolonged war. Patrick Magruder, librarian of the House of Representatives, told Henry Clay he feared that given the destruction from the fire he doubted whether the House could function properly. Congress took the apocalyptic step of setting up a committee to discuss permanently moving the capital. Virginia Federalist Joseph Lewis Jr., who represented the Goochland District in the Virginia Piedmont, ridiculed westerners' assertion that the capital should be moved out of military necessity. "The natural situation of Washington," said Lewis, "was as well calculated to test an enemy as any to which gentlemen might desire to remove to." Lewis took the opportunity to swipe at the Republicans, telling the House that if Madison prepared better, Washington might not have fallen.⁶

Richard Johnson realized that the Federalist complaints about Madison and the Republican administration lessened westerners' cause in the eyes of the national populace. Still, Johnson remained a believer in the war effort. When Federalists in the

⁶ Richard Archer, "Dissent and Peace Negotiations at Ghent," *American Studies* 18 (Fall 1977): 5-16.; *Daily National Intelligencer*, (Washington, DC) Thursday, March 03, 1814; *Annals of Congress*, 13th Cong., 3rd sess., 306, 311-312; "Kentucky Governor's Message to the Legislature," *Daily National Intelligencer*, (Washington, DC) Thursday, December 22, 1814; "The Cocke Family of Virginia," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 4 (June, 1897): 431-450.

House proposed a committee to review all of the military defeats surrounding the American defense of Washington, Johnson hoped to assign appropriate blame for misconduct and lack of preparation if it existed, but was disinclined “to encumber” with matters unconnected to the campaign. Ultimately Johnson agreed only to certain issues, effectively limiting the congressional investigators’ scope. He voted to offer bounties to deserters from the British Army, a measure deemed unseemly by the gentleman class of southerners and by northern High Federalists, In these ways, he energetically supported the continued war-effort. ⁷

Other westerners exhorted the rest of the nation to endure the cost of the war, despite the obvious privations. Kentucky Governor Isaac Shelby reminded his legislature in his December 1814 message that Britain, not the United States, started the struggle. Shelby explained that the “honest mind, who felt his country’s wrongs, sickened at the very name of negotiation, and looked upon it as a slow poison, to sap the better feelings of the nation.” Shelby and most westerners viewed their fight as that of the nation’s. The United States’ future lay in the West, not in economic and cultural concourse with Britain and the rest of Europe. ⁸

Westerners willingly fought for the United States, but they also seemed not to understand the material damage visited on the eastern seaboard by the Royal Navy and British Army. The burning of Washington finally brought matters to a head. During the

⁷ *Annals of Congress*, 13th Cong., 3rd sess., 308-310.

⁸ *Annals of Congress*, 13th Cong., 3rd sess., 327; Jon Latimer, *1812: War with America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 366.

fall of 1814 Congress met in the U.S. Post Office, the only major public building not seriously damaged during the British attack on Washington City. Federalists in New England added to the sense of urgency faced by President Madison and the peace commissioners when they met in Hartford and discussed seceding from the United States. Facing financial and political collapse, the United States swiftly concluded peace negotiations the week of Christmas, 1814.⁹

Despite the nationalist pulse that followed the War of 1812, Americans remained at odds. East and West faced off across the Appalachians, each suspicious of the other and each convinced of the other's duplicity in either incompetent maintenance of the American Republican experiment, or in various nefarious plots to destroy the American Union. The West's constant bellicosity annoyed easterners tired of conflict. In 1815 Republican newspapers decried the recently signed peace between Great Britain and the United States. The treaty, they argued, represented nothing more than a passing truce. After all, they had gained nothing in territory from their war efforts. Surely Madison realized that "the honor of the country" demanded an immediate resumption of fighting.¹⁰

Calls for more war fell on deaf ears, especially in the hard-hit Chesapeake. A newspaper in Annapolis, Maryland accused westerners of profiting from the war. "Their fortunes," wrote a columnist for the *Maryland Gazette and Political Intelligencer*, "had

⁹ Buel, *America on the Brink*, 219-236.

¹⁰ Marshall Smelser, *The Democratic Republic: 1801-1815* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 311.

increased during the war, while the citizens on this side had been smarting under the sorest calamities.” Westerners countered that the majority of northeastern editors and merchants (and their political proxies, Federalist politicians) openly supported the British war-effort. The Republicans’ official organ, the *Daily Intelligencer*, accused Bostonians of hoping for western soldiers’ defeat at New Orleans. “The Boston editors,” accused the *Daily Intelligencer*, “appear determined that New-Orleans shall be taken, and that the western militia shall not fight.” The Federalist Northeast, charged the paper, was willing for the country to “suffer some dismemberment if the blame can be thrown upon the government.” Again the Republicans couched their war aims in language of nationalism. New Englanders immigrated to the West and filled the ranks of western militias. Northeasterners, therefore, could “hardly suppose” that these New England-filled western militias “have lost their spirit and faculties since emigration.”¹¹

During the war Westerners and particularly Kentuckians like Johnson became Madison’s most loyal bloc of supporters. Senator Jesse Bledsoe of Kentucky encouraged Republicans to rally to the President when the Clintons in New York and the Virginia-based “Old Republicans” sniped at the President in the aftermath of the War of 1812. Earlier, in 1813, Bledsoe lamented how “the friends of this administration will put it

¹¹ *Maryland Gazette and Political Intelligencer*, (Annapolis, MD) Thursday, April 20, 1815; *Daily National Intelligencer*, (Washington, DC) Wednesday, January 18, 1815. [Type text]

down faster than its enemies.” Madison’s reputation for flattering republican farmers somewhat shielded him politically from dissatisfied westerners.¹²

Madison believed peace provided the best opportunity for the defense of the United States. He told his presidential predecessor that because Spain eyed their old province of Louisiana jealously, peace with Britain accompanied with Andrew Jackson’s leadership in the region, made any European power interested in the region think twice before warring on the United States. More importantly, the United States’ finances began to slip into insolvency. Madison needed peace, and he needed it immediately. In his capacity as chairman of the congressional committee investigating the fall of Washington, Johnson defended Madison and solicited opinions and testimonials from citizens affirming the Madison administration’s handling of the war.¹³

Johnson’s support for Madison and the war effort never meant his support became unconditional. When Madison’s prosecution of the conflict affronted the rights and needs of western democrats, Johnson raised his voice against the President. In the fall of 1814 Madison called Congress into special session to find some emergency financial measure to continue funding the war. He settled on taxing common commodities. His proposal annoyed Johnson, who protested that the tax levied against liquor distilleries appeared much too high compared to the other taxes being considered. Taxes on liquor, unpopular since the time of the Whiskey Rebellion, proved

¹² James Madison to Thomas Jefferson, March 12, 1815 in *Letters and other Writings of James Madison II* (Philadelphia: J.P. Lippincott and Co., 1865), 600-602

¹³ *Ibid.*

especially unpopular in the West because of the ease with which farmers made corn whiskey. Common and cheap, westerners dominated liquor production and taxing it caused broad-based popular resentment. Johnson, ever conscious of his Kentucky constituents, protested but ultimately voted for the measure as a means of furthering the West's chances of using the war to gain territory.¹⁴

Johnson's time in the 14th Congress often revolved around post-war policies. During that congressional term, from 1815-1816, Johnson transformed from a broadly Jeffersonian Kentuckian into a staunch defender of the West. Subtly, he began to defend the West at the expense of national policies. He proposed that Congress throw out claims made on the government for property damaged during the war. Few if any Kentuckians lost property in the War of 1812, for the majority of the fighting took place in the yet unpopulated regions around Lake Michigan. Johnson took up the cause of Illinois settlers during the fall of 1815 when they petitioned the government to confirm their land titles.¹⁵

Western land titles often proved difficult to maintain. In Kentucky, especially, and Illinois and Indiana to a lesser extent, the colonial and subsequently the state

¹⁴ Hickey, *The War of 1812*, 232-233; "Letter from George W. Campbell, Esq. Late Secretary of the Treasury, to the Chairman of the Committee Appointed to Enquire into the Causes and Particulars of the Invasion of the City of Washington," *Daily National Intelligencer*, (Washington, DC) Thursday, January 26, 1815; *Annals of Congress*, 13th Cong., 3rd sess., 454-458, ; William Hogeland, *The Whiskey Rebellion: George Washington, Alexander Hamilton, and the Frontier Rebels Who Challenged America's Newfound Sovereignty* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006), 112; Aron, *How the West Was Lost*, 124-129.

¹⁵ *Annals of Congress*, 14th Cong., 1st sess., 388.
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government of Virginia doled out titles to massive tracts of lands, most often to wealthy planters or their relatives with access to state legislators. The state of Kentucky later granted its own titles, and poor farmers who barely managed to purchase their land in the first place found their claims being challenged. In Indiana and Illinois, the federal government's surveys proved more accurate and easier to obtain. Western small farmers, like the Illinois petitioners, looked to Johnson to protect their titles in the face of a powerful planter interests. Kentucky's transformation from a frontier state of small sustenance to a state built on a small but powerful plantation elite began in earnest following the War of 1812. In Woodford County, Kentucky, the number of planters owning 1,000 or more acres stood at one in twelve. In 1810 the number of 1000 plus acre holders fell to one in twenty-two. By 1825 one in forty-two owned more than a thousand acres.¹⁶

Western farmers distrusted and feared banks as much as they did large planter-style landowners. Furthermore, many, like Johnson, believed banks actively harmed the body-politic of the United States. "When I came into public life," he later told a colleague, "the United States Bank was in existence....It then became my duty to investigate the subject in all its bearings, and the conclusion to which I then arrived has never undergone any change." Johnson feared the influence of "great moneyed monopolies, controlled by persons," and "irresponsible to the people." Johnson deemed

¹⁶ Timothy Pickering to Edward Pennington, July 12, 1812 in Henry Adams ed., *Documents relating to New-England Federalism, 1800-1815* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1905), 388-389; Aron, *How the West Was Lost*, 127.

banks “liable to exercise a dangerous influence.” His indictment included not only banks but by proxy the entire burgeoning capitalist class. “Corporate bodies generally, especially when they have power to affect the circulating medium of the country, do not well comport with the genius of a republic.” Bankers and capitalists were “always likely to be favorable to aristocracy, and prejudicial to liberty and equality.” Banks constituted “a power in which the weight of a majority of those who achieved, and still sustain our independence, is never felt.” Johnson therefore felt duty-bound to oppose the charter of the National Bank.¹⁷

The Democratic-Republican press used the conclusion of the War of 1812 to bolster the interests of small farmers and increasingly the interests of the West. The fast-fading Federalist Party lashed out repeatedly at the influential place of the West in American political and social life. Timothy Pickering, writing to a fellow New Englander, hoped for the separation of the West from the North and South. “The permanent severance” of the West from the Union “would be a real blessing to the ‘good old thirteen states.’”¹⁸

Still, the socio-political tide of the country buoyed western republicans. The *Daily National Intelligencer*, Madison’s press mouthpiece, especially found reasons to laud

¹⁷ Charles G. Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1846* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 70-102; *Kentucky Gazette*, April 2, 1836 in Meyer, *Col. Richard M. Johnson*, 142.

¹⁸ Allen C. Clark, “Joseph Gales Jr., Editor and Mayor,” in John B. Larnier ed., *Records of the Columbia Historical Association Vol. 23* (Washington: Columbia Historical Society, 1920), 86-144.

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men like Johnson. The paper's British-born editor, Joseph Gales, found new reasons to hate his birth-country and support the American war effort when the British Army destroyed his offices (along with much of the rest of Washington) the night of August 25, 1814. Gales needed little help in extolling the virtues of newly-famous Americans who earned their laurels in the late war. The August 14 issue introduced Washington's reading public to "the life and character of the Hero of the Thames," Colonel Richard Mentor Johnson. His participation in the Battle of the Thames became national news, and Americans naturally wondered more about this interesting western patriot. The paper described Johnson as a respectable farmer. Because the *Intelligencer* served the interests of Jeffersonian Republicans in Congress, describing Johnson as a respectable farmer reinforced the vision of the United States being led and defended by democratic yeomen.¹⁹

The notion of western yeomen defending the United States gained credence following 1815. At the Battle of New Orleans Kentucky riflemen supposedly played an outsized role in beating back the British army. These veterans of the New Orleans campaign traded on their military reputations in order to gain public office in Kentucky and the surrounding states. One such veteran, Col. Gabriel Slaughter, parlayed his reputation as a soldier into election as Kentucky's Lieutenant Governor in 1816. When

¹⁹ *Daily National Intelligencer*, (Washington, DC) Monday, August 14, 1815.
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his running mate, Major George Madison, died shortly after being inaugurated, Slaughter ascended to the governorship.²⁰

Memorialized in Samuel Woodworth's popular song, "The Hunters of Kentucky," men like Johnson and Slaughter conjoined western democracy with militant expansion. Once in the political arena military involvement and the defense of the United States from European imperialism created a new pillar of Democratic orthodoxy. Western Democratic-Republicans argued for increased defense spending and tended to the military and veterans' desires more solicitously than their eastern counterparts. Johnson embraced the common soldiers of Kentucky, who formed a sizeable bloc of the yeomen vote. A few days before Christmas, 1815, Johnson stood in the House and proposed a bill giving governmental and financial aid for the "relief of the infirm, disabled, and superannuated officers and soldiers" of the Revolutionary war, the War of 1812, and the peacetime army.²¹

Johnson's interest in aggrandizing the democratic West led him to introduce cumbersome, unorthodox, and often unworkable legislation. Johnson and other western democrats feared the presence of the United States Military Academy and its impact on the body politic. They feared even the benefits of a West Point education on young American men. Graduates promoted nationalism, technical knowledge, military and intellectual discipline, and a martial brand of cosmopolitan gentility. While noble and

²⁰ A.C. Quisenberry, "The Battle of New Orleans," *The Register of the Kentucky State Historical Society* 13 (January, 1915): 8-26.

²¹ Eustace, *1812*, 233; *Annals of Congress*, 14th Cong., 1st sess., 392.
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conducive to the creation of a professional national army, such elite trappings alarmed democrats, especially in the West. The Academy's proximity to eastern cities and its willful adoption of the trappings of a militarist "aristocracy" enjoyed mass eastern support. A Philadelphia paper pronounced its students "gentlemen cadets" and praised the elite qualifications instituted to ensure the Academy trained the Union's best and brightest young men. Eastern elites heaped praise on the instructors for their knowledge in the natural sciences, and even more effusively for their "urbanity of manners." Democratic-Republicans feared that West Point's admission standards and the need for congressional appointment for admission closed the Academy's doors to all but "the sons of the great, ready enough to play the part of aristocrats."²²

Combating the potential nascent aristocracy of the military academies assumed an important place in Johnson's congressional life. He apparently worked in conjunction with President Madison to mitigate West Point's influence in the life of the United States military. Almost simultaneously, Johnson and Madison both proposed the creation of three additional military academies. Madison's proposal in his Annual Message of December, 1815, lacked specifics. Johnson's proposal in the House included several specifics, especially those pertaining to the geographic situation of these potential new

²² Samuel J. Watson, "West Point and the Struggle to render the Officer Corps Safe for America, 1802-1833," in Robert M.S. McDonald ed., *Thomas Jefferson's Military Academy: Founding West Point* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2004), 154-181; Skelton, *An American Profession of Arms*, 87-90; "Sketch of the Military Academy at Westpoint," *Philadelphia Repository* in *Mississippi Herald & Natchez Gazette*, Tuesday, May 27, 1806; *Niles Weekly Register*, March 29, 1817.

service academies. Johnson proposed to place one of the new academies in the District of Columbia. Johnson parsed out two other academies to the South and West, at Great Falls, South Carolina, and at Newport, Kentucky. Certainly Johnson hoped to accrue as much federal spending in Kentucky as possible. In this case, his attempt to acquire federal largess for Kentucky dovetailed into his desire to reduce any centralized federal military establishment.²³

Veterans dominated Johnson's mind. He insisted on raising the issue of financial compensation for veterans again. He told his colleagues that the particular "character" of common soldiers, in this case soldiers but especially western militiamen, allowed them to exercise "the strongest claim upon the justice of Congress." He specified that these men, "farmers and mechanics," earned "a livelihood by labor," precluding great planters, whose slaves labored for them. "Men in moderate circumstances, some of them really poor," flocked to the American standard with more enthusiasm than wealthy Americans.²⁴

Johnson implored his colleagues to recognize that western yeomen asked for nothing but peace and quiet; they gave, according to Johnson, everything, and selflessly defended the "rights and privileges" of others. These selfless soldiers never "aimed at

²³ James Madison, Annual Message, Dec. 3, 1815 in James D. Richardson ed., *A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents I* (Washington, DC: Bureau of National Literature and Art, 1908), 563-570; *Annals of Congress*, 14th Cong., 1st sess., 402; Richard H. Kohn, *Eagle and Sword: the Federalists and the Creation of the Military Establishment in America, 1783-1802* (New York: Free Press, 1975).

²⁴ *Annals of Congress*, 14th Cong., 1st sess., 403.

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power, authority, or distinction, save that which has arisen from the glory of their valiant deeds." By their toils, Johnson rhapsodized, the common soldiers "elevated the character of the nation to the highest pinnacle." If his colleagues doubted he referred almost exclusively to soldiers in the West, he used as his example "Governor Shelby and his gallant corps." Shelby and his Kentuckians lost horses, and many lost the opportunity to bring in their crops in the Fall of 1813. Shelby's cavalrymen, in fact, consisted overwhelmingly of Kentuckians, somewhat justifying Johnson's claim. The Kentuckians, however, ransacked the property of Americans as much as they actually pursued the British Army. More than a few Federalists saw no reason to compensate what they viewed as essentially an undisciplined rabble.²⁵

Old Republicans allied with the Federalists against Johnson and the West, especially on military matters. John Randolph of Roanoke smarted at his inability to stop American bellicosity. After the fighting ended in 1815, Randolph turned his considerable talent for speech against the Madison administration. Randolph held westerners like Johnson in particular disdain for their democratic proclivities. Massively egotistical by nature, and aristocratic by class, Randolph once said "I am an aristocrat. I love liberty. I hate equality." Johnson especially derided the anti-militarism of the Old Republicans. In the spring of 1816, when the House debated military appropriations Johnson accused Randolph of shortsightedness. Randolph in years that preceded the

²⁵ *Annals of Congress*, 14th Cong., 1st sess., 403; Alan Taylor, *The Civil War of 1812: American Citizens, British Subjects, Irish Rebels, & Indian Allies* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010), 244
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1812 war saw only a “speck of war in the political horizon.” Randolph and his like, accused Johnson, failed to realize the “consequences of submission” to Britain. They also saw no reason to help veterans, which particularly grated westerners.²⁶

Johnson persisted in his attempt to acquire help for aged and injured veterans, and common soldiers. His support for wounded veterans impressed his fellow members, even Northeasterners. Johnson’s own wounds precipitated a moving moment in the House. Samuel Conner, a Democratic-Republican from Massachusetts, largely undecided on whether or not to support Johnson’s measures, stood to speak Christmas week, 1815. He lambasted Randolph, asserting that the Virginian entirely misunderstood basic human nature. He stated his hope that whatever the country’s policy towards the army, justice might prevail. Conner hoped, by passing the bill, Congress would “bind soldier’s wounds.” Then, to the surprise of his colleagues, Conner turned and pointed to Johnson. “That Honorable gentleman from Kentucky,” said Conner, “who had received severe wounds in the service of his country well knew, that altogether to the soldier’s mind death is divested of his terrors in the field,” the fear of being maimed and crippled and left to burden their loved ones excited “disgust,” and was a “terrible consideration.” The House ultimately rewarded Johnson’s perseverance in April, 1816, by overwhelmingly passing his bill for the provision of infirm and impoverished soldiers.²⁷

²⁶ Henry Adams, *John Randolph* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1898), 263-264; Russell Kirk, *John Randolph of Roanoke: a Study in American Politics, with Selected Speeches and Letters* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1951), 46.

²⁷ *Annals of Congress*, 14th Cong., 1st sess., 412; Meyer, 149.
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Johnson's answer to military preparedness consisted of restating the traditional Jeffersonian formula for American defense; the militia formed the essential core of American soldiery. A standing army, according to Johnson, was "inconsistent with the constitution & our free institutions." He feared that a standing army easily served as tool for an over-powerful executive to suppress internal insurrection. Johnson reminded his fellow Representatives that no insurrection existed, nor was one likely to arise. Johnson's vision for the tiny regular army fell squarely within his hopes for the West. Johnson recommended that the divisions of the army be placed at Detroit and on the Niagara River.²⁸

Western Democratic-Republicans supported another idea common among the United States' political class: better pay for Congress. The cost of living, driven by inflation, steadily increased between 1815-1819. Hezekiah Niles called for an increase of congressional stipends, set in the beginning of 1816 at six dollars per diem. The *Daily Intelligencer*, *Baltimore American*, and most major Democratic-Republican papers supported the measure. Even well-known Federalists such as Massachusetts's Timothy Pickering offered potential congressional pay a tacit endorsement.²⁹

Although the measure garnered support among journalists, members in congress appeared reluctant to sponsor the measure, most likely because they feared constituents' perception of Congress granting itself a salary. For members like South Carolina's

²⁸ "Debate on the Direct Tax," *Daily National Intelligencer*, (Washington, DC).

²⁹ C. Edward Skeen, *1816: America Rising* (University Press of Kentucky, 2003), 79.
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William Lowndes, membership in the House seemed rightly the province of gentlemen. Lowndes' complemented his intense dislike of adulation for Andrew Jackson with an equally potent distaste for congressional salaries. The South Carolinian vocally opposed the measure, ripping into Johnson for promoting such a revolutionary prospect. Johnson, increasingly convinced that the people supported his cause, ignored Lowndes' aristocratic caution.³⁰

Johnson, either through extreme confidence in his popularity with his own constituents, or certitude in the rightness of his cause, accepted Speaker Henry Clay's assignment to usher through the House what later became known as the Compensation Act. He initially feared the consequences of attaching his name to unpopular legislation. He wrote to a supporter, General James Taylor, telling him of his concerns over accusations that he supported paying Congress being batted around in Kentucky while he was in Washington. Johnson regretted his inability to be in Kentucky to campaign directly. "I therefore confide in you," Johnson pleaded, "to have justice done me in case any false reports or rumors injurious to my election should be conjured up for electioneering purposes. As to the Compensation Bill, Johnson authorized Taylor "to state (if necessary) that I will without instruction do that which I shall find to be the will of my constituents." "In case of instruction I will obey them," he told Taylor.³¹

³⁰ Carl J. Vipperman, *William Lowndes and the Transition of Southern Politics, 1782-1822* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1989), 144-48, 167.

³¹ Remini, *Henry Clay*, 144; Richard M. Johnson to General James Taylor, July 25, 1816 in Richard M. Johnson Papers 1816-1838, Kentucky Historical Society.
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Amos Kendall, a partisan of Democratic-Republicans in Kentucky and a rising star in western journalism, expressed the opinion of many of Johnson's constituents. He "intended to vote for Richard...though I disprove of the compensation bill, I think it not a sufficient reason for rejecting him altogether." In July 1816, Kendall wrote in his diary that he intended to be Johnson's "friend, but not his tool." Johnson resorted to using his considerable magnetism in garnering support for the Compensation Bill. Kendall resisted Johnson's charm. Others noted its usefulness. In the fall of 1816 Johnson rose at a meeting of voters in Harrison County, Kentucky, "and with great eloquence and enthusiasm addressed the company for the space of two hours." Johnson, undoubtedly with his signature self-deprecation, boasted of "his past services, while with uplifted hands and tearful eyes, he committed himself to the mercy of that enlightened and charitable people." He implored the Democratic-Republicans of Harrison County to erase an earlier resolution passed amongst their number, "expressing the Compensation to be unjust and indelicate." The resolution's previous passage was unanimous, but Johnson's charm offensive succeeded in persuading "5 or 6 others, whose sympathetic dispositions" were seduced by Johnson's emotional plea for support.³²

Johnson's impassioned defense of the compensation legislation came naturally, for he enthusiastically and sincerely sympathized with the measure. He complained often that because congressmen received pay per diem, they dragged Congress' business

³² Amos Kendall, *Autobiography of Amos Kendall* (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1872), 175; *Argus of Western America*, August 2, 1816 in Meyer, 173.
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out far too long. He hedged his bets, telling the House that he never received “written Instruction” from his constituents on the subject of compensation. Nevertheless Johnson charged ahead with compensation anyway. Johnson noted that the proposed Compensation bill allowed members to draw up to \$1,500 per annum, without reference to the number of congressional sessions in a given year. The previous six dollars a day meant that the United States paid many minor government functionaries better than Congressman. Johnson thought this unfair, and even thought \$1,500 far too little pay. Congressional salaries, far from making Congress a haven for social climbers, instead merely placed Congress “on an equality with the sergeant at arms, the door-keeper, the assistant door-keeper, the chief clerk, and the engrossing clerk.” New Western congressmen, less affluent than their colleagues from the South and Northeast, needed the stability of an annual salary.³³

Johnson managed to find support for compensation amongst former enemies. John Randolph’s public support for the compensation bill infuriated Benjamin Huger, a thoroughly aristocratic South Carolina Congressman. Historian William Freehling called Huger’s home city, Charleston, the most English and aristocratic city in the United States in 1816. Huger fulfilled his hometown’s latter-day billing. His “cause for alarm” originated in his conviction that paying Congress made the legislative body *de facto* employees of the executive. The salary system, feared Huger, increased

³³ “Mr. Johnson’s Speech,” *Daily National Intelligencer*, (Washington, DC) Friday, December 6, 1816.

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“enormously and fearfully” the influence of the President “over the legislative branch of the Government.” Salaries, warned Huger, might “injuriously” shorten legislative sessions. “Business,” Huger cautioned, “would be hurried through any how and every how.” He predicted that Congress “would meet for little else than to lay taxes and make appropriations.” Huger’s speech lasted some time, and he apologized to Johnson for taking so much time in opposing the compensation bill. He felt honor-bound to speak at length, because he realized “the active opposition to the bill devolved almost exclusively upon himself” while Johnson, one of the House’s “first talents,” marshaled the forces supporting the bill.³⁴

The forebodings of a South Carolina aristocrat left Johnson and a majority of Congressmen unmoved. Huger, Johnson stated, aroused baseless fears over the potential for executive corruption inherent in paying Congress. The people desired “wise and strong” measures to secure the peace and prosperity of the United States. They wanted a responsible Congress. Few knew the length of time Congress took to make decisions. “The people,” Johnson regretted, “remained ignorant of our delinquency.” He wished for Congress to be “responsible to the people, the legitimate fount of power and authority.” Johnson’s trust in democracy came to the forefront of his dialogue on congressional pay.³⁵

³⁴ William W. Freehling, *Prelude to Civil War: The Nullification Controversy in South Carolina, 1816-1836* (New York: Harper & Row, 1865), 1-7; *Annals of Congress*, 14th Cong., 1st sess., 1167.

³⁵ *Annals of Congress*, 14th Cong., 1st sess., 1168-1170.
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His western constituents “were a wise people, a patriotic people, a well-judging people, who valued independence, liberty, and honor more than a few cents, or dollars, or pounds.” While western states like Kentucky embraced democracy, Huger’s South Carolina remained far less democratic. Although the state loosened requirements for the franchise, the state retained many non-democratic facets in its political organization. In 1810, the South Carolina General Assembly gave the right to vote to all white males (except paupers and enlisted soldiers in the U.S. Army) resident in South Carolina. Even so, they only voted for state legislators and U.S. representatives. The planter-dominated state legislature elected the governor and the state’s presidential electors.³⁶

No other member sustained Huger’s objections, and the bill passed comfortably. The legislation owed much of its eventual passage to the power of Johnson’s military prestige. During the debate in the fall of 1816, he compared the plight of Congress to that of soldiers. “In the case of sickness or absence on furlough,” Johnson grumbled, “no deduction is made to the pay of the officer.” Why, he entreated his colleagues, should the case of Congress be different? Johnson’s military-based public relations battle worked marvelously. Even members who voted against the bill (probably to protect themselves from angry constituents back home) expressed sympathy for the measure on the floor of the House. The few who bravely stated their intent to vote for the bill attached their support to Johnson’s person. Representative Robert Wright of Maryland, a former

³⁶ Ibid; Manisha Sinha, *The Counterrevolution of Slavery: Politics and Ideology in Antebellum South Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 13. [Type text]

governor and loyal supporter for the American military during the War of 1812, offered his reason for supporting compensation. Wright asked his comrades how they would feel if, “the highly honorable mover of this bill, (Mr. Johnson of Kentucky) who slew Tecumseh with his own hands,” was left destitute. Wright used Johnson, “he who came up here covered with wounds and glory, with his favorite war-horse and his more favorite servant—his attendant in the army, his nurse and necessary assistant” as the main motivator to spur his colleagues to support the bill. If Johnson, said Wright, was financially “unable to do anything for himself at the close of the session” and therefore “obliged to sell his war-horse or his servant,” his mortified colleagues would be deeply shamed. Salaries, offered Wright, kept this appalling contingency from occurring.³⁷

Democracy spoke, and the Compensation Act passed. Unfortunately, the members’ misplaced belief in their legislative ability affected sound judgment. They applied the increased salaries to the present term, enraging the electorate. Kentucky voters turned out every Congressman elected except for Henry Clay and Richard Johnson. Of the eighty-one Representatives who voted for the Act, voters returned only fifteen to Congress. Thoroughly chastened, Johnson returned to the House with precise instructions from his constituents to vote for repeal. He followed their instructions. Democracy made its opinion explicitly clear, and to Johnson’s credit he faithfully

³⁷ “Extract from Mr. Johnson’s speech on the Compensation Law,” *Daily National Intelligencer*, (Washington, DC) Saturday, December 21, 1816; J.D. Warfield, *The Founders of Anne Arundel and Howard Counties, Maryland* (Baltimore: Kohn & Pollock, 1905), 253-254; *Annals of Congress*, 14th Cong., 1st sess., 1181-82.
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executed the will of the *vox populi*. Not even Wright's adulation shielded Johnson from the democracy's passions. He learned, quite quickly, what the will of the people entailed.³⁸

Wright's invocation of Johnson slaying Tecumseh reminded the House, in the off chance any of them forgot, that Indians still remained very much an obstacle to the United States' imperial ambitions. Many Americans considered Tecumseh's defeat at the Battle of the Thames a final resolution between the Shawnees and the United States. Yet, the Prophet still lived, as did Tecumseh's wives. A few of the Prophet's followers even stole back into the United States from British Canada in 1816 and 1817. They made their way south through Illinois, and crossed the Wabash River into Indiana. Most of the Prophet's warriors contentedly remained with their leader in Canada, where they lived on British subsidies. Hezekiah Niles and the editors of *Niles' Weekly Register* pronounced that the Indians of the West must be "brought to a sense of justice...they must be Jacksonized, as the saying goes in the West." A few Shawnee scouts, brothers John and William Perry, and Black Hoof, traveled to Lexington, Kentucky, and nearby Bourbon County to visit friends in the U.S. Army and explore the Bluegrass. They hoped to foster friendship and to find allies in their fight against removal.³⁹

³⁸ C. Edward Skeen, "The Compensation Act and the Rise of Popular Politics," *Journal of the Early Republic* 6 (Fall 1986): 253-74.

³⁹ John Sugden, *Tecumseh: A Life* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1997), 386; Stephen Warren, *The Shawnees and Their Neighbors, 1795-1870* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 45.

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Tensions mounted between western settlers and Indians during the 14th Congress. Most of Congress' direct dealings with Indians came from the conflict in the South. Andrew Jackson's forays into Florida during the spring of 1817 captured the American public's imagination and the attention of the public's political representatives in Congress. Occupying a violent and unstable Spanish province in the absence of any effective Spanish authority, Jackson also pushed against the powerful Seminoles who controlled much of Florida's swampy interior.⁴⁰

Southerners took up the cause of Jackson. His presence contributed to a general feeling of security for Georgia planters; he also lent hope to settlers hoping to seize Indians lands at the first possible moment. Georgia Representative Thomas Telfair spoke in the House of "an impression" in Washington City that Indian affairs seemed to assume "a more pacific aspect" as 1817 progressed. Peace in the North also proved ephemeral. Reports filtered in from the Northwest of white captives held by remnant Shawnees. Richard Rush, serving as acting Secretary of State for incoming President James Monroe, informed Richard Johnson of the details "on the subject of certain American prisoners...held in captivity on Lake Huron. In September 1817, Governor Gabriel Slaughter wrote from Frankfort, complaining to Johnson of difficulties

⁴⁰ David S. Heidler and Jeanne T. Heidler, *Old Hickory's War: Andrew Jackson and the Quest for Empire* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003), 29-54.
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encountered by Kentuckians negotiating with Indians for the return or release of captured loved ones.⁴¹

Johnson's own involvement in reconciling Indians with western whites began three years earlier. In 1814 several Choctaw chiefs wrote to Johnson, asking him to take their children and to educate them. He agreed, and he undertook their education as a private citizen. Over twenty Indian boys arrived on his farm. He seems to have taught some himself, but he realized he needed help and sought the assistance of the Baptist church's considerable resources. He argued that the Baptists were better prepared to pursue the youths' education more energetically, but agreed to serve as the school's superintendent. To this the Baptist Missionary Board consented, appointing Johnson as their Agent, and the Rev. Archibald Henderson, of Scott County, as the school's daytime instructor. Johnson's school carried unusual potential. The Choctaws paid almost all the expenses themselves, and created a Baptist board, consisting to serve as the school's trustees and fundraisers.⁴²

Johnson's added to his interest in Indian education through his involvement with a missionary organization called the "Kentucky Baptist Society for promoting the Gospel among the Heathen." Thomas McKenney, Superintendent of Indian Affairs, wrote

⁴¹ Betty Wood ed., *Mary Telfair to Mary Few: Selected Letters, 1802-1844* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007), xxiv; *Annals of Congress*, 14th Cong., 1st sess., 757-58; "Indian Captives," *Daily National Intelligencer*, (Washington, DC) Monday, April 21, 1817; Gabriel Slaughter to Richard M. Johnson, September 4, 1817 in Papers of Richard M. Johnson.

⁴² *Proceedings of the Baptist Convention for Missionary Purposes* (Philadelphia, 1814), 13-14.

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Johnson applauding the work of the Society and its objectives. The Baptists hoped to convince Indian leaders to allow the missionaries to take “three, four, or more” children away from their tribes in order to send them to Indian schools in Kentucky. Although the official opening of the Academy lay in the future, Johnson’s interest in Indians and in the West gained him a reputation for magnanimity. McKenney picqued Johnson’s interest. The Kentucky Baptists promised to teach “reading, writing, and arithmetic” to the young men and women in their charge. “In some cases, where genius warrants it,” teachers promised to teach these particularly intelligent students “the higher branches of literature.”⁴³

McKenney urged Johnson to support the Society. He recounted previous successes of a similar Methodist mission in Ohio, and offered a warm official “recommendation” for their efforts. Perhaps most important for Johnson, McKenney told him how he contemplated “with warm pleasure the signs of the times.” Westerners, enthusiastically teaching Native Americans the accoutrements of white society, boded well for hopes of democratic believers like Johnson. “Every American, who relishes the enjoyments which result from civilization,” McKenney declared to Johnson, anxiously hoped to extend the blessings of white Christian civilization to “men having souls like ourselves, and who, like us, are destined to run the circle of the same eternity.” Johnson already knew the leaders of the Kentucky Baptists, and needed little convincing.

⁴³ *Daily National Intelligencer*, (Washington, DC) Saturday, August 2, 1817.
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McKenney, in fact, asked Johnson to assure any members of the Society he knew to assure them of his complete and total cooperation.⁴⁴

Johnson embraced the project, and lent more than simple emotional support. A Baptist minister, John Ficklin, recruited ten young Indians from Missouri and took them to a school established near Johnson's property. Until 1825, the school operated through funds provided by the Kentucky Baptist Society, with an occasional donation from the federal government. Johnson's role in the school became more formalized when it became the well-known Choctaw Academy and relocated to his farm. Johnson involved himself with the Kentucky Baptist Society in order to bring Native Americans into the fold of white society. His apparent sympathy lent credence to the belief that Johnson treated Indians liberally.⁴⁵

Like many Democratic-Republican leaders, most notably Andrew Jackson, Johnson separated personal charity towards Native Americans from pro-expansion (and by proxy pro-removal) politics. Politically, he championed wars against Indians; the most noted being the First Seminole War. More important for his future, Johnson buttressed General Andrew Jackson when his conduct during the Seminole War came under significant scrutiny. As Florida's governor, Jackson personally engaged in strong-arm diplomacy with his Spanish counterpart. His dealings with the British traders in Florida bordered on murderous. He arrested and tried by special courts martial two

⁴⁴ *Daily National Intelligencer*, (Washington, DC) Saturday, August 2, 1817.

⁴⁵ "Brief View of the Baptist Interest in each of the United States," *American Quarterly Register* XIII (1841): 51.

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British subjects, Alexander Arbuthnot and Robert Ambrister. After the courts martial found them guilty, Jackson hanged Arbuthnot and shot Ambrister for being “exciters” of the local Indian population. Unsurprisingly, Jackson felt clothed with the appropriate power to occupy several Spanish forts, precipitating an actual diplomatic crisis. The Spanish complained to President Monroe and to U.S. Secretary of State John Quincy Adams. Spain insisted that no real peace could exist in Florida until the U.S. government “marked the conduct of General Jackson in a manner suitable to its honor.”⁴⁶

Fortunately for Jackson, House members, led by Johnson and other former War Hawks, rallied to him as both a western man and a democratic hero. Johnson’s backing of Jackson mirrored his earlier support of William Henry Harrison in January, 1817. Johnson joined a House committee created to investigate claims that Harrison misspent public money during his campaigns in the Northwest. Johnson joined in the unanimous opinion of the members of the Committee, asserting that they were “unanimously of the opinion that Genl Harrison stands above suspicion, as having pecuniary or improper connections with the officers of the commissant for the supply of the N.W. Army.” Johnson’s participation in the report became a boon for Harrison. Of the investigating Congressmen, he knew Harrison the best and undoubtedly understood best what circumstances led to suspicions about Harrison. Whether, the accusations, labeled by Congress as “unmerited, groundless, and unjust” were actually unwarranted mattered

⁴⁶ *National Intelligencer* (Washington, DC) Tuesday, December 23, 1817; John Buchanan, *Jackson's Way: Andrew Jackson And the People Of The Western Waters* (Castle Books, 2005), 367.

little. Johnson, the only member who knew Harrison for the patrician he was, chose to buttress Harrison's reputation. Throughout the rest of his political life, Johnson refused to hurt Harrison. The General convinced Kentucky leaders like Isaac Shelby and Henry Clay that he represented the best hope for westerners during the darkest days of the War of 1812.⁴⁷

Johnson attached himself to Andrew Jackson instead of William Henry Harrison during times when their reputations came under scrutiny. His decision not to harm Harrison lay in his loyalty to the West's political interest, not to Harrison personally. Consciously, the American public began to see in Johnson the same western heroism they saw in Harrison and Jackson. Johnson continued to harp at Congress in the summer of 1818, trying to procure better pensions for injured soldiers and the families of soldiers killed or maimed in the line of duty. "The widows and orphans of the great American republic," Johnson insisted, "belong to the republic and it is our solemn duty to provide for them."⁴⁸

Johnson's efforts gained him popularity among the populace and among his congressional colleagues. The U.S. Senate spent a day celebrating him, and Senator Philip Barbour offered a neat summation of Johnson's growing fame and prestige. "Wherever there is an American," said Barbour, "the courage and services of Colonel

⁴⁷ "Remarks of Mr. Johnson, of KY," *Daily National Intelligencer*, (Washington, DC) Tuesday, June 16, 1818; *Annals of Congress*, 14th Cong., 2nd Sess., 709-11; *Niles Weekly Register* (February 1, 1817), 380; Philip P. Mason, *After Tippecanoe: Some Aspects of the War of 1812* (East Lansing: Michigan State University, 2011), 86.

⁴⁸ *Annals of Congress*, Senate, 15th Cong., 1st Sess., 306.
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Johnson are known and applauded. To show the nascent nation's appreciation, Congress forged a sword for Johnson. Martial heroism, combined with western democracy, defined Johnson and Jackson. Jackson's troubles in Florida became a major scandal in Washington City. President Monroe felt compelled to address the incidents in his annual address to Congress on November 16, 1818. Monroe only discussed facets of the Florida conflict that placed Jackson in the best possible light. Indian attacks, Spanish disorganization, and military expediency all offered, according to Monroe, justification for Jackson's high-handed actions.⁴⁹

Privately, Monroe remained more skeptical of the expediency, wisdom, and legality of Jackson's actions. William Crawford, a Georgia planter and Monroe's Secretary of the Treasury, despised Jackson and hoped to use the Florida debacle to humble the self-aggrandizing westerner. Jackson's actions also outraged Secretary of War John Calhoun. Cerebral and educated at Yale, Calhoun disliked the violent Jackson and feared that his actions threatened civilian control of the military. The notable and (given the outcome of future presidential elections) ironic exception in Monroe's Cabinet, Secretary of State John Quincy Adams, defended Jackson. Aware of Spain's fading power in North America and working for the expansion of the American nation, Adams attached singular importance to defending Jackson. If the cabinet censured Jackson, it might display weakness and give Spain a reason to re-double her efforts to

⁴⁹ *Annals of Congress*, Senate, 15th Cong., 1st Sess., 306; James Monroe, Nov. 16, 1817 in James D. Richardson ed., *A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents II* (Washington, DC: Bureau of National Literature and Art, 1908), 40-45.
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hang on to Florida. If the United States presented a unified front supporting Jackson, the Spanish government might bow to the inevitable and relinquish Florida to American control.⁵⁰

Adams jostled with Calhoun and Crawford, eventually convincing Monroe to wait on any action he might take against Jackson. Adams watched Johnson intently, for the affable Johnson was liked by Adams, Jackson, and Monroe. Adams noted in his diary that Johnson “disapproved of proceedings on the trial, and the execution of the two British subjects, Arbuthnot and Ambrister.” Later, Adams asked Johnson to come to his home on the way to the Capitol. They talked for three hours. After Johnson left Adams continued to read on the subject of Jackson’s censure. Adams even sent to books to Johnson so that the latter could make his own notes.⁵¹

The House preferred not to wait on the President. In November 1818, the House sent the portions of Monroe’s message regarding the Seminole War to a select committee, chaired by Richard Johnson. Committee members disagreed about Jackson’s conduct. A majority report, appropriately represented by aristocratic Virginia Representative Thomas M. Nelson, castigated Jackson and proposed censure for his Florida expedition. Nelson’s patrician heritage and familial relationship with the First

⁵⁰ Andrew Burstein, *The Passions of Andrew Jackson* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), 130; John Niven, *John C. Calhoun and the Price of Union* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State, 1988), 69-72; William Earl Weeks, *John Quincy Adams & American Global Empire* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1992), 113-17.

⁵¹ John Quincy Adams, January 18, 1819 in John Quincy Adams, *Memoirs of John Quincy Adams* IV, 222.

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Families of Virginia (he counted among his relations the Byrds, Carters, and Lees) guaranteed his repugnance for a man he viewed as a military adventurer. Other patricians joined Nelson in opposition to Jackson.⁵²

Old Federalists—Connecticut’s Henry Storrs and Thomas Scott—joined Tidewater patricians such as John Tyler in their abhorrence of Jackson. Henry Clay, long a supporter of Jeffersonian expansion practiced by chieftains like Jackson, broke with westerners and supported censuring Jackson. Clay, a skillful political operator, rightly saw in Jackson a powerful rival for higher office. He also saw an unprincipled barbarian who ignored legal processes and murdered unarmed captives at will. On January 20, 1819 Clay, unusually, left the Speaker’s chair and addressed the House. He spent over three hours roaring in his baritone about Andrew Jackson, especially for his killing of “unarmed and prostrate” captives. If the House failed to censure Jackson, then any hope for keeping the republic from military rule might be lost.⁵³

Johnson presented a minority report standing squarely for Jackson and by inference against the War Department. Johnson’s statement read that Jackson “had a sacred duty which he owed to himself, to his army, to the government and to his country.” The report claimed that Jackson’s actions remained well within his rights as a commander and that the government owed the general its thanks. Johnson took a

⁵² Richard C.M. Page, *Genealogy of the Page family in Virginia* (New York: Jenkins & Thomas, 1883), 172-73.

⁵³ David S. Heidler and Jeanne T. Heidler, *Henry Clay: The Essential American* (New York: Random House, 2010), 141-42.

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calculated risk in identifying with Jackson in the report. He and his brothers began negotiation contracts with John Calhoun in 1818 to supply an expedition up the Yellowstone River. Johnson's insistence that the congressional ruckus over Jackson's actions in Florida embodied more than a "mere party squabble was truer than he realized. Unity between the South and West began to crack not just along economic or political lines, but also along cultural lines.⁵⁴

The report supporting Jackson garnered considerable attention. Johnson propped up his argument by arguing that Jackson's congressional opponents simply misunderstood international law. Johnson, certainly no legal expert, and probably at the behest of Jackson supporter John Quincy Adams, cited the eighteenth-century works of Emerich de Vattel, a noted Swiss legal theorist, in his attempt to buttress the doubtful legality of Jackson's execution of the two Britons. Mostly, however, Johnson fell back on an appeal to his congressional colleagues emotions and their faith in Jackson as a defender of the West. "I do not censure Gen. Jackson," Johnson told the House, "before my God, I give him my thanks." Johnson's support rested on Jackson's western credentials. The Kentuckian scolded Henry Clay, who earlier sought to cast aspersion on Jackson's character for treating Seminoles poorly in battle and in treaty negotiations.

⁵⁴ *Annals of Congress*, 15th Cong., 2nd Sess., 600-680, 830-36; Heidler & Heidler, *Old Hickory's War*, 214; Meyer, 178.

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Western life mandated tough treatment of Indians. “On whose head,” asked Johnson, “should the blood fall, if you cannot control the Indians, with the Bible?”⁵⁵

Johnson’s firm commitment to religious education assuaged his conscience concerning Jackson’s rough treatment of the eastern United States’ Native Americans. “There is, at this moment, at the heart of my country a school for the education of the Indians in the arts of civil life.” He referred to the Indian school on his farm, operated by Kentucky Baptist missionaries. Johnson assured those listening that he would be “the last to raise his sword” against the Indians. If, however, the Bible and white acculturation failed to pacify them, violence became imperative. “When they flourish their tomahawk over your head,” Johnson asked sarcastically, “are you to meet them with the Bible in your hands, and invoke their obedience to that holy religion?” Johnson pressed on with his defense of Jackson. Since Indians “do not declare war, but come like a thief in the night,” their treacherous war making absolved Jackson. More than any other factor, Johnson argued, the need “to give security to the frontier” justified Jackson’s ruthlessness. The House, retorted Johnson should not “bring censure and sorrow” upon “the grey hairs of him whose hand never faltered in the discharge of the duty of his country.” The government, according to Johnson, knew Jackson’s character when they

⁵⁵ Emerich de Vattel, *Law of Nations* (London: GG & J. Robertson, 1797); *Niles Weekly Register* XV (Feb., 20, 1819), 135.
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sent him to Florida. Furthermore, Calhoun and anti-Jackson members of Congress understood from the beginning that Jackson “would finish what he begun.”⁵⁶

Johnson’s impassioned speech helped ensure the defeat of the censure resolution. Jackson’s standing only increased in the eyes of Americans yeomen and workers. *Niles’ Register* denoted Johnson’s defense of Jackson as “the best speech” yet made by Johnson during his time in Congress. The press excitedly reported Johnson’s duel in the House with Henry Clay. Johnson, said Niles, “staggered” the best arguments advanced by Clay. Papers extolled Johnson’s research and his animated delivery. Women in the House gallery begged Johnson to change to a seat “more favorable to their observation.” New England’s Democratic-Republicans celebrated Johnson’s impassioned defense of Jackson. “Everlasting honors are due to Col. Johnson and the members who united in the remonstrance against a report unfavorable to the reputation of Gen. Jackson,” crowed the *Salem (Mass.) Register*. “It will always be remembered that Col. Johnson dared to support the reputation of the Republic, and to do honor to the services which have blessed our country.” The paper metaphorically begged for “some emblem of this worthy member” to “bind it upon our hearts.”⁵⁷

Popularity came at a high price for Johnson. His identification with Jackson created a rift with Clay, heretofore a long-time political ally. During the House debates

⁵⁶ *Niles’ Weekly Register* XV (Feb., 20, 1819), 135; Meyer, *Col. Richard M. Johnson*, 179-80.

⁵⁷ *Niles’ Weekly Register*, January 30, 1819; *Kentucky Gazette*, March 26, 1819; *Kentucky Reporter*, February 17, 1819 in Meyer, 180-81.

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Clay used every possible resource to slam Jackson's behavior. Jackson's execution of the two Britons especially incensed Clay, who reminded the House that William Henry Harrison (another general fighting for the security of the nation and the West) spared several Indians convicted of far more egregious crimes than those attributed to Arbuthnot and Ambrister. Jackson, warned Clay, harbingered a fearful coming era when "military chieftains" and not good honest republicans might rule the United States. For his part, Johnson felt no ill will towards Clay. The "warmth of friendship" still categorized their friendship.⁵⁸

Speaker Clay's insulted emotions remained wounded, and his relationship with Johnson chilled. Johnson seemed genuinely surprised at Clay's reaction. He "did not calculate the consequences as I was willing to sink or swim with the cause." Johnson believed he had done his duty, but he felt no "pulse" for his duty like he did for his friendship with Clay. "I am extremely sorry that my friend Mr. Clay should have taken a part which has so deeply wounded that friendly feeling which once existed. I did everything to prevent it." Johnson asked Jackson to forget any perceived slight from Clay. Desperate to restore "social intercourse" between two heroes of the West, Johnson asked Jackson for some semblance of civility toward Clay. Jackson reacted coolly, and continued to harbor a powerful hatred of Clay. Jackson wrote to his wife in February 1819, crowing that the "insidious Mr. Clay will sink into that insignificance that all those

⁵⁸ James Parton, *Life of Andrew Jackson II* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1860), 587-89; Heidler and Heidler, *Henry Clay*, 142; *Kentucky Reporter*, February 24, 1819.

who abandon principle and justice and would sacrifice their country for self-aggrandizement ought and will experience.”⁵⁹

Clay’s and Jackson’s increasingly divergent views of what constituted the heretofore united Democratic-Republicans ended an era of genuine nationalism in American politics. James Monroe’s presidency oversaw an era of considerable (although not total) political unanimity. With the exception of New England, the different sections of the United States found common ground in most major policy questions. Secretary of War Calhoun, who eventually turned into a dogmatic sectionalist, espoused such intense nationalism during his tenure in the Monroe Cabinet that he supported centralizing measures (inherited from the Federalists) meant to create commercial and social progress. By Monroe’s second term however major fault-lines emerged in the alliance between South and West.⁶⁰

Initially, economic forces drove South and West apart. The West began to embrace the tenets of what Henry Clay eventually called the American System; high tariffs protected American manufacturers, and government sponsored internal improvements created an amenable environment for burgeoning industry in the West.

⁵⁹ Johnson to Jackson, Aug 4. 1819 in Meyer, *Col. Richard M. Johnson*, 1819; Johnson to Andrew Jackson, Aug. 4 1819 in *Papers of Andrew Jackson*; Andrew Jackson to Rachel Jackson, February 6, 1819 in Harold D. Moser, David Hoth, George Hoeman eds., *The Papers of Andrew Jackson IV* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1980-), 271.

⁶⁰ Charles S. Sydnor, *The Development of Southern Sectionalism, 1819-1848* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1948), 1-32; John Lauritz Larson, *Internal Improvement: National Public Works and the Promise of Popular Government in the Early United States* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 127-28.
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The nascent metropolis of Louisville, on the Ohio, contributed to the increasing industrialization in the West. A steamboat leaving Cincinnati in 1816 arrived at Louisville just fifteen hours later. Quick shipment of timber and mill products allowed factory owners cheaper prices for raw goods, and more efficient production in western factories. Southern planters in the Virginia and Carolina Tidewater dreaded industrialization and the politics of capitalism. They relied on low tariffs to turn a profit on cash crops, and generally hated modern financial innovation. Southern expansion into the Southwest and the admission of the new states of Mississippi and Alabama offered new lands for cash crops. As the new states filled with settlers, they added allies to Jeffersonian disciples in Congress. Planters in the Old South and the *nouveau riche* planters on the Southwestern frontier remained true to Jefferson's vision, now resting on the rising political fortunes of Andrew Jackson. For his part, Richard Johnson staked his political claim in Jackson's camp.⁶¹

Tidewater aristocrats and new planters in the Southwest forged the agrarian dominion of the Democratic-Republican Party. Yet Richard Johnson never totally committed to this bucolic conception. Small-scale agrarians dominated the West, but the beginnings of industry took hold as well. Industrialists in the North and a few large

⁶¹ Homer Hockett, *Western Influence of Political Parties to 1825: An Essay in Historical Interpretation* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1970), 112-26; Thomas Hart Benton, *Abridgment of the Debates of Congress, from 1789 to 1856*, vol. VI (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1858), 332-33; Edwin Adams Davis, John C. L. Andreassen eds., "From Louisville to New Orleans in 1816: Diary of William Newton Mercer," *Journal of Southern History* 3 (Aug., 1936): 390-402; Adam Rothman, *Slave Country: Origins of the Deep South* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 165-216
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planters committed to internal improvements rallied behind a rump group of Democratic-Republicans and old Federalists. This coalition eventually styled themselves National-Republicans. Richard Johnson, ostensibly a follower of Jefferson and Jackson, never defined himself strictly as a farmer. Politically, he remained opened to measures decried by many Democratic-Republicans as unorthodox. During Johnson's time as the House military committee chair he urged Calhoun to disregard free-trade principles and to give preference to American textiles. Johnson's tacit support of American-made clothing represented a gap between him and contemporary southerners. Southern gentry shipped much of their clothing and furniture from Europe. American textiles also enjoyed the protection of high-tariffs, another thorn in the side of the southern planter-class.⁶²

Johnson also offered subtle but substantive encouragement to using the federal government to encourage the material progress of the United States when he cautioned Kentucky voters to carefully distinguish between "economy and parsimony." His political future took a momentary breath when he declined to seek office again in 1819. His popularity in Kentucky, however, created a circumstance by which he quickly returned to Congress, this time as U.S. Senator from Kentucky. John Crittenden, a disciple of Henry Clay, retired from his chair in 1819. The Kentucky legislature elected

⁶² Shaw Livermore, *The Twilight of the Federalists: the Disintegration of the Federalist Party, 1815-1830* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962); Richard M. Johnson to John Calhoun in Clyde Wilson ed., *The Papers of John C. Calhoun III* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1969), 411.

Johnson to replace Crittenden, much to the chagrin of Federalists and Clay allies.

Johnson's time in the Senate comprised the most important portion of his political career. In the Senate Johnson battled most vigorously for the West, and for the nation.

During his time as a Senator Johnson battled vigorously for the West against enemies within and without. At the outset, he made a political blunder and fell into financial troubles, but in doing so he proved marvelously far-sighted. Johnson cared not only for the West he knew, but also for the Far West, beyond the Mississippi and regions unexplored and waiting for the westward march of the American nation.⁶³

⁶³“Col. Johnson's Valedictory Address,” *Orleans Gazette, and Commercial Advertiser*, (New Orleans, LA) Monday, May 10, 1819; *Kentucky Gazette*, Dec. 17, 1819 in Meyer, *Col. Richard M. Johnson*, 188.

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Chapter 5: Frontiers in Politics and Religion

On December 19, 1819, Secretary of War John Calhoun wrote to the chairman of the House Committee on Military Affairs relating details of an expedition planned by the war department for 1820. The War Department hoped to send a lightly armed corps of exploration up the Yellowstone River into the American Far West. Calhoun told the House Committee the expedition formed part of a “system of measures” to protect the Northwest and to help expand the American fur trade. The fur trade had exploded in the 1810s as the American populace moved west, placing cities and towns closer to the trapping territories in the Rocky Mountains. Shorter distances to entrepôts, St. Louis chief among them, created a fur boom. The creation of steam technology for river travel drastically shortened the time needed to get from St. Louis or New Orleans to the Missouri River, the major water highway into the Far West. John Jacob Astor’s American Fur Company proved especially profitable, and Astor became the wealthiest man in the United States. Competition from British traders convinced American fur trade investors to lobby Congress to protect the trade from foreigners, especially Britons.

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¹ *American State Papers: Military Affairs* 2, 33; Cardinal Goodwin, “A Larger View of the Yellowstone Expedition, 1819-1820,” *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 4 (Dec., 1917): 299-313; Eric Jay Dolin, *Fur, Fortune, and Empire: The Epic History of the Fur Trade in America* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2010), 221
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Calhoun's faith in the Yellowstone Expedition stemmed from its ability to protect the fur trade and explore. He also realized its potential to project American power in untamed wilderness populated by Native Americans and frequented by British traders sympathetic to Indians. The Indians of the Northwest, Calhoun believed, "are open to the influence of a foreign power." He worried that "many of the most warlike and powerful tribes, who, by the extension of our settlements, are becoming our near neighbors, are yet very little acquainted with our power." He sought to rectify their ignorance, and also nudge Britain from further interference in the Fur Trade. "This intercourse is the great source of danger to our peace; and until that is stopped our frontiers cannot be safe." Calhoun decided to take action, and the Yellowstone Expedition appeared to fulfill multiple military and foreign policy objectives.²

Calhoun selected Major Stephen Long to command the expedition. Long served as a senior topographical engineer in the U.S. Army with a sterling reputation. Calhoun chose as contractor to provide transportation and supplies to the Expedition James Johnson, Richard Johnson's younger brother, who received the contract only after his brother used his considerable influence. Calhoun and Johnson knew each other from their times as War Hawks in the House. From the outset, Calhoun understood that while

² John Calhoun to A. Smith, December 29, 1819 in Richard K. Cralle, *Reports and Public Letters of John C. Calhoun* (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1855), 65-70.
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James Johnson officially served as the contractor, his brother Richard was also explicitly involved.³

The Expedition eventually became one of the most farcical exercises in U.S. military history, for which Richard and James Johnson share much of the blame. Yet, despite its failures, the Yellowstone Expedition revealed Richard Johnson's expansive vision for the American West. Controversially, Johnson chose to use steamboats to transport the Expedition up the Missouri River. The poorly constructed steamboats' failure marked Johnson as incompetent. But Johnson's ideas remained sound, even if their execution waited for future generations of western explorers to be fulfilled. The fact remains that Johnson laid the groundwork and created the blueprint for the entirety of government-sponsored exploration of the American Northwest in the nineteenth century.⁴

Exploration and discovery probably were not uppermost in his mind when Richard Johnson interceded with Calhoun to procure the Expedition. Most likely, Johnson simply needed money and, given his interest in the West, the Yellowstone Expedition seemed like a useful enterprise. Congressional duties and the War of 1812 kept him largely absent from his farm in Kentucky for nearly eight years. But need for

³ John Niven, *John C. Calhoun and the Price of Union* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State, 1988), 76.

⁴ Hiram Martin Chittenden, *The American Fur Trade of the Far West* (New York: Francis P. Harper, 1902), 572; Henry Clay to John C. Calhoun, November 25, 1818 in William E. Hemphill ed., *The Papers of John C. Calhoun III* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1967), 298; hereafter referred to as Calhoun Papers.

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money dovetailed with his growing interest in steamboats, then just beginning to ply the waters of the Kentucky, Mississippi, Ohio, and Tennessee Rivers.⁵

Major steamboat construction began in earnest in Kentucky in 1818. The *Gov. Shelby*, at 120 tons, quickly gave way to even larger steamboats. The *Exchange*, *St. Louis*, and *Riflemen* all built at shipyards at Louisville, each displaced between 220 and 250 tons. In 1818 Johnson commissioned construction on a steamboat at Leestown, about a mile downstream from the Frankfort boatyard. Local newspapers cheered the boat's launch in October 1818. The *Kentucky Gazette* hailed "this as the commencement of an effort which will exhibit to us the importance of the navigation of the Kentucky River, and give a new spring to the trade of this place and the central parts of the state." A few more individuals like Johnson, extolled the *Gazette*, "would soon teach us how to realize the advantages of our natural situation." Impressed, Calhoun agreed to grant the Johnsons the contracts. Henry Clay, Calhoun's former messmate and a friend of the Johnson family, placated the Secretary's concerns when he vouched for James Johnson, as well as his brothers John, Joel, and Henry, none of whom Calhoun had any personal acquaintance with.⁶

Calhoun received regular reports from an enthusiastic Richard Johnson. In February 1819, four months after Johnson started construction on the steamboat, he informed the Secretary of War that he named his new steamboat the *Calhoun*. The men

⁵ Richard H. Collins, *History of Kentucky*, (Louisville, KY: Richard H. Collins, 1877), 362; *Kentucky Gazette*, October 30, 1818.

⁶Ibid.

were still friends and political allies in 1819. Aware that Calhoun's interest lay more in the material progress of the Expedition's boats than their names, Johnson kept him informed on the state of his boat-building initiatives. The maiden voyage, he reported to Calhoun, attracted the attention of the citizens of Franklin and its vicinity. Johnson reminded Calhoun how popular the Expedition was in Kentucky, and in the entire West. "The whole country," Johnson wrote to Calhoun, "is in an uproar of applause." Johnson then brought up a sticking point in the Expedition's preparations, the timetable for payment to his brother James. Calhoun wanted to pay James upon the completion of the boats, but the Johnsons wanted a cash advance. Richard pressed Calhoun, telling him that since the Expedition was so popular, "it will not do to let this matter fail for want of a few thousand dollars." Johnson pleaded that his brother James' credit would be ruined without an advance. He pleaded with Calhoun. "You see [James's] zeal. We are both devoted to the service. I want no compensation. I have no pecuniary interest in the affair." Johnson only wanted to see his brother "happy in the contemplation of serving his country & in making that which will relieve his embarrassment."⁷

Calhoun probably began to wonder who actually controlled the contract when Richard Johnson communicated with him as much if not more than James. Richard unquestionably dominated his younger brothers, each of whom played a part in the Expedition. Johnson kept Calhoun informed as to "progress of events as to the western

⁷ Irving Bartlett, *John C. Calhoun: A Life* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1993), 94; Richard M. Johnson to John C. Calhoun, April 3, 1819 in William E. Hemphill ed., *The Papers of John C. Calhoun IV* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1967), 9. [Type text]

armament, as so much interest has been excited & so much is expected from its success.” For all the advantages of the Johnsons running the boats, there remained some serious disadvantages.⁸

To start, the clannish Johnsons operated in an unmistakably nepotistic fashion. Accustomed to local popularity in Scott County, they hoped to soothe Calhoun and the U.S. government’s questions of their competence. The Johnsons clearly wanted money. Richard told Calhoun that he had “never seen such difficult times.” Haggling, however, offended Calhoun. The sum Johnson asked for, \$50,000, especially concerned Calhoun. Calhoun learned another disturbing fact in May, 1819. The barrels of provisions the Johnsons supplied began arriving in Missouri. Civil agents discovered the barrels to be either nowhere near full or polluted by sitting in river water. “Everything,” Johnson explained, “is coming to a crisis[;] all things have been concentrated [;] rest assured that what exertion of man can accomplish will be done. I feel no anxiety or trouble except the position I find myself in.”⁹

Throughout the summer Johnson showed no concern publicly. In a letter published nationally, he shrugged off questions over his boats’ water-worthiness and made light of accidents that regularly plagued the expedition. Johnson announced that he was “convinced more than ever that we shall succeed in our undertaking and carry

⁸ Richard M. Johnson to John C. Calhoun, April 9, 1819; Richard Johnson to John C. Calhoun, April 12, 1819 in *Calhoun Papers IV*, 16.

⁹ Richard Johnson to John C. Calhoun, April 12, 1819 in *Calhoun Papers IV*, 19; Leland W. Meyer, *The Life and Times of Colonel Richard M. Johnson of Kentucky* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1932), 197.

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out the views of the Secretary of War to complete effect.” He expected “to encounter many difficulties, but we must and can overcome them—I also expect to meet many accidents,” but he assured Calhoun there was no cause for alarm. Johnson confidently apprised the American public that his preparations were ample to repair any ordinary injury to his boats, thereby not slowing the Expedition. “We must not even think of defeat. That which human prudence, industry, and watchfulness can accomplish must be done.” Johnson’s great desire, he said, was to “form the part assigned to me.” Johnson’s undaunted protestations hid the massive number of problems the Expedition encountered. Calhoun grew increasingly concerned. In the summer of 1819, he found himself in a quandary. Over his strident objections, Monroe agreed in July to advance the cash the Johnsons requested. Monroe showed no hesitation. Like Johnson, Monroe saw himself as an agent for the West. “The people of the whole western country,” Monroe wrote to Calhoun, “take a deep interest in the contemplated establishment at the mouth of the Yellowstone.¹⁰

Monroe realized that westerners looked upon the expedition “as a measure, better calculated to secure the frontier, to secure us the fur trade, and to break up the intercourse between the British fur traders and the Indians.” Monroe understood the importance of the fur trade, especially to westerners. Hundreds of Americans went into the vast reaches of the American Far west to fulfill hopes they initially had for lives in

¹⁰ “Extract of a Letter from Col. ... Johnson, on Board the Steam Expedition, Dated,” *Maryland Gazette and Political Intelligencer*, (Annapolis, MD) Thursday, June 17, 1819; James Monroe to John C. Calhoun, July 5, 1819 in *Calhoun Papers* IV, 135-136. [Type text]

Kentucky, Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, and Tennessee. Westerners, especially young men in their twenties, headed west across the plains to the trapping areas in the Rockies.

Bernard DeVoto called the Far West the place “where Kentucky came true at last.” And so it was for many Kentuckians who traveled to St. Louis. To their credit, Calhoun and Monroe both believed that science as much as national security dictated the necessity of the Expedition. Calhoun reminded the Expedition’s commander, Stephen Long, of Jefferson’s earlier instructions to Merewether Lewis. “The instructions of Mr. Jefferson to Capt. Lewis printed in his travels will afford you many valuable suggestions.”¹¹

Calhoun forwarded letters from Johnson to Monroe throughout the summer. Although no one accused the Johnsons of wrongdoing, they clearly had not lived up to their agreement. Additionally, rumors of dubious financial proceedings dogged the Johnsons. On July 14, Calhoun dispatched a bundle of letters to the President. Not wanting to unfairly accuse Johnson or his brother of incompetence or misconduct, Calhoun stated the facts to Monroe and asked for his opinion. Johnson’s brother James’ transportation contract, Calhoun believed, “will about square with the advances, but his brother will fall greatly indebted to the government on his provisions contracts.” Johnson also wrote to Calhoun trying to procure a contract involving West Point. Wary because of James Johnson’s ineptitude, Calhoun passed the decision to Monroe. In order to keep Johnson’s well-intentioned but nepotistic interference from swaying another

¹¹ Bernard DeVoto, *Across the Wide Missouri* (New York: Mariner Books, original 1947), 5; Noble Cunningham, *The Presidency of James Monroe* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995), 77.

contract, Calhoun offered that “the contract out to be made on public proposals. This would help the Johnsons “avoid all censure.”¹²

Most of Johnson’s trouble came from how the government paid him. The government deposited cash in a St. Louis bank for the Johnson’s use. But since the Johnsons spent much of their own money to help built the steamboats and provision the expedition they wanted money put directly into Richard’s possession. Herein lay Calhoun’s difficulties and his letter to Monroe. Johnson wrote to the cashier of the Bank of the United States in Washington, complaining of his financial misfortunes. “I can assure you,” lamented Johnson, “that I have been the most unfortunate man on earth in my friendship for others...Language cannot describe here our distress for want of money.” Johnson also wrote Smith asking to serve as his brother James’ agent for money arriving for the latter from the War and Navy Departments, and the Post Office.¹³

Calhoun’s consideration kept the Johnsons from being criminally implicated but in the Missouri Territory the Johnson brothers encountered serious accusations involving both their financial solvency and their honesty in business dealings. Over budget and unsure of how to salvage his and his brother’s finances Johnson wrote to various government agents trying to extricate himself and his brother from the financial quagmire they had gotten themselves into. More disturbing, none of their

¹² John C. Calhoun to James Monroe, July 14, 1819 in J. Franklin Jameson ed., “Calhoun Correspondence,” in *Annual Report of the American Historical Association* (Washington: Govt. Printing Office, 1899), 174-76.

¹³ Richard M. Johnson to Richard Smith, May 14, 1819 in Meyer, *Col. Richard M. Johnson*, 199.

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boats or provisions approached the quality or readiness needed to ascend the Missouri to the Yellowstone headwaters. Calhoun tried his best to help the Johnsons, telling the army commissary to try and not “impair the interest or credit of the contractor.”¹⁴

In September the *Kentucky Gazette* reported that the bank used by the Johnsons in St. Louis might close. The reason given for the possible closure was the inability of the Johnsons to pay what they owed the bank. The Johnsons offered to mediate the matter outside of the Missouri Territory, but the bank’s trustees refused. Johnson wrote to South Carolina congressman Langdon Cheves, cashier for the main office of the Bank of the United States in Philadelphia. Johnson discovered that “it will be in my power to discharge the whole of my debt in [Kentucky] within the period of six months.” Johnson admirably decided to pay what he owed, at least as he could. Property, he told Cheves, “has lost its charm with me & poverty has no terrors in my mind. My object is to pay off every debt.” In Kentucky, Johnson’s financial troubles created a wave of public sympathy for him and his work on the Expedition. The *Kentucky Gazette* informed its readers that three of the Johnson steamboats, *Expedition*, *Jefferson*, and *Johnson* took on six regiments of infantry and was already 100 miles into the trip. “The magnanimous zeal of Col. Johnson, and his indefatigable industry, deserve to be crowned with the most

¹⁴ John C. Calhoun to George Gibson, June 9, 1819 in *Calhoun Papers* IV, 97.
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brilliant success.” Few men, said the *Gazette*, hazarded what he has done, to carry into execution the views of the war office.¹⁵

Apart from a few accolades from Kentucky and western papers, Johnson never received credit for his sense of vision and his desire to participate in the exploration of the Far West. He served as an avatar for thousands who saw the Far West as the eventual destiny of the American nation. The *Frankfort Commentator* explained that with exploratory journeys like the Yellowstone Expedition, the movement west became nearly unstoppable. Trails across the Rocky Mountains would connect to the Columbia River, and the Columbia emptied into the Pacific. The Kentucky paper hoped that eventually “a new communication with Asia will thus be established.” Bluegrass citizens “shall see the productions of China.” The Ohio River would eventually be connected through the channel of American commerce with India.”¹⁶

While regular commerce between the Pacific Rim and Central North America lay far in the future, Johnson’s point made sense. Most trade from Asia came through the great eastern ports on ships owned by the hated British. Might a trade route over the Rockies, controlled by Americans, be faster and help the economic independence of the nation? Johnson harped on the United States’ need to bolster trade with the East Indies several times in 1819. He published a circular in May, arguing that America sent tons of precious metals to the East Indies and received little in return. They key to boosting

¹⁵ Richard M. Johnson to Langdon Cheves, Oct. 17, 1819 in Meyer, *Col. Richard M. Johnson*, 201; *Kentucky Gazette*, July 30, 1819.

¹⁶ *Frankfort Commentator*, February 24, 1820.

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trade with Asia lay in more exports and better regulation of those exports. “By a wise regulation of our foreign commerce,” Johnson offered, “America may export her surplus produce to the best markets which the world affords, and bear in return to our shores the wealth of every other nation.”¹⁷

Praise for Johnson’s contribution to the commercial and social future of the West quickly fell silent while questions over his brother’s possible improprieties compounded. While the worst of the actual financial quibbling lay behind him, Johnson nevertheless endured public excoriation for what were probably his brother’s misdeeds. In St. Louis, the populace quickly turned against Johnson for not paying the bills. Since May, the *St. Louis Enquirer* stated, “newspapers have been full of letters and paragraphs ascribing to Col. Johnson an extravagant degree of merit for the part he was acting in the military expedition to the upper Missouri.” Even worse, said the *Enquirer*, Johnson wrote the letters himself. These letters, claimed the paper, were “calculated to concentrate upon him the public attention, to hold him forth as the prime mover of the expedition, in the advance, leading it on.” Johnson was “nothing more or less than that of a contractor, who had engaged, for hay, to furnish provisions to the troops; and that of a carrier, who undertaken, for reward, to transport troops and their baggage.”¹⁸

¹⁷ Eric Jay Dolin, *When America First Met China: An Exotic History of Tea, Drugs, and Money in the Age of Sail* (New York & London: Liveright Publishing Co., 2012), 146-148; “Commerce and Internal Improvement,” *Raleigh Register, and North-Carolina Gazette*, (Raleigh, NC) Friday, May 14, 1819

¹⁸ *St. Louis Enquirer*, (St. Louis, MO) Wednesday, August 25, 1819.

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The *Enquirer* saw nothing special about Johnson as a contractor, and even if he fulfilled his obligations, the paper could not “see what titles to mortal renown his performance would have conferred on him. “But,” grumbled the paper, “he did not comply with his undertakings. He did not furnish either provisions, or the means of transportation, at the time appointed, nor in the quantities stipulated.” The *Enquirer’s* accusations falsified information; Johnson served as a major cheerleader and public figurehead for the Expedition. He provided both transportation and provisions, although both admittedly proved faulty.¹⁹

Bad news arrived constantly for Johnson in the fall of 1819. During the second week of October a riverboat passed the *Johnson* twenty-five miles above Fort Osage on the Missouri, where the steamboat lay listing on the bank of the river. Keelboats took on the boat’s provisions and proceeded. The *Jefferson* floundered a few days afterward. Troops onboard marched to Council Bluffs, Iowa and made camp for the winter, with the possibility of setting out for the Yellowstone in the spring. Johnson’s troubles threatened to leave the War Department vulnerable to a litany of charges, so Calhoun stopped funding and the Expedition halted at Council Bluffs. The damage in Washington City proved more considerable than the fleeting praise Johnson received in the West. In December 1819, former U.S. Senator from Kentucky John Pope wrote to John Quincy Adams, Monroe’s Secretary of State, warning him of attacks on the

¹⁹ Ibid.

administration. Pope, a former Federalist, disliked Republicans and felt it his duty to inform Adams that the “honesty of the Johnsons is deeply implicated.”²⁰

Pope and other detractors never established Johnson’s dishonesty, for there was nothing he lied about. He took on a mission far too great for his knowledge and abilities, but he never stole or wrangled money from the government illegally. What he received he used to buy supplies and materials. Amos Kendall’s *Argus of Western America* credited Johnson with limited success, and even some of his doubters expressed support. Colonel Zachary Taylor, a Kentucky soldier and acquaintance of the Johnsons, wrote to James Johnson that “certain gentlemen” disapproved of Richard receiving an advance from Monroe for his contract to transport materials for the Yellowstone Expedition. Taylor took up Richard’s cause and told James he believed any charges against Richard were untrue and those that believed he filched the government had received incorrect information.²¹

Unfortunately for Johnson Congress refused to grant the Expedition any more money. The Senate initially granted more funding, but the House blocked any more being spent on what many members considered a lost cause. Johnson apparently learned a powerful lesson; he became more reasonable in his expectations politically and more

²⁰ *The Supporter*, (Chillicothe, OH) Wednesday, November 03, 1819; Thomas Marshall Green, *Historic Families of Kentucky* (Cincinnati: Robert Clark, 1889), 146-47; John Quincy Adams, December 1819 in Charles Francis Adams ed., *Memoirs of John Quincy Adams IV* (Philadelphia: J.P. Lippincott, 1877), 472.

²¹ *Argus of Western America*, March 9, 1820; Zachary Taylor to James Johnson, January 23, 1820 in Zachary Taylor Papers, 1774-1850, Kentucky Historical Society.
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moderate in his approach to money. Several outstanding legal suits between the Johnsons and the government continued in court. Eventually a jury granted a cash award to James Johnson. Richard worked out a deal with the War Department by which he expanded the Choctaw Academy. Some of his opponents objected, but the Choctaw Academy eventually became one of Johnson's most enduring institutional legacies. To his credit, Johnson paid off his creditors and generally restored his reputation throughout 1819-20. Republicans offered his name around for public office again. Some mentioned him for Postmaster-General, but at the end of 1819 the Kentucky General Assembly elected him to the state's vacant seat in the U.S. Senate²²

II.

Johnson arrived in Washington in January 1820. Established as a political mover in the West, Johnson's time in the Senate proved how effective his general likeability proved in furthering the course of democracy. In the 1820s Johnson began to encounter the opposition of southern gentry fearful of the political power of democracy in the West. Richard Johnson's reputation and empathy for the West led him to take positions very different from the southern coastal cabal during his political career. Those differences became more pronounced as the decade progressed. Johnson stood against economic elites in all forms and against planter privilege. He emerged from the decade a hero not only for westerners, but also for workers in northern cities. He deviated from

²² *Daily National Intelligencer*, April 13, 1820; *Niles Weekly Register*, Dec. 21, 1822; *Louisville Public Advertiser*, (Louisville, KY) Saturday, October 28, 1820; Meyer, 207.

Jeffersonian orthodoxy regularly, and by the end of the decade Johnson emerged as a nationalist not committed to the preservation of a strictly agrarian or plantation based economy, but to the geographic and social progress of the American nation. He told his colleagues that he carried into the Senate “those principles and those feelings which I am proud to see prevailing in the General Assembly of Kentucky.”²³

Johnson eluded the Relief War in Kentucky. The Republican General Assembly, acting on Johnson’s own principles, disbanded the Kentucky Court of Appeals and appointed a new court, this one sympathetic to debtors’ rights and the claims of the poor in general. The old court refused to recognize the new. Political civil war broke out in Kentucky. The conflict, called the Relief War after relief for debtors, led to personal violence among Kentucky legislators. Johnson sided with the General Assembly and the New Court. The Kentucky legislature elected Johnson to carry similar democratic policies to the U.S. Senate. Johnson assured Kentuckians they would “never find me in a disposition to shrink from my duties.”²⁴

Kentucky transformed slowly in the 1820s from a farm-dominated state to one with several large cities. Louisville particularly grew. A canal around the Falls of the Ohio allowed regular packet boats to service the city by 1820. Freight created scores of dock jobs for Louisville. Young men formerly resigned to farm work flooded the city.

²³ *Annals of Congress*, 16th Cong., 1st sess., 46.

²⁴ B. J. Bethurum, "Old and New Court Controversy," *Kentucky Law Journal* 6 (February 1918): 173–182.

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Merchants built warehouses and opened stores along the waterfront. Commerce boomed and Louisville gained its first heavy industry. Never an anti-industrial doctrinaire, Johnson strayed from Jefferson's vision for a pastoral America. From the outset of his life in politics, Johnson supported industry and hoped that manufacturing might gain a greater economic presence in Kentucky. He told James Monroe in 1820 that the citizens of Kentucky had "a deep interest" in the "success" of manufacturers moving into Kentucky, both from northern states and from Great Britain.²⁵

Johnson's understanding of manufacturers coincided with an extremely un-Democratic reliance on large banks to further his own interests. In 1819, Johnson refused to vote in the debates concerning the re-charter of the National Bank. A year later, Johnson used the services of at least three western banks (one in Louisville, one in Lexington, and one in Cincinnati) to shore up his finances during his early career as both a planter and politician. Although expedient at the time, Johnson's utilization of the banks later haunted him when he attempted to carve a national reputation in the Democratic Party. Western Democrats, imbued with Jackson's dislike of the Bank of the U.S. and banks in general, accused Johnson of cavorting with bankers for his own self-

²⁵ James A. Ramage and Andrea S. Watkins, *Kentucky Rising: Democracy, Slavery, and Culture from the Early Republic to the Civil War* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2011); Paul W. Gates, *The Farmer's Age: Agriculture, 1815-1860* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1960), 101; Richard M. Johnson to James Monroe, August 15, 1820 in W. Edwin Hemhill ed., *The Papers of John C. Calhoun* Vol. V, 1820-1821 (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1971), 330.

aggrandizement. For personal gain or not, Johnson encouraged the U.S. government to establish factories, such as one for small arms in Kentucky.²⁶

Johnson realized the commercial potential of western expansion earlier than most. Other southern Democrats cared little for the development of industry and commerce, especially in a territory few knew anything about. Johnson believed that commerce and industry sweeping the West might help the condition of the poor and middling whites but Indians as well. Johnson advised his fellow Senators that the “blessings of civilization,” not annihilation, inevitably ameliorated the condition of Native Americans. “The great means of influence over the sons of the forest,” informed Johnson, “are trade and intercourse.” Johnson’s shared his affinity for commerce with a growing number of northern and western Republicans. Some embraced both agrarianism and commerce as twin pillars for American economic expansion. Henry Clay championed this combination in his American System, which embraced high domestic tariffs to bolster American manufacturing concentrated in northern cities.

²⁶ *Niles’ Register*, Vol. 16 (April 17, 1819), 131; Richard M. Johnson to John C. Calhoun, May 22, 1820 in *The Papers of John C. Calhoun* Vol. V, 134-135; Andrew Jackson, John F. Brown & William White eds., *Messages of Gen. Andrew Jackson: with a Short Sketch of His Life* (Boston: Otis Broaders and Co., 1837), 419-420; For Jackson’s political battle over the Bank of the U.S., see Robert V. Remini, *Andrew Jackson and the Bank War: A Study in the Growth of Presidential Power* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1967); *Indiana Journal*, (Indianapolis, IN) Saturday, July 09, 1836; *Niles’ Weekly Register* Vol. 11 (September, 1816-March, 1817), 311.

While Johnson never embraced industry and become a Clay disciple, neither did he denigrate commercial pursuits or manufacturing.²⁷

Johnson's acceptance of nineteenth-century commerce pitted him against a powerful clique of Virginians and Carolina Republicans who openly despised industrialism. Aristocratic, and tied by economic necessity and social privilege to their massive plantations, they used their political offices to obstruct democratization of the U.S. economy and democratization of the political system. John Tyler, who served as U.S. Senator with Johnson, hated manufacturing and hated cities that fed factories. The United States foolishly looked to "became a manufacturing nation" while lands for agricultural growth existed. Tyler stretched his credibility when he claimed that manufacturing nations were more vulnerable than agricultural ones. Tyler saw no reason for the United States to rush through the pastoral period it found itself in. This lay in Tyler's limited geographic experience and in the culture of 1820s Virginia. Johnson's acceptance of commerce lay in his knowledge of its very real benefits. Virginia aristocrats' fear lay in Virginia's economic and social slide during the 1820s. Once the greatest state in the Union, Virginia transformed into a sleepy backwater

²⁷ *Annals of Congress*, 16th Cong., 1st sess., 83; Maurice G. Baxter, *Henry Clay and the American System* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1995), 34-54.
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dominated by an aristocratic gentry uninterested in Johnson's western conception of progress²⁸

No state exemplified aristocracy to antebellum Americans more than Virginia. Although the political power of the Tidewater elites waned, their culture and biases remained. Their finances increasingly depended on foreign investors' easy access to American exports, which the Tariff of 1824 weakened significantly. Debates over the Tariff of 1824 and its consequences revealed serious divisions from region to region, but the strongest support for economic protectionism emanated from the West and industrial North. Some southerners, particularly upland cotton planters, hailed the tariff. Powerful voices against the tariff came from every region, but coastal aristocrats condemned it with distinctive vehemence. Led by John Randolph of Roanoke, the Tidewater gentry met opposition fiercely, and remembered who opposed them. When Richard Johnson deigned to defend the Tariff of 1824, John Taylor, the venerable septuagenarian Virginian and early state rights theoretician answered him. Johnson and tariff supporters, said Taylor, ultimately supported nothing more than a plan where states may "rob" their neighboring states "to enrich themselves."²⁹

²⁸ Dan Monroe, *The Republican Vision of John Tyler* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2003), 46-48; Susan Dunn, *Dominion of Memories: Jefferson: Madison: and the Decline of Virginia* (New York: Basic Books, 2007), 8.

²⁹ *Niles' National Register* (July 21, 1827), 338; *Proceedings and Debates of the Virginia State Convention of 1829-1830: to which are Subjoined the New Constitution of Virginia and the Votes of the People* (Richmond: Samuel Shepher and Co., 1830), 401-402; Charles E. McFarland and Nevin E. Neal, "The Nascence of Protectionism: American Tariff Policies, 1816-1824," *Land Economics* 45 (Feb., 1969): 22-30; John [Type text]

Among the most imperious antebellum Virginians stood John Marshall. The Chief Justice of the United States began his career as a Federalist and ended it by famously opposing the policies of Andrew Jackson. Conservative and traditionalist by nature and education, Marshall often sided with the eastern elites. Westerners recognized this, and Richard Johnson and other democratically inclined politicians began to heed the strong anti-court sentiment emerging from their constituencies. In Johnson's case, he approached the Supreme Court armed with a long-held loathing of appointed justices. He overplayed his hand by assuming his Republican colleagues disliked the Court as much as he did.³⁰

In January, 1822, Johnson introduced an ill-conceived bill limiting the power of the Supreme Court. Johnson proposed taking the Court's power of judicial review away and making the Senate the *de facto* court of last appeal. The annoyed Chief Justice noted the limitations on the power of the judiciary, and treated Johnson's ideas scornfully. In a rambling speech, Johnson invoked ancient despots, the ghost of King Alfred, and near "Egyptian darkness" if the power of the Supreme Court to review legislature remained unchecked. The speech failed to impress John Marshall. He voiced

Taylor, reply to Richard M. Johnson on the Tariff, April, 1824 quoted in [Thomas Hart Benton] *Abridgment of the Debates of Congress, from 1789-1856* Vol. VII, 1821-1824 (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1858), 570.

³⁰ Jean Edward Smith, *John Marshall: Definer of a Nation* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1996), 4; R. Kent Newmeyer, *John Marshall and the Heroic Age of the Supreme Court* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 2001), 381.

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his annoyance to Henry Clay and joked about how many justices Johnson thought it took to declare a bill unconstitutional.³¹

Richard Johnson's western democratic principles and his identification with national democratic causes made him anathema to the ultraconservative aristocrats of Virginia's southern sister: North Carolina. U.S. Senator Weldon N. Edwards, who supported Johnson's enemy William Crawford in 1824, questioned Johnson's "*honest* zeal and interesting animation" in his debates in Congress. Edwards derided Johnson's democratic principles, claiming "vox populi, vox dei" as Johnson's mantra. Even Democratic southern politicians from the seaboard states opposed his western democratic principles. In December 1829, Johnson supported establishing a new armory "at some suitable point upon the Western waters." During the debate, Samuel Price Carson, a Democrat and one of the few wealthy men from North Carolina's mountainous western region, rose in the House and declared that "no part of the country possessed more valuable [water] power than the western part of the State of North Carolina." The argumentative and cantankerous Carson asked that the House consider the "western waters of the State of North Carolina." Johnson saw the set-up. Johnson told the representatives that he regretted Carson's motion, because he knew it was "calculated to produce a collision between the West and the South." Johnson

³¹ Richard M. Johnson, Speech before on the proposed Amendment to the Constitution, January 14, 1822 quoted in *Abridgment of the Debates of Congress* VII 145-154; John Marshall to Henry Clay, December 22, 1823 in Charles F. Hobson ed., *The Papers of John Marshall*, Vol. IX (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 365.

observed that the North and the South gained armories in their regions, at Springfield, Massachusetts and Harper's Ferry, Virginia respectively. The West deserved one as well.³²

In 1825, Johnson found himself locked in verbal combat with North Carolina's venerated Republican, Nathaniel Macon. Nearly seventy years old, ultraconservative, and resentful of the rest of the country's growth at the expense (financially and demographically) of the older southern states, Macon refused to vote for western improvements. Macon likely resented Johnson for his past support of tariffs, and he refused to support Johnson in his bids for national office in 1832 and 1836. When Johnson and William Kelly of Alabama supported a bill to finance the construction of a road from Missouri to Santa Fe, Macon balked. This triggered an outburst by Johnson, who accused the North Carolinian of unfairness. "Do you call for fortifications? We vote money to make them." Johnson continued. "Do you want an increase in the navy, to secure our commerce on the high seas, and to secure our seaboard in the case of war? We grant the sum necessary to accomplish the object." Johnson noted that Macon and other coastal southerners asked for \$500,000 to suppress West Indian piracy. His project

³² William S. Powell, *North Carolina Through Four Centuries* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 252; Weldon N. Edwards to Thomas Ruffin, December 9, 1816 in J.G. de Roulhac Hamilton *The Papers of Thomas Ruffin*, Vol. 1 (Raleigh: Edwards and Broughton Printing Co., 1918), 185; Richard M. Johnson and Samuel Price Carson, December 15, 1829 quoted in *Abridgment of the Debates of Congress, from 1789-1856* Vol. X, 1828-1830 (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1858), 579-580; John H. Wheeler, *Reminiscences and Memoirs of North Carolina and Eminent North Carolinians* (Baltimore, MD: Clearfield, 2001), 89-93.

for a road in the West cost only \$10,000. Exasperated, Johnson asked why there remained so many objections to supporting “commerce and security in the West.” Macon replied tersely, telling Johnson simply that maritime security mattered more because “the products of the West” benefited from eastern ports, their natural point of export.³³

Other coastal states thought Johnson beneath their gentry’s stature. As early as 1824, Johnson complained to John Quincy Adams that presidential candidate William Crawford of Georgia (Virginia born and routinely accused of haughtiness) conducted espionage against him. The Kentuckian probably knew that Crawford suspected Johnson and his brother John of pressuring John Calhoun into greater federal spending than the financially conservative Georgian approved of. Although he remained silent in public, Crawford privately thought Johnson unqualified for the post of Secretary of War, something Monroe apparently considered momentarily. In fact, Crawford judged all of the westerners Monroe vetted unworthy of cabinet post. Crawford later exerted his influence against Johnson and other westerners in 1823, when he ran the General Land Office. Another Georgian, aristocratic and northern-born Whig journalist Benjamin Perley Poore, called Johnson “slightly educated” and suggested that the colonel relied entirely too much on his war service to gain political capital. Poore felt that Johnson

³³ William Edward Dodd, *The Life of Nathaniel Macon* (Raleigh: Edwards and Broughton, 1903), 331-369, 391; Richard M. Johnson, Speech on internal Trade With Mexico, January 26, 1825 in *Abridgment of the Debates of Congress, from 1789-1856* VIII, 132-133; Nathaniel Macon, reply to Richard M. Johnson, January 26, 1825 in *Abridgment of the Debates of Congress, from 1789-1856* VIII, 133.

feigned a magnanimous refusal to fight for the Vice Presidential nomination. Poore ignored Johnson's long public service and wasn't convinced, like many in the West were, that Johnson killed Tecumseh. According to Poore, the Kentuckian would simply "electioneer for the Democratic nomination for the Vice-Presidency, basing his claim upon his having shot Tecumseh at the battle of the Thames."³⁴

Shooting Indians never helped Johnson's status among eastern gentry. Especially among Virginians, he suffered from guilt by association during the political rise of Andrew Jackson. Eastern Shore aristocrat and lawyer Littleton Waller Tazewell, who served as U.S. Senator from 1824 to 1832 and governor from 1834-1836, articulated the Tidewater Virginia aristocrats' perceptions of Jacksonian democracy. Jackson's political views denied "the correctness of certain propositions that have ever been held (in Virginia, at least) as fundamental truths of constitutional law." Jacksonian policies affirmed "in the confident language of authority, the propriety and justice of other propositions, which we, of Virginia, have ever regarded as political heresies." Total democracy, Tazewell warned, concerned the great Greek philosophers. The United States' imperial scale precluded total democracy. Tazewell and other coastal planters

³⁴ Charles Francis Adams ed., *The Memoirs of John Quincy Adams* Vol. VI (Philadelphia: Charles Lippincott & Company, 1875), 241-244, 261; U.B. Phillips, *Georgia and State Rights* (Washington, 1902), 95; Chase C. Mooney, *William H. Crawford, 1772-1834* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1974), 157, 175, 205; Benjamin Perley Poore, *Perley's Reminiscences of Sixty Years in the National Metropolis* (Philadelphia: Hubbard Brothers, 1886), 72, 153.

feared basic democratic reforms, and they stalled democratic agendas whenever possible (Tazewell especially annoyed Andrew Jackson).³⁵

Johnson's pet project, abolition of imprisonment for debt, brought him into direct conflict with the patrician Tazewell on the Senate floor. In April 1823 Johnson stood and blasted the condition of debtors in the United States. Every citizen, Johnson argued, "should be secured in the pursuit of happiness and protected from violence. He should never be degraded, unless he has been guilty of a crime." In a sentence that shocked some Senators, Johnson took democracy to its logical conclusion. "Equality of rights should be preserved," by which he meant the rights of white Americans. The law, Johnson explained, "should carefully avoid giving one control over the personal liberty of another. Debtors, cried Johnson, suffered virtual slavery. Many committed no crime, they only owed money. "If the debtor be innocent, you can never recall the punishment; nor has he any redress for such barbarity." States with laws allowing imprisonment for debt "clothed the creditor with the transcendent and despotic power of imprisonment," even if the debtor proved able to pay. The character of the debtor, lamented Johnson, was turned into that of a criminal.³⁶

³⁵ Norma Lois Peterson, *Littleton Waller Tazewell* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1983), xi, 134, 245; Littleton Waller Tazewell, *A Review of the Proclamation of President Jackson: of the 10th of December, 1832* (Norfolk: J.D. Chiselin, 1888), 3-4, 8.

³⁶ "Extracts From Col. Johnson's Speech in the American Senate, on Abolishing Imprisonment for Debt," *St. Louis Enquirer*, (St. Louis, MO) Saturday, April 19, 1823. [Type text]

Virginia's blue-bloods understood which states Johnson accused of acting tyrannically. Virginia's archaic laws allowed for debtor's imprisonment, and many aristocratic supporters still upheld the law's appropriateness. Archconservative Tazewell argued with Johnson, declaring that he saw no reason why debtors who retained property might not be imprisoned. On another occasion, Tazewell had quarreled with Johnson over the Kentuckian's plan to remove certain powers from the Supreme Court and create justices appointed by region. Johnson complained that the West remained under-represented on the Supreme Court. When Tazewell scoffed at Johnson's proposal, the Colonel told the Senate that Tazewell's comments habitually aimed to "degrade the western states." Johnson continued and accused the "old states" of securing rights they attempted to deny to the West.³⁷

Westerners exulted in Johnson's stand for debtors. Many still feared the consequences of their debt, but Johnson's thrown gauntlet emboldened not only westerners but urban workers as well. In Kentucky, newspapers began to place his name in consideration for higher office than even the U.S. Senate. During the summer of 1823 Kentucky's major newspapers mentioned Johnson as a supremely qualified candidate for election in the presidential election of 1824. Kentucky partisans of Henry Clay, by then Johnson's rival as much as a friend, quashed the rumors but Johnson's prestige

³⁷ Littleton Waller Tazewell, Speech on Imprisonment for Debt, January 17, 1825 in *Abridgment of the Debates of Congress*, from 1789-1856 Vol. VIII, 1824-1826 (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1858), 109-110; Richard M. Johnson, Speech on the Judiciary, February 16, 1825 in *Abridgment of the Debates of Congress VIII*, 158-159.
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unmistakably rose from his intercession for the common man. Johnson played an important part in the preparations for the election when he joined an increasingly vocal group of Republicans decrying the caucus system of nomination.³⁸

Virginia patricians dominated the Republican nominating caucus. They also picked Virginians as the Republican nominee. Jefferson, Madison, and Monroe all hailed from Piedmont Virginia. Southerners generally dominated the Republican caucus at the expense of the North and West. Virginia typically dominated the South. And Piedmont planters dominated Virginia. Although Republicans conducted nominating caucuses in public and the system was not secret as its opponents' charged, western Republicans turned against the inherently undemocratic system when the Republican caucus appeared ready to nominate William H. Crawford, a Virginia-born Georgia planter. Johnson publicly called the caucus system inexpedient and gathered twenty-three Congressman's signatures asking their colleagues if they concurred with their opinion of the caucus's perceived inexpediency.³⁹

A caucus nominated Crawford, but his presidential hopes proved stillborn not just from the method of nomination but also because of changes in United States' demographics. The West wanted a western president, so they ignored the caucus and vetted their preferred candidates "The wishes of the western states," said *the National*

³⁸ *Louisville Public Advertiser* (Louisville, KY) Saturday, August 9, 1823.

³⁹ Charles S. Sydnor, *The Development of Southern Sectionalism, 1819-1848*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1966), 159; *Niles Weekly Register*, February 24, 1824.

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Reporter, “is natural—is laudable—though sectional preference should never be put in competition with the general good.” Johnson believed that the development and growth of the West interlocked with the general good. Throughout 1824 he used his Congressional pulpit to bolster western commerce. Johnson willingly used federal dollars to make internal improvements in Kentucky. He lobbied the Senate for \$75,000 for the dredging of the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers.⁴⁰

Johnson also proposed a bill making the Supreme Court more geographically representative. Adding three justices from the West rectified an institution, Johnson believed, that left the West without “an atom of advantage.” The Court’s representation “disenfranchised” the West, thus justifying what Johnson called radical measures. Time and again, a still conservative Senate defeated Johnson’s measures. Westerners believed they remained at a disadvantage until a westerner became president. And in the summer of 1824, that eventuality looked quite probable.⁴¹

In 1824 General Andrew Jackson, the Hero of New Orleans, emerged as the choice of most westerners for the presidency. A slave-owner and strong defender of state rights, Jackson’s broad appeal calculated not only to impress western farmers but also urban workers. Jackson enjoyed the early support of Johnson and remembered the

⁴⁰ Meyer, *Col. Richard M. Johnson*, 219; *Daily National Journal*, August 21, 1824; “Speech of Mr. R. M. Johnson, of Ken. In Senate of the United States, on the Bill Appropriating \$75, 000, to Remove Obstructions from the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers,” *Daily National Intelligencer* (Washington, DC) Wednesday, June 23, 1824.

⁴¹ *Louisville Public Advertiser* (Louisville, KY) Saturday, January 29, 1825; *Daily National Journal*, (Washington, DC) Tuesday, March 15, 1825.

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loyalty of Johnson and his brother John Telemachus. Jackson publicly supported Richard Johnson in his unsuccessful bid for the U.S. Senate in 1828. The General also undertook small favors for Richard Johnson, such as using his influence for his friends and political allies. The Johnson family loyally supported the Tennessean in the election of 1824; when the majority of Kentucky's representatives, led by Henry Clay, voted in the House for John Quincy Adams, John Telemachus and three others voted for Jackson.⁴²

Andrew Jackson treated Johnson as a trustworthy lieutenant throughout his presidency. When Jackson took office in 1829, it seemed only a matter of time until Richard Johnson became lumped in with Jackson. Eastern elites ostracized both men. Southern patricians disliked Johnson for his domestic habits, but his politics truly rankled them more. Jackson similarly faced slander about his wife, and women emerged as an area of commonality between the two. Aristocratic social privilege mandated absolute order within the established social milieu. Black women, white women, slave women, and free women especially represented different places within that order. Since

⁴² Jon Meacham, *American Lion: Andrew Jackson in the White House* (New York: Random House, 2008), 41-51; Andrew Jackson to John Telemachus Johnson, October 30, 1825 in *The Papers of Andrew Jackson* VI, 116; Moser and Cliff eds., *The Papers of Andrew Jackson* VI, 28; William Grimshaw, *History of the United States, from Their First settlement as Colonies, to the Period of the Fifth Census, in 1830* (Grigg and Elliott, 1840), 307-308; Thomas P. Abernethy, "Andrew Jackson and the Rise of South-Western Democracy," *The American Historical Review* 33 (Oct., 1927): 64-77; Richard M. Johnson, Speech before the House of Representatives, January, 1819 quoted in *Abridgment of the Debates of Congress, from 1789-1856* Vol. VI, 1817-1821 (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1858), 247.

men defined the social order, any deviation caused considerable social distress.

Tidewater southerners never experienced the equalizing affects of the frontier, and they became especially incensed at women acting outside their designated roles. Johnson interacted with the most famous controversy regarding the social place of women, the famous Petticoat Affair, during Andrew Jackson's first term.⁴³

Aristocrats in the South Atlantic states notably recoiled at the elevation of another woman during the Jacksonian Era, Peggy Eaton. Heartbroken and angry over the death of his beloved wife Rachel, Andrew Jackson immediately saw a parallel in the tongue wagging gossip over his Secretary of War John Eaton's marriage to the recently widowed Margaret O'Neal Timberlake. When the vivacious and beautiful Margaret became the new Mrs. Eaton, some speculated that Margaret's late husband, John, killed himself because of Peggy and John Eaton's rumored affair.⁴⁴

Jackson saw only the reflection of the slanders his late wife endured. Jackson's sensibility to Rachel's memory caused him to accuse members of his cabinet of lies and slander. Most of the supposed liars and slanderers hailed from the South Atlantic States. John Calhoun, hailed by his contemporaries and nineteenth-century historians as

⁴³ Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 192-240; Amrita Chakrabarti Myers, *Forging Freedom: Black Women and the Pursuit of Liberty in Antebellum Charleston* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 77-111.

⁴⁴ John F. Marszalek, *The Petticoat Affair: Manners, Mutiny, and Sex in Andrew Jackson's White House* (New York: Free Press, 1997).

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consummately proper, and his Charleston-bred aristocratic wife snubbed Peggy Eaton. The other cabinet wives followed suit. Georgia's John Berrien and his wife disapproved of the Eatons. So too did North Carolina's John Branch. Jackson realized that even Jacksonians from the old southern states along the Atlantic held any socialization with Peggy, not from "good society," in utter contempt.⁴⁵

Furious, Jackson threatened his cabinet, and looked for political allies. His Secretary of State, the widower Martin Van Buren, doted on Peggy, but Jackson sought a powerful westerner known for egalitarianism and open-mindedness, as well as affability. Jackson proved unwilling to engage the South Atlantic aristocrats in his cabinet on the subject, so he dispatched Richard Johnson. The Kentuckian repeatedly came to the intransigent cabinet members, attempting to impress upon them the importance of socializing with the Eatons for the sake of the government. Johnson served as a go-between cabinet and president expressly at the wish of Jackson. Although unable to save the situation (Jackson forced his cabinet to resign), Johnson gained a reputation for kindly but firmly resisting the aristocratic pretensions of the South Atlantic gentry. He also learned that not even prominent whites like the Eatons were safe from the

⁴⁵ Andrew Jackson to John Christmas McLemore, May 3, 1829 in Daniel Feller, Harold D Moser, Laura-Eve Moss, and Thomas Coens eds., *The Papers of Andrew Jackson* Vol. VII, 1829 (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2007), 200; Hermann Von Holst, *John C. Calhoun* (Boston: Houghton & Mifflin and Co., 1882), 87; Kirsten E. Wood, "One Woman so Dangerous to Public Morals": Gender and Power in the Eaton Affair, *Journal of the Early Republic* 17 (Summer, 1997): 237-275.

haughtiness of aristocrats of the oldest southern states, a fact that would haunt him during the election of 1836.⁴⁶

III.

Johnson's reputation finally coalesced during Andrew Jackson's first term. He helped Jackson weather the Eaton Affair, and duly supported the President's congressional agenda. But in 1829 and 1830, Johnson earned fame for his involvement in the national dialogue over the relationship between church and state. In 1829, Johnson embroiled his public image in a controversy over Sunday Mail petitions, attempts by evangelicals to convince the government to stop running mail on Sunday. Due to his relative seniority in the House of Representatives, Johnson assumed headship of a committee composed to address evangelical sabbatarians' request to halt the delivery of the government's mail on Sunday.

Since its *de facto* creation by Jefferson and Madison, the Democratic-Republican Party supported religious disestablishment and secularism in the public square. The Constitution's Establishment Clause spoke only to a national religious establishment and officer qualifications. It left the states to their own devices. Most states except in New England disestablished state churches in the two decades that succeeded the American Revolution. Virginia led the way among southern states. James Madison

⁴⁶ *Maryland Gazette*, (Annapolis, MD) Thursday, July 28, 1831; *New-York Spectator*, (New York, NY) Friday, July 29, 1831.
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joined the persecuted Baptists and Methodists of Virginia to demolish the Church of England's privileged position in Virginia society. In western Virginia, both denominations gained converts and social standing. Virginia's elites feared the powerful social change that came with increased Baptists and Methodists converts.⁴⁷

Johnson in many ways reflected both American Protestantism's continuity and the religious transformation that occurred during the religious movements collectively known as the Second Great Awakening. His participation in the religious controversies that pervaded the United States reflected both a strong appreciation for the United States' religious heritage and an even greater appreciation for the liberties embraced by the peoples who settled the West.

Piety of the sort prevalent during the Second Great Awakening never influenced Kentuckians to the degree similar movements influenced New England and the Mid-Atlantic States. Eastern Protestant morality included respectable social behavior. Public temperance, highly defined gender roles, abstention from gambling, and marital fidelity all defined the pursuit of Christian holiness for respectable Christians. In the West, democratic gender norms and public consumption of alcohol typified many Protestant denominations. They also consorted with slaveholders, something considered taboo among urban northeastern Protestants. Richard Johnson represented the majority of

⁴⁷ Gordon Wood, *Empire of Liberty: A History of the Early Republic, 1789-1815* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 579; Ralph Ketcham, *James Madison: A Biography* (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, original 1971), 163.

western Baptists' social acceptance of alcohol and slave-holding. Johnson owned slaves, kept his own home well stocked with whiskey, and drank regularly.⁴⁸

Johnson's personal life handicapped him among the respectable easterners but not in Kentucky. His loyalty to Julia Chinn, the muted but still public knowledge of the relationship, and Johnson's genuine dislike of evangelical reformers confirmed his predilection for governmental secularism. Johnson used religious articulations sparingly in his political or personal discourse. Despite maintaining the public aesthetic of himself as a "zealous and devoted Christian," Johnson only occasionally attended the Baptist Church at Great Crossings in Scott County.⁴⁹

A nominal Baptist, Johnson nevertheless disregarded domestic facets of the evangelical piety that increasingly characterized the older Protestant groups in Kentucky such as Baptists and Methodists. The movement affected Johnson's brother John, who became a Disciples of Christ Minister. The state of Kentucky experienced considerable religious enthusiasm from 1810 to 1830. Alexander Campbell, a Scottish minister educated and ordained in the Presbyterian tradition, preached around the state advocating a departure from traditional Calvinism. His followers split from orthodox Presbyterians. Baptists, Presbyterians, and Campbell's Disciples of Christ all exhibited

⁴⁸ Bill J. Leonard, *Baptists in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 15; Meyer, *Col. Richard M. Johnson*, 368.

⁴⁹ John B. Boles, *Religion in Antebellum Kentucky* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1976), 31-51; Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 60-61; John Rogers, *The Biography of Elder J.T. Johnson* (Cincinnati, 1861), 296.

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the increasing democratization of Christianity in the West. One whole band of Presbyterians in Kentucky and Tennessee, the Cumberland Presbyterians, separated from the usually stable national denomination entirely over emotionalized revivalism.⁵⁰

Revivals brought both sinner and pious together under the (sometimes literal) tent of conversion. Through revival culture crude westerners on the margins of society claimed the same piety of respectable eastern Christian through the language of conversion experiences. The emotionalized tenor of camp meetings encouraged such conversions, so the West's religious composition remained far less organized and less predicated on visible and sacramental piety. Even Presbyterians, deemed more severe and less tolerant of profligacy than their neighbors, struggled against the license of the frontier. Still, evangelical morality made inroads, largely through the two great religious groups that initially settled Kentucky: Methodists and Baptists.⁵¹

In Kentucky, the two groups formed the bulk of orthodox and respectable religion and even worked together in ecumenical Sunday schools and revivals. Both denominations weighted an emotional conversion experience greater than creeds and confessions. Likewise the supposed need to separate Christian believers from non-believers remained less pronounced in the West than in the East. Frontier culture's raw society maintained a different standard for respectability and Western Christians

⁵⁰ Ibid; Elder John Smith, *Raccoon John Smith: Frontier Kentucky's Most Famous Preacher* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2005), 321.

⁵¹ Robert Davidson, *History of the Presbyterian Church in the State of Kentucky* (New York: Robert Carter, 1847), 127.

exercised morality broadly. The churches of eastern elites, Episcopalians, Presbyterians and Unitarians, held no significant social sway in frontier states, so Baptists, Methodists, and New School Presbyterians filled the voids, joined by small Episcopal inroads in the burgeoning cities. As the West filled, a slave-owing plantation class formed. Patriarchal and intent on emulating the prosperity associated with the East, Kentucky masters mainstreamed Baptist and Methodist congregations away from their more egalitarian and radical roots.⁵²

Kentucky and the West's embrace of respectable evangelicalism lay in the need for prosperous westerners to project their elite societal status without embracing the Episcopal Church and to a lesser degree Presbyterianism. The legacy of Anglican establishment remained fresh for many Kentuckians barely a generation removed from Virginia's Episcopal domination of the colony and subsequently of the state's religious life. Not surprisingly, they embraced both a vibrant religious life and an aggressively secular state. Westerners drew an important distinction between their religious and political lives. Kentuckians and westerners in general associated state-sponsored religious authority with authoritarianism. Many Kentucky settlers left Virginia to escape debts, often held by wealthy Anglican planters. Others left to practice their faith without

⁵² Philip N. Mulder, *Controversial Spirit: Evangelical Awakenings in the South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 113; Christine Leigh Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997).

the ignominious label of dissenter. In the case of Baptist and Methodist Kentuckians, they formed a numerical majority in Virginia by 1790.⁵³

Despite being irreligious in the believers' sense of the word, religion figured prominently in Johnson's conception of his charitable duty. He believed in a powerful social position for religion and for the reforms brought about by religious Americans. Yet even his acceptance of religious reform remained bound to a strictly temporal reformation of human character and society. Souls might be saved, but restoring individuals on the societal fringe to full participation in a democratic society remained Johnson's first priority. He articulated as much when wrote to a Baptist minister in 1828 about the efforts of Baptist churches to support the Choctaw Academy. "I was very much gratified that to there existed a most extraordinary revival of religion in this neighborhood; about two hundred and fifty new converts have already joined the Crossing Baptist Church, about two miles from the school."⁵⁴

Johnson embraced a broadly Protestant worldview, and therefore also applauded the "vast number who have joined the adjacent churches." For Johnson, "the most pleasing part" of his narrative dwelled in "the influence which this stir of religion has had upon the students of the Choctaw Academy." A number of young Native American

⁵³ Leo Damrosch, *Tocqueville's Discovery of America* (Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 2010), 50-52; Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1921), 110; Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740-1790* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 309-310.

⁵⁴ Richard M. Johnson to Rev. Brantley, June 24, 1828 in "Revivals," *The American Baptist Magazine* 8 (1828): 250
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men at the school joined “the Church at the Great Crossings, and the respectable Methodist Society at Georgetown, about four miles distant.” A pleased Johnson “had the satisfaction myself to see other students added to the Crossing Church, a few days since, at which time fifty were baptized. This solemn ceremony was performed in the presence of several thousand admiring and deeply affected spectators.”⁵⁵

Johnson and Baptist parishioners of Scott County’s appreciation for Indian baptisms hinged less on interest in the salvific condition of their souls and more on their acceptance and emulation of white society. Johnson’s own interest “in the scene seemed greatly to be increased by the fact that the native sons of the forest composed a part of the subjects for baptism.” Johnson believed that youthful Indians embracing white religiosity boded well for future generations of Native Americans. Even sympathetic whites understood that Indians, overwhelmed by white America in their inevitable march west, stood a better chance of surviving if they in essence became white sooner rather than later. Whites saw this cultural and religious transformation not as a tragic loss of identity but instead as the workings of a gracious God saving a people through divine grace in spite of their heathen hearts’ unwillingness to embrace Christian atonement.⁵⁶

In this vein Johnson joyfully wrote that his Christianized Indian students “are composed indiscriminately of the young men and boys down to nine years of age.” The

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

son of a Creek chief and others spoke testimonies in front of church, an exercise rendered more exciting from the Indians' use of English than by its spiritual connotations. Johnson, ever proud of his patronage, opened his home for religious meetings "The students have their prayer meeting this evening at my house, by invitation, and they have their regular weekly prayer meetings at their school rooms." Johnson bragged that their devotion "would not be disparaged in comparison with their white brethren for interesting and correct views on the subject of religion." Religion, however, merely served as a vehicle. The great benefit of the school remained tied to incorporating Indians into American society.

The greatest pleasure that I experience from a communication of these facts arises from the conviction of my own mind that the change is real and of divine origin, judging from the change in their conduct, in their temper and in their dispositions. Their humility and meekness would do honor to any Christian community. The Christian may rejoice in the full confidence that God, in his providence, has smiled upon this institution, and intends it for the useful and desirable purpose of civilizing and Christianizing our red brethren within the United States.

Johnson's piety expressed itself in the looser moral parameters of the frontier. He helped Indians. Because of this, few of his neighbors held his enslaved wife against him. Devout young Indian men prayed and read devotions at Johnson's home, where Julia Chinn still presided in her matrimonial role in 1828. None of his Baptist neighbors seemed to care

that these prayer meetings, ostensibly designed to nurture Christian piety, took place in the home of fornicator and race-mixer.⁵⁷

Lyman Beecher, a Connecticut-born Presbyterian minister, and Josiah Bissell Jr., an evangelical merchant from Rochester, New York, directly opposed the very sort of moral laxity displayed by Johnson. In 1828 the two helped found the General Union for the Promotion of the Christian Sabbath. Beecher's early ministry in Boston revealed a man of genuine faith firmly opposed to intemperance, slavery, Catholicism, infidelity, and gambling. "Lotteries," as gambling was known, particularly riled this pious son of the Puritans. Beecher's ministry took him ultimately to Cincinnati. Beecher and Bissell understood the Christian Sabbath as a rigidly holy day, wherein no commercial or even governmental business rightly took place. Since 1810, the United States' government ran mail on every day it received mail, much to the chagrin of Northern Evangelicals such as Timothy Dwight, Yale's President until his death in 1817. In the latter half of the 1820s, evangelical northerners flooded Congress with petitions designed to uphold public observance of the Sabbath. The government's decision to run mail on Sunday served as a powerful rallying cry, and petitioners inundated Congress.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Michael C. Coleman, *Presbyterian Missionary Attitudes Toward American Indians, 1837-1893* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1985), 33-51; Richard M. Johnson to Rev. Brantley, June 24, 1828.

⁵⁸ Steven K. Green, *The Second Disestablishment: Church and State in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 111-12; James C. White ed., *The Personal Reminiscences of Lyman Beecher* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1882), 13; Richard R. John, "Taking Sabbatarianism Seriously: The Postal System, the Sabbath, and the [Type text]"

The sheer number of petitions convinced the Senate Committee on the Post Office and Public Roads to hold hearings. Johnson, long a confirmed anti-cleric of the Jeffersonian school, headed the Senate's committee. Johnson's leadership indicated to the Sabbatarians that the Senators took a very different view of the Sabbath from their colleagues in the House of Representatives. Over the next year, Johnson's political status revolutionized by his (supposed) authorship of what came to be known as the Sunday Mail Report. Although in fact written by Obadiah Smith, a young clerk who shared Johnson's boarding house, the Kentucky Senator assumed headship of the Committee's report. The Report began with a powerful recognition that while the institutional framework of American democracy was not explicitly religious, theistic and more explicitly Christian morality and moral expression pervaded the political culture of the United States.

By the title and design of our work; by the memory of those who fled from Holland to Plymouth, because in that land of merchandise they could not enjoy a quiet Sabbath, or accustom their children to keep it holy; by all the blessings, civil and religious, which exist in close alliance with that day, which have been our birthright, and are the just inheritance of the future generations of our children; and by all our obligations, as patriots to our country, and as Christians to our God, we consider ourselves called upon to animadvert upon the facts, principles, and reasonings contained in this Report.

Transformation of American Political Culture," *Journal of the Early Republic* 10 (Winter 1990): 517-567.

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Johnson nevertheless refused to countenance a religious observance's creep into the working of the federal state. The report rejected any change in the government's mail policy.⁵⁹

Johnson's report went one step further, faulting the evangelical movement as intrusive and destructive toward American liberties. Yet for all of the apparently anti-religious text in Johnson's report, he and his committee members essentially viewed the debate over Sunday mails as intra-Christian and not between believer and non-believer. Some Christian denominations valued the observance of the Sabbath more than others. "It is not the legitimate province of the Legislature to determine which religion is true, and what false." Congress refused to weigh in on what was essentially a sectarian proposition. Johnson's statement indicated that he thought the status quo perfectly consistent with constitutional liberties. The U.S. government in no way encroached upon religious observances. Indeed, the government recognized the preeminent place of orthodox Protestantism routinely in the nineteenth century.⁶⁰

Johnson's report sent shockwaves through the American religious establishment. Many saw Johnson's broadside as a blatant swipe against religious urban northerners. President Jackson encountered serious opposition from Philadelphia's Ezra Styles Ely, pastor of Third Presbyterian and an increasingly loud and annoying critic of the

⁵⁹ [Obadiah Smith], *Review of a Report of the Committee, to whom was referred the Several Petitions on the Subject of Mails on the Sabbath* (Washington: Govt. Printing Office, 1829).

⁶⁰Ibid.
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President's lenient handling of John and Peggy Eaton. In 1827, Ely used a sermon to propose a "Christian Party" in politics to ensure the election of orthodox Protestants. President Jackson's past connections to Ely ensured that the Presbyterian minister supported Jackson from his pulpit, and Ely increasingly expected Jackson to support evangelical political involvement. Jackson, himself increasingly religious after the death of his beloved Rachel in 1828, enthusiastically invoked American's right to freedom of religion. Yet he refused to lend his voice to Ely's program, which included stopping Sunday Mail. The President never condoned state sovereignty over churches in any form but merely thought it wise not to conflate the two operationally. He therefore declined to support Ely's plan, earning the minister's ire. Ely's hopes of electing politicians devoted to acting "upon purely religious principles on all civil matters" betrayed his own departure from Calvinist orthodoxy, grounded as it was in the Augustinian tradition of "two kingdoms," one temporal, and one spiritual. Ely's reputation as an extremely ambitious man also caused Jackson to withhold his support.⁶¹

Johnson intended to make a political statement with the report but not to redefine the relationship between church and state. Evangelicals increasingly sided against Jackson's party. Spurred along by parties such as the Anti-Masons, middle class evangelicals spurned communion with a party they deemed licentious. Leonard Bacon, a

⁶¹ *The Utica Magazine* (March, 1827-March, 1828), 5; Meacham, *American Lion*, 86-88; John Quincy Adams in Charles Francis Adams ed., *Memoirs of John Quincy Adams: comprising portions of his diary from 1795 to 1848* VIII (Philadelphia: J.P. Lippincott, 1876), 184.

Congregationalist minister trained at Yale, exemplified their judgment when he preached a sermon that, according to Lyman Beecher, made the name of Jackson “distasteful to the moral and religious feeling of the people.” Johnson saw the Report as a response to the overreach of anti-Jacksonian New England evangelicals into politics. He ordered 3,000 copies of the report and its words found the expected affirmation and denigration, friends and foes. The Jacksonian press, led by the *United States Telegraph*, gushed at Johnson’s report. “The sentiments advanced by Col. Johnson,” boasted the *Telegraph*, “are in unison with those of every man of sense, and will only be carped at by those puritanical bigots who would have the world believe that none are so holy as they.” These selfsame evangelicals abused “the Influences of religion for the worst of purposes.” Col. Johnson, the *Telegraph* assured its readers, did credit himself by stopping this insidious overreach from homegrown zealots.⁶²

Although they shared significant theological ideals, western evangelicals consciously avoided being thought of as politically minded. The two largest religious groups in the region, the Baptists and Methodists, applauded Johnson’s report. The Kentucky Baptist Association approved of Johnson’s Sabbath report. The association “sincerely advise[d] all friends of civil and religious liberty, to refuse to subscribe any petition that has the least tendency to influence legislative powers to act upon religious

⁶² Ronald P. Formisano, *For the People: American Populist Movements from the Revolution to the 1850s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2008), 117-140; *Aurora & Pennsylvania Gazette*, (Philadelphia, PA) Thursday, January 22, 1829; “Col. Richard M. Johnson, the Sabbath, &c.,” *United States’ Telegraph*, (Washington, DC) Tuesday, February 3, 1829;
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matters.” Kentucky’s Baptists considered “an association of civil and ecclesiastical power, or an union of Church and State, as one of the greatest calamities which could befall our country.” Such a development, they warned, “should be resisted in every possible shape in which it may be presented.” The national *Baptist Magazine* saw Johnson as a champion not of secular intrusion on religion, but religious liberty’s guardian. Noting Johnson’s membership in the Baptist Church, the *Baptist Magazine* told its readers that Johnson’s report showed “with what extreme jealousy the inhabitants of the new world regard the first approaches of the civil magistracy towards questions of a religious character.” The report clearly illustrated “how concerned” Johnson and the Jacksonians on the committee were “to preserve the principles of their holy religion pure from worldly admixtures, and its sacred institutions, from being touched by the hand of political power.”⁶³

Authoritarian religiosity offended westerners liberty-loving sensitivities as much as authoritarian politics. Johnson’s report voiced the sensitivities of the West against intrusion by any power that derived its power from a source other than the western people. Calls, ostensibly by God but seconded by democratic votes in local congregations, formed the basis of Baptist and Methodist pastoral ordination. Northeastern urban evangelicals, and some southern divines, remained more attached to authoritarian and aristocratic forms well into the era of Jackson. To that end, they

⁶³ W.T. Brantly, *The Columbian Star and Literary Index* I (Philadelphia: Marten & Boden, 1829), 285; *The Baptist Magazine* (January, 1829), 340.
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despised Johnson's report and saw it as an immoral and licentious use of the federal state to squelch moral reform (southerners consciously began to see abolition as something other than moral reform in the 1830s). One Virginia Presbyterian complained that that Johnson misrepresented Sunday Mail advocates. "Mr. Johnson," the complaint went, seemed "alarmed at the simultaneous exertions of citizens of every rank and denomination of Christians in our country." Johnson of course disagreed with that basic premise. Every rank and denomination of Christians actually appeared to *disagree* on the importance of the Sabbath. Western Baptists and Methodists kept the Sabbath holy with powerful and vibrant worship, but refused to place the dour social strictures on the day embraced by New England's Congregationalists and Presbyterians and the southern slaveocracy's order-obsessed Episcopalians and Presbyterians.⁶⁴

Johnson and the West foresaw a society with every unwarranted authority removed. Only the voice of the people legitimized political or religious officialdom. Louisville, Kentucky's main paper, the *Public Advertiser*, pronounced to its readership that Johnson stood "upon much higher ground" than the average politician. "His celebrated report on the subject of the mails, has evinced that he is as much alive to the religious liberties of his country" as any other politician. His country, the West, was ruled by religious Americans fully embracing liberty of worship and fully committed

⁶⁴ R. Carlyle Buley, *The Old Northwest: The Pioneer Period, 1815-1840* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, original 1950), 417-488; "Sunday Mails," *Niles Weekly Register* 36 (March-September, 1829), 5.
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the freedoms guaranteed by the federal state, so long as there was no conflation of the two.⁶⁵

⁶⁵ “Col. R.M. Johnson,” *Louisville Public Advertiser*, (Louisville, KY) Saturday, May 23, 1829.
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The Cause of Democracy

The *New York Herald* in 1830 devoted an increasing amount of print to the political workings of Col. Richard Johnson. Johnson already enjoyed a reputation as a war hero and he had served as a U.S. Representative and Senator from Kentucky. Many disliked the Johnson's politics. His politics frightened southerners, precisely because he transcended democracy as articulated by Jefferson and Jackson and espoused a form of proto-populism. Like most Jacksonians, Johnson used populist language to deplore imprisonment for debt and to praise working Americans. Praise for working Americans implicitly implied political distancing from the American urban business class, who voted for Henry Clay's Whigs. While many southern and western Jacksonians only denounced wealthy capitalist elites, Johnson excoriated the slave South, especially its patrician representatives, with equal vehemence.

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Urban workers also perceived Johnson as the guardian of the republic against evangelical intervention. While they overstated Johnson's objections to religion in the public square, Johnson nevertheless accepted public praise as a custodian of basic American freedoms. In each case, Johnson butted against establishment forces allied

¹ *Mechanics' Free Press*, (Philadelphia, PA) Saturday, March 27, 1830; Ronald P. Formisano, *For the People: American Populist Movements from the Revolution to the 1850s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2008), 144-45.

with the Whigs and Democrats. Johnson practiced democracy to the greatest possible extent without taking the last possible step of embracing emancipation for enslaved Americans. While imperfect, Johnson's legacy of antebellum democracy was far and away the most complete of any major political figure.²

II.

Andrew Jackson appreciated Richard Johnson's political support, but the two men saw democracy totally differently. Jackson grew tired of Johnson constantly writing to him and telling him to more actively engage the people. For all his democratic rhetoric, Jackson preferred to practice politics like the aristocrats who preceded him as President. He refused to engage the people personally, and refused to take up the cause of the people in the visceral way Johnson did. Johnson attributed Jackson's troubles in the election of 1828 to the President's unwillingness to be the democrat he claimed. "If you had visited the various parts of the U. States by invitation or otherwise," Johnson lectured, "the contest would have been over long since & the falsehoods against you would have fallen dead from the mouth of slander." Jackson disregarded Johnson. He allowed the accusation of bigamy to be answered by surrogates speaking for him in the press.³

² *Louisville Public Advertiser*, (Louisville, KY) Saturday, April 17, 1830.

³ Leland W. Meyer, *The Life and Times of Colonel Richard M. Johnson of Kentucky* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1932), 249; Lynn Hudson Parsons, *The Birth of Modern Politics: Andrew Jackson, John Quincy Adams, and the Election of 1828* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 189-198.

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Johnson returned to Congress in 1829. His reputation outpaced Jackson's in working-class urban precincts. Workers noticed the differences between Johnson and most Jacksonians. "Strenuous efforts," exclaimed the New York *Working Man's Advocate*, "have been made all over to the country to injure [Johnson's] character, and prevent his holding a seat again within the walls of the capital." *Working Man's Advocate* noted how "the orthodox are afraid of his influence." The orthodox, according to the *Working Man's Advocate*, included those who defended the established social and religious order. Johnson supported the people above all else, even if the people proved to be workers or anti-sabbatarians. Despite his unwillingness to place the government's official stamp on evangelical Protestantism, Jackson became an increasingly pious representative of the planter class during his presidency. When Jackson referred to the "real people" of the Democracy he referred to planters, along with workingmen and small farmers. Johnson, unlike Jackson, sought to actualize the two latter groups at the expense of the slaveholding master class.⁴

Johnson tried to reconcile differences with President Jackson. He reminded Jackson of his friendship for him, "I have been your friend in good & evil report," Johnson reminded the President. "As I am a so like a plain blunt man, I speak—I have not left you in seven troubles, and so far as I have any power I shall not leave you in the seventieth." Johnson loyally stood by the President, even when Jackson's temper and

⁴ *Working Man's Advocate* (New York), December 19, 1829; Marvin Meyers, *The Jacksonian Persuasion: Politics and Belief* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1957), 14.

anger over the Petticoat Affair threatened to bring down the government. One of the cabinet members who experienced Jackson's wrath, Samuel D. Ingham, remembered that Johnson, a "friend of us all," tried to find some room for dialogue during the stand-off between Jackson and his cabinet. Some opposition newspapers claimed that Jackson ordered Johnson to act as intercessor between president and cabinet, but Johnson acted without any coercion or orders from Jackson. A friend to Jackson and his cabinet members, Johnson used his popularity to attempt reconciliation between Jackson and the wayward cabinet members shunning Peggy Eaton.⁵

Johnson's desire to reconcile Jackson with his government trumped considerable political disagreements that existed between them. Johnson was, according to Martin Van Buren, "a friend of the human race" during the Petticoat Affair. "All who needed his services in any honorable way could have them." Johnson especially wanted to help Calhoun. Van Buren described Johnson as "not only willing but anxious to serve" the South Carolina Senator. Johnson's innate sense of loyalty left him feeling indebted to Calhoun ever since the Yellowstone Expedition ten years earlier. Johnson went to so far as to lie to Jackson about Calhoun's feelings over his conduct in Florida years earlier.⁶

Johnson told Jackson that he had several conversations with Calhoun while he was preparing the minority report supporting Jackson. "Mr. Calhoun," he pleadingly told

⁵ Meyer, *Col. Richard M. Johnson*, 266; *Niles' Weekly Register*, July 30, 1831.

⁶ Martin Van Buren, *The Autobiography of Martin Van Buren II* in *Annual Report of the American Historical Association for 1918* (Washington: Govt Printing Office, 1920), 377.

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Jackson, “always spoke of you with respect & kindness.” Calhoun, Johnson told Jackson, approved of the course taken by Congressmen to exonerate Jackson of any wrongdoing. “He never expressed to me any disapprobation of your conduct on that occasion.”

Johnson knowingly lied, largely because he believed any option appropriate to reconcile two men he cared for. Johnson was not stupid, and he obviously knew the truth. He also knew that the record proved him wrong. Shortly after Johnson wrote to Jackson, Francis Preston Blair’s *Daily Globe* exposed Calhoun’s attempt to censure Jackson over Florida. Johnson’s friendship with Jackson appeared unshakeable. Johnson told Jackson he felt more for their friendship than simple duty.⁷

For all his protestations of constancy and friendship to Jackson, Johnson also harbored serious concerns over Jackson’s commitment to the people. Far from being a “willing tool” of Jackson, Johnson opposed, him, vigorously, when Jackson chose to follow ideology instead of the people’s will. On more than occasion Johnson openly disagreed with Jackson, as in the case of the Maysville Road. Jackson vetoed federal funding for the project, which he viewed as beneficial to local interests. Johnson and most westerners embraced the building of the Maysville Road. Western Democrat and Western Whig alike cheered the improvement.⁸

Johnson saw the benefits the road provided. Southern planters, filled with state rights philosophy, despised the idea of the federal government paying for internal

⁷ Meyer, *Col. Richard M. Johnson*, 271.

⁸ Meyer, *Col. Richard M. Johnson*, 274; *United States’ Telegraph*, (Washington, DC) Tuesday, May 18, 1830.

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improvements. Jackson, a southern planter who affirmed state rights throughout his two terms, planned on vetoing the bill. Johnson, furious, confronted Jackson in his office. On the edge of his chair and holding out an open hand, Johnson passionately pleaded with Jackson. “General! If this hand were an anvil on which the sledge hammer of the smith was descending and a fly were to light upon it in time to receive the blow,” Johnson shouted, “he would not crush it more effectively than you will crush your friends in Kentucky if you veto that bill.”⁹

Johnson’s insinuation that his veto betrayed westerners angered Jackson, and the furious President got up from his chair and walked toward Johnson. Johnson stood and marched toward Jackson. The President shouted at Johnson. “Sir, have you looked at the condition of the Treasury, at the amount of money it contains—at the appropriations already made by Congress—at the amount of other unavoidable claims upon it?” Johnson replied that he had not looked at the debt but responded that “there always seemed to be enough money for appropriations and I do not doubt there will be now!” The men stood down, avoiding a physical confrontation, but the episode revealed the depth of their disagreement. Jackson’s protest rested on the enduring Jeffersonian hatred of debt. Although Jefferson called anti-debt politics a defense of republicanism, it really served as protection against banks and merchants for a southern planter

⁹ Van Buren, *The Autobiography of Martin Van Buren II*, 325.
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constantly in debt to urban capitalists. Johnson's constituents wanted the road, and he saw how it helped the West develop. Jackson saw it through an ideological prism.¹⁰

Reports that Jackson would choose Johnson for his second-term Vice President circulated throughout 1831. But the two men's priorities remained poles apart. Jackson's protégés included young men committed to the Democratic program, but not necessarily committed to the practice of democracy. James K. Polk typified the group. A Carolina-born and reared Democrat, Polk owned two plantations by 1833 and built his political base defending the interest of the flourishing planter class in West Tennessee and Mississippi. Polk joined a cabal of Virginia Democrats trying to halt Johnson's ascendancy in the national Democratic Party. Their ostensible reason for opposing Johnson lay in his unorthodox household, but Democrats in Kentucky, Arkansas, and throughout the West and Southwest overlooked Johnson's enslaved wife and his two mixed-race daughters. Polk's real reason emanated from his powerful distaste for Johnson's unorthodox politics. Although he never embraced the Whig Party's platform, Johnson nevertheless accepted certain aspects of it in the spirit of doing what was best for his constituents. The Maysville Road and banks threw him into a category of his own among western Democrats.¹¹

¹⁰ Ibid; Herbert E. Sloan, *Principle and Interest: Thomas Jefferson and the Problem of Debt* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 22; *Daily National Intelligencer* (Washington, DC), April 09, 1831.

¹¹ William Dusniberre, *Slavemaster President: The Double Career of James Polk* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 26-27; Charles G. Sellers, *James K. Polk: Jacksonian* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 271.

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In the early 1830s, when Polk worried about Jacksonian ideological purity, Johnson worked to make the lives of common westerners better. He sponsored legislation unimportant to the planter elite but important to small farmers, shopkeepers, and workers. Returned to the House after almost a decade in the Senate, Johnson took up the concerns of poor farmers and workers in the West and North. This led him to distasteful positions. Ironically, in 1831 he ridiculed a motion made by a northeasterner providing for the repeal of laws against interracial marriage. Johnson wrote a satirical cartoon, poking fun at a hypothetical slave who becomes angry about the possibility that “de low white trash” could marry slave women. Poor western whites often demanded the strongest legal enforcements of the racial caste system. Johnson knew this, and he derided any attempt to loosen the legal bonds keeping black Americans from freedom or from actual citizenship in the case of free blacks.¹²

In other cases, Johnson carried propositions to the House floor designed to immediately help middling westerners. During the summer of 1831 Johnson proposed reducing the price of postage on newspapers. He appealed directly to the circumstances of common farmers. “A large proportion, perhaps a majority of the new paper readers, take but one paper, and that a weekly one.” Poor men, Johnson reminded the House, “cannot well afford to take more.” Reducing the price on newspaper postage “would, we doubt not, induce many to take a paper who do not now, and these are the very persons

¹² Eugene Irving McCormac, *James K. Polk: A Political Biography* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1922), 26-46; “Col. R.M. Johnson,” *Argus of Western America*, (Frankfort, KY) March 2, 1831.

of all others, whom it is in the interest of a republican government to have as well informed as possible.” The government’s clear responsibility in Johnson’s mind lay in uplifting the condition of the poor, not in preserving the elite’s order. “The rich,” Johnson told the Representatives, “often take a half dozen papers” and enjoyed the ability to easily pay the postage. “But the poor constitute a large proportion of the population of our country, and every facility should be afforded them of gaining knowledge.¹³

Johnson’s support for the National Road, postage reduction, and other democratic measures only increased the affection poor whites felt toward him. Poor whites, unable to purchase their own land, often sought careers as craft apprentices in western cities and towns. One such, a cobbler also named Johnson later elected as U.S. senator from Tennessee, saw the Kentuckian as a “gallant” war hero who rendered faithful service to his country. Later, as President during Reconstruction, notoriously bigoted Andrew Johnson attempted to punish the South’s aristocrats. The same “rich men” that snubbed Richard Johnson later “forced into battle” poor whites in order “to protect their property in slaves.” Like the earlier Vice President Johnson, Andrew Johnson prospered. He bought and owned slaves but never considered himself a part of the gentry class. Resentful of his poor family’s treatment by the aristocrats of his native Raleigh, North

¹³ *New-Hampshire Statesman and Concord Register*, (Concord, NH) Saturday, April 23, 1831.
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Carolina, Johnson famously sought revenge, declaring as military governor, Vice President, and President his hope to punish the “traitorous aristocrats” of the Old South.¹⁴

Northern workers joined western workers and farmers in praising Johnson’s efforts to democratize American society. Inmates in New York’s debtor prison toasted Johnson as they celebrated the anniversary of the Battle of New Orleans in 1830. Their compliment flattered Johnson so completely he wrote a thank you. Johnson thrilled that the inmates made his name “the theme of two patriotic sentiments for my feeble exertions to abolish imprisonment for debt.” He seconded them in “reprobating the principle that man, on account of his misfortunes, should be punished with imprisonment, a punishment due only to crime.” Johnson in his letter anxiously hoped “public sentiment will fix a just execration upon the violence and barbarity of such a law—and that the light of reason and love of freedom will soon dissipate the darkness which shrouds many a fair portion of our otherwise happy county.” He bragged on western freedoms Kentucky exemplified. “In...my native state, I am proud to say, imprisonment for debt is not to be found in our statute books, under any

¹⁴ Richard E. Ellis, *The Union at Risk: Jacksonian Democracy, States' Rights, and the Nullification Crisis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 22; Andrew Johnson, “The Speech in Defense of the Immortal Thirteen,” October 27-28, 1841 in LeRoy P. Graf and Ralph W. Haskins eds., *The Papers of Andrew Johnson*, Vol. 1, 1822-1851 (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1967), 42; Andrew Johnson quoted in W.W. Holden, *Memoirs of W.W. Holden* (Durham: The Seeman Printery, 1911), 85; Andrew Johnson quoted in John M. Palmer, *Personal Recollections of John M. Palmer: the Story of an Earnest Life* (Cincinnati: Robert Clarke Company, 1901), 127; Hans L. Trefousse, *Andrew Johnson: A Biography* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1989), 20-21, 35, 45, 246, 389.

circumstance...Nothing short of a total abolition of imprisonment for debt,” asserted Johnson, “will preserve the sacred principle of freedom from violation.” He closed by sending his “warmest sentiments to inmates of the debtor’s prison, New York,” and optimistically offered his hope that they would never spend January 8 again imprisoned as debtors.¹⁵

Johnson’s coziness with urban debtors and his sympathetic treatment of their plight infuriated southern planters, especially the dying aristocracy of Virginia. John Randolph, Benjamin Leigh Watkins, and Littleton Tazewell decried any democratic elements that challenged aristocrat’s political monopoly, their minority rights, and Virginia’s constitutional constraints on popular will. Watkins complained that northern plagues, democracy among them, invaded through western Virginia, where democratic small farmers toiled in the mountains. “The Influenza—the smallpox—the varioloid—the Hessian fly—the Circuit Court system—universal suffrage, all come from the north—and they always cross above the falls of the great rivers.” Virginia aristocrats, with their famous detestation of cities, reviled Johnson’s empathy for urban debtors. John Randolph once bemoaned that since a newspaper he subscribed to was “stuffed with city...politics,” he never read it.¹⁶

¹⁵ “Imprisonment for Debt,” *United States’ Telegraph*, (Washington, DC) Wednesday, January 27, 1830.

¹⁶ Robert P. Sutton, “Nostalgia, Pessimism, and Malaise: The Doomed Aristocrat in Late-Jeffersonian Virginia,” *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 76 (Jan., 1968): 41-55; John Randolph to Joseph Nicholson, Aug 27, 1804 in Henry Adams, *John Randolph* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1898), 112
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Even after Johnson's election in 1836, *The Richmond Whig* echoed similar opinions published by a majority of Democratic newspapers in Virginia, especially since the Virginia gentry clustered around the state capital (led by Johnson's rival John Tyler) particularly disliked Johnson. Virginia's politicians "turned up their noses at the Colonel, and publicly branded him as unworthy the support of the Virginia people." John Tyler's son also noted that the Tidewater elites simply found Johnson "offensive" to their "aristocratic nostrils." Virginia's rejection of a slave-owner from a neighboring state for any office surprised contemporaries. Three decades after Johnson's term in office a New York magazine noted that Virginia's political machinations at the Democratic Convention appeared "to be intended to defeat the nomination of Richard M. Johnson for Vice President."¹⁷

Virginians used a typically aristocratic method of attempting to remove Richard Johnson from the Democratic ticket; the Tidewater elites, detached as ever, simply ignored him. The Democratic elites focused much of their dialogue on Vice President Van Buren. Richmond Democratic operative Thomas Ritchie undertook the difficult chore of drumming up whatever support he could find among Virginia's leading Democrats for Johnson. Success eluded Ritchie. But the Democrats sent the wrong messenger. Convinced that the problem lay solely with Johnson's credentials as a slaveholder and southerner, Ritchie portrayed Johnson as friendly to southern interest.

¹⁷ Lyon G. Tyler, *The Letters and Times of the Tylers*, (Richmond: Whittet & Shepperson, 1884), I: 629; J. Holmes Agnew ed., *The Knickerbocker; or, New York Monthly Magazine* 64 (New York: 1864), 355.

Ritchie, aided by newspapers that referred to Johnson as a native Virginian, declared the Colonel's self-proclaimed Virginia heritage and continued regard for the Old Dominion. But Ritchie's message made no impact. A long-time political and journalistic enemy of the aristocratic clique through his *Richmond Enquirer*, Ritchie's message carried no weight because the aristocrats saw no difference between Ritchie and Johnson. The aloof Tidewater Virginians, unhappy with just any slaveholder, required one of a certain stature.¹⁸

Johnson's only significant support along the southern seaboard came from North Carolina's Democrats. Beneath Virginia in geography and in wealth, North Carolina remained woefully divided between the eastern establishment and the yeomen western part of the state. Western North Carolina yeomen held considerable influence in the state's Democratic establishment. They praised Johnson's simple republicanism and his lack of pretension, things not found in abundance among North Carolina's Whig elites. Considerably more impoverished than Virginia and South Carolina, North Carolina retained a small but powerful clique of Tidewater aristocrats. A newer group of planters

¹⁸ William G. Shade, *Democratizing the Old Dominion: Virginia and the Second Party System, 1824-1861* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996), 215; *The Mississippian*, Friday, May 13, 1836; *Arkansas Gazette*, (Little Rock, AR) Tuesday, March 01, 1836; Charles Henry Ambler, *Thomas Ritchie: A Study in Virginia Politics* (Richmond: Bell Book and Stationary Co., 1913), 121-122.
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in central North Carolina accompanied the traditional tobacco and rice planters along the coast.¹⁹

As in Virginia, institutional aristocracy played a role in North Carolina. In 1823, *Niles' Register* noted that North Carolina remained among “the states whose representation, in their several legislatures, depends on the long-laughed-at and truly ridiculous, though abominable and unjust, rotten borough-system of England.” State conventions occasionally changed statutes, but *Niles'* hoped that “truth and justice,” euphemisms for democracy and universal suffrage, would prevail in North Carolina’s future. The current system, *Niles'* noted, appeared vastly undemocratic. “One county in North Carolina, with two members, is equal in its number of citizens to seven counties sending fourteen members.” Among the most conservative aristocrats in the South, the Piedmont planters joined the gentry of the coast in upholding the North Carolina elite’s hold on power. Governor Edward Dudley noted the disparity of opinions between the state’s aristocrats and the majority of the state’s residents. On issues such as the national bank Dudley believed “that if our state was polled, a very great number of our population would be found to be indifferent on the subject,” he told local Whig leader, future governor, and Secretary of the Navy William Alexander Graham.²⁰

¹⁹ Clarence Clifford Norton, *The Democratic Party in Ante-Bellum North Carolina, 1835-1861* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1930), 9, 84-85; Patrick Gerster and Nicholas Cords eds., *Myth and Southern History: The Old South* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 69-73.

²⁰ *Niles' Register* 25 (November 29, 1823), 193-194; Edward Bishop Dudley to William Alexander Graham, July 10, 1841 in J.G. de Roulhac Hamilton ed., *The Papers* [Type text]

North Carolina's eastern establishment Whigs derided Richard Johnson. James Graham, brother of William Alexander Graham, held little respect for Johnson and lambasted his abilities and character as the election of 1836 approached. "Dick Johnson is not quite elected by the People but the Senate will certainly elect him vice president. Dick is dead weight to carry. He is not only a man of vulgar habits and loose morals, but destitute of talent and propriety." Many North Carolina Democrats agreed with their Whig counterparts. During the election of 1832, Romulus M. Saunders, a Democrat, told Whig senator Willie P. Mangum he thought Johnson untrustworthy and immoral, and especially too democratic. "I am decidedly opposed to Dick Johnson. He wants character and talent and his constitutional talents are too wild for us." In 1835, a Whig associate of Senator Mangum acknowledged the sectional disparity between sections in their opinions of Johnson. North Carolina Whigs acknowledged that Johnson brought much of the Old West and Southwest into play for the Democrats, and suggested that the national Whigs tap William Henry Harrison as Vice President in the election of 1836. Mangum and others hoped that Harrison, a westerner and hero, would counteract Johnson's influence on western voters.²¹

of William Alexander Graham Vol. II, 1838-1844 (Raleigh: State Department of Archives and History, 1959), 212; Thomas E. Jeffrey, "National Issues, Local Interests, and the Transformation of Antebellum North Carolina Politics," *Journal of Southern History* 50 (Feb., 1984): 43-74.

²¹ James A. Graham to William Alexander Graham, December 29, 1836 in J.G. de Roulhac Hamilton ed., *The Papers of William Alexander Graham* Vol. I, 1825-1837 (Raleigh: State Department of Archives and History, 1959), 471-472; Romulus M. Saunders to Willie P. Mangum, January 23, 1832 in Henry Thomas Shanks ed., *The* [Type text]

Johnson's popularity earned him the ire of Georgia's most influential Jacksonian, Secretary of State John Forsyth. Born among Virginia aristocrats in Fredericksburg, Virginia, Forsyth (like Crawford) retained customs he inherited from his birth state. A Boston newspaper noted that "Mr. Forsyth's manner is peculiarly Virginian." Forsyth's dislike of Johnson stemmed from the party and sectional politics of the election of 1836. He served Jackson faithfully for two years as Secretary of State and supposed that he earned his party's nomination to be Vice President. The Whig campaign of William Henry Harrison, a popular Indian fighter, gained momentum and national Democrats felt that the presence of a Democrat Indian fighter would mitigate the influence of Harrison. Although Georgia faithfully nominated native son Forsyth for Vice President, Georgia papers demurred from declaring their support. The Democratic newspapers of the state refused to endorse Forsyth, preferring to wait for Johnson's decision.²²

Forsyth proved unable to hide his frustration at being passed over for the westerner. When Democrats invited him to campaign in New York for Johnson in 1836, Forsyth curtly refused. Incensed by Forsyth's intransigence, Col. Johnson and his associates allegedly "let off sundry vollies of righteous indignation at Mr. Forsyth."

Papers of Willie P. Mangum, Vol. 1, 1807-1832 (Raleigh: State Department of Archives and History, 1950), 462; (Probably Benjamin Leigh Watkins) to Willie P. Mangum, April 14, 1835 in Henry Thomas Shanks ed., *The Papers of Willie P. Mangum*, Vol. 2, 1833-1838 (Raleigh: State Department of Archives and History, 1950), 331.

²² George White, *Historical Collections of Georgia* (New York: Pudney and Russell, 1855), 233; Alvin Laroy Duckett, *John Forsyth: Political Tactician* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1962), 213-215, 33-34; *Acts passed by the General Assembly of Georgia, Passed in Milledgeville at an annual Session in November and December* (Milledgeville: Grieve and Orme, 1840), 228-229.

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National newspapers correctly speculated that “a personal quarrel” existed between Forsyth and Johnson. Like Johnson, Forsyth held orthodox southern views on slavery and state rights. Power politics, not race or slavery, caused Forsyth’s contempt for Richard Johnson.²³

Slavery and politics mixed constantly in Georgia’s influential neighbor, South Carolina. Barbados’ English planters of the eighteenth-century imbued the Lowcountry planters of South Carolina with the lucrative but brutal island plantation society of the British Caribbean. More tropical and less partisan than Virginians or North Carolinians, South Carolina’s coastal aristocrats exemplified the image of southern aristocrats as arrogant, violent, and chauvinistic. Convinced that South Carolina aristocrats had created an ideal society out of a former backwater, U.S. Senator William C. Preston proudly told gathered southerners in Charleston: “We possess an intelligence not exceeded by any portion of the world.” Although not as intelligent *en masse* as Preston declared, South Carolina’s gentry boasted an impressive political unanimity. Even South Carolina’s yeomen, jealous of their wealthier neighbors’ plantations and social status and protective of their own rights, marched in step politically when politicians invoked the specter of abolitionism and slave revolts.²⁴

²³ *New-York Spectator*, (New York, NY) Monday, July 15, 1839; *Newark Advocate*, (Newark, OH) Saturday, May 18, 1839; *Niles Weekly Register*, Vol. 56 (July 27, 1839), 337; *Morning Herald*, (New York, NY) May 11, 1840.

²⁴ Jno. P. Thomas, Jr. “The Barbadians in Early South Carolina,” *The South Carolina Historical and Genealogical Magazine* 31 (Apr., 1930): 75-92; Jack P. Greene, “Colonial South Carolina and the Caribbean Connection,” *The South Carolina Historical* [Type text]

Richard Johnson ran into South Carolina's political unity as early as 1817. Led by the erudite upstate Secretary of War Secretary of War, John Calhoun, South Carolina's political elite condemned Andrew Jackson when he invaded Florida. Calhoun rebuked his general in cabinet meetings. South Carolina's legislators in Congress followed suit. William Lowndes, a staunch republican and partisan of Calhoun, shared his ally's displeasure with Andrew Jackson. Lowndes took issue with western members, such as Richard Johnson, when they applauded Jackson's invasion.²⁵

Demographics played a vital role in South Carolina's unusual political milieu. Unlike Virginia, North Carolina, and Georgia, South Carolina planters hoarded power over an increasingly resentful yeomen population. While farmers in the Appalachians of Virginia and North Carolina found commonality with westerners, South Carolina's planters supported exclusively southern policies. Aristocratic by nature and in their politics, South Carolina's politicians feared societal changes stemming from the emerging democracy and industrialism in the North and West. South Carolina defended the traditional agrarian and aristocratic interest of the South fiercely, eventually leading

Magazine 88 (Oct., 1987): 192-210; Frederic Trautmann, "South Carolina through a German's Eyes: The Travels of Clara von Gerstner, 1839," *The South Carolina Historical Magazine* 85 (Jul., 1984): 220-232; Stephanie McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations, and the Political Culture of the South Carolina Low Country* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 92-129.

²⁵ Charles M. Wiltse, *John C. Calhoun: Nationalist, 1782-1828* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1968), 155-163; Carl J. Vipperman, *William Lowndes and the Transition of Southern politics, 1782-1822* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 144, 147-148, 167.

to the Nullification Controversy of 1832. Even before Nullification, South Carolina's politicians blocked more than one western program. Senator Robert Hayne famously engaged western senators in debate over the supposed ill treatment of the West by the Atlantic states on January 19, 1830, barely a week before the famous Webster-Hayne Debates. Thomas Hart Benton, incensed over the suspension of the government's policy of opening western land to the public, launched a tirade against the East so virulent that a colleague accused him of calling the thirteen oldest states "tyrants," who pushed their poor into the western states. Hayne's answer to Benton betrayed the South Carolinian's fear. Hayne worried about the kind of settlers buying public land; he feared that the West would attract "that low and degraded population which infest the cities and towns of Europe."²⁶

President Jackson vetoed a few western proposals and the National Bank, but the influence of John Calhoun and South Carolina waned during the Jackson administration. Jacksonians looked to what Johnson called a "free and enlightened yeomanry" to maintain their political stations. Such democratic notions alienated South

²⁶ McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds*, 5-36; John L. Conger, "South Carolina and the Early Tariffs," *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 5 (Mar., 1919): 415-433; Robert Hayne, January 19, 1830 in *Abridgment of the Debates of Congress, from 1789-1856*, Vol. IX, 1828-1830 (New York: D. Appleton, 1858), 418-421; Thomas Hart Benton, John Holmes, and Robert Hayne, January 19, 1830 in *Register of Debates in Congress*, Vol. IV, 1829-1830 (Washington: Gales and Seaton, 1830), 27-25; Robert Y. Hayne, *Speech of Mr. Hayne, of South Carolina, on Mr. Foot's Resolution Proposing an Inquiry into the Expediency of Abolishing the Office of Surveyor General of Public Land and for Discontinuing Further Surveys, etc.*, (Washington: Duff Green, 1830); William H. Denney, "South Carolina's Conception of the Union in 1832," *The South Carolina Historical Magazine* 78 (Jul., 1977): 171-183.

Carolina's leading men. According to Calhoun, democracy as practiced by the Jacksonians held "that the will of a mere numerical majority is paramount to the authority of law and constitution." This fear of popular democracy led Calhoun to oppose any extension of western power, such as the admission of Michigan as a state. Democracy pressured states that retained aristocratic principles in their government, such as South Carolina and other old southern states like Maryland, which Calhoun believed to have a constitution "somewhat similar in its character to our own."²⁷

Calhoun feared that southern state governments might "remedy" their undemocratic polities by broadening the franchise, thereby "a mere majority might, at their pleasure, subvert the constitution and government of a State." Calhoun believed that South Carolina had "a constitution that could not stand a day against such doctrines, and yet we glory in it as the best in the Union. It is a constitution which respects all the great interests of the State." Calhoun reminded the senators that South Carolinians called their "State a Republic—a Commonwealth, not a Democracy; and let

²⁷ Andrew Jackson, *Messages of Gen. Andrew Jackson: with a Short Sketch of His Life* (Concord, NH: John F. Brown and William White, 1837), 147-168; "Col. Johnson's Valedictory Address" in *Orleans Gazette, and Commercial Advertiser*, (New Orleans, LA) Monday, May 10, 1819; John C. Calhoun, Speech on the Admission of Michigan into the Union, January 5, 1837 in Richard Cralle ed., *The Works of John C. Calhoun*, Vol. II: *Speeches delivered in the House of Representatives and the Senate of the United States* (New York: D. Appleton, 1888), 613-614.

me tell the Senator it is a far more popular government than if it had been based on the simple principle of the numerical majority.”²⁸

By 1836 Andrew Jackson’s influence thwarted easterners from gaining adherents among western democrats. A Mississippi newspaper exclaimed “Probably there was no period of his life at which General JACKSON was so popular and so deservedly popular as at the present.” Jackson exercised a powerful influence in the Democratic Party until his death in 1845. Notably, Jackson rewarded Richard Johnson’s long-time loyalty by pushing the southern Democrats to accept him as Vice President in 1836.²⁹

Johnson served as a rallying point for the Democratic faithful. In 1840 a Democratic pamphlet warned citizens of an aristocracy, occurring in many forms and under “British influence.” In the eyes of concerned Democrats, the supposedly British-dominated aristocracy threatened to undo the progress brought about by Andrew Jackson. Such charges served their purpose among western Democrats throughout the United States. Many perceived Anglophile Virginians and Carolinians as universally arrogant. Calhoun ally and U.S. Senator William Preston, for example, still wore a wig

²⁸ John C. Calhoun, Speech on the Admission of Michigan into the Union, January 5, 1837 in Richard Cralle ed., *The Works of John C. Calhoun*, Vol. II: *Speeches delivered in the House of Representatives and the Senate of the United States* (New York: D. Appleton, 1888), 613-614.

²⁹ *The Mississippi Free Trader, and Natchez Gazette*, (Natchez, MS), February 26, 1836.

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on the floor of the Senate. Educated in Britain, cosmopolitan, and erudite, Preston fit the national stereotype of gentrified southerners perfectly.³⁰

John Calhoun understood that Andrew Jackson's symbolic victory for the West boded poorly for the old southern Tidewater elites. He lamented the reality that in Jackson's second administration "the west will have the President, the Secretary of State, the Secretary of war and the Post Master General." Even more disheartening, Calhoun perceived that "the Southern influence will be still farther diminished. . . . This old, talented and virtuous section will have but one member in the Cabinet, and he the least influential." Calhoun's veiled implication that westerners had neither talent nor virtue accompanied more explicit and specific criticisms of westerners in the Democratic Party. Conflict over the National Bank, the power of the federal government, and tariffs kept the northern and southern Democrats disunited.³¹

³⁰ Robert V. Remini, *Andrew Jackson: The Course of American Democracy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), 330-346; Jon Meacham, *American Lion: Andrew Jackson in the White House* (New York: Random House, 2008), 309; *The Crisis Met: a Reply to Junius* (New York, 1840); *Indiana Journal*, (Indianapolis, IN) Saturday, June 18, 1836; Harriet Martineau, *Society in America*, Vol. 3 (London: Saunders and Otley, 1839), 21; Francis Joseph Grund, *Aristocracy in America: From the Sketch-book of a German Nobleman*, Vol. 2 (London: Richard Bentley, 1839), 19, 278; Minnie Clare Yarborough ed., *The Reminiscences of William C. Preston* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1933), ix, 43, 134.

³¹ John C. Calhoun to James Henry Hammond, May 16, 1831 in J. Franklin Jameson ed., *Correspondence of John C. Calhoun*, Vol. 2 (Washington: Government Printing Office), 291; William J. Cooper, *Liberty and Slavery* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2000), 190-191; Philip Shriver Klein, *President James Buchanan, a Biography* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1962), 13, 275.
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Ultimately, Martin Van Buren ran on positions that pleased the South, but the damage to southern pride already had begun to run its course. Calhoun decried the rise of the West and Richard Johnson in the Democratic establishment. All the while he applauded “the more decent portion under William C. Rives, [and James] Buchanan,” conservative gentry southerners and patrician northerners, fighting to maintain conservatism in the Democratic Party “against...filthy associates under [Thomas Hart] Benton, [Amos] Kendall, [Francis P.] Blair and [Richard M.] Johnson.” Calhoun decried how “Jackson and Benton with his associates” imposed “outrageous acts” on southerners and good Democrats.³²

Calhoun lashed out as his region’s power and leadership of the South slipped away, into the hands of western and southwestern politicians. William Henry Harrison’s death in 1841 elevated John Tyler to the presidency, the last from the aristocratic Virginia dynasty that represented the old Tidewater elites. James K. Polk, an inflexible and ambitious western planter “raised at the side” and “partaking of the counsels” of his mentor Andrew Jackson, replaced Tyler in 1845, ushered in the political leadership of western and southwestern planters who conformed to the prototype laid out by Richard M. Johnson. Planters from Tennessee, the Gulf States, and Kentucky all used their wealth (built by slaves), military credentials, or a combination thereof to step into political office. John Quitman, Mississippi’s governor and later a general in the Mexican

³² John C. Calhoun to James Henry Hammond, February 18, 1837 in Clyde N. Wilson ed., *The Papers of John C. Calhoun*, Vol. XIII, 1835-1837 (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1980), 442-443.

War, earned his place in Mississippi politics by appealing to the “Jackson men” in his prospective constituency. Southwestern and western planters like Polk, Quitman, and Johnson became increasingly enthusiastic about U.S. expansion to the west and South. By 1840, Texas, Mexico and the Caribbean Basin appeared ripe for the taking to the newly influential planters.³³

III.

The presidential election of 1836 proved to be an interesting one. Andrew Jackson’s eight years in office came to a close, ending what his numerous and enthusiastic supporters called “a period that will shine in American history with more inherent and undying luster, than any other which the chronicler has yet recorded, or which perhaps will ever form a portion of our country’s annals.” Jackson’s ostensible successor, Vice President Martin Van Buren, appeared poised to earn the Democratic

³³ John McCardell, *The Idea of a Southern Nation: Southern Nationalists and Southern Nationalism, 1830-1860* (New York and London: W.W. Norton and Co., 1979), 72; Edward Crapol, *John Tyler: The Accidental President* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2006), 3; Sellers, *James K. Polk, Jacksonian*, 41; *Weekly Ohio Statesman*, (Columbus, OH) Wednesday, June 12, 1844; John A. Quitman quoted in Francis Hamtramck Claiborne, ed., *Life and Correspondence of John A. Quitman: Major-General, U.S.A, and Governor of the State of Mississippi I* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1860), 98, 212; Robert E. May, *The Southern Dream of a Caribbean Empire, 1854-1861* (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 1989), 3-45; Henry Stuart Foote, *Texas and the Texans: or, Advance of the Anglo-Americans to the South-West II* (Philadelphia: Thomas, Cowperthwait, and Co., 1841), 352-352.

nomination. Jackson had high regard for Van Buren but the Vice President's popularity with the people left something to be desired.³⁴

One biography, published near the end of the election of 1836 and written by the late David Crockett, suggested that Van Buren held neither the support of his party nor the support of the people of the United States. Jackson partisan and influential Kentucky journalist Francis Preston Blair, editor of the Democratic *Extra Globe*, supported Van Buren out of solidarity with the Democratic establishment, but Blair's paper noted that prominent Whigs accused Van Buren of being non-committal on major policy questions such as slavery and the National Bank; some of the accusations, Blair noted, appeared to have some substance. The *Extra Globe* also included news and information regarding the other major political drama playing out in the Democratic Party: the controversial nomination process for the Democratic candidate for Vice President, eventually won by Kentucky Indian fighter, former U.S. Senator and current U.S. Representative Colonel Richard Mentor Johnson.³⁵

³⁴ William G. Shade, "The Most Delicate and Exciting Topics': Martin Van Buren, Slavery, and the Election of 1836," *Journal of the Early Republic* 18 (Autumn, 1998): 459-484; *The Plaindealer* (New York, NY), March 4, 1837; Andrew Burstein, *The Passions of Andrew Jackson* (New York: Random House, 2007), 197; Arthur Schlesinger, *The Age of Jackson* (New York: Little, Brown, and Co., 1953), 55.

³⁵ Donald B. Cole, *Martin Van Buren and the American Political System* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 256-281; David Crockett, *The Life of Martin Van Buren: Heir-Apparent to the "Government," and the Appointed Successor of General Andrew Jackson* (Philadelphia: Robert Wright, 1836), 7; Francis Preston Blair, *Extra Globe* (May, 1835), 10, 379.

Martin Van Buren won the election, becoming the first Vice President to succeed to the presidency since Thomas Jefferson. Americans interested in the Democrats' victory opened their periodicals to glean information about the voting. The major drama of the election actually took place in the Senate. Four candidates ran for Vice President: Richard Johnson, William C. Rives of Virginia, Francis Granger of New York, and William Smith of Alabama. Virginia's Democratic electors withheld their votes for Johnson, creating a tie and leading a perceived southern uprising against Johnson's election. Under the Twelfth Amendment, the election of the Vice President became the privilege of the U.S. Senate, who elected Johnson in a run-off over Francis Granger.³⁶

Richard Johnson's private life never matched that of his fellow slaveholders. He regarded his enslaved consort as his common-law wife and kept a mixed-race family on his farm in Kentucky. He acknowledged his two mulatto daughters and brought them to Washington. The obvious intransigence of antebellum southerner slaveholders against open miscegenation appeared to explain the mutiny of southerner slaveholders against Johnson, but observant Americans would have noticed that the revolt against Johnson appeared less than total in the South. In fact, four southern states in the Deep South openly supported Johnson from the outset of the election; Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana, and Mississippi all cast their votes for the Kentuckian. Mississippi editors ran

³⁶ *The American Almanac and Repository of Useful Knowledge* (Boston: Charles Owen, 1838), 111-112; Joel H. Silbey, "The Election of 1836," in Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. ed. and Fred L. Israel ed., *History of American Presidential Elections: 1789-1968*, Vol. 1, 1789-1844 (New York and Toronto: Chelsea House, 1971), 575-640.

articles well before Election Day, calling Johnson “open, brave, gallant, honorable humanity itself, and magnanimous in all the public and private walks of life. These are unerring evidences of his high worth and spotless reputation.” The same Mississippi newspaper made light of miscegenation in Johnson’s household. Had Democrat Johnson not repudiated his earlier flirtation with Whig policies, said *The Mississippian*, Americans would not have heard about “dusky Sally, nor vile amalgamations, nor creoles, nor the rearing of mulatto pets, nor the introduction of those pets into polite and polished society.” Whigs, the Democrats explained, inflated the issue to smear Johnson.³⁷

Western Whigs spared Johnson nothing, and attacked him with the same ferocity as did southern planters and northern Whigs. Springfield, Illinois’ Whig *Sangamo Journal* accused the Democrats of opening the franchise to free blacks and slaves. Abraham Lincoln, then a young lawyer in Springfield, wrote a letter (in the voice of black man named Sees-her) castigating the Democrats on the issue of race.

Massa Prenter:

...I suppose you knows as how you sees dese men goes for [Van Buren], and that dare tudder man wat lub de nigger so. [Van Buren] says de nigger shall all vote, and dat oder man in Kentucky state [Richard M. Johnson] is goin to make all the nigger women’s children white

³⁷ Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 312; Edwin Williams ed., *The New York Annual Register* (New York: G. & C. Carvill and Co., 1837), 523; *The Mississippian* (Jackson, MS) Friday, August 7, 1835.

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Lincoln's coarse letter was well within the mainstream of Whig attacks on Johnson. Johnson's assumption of Jackson's western mantle challenged the rise of the Whig's leading western congressional spokesman, Henry Clay. The Whigs also worried about Johnson's continued popularity in the Southwest; in Mississippi and Louisiana, Whigs believed they stood to gain politically especially among the great planters along the Mississippi River.³⁸

Politics alone does not explain Johnson's continued support in the Old Southwest. The Deep South states trended towards the Whigs throughout the late 1830s, and William Henry Harrison won Louisiana and Mississippi in 1840. Historians agree that Johnson's mulatto concubine Julia Chinn played a part in his demise. A recent Jacksonian history stated simply that southerners found Johnson's relationship with Chinn distasteful, and thus scuttled his aspirations for higher office. Another historian notes that, interestingly, Johnson's mixed-race partner never hurt his political aspirations until he brought his mulatto daughters to Washington. This made his relationship with Chinn public, creating a scandal. Had Johnson left his daughters in Kentucky, his political troubles might have never occurred. The other alternative: Johnson's egalitarianism, often articulated as "vulgarity" or "coarseness," lost him the support of the states along the Atlantic South. "He was not respectable enough for them;

³⁸ Michael Burlingame, *Abraham Lincoln: A Life I* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 109; *Niles' Weekly Register* 52 (July 22, 1837).
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quite too vulgar in his tastes and habits” Northern commentator Richard Hildreth explained Johnson’s dilemma in a period historical novel.

It is not his taste for black women, it is not his family of colored children—perhaps these innocent gentlemen here from the north know nothing about the matter, but any white boy in the city of Charleston of sixteen years old and upwards could enlighten them. It is not these little peccadilloes that reflect anything upon Mr. Johnson's character. They are as much parts of our domestic institutions here at the south as the use of the cowhide...and just as little thought of. But the pinch is here. Mr. Johnson, being a bachelor, with no white wife or white children to control him, and, withal, one of the best-natured men in the world, must need so far to imitate the example of the patriarchs as actually to recognize a number of colored daughters as his own children. He has raised and educated them in his own house. He has even made efforts to introduce them into respectable society. The spirit of the Kentucky women—the women, you know, are all natural aristocrats—defeated him in that; but he has procured white husbands for them, and their children, under the law of Kentucky, will be legally white, and entitled to all the rights and privileges of white persons. It is this in which the scandal of Mr. Johnson's conduct consists.

Johnson’s attempt to elevate his daughters caused the eastern grandees to balk at his candidacy.³⁹

The selection of Johnson as the Vice Presidential nominee underlined deep divisions within the American political scene and in the Democratic Party. Johnson earned the derision of the aristocrats largely because he embraced the cause of the West, workers and poor farmers. Stephen Douglas, the Democratic luminary from Illinois,

³⁹ Michael F. Holt, *The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party: Jacksonian Politics and the Onset of the Civil War* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 71-76; Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, 312; Richard Hildreth, *Archy Moore: The White Slave* (New York: Miller, Orton, and Co., 1857), 316-318.

attributed the opposition to Richard Johnson to “the old leaven of aristocratic federalism.” Whigs both northern and southern accurately accused the Democrats of adding Johnson in 1836 for the sole purpose of “capturing the popular good-will,” trading on Johnson’s military reputation and popularity with working Americans.⁴⁰

Johnson maintained this reputation throughout the Jacksonian Era. His fellow Democrats in the Bluegrass State nominated him for president in 1834, where he earned the thanks of middle and lower-class voters (specifically urban workers) by campaigning to eradicate debtor’s imprisonment. Johnson’s campaign for the rights of debtors won him widespread praise. Upon the legislative victory over debtor’s imprisonment in 1833, Missouri’s Thomas Hart Benton extolled Johnson’s efforts. “The philanthropic Col. R.M. Johnson of Kentucky labored for years at this humane consummation; and finally saw his efforts successful.” The incorrigible farmer and soldier proved popular in his native Kentucky and in the West, as well as in New York City and other eastern cities. Popular histories of the Old Northwest told Americans how Johnson had personally killed the Shawnee chief Tecumseh at the Battle of the Thames, victoriously ending the war that opened up the West to American settlers.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Stephen A. Douglas, December 31, 1835 in Stephen A Douglas, Robert W. Johannsen ed., *The Letters of Stephen A. Douglas* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1961), 29.

⁴¹ Andrew Dickson White, *Autobiography of Andrew Dickson White*, Vol. 1 (New York: The Century Co, 1905), 49; James C. Curtis, *The Fox at Bay: Martin Van Buren and the Presidency, 1837-1841* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1970), 46-47; *Niles Weekly Register* (March 1, 1834), 1; *The North American Review*, Vol. 32 (Boston: Gray and Bowen, 1831), 509; Thomas Hart Benton, *Thirty Years' View; or, A History of the Working of the American Government for Thirty Years* Vol. 1, 1820-1850 (New York: D. [Type text]

IV.

Van Buren's victory in November 1836 signaled Johnson's departure from the House of Representatives. As early as the beginning of 1836 Johnson appeared confident of a Democratic victory and equally confident of his candidacy for the Vice Presidency. Johnson subsequently tired of House debates. In January 1836 Congress vigorously debated the question of the slave trade in the District of Columbia. Supposedly the capital of a republican empire of liberty, the presence of slave auctions in Washington City disgusted northerners (and a few southerners) and mocked the American experiment. In 1831 William Lloyd Garrison called for petitions to end the slave trade in the District of Columbia. Abolitionists and anti-slavery northerners dutifully submitted the petitions annually, only to see them not accepted because of southern obduracy and paranoia.⁴²

Johnson cared little for the fearful politics of pro-slavery ideologues in the South. Although he owned slaves, Johnson never embraced disunion as a defense of slave property. While Johnson spoke for Kentucky in the House, southern extremists began to export their secessionist rhetoric throughout the slave states. Barnwell Smith (who later changed his name to Barnwell Rhett), a particularly virulent South Carolina disunionist,

Appleton and Co., 1854), 291-292; James Strange French, *Elkswatawa, or, The Prophet of the West: A Tale of the Frontier* Vol. 2 (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1836), 235-243.

⁴² Stephen Deyle, *Carry Me Back: The Domestic Slave Trade in American Life* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 174; "Col. Johnson," *The Globe*, (Washington, DC) Monday, January 26, 1835
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traveled throughout Kentucky observing the sentiments of western Democrats in 1836. Anti-slavery politics made small inroads in Kentucky during the 1830s. Voluntary emancipation and colonization became politically and socially acceptable positions in the state's slavery discussion. This maddened Rhett and pro-slavery expounders like John Calhoun. Kentucky, instead of allying with pro-slavery forces, sat out the conflict.⁴³

Richard Johnson formed the vanguard of Kentuckians disinterested in the political debate over slavery. Johnson certainly never embraced abolitionism or anti-slavery politics. He generally preferred not to talk about the matter. When southerners again confronted the question of slavery in the District of Columbia, Johnson's patience ran out. He preferred not to change the status quo, but he also grew impatient with listening to pro-slavery rhetoric. "If we were to vote, and not to speak so much," he suggested to his colleagues, "We would be enabled to get through the business much more advantageously than at present." Johnson casually remarked that of course he agreed that Congress held no authority over slavery in the states. He believed it inexpedient to even try and address slavery in the District of Columbia.⁴⁴

Balie Peyton, a Tennessee Whig, pressed Johnson to clarify his remarks. Johnson, Peyton said, seemed to believe that Congress had no authority over slavery in the states. Johnson's statement on the District of Columbia concerned the pro-slavery Peyton. Did Johnson believe that Congress held power over slavery in the District of Columbia? Pro-

⁴³ William C. Davis, *Rhett: The Turbulent Life and Times of a Fire-Eater* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2001), 95, 113.

⁴⁴ *United States' Telegraph*, (Washington, DC) Friday, January 15, 1836.
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slavery theorists said that Congress did not have power to regulate slavery in the District. Johnson allowed that Congress might limit slavery there; expediency, Peyton noted, meant Congress could destroy the slave trade in the District if they found it expedient. Johnson begged off the question, saying that the House should vote and not debate.⁴⁵

Johnson's unwillingness to engage in a vigorous defense of slavery brought a torrent of criticism from the Democratic press. *The United States Telegraph*, Jackson's official organ, required Johnson to make his views on slavery known. His peculiar views on the subject render it necessary that he should come out openly and show what he is." Democrats, said the *Telegraph*, needed to know "whether abolitionists are to look forward to him as their aid and assistant." Using race-baiting language, the *Telegraph* chided Johnson. "Does he fear to imitate his friends who are such warm friends of the *black race*?" Southern Democrats demanded that Johnson "tell the abolitionists not to look to him for help." Then, said the paper, the South would know how to vote.⁴⁶

Southern newspapers touted the legacy of Jefferson and Jackson during 1836 and 1837. Tidewater gentry in Carolina and Virginia saw Jackson's successor as Polk or Virginia planter William Cabell Rives. The West and Southwest believed Richard Johnson best represented the tradition of Jefferson and Jackson. The similarities,

⁴⁵ William S. Speer, *Sketches of Prominent Tennesseans* (Nashville, 1888), 139; *United States' Telegraph* (Washington, DC), January 15, 1836;.

⁴⁶ Frederic Hudson, *Journalism In The United States From 1690 To 1872* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1873), 235; *United States' Telegraph*, (Washington, DC) Friday, January 15, 1836.

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however, revolved around form more than substance. Johnson's military service in the War of 1812 earned him the laurels of southwestern papers. Devoid of the aristocratic disdain present in Virginia papers, southwestern print media praised Johnson's service to the nation in war, his democratic election to Congress, and his continual battle for the rights of westerners. But the papers never mentioned his similarities with Jefferson and Jackson. The only real similarity the *Natchez Free Trader* found was that "religious parties" and "moneyed parties" opposed all three. Johnson's main contribution remained his ability and willingness to absorb the "wrath" of eastern papers. "This valued son of the West" fought for the west year after year. The *Free Trader's* enthusiasm for Johnson as a successor to Jefferson and Jackson did not require political policy commonality, only commonality of political aesthetics.⁴⁷

Johnson never actively sought to antagonize southerners, but all too often his willingness to deviate from orthodoxy angered the planter elite driving the party in the South. During the 1836 presidential campaign Johnson's former association with St. Louis banks became an area of significant political weakness for him. His alleged control of banks in Kentucky warned Democratic partisans from the South and West of his mutinous association with banks and internal improvements. But he retained some partisans outside his newfound base of eastern workers. At the beginning of 1837 some Jackson loyalists in the West remembered Johnson with affection. They based their

⁴⁷ Shade, *Democratizing the Old Dominion: Virginia and the Second Party System, 1824-1861*, 89-91; "Jefferson, Jackson and Johnson," *The Mississippi Free Trader, and Natchez Gazette*, (Natchez, MS) Friday, March 25, 1836.

memories on an idealized past, not on the substance of Johnson's political record. An admirer sent Johnson a hickory cane cut from the forests of Jackson's estate, the Hermitage. Johnson wrote a letter of thanks. He included platitudes about Jackson's honor, integrity, and rectitude, but nothing of Jackson's politics, the West, or democracy.⁴⁸

Johnson also encountered opposition from respectable elements of northern society. In New York City in 1836, Johnson attended the Park Theater. Johnson enjoyed cultural pursuits like the theater in Washington. He enjoyed a vibrant social life. Johnson attended the gala performance of the play "Brutus" in 1835. He gushed over Junius Brutus Booth's (the aptly named father of Abraham Lincoln's assassin) expert portrayal of the play's protagonist, Junius Lucius Brutus. At the Park Theater a worker sitting in the inexpensive pit spotted him and cried for the audience to give him three cheers. Instead the New Yorkers in the balcony and boxes began hissing at Johnson. The *Telegraph* voiced the opinion of southern Democrats' on Johnson's theater attendance. The paper said that all "the fashionable colored ladies" came to see Johnson. After reciting a litany of racist descriptions, the paper supplied enough innuendo to leave no

⁴⁸ "R. M. Johnson's Bank Operations," *Indiana Journal* (Indianapolis, IN) Saturday, July 09, 1836; "Token of Respect," *The Globe*, (Washington, DC) Thursday, July 14, 1836. [Type text]

doubt over what they believed Johnson's relationship with black women revolved around.⁴⁹

While no southerner approved of Johnson's open miscegenation, they used his relationship to cover their real disdain for his politics. His relationship with Julia was common knowledge for twenty years and yet no one raised it during his earlier campaigns. Johnson's apostasy on core southern Democratic creeds such as anti-bank and anti-tariff drove his enemies to use the most available tool against him. When a public crucifixion of Johnson failed to stall his nomination, Virginia's gentry-dominated Democratic Party refused to accept Johnson and instead cast the state's votes for Alabama Senator Williams Smith.⁵⁰

No words by Johnson served to unnerve the slaveocracy more than a letter he sent to a Democratic committee. "No one," Johnson claimed, "has the natural right to interrupt another in the pursuit of 'life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,' according to his own volition." If man were not depraved, "there would be no necessity for human laws or government to secure him the enjoyment of these rights." Government's sole responsibility was restraining those "whose licentiousness...would invade these rights....All beyond is usurpation." Johnson's words appeared to allow for an anarchic exercise of individual rights outside of paternal control. He advocated real democratic

⁴⁹ *United States' Telegraph*, (Washington, DC) Saturday, July 16, 1836; Aloysius I. Mudd, "The Theatres of Washington from 1835 to 1850," *Records of the Columbia Historical Society, Washington, D.C.*, 6 (1903): 222-266.

⁵⁰ *Raleigh Register, and North-Carolina Gazette*, (Raleigh, NC) Tuesday, August 16, 1836.

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equality. Carried to their logical conclusion, Johnson's logic allowed allow that even slaves might be included amongst those with natural rights. If southerners feared Johnson simply because of his challenge to the South's racial order, then all slaveholding southerners should have condemned him and his candidacy. Instead, Johnson continued to draw support from the western and southwestern slaveholding public. Natchez, Mississippi's main daily newspaper touted his experience and called him a worthy patriot. Over the next four years, however, Johnson's ability to aid the West declined. Shackled by the office of Vice President, Johnson no longer retained any ability to affect legislation.⁵¹

⁵¹ "Moral Principles-Colonel R. M. Johnson," *United States' Telegraph*, (Washington, DC) Friday, July 22, 1836; "Hon. R.M. Johnson," *The Mississippi Free Trader, and Natchez Gazette*, (Natchez, MS) Friday, September 16, 1836.
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Vice President

On February 10th, 1837, aged Tennessee Senator Felix Grundy strolled across the Capitol to gather a committee of Senators. They met to welcome the new Vice President. Grundy distrusted the newest addition to the vice presidential fraternity. An old Kentuckian who moved to Tennessee and joined Jackson's cadre of western planters, Grundy mentored James K. Polk and other western politicians. Their hopes hinged on recreating the plantation society of Virginia and Carolina in Tennessee, Mississippi, and places farther southwest such as the newly independent Republic of Texas. Grundy's power center in Middle Tennessee held a majority of the state's wealthiest planters. Discussions over slavery and active inclusion of poor in Tennessee's high politics never found sympathy with Grundy and Jackson's partisans in Middle Tennessee. In East Tennessee, Jacksonians who deviated from party orthodoxy became followers of Hugh Lawson White and members of the early Whig Party.

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The new Democratic Vice President similarly strayed from the party's beliefs, but because of an influx of Democratic voting urban workers the Democrats needed a politician that appealed to both workers and western farmers. They settled on Richard M. Johnson; Whigs and Democratic opponents alike tried to use his private life as a

¹ *Daily National Intelligencer*, (Washington, DC) Wednesday, February 15, 1837; J. Roderick Heller III, *Democracy's Lawyer: Felix Grundy of the Old Southwest* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 2010), 215-226.

weapon against him in order to keep his populism from becoming the party's policy. They failed to keep him from the Vice Presidency, but at least he no longer directly influenced legislation. In some ways they were correct. Johnson lost much of his political influence during his vice presidency. But he remained committed to the West and to democracy; for those two causes he never stopped fighting, regardless of his political station²

Johnson received the Senate committee with his typical friendliness and self-deprecation. He told the gathered Senators that he felt himself deficient compared to his predecessors. He pleaded their dispensation for his lack of experience for "the appropriate duties of his station." Johnson, somewhat dryly, observed that "so many friends with whom I have been associated in public life" filled the ranks of incoming Senators. A few men in the room squirmed. Many Democrats publicly abandoned Johnson when gentry Virginians, the aging guardians of Jefferson's party, pitched a temper-tantrum over Johnson's nomination. Johnson hoped any mistakes he made during his term hurt only him personally and not the public at large. His address exhibited very humility. Johnson told the Senators he had "generally been engrossed by the more immediate acts of legislation." He admitted to them his ignorance of "rules and orders, so necessary to the progress of business, and so important to the observance

² Paul H. Bergeron, *Antebellum Politics in Tennessee* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1982), 82.

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of the presiding officer. He asked for charity in all things related to his assumption of the office.³

Johnson probably expected little charity from Grundy and his fellows. Southern Democrats committed to the plantation ideal saw in Johnson serious challenges to their ideological domination of the South. Van Buren's poll numbers paled in comparison to those of Jackson's. What might have been a landslide turned into a tight election as Jackson's chosen successor squeaked out a victory against two major Whig opponents, William Henry Harrison in the West and Hugh Lawson White in the South.⁴

Once the voters determined the outcome of the election of 1836, the two main political parties began to position themselves with the American public. Voters chose Martin Van Buren, but the United States' changing demographics endangered policies held dear by Democrats. Urban workers showed a willingness to support Whig economic policies if those same policies eventually helped the poor. The economic crash of 1837 only deepened the American populace's distrust of Martin Van Buren's Democratic policies. Caused partly by Jackson's hatred of institutions able to stabilize currency, Democrats reinforced those positions when the Union's economic underpinnings gave way. By the summer of 1837, angry American regretted their choice of President. The

³ Glyndon G. Van Deusen, *The Jacksonian Era, 1828-1848* (New York: Harper & Row, 1959), 110; "The Vice President's Acceptance," *Boston Courier* (Boston, MA) Monday, February 20, 1837.

⁴ Edward Pessen, *Jacksonian America: Society, Personality, Politics* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1969), 168; Bruce Levine, *Half Slave and Half Free: The Roots of Civil War* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1999).unfairly
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Vice president, Richard Johnson, enjoyed a slight rehabilitation, largely because he never totally committed to an absolute defense of Jackson's policies.⁵

Enthusiasm for Johnson endured, especially in newer western states. Johnson's partisans in Arkansas, his brother's home state, ran an article in a Little Rock newspaper touting Johnson's wisdom and how the Whigs unfairly denigrated him. The *Arkansas State Gazette* crowed that now that his political flexibility proved prescient, "some of the Whig presses are endeavoring to make amends for the rancor with which they have assailed Col. Johnson." The *New York Evening Star*, a staunch Whig paper, asserted that many of Johnson's "old political friends" unfairly and "severely assailed" him during the election. The paper also admitted that Whigs used racial politics concerning his supposed slave wife and supposed mixed-race daughters to gain an advantage over him in the general election (which was true), but made sure to ensure its readers that Johnson had no slave wife (which was not true). Johnson's daughters showed no trace of African ancestry, were educated in Washington City and married to white gentlemen. Given the Whig party's sponsorship of evangelical piety, the *Evening Star* reassured New York's Whig evangelicals that Johnson's daughters never really knew their mother, who died early but in life lived a pious and virtuous life. *The Star* pronounced Johnson "not a

⁵ Pessen, *Jacksonian America*, 118; Joel H. Silbey, *Martin Van Buren and the Emergence of American Popular Politics* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), 117.

great man,” but “an honest and patriotic man.” Johnson’s kind-heartedness and courtesy, said *the Star*, won over even his opponents.⁶

The southern slaveholding class demanded more than kindness from Johnson. Increasingly fearful of abolitionist threats to their human property, slave-owners became more and more demanding. They questioned Andrew Jackson’s trust in Martin Van Buren. Although a loyal Democrat, Van Buren nevertheless retained a northerner’s reluctance to embrace slavery as the cause of the Democratic Party. A northern President, coupled with nearly 130,000 anti-slavery petitions to Congress each year, terrified southern elites increasingly reliant on slave labor. Faced with attacks from Whigs and gentry southern Democrats in his own party, Van Buren needed political support. He looked to Johnson to bolster support in the Southwest, where the Vice President remained extraordinarily popular.⁷

In April after the inauguration, Johnson arrived in Natchez, Mississippi en route to New Orleans. Natchez’s super-wealthy planter elite, unlike that of the Tidewater, rabidly supported the Whig Party. Generally pro-bank, they saw no real reason to dislike Johnson other than his party affiliation. Accordingly, Johnson enjoyed a raucous reception when he arrived in Natchez. He spent several days in Mississippi, and only a few hours in Natchez. Enough time lapsed, however, for locals to drum up several

⁶ “Col. Johnson,” *Arkansas State Gazette*, (Little Rock, AR) Tuesday, January 24, 1837; Daniel Walker Howe, *The Political Culture of the American Whigs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 150-160.

⁷ Leonard L. Richards, *The Slave Power: The Free North and Southern Domination, 1780-1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 2000), 136.
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hundred people to stand outside the Parker hotel in Natchez where the Vice President took his lunch. Natchez's best citizens, including Senator Robert Walker of Mississippi, toasted Johnson before he continued on to New Orleans.⁸

Johnson arrived in the largest southern city during the first week of May, 1837. New Orleans in many ways reflected Johnson. A long association with slavery, coupled with mix-raced attachments and racially intertwined families of free and slave, created in New Orleans diffidence towards the racial paradigms of slavery. The city severely taxed the interstate slave trade. Planters and the city's merchants disdained slave-traders, whom they called southern shylocks, southern Yankees, and Negro jockeys. Still, slavery drove New Orleans' economy and the economy of the Mississippi River Valley. Johnson's status as a slaveholder with mixed-race domestic life never shocked New Orleans' elites, for many of Louisiana's great families operated in an unstated world of mixed-race relationships.⁹

New Orleans also served as a starting point for journeys into the American Far West and to the Republic of Texas. Johnson's support for Anglo-Americans' westward advance lent him further credence in the eyes of New Orleans' expansionist-minded citizenry. So an unsurprised Johnson probably enjoyed an invitation to attend a banquet

⁸ William Kauffman Scarborough, *Masters of the Big House: Elite Slaveholders of the Mid-Nineteenth-Century South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006), 256; Schlesinger, *The Age of Jackson*, 250-266; *Mississippi Free Trader*, (Natchez, MS) Friday, April 21, 1837.

⁹ Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 24.
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in his honor. The banquet's Democratic sponsors gushed over Johnson's presence in their city. They recognized in him "an able and consistent advocate, and an exemplar of those pure principles of government and policy" espoused by the Democratic Party. After reciting Johnson's many services to the country, the banquet committee told Johnson they anticipated his assistance to the president in ruling the country through "the principles of Jeffersonian democracy, as illustrated by the practice of General Jackson." Johnson decided not to attend. He pleaded business. Most likely his real reason revolved around not wanting to appear before a dinner packed with planters. Johnson enjoyed his time in New Orleans, but deigned to speak before a group which no doubt demanded he voice support for a political program he increasingly harbored doubts over.¹⁰

Not until May, 1837, did Johnson's Democratic unorthodoxy truly become known to the American public. During the campaign that summer for Johnson's old congressional seat, Kentucky's Thirteenth District, the Whig candidate William Southgate ran surprisingly well. The Democrat, the ironically named Jefferson Phelps, realized that support in the Bluegrass District for banks, tariffs, and a host of other whiggish and anti-Jeffersonian measures now crossed party lines. Phelps joined a few other western Democrats like Johnson and publicly supported re-chartering a United States bank. Stalwarts of Jeffersonian agrarianism branded Phelps guilty of political

¹⁰ Shirley Elizabeth Thompson, *Exiles at Home: The Struggle to Become American in Creole New Orleans* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 11, 50; "Colonel Johnson," *Mississippi Free Trader*, (Natchez, MS) Friday, May 12, 1837. [Type text]

treason. Enthusiasm over positions formerly seemed a liability in the West stung Democrats. Barely six days after the western press outed Jefferson Phelps for being pro-bank, a similar charge was leveled at Johnson. The Democratic Vice President supposedly admitted to a friend his advocacy for a new national bank. Johnson contradicted the report, but western doubts lingered. Just how much in the Democratic canon did the Vice President disagree with?¹¹

Endurance typified Johnson's time as Vice President. Democrats committed to manor-based agrarianism assaulted him in the South and West. In eastern cities the press painted him as an uneducated buffoon. Judicious Americans, the *Baltimore Patriot* said, grieved at the very sight of Johnson in the vice presidential chair. Johnson's popularity among urban New Yorkers remained high. Van Buren, keenly aware that the Democrats' influence in New York City waned daily, dispatched Johnson to drum up support for Democratic congressional candidates. The trip went poorly; most Democrats lost, a poor harbinger for Van Buren.¹²

One interesting story emerged from Johnson's trip to New York. Johnson reportedly introduced an old Revolutionary War soldier to Van Buren while the latter

¹¹ Robert Seager II, *The Papers of Henry Clay: The Whig Leader, January 1, 1837-December 31, 1843* IX (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1988), 69; *Daily Herald and Gazette*, (Cleveland, OH) Thursday, June 22, 1837; John Ashworth, *Slavery, Capitalism, and Politics in the Antebellum Republic: Commerce and Compromise, 1820-1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 399; *Daily Herald and Gazette*, (Cleveland, OH) Wednesday, June 28, 1837; "The Vice President," *The Globe*, (Washington, DC) Friday, July 14, 1837.

¹² *The Atlas*, (Boston, MA) Monday, October 16, 1837.
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visited the city in November, 1837. The soldier, a member of New York's gentry Whigs, told Johnson of his dislike of Van Buren's politics. Johnson, perhaps trying to create some levity, told Van Buren as much when he introduced the President and veteran. It was true, admitted the embarrassed soldier. "I do not approve of your measures, he told the President, "but I am not more hostile to you than Col. Johnson: for it was only yesterday that he told me 'you had not done one thing right since you came into office!'"

The story, probably apocryphal, nevertheless revealed the deepening divide between Johnson and Democratic power brokers. Johnson increasingly looked to grassroots Democratic voters for support. While in New York a large crowd, most likely composed of working class Democrats, gathered outside Johnson's hotel hoping to glimpse him.¹³

No matter how enthusiastically New York crowds greeted Johnson, his political struggles continued. His rumored support of a national bank continued to circulate in the national press. Some of the stories included specifics that not even Johnson's partisans discounted. Johnson usually made his supposed pro-bank statements when speaking to gatherings of northern Democrats and Whigs. At a meeting in Philadelphia he told a bipartisan group of businessmen, according to an unnamed source:

"Gentleman, I am in favor of a U.S. Bank." Johnson, according to the source, said he hoped the bank would have "branches so disseminated, in every part of the country, that

¹³ "Col. Johnson floored!" *Daily Herald and Gazette*, (Cleveland, OH) Tuesday, November 21, 1837; *Vermont Patriot and State Gazette*, (Montpelier, VT) Monday, November 27, 1837
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there would not be a square mile of United States or its dependencies where its notes would not be redeemed.”¹⁴

The constancy and number of rumors confirmed some truth in charges that Johnson supported banks. Most likely Johnson saw Van Buren as a sinking ship, and began to build an alternative political base. Johnson probably allowed that a national bank, under certain circumstances, would be beneficial. He probably made the statement about multiple branches around the country because if a bank became expedient, he undoubtedly wanted its power diffused and not concentrated in one city or region as he had criticized the bank for being under Nicholas Biddle in Philadelphia. Johnson’s nuance never satisfied Democratic purists. They demanded he deny the allegation. Johnson received at his office the offending accusation. The papers wanted him to sign an official denial, but he declined. Johnson wanted no more connections to Van Buren’s failed policies, but he increasingly languished in political isolation¹⁵

Suspicious Democrats eventually figured out Johnson’s game. Democrats in Louisville offered that “Col. Johnson, when in the company of Whigs, is in the constant habit of seeking to promote his own personal popularity by finding fault with measures of the administration.” Johnson, Democrats theorized, “would tremble at the idea of

¹⁴ *Pennsylvania Inquirer and Daily Courier*, (Philadelphia, PA) Friday, December 1, 1837.

¹⁵ Thomas Payne Govan, *Nicholas Biddle: Nationalist and Public Banker, 1786-1844* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), 113; “Colonel Johnson and a National Bank,” *Pennsylvania Inquirer and Daily Courier* (Philadelphia, PA) Friday, December 22, 1837

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having his remarks made public. Although Johnson publicly remained loyal, his interest—political, cultural, and social—no longer coincided with old Jeffersonian conceptions of democracy. He flirted, for example, with typical Jeffersonian taboos, a noted one being a fascination with maritime exploration. When Charles Wilkes outfitted the United States Exploring Expedition in 1838, Johnson found out and pushed the project amongst his political contacts. Johnson’s interest in exploration coincided with a season of heightened intellectual curiosity in Johnson’s life. Johnson believed that the planet’s poles were indented. He turned out to be wrong, but nonetheless helped Wilkes gain Congress’s support.¹⁶

Johnson’s emerging eccentricity brought him to the attention of dissenters of all types, especially those accused of unorthodox religious practices. In April, 1838, he received a letter from a man being sued for blasphemy. Under the impression that Johnson regularly defended blasphemers during his days as a Kentucky lawyer, he wrote asking the Vice President for help. Johnson told the man he had not ever worked on a case like this, but he credited that to what he deemed as Kentucky’s enlightened tolerance. In Kentucky no man, Johnson said, “can be persecuted, prosecuted, or

¹⁶ “Col. Johnson and a National Bank,” *Pennsylvania Inquirer and Daily Courier*, (Philadelphia, PA) Tuesday, January 30, 1838; Nathaniel Philbrick, *Sea of Glory: America’s Voyage of Discovery, The U.S. Exploring Expedition* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2003).

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punished for his opinions, whether political or religious, no matter what his faith or belief may be in politics.”¹⁷

Johnson regretfully told the doubter he had no case. The Vice President knew of no “remedy for the evil you suffer and which you complain.” Nonetheless, he wished him success against “all attempts to punish you for faith, belief, or religious sentiments.” Johnson sympathized with doubters, non-religious Americans, and those who practiced differently from the rigid Protestantism of the United States in the 1830s. Nonetheless, he needed to keep in the good graces of northern Whigs, some of whom might break from the party and give him votes should he run for national office in the future. He hastily included a postscript in his letter. Despite his expressed sympathy for blasphemers and abhorrence of persecution in any form, “my parents were both upwards of 40 years members of the Baptist Church and brought me up in the full belief of the Christian religion.” Johnson “always regretted to see any person make war against it, although the right is perfect.”¹⁸

Johnson’s vice presidency never transcended the limitations of the office imposed by nineteenth-century American political practice. He faced considerable opposition from his own party and the slaveholder elite that controlled the party. On March 19, 1839 the *Richmond Enquirer*, a voice for Virginia’s Democratic planters, argued that Johnson should step down as Vice President “if it be the wish of his Republican friends.”

¹⁷ *Boston Investigator*, (Boston, MA) Friday, May 11, 1838.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

The *Enquirer's* none too subtle allusion coincided with similar sentiments from other southern papers. The *New Orleans Bee* stated that the “venerable Vice President had grown old,” and needed to retire. Andrew Jackson, for many years inflexible about Johnson, suggested that the Vice President was the only thing jeopardizing the Democrats’ chances for success against the presumptive Whig nominee, William Henry Harrison. Johnson’s friends begged him to respond to the charges leveled against him during his vice presidential term. Johnson refused again. Convinced of his support in the West, he ignored negative news altogether. *The Kentucky Gazette* believed that in 1840, more than ever, western democrats would “unite upon Col. Johnson, stronger than they have ever done.”¹⁹

II.

The presidential election of 1840 featured a rejuvenated Whig party. Formerly a coalition of northern capitalists, southern great planters, reformists, and State Rights southerners, the incarnation of the Whig Party of 1840 presented a personality instead of a platform as its major selling point. At first, Democrats seemed pleased. Sixty-seven years old and distinguished only by his martial record and his tenure as Indiana’s territorial governor, Harrison meandered between government posts over a period of fifteen years. He served an unheralded term as a congressman from Ohio. As U.S. Minister to Colombia, Harrison precipitated diplomatic incident by publicly lecturing

¹⁹ Leland Meyer, *The Life and Times of Colonel Richard M. Johnson of Kentucky* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1932), 434-437.

Simon Bolivar on democracy. Although his stand against Bolivar received applause in the United States, it illustrated Harrison's somewhat amateurish and cavalier approach to politics. When a Democratic paper sneered that Harrison was nothing more than a clerk who should be satisfied with a "log cabin and a barrel of hard cider," Whig sloganeers turned the phrase to their advantage, transforming the patrician Harrison into a common western farmer happy in his cabin drinking a draught of cider.²⁰

The choice of William Henry Harrison instead of Henry Clay did not mean that the party jettisoned principles. They remained motivated by Clay and the American System. Henry Clay made speeches denouncing Spoils and other Democratic excesses throughout the campaign. "Misrepresentation, falsehood, bribery, forgery, perjury, corruption of the ballot boxes," Clay accused, "have all been established upon by members of [the Democratic] party." Clay's allegations touched on a difficult facet of Democratic politics: the party's relationship with urban workers.²¹

Much of the Democrats' strength in eastern cities originated in boroughs like New York City's Five Points, a neighborhood populated by Irish immigrants firmly in the palm of local political bosses. Urban workers during Van Buren's administration

²⁰ William R. Manning ed., *Diplomatic Correspondence of the United States Concerning the Independence of the Latin-American Nations II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1925), 1333-1334; David A Green, "A Republican in Gran Colombia" The Diplomatic Mission of William Henry Harrison," MA Thesis, TCU, 1994.

²¹ "Vote for Old Granny," *The Ohio Statesman*, (Columbus, OH) Friday, March 20, 1840; "The Log Cabin Candidate," *Tennessee Whig*, (Jonesborough, TN) Thursday, January 30, 1840; Davis S. Heidler and Jeanne T. Heidler, *Henry Clay: The Essential American* (New York: Random House, 2010), 315

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believed that Vice President Johnson took up their cause. Despite his support for the national bank, Johnson's ease with workers and his personality endeared him to northern laborers. Van Buren used Johnson as his urban troubleshooter throughout his presidency. Flagging Democratic popularity in the cities signaled a Johnson trip to New York or Philadelphia. Without exception, the cities' Democratic working classes received him with enthusiasm. Johnson, more than any other prominent Democrat, enjoyed popularity with northern workers, a critical voting group for the Martin Van Buren and Democrats in the election of 1840.²²

The Democrats had enjoyed an enthusiasm advantage in the presidential elections of 1832 and 1836. The personality of Andrew Jackson loomed large in Van Buren's victory in 1836. But four years of a lackluster economy, exacerbated by the Panic of 1837, weakened any influence Jackson might directly exercise on the Democrats' success. Jackson, said one Boston newspaper, "has almost ran his career." The General, "with no more than a ordinary mind," used the great minds of his peers to manufacture an impressive string of Democratic electoral and policy victories. Even in the West and Southwest, the Jackson allure had run its course.²³

²² Tyler Abinder, *Five Points: The Nineteenth-Century New York City Neighborhood That Invented Tap Dance, Stole Elections, and Became the World's Most Notorious Slum* (New York: Free Press, 2001), 328; *Vermont Patriot and State Gazette*, (Montpelier, VT) Monday, November 27, 1837.

²³ "Andrew Jackson," *Boston Investigator*, (Boston, MA) Wednesday, January 8, 1840.

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The Whigs, chastened by eight years of Jackson's popularity, nominated a popular former army commander: William Henry Harrison. Almost immediately, Harrison's position made Johnson's political life difficult. The Whigs effectively neutralized the electoral advantage gained by having the warrior Johnson on the ticket. The Whigs now claimed a warrior of their own, one who happened to be Johnson's former commander, and the respectable scion of one of Virginia's first families. More importantly, Whig papers began to convincingly sell William Henry Harrison as a man of "humble station" fully prepared to battle the "aristocrats" of the Democratic Party. The Whigs consciously projected a moderate tone on slavery for northern voters; in the South they ignored the subject altogether. Whig congressional leadership rightly discerned that as long as the planters did not feel threatened, Whig promises of maintaining a ruling elite and deliverance from Democrats that thrived on "the idolatry of the passions" might make the class-conscious great planters a reliable Whig voting-bloc. Harrison preempted any further questions over his slavery views by publishing a letter explaining his opinions. The scorn abolitionists heaped on Harrison further validated his candidacy in southern eyes. By nominating Harrison and staying mum on slavery, the Whigs now seemed more conservative on slavery than the Democrats. The Vice President's amalgamation now became the real issue, much more so than his radicalism. From the Hermitage, Andrew Jackson worried that the Whigs might have finally found a way to outfox the

Democrats. Feverishly, he urged Van Buren drop Johnson from the ticket and replace him with James Polk.²⁴

Other Democrats hankered for elevation to the Vice Presidency. John Forsyth, Van Buren's Secretary of State, made no secret of his interest in the office. He viewed himself as the man for the moment, given Harrison's likely victory in many of the southern states, including Forsyth's home state of Georgia. Forsyth struggled to overcome the machinations of powerful Pennsylvania Democrat James Buchanan. The Pennsylvanian preferred his colleague William R. King, from Alabama. Van Buren admitted the qualities of Polk and other Democrats put forth, but he argued vehemently that Johnson became even more necessary to balance Harrison's image. Jackson, displaying a prophetic awareness that Harrison's military credentials rendered Johnson's own military record mute, gave up on Van Buren. "I shall argue no more," Jackson wrote in a huff. He warned that "if Johnson is selected, the Democracy when too late will see its error." Other Democrats preempted Jackson. Newspaper reports appeared spuriously claiming that Johnson agreed to step down as Vice President. The false report never took

²⁴ *Fayetteville Observer*, (Fayetteville, NC) Wednesday, January 1, 1840; John L. Dorsey, *The Spirit of Modern Democracy Explained* (St. Louis, 1840), 9; "Gen. Harrison on Slavery," *Raleigh Register*, and *North-Carolina Gazette*, Friday, January 3, 1840; "General Harrison and Abolition," *The Emancipator* (Boston, MA) Thursday, January 16, 1840; Joel H. Silbey, *Martin Van Buren and the Emergence of American Popular Politics* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002), 148.

into consideration Johnson's popularity in the North and West and his ability to generate enthusiasm among the party faithful.²⁵

Jackson's opposition played well with southerners angry over Johnson's race-mixing, but in the North and West Johnson's popularity still made him a potent force on the stump. Urban radicals continued to adore him, despite four years of generally non-descript vice-presidential place-holding. Johnson proved not only a willing but an enthusiastic campaigner. Johnson's popularity in the West scuttled any effective Democratic opposition to his re-nomination. Ohio Democrats met for their 1840 convention just after the New Year and begged that Richard Johnson be nominated. The Democrats, aware that the majority of state Democratic conventions still supported Johnson, simply declined to nominate a vice presidential candidate. Johnson enjoyed the support of most states outside the homes of his old detractors in the South Atlantic States, so northern and western states led the way to his de facto nomination.²⁶

Once Johnson secured a place on the ticket, Whigs began searching for ways to limit his influence in the election. They resurrected the very public and fawning correspondence between Harrison and Johnson from the War of 1812. Johnson's past

²⁵ "The Vice Presidency," *Daily National Intelligencer*, (Washington, DC) Tuesday, May 12, 1840; Martin Van Buren to Andrew Jackson, April, 1840 in John Spencer Bassett ed., *Correspondence of Andrew Jackson*, VI: 1839-1845 (Washington: Carnegie Institute of Washington, 1933), 55-56; Andrew Jackson to Martin Van Buren, April 29, 1840 quoted in James C. Curtis, *The Fox at Bay: Martin Van Buren and the Presidency, 1837-1841* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1970), 197; *The Ohio Statesman*, (Columbus, OH) Friday, March 13, 1840.

²⁶ *Niles Register* 57 (February 1, 1840), 368; *Raleigh Register*, and *North-Carolina Gazette*, (Raleigh, NC) Friday, June 5, 1840.

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flattery and deference to Harrison haunted him during the campaign of 1840. Isaac Rand Jackson, a Whig partisan and future *Charge d' Affaires* to Denmark, seized upon the relationship between Johnson and his former commander in a hagiographic Harrison biography distributed during the campaign. The biographer stated that he could not “refrain from introducing the following extract of a letter written about this time to General Harrison, by Colonel Richard M. Johnson.” The letter, written by the “now Vice-President of the United States,” illustrated “the ardour of the people of the West to serve under the command of one who they knew would lead them to victory.” The Whigs used the letter to establish Harrison’s dominance over Johnson as a military figure. Although Johnson might have killed Tecumseh, the letter reminded voters that General Harrison commanded both Johnson “and the brave Kentuckians under his command. The author repeatedly attacked Johnson’s exploits at the Battle of the Thames, arguing that Richard Johnson’s brother James actually led the cavalry charge that turned the tide of the battle.²⁷

Given Johnson’s near unanimous support in the West, Whigs needed to attack Johnson without seeming to call into question his personal bravery. With Johnson safely cast as a western hero in Harrison’s image, they could easily attack the thoroughly un-martial Van Buren as an out of touch and venal elitist. They accomplished the task

²⁷ Silbey, *Van Buren*, 155; Curtis, 203; Charles S. Hall ed., *Life and Letters of Samuel Holden Parsons* (Binghamton, NY: Otsinengo Publishing Co., 1905), 12; Isaac Rand Jackson, *The Life of Major-General William Henry Harrison* (Philadelphia: Grigg & Elliott, 1840), 66, 70.

deftly. Whigs freely admitted that the Shawnee leader lay dead “among the Indians attacked by Colonel Richard M. Johnson's battalion.” But they refused to allow the Johnson claim to go untested. “A question has lately arisen as to who killed [Tecumseh]. The friends of Colonel Johnson have claimed the merit for him. If there be merit in such an act, and it belongs to Colonel Johnson, we would not withhold it from him.” The argument stressed that “Tecumseh was not distinguished from the rest of his tribe during the combat, nor was it known that he had fallen until General Harrison, to whom he was well known, pointed him out among the numbers who had fallen.”²⁸

The evidence for Johnson rested on the fact that Tecumseh was found “lying near the place where Colonel Johnson had received his last wound; along side of it lay another body, and the Colonel could not distinguish the one which he had slain.” But a nearby soldier, a Private King, also claimed to have shot a chief. “The merit of this deed lies between Colonel Johnson and a Mr. King, a private in Captain Davidson's company.” Well aware of Johnson's still powerful prestige in the West, the Whig machine circumvented the question of whether Johnson shot Tecumseh. “Colonel Johnson has never asserted that he killed this chief.” Appealing to both Johnson's personal humility and to voters' disgust at braggadocio Democratic handlers, the Whigs maintained that Johnson was better than his party, and his unsoldierly eastern running mate. Johnson, they claimed, was “unwilling to wrest the laurels from the brow of Mr. King, and in

²⁸ *Morning Herald*, (New York, NY) Wednesday, February 26, 1840; Jackson, *William Henry Harrison*, 73
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justice to a humble but brave man, we may regret that others should be less scrupulous than Colonel Johnson.”²⁹

Discussions of the Vice President formed part of the sometimes dynamic congressional workings traditionally accomplished during the winter months. Aware that the Senate needed him to carry out at least a few of his official obligations (which he continued to despise), Johnson returned to the capital in the winter of 1839/40. He spent most of the summer and fall of 1839 at White Sulphur Springs, but seemed ready to resume his duties as Christmas approached. January and February were busy months politically and socially. An 1840 guide to Washington City for genteel visitors informed them that “the society of Washington, though very mixed, is good, partaking of the hues of ‘many colored life,’ from the highest refinement of polished France, to the manly dignity of untutored nature.” Well-connected visitors to the city expected the parties during the winter months to be “numerous, and well-attended.” The democratic flavor of these social events was “calculated to bring together many who might not otherwise have an opportunity of mingling with each other.” Most importantly, private citizens gained an opportunity to mingle with great statesmen and society figures.³⁰

Johnson attended as many parties as he could. He loved socializing in all forms; he loved people even more. He never turned down an invitation but likely seemed less

²⁹ Samuel Jones Burr, *The Life and Times of William Henry Harrison* (New York: L.W. Ransom, 1840), 225; Jackson, *William Henry Harrison*, 73.

³⁰ George Watterson, *A Picture of Washington: Giving a Description of all the Public Buildings, Grounds, etc.* (Washington: William M. Morrison, 1840), 76.

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than an inspiring presence in Washington society. He also presented a less impressive physical figure. Most of the previous year he spent running his Kentucky tavern, an activity that apparently rounded out his once imposing physique; during his vice presidency he transformed into a portly farmer, not so different than any other established Kentucky farmer. If westerners needed any proof that Johnson shared not only their political beliefs, but their cultural beliefs and lifestyles as well, his tavern offered all the evidence they desired.³¹

Johnson's comfort as a tavern-keeper surprised many of his political acquaintances. Postmaster-General Amos Kendall pleaded with Van Buren to either drop Johnson or to order his Vice President to drop his plebian pastimes. A friend of Kendall's was so surprised by Johnson's boisterous social life at the tavern that he wrote an unsolicited letter to Kendall. "The old gentleman," Kendall's friend related, "seems to enjoy the business of *Tavern-Keeping* as well as any host I ever stopped with, and is as bustling a land lord as the most fastidious traveler could wish." But instead of impressing Kendall's friend, Johnson's life revolted him.

The example of Cincinnatus laying down his public honors and returning to his plough should no longer be quoted as worthy of imitation, when the Vice President of the United States, with all his civic and military honors clustering around his time honored brow, is, or seems to be so happy in the inglorious pursuit of tavern-keeping—even giving his personal superintendence to the chicken and egg purchasing and water-melon selling department."

³¹ Leland Meyer, "Kentucky Hospitality' as Extended by Colonel Richard M. Johnson and His Fellow Citizens" *Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 89 (October, 1931): 372-378.

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Kendall grimaced at Johnson's choice of occupation. Although born in the Massachusetts, Kendall loved his adopted state of Kentucky. He attached his love, however, to the busting capitalists in Lexington and the planters of the Bluegrass Region, not to the region's common farmers. Kendall's friend provided even more disconcerting news. Johnson spent much of his time in the "presence of a young Delilah about the complection of Shakespeare's swarthy Othello." Johnson supposedly took this "present lady," reportedly between eighteen and nineteen years old, as his "third wife." Johnson's "second" wife was apparently the sister of his current partner. After discovering his second wife's infidelity, Johnson sold her and began a relationship with her sister. Johnson's behavior revealed how unaware he was of contemporary political realities.³²

Eastern and southern averseness mitigated western enthusiasm over Johnson, something that he never seemed to fully grasp. Whigs sang songs that conspicuously referenced Johnson's well-known relationships: "Tecumseh's half-breeds to displace, We'll vote for Tyler too sir, The Rights of states he will defend, and be a Tyler true sir." Again, respectability proved to be the essential corollary in how southerners approached Johnson, politics, and race. Johnson's amalgamation was replaced not just by whiteness, but by John Tyler and his aristocratic heritage. "A Tyler true" paid homage to Tyler's

³² Leland Meyer, "Kentucky Hospitality' as Extended by Colonel Richard M. Johnson and His Fellow Citizens" *Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 89 (October, 1931): 372-378; Cole, *A Jackson Man*, 42-54; Sean Wilentz, *Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2005), 479.
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patrician father, a Revolutionary War veteran, Governor of Virginia, and judge—a perfect exemplar of what antebellum Americans called the F.F.V.; First Families of Virginia. A broad spectrum of Kentuckians, both Democratic and Whig, derided Virginian pretensions. Men, like noted Whig abolitionist Cassius M. Clay, supported or didn't support Johnson not because of their position on his multi-racial relationships. In Clay's case, he broke with Johnson over the annexation of Texas, which he viewed as a power-grab by a decaying planter class. "The remnants of the nobility and the Cavaliers," sneered Clay, "have gawn down to oblivion, leaving nothing bright or permanent behind them."³³

Johnson's taste in domestic partners, although not the politically defining factor of the election, nevertheless played into the hands of Whigs eager to market their program as a respectable and viable option for southern slaveholders. Whig papers, especially in North Carolina and Virginia, dredged up statements made by Johnson twenty years earlier during debates over the Missouri Compromise. Already painted as a race-mixer, Johnson became even more odious to planters by this supposed association of "Col. Johnson and Abolition." The nomination of Harrison and Tyler, two gentry Virginians, forced Johnson to reluctantly play the part of token slaveholder on the Democratic ticket. Tyler especially presented a problem for the Democrats. Northern anti-slavery activists bemoaned his nomination, saying that a politician could not

³³ "Tippecanoe Songs," *Morning Herald*, (New York, NY) Wednesday, April 1, 1840; Horace Greeley ed., *The Writings of Cassius Marcellus Clay: including Speeches and Addresses* (New York: Harper and Bros., 1848), 190.

possibly be more proslavery than the former Virginia governor. Harrison took the typical view of the time: Congress could not interfere with slavery in the states.³⁴

The campaign's escalation in the spring of 1840 brought new vigor to Democrats, but especially to those in the West, who viewed their section as being sacrificed to the Whigs. To men like Ohio's Dr. Alexander Duncan, Johnson represented the West's greatness and the great hallmarks of Democratic politics. A physician from Madison, Ohio, Duncan gained notoriety for once nearly causing a riot in Cincinnati when he purportedly disrespected a local religious leader. Richard Johnson, still known in many political and religious circles for the Sunday Mail Report, naturally appealed to westerners like Duncan. When the Whigs offered Harrison as a more authentic western hero, Duncan, now an Ohio Senator, rose on the floor of the Senate not to attack Harrison, but to extol the Johnson's service. "Yes, he was there," Duncan said of Harrison's leadership at the Battle of the Thames, "and of his conduct there I have no fault to find; nor would I name it, except in his praise." But communications and newspaper reports "now afloat" compelled Duncan to speak up for Vice President Johnson, for "the laurels which Colonel Johnson reaped in blood on the plains of the Thames" were being called into question "for the base, mean, and unhallowed purpose of crowning General Harrison." Duncan accused "degraded" Whig enthusiasts of robbing

³⁴ "Col. Johnson and Abolition," *Raleigh Register, and North-Carolina Gazette*, Tuesday, March 17, 1840; *The Emancipator* (Boston, MA) Friday, June 12, 1840; Anthony B. Norton, *The Great Revolution of 1840: Reminiscences of the Log Cabin and Hard Cider Campaign* (Mt Vernon, OH & Dallas, TX: A.B. Norton Co., 1888), 373.
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a “crippled veteran” of his honors, and permitting him “to sink in forgetfulness to the grave, with his body covered with wounds received on the field of battle in his country's cause, for the base purposes of party.”³⁵

Johnson refused to take advantage of Harrison’s controversial performance as a general. Journalists cornered him throughout the winter of 1839/40, begging him to make a statement on Harrison. He said nothing. Finally he broke his silence in January, 1840. His gentlemanly conduct toward his difficult former commander surprised some of his colleagues. Johnson asked: “Who is General Harrison?” He was, said Johnson, the son of a signer of the Declaration of Independence, “who spent the greater part of his large fortune in redeeming the pledge he then gave of his ‘fortune, life, and honor,’ to secure the liberties of his country.” Johnson overplayed Harrison’s sacrifice of his fortune. Johnson never held Harrison’s history of aristocratic privilege against him. Harrison expiated for his forbearers by his life not simply of public service, but of service to the West. “Of the career of Gen. Harrison I need not speak,” said Johnson. “The history of the West is his history. For forty years he has been identified with its interests, its perils, and its hopes.”³⁶

³⁵ *An Illustrated Historical Atlas Map of Holt County, Mo* (Philadelphia: Brink, McDonough, and Co., 1877), 28-30; *The Boston Observer and Religious Intelligencer* I (1835), 63; *Cong. Globe*, 26th Cong., 1st Sess. (1840).

³⁶ *New-Hampshire Statesman and State Journal*, (Concord, NH) Saturday, January 11, 1840; John Sanderson ed., *Biography of the signers to the Declaration of Independence*, Vol. 5 (Philadelphia: William Brown & Charles Peters, 1828), 39.
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During the intense campaigning of the fall of 1840, Johnson remained a cheerleader for the Democratic ticket. He traveled to northern and western cities, extolling the faithful to turn out for Old Kinderhook. In central Ohio, Johnson spoke at a rally attended by over 3,000 people. His speeches drew applause and some observers noted that Johnson spoke most passionately in defense of his record in the War of 1812. In August, he addressed the controversy, nearly twenty-eight years old but newly important, over what really happened at the Battle of the Thames. Johnson took justifiable pride in his service; he took no less than five balls, and his dying horse staggered, barely holding him as the battle intensified. "A tall, good-looking Indian approached me with his tomahawk ready for a throw...I pulled out a loaded pistol from my holsters and shot him. They say it was Tecumseh I shot." Johnson's reluctance to proclaim himself Tecumseh's killer, even twenty-eight years later, reemerged. "I care not," Johnson proclaimed, "and I know not; I would have shot the best Indian that ever breathed under such circumstances, without inquiring his name or the ages of his children." Johnson hoped this frank and seemingly sober statement on the battle might finally put to rest any continuing public controversy.³⁷

The significance of Johnson's campaign emerged as the election neared its final stages. No amount of Johnson's speechifying lifted Martin Van Buren's reelection chances. New York journalists pointed out that the President would lose his home-state

³⁷ *Morning Herald*, (New York, NY) Tuesday, September 08, 1840; *Ohio Statesman*, (Columbus, OH) Wednesday, September 30, 1840 "Col. Johnson vs. Tecumseh," *The Mississippian*, Friday, August 21, 1840.
[Type text]

and almost certainly the election as early as September. But Johnson gained a new-found national respect for his defense of Harrison and his seemingly magnanimous behavior toward the Whig candidate during the campaign. Whigs and Democrats alike compared Johnson favorably to the President. Westerners (who never fully embraced Van Buren) accused the President of riding Johnson's coattails. Johnson's biography and geographic provenance fit more neatly with the popular tone of the campaign. A Democratic campaign tune extolled Johnson as "part horse, part alligator," and "part snapping turtle."³⁸

Still, the Democrats' probable loss emboldened Johnson's detractors. Denounced as indiscreet, rash, and as a glory-hound, Johnson's genuine exuberance on the campaign trail played into the hands of his political opponents. The Whigs successfully cast Johnson not as a prosperous Kentucky farmer and soldier but as a base and delusional tavern-keeper. Indianans jested that a coroner would pronounce "death by visitation of Col. Johnson" as the reason for the Democrats' loss in the state. After one particularly rambunctious appearance by Johnson, embarrassed local Democrats told their shocked constituents that Johnson was actually a British Whig imposter, "bribed by Biddle and the Bank to travel under Col. Johnson's name, and do as much injury as possible to the Administration Party." Respectability demanded men like Harrison and Tyler. The Whigs broke the Democratic hold on slaveholders in the election of 1840.

³⁸ "Old Col. Johnson," *The Ohio Statesman*, (Columbus, OH) Wednesday, October 14, 1840.
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The West Johnson conceived of, one of pristinity, liberty, and freedom untouched by the social and political constraints, fell victim to the Whig vision of a progressive industrial society.³⁹

II.

Van Buren and Johnson barely carried Scott County. Situated within the Bluegrass plantation region, and increasingly dominated by the politics of Whig leader Henry Clay, Scott County in 1840 included established plantation slaveholders. Large brick mansions housed aristocrats dressed not in buckskin, but in European fashions. The presence of Georgetown College lent an air of erudition to a town barely thirty years removed from being a country trading post. The drop in farm prices following the financial crisis of 1837 hurt local yeomen small farmers. Wheat, corn, and livestock prices plummeted. Most farmers lacked the acreage and capital to compete with the Bluegrass gentry. They packed up and headed west in what amounted to a second Great Migration. Americans moved *en masse* west of the Mississippi River. Illinois, Wisconsin, and Iowa became fast growing states. Bustling frontier populations pushed westward, leaving Kentucky more patrician, more slaveholding, and more southern than it had been in earlier years. The Kentucky Richard Johnson understood moved west, and his own conception of what the American nation was moved west as well. After 1840,

³⁹ *Log Cabin Herald*, (Chillicothe, OH) Monday, October 05, 1840, Wilentz, *Rise of American Democracy*, 519-546; *Cleveland Daily Herald*, (Cleveland, OH) Thursday, November 12, 1840; *New-York Spectator*, (New York, NY) Wednesday, November 25, 1840.

Johnson never again held federal office, but his shadow continued to affect Kentucky politics. On a national level, Johnson energetically supported American expansion in the Age of Manifest Destiny's fruition. Johnson's hopes for the United States traveled into the West, while Kentucky began to and look more and more like her sister slave-states to the South.⁴⁰

Johnson settled quietly back into life in Washington in the winter of 1840/41. With the campaign over, Johnson attended to matters of state. He knew that many viewed him as a laughing stock for his oft colorful actions. But he also cared little for the opinions of elites. He ignored the fact that twelve faithless electors (all from the Atlantic South) abstained from voting for him. His support, he knew originated in the West anyway. If he made another run at high office, he knew his chances rested completely on western farmers and northern workers. Over the next decade Johnson emerged as an orthodox pro-slavery but also pro-worker national Democrat.⁴¹

Despite slavery's understated place in the two major party's campaign of 1840, fervent anti-slavery Americans rallied to the banner of the tiny Liberty Party. Openly avowing abolitionism as its political credo, the Liberty Party nominated James G. Birney, a former Alabama planter turned abolitionist, and reformer. Massachusetts reformer

⁴⁰ "Col. Johnson's Old District in Kentucky," *Cleveland Daily Herald*, (Cleveland, OH) Friday, November 13, 1840; *Portrait and Biographical Record of Lafayette and Saline Counties, Missouri* (Chicago: Chapman Bros., 1893), 346; Malcolm J. Rohrbough, *Trans-Appalachian Frontier: People, Societies, and Institutions, 1775-1850* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 420

⁴¹ "Richard M. Johnson," *Scioto Gazette*, (Chillicothe, OH) Thursday, December 31, 1840;
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Thomas Earle received the vice presidential nomination. Neither Birney nor Earle believed their party would succeed in the election. The party gained just over 7,000 votes on Election Day. But both appreciated the power of publicity and public opinion in their moral crusade to fight slavery. Earle's connections to the large abolitionist community in New England allowed him to assume the mantle of ideological spokesperson, a status he relished. The day after Christmas, 1840, Earle sent a petition from the citizens of Massachusetts to Johnson, asking him to present it to the Senate in an expeditious manner.⁴²

Johnson's reply to Earle masterfully navigated the political minefield surrounding slavery. He answered Earle and that very fact represented a willingness to discuss slavery, something that proslavery extremists in the South refused to even consider. Johnson assumed that Earle knew the Vice President publicly refused to present any petition touching on the subject of slavery in the States or in the District of Columbia. However, Johnson believed that Earle's petition presented a perfect venue to make his "sentiments" on the subject "universally known." Johnson argued that the Constitution implicitly recognized the place of slavery in states where it existed. The

⁴² Steven E. Woodworth, *Manifest Destinies: America's Westward Expansion and the Road to the Civil War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010), 22-25; Edwin B. Bronner, *Thomas Earle as a Reformer* (Philadelphia: International Printing, 1948); "Official Correspondence," *Daily National Intelligencer*, (Washington, DC) Wednesday, January 13, 1841; "Official Correspondence," *The Ohio Statesman*, (Columbus, OH) Friday, January 29, 1841.

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only constitutional way to eradicate slavery, Johnson believed, was to alter the Constitution by amendment.⁴³

Johnson knew that no amendment held any chance of garnering the needed number of states to ratify an amendment abolishing slavery. “Each state,” argued Johnson, “reserved for itself the power of pursuing its own policy in relation to involuntary servitude.” Furthermore, he affirmed the Fugitive Slave Clause, reminding Earle that Congress decided that no state should become “a receptacle” for “those who might flee from service. Johnson felt strongly that “if the spirit of conciliation is so lost as that this compromise shall be disturbed, it must be obvious to every reflecting mind that the Union will cease to exist.” Abolitionists, complained Johnson, needed to moderate their demands. “Within the brief period of a few years,” Johnson lamented, “I have seen the spirit of abolition, confided first to the District of Columbia, pass with hasty step to the prohibition of the slave trade between the states.” Abolitionists might have gained real benefits, but according to Johnson, they squandered their respectability by agitating for the abolition of slavery and the “slave trade within the territories—to the non-admission of new states providing for this domestic institution—to the exclusion of Texas upon the same ground—to the recognition of Hayti.” Slavery petitions, Johnson explained, “perpetually agitated” the American political condition. “Legitimate” subjects—of war and peace—inevitably caused political consternation, but those

⁴³ “Official Correspondence,” *Daily National Intelligencer*, (Washington, DC) Wednesday, January 13, 1841.
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stemmed from normal discourse in a democratic society. Abolitionism, argued Johnson, tore at the very fabric of American society and threatened to “destroy the last hope of man in this world of despotism.”⁴⁴

Although he joined in the chorus of slaveholding and non-slaveholding anti-abolition voices, Johnson departed from the extremism exemplified by pro-slavery southerners. Southern Democrats, led in succession by Calhoun and southern Senators such as Jefferson Davis, argued that society grounded in slavery guaranteed white freedoms better than a non-slave society. Johnson addressed Earle, an insignificant person politically speaking, respectfully. In the Deep South, southerners routinely spewed vitriol at abolitionists like Earle. Bishop William Winans, a Mississippi Methodist, told a gathering of fellow bishops that “abolition movements are evil, only evil, always, everywhere, and at all times.” Johnson saw no need to engage in that type of sensational anti-abolitionists rhetoric. As long as they confined their activities to northern states, their activities remained “harmless.” Moreover, Johnson allowed that the roots of abolitionism “in its origin created in the bosom of the patriot nothing but pity for the few willing to antagonize this happy and quiet community with this subject.” Abolitionists of former days deserved pity for their dogged and sincere devotion to a hopeless cause. The abolitionists of the 1840s, however, created a sense of “dread, of danger, and awful forebodings.” Abolitionism in 1841, regretted Johnson, demonstrated the “melancholy fact that misguided sympathy, inflamed by religious enthusiasms,

⁴⁴ Ibid.

having nothing to lose itself as to property,” foolishly dismissed “the prospect of losing the inestimable blessings, the inexhaustible happiness, and the innumerable benefits rising from the most perfectly organized and best regulated government on earth.”

Abolitionism, Johnson warned, inevitably led to disunion.⁴⁵

Johnson’s final substantive act as a public officer proved personally satisfying. On January 14, 1841, the Senate finally abolished the last legal provisions for debtor imprisonment. Two decades after his initial war for debtors’ rights, Johnson undoubtedly enjoyed watching the culmination of an undeniable piece of his political legacy. With some sense of satisfaction, He delivered his valedictory to the Senate on March 2, 1841. Ever deferential, and ever loquacious, Johnson rose from the Vice President’s chair and addressed his peers. “In taking my leave of the members of this body, language is inadequate to express the feelings which agitate my bosom.” Johnson’s greatest happiness, he told his colleagues, came from knowing that his personal relations” with members he disagreed with “have ever been kind and tender.” Circumstances rendered his service “pleasant and agreeable.”

I must not omit to say that whatever momentary agitation or excitement in debate may have interrupted the harmony and quiet and order of the body, I can declare with truth and with candor, that such has been the generous, the magnanimous course of the individual members of the body, and particularly

⁴⁵ William W. Freehling, *The Road to Disunion: Secessionists at Bay* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 259, 498; William Winans, Friday, May 13, 1836 in “American Methodist Episcopal Conference,” in Thomas Price, *Slavery in America: With Notices of the Present State of Slavery and the Slave Trade throughout the World* (London: G. Whiteman, 1837), 55; “Patent Democracy,” *The Liberator*, (Boston, MA) Friday, January 22, 1841.

such has been their indulgence towards me, who never studied the rules of order technically, that my station here has been rendered pleasant and agreeable.

Johnson graciously offered an apology if, “in the discharge of my official duties, I have ever failed to gain your approbation or to meet your acquiescence in the course I have pursued.” It arose, Johnson said, “not from any want of inclination, but from a want of ability on my part to have formed them better.” Johnson constantly endeavored to act “with perfect impartiality towards the members of this body.”⁴⁶

Yet hopeful about his political future, Johnson used his farewell address to pacify different segments of the Democratic coalition. Johnson nodded to State Rights southerners. He viewed “each Senator as the representative of a sovereign and independent State, and as entitled to equal consideration from me.” Johnson then recognized his successor. Johnson’s impressive campaign in Ohio stirred Whig vice presidential nominee John Tyler from his aristocratic diffidence toward campaigning. Tyler undertook a speaking tour in western Virginia, an unprecedented political action for a member of the Virginia aristocracy. Neither man knew each other. Their differing political positions and cultures precluded any real warmth between the two men. Still, Johnson kept his comments civil. “The place from which I am about to retire, will be

⁴⁶ “An Act to Abolish Imprisonment for Debt,” *Cleveland Daily Herald*, (Cleveland, OH) Thursday, February 18, 1841; *Cong. Globe*, 26th Cong., 2nd Sess. (1841).
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occupied by a distinguished, citizen of Virginia, who has been called by the voice of the people to this station.”⁴⁷

Johnson’s pleasant tone confirmed his general good cheer leaving office. The vice presidency never suited his active personality. He retired “without the least dissatisfaction.” During his “humble service” to the United States, Johnson pronounced his devotion to the “great radical and fundamental principle of submission to the voice of the people when constitutionally expressed.” Clay immediately rose and offered an adulatory affirmation of Johnson’s service. Both men respected and liked each other. Both fought for the West, albeit through different political mediums. A former enemy of Johnson’s, North Carolina Whig Willie Mangum, echoed the Kentucky Senator. Clay’s comments annoyed reformist northern Whigs. They accused the two southern Whigs of “soft-soaping” the now ex-Vice President. Johnson, the *Scioto Gazette* intimated, was nothing more than a stupid and lucky old man led around by party lackeys.⁴⁸

No Vice President before Johnson attended the inauguration of his successor. Eight years later George M. Dallas debated whether to attend to accession of Zachary Taylor and Millard Fillmore. He decided to attend based on the example of Johnson. “I believed from a careful examination of the journals, that but a single retiring Vice-President had attended to inauguration of his successor, namely, Col. R. M. Johnson.”

⁴⁷ Oliver P. Chitwood, *John Tyler, Champion of the Old South* (New York: D. Appleton-Century Co., 1939), 185; *Daily Herald* (Cleveland, OH) Thursday, February 18, 1841.

⁴⁸ *Cong. Globe*, 26th Cong., 2nd Sess. (1841); “Mangum, Clay, and Johnson,” *Scioto Gazette*, (*Chillicothe, OH*) Thursday, March 25, 1841.

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Dallas, a thoroughly snobbish Pennsylvania Democrat, found Johnson a poor exemplar of past Vice Presidents. "I did not feel much pride in imitating Col. Johnson." Dallas assumed the only reason Johnson attended Harrison's inauguration was "his having served under the command of that general in the war of 1812." Nevertheless, Dallas admitted that Johnson's attendance set an admirable precedent. He felt proud in "preserving that proper courtesies of public life." Johnson's act, which Dallas now emulated, "manifested entire deference to the will of the people."⁴⁹

III.

Johnson returned to Scott County after the inauguration. April meant planting season in Kentucky. Farmers sowed corn. A few planted cotton. Most used simple hand-made tools. The demands of sowing, hoeing, and plowing sent farmers scurrying to hamlets and towns looking for blacksmiths to repair their tools. A few bought new tools altogether if their purses afforded such a purchase. Farmers in town at the appointed hours of 11 o'clock and 4 o'clock marched through the doors of open taverns and took their glasses of bourbon. Kentuckians, said early-nineteenth settler Ebenezer Stedman, "could not work without whiskey." Many patronized Johnson's own establishment. His popularity in Scott County never wavered. On April 8, 1841, mounted militia and a "numerous cavalcade of citizens on horseback" met Johnson's coach at the turnpike

⁴⁹ George M. Dallas, "Diary and Letters of George M. Dallas December 4, 1848-March 6, 1849," *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 73 (Oct., 1949): 475-517; John M. Belohlavek, *George Mifflin Dallas: Jacksonian Patrician* (University Park and London: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1977), 188.

connecting Georgetown to Frankfurt. Johnson entered Georgetown to an artillery salute and cheering townspeople. After a quick parade through town, Johnson and the throng made their way to the county courthouse. After the speech, Johnson went to the Georgetown Hotel. That evening most of Scott County turned out for a great dinner in his honor. In May, local Democrats reaffirmed their confidence in Johnson by nominating him to the Kentucky legislature. Johnson won comfortably.⁵⁰

Johnson's election heartened his partisans around the country. Northern Democrats especially saw him as the ideal candidate to run against Tyler in 1844. New England newspapers reported his political movements. Despite the rumblings, Johnson remained in Kentucky, tending his farm and tavern. This temporary quiet ended during the summer of 1841. On June 1, John Tyler vetoed a new national bank, a pillar of the Whig platform. Clay and other Whig leaders understood that Harrison accepted their designs for a bank, and expected that Tyler would simply continue Harrison's course. When Tyler exercised independence on the question, his support from Whigs (many whom never trusted him in the first place) all but evaporated. By the end of June, whisperings emitted from Georgetown indicated that Johnson remained a possible candidate to challenge Tyler in 1844. Whig intransigence toward Tyler and his

⁵⁰ Harriette Simpson Arnow, *Seedtime on the Cumberland* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, original 1960), 252; Mark Edward Lender and James Kirby Martin, *Drinking in America: A History* (New York: Free Press, 1982), 47; Stephen Aron, "The Poor Men to Starve': The Lives and Times of Workingmen in Early Lexington," in Craig Thompson Friend ed., *The Buzzel about Kentuck: Settling the Promised Land* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1999), 180; "Public Dinner to Col. Johnson," *Vermont Patriot*, (Montpelier, VT) Saturday, May 1, 1841.

crumbling political base made the President an increasingly vulnerable incumbent. The editor of the *Kentucky Gazette* visited Johnson at his home in early June, He found the Colonel looking well and more than happy to talk about politics. Johnson intimated to the editor, a friend of some time, that Pennsylvania's Democrats "strongly solicited" Johnson to allow his name to be announced for the presidency. Johnson's public statements included the usual deferment. He refused to seek the office, but if the Democracy demanded his candidacy, he believed it his duty to accept.⁵¹

Johnson's initial activities during his retirement revolved around the status of remnant Indians in the Old Northwest. In Ohio, the continuing presence of the Wyandot Nation irked the growing population of Ohio's cities and towns. The Wyandots administered justice through tribal councils and meetings. They levied fines and ordered executions. Indian justice in particular angered white urban westerners. The *Cleveland Daily Herald* observed, "though justice, according to the forms of savage law, was done...it appears strange that such proceedings should have been permitted in an organized and populous county of Ohio." The Wyandots emigrated during the late-eighteenth century from New York. Negotiations with the Wyandots snagged on the price of lands the tribe released. Throughout the summer, Indian agents worked with

⁵¹ *Norwich Aurora* (Norwich, CT) Wednesday, June 23, 1841; Dan Monroe, *The Republican Vision of John Tyler* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2003), 92; "John Tyler, President of the United States," *The Dollar Magazine* 1 (January, 1841), 154; Duff Green, *Facts and Suggestions, Biographical, Historical, Financial and Political, addressed to the People of the United States* (New York: Richardson and Co., 1866), 141; "Colonel Johnson and the Presidency," *Cleveland Daily Herald*, (Cleveland, OH) Monday, June 28, 1841.

the Wyandots. By the middle of the summer, Richard Johnson entered into negotiations with the Indians. On August 4, 1841, the *Cincinnati Republican* reported a final resolution with the 700 remaining Wyandots in Ohio.⁵²

Johnson knew the Indians' fate. Jackson's ruthless removal rested on too firm a legal and political foundation to be overturned by a well-intentioned Indian agent. This conviction never meant that Johnson hoped to eradicate Indians from the eastern United States. On the contrary, he believed that education and adoption of white cultural norms guaranteed a place for Native Americans in antebellum white society. Johnson continued to patronize Rev. Thomas Henderson and the Choctaw Academy. In 1841 the academy educated forty-four Choctaws, twenty-two Chickasaws, eight Cherokees, fourteen Creeks and Seminoles, fourteen Pottawattamies, and seven boys from various tribes.⁵³

Johnson's involvement in the Choctaw Academy reflected his personality. Genuinely interested in bettering the Indians' place in society, his lackadaisical administration harmed the school's reputation. Serious discipline problems became endemic. Indian fathers charged the Choctaw academy with injustice towards their sons. All they learned were the vices of southern gentlemen. Young men entered the

⁵² "Wyandot Execution," *Cleveland Daily Herald*, (Cleveland, OH) Friday, January 22, 1841; *The Ohio Statesman*, (Columbus, OH) Wednesday, August 04, 1841.

⁵³ John P. Bowes, *Exiles and Pioneers: Eastern Indians in the Trans-Mississippi West* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 160-170; *Public Documents Printed by order of the Senate of the United States during the Second Session of the Twenty-Sixth College I* (Washington: Blair and Rives, 1841), 392.

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academy as Indians and left as dissipated and confused half-southerners. Johnson and the school's friends in Kentucky probably never understood the concerns of Native American fathers. They saw the boys as reflections of a Kentucky farmer or planter. They drank and gambled, and comported themselves like whites. Johnson likely saw his school as a success. Full-blood Indians who never tasted white society particularly suffered once they returned to their families. Henry Benson explained the difficulties the academy created for full-blood Indians.

Their sons came home disqualified for usefulness. They were neither Indians nor white men. They remained in Kentucky till they forgot their own people, their customs, and their traditions—in some instances even their native tongue. They came home strangers to their own parents and brethren, and wanting in attachment to their tribe and its national characteristics.

In 1840 Johnson reluctantly agreed to shut the school down. He enacted a waiting period of a few years before he actually closed the academy. The Harrison and Tyler administrations, however, sped the closing process. The Whigs declined to use federal funds to support a school patronized by a former Democratic Vice President.⁵⁴

Johnson kept his eye on politics, especially in northern cities. In New York, Boston, and Philadelphia Irish voters quickly became pawns in the vicious political battles that defined the United States' burgeoning democratic tradition. A few politicians realized their cause represented an extraordinary opportunity. Johnson's long-standing popularity with urban workers allowed him to easily revamp his political

⁵⁴ Ronald N. Satz, *American Indian Policy in the Jacksonian Era* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1975), 263.
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image as crusader for the Irish cause. His efforts brought him the attention of the British Foreign Secretary, Lord Aberdeen. William Peter, the British consul in Philadelphia, alerted Aberdeen to the formation of a Repeal Society, which supported Irish independence or repealing the Union with Britain. The Society consisted of “1,500 to 2,000 members, American and Irish, but chiefly the latter. The members hailed from the lowest orders, an ideal audience for the rabble-rousing speeches given by Johnson. Peters warned Lord Aberdeen that since any “ignorant Democrat” appealed to the Irish, such speeches especially emboldened radical Irish resistance to the British.⁵⁵

Johnson decided to place himself at the forefront of Repealers in the West. At a meeting of Repealers in Frankfort, Johnson utilized every rhetorical tool in his considerable disposal. The Irish, he told his audience, suffered under the “iron hoof of oppression” under British rule. The manacle of British oppression, Johnson promised, would fall at the feet of the Irish cause’s moral superiority. Johnson painted the Irish as spirited players in the early days of the American experiment, effectively codifying their place as cultural Americans. Johnson ramped the crowd by reminding them that they always responded “to claims of the oppressed in every country.” Ireland, Johnson reminded his fellow Kentuckians, gave many of her sons for American independence. “I have, with some of you, my fellow citizens, fought by the Irishman in the ranks of

⁵⁵ Kerby A. Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 265; William Peter to George Hamilton Gordon Earl of Aberdeen, April 20, 1842 in Joseph Alfred Boromé, “William Peter Her Majesty's Consul at Philadelphia, 1840-1853,” *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 80 (Oct., 1956): 416-442.

liberty, under the Star-Spangled Banner.” In the past, Johnson exclaimed, he saw Irishmen “fall in the ranks, and thank his God that he had one life to give to American freedom, and regret that he had not another to lose for her sake.”⁵⁶

Several reasons prompted Johnson to publically and vocally boost Repeal. He courted a growing and active urban constituency that found the Kentucky slave-owner sympathetic and willing to listen. Any election in 1844 presented an opening for a Democratic candidate popular with the urban Irish. Second, the Irish despised the abolitionists. Democratic propaganda warned Irish voters that free blacks in the North might take work from them. Southern Democrats and their northern surrogates sympathetically argued that the Irish endured a “worse slavery” than enslaved southern blacks. Johnson’s support of the Irish allowed him to gain the support of constituents who despised abolition and supported slavery, yet agitated for urban labor reforms. In short, he seized the adulation of voters on the right of the slavery and on the left of labor struggles.⁵⁷

Irish Repeal, the occasional public speech, and generally remaining in the public eye formed the core of Johnson scheme for grabbing the Democratic nomination in 1844. The Louisville *Public Advertiser’s* announcement on January 7, 1842, that Kentucky’s Democrats nominated Johnson for the presidency shocked absolutely no

⁵⁶ Col. Johnson and the Repealers,” *The Liberator*, (Boston, MA) Friday, February 25, 1842.

⁵⁷ “Colonel Johnson and the Irish Repealers,” *The Mississippian*, Friday, February 18, 1842; Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York: Routledge, 1995); “Democracy’—‘Irish Patriotism’!!!” *The Liberator*, (Boston, MA) Friday, February 18, 1842 [Type text]

one. Still, it thrilled western Democrats. In Arkansas, Johnson enjoyed enormous popularity. The Arkansas *State Gazette* admitted that the crowded field precluded any unanimity of action but nonetheless exuded confidence. “Coonskins, log cabins, and hard cider have had their day, and so has the credit system.” Democrats hoped to see the next election determined by reference to the “opinions, the public acts, and public services of the candidate.” “Let our party concentrate on the most deserving individual.” If, the *State Gazette* said, Johnson became “that individual, it would afford us sincere gratification, for he would, in our opinion, as well unite the Democracy as any other individual.” If the national Democrats balanced Johnson’s nomination with Pennsylvania’s James Buchanan, the ticket, stated the paper, would be as strong as any in recent memory. Once again, the West rallied to Johnson, but the East demurred. Rumors that Pennsylvania’s Democrats agreed to the Johnson-Buchanan ticket ran into opposition from Pennsylvanians expressing the same reluctance George Dallas did. Few Pennsylvanians believed the elegant and cultivated Buchanan should be subservient to an aged backwoodsman who happened to luck his way into the vice presidency. Johnson brooked no such doubts. He jubilantly told Robert Letcher he would win Pennsylvania. When Letcher told Johnson he was playing against a “stocked pack,” Johnson responded confidently that his cards were “strong enough.” In the meantime, Johnson served a term in the Kentucky legislature during 1841 and 1842.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ *Louisville Public Advertiser*, January 7, 1842; “Nomination of Col. Johnson to the Presidency,” *Arkansas State Gazette*, (Little Rock, AR) Wednesday, January 19, 1842; [Type text]

Although he held no seat in any legislative body, Martin Van Buren also began his scheming for the Democratic nomination in the spring and summer of 1842. A Whig paper in Tennessee noted that Van Buren and one of his “broken-down ex-secretaries” traveled through the South and West, the regions where Harrison and Tyler so thoroughly obliterated Van Buren and Johnson. Whigs asserted early in 1842 that cool relations existed between Van Buren and Johnson. Some truth lay in the charge. Johnson in fact distanced himself from the entire Democratic hierarchy in 1842. His moderate support for the bank and outspoken unionism painted a picture of a Democrat willing to work with a Whig Congress. Johnson befriended Robert Letcher, a former Jacksonian who joined the Whigs in the aftermath of General Jackson’s Maysville Road Veto. Letcher reported to John Crittenden that Johnson visited him on several occasions, “renewing his bond of fidelity. We are getting very thick, I can tell you.” Letcher simultaneously assured Crittenden that Johnson “promised to act the gentleman, and go for you ‘through thick and thin.’” Letcher received Johnson at his home throughout the winter and spring of 1842. Johnson swore that he “had never exerted himself so much in all his life to keep down a damned factious opposition of rascally Whigs, as well as

“Buchanan and Johnson,” *Pennsylvania Inquirer and National Gazette*, (Philadelphia, PA) Thursday, March 10, 1842; Jean H. Baker, *James Buchanan* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 2004), 9-44; Robert Letcher to John Crittenden, Dec. 8, 1842 in Mrs. Chapman Coleman ed., *The Life of John J. Crittenden, with Sections from his Correspondence and Letters* (Philadelphia: J.P. Lippincott & Co., 1873), 195; Henry Bayard to Henry Watson Jr., January 29, 1843 in Bayard Still, “Observations of Henry Barnard on the West and South of the 1840’s,” *Journal of Southern History* (May, 1943): 247-258.

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Democrats.” Letcher felt that Johnson proved himself worthy of Whig trust. He told Crittenden that Johnson behaved “well, indeed, and make no mistake.”⁵⁹

Political watchers perceived a public fracture in the relationship between Johnson and Van Buren in 1842. One theory posited that Johnson’s “old black woman” caused the supposed rift to widen. Alternate theories included Johnson’s gentle treatment of William Henry Harrison in the campaign of 1840. Most likely, however, Johnson and Van Buren viewed each other as rivals. Johnson, convinced that no candidate could challenge him in the West, confidently ignored campaigning there, instead spending much of his time and energy in the North. The two appeared together in public in late May, 1842, when Van Buren visited Lexington, Kentucky.⁶⁰

Van Buren rode in an open barouche “under the protection” of Johnson. Local gossips figured that Van Buren arrived either to politic or find a wife. While locals guessed at the reasons for Van Buren’s visit, Johnson certainly joined the ex-President to both keep an eye on him and to remind Kentucky voters of his presence. Van Buren also visited Johnson’s home, fifteen miles northwest of Lexington. Politicians who knew both men understood that Van Buren tried to undercut Johnson at every opportunity. Johnson never fully trusted the ex-President but failed to appreciate the means that Van

⁵⁹ Robert P. Letcher to John J. Crittenden, Feb. 25, 1842 in Coleman ed., *The Life of John J. Crittenden*, 171; Letcher to Crittenden, February 24, 1842; Letcher to Crittenden, Feb 26, 1842; Amos L. Herold, *James Kirke Paulding: Versatile American* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1926); Robert V. Remini, *Andrew Jackson: The Course of American Democracy, 1835-1854* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), 480.

⁶⁰ “Van Buren and Dick Johnson,” *The Jonesborough Whig, and Independent Journal*, (Jonesborough, TN) Wednesday, May 25, 1842.

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Buren used to undermine his political chances. His friends in Kentucky tried to make Johnson understand that Van Buren hoped to “stack the deck” against him. Robert Letcher told Crittenden that an “excited” Johnson understood that he “will have to stand” Van Buren’s onslaught. Letcher felt sorry for Johnson, whom he believed exhibited better character. “Dick is much the best fellow of the two,” said Letcher, “but he will be bamboozled sure as a gun.”⁶¹

Van Buren’s itinerary took him from Scott County to Columbus, Ohio. When the Democrats of Ohio’s capital heard of Van Buren’s stop in Scott County, they hurriedly invited Johnson to join Van Buren and Paulding on their western tour. Johnson declined, possibly because the meeting between and Van Buren turned frosty, possibly because it turned pleasant and they found common ground, or possibly because he disliked the idea of traveling with Paulding, who detested him. He nevertheless turned the situation to his advantage. He affirmed Columbus citizens with the usual exultations of their patriotism and love of liberty. He expressed his entire agreement with their principles.⁶²

In short, the letter appeared to be a very normal piece of campaign literature from an erstwhile Vice President exploring his party’s candidacy. Surprisingly, Johnson used the letter to gain support not from Ohio, but from the urban North. In the middle of a self-promoting promise to “make any sacrifice with the gallant sons of Ohio,”

⁶¹ Ibid; “Lexington, KY,” *The New York Herald*, (New York, NY) Thursday, June 02, 1842; Robert P. Letcher to John J. Crittenden, June 3, 1842 in Coleman ed. *Crittenden*, 181.

⁶² Ralph Aderman, *Letters of James K. Paulding* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1962).

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Johnson brought up New England. “The very foundation of free government,” Johnson informed his reader, “is the right of the whole people to govern themselves—depart from this principle, and the tendency is toward despotism.” He then moved to comment on the Dorr War. In Rhode Island Thomas W. Dorr, the leader of the People’s Party, stirred public opinion by leading a public campaign for universal white manhood suffrage. When conservative landowners blocked a new more democratic constitution, a small-scale civil war broke out. Things took a violent turn in Providence. Riots resulted in property damage and one man died. Johnson announced his sympathies. As expected, he sided with the Dorr rebels. Johnson regretted to see even “a diversity of opinion as to the people of Rhode Island, to modify or abolish the royal charter.” Johnson’s reliance on the Northeast seemed designed to force the hand of Democratic grandees hoping to remove him from the race. Winfield Scott told John Crittenden that despite “the universal preference of the rank and file,” Johnson’s chances in the South and West compelled him to move north and take up the mantle of radicalism.⁶³

Johnson displayed none of the carefully planned opulence so common in planter-aristocrats. To be sure, he wore fine clothes and enjoyed a greater than average level of prosperity than most farmers of his time. Massachusetts’s Whig governor John Davis complained that even though Johnson wore his expensive trademark red silk vest on the

⁶³ “Letter from Col. Johnson,” *The Ohio Statesman*, (Columbus, OH) Wednesday, June 15, 1842; George M. Dennison, *The Dorr War, 1831-1861* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1976); Winfield Scott to John Crittenden, Oct 4, 1843 in Coleman ed. *Crittenden*, 203.

stump, the newspapers and the people still believed that he cared nothing for his appearance. Johnson expressed his lack of ostentation in other ways. A Lexington lawyer, James Bennett, commented that Johnson visited often. "Col. Johnson resides on 'that farm' about 14 miles from this. He is a very pleasant gentleman in his discourse with fellow men." Bennett's description of Johnson displayed none of the cartoonish elements captured in sympathetic or opposition political literature. He described Johnson as "quite polite after the old-fashioned style, and less the great man in appearance than other any I know of." If Johnson "had a moiety of talent that he has of energy, industry, and zeal as a businessman, he would rank a no. 1." Johnson's absolute lack of interest in material wealth manifested itself in his home. Rust collected on the sword given to him by Congress. Elsewhere in his home, the pistol used to shoot Tecumseh lay for the inspection of visitors.⁶⁴

Johnson, sixty-two years old and not particularly careful of speech, appeared more often in public as 1842 progressed. At a barbeque thrown for him by Democrats in New Albany, Indiana, ostensibly celebrating July 4th, Johnson loudly told the crowd that the event's organizers requested him by letter to speak no more than five minutes. He yelled that he "scorned the compliments of such advisers!" Johnson then launched into a tirade on the current negotiations with Great Britain on the border between the United States and British Canada. The pace and tone of diplomacy annoyed Johnson and other

⁶⁴ John Davis to Henry Clay, October 14, 1843 in Calvin Colton ed., *The Private Correspondence of Henry Clay* (New York: A.S. Barnes and Co., 1855), 480; *The New York Herald*, (New York, NY) Saturday, July 9, 1842.

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expansionist Democrats. If he was not so old, exclaimed Johnson, he “would like to have a little fun with Great Britain...if there should be a war, he would like to take eight hundred Hoosiers and two hundred Kentuckians” and go facedown the British “upon the boundary line.” Johnson’s intended compliment to Indianans turned into a gaffe. Many in the crowd grumbled that Johnson implied one Kentuckian was worth four Indianans.⁶⁵

Throughout the summer, Johnson maintained a national political presence. He weighed in on a proposed national bankruptcy law. Johnson argued enthusiastically for the measure. Bankruptcy, Johnson argued, simply protected Americans from financial vultures who might otherwise take advantage of them in a time of personal economic or financial difficulty. He took issue with those who viewed bankruptcy as an admission of some sort of financial impropriety. It simply “extended protection from oppression to the unfortunate of our citizens.” The measure politically played well in the urban North, where new immigrants trying to set up businesses often lost everything to opportunistic and unscrupulous investors. Support for the bankruptcy law exposed Johnson’s commitment to urban northern voters, and his presumption, that he held the overwhelming support of western Democratic voters. Johnson miscalculated badly. His support in the West remained far from total. Many westerners took issue with the

⁶⁵ Edward Crapol, *John Tyler: The Accidental President* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2006), 89-128; *The North American and Daily Advertiser*, (Philadelphia, PA) Wednesday, July 13, 1842; *The New York Herald*, (New York, NY) Monday, July 18, 1842.

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bankruptcy law. Northern working class voters, despite their energy, held little power in the national party. Democrats increasingly realized that bypassing both Johnson and Van Buren might preserve Democratic unity. Johnson's presidential ambitions weakened further when he foolishly told a reporter that after himself, he preferred Henry Clay for the presidency in 1844.⁶⁶

Johnson campaigned throughout 1842 and 1843. He spent much of his time and energy in Ohio and in Pennsylvania, especially in the cities. His typical stump speech included allusions to his military background and a broad affirmation of Democratic principles. Unlike most southern Democrats, Johnson allowed that some protective tariff might in fact be in the best interest of the United States. To achieve the support of urban voters, both workers and the nascent capitalist class, Johnson necessarily supported the tariff. His tour through Ohio and Pennsylvania took most of the summer and fall, but Johnson's effort brought some fruit. In November 1842, Ohio's Democrats met at the Franklin County Courthouse in Columbus and nominated him for the presidency.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ "Bankrupt Law," *The Jonesborough Whig, and Independent Journal* (Jonesborough, TN), Wednesday, July 27, 1842; *Niles Weekly Register* (Aug 1843), 619; "Col. Johnson and a Bankrupt Law," *Arkansas State Gazette* (Little Rock, AR) Wednesday, August 17, 1842.

⁶⁷ *The North American and Daily Advertiser*, (Philadelphia, PA) Wednesday, September 28, 1842; "Col. Johnson at Pittsburgh," *Cleveland Daily Herald* (Cleveland, OH) Friday, September 30, 1842; *The North American and Daily Advertiser*, (Philadelphia, PA) Tuesday, October 11, 1842; "Col. Johnson and the Tariff," *Cleveland Daily Herald*, (Cleveland, OH) Monday, October 10, 1842; "Honor to Whom Honor is Due," *The Ohio Statesman*, (Columbus, OH) Wednesday, November 30, 1842.
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By the end of 1842, Johnson's chances of taking the Democratic nomination appeared shaky. Nevertheless, many northerners likewise saw him a candidate that might easily unite the disparate factions of the Democratic Party. Despite this support, Johnson's greatest mistake was the nature of his support nationally. In Pennsylvania, the Democrats placed most their hopes in James Buchanan. "The attempt of Col. Johnson's friends there," Buchanan assured Robert Letcher, "has been a greater failure than I anticipated." Southerners found Buchanan's sympathetic attitudes toward slavery agreeable. Many patrician Democratic power-brokers in Virginia and the Carolinas flocked to Buchanan's mantle. Other influential Democrats, such as Tennessee's James K. Polk, presented an attractive alternative to a man many southerners thought of as a vulgar race-mixing western farmer. A paper in Louisville made fun of Johnson by referencing the Vice President's interracial relationships. The paper recounted that Johnson often said "like begets like" in his speeches and facetiously asked if Col. Johnson wished "to prove himself a mulatto." The abuse of southern Democratic papers, his own missteps, and the changing political landscape all devastated Johnson's chances for the Presidency in 1844. Johnson told Robert Letcher at the beginning of 1844 that his party would not even nominate him for Vice President. Despite the miscalculations that characterized his own often-clumsy attempt at the presidency, he accurately predicted who the Democratic nomination would eventually fall to: former House Speaker James K. Polk.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ James Buchanan to Robert Letcher, April 17, 1842 in Coleman ed., *John J.*
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Crittenden, 177; "Col. Johnson," *Vermont Watchman and State Journal*, (Montpelier, VT) Friday, December 09, 1842; "The Presidency and Col. Johnson," *Pennsylvania Inquirer and National Gazette*, (Philadelphia, PA) Friday, November 25, 1842; James B. Ranck, "The Attitude of James Buchanan Towards Slavery," *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 51 (1927): 126-142; *Cleveland Daily Herald*, (Cleveland, OH) Wednesday, February 8, 1843; Robert P. Letcher to John J. Crittenden, Jan 6, 1844 in Meyer, *Col. Richard M. Johnson*, 461.

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Into The West

In 1844, few Americans thought about former Vice President Richard M. Johnson. He proved to be the butt of jokes more than a viable political candidate. The press mocked him. They alluded constantly to what they perceived as licentious relationships with slave women. One New Hampshire paper featured a speech from a fictional Johnson: "I will stand by the men when they are right, but I will stand by the women, right or wrong." Despite being lampooned in eastern papers, Johnson's popularity in the West kept his name circulated as a possible presidential candidate. Kentucky Democrats wanted him to be President, but Kentucky's Whig ascendancy panned the very notion and harped about his "mulatto" children. Democratic small farmers loved Johnson despite his relationships, white or black. The Democrats of Bradford County, Pennsylvania happily nominated him for the Presidency. Just over the New York border in Chemung County, the Democrats likewise recommended Johnson for President. Bradford County, Pennsylvania and Chemung County, New York both lay in the central parts of their respective states, away from the business-minded Whigs of the cities and from the patrician Democrats of the Hudson Valley and Philadelphia hinterlands. Johnson's most enthusiastic support in the West and southwest never wavered. After the election of 1840 Johnson used his waning but still considerable influence to further the cause of the last great western territorial additions of the antebellum United States: the Republic of Texas and what eventually became the American Southwest.

II.

Johnson's popularity in western slave states seemed incongruous with his perception in older slave states like the Carolinas and Virginia. But few of those states retained the aristocratic culture inherent in the Carolinas or Virginia. Some transplanted Virginians and Carolinians like Jackson and Polk self-consciously emulated the manorial lifestyle of Tidewater grandees. In the Mississippi River Valley, Americans from every region settled and while they owned slaves and plantations many saw themselves as successful businessmen. They adopted banks and tariffs as they needed them. They also saw the far West as a frontier waiting on inevitable settlement. Johnson, a westerner and believer in Manifest Destiny, fit the political ideal of many new planters in the Southwest. In March, 1843, Natchez, Mississippi invited Johnson to return to the city. Realizing he returned to a friendly environment, Johnson accepted. He toured Mississippi throughout the spring of 1843.²

Johnson accepted the invitation because Natchez happened to be on the way to his brother's plantation in Arkansas. Still ambitious, he realized his chances for high office, maybe even the presidency, lay in the West. Support for Johnson in Missouri,

¹ "Col. Johnson," *New-Hampshire Statesman and State Journal*, (Concord, NH) Friday, January 13, 1843; "Col. Johnson," *The Ohio Statesman*, (Columbus, OH) Friday, January 27, 1843; "Col. Richard M. Johnson." *The North American and Daily Advertiser*, (Philadelphia, PA) Thursday, February 16, 1843; *The New York Herald*, (New York, NY) Sunday, March 12, 1843.

² James Oakes, *The Ruling Race: a History of American Slaveholders* (New York: Knopf, 1982), 40; "Col. R. M. Johnson," *Mississippi Free Trader and Natchez Daily Gazette*, (Natchez, MS) Monday, March 27, 1843.

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Mississippi, Arkansas, and other western states flourished among Democrats looking for an alternative to imperious eastern transplants such as Missouri Senator Thomas Hart Benton. Unlike so many of his contemporaries, Johnson saw campaigning as exhilarating and necessary. He derided the idea that he needed to distance himself from the people to be elected. The Democrats for too long clung to the whims of patricians in the Southeast and North. Times changed, and the Whigs continually beat Democrats in the 1840s. The Democrats needed, Johnson believed, not an ideologue but a pragmatic man of the people. He alone, he told crowds on stump speeches, could beat presumed Whig nominee Henry Clay.³

The ardor that typified westerners' reception of Johnson, however, remained conspicuously absent in the eastern councils of the Democratic Party. Martin Van Buren, still considering a second run at the presidency, disliked his former deputy. So too did Van Buren's councilors. Patrician Democrat George Bancroft especially saw Johnson as a threat to Democratic political success. Bancroft ripped Johnson in a letter to Van Buren at the end of 1842. "It is my deep conviction that [Johnson] has done you more harm than any score of Whigs in the land. I trust most earnestly he may never find his name by the side of yours." Bancroft complained that Johnson had "no fixed opinions." In New England, Bancroft confidently told Van Buren, there was "a pervading sentiment against him." According to Bancroft, Johnson had no strength anywhere. "I hope," Bancroft

³ Edward Stanwood, *A History of the Presidency* (Boston & New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1904), 208-209.

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scornfully wrote, “he will be left ‘alone in his glory.’ The people never chose him as Vice President and as I believe never will.”⁴

Johnson believed, perhaps with some reason, his pockets of support might grow. He traveled throughout the spring of 1843. He went to St. Louis and enjoyed a particularly gratifying stay in Springfield, Missouri. Johnson enjoyed considerable support in small towns throughout the West, even those which favored Whig politics. Springfield’s Whig population turned out along with Democrats, led by former Illinois governor John Reynolds, to welcome Johnson. The chairman of Johnson’s reception committee, W.L.D. Ewing, served as U.S. Senator after he defeated Kentucky-born Abraham Lincoln for the post in 1837. Johnson visited not only Springfield but also the nearby town of Jacksonville, drumming up support wherever he could. Ewing applauded Johnson’s commitment to “western interest” and “western prosperity.” Ewing insightfully noted that Johnson watched “with keen anxiety and more than parental feeling, the western settlers since that day when you exchanged the secure and peaceful halls of Congress for the field of battle—of danger and blood.” Johnson’s speech rambled. He seemed in incredibly good spirits to the audience, very literally. Johnson drank too

⁴ “Arrival and Reception of Col. R. M. Johnson,” *Mississippi Free Trader and Natchez Daily Gazette*, (Natchez, MS) Saturday, April 29, 1843; Russell B. Nyle, *George Bancroft, Brahmin Rebel* (New York: Octagon Books, 1972), 160; George Bancroft to Martin Van Buren, December 9, 1842 in Leland Meyer, *The Life and Times of Colonel Richard M. Johnson of Kentucky* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1932), 456-57 .
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much at the dinner in his honor but nonetheless Springfield wanted Illinois to nominate Johnson as the Democratic candidate for President.⁵

Johnson continued to take stands at odds with the Democratic hierarchy. He challenged the southern wing of the Democratic Party on bankruptcy law. Southern Democrats relied on credit, generally using their produced agricultural commodities as collateral. This gave them a distinct advantage over urban businessmen and merchants, who lacked the massive amount of real estate and produce planters used to ensure their financial solvency in the face of their constant debt problems. When Congress debated a national bankruptcy law in 1843, southern planters balked, viewing it as another intrusion of urban capitalism into a pastoral society. Johnson, however, embraced the bankruptcy law. “We are a commercial, an agricultural, and a manufacturing nation,” said Johnson, which stretched across the continent. “Through this vast domain, and in their vast pursuits, bankruptcies will always exist.”⁶

Johnson insisted that it was the duty of government “to make such provisions as will be calculated to give the greatest possible relief that can be given, consistent with the principles of justice.” Only Congress, theorized Johnson, had power to pass a bankruptcy provision. “On [Congress] the work devolves, not only as a constitutional

⁵ Meyer, *Colonel Richard M. Johnson of Kentucky*, 458; W. L. D. Ewing and George R. Weber, “The Visit to Springfield of Richard M. Johnson, May 18-20, 1843,” *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 13 (Jul., 1920): 192-209

⁶ Edward J. Balleisen, *Navigating Failure: Bankruptcy and Commercial Society in Antebellum America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 124; “Bankrupt Law,” *Raleigh Register, and North-Carolina Gazette*, (Raleigh, NC) Friday, June 16, 1843.

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right, but as a solemn duty.” Both in Johnson’s “private and public life” he regarded “it as a paramount duty to relieve the distressed from every burden, as far as possible, and especially break that yoke by which none can be benefitted, and to soothe, rather than break, the heart already rent with the anguish of misfortune.” Johnson defended commercial and manufacturing pursuits in his bankruptcy boosterism. “Honorable men” often fell victim to bankruptcy, so it stood to reason they should be protected. Johnson also believed that the bankruptcy law needed to protect “all classes of every profession.” Johnson’s rhetoric by 1843 revealed that he truly saw himself as a class warrior, and he included bankruptcy among government-sponsored defenses of the poor. The poor being enriched served the interest of the nation, but so too did the wealthy losing their financial power. “There is,” he offered, “a perpetual revolution of poverty; the poor becoming rich and the rich becoming poor.” Johnson saw this as a beneficial, not harmful social reality.⁷

While Johnson’s following among northern wage earners, workers, and West never failed him, his chances at the presidency waned throughout 1843. His political isolation destroyed any opportunity to broaden his base. Johnson stated a willingness to accept a nomination for the Vice Presidency if chosen. “I am in the hands of the people.” If nominated for president, “I should accept the honor with gratitude and reluctance. I should accept of the second with thanks and pleasure.” Johnson also indicated a

⁷ “Bankrupt Law,” *Raleigh Register, and North-Carolina Gazette*, (Raleigh, NC) Friday, June 16, 1843.
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willingness to assume a lesser position among the rank and file “without a murmur.” He asked “for nothing and expected nothing.”⁸

Johnson traveled to the Northeast to drum up support among his last loyal group of supporters, urban workers. An enthusiastic bipartisan crowd greeted him in New Haven. Touting his vigor, he won converts to his personality if not his politics. His joke that he and Van Buren “retired” in 1840 “with the people’s consent” brought particular laughter and applause. In Dover, Boston, and Hartford he drew similar crowds—large, enthusiastic, and typically working class—without any real connection to the Democratic power structure.⁹

Johnson worked to incorporate the urban poor into the Democratic Party. During the summer of 1843, Johnson became the first major nationally prominent politician to aggressively court the growing Irish population in northern cities. He accepted an invitation to speak at the Repeal Meeting held in New York’s giant Tabernacle meeting hall and planned by the city’s Irish leaders. The repeal societies agitated for the repeal of the 1801 Act of Union which formed the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland.

⁸ *Daily Globe*, March 6, 1844.

⁹ *The Cleveland Herald*, (Cleveland, OH) Tuesday, October 17, 1843; “Col. R.M. Johnson,” *Dover Gazette & Strafford Advertiser*, (Dover, NH) Saturday, October 28, 1843; “Col. Johnson,” *The North American and Daily Advertiser*, (Philadelphia, PA) Monday, October 16, 1843.

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Since most Irishmen in New York worked menial jobs, they saw Johnson as a working-class hero.¹⁰

Keenly aware that he was the first high-ranking official ever to darken the door of an assembly as lowly as a repeal meeting, the Irish gave him a rapturous welcome. “The moment it was known that the old hero had entered the building, the whole assemblage sprung to their feet and gave utterance to a shout—loud, deafening, and prolonged—such as only Hibernian lungs could originate.” Johnson addressed the meeting without the formality of other planned political meetings. He compared the fight of the Irish to South America’s liberation from Spain; to Poland’s fight against Russia; to the Greeks and the Persians, and finally to the American fight against the British. The speech was not particularly insightful or impressive, but the audience was. No Vice President or President had ever addressed a group of politically active Irish before, and certainly none had courted them as a viable voting bloc. When he went to Albany the next week he pronounced himself deeply interested in “the cause of repeal.” His interest in repeal, he maintained, came from his belief in the cause of liberty and human rights. Again Johnson’s articulation radically departed from many slave state Democrats who spoke often of property and honor than liberty and human rights.¹¹

¹⁰ “Colonel Dick Johnson’s Great Speech at the Repeal Meeting in the Tabernacle Last Evening,” *The New York Herald*, (New York, NY) Saturday, November 04, 1843.

¹¹ “Colonel Dick Johnson’s Great Speech at the Repeal Meeting in the Tabernacle Last Evening,” *The New York Herald*, (New York, NY) Saturday, November 04, 1843; Joseph Alfred Boromé, “William Peter Her Majesty’s Consul at Philadelphia, 1840-1853,” *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 80 (Oct., 1956): 416-442
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Johnson's powerful sense of basic human decency came to the forefront at the end of 1843. In November Johnson stopped briefly in Staunton, Virginia. A member of the press entourage following Johnson noted that he would travel near an area of Hanover County, Virginia known as the Slashes—the childhood home of Henry Clay. Perceiving the press corp's desire for a partisan rebuttal of the Whig leader, Johnson's face "immediately lit up." His words stunned the newspapermen and Democratic notables with him. "I should be delighted to see that place. Every spot of ground Henry Clay touches he immortalizes." Of all the men he knew in forty years in politics, Johnson placed "Jefferson first, then Henry Clay." Johnson told of how he had looked to Clay for guidance during his early political career. "We were certain to be right when we followed his opinion. He is a great man, a very great man." By the end of 1843 Johnson saw little hope for his presidential ambitions. None of his actions were those of a man desperate for office. He went on record calling the Whig nominee a great man. He was unwilling to engage in aggressive politicking. He wrote a rather unconvincing letter to the *Globe* in which he professed loyalty to the Democratic Party. But Johnson's political career was done. His political influence still remained powerful, and in many ways his final political act was his finest. He threw himself wholly into the cause of the West.¹²

III.

¹² "Col. Richard M. Johnson's Opinion of Mr. Clay," *Fayetteville Observer*, (Fayetteville, NC) Wednesday, November 15, 1843; *The Ohio Statesman*, (Columbus, OH) Friday, February 16, 1844
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Johnson understood his political precariousness in the summer of 1843. He slowly, and reluctantly, transformed into an elder statesman who remained involved in, and hopeful for, the cause of democracy and the West. Sixty-one years old, and no doubt disappointed, he nevertheless remained cheerful and found causes to be involved in. The Far West continued to interest him. He felt vindicated by his early enthusiasm for the Yellowstone. In 1843 the first large wagon trails headed west into prairies on the Oregon Trail, an overland route towards the Oregon Territory. The route partly followed that taken by the Yellowstone Expedition of 1820. Jointly occupied by Britain and the United States, Oregon seemed to most Americans a natural extension of American territorial empire. Richard Johnson saw Oregon as a new Kentucky, where farmers and all settlers might live under an enlightened democratic regime. Democracy demanded kicking Britain out Oregon, so in the summer of 1843, Johnson accepted an invitation to attend an Oregon convention in Cincinnati.¹³

In accepting the invitation to attend the Oregon Convention Johnson laid out his doctrine of expansion as it applied to the United States' legal and natural rights to Oregon. The title of the United States to Oregon, Johnson boasted, "is valid and should not be disputed by any foreign power." Oregon, claimed Johnson, "is invaluable as a part of our confederacy, in an agricultural, manufacturing, and commercial point of view,

¹³ Washington Irving, *The Adventures of Captain Bonneville, U.S.A., in the Rocky Mountains and the Far West* (Philadelphia: J.P. Lippincott & Co., original 1837); Nathaniel Philbrick, *Sea of Glory: America's Voyage of Discovery, The U.S. Exploring Expedition* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2003), 259-286; David Dary, *The Oregon Trail: An American Saga* (New York: Knopf, 2008), 84-108.

and above all in its political aspect.” If, Johnson, posited, “our rights and claims to our own domicile must be disputed by foreign nations, the sooner the difficulty the better.” Johnson hoped to gain Oregon, “peaceably if we can—forcibly if we must.” Unlike Britain, the United States did not “cross the ocean and disturb, with our claims, and jeopardize the fire side of people of other nations.” Britain’s claims perplexed Johnson. Free and independent people, he argued, never understood the claims of monarchy and the Old World. “Our confederation is the only spot on earth where man enjoys the right of self-government—the only asylum of liberty for those who are oppressed and down trodden in other parts of the globe.” America owed its citizens and “generations yet unborn” the acquisition of Oregon.¹⁴

In May 1844, Democrats met and picked a presidential nominee. They settled on the stiff and gentrified former House Speaker James K. Polk. What he lacked in personality Polk made up for in political acumen. Polk firmly committed himself and the Democratic Party to annexing Oregon and the Republic of Texas. Henry Clay wavered, and then ultimately decided against supporting immediate Texas annexation. The Whigs’ lack of unanimity exposed the party to accusations of not supporting American expansion.¹⁵

¹⁴ “Oregon Convention,” *Mississippi Free Trader and Natchez Daily Gazette*, (Natchez, MS) July 8, 1843.

¹⁵ Lex Renda, “Retrospective Voting and the Presidential Election of 1844: The Texas Issue Revisited,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 24 (Fall, 1994): 837-854; Joel H. Silbey, *Storm over Texas: The Annexation Controversy and the Road to Civil War* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 52-79.

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Johnson put away his political differences with Democrats. He accepted Polk's nomination and threw his considerable influence behind Texas' annexation. Johnson announced that he was in favor of annexation so long as Texas received no special treatment. The status of slavery should be left to the people of the new state. Naturally, Johnson argued, Texas belonged to the United States. Texas, according to Johnson, was "as much a part of the Mississippi Valley" as Mississippi, Arkansas, Missouri, or Iowa. The same necessity which made Johnson willing to bleed for the West during the War of 1812 made him willing to bleed for Texas. He was "willing...to pour out the remainder of my blood to vindicate and maintain" the rights of American to democratic governance and to western territories. On another occasion, Johnson said in public that he "should prefer a little war and Texas along with it, to no war and no Texas."¹⁶

Johnson's adoption of Texas' cause threw him into an unusual alliance with southern planters. Aristocratic eastern grandees and western yeomen alike offered impassioned arguments for the annexation of Texas. The outgoing President, John Tyler, viewed the annexation as his political opus. Johnson's friends in Washington City began a whisper campaign to place Tyler and Johnson on a political ticket together. Both men affirmed the belief shared by Jefferson and Madison that expansion ensured, instead of weakened, the republican Union. They envisioned very different agents of expansion. Tyler hoped for the expansion of the plantation system. Johnson saw the

¹⁶ "Texas Correspondence," *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, (Cleveland, OH) Wednesday, May 1, 1844; "Col. Johnson on Texas," *The Cleveland Herald*, (Cleveland, OH) Monday, May 27, 1844.

workingman and small farmer as agents of American expansion. Tyler's political minions desperately tried to entice Johnson to join the president, but nothing ever came of the proposal. Most likely Johnson nixed the plan. He gained nothing by running with Tyler. More importantly both men found the other an exemplar of a political and social culture they disliked.¹⁷

Johnson enthusiastically supported Texas' incorporation into the United States. When abolitionists inquired why Johnson supported annexation, he gave honest answers that often focused on economics. Johnson argued that the plantation system that made cotton and sugar lucrative would "bring into the country rich sums" if Americans planted the rich soils of Texas. When war appeared eminent in the fall of 1845, Johnson wrote to President Polk, asking him for permission to raise 8,000 soldiers from Kentucky and Missouri. Ever confident of his western riflemen's fighting ability, Johnson told Polk that he could take possession of New Mexico and the mines around Santa Fe in sixty days, given the appropriate supplies."¹⁸

Although the President declined Johnson's offer, the old Kentuckian enjoyed positive press because of it. In the West, any enthusiasm for annexation guaranteed

¹⁷ Edward Crapol, *John Tyler: The Accidental President* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2006), 176-180; "Tyler and Johnson," *The Cleveland Herald*, (Cleveland, OH) Tuesday, June 4, 1844.

¹⁸ *Niles' Weekly Register*, 64 (issue of July 22, 1843), 327; *The Cleveland Herald*, (Cleveland, OH) Monday, May 27, 1844; *Mississippi Free Trader and Natchez Gazette*, (Natchez, MS) Wednesday, June 5, 1844; Richard M. Johnson to James K. Polk, September 1, 1845 in Wayne Cutler ed., *Correspondence of James K. Polk: July-December 1845* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee, 2004), 200-201.

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popular favor. That Johnson, “literally covered with scars,” volunteered provided an example for all Americans, said the *Weekly Nashville Union*. Deeply involved with supporting the war, Johnson also visibly lifted the spirits of westerners. He traveled quietly, but spoke when members of the public greeted him. In Columbus, Ohio, he stopped for a few minutes at a train station and spoke for a few minutes with old friends. As always, newspapermen surrounded the verbose Johnson. One reporter from the *Ohio Statesmen* repeated the bravado-filled words of Richmond editor (and long-time Johnson foe) Thomas Ritchie about a potential war with Britain or Mexico, Johnson cheerfully boasted about his health and fighting ability. “I stopped five bullets, and my mare fifteen, in the late war, and I think I am good for one yet!”¹⁹

Polk’s election and the onset of the war with Mexico created a spirit of unity the Democratic Party had not enjoyed since the presidency of Andrew Jackson. Politics continued, but with less rancor. Johnson continued to receive adulatory pleas from urban northern Democrats, poor farmers, and western farmers, but he urged them to support the administration. Polk finally took up a cause Johnson loved, that of western expansion. Johnson refused to let the Whigs’ partisan attacks stop what appeared to be a powerful advance of American power into the southwestern reaches of North America. He offered assurances to his supporters in Bradford County, Pennsylvania that Polk held his esteem and loyalty. Polk’s victory “vindicated and secured” the policies he long

¹⁹ “Col. R.M. Johnson,” *The Weekly Nashville Union*, (Nashville, TN) Wednesday, September 10, 1845.

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supported. Polk ensured, “for a long time to come—the sovereignty of the states—personal liberty—the reserved rights of the people—a strict construction of the federal constitution—opposition to the assumption of state debts,” and finally opposition to a national bank. Johnson told the Pennsylvania Democrats about his “opposition to internal improvements in the states by the general government.” This was blatantly false, as was Johnson’s supposed long-term refusal to support a national bank and federal assumption of state debts.²⁰

Johnson often traded state power for federal power, and willingly and even enthusiastically allowed the federal government to legislate on areas deemed by the Jeffersonian and Jacksonian faithful—internal improvements, national finance, and debt relief—as the exclusive province of the states. He remained committed to urban workers and voiced his opposition to the imprisonment of Rhode Island radical Thomas Dorr. He also believed that the “rights of foreigners” (an allusion to the Irish) needed to be jealously guarded. Johnson offered “the great principles of liberty and human rights” as his compass, not highbrow articulations of republicanism. While he whitewashed his record to conform to Polk’s, he understood that American victory over Mexico might guarantee American expansion West. Cooperating with Polk to push American

²⁰ David Clary, *Eagles and Empire: The United States, Mexico, and the Struggle for a Continent* (New York: Bantam Books, 2009), 101; “Interesting Correspondence,” *Semi-Weekly Ohio Statesman*, (Columbus, OH) Friday, January 31, 1845.
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democracy West was well worth a few minor untruths to the ladies and gentlemen of Bradford County, Pennsylvania.²¹

Richard Johnson encouraged Polk to continue his policies. Polk, formerly an enemy of Johnson, appreciated Johnson's words of support, and recorded them. "Colonel R. M. Johnson of Kentucky and [I] had a friendly conversation of an hour. He approves the whole course of my administration, and expressed himself warmly to that effect." Aware of South Carolina's strong objections to Polk's policies, Johnson warned the President that "some of Mr. Calhoun's friends who had come to him & condemned my course on the Mexican question," attributing to Polk "the motive in bringing on the war with Mexico the desire to run a second time for the Presidency." In a show of western solidarity, Johnson "repelled the imputation as unworthy of them and vindicated my course on the Mexican question, & had told them plainly that he would prefer me to any man spoken of for the Presidency." While most southerners supported Texas annexation and the Mexican War, a few vocal dissidents despised the hasty manner that Polk carried out his expansionist agenda. Southerners who objected to Texas' annexation and the Mexican War most often hailed from the southern states along the Atlantic.²²

²¹ "Interesting Correspondence," *Semi-Weekly Ohio Statesman*, (Columbus, OH) Friday, January 31, 1845.

²² James K. Polk, May 15, 1846 in Milo Milton Quaife ed., *The Diary of James K. Polk During His Presidency, 1845 to 1849* (Chicago: A.C. McClurg and Co., 1910), 402; For a scholarly analysis of South Carolina's nearly uniform political opposition to the Mexican War, see Ernest McPherson Lander, Jr., *Reluctant Imperialists: Calhoun, the South Carolinians, and the Mexican War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980).

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George Troup of Georgia, a remnant of the aristocratic southern political milieu that preceded the rise of democracy and the West during the Jacksonian Era, protested Texas annexation. George Troup supported the slavery plantation system as it existed in the South, and worried that admitting Texas to the Union might disrupt the delicate political maneuverings that kept slavery from tearing the United States apart. Troup correctly diagnosed the impact that Texas and slavery had on the relationship between the slave and free states, accusing Polk of sacrificing the interest of the slave states to “fraud, falsehood” and trickery” in order to quickly annex Texas.²³

Polk ignored the misgivings of the these South-Atlantic planters, and proceeded along his annexationist course. Richard Johnson, in a letter to anti-Texas citizens in Ohio, concurred with Polk. To the Ohioans, Johnson declared annexing Texas to be “important to the happiness” of the “whole Union.” Texans remembered Richard Johnson’s enthusiasm for their independence and their incorporation into the United States. In 1854, Texas created Johnson County, named for the late Kentuckian.²⁴

²³ Elizabeth Howard West, “Southern Opposition to the Annexation of Texas,” *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 18 (Jul., 1914): 74-82; George M. Troup to John G. Slappy, October 29, 1850 in Edward Jenkins Harden, *The Life of George M. Troup* (E.J. Purse: Savannah, 1859), xx.

²⁴ James Hamilton, Jr. to James Henry Hammond, May 21, 1831 in *American Historical Review* 6 (Oct., 1900-July, 1901), 745-746; James K. Polk to James Hamilton, Jr., September 2, 1845 in Cutler ed., *Correspondence of James K. Polk: July-December 1845*, 201-202; Resolution in Favor of Recognizing the Independence of Texas, July 4, 1836 in *Register of Debates in Congress: Comprising the Leading Debates and Incidents of the Twenty-Forth Congress XII* (Washington, D.C.: Gales and Seaton, 1836), 4622; John Henry Brown, *History of Texas: from 1685 to 1892*, Vol. II (St. Louis: L.E. Daniel, 1893), 544; *Weekly Ohio Statesman*, (Columbus, OH) Wednesday, June 05, 1844.
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At the beginning of 1848, removed from national politics for nearly a decade, Johnson provided his own justification for the Mexican War. The conflict, he believed, could not be avoided. He also defended what he viewed as the most important part of the peace negotiations with Mexico: the annexation of large tracts of Mexican territory. He favored “taking enough of the conquered territory of Mexico to indemnify us for the spoliations before the war, and for reasonable expenses since. He viewed these as important for the future generations of westerners that would fill the vast expanses of what was now the American Southwest. He would never, he declared, give “his sanction to the ratification on any treaty which did not make provision for the future.”²⁵

The future weighed heavily on Johnson’s mind in 1848. He felt confident about the future of the United States and the West. Polk and American arms saw to that. His own future remained uncertain. He traveled to Washington City in February 1848. While there he decided to run again for office. In April 1848 Johnson, probably against the advice of his friends, threw his name into consideration for Governor of Kentucky. Johnson, still anathema from the national Democratic Party, ran as an independent Democrat. The actual Democratic nominee, Lazarus Powell, knew the campaign was an uphill battle for the Democrats. The Whig nominee, John J. Crittenden enjoyed personal

²⁵ “Col. R.M. Johnson,” *The National Union*, (Nashville, TN) Monday, January 31, 1848.

prestige and association with Henry Clay. Fearing Johnson might embarrass himself, political friends convinced him to step out of the race. Crittenden won easily.²⁶

Kentucky might not make Johnson governor, but Crittenden's Senate seat needed filling. Johnson hastily assembled support for his candidacy. Nearing seventy and not able to command the influence he once wielded, Johnson appeared as little more than a sacrificial candidate to Henry Clay. In February 1849, the Kentucky legislature met to debate who would represent the state and fill the open seat in the Senate. At the completion of the election that succeeded the debate, the count stood ninety-two for Whig leader Henry Clay, and forty-five for the Democrat, Colonel Richard Mentor Johnson.²⁷

Johnson refused to accept idleness after his loss in the Senate election. He decided to run for Scott County's seat in the Kentucky legislature. He ran unopposed "because no one would run against him. Everyone liked him. You couldn't beat him." The first week of November, 1850, he took the eighteen-mile carriage ride west on the Frankfort Pike to the state capitol. On November 8th, a visibly ailing Johnson took his seat. His doctors ordered him not to travel. Active to the last, Johnson ignored them. The *Louisville Weekly Courier* diagnosed him as "suffering from the effects of protracted

²⁶ *Vermont Patriot* (Montpelier, VT) Thursday, February 10, 1848; *Raleigh Register, and North-Carolina Gazette* (Raleigh, NC) Saturday, April 22, 1848; "Col. R. M. Johnson has withdrawn as an independent candidate for Governor of Kentucky," *The Floridian* (Tallahassee, FL) Saturday, June 24, 1848.

²⁷ *Niles Weekly Register* 75, February 7, 1849, 81; *The Chattanooga Gazette* (Chattanooga, TN) Friday, June 14, 1850; Meyer, *Col. Richard M. Johnson*, 473.
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and dangerous illness from which little hope had been entertained of his recovery.” The unknown disease hampered Johnson, and he struggled to endure the basic duties necessary for his office. Another sympathetic Louisville paper, the *Daily Journal*, reported that Johnson labored “under an attack of dementia, which renders him totally unfit for business. It is painful to see him on the floor trying to discharge the duties of a member.”²⁸

Johnson’s attempts to fulfill his duties ended during the third week of November 1850 when he was paralyzed by a stroke. Physicians visited him, but they knew the end had come. John died at four o’clock in the morning on November 19, 1850. Several hours later, Joseph Desha rose and announced the death of the Kentucky legislature’s “most-honored member.” Beriah Magoffin, a Kentucky State Senator and a descendent of poor Irish immigrant farmers, stood and offered a moving tribute to Johnson after the clerk announced the latter’s death. “He was,” Magoffin said of Johnson, “the poor man’s friend, and their tears will tell in the mute eloquence of sorrow how dearly, how deeply the masses loved him.” Johnson remained “void of ostentation, simple in his taste, his manners, and his dress—brave, magnanimous, patriotic and generous to a fault.” In his early years, Magoffin told the senators, Johnson “was the beau ideal of the soul and

²⁸ *Louisville Weekly Courier*, November 9, 1850; *Louisville Daily Journal*, November 9, 1850.
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chivalry of Kentucky as he was, in his declining days, the very type of her wisdom and moderation.”²⁹

News of Johnson’s death quickly traveled via telegraph throughout the Union. In New York City, Democrats gathered to honor the late former Vice President. On December 6, 1850, a jeweler and Tammany Hall functionary, John C. Mather, delivered a eulogy praising Johnson as a friend of the workingman. The Whig *New York Tribune* offered a less flattering opinion of Johnson. The *Tribune* called him “a weak man, with inordinate vanity, but brave and naturally generous.” The *Tribune* also praised Johnson’s “conduct to his children, who were partly negro blood, and not born under the sanction of wedlock.” Johnson treated his two girls admirably and “manly.” The “meanness” of Whig political animosity, the *Tribune* admitted, made “contemptible use” of his daughters’ race against Johnson in the national elections of 1836 and 1840. Ultimately, however, the *Tribune* suggested that Johnson’s “long career in political life has no other fact so remarkable as his rise to the Vice Presidency.”³⁰

The *Tribune* was wrong about Johnson; his contributions were great, but they would not be seen until after the Civil War. Until then, the Democratic Party remained under the sway of powerful southern planters committed to the maintenance of the

²⁹ Meyer, *Col. Richard M. Johnson*, 473; Michael T. Dues, "Governor Beriah Magoffin of Kentucky," *Filson Club Historical Quarterly* 40 (January 1966); *Louisville Weekly Courier*, November 23, 1850.

³⁰ *New York Times*, November 5, 1860; Jean H. Baker, *Affairs of Party: The Political Culture of Northern Democrats in the Mid-nineteenth Century* (Bronx, N.Y.: Fordham University Press, 1998), 325; *The Boston Daily Atlas*, (Boston, MA) Monday, November 25, 1850

plantation economy and aristocratic political power. After the final defeat of the South at Appomattox, the Democrats, freed from the shackles of the southern slaveocracy, adopted Johnson's populist brand of democracy. In the West and the South, Populists kicked against the power of agrarian oligarchs and for the first time secured a political voice for small farmers through the Populist Party. Eventually, the Populists joined with the Democratic Party and the latter adopted central planks of the populist platform. The aristocratic agrarian tradition now bowed to that of the small farmer, thus completing Johnson's vision for the United States.³¹

Richard Johnson's attachment to the West and western principles proved difficult for gentry southern Democrats to overcome. His loyalty to the Democratic Party, though not always to Jackson or Jefferson's ideals, also caused him significant political difficulty. Still, he labored with the Democrats. Jacksonian Virginian James Barbour once said "no man in Congress had performed more service than Colonel Johnson."³²

Ultimately Johnson's service ran into the waning but still powerful clique of aristocrats in the old southern states along the Atlantic. Still, aristocracy gave way to an imperfect yet very real meritocracy in the United States. Johnson proved to be the

³¹ Bruce Levine, *The Fall of the House of Dixie* (New York: Random House, 2013), 3-27; Lawrence Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment: A Short History of the Agrarian Revolt in America* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 3-19.

³² Jonathan Milnor Jones, "The Making of a Vice President: The National Political Career of Richard M. Johnson of Kentucky." PhD Diss., University of Memphis, 1998, v, 10; "Honors to Colonel R.M. Johnson," in *Abridgment of the Debates of Congress, from 1789-1856* Vol. VI (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1858), 45-46; *Belleville Weekly Advocate* (Illinois), October 22, 1856;

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historical winner, but his stand for egalitarian principles inherent in his democratic philosophy remained incomplete. He refused to free his slaves, and supported one of the most intense strains of U.S. imperialism. But the reorientation of American and southern society after the Civil War owed much to Johnson and other western democrats who fought for the rights of debtors, immigrants, and the urban and rural poor. Johnson, according to his friend Amos Kendall, “sowed the seeds of that harvest which we this day enjoy.”³³

³³ Amos Kendall, Edward Stickey ed., *The Autobiography of Amos Kendall* (Boston: Lea and Shepard, 1872), 331.
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ABSTRACT

THE KENTUCKY COLONEL: RICHARD M. JOHNSON AND THE RISE OF WESTERN
DEMOCRACY, 1780-1850

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From 1815 to 1848, Richard M. Johnson was involved in some way in the great political and social issues addressed by the nineteenth century United States. A Representative and Senator from Kentucky, Johnson embodied the democratic spirit of the western frontier in his lifestyle, relationships, and most notably his politics. He remained an unrepentant slaveholder who nonetheless engaged in open relationships with enslaved women. He acknowledged his children from his relationship with his enslaved mistress Julia Chinn and sought to introduce his daughters into white society. Although elite southerners along the Atlantic Coast balked over his mixed-race relationships, Johnson was controversially elected to the Vice Presidency in 1836. Most

historians attributed Johnson's electoral difficulties to his mixed-race relationships, Johnson in fact angered elite Tidewater southerners from the beginning of his political career. He championed a more authentic democracy than contemporary Jeffersonians or Jacksonians, often taking positions at odds with the planter elite that comprised the leadership of the Jefferson and Jackson influenced Democratic Party.

Johnson embraced the tenants of democratic nationalism--congressional compensation, abolishment of imprisonment for debt, worker's rights, the rights of immigrants, government sponsored exploration of the west, and large-scale electoral democratization--well before southern slaveholding Democrats and before many northern Democrats as well. He refused to be tied to ideology, occasionally affirming banks and internal improvements if he believed the cause democracy and the West might be furthered. He courted urban workers, a constituency largely ignored by southern party bosses. In the process he made enemies, angering at times Andrew Jackson, James Polk, and others committed to the wholesale maintenance of the plantation system. Although his legacy has been vastly underappreciated by historians, Johnson, not Jefferson or Jackson, laid the groundwork for the Democratic Party's transformation from a party committed to state rights agrarianism into one that embraced populist nationalism.